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Opening Extract from...

Praetorian

Written by Simon Scarrow

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SIMON SCARROW

PRAETORIAN

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CHARACTERS

In the Praetorian Guard

Tribune Balbus – in charge of the bullion convoy
Centurion Gaius Sinius – an ambitious back-stabber
Tribune Burrus – commander of the Third Cohort of Praetorians
Centurion Lurco – practically part-time commander of the Sixth Century of the Third Cohort
Optio Tigellinus – Lurco's frustrated subordinate
Guardsman Fuscius – a recent recruit who thinks he's a veteran
Prefect Geta – commander of the Praetorian Guard

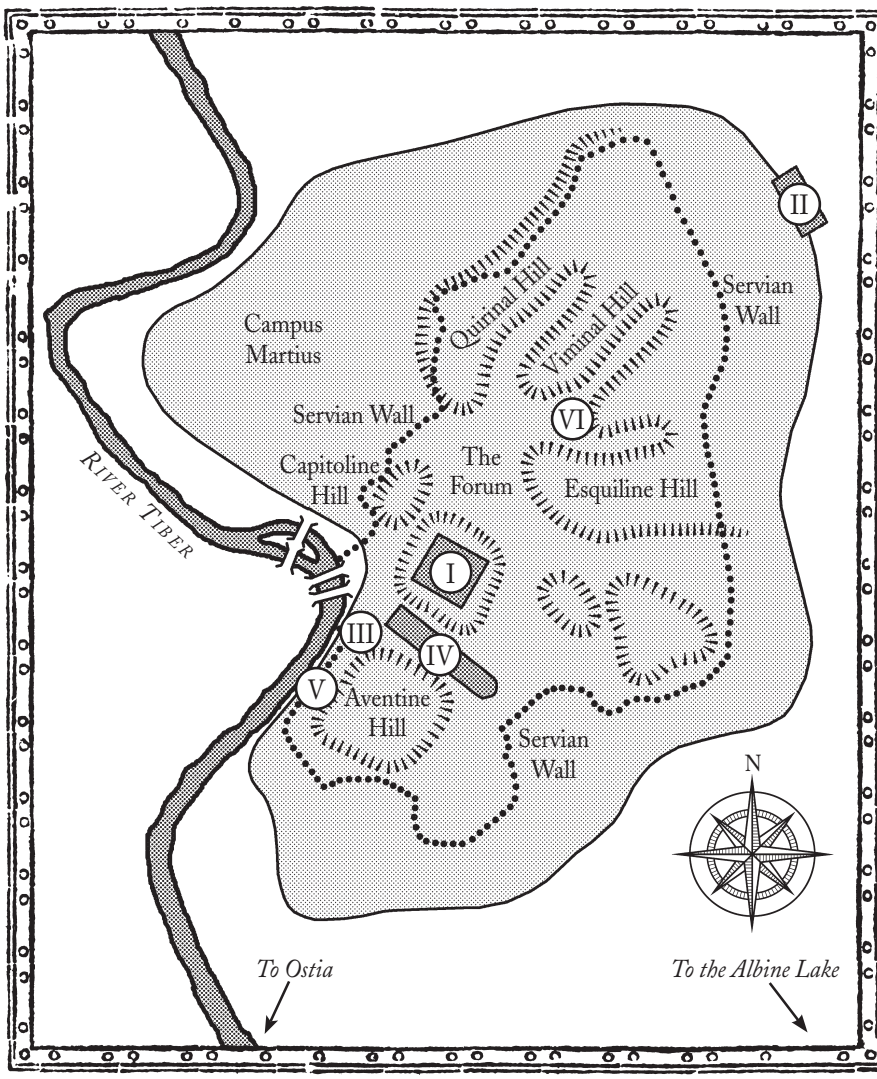
At the Imperial Palace

Emperor Claudius – a fair ruler, though not always a coherent one
Empress Agrippina – his wife and niece, and mother of
Prince Nero – a pleasant boy with artistic ambitions
Prince Britannicus – the son of Claudius, clever but cold
Narcissus – imperial secretary and close adviser to Claudius
Pallas – another close adviser to the Emperor and Empress
Septimus – an agent of Narcissus

In Rome

Cestius – a vicious and ruthless leader of a crime gang
Vitellius – playboy son of a senator, and long-standing enemy of Macro and Cato
Julia Sempronia – the lovely daughter of Senator Sempronius

ROME IN THE AGE OF EMPEROR CLAUDIUS



I The Imperial Palace Complex

II The Praetorian Camp

III The Boarium

IV The Great Circus

V The Warehouse District

VI The Subura Slum District

CHAPTER ONE

The small convoy of covered wagons had been on the road for ten days when it crossed the frontier into the province of Cisalpine Gaul. The first snows had already fallen in the mountains to the north that towered above the route, their peaks gleaming brilliantly against the blue sky. The early winter had been kind to the men marching with the convoy and though the air was cold and crisp, there had been no rain since they had left the imperial mint in Narbonesis. A bitter frost had left the ground hard and easy going for the wheels of the heavily laden wagons.

The Praetorian tribune in command of the convoy was riding a short distance ahead and as the route crested a hill he turned his horse aside and reined in. Ahead the road stretched out in a long straight line, rippling over the landscape. The tribune had a clear view of the town of Picenum a few miles away where he was due to meet the mounted escort sent from the Praetorian Guard in Rome – the elite body of soldiers tasked with protecting Emperor Claudius and his family. The century of auxiliary troops that had escorted the four wagons on the road from Narbonensis would then march back to their barracks at the mint, leaving the Praetorians, under the command of the tribune, to protect the small convoy for the rest of the journey to the capital.

Tribune Balbus turned in his saddle to survey the convoy marching up the slope behind him. The auxiliaries were Germans, recruited from the tribe of the Cherusci, large, fierce-looking warriors with unkempt beards thrusting out between the cheek-guards of their helmets. Balbus had ordered them to keep their helmets on as they passed through the hills, as a precaution against any ambushes from the bands of brigands that preyed on unwary travellers. There was little chance that the brigands would risk an

attack on the convoy, Balbus knew well enough. The real reason for his order was to cover up as much of the auxiliaries' barbaric hair as possible to avoid alarming any civilians they passed. Much as he appreciated that the German auxiliaries could be trusted with guarding the mint, owing their loyalty directly to the Emperor, Balbus felt a very Roman contempt for these men recruited from the wild tribes beyond the Rhine.

'Barbarians,' he muttered to himself, with a shake of his head. He was used to the spit and polish of the Praetorian cohorts and had resented being ordered to Gaul to take charge of the latest shipment of silver coin from the imperial mint. After so many years of service as a guardsman, Balbus had very fixed ideas of how a soldier should appear and if he had been posted to a cohort of German auxiliaries, the very first thing he would have done would be to order them to shave off those wretched beards and look like proper soldiers.

Besides, he was missing the comforts of Rome.

Tribune Balbus was typical of his rank. He had joined the Praetorians and served in Rome, working his way up through the ranks, before taking a transfer to the Thirteenth Legion on the Danube and serving as a centurion for several more years and then applying to return to the Praetorian Guard. A few more years of steady service had led to his present appointment as tribune, in command of one of the nine cohorts of the Emperor's personal bodyguard. In a few more years Balbus would retire with a handsome gratuity and take up an administrative post in some town in Italia. He had already set his sights on Pompeii where his younger brother owned a private bathhouse and gymnasium. The town was on the coast with fine views of the bay of Neapolis and had a decent set of theatres as well as a fine arena, surrounded by taverns selling cheap wine. There was even the prospect of an occasional brawl with men from the neighbouring town of Nuceria, he mused wistfully.

Behind the first five sections of auxiliaries came the four wagons, heavy vehicles drawn by ten mules each. A soldier sat on the bench beside each of the drivers and behind them stretched the goatskin covers, tightly tied over the locked chests resting on the beds of the

wagons. There were five chests in each wagon, each containing one hundred thousand freshly minted denarii – two million in all, enough to pay an entire legion for a year.

Balbus could not help a moment of brief speculation about what he could do with such a fortune. Then he dismissed the whimsy. He was a soldier. He had given his oath to protect and obey the Emperor. His duty was to see that the wagons reached the treasury in Rome. Balbus's lips tightened as he recalled that some of his fellow Praetorians had a somewhat more flexible understanding of the concept of duty.

It was less than ten years ago that members of the Praetorian Guard had murdered the previous Emperor and his family. True, Gaius Caligula had been a raving madman and tyrant, but an oath was as solemn a commitment as Balbus could think of. He still disapproved of the removal of Caligula, even though the new Emperor chosen by the Praetorians had proved to be a rather better ruler. The accession of Claudius had been a confused affair, Balbus recalled. Those officers who had murdered his predecessor had intended to return power to the Roman senate. However, once the rest of their comrades realised that no emperor meant no Praetorian Guard, with all the privileges that went with the job, they swiftly cast around for a successor to the throne, and came up with Claudius. Infirm and stammering, he was hardly the ideal figurehead for the greatest empire in the known world, but he had proved himself a generally fair and effective ruler, Balbus conceded.

His gaze shifted to the last five sections of the German auxiliaries marching behind the wagons. While they might not look like proper soldiers, Balbus knew that they were good in a fight, and their reputation was such that only the most foolhardy of brigands would dare to attack the convoy. Anyway, the danger, such as it was, had passed as the convoy descended on to the broad flat valley of the River Po.

He clicked his tongue and pressed his boots into the flanks of his mount. With a brief snort the horse lurched forward into a walk and Balbus steered it back on to the road, passing the leading ranks of auxiliaries and their commander, Centurion Arminius, until he had resumed his position at the head of the convoy. They had made

good time. It was not yet noon and they would reach Picenum within the hour, there to await the Praetorian escort if it had not already reached the town.

They were still some two miles from Picenum when Balbus heard the sound of approaching horses. The convoy was passing through a small forest of pine trees whose sharp scent filled the cold air. An outcrop of rock a short distance ahead obscured the road beyond. Balbus instinctively recalled his days on the Danube where the enemy's favourite trick was to trap Roman columns in similar confined settings. He reined in and threw his hand up.

'Halt! Down packs!'

As the wagons rumbled to a standstill, the German auxiliaries hurriedly set down their marching yokes, laden with kit, on to the side of the road and closed ranks at the head and tail of the convoy. Balbus passed the reins into his left hand, ready to draw his sword, and glanced round into the shadows beneath the trees on either side. Nothing moved. The sound of hoofbeats grew louder, echoing off the hard surface of the paved road and the rocks. Then the first of the riders came into view round the bend, wearing the red cloak of an officer. His crested helmet hung from one of the saddle horns. Behind him rode another twenty men in the mud-spattered white cloaks of Praetorian Guard rankers.

Balbus puffed his cheeks and let out a sharp sigh of relief. 'At ease!'

The auxiliaries lowered their shields and the shafts of their spears, and Balbus waited for the riders to approach. Their leader slowed his horse to a trot and then to a walk for the last fifty paces.

'Tribune Balbus, sir?'

Balbus looked closely at the other officer. The face was familiar.

'What is the correct challenge, Centurion?' he demanded.

'The grapes of Campania are ripe to pick, sir,' the other man replied formally.

Balbus nodded at the phrase he was expecting to hear. 'Very well. You were supposed to wait for us at Picenum, Centurion . . .'

'Gaius Sinius, sir. Centurion of the Second Century, Eighth Cohort.'

'Ah yes.' Balbus vaguely recalled the name. 'So, what are you doing out on the road?'

‘We reached Picenum yesterday, sir. Place was like a ghost town. Most of the people had gone to a nearby shrine for some local festival. I thought we would ride out and meet you, and your boys there.’ He gestured towards the German auxiliaries.

‘They’re not mine,’ Balbus growled.

‘Anyway, we saw you approaching the town, sir, and, well, here we are. Ready to escort the wagons back to Rome.’

Balbus regarded the centurion silently for a moment. He liked soldiers who stuck to the letter of their orders and was not sure that he approved of Sinius and his men meeting them here on the road instead of in the town, as arranged. Clear plans for the delivery of the silver had been made in Rome some two months earlier and all concerned should obey their instructions. The moment officers began to play free and easy with their orders, plans began to fall apart. He resolved to have a word with Sinius’s commanding officer when they returned to the Praetorian camp just outside the walls of Rome.

‘Centurion Arminius!’ Balbus called over his shoulder. ‘On me!’

The officer in charge of the German auxiliaries hurried forward. He was a tall, broad-shouldered individual whose scale armour just about fitted his muscular torso. He looked up at the tribune, his beard almost flame-red in the sunshine.

‘Sir?’

Balbus nodded to the horsemen. ‘The escort from Rome. They’ll protect the wagons from here. You and your men can turn back towards Narbonensis at once.’

The German pursed his lips and replied in heavily accented Latin. ‘We were supposed to make the handover in Picenum, sir. The lads were hoping to enjoy themselves in the town for the night before we headed back.’

‘Yes, well, that’s not necessary now. Besides, I doubt the locals will take kindly to being invaded by a small horde of Germans. I know what your men are like when they get some drink inside ’em.’

Centurion Arminius frowned. ‘I’ll see to it that they don’t cause any trouble, sir.’

‘Nor will they. I’m ordering you to turn round and march back to Gaul at once, d’you hear?’

The other man nodded slowly, his bitterness quite clear. Then, with a curt nod to his superior he turned and strode back to the convoy. 'Take up your packs! Make ready to march! It's back to Gaul for us, boys.'

Some of his men groaned and one swore a loud oath in his native tongue, drawing a sharp rebuke from the centurion.

Balbus glanced at Sinius and spoke softly. 'Can't have a bunch of hairy-arsed barbarians imposing themselves on decent folk.'

'Indeed not, sir.' Sinius nodded. 'Bad enough that the Germans have been tasked with guarding the mint and the silver convoys as it is. That should be work for proper soldiers, legionaries, or a cohort of the Guard.'

'Seems that we are not to be trusted by the Emperor,' Balbus said ruefully. 'Too many senior officers playing at politics in recent years. And this is what the rest of us have to put up with. Anyway, there's nothing we can do about it.' He drew himself up in his saddle. 'Have your men form up either end of the wagons. As soon as the auxiliaries are out of the way we can proceed.'

'Yes, sir.' Centurion Sinius saluted and turned away to call out the orders to his men. As the Germans grumpily formed a single column beyond the wagons, the mounted men eased their horses into place and soon the two small forces were ready to part company. Balbus approached Centurion Arminius to issue his parting instructions.

'You're to return to Narbonensis as swiftly as possible. Since I won't be there to keep watch on your men, don't let them cause any trouble in any settlements you pass through on the way back. Understand?'

The centurion pressed his lips together in a tight line and nodded.

'Then you can be off.'

Without waiting for a response, Balbus turned his horse in the other direction and trotted back to the head of the small column where Centurion Sinius was waiting. He waved his arm forward and gave the order for horsemen and wagons to advance. With a crack of the reins from the drivers, the wagons began to move with a clatter and deep rumble from the heavy iron-rimmed wheels. The

clop of the hoofs of mules and horses added to the din. Balbus rode on without looking back until he reached the rocky outcrop. Then he glanced round and saw the rear of the auxiliary column a quarter of a mile down the road, tramping back towards Gaul.

'Good riddance,' he muttered to himself.

The wagons, with their new escort, followed the road round the rocks and the route resumed its straight direction, through another quarter of a mile of pine trees, towards Picenum. Now that he was well clear of the German troops Balbus felt his mood improve. He slowed his horse until he was riding alongside Centurion Sinius.

'So, what's the latest news from Rome?'

Sinius thought for a moment and replied with an amused smile. 'The Emperor's new squeeze continues to tighten her grip on the old boy.'

'Oh?' Balbus frowned at the coarse reference to the Empress.

'Yes. Word round the palace is that Agrippina has told Claudius to get rid of his mistresses. Naturally, he isn't so keen. But that's the least of his worries. You know that kid of hers, Lucius Domitius? She's putting it about that the boy is going to be adopted by Claudius.'

'Makes sense,' Balbus responded. 'No point in making the lad feel left out.'

Sinius glanced at him with an amused smile. 'You don't know the half of it, sir. Agrippina's openly pushing Claudius to name young Lucius as his heir.'

Balbus raised his eyebrows. This was a dangerous development; the Emperor already had a legitimate heir, Britannicus, his son by his first wife, Messallina. Now there would be a rival to the throne. Balbus shook his head. 'Why on earth would the Emperor agree to do that?'

'Maybe his mind is growing weak,' Sinius suggested. 'Agrippina claims that she only wants Britannicus to have a protector and who better for the job than his new big brother? Someone to look out for his interests after Claudius has popped off. And that day ain't so far off. The old boy's looking thin as a stick and frail with it. So, once he goes, it looks like the Praetorians are going to have young Lucius Domitius as their new employer. Quite a turn-up, eh?'

‘Yes,’ Balbus replied. He fell silent as he considered the implications. As an infant the Emperor’s son, Britannicus, had been popular with the Praetorian Guard; he used to accompany his father on visits to the camp, wearing a small set of armour of his own and insisting on taking part in the drilling and weapons practice, to the amusement of the men. But the infant had become a boy and these days attended to his studies. Now young Britannicus was going to have to compete for the affection of the Praetorians.

‘There’s more, sir,’ Sinius said softly, glancing over his shoulder as if to make sure that his men did not overhear. ‘If you would care to know it.’

Balbus looked at him sharply, wondering just how far he could trust the other officer. In recent years he had seen enough men put to death for not guarding their tongues and he had no wish to join them. ‘Is there any danger in hearing what you have to say?’

Sinius shrugged. ‘That depends on you, sir. Or, more accurately, it depends on where your first loyalty lies.’

‘My first and only loyalty is to my Emperor. As is yours, and all the men in the Praetorian Guard.’

‘Really?’ Sinius looked at him directly and smiled. ‘I would have thought a Roman would be loyal to Rome first.’

‘Rome and the Emperor are the same,’ Balbus replied tersely. ‘Our oath is equally binding to both. It is dangerous to say different, and I’d advise you not to raise the issue again.’

Sinius scrutinised the tribune for a moment and then looked away. ‘No matter. You are right, of course, sir.’

Sinius let his mount drop back until he was behind his superior. The convoy reached the end of the pine trees and emerged into open country. Balbus had not passed any other travellers since dawn and could see none ahead in the direction of Picenum. Then he recalled what Sinius had said about the festival. A short distance ahead the road descended into a slight fold in the landscape and Balbus stretched up in his saddle as he caught sight of movement amid some stunted bushes.

‘There’s something ahead,’ he said to Sinius. He raised his arm and pointed. ‘See? About a quarter of a mile in front, where the road dips.’

Sinius looked in the direction indicated and shook his head.

'Are you blind, man? There's clearly something moving there. Yes, I can make it out now. A handful of small carts and mules among the bushes.'

'Ah, now I have them, sir.' Sinius stared into the dip a moment and then continued, 'Could be a merchant's train in camp.'

'At this time of day? This short a distance from Picenum?' Balbus snorted. 'I don't think so. Come, we need a closer look.'

He urged his mount forward, clopping down the road towards the bushes nestling in the dip. Sinius beckoned to the leading section of horsemen to follow him and set off in the wake of his superior. As Balbus drew nearer he realised that there were several more carts than he had first thought and now he could see a handful of men crouching down between the bushes. The anxiety he had felt shortly before returned to prick the back of his scalp with icy needles. He reined in a hundred paces from the nearest of the men and their carts to wait for the others to catch up.

'I don't like the look of this. Those scoundrels are up to no good, I'll be bound. Sinius, ready your men.'

'Yes, sir,' the centurion replied in a flat tone.

Balbus heard the rasp of a sword being drawn from its scabbard and he took a tighter grip of his reins as he prepared to lead the mounted guardsmen forward.

'I'm sorry, sir,' Sinius said softly as he plunged his sword into the tribune's back, between the shoulder blades. The point cut through the cloak and tunic and on through the flesh and bone into the spine. Balbus's head jerked back under the impact and he let out a sharp gasp as his fingers spread wide, half clenched like claws, releasing his grip on the reins. Sinius gave a powerful twist to the blade and then ripped it free. The tribune collapsed forward between his saddle horns, arms hanging limply down the flanks of his horse. The animal started in surprise and the movement dislodged the tribune from his saddle. He fell heavily to the ground, rolling on to his back. He stared up, eyes wide open as his mouth worked feebly.

Sinius turned to his men. 'See to the drivers of the wagons and then bring them up to the carts.' He looked down at the tribune.

‘Sorry, sir. You’re a good officer and you don’t deserve this. But I have my instructions.’

Balbus tried to speak but no sound escaped his lips. He felt cold and, for the first time in years, afraid. As his vision began to blur, he knew he was dying. There would be no quiet life for him in Pompeii and he felt a passing regret that he would never again see his brother. Swiftly the life faded from his eyes and they stared up fixedly as he lay still on the ground. Further down the road there were a few surprised cries that were quickly cut off as the wagon drivers were ruthlessly disposed of. Then the wagons and the mounted men continued towards the waiting carts. Sinius turned to a large man close behind him and indicated the tribune’s body. ‘Cestius, put him and the others on one of the wagons. I want two men to ride ahead and keep watch. Another two to go back to the bend in the road and make sure those auxiliaries don’t pull a fast one and turn round to take some unofficial leave in Picenum.’

The men with the carts emerged from the bushes and formed them into a line beside the road. Under Sinius’s instructions, the chests were quickly unloaded from the wagons, one to each of the carts. As soon as they were secured, they were covered with bales of cheap cloth, sacks of grain, or bundles of old rags. The traces were removed from the mule teams on the wagons and the animals were distributed among the carts to haul the additional burden. Once empty, the wagons were heaved deep into the bushes and their axle caps knocked out and the wheels removed from the axles so that they collapsed down, out of sight of the road. The bodies were taken further into the scrub and tossed into a muddy ditch before being covered over with brush cut from the bushes. Finally the men gathered around the carts as Sinius and a handful of others cut some more brush to cover the gaps in the bushes where the wagons had passed through and to sweep the tracks in the grass. Thanks to the frost there were no telltale ruts in the ground.

‘That’ll do,’ Sinius decided, tossing his bundle of twigs aside. ‘Time to change clothes, gentlemen!’

They hurriedly removed their cloaks and tunics and swapped them for a variety of civilian garments in a range of styles and colours. Once the uniforms were safely tucked away in bundles

behind their saddles, Sinius looked the men over. He nodded in satisfaction; they looked enough like the merchants and traders who regularly passed along the roads between the towns and cities of Italia.

'You have your instructions. We'll leave here in separate groups. Once you get beyond Picenum, take the routes you have been given back to the warehouse in Rome. I'll see you there. Watch your carts carefully. I don't want any petty thieves stumbling on the contents of these chests. Keep your heads down and play your part and no one will suspect us. Is that clear?' He looked round. 'Good. Then let's get the first carts on the move!'

Over the next hour the carts left the dip in the road singly, or in groups of two or three at irregular intervals, intermixed with the horsemen. Some made for Picenum, others branched off at the road junction before the town, passing to the west or east and following an indirect route to Rome. Once the last cart was on its way, Sinius took a final look around. There were still some tracks left by the carts and the hoofs of the mules and horses, but he doubted that they would attract attention from travellers on their way to or from Picenum.

With a brief nod of satisfaction, Sinius steered his horse on to the road and walked it unhurriedly towards the town. He paid his toll to the guards on the town gate and stopped at a tavern to have a bowl of stew and a mug of heated wine before continuing his journey. He left the town's south gate and took the road to Rome.

It was late in the afternoon when he saw a small column of horsemen in white cloaks riding up from the south. Sinius pulled the hood of his worn brown tunic up over his head to hide his features and raised a hand in greeting as he passed by the Praetorian guardsmen riding to meet the convoy from Narbonensis. The officer leading the escort haughtily ignored the gesture and Sinius smiled to himself at the prospect of the man having to explain the disappearance of the wagons and their chests of silver when he reported to his superiors in Rome.