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Warrior of Rome

Part 1: Fire in the East

Written by Harry Sidebottom

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Warrior of Rome

PART I

Fire in the East

DR HARRY SIDEBOTTOM



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Prologue (Summer AD238)

War is hell. Civil war is worse. This civil war was not going well. Nothing was going to plan. The invasion of Italy had ground to a halt.

The troops had suffered crossing the Alps before the spring sunshine had melted the snows in the passes. They had expected to be welcomed as liberators. They had been told that they only need set foot in Italy for everyone to come running, holding out olive branches, pushing forward their children, begging for mercy, falling at their feet.

It had not happened as they had hoped. They had come down from the mountains into an empty landscape. The inhabitants had fled, taking with them everything that they could move. Even the doors of their houses and temples were gone. The normally bustling plains were deserted. As the soldiers passed through the city of Emona the only living thing they found was a pack of wolves.

Now the army had been camped for over a month outside the walls of the north Italian city of Aquileia. The legions and auxiliaries were hungry, thirsty and tired. The hastily improvised supply chain had broken down. There was nothing to be had locally. What the citizens had not gathered within the walls, the soldiers themselves had wasted when they first arrived. There was no shelter. All the buildings in the suburbs had been torn down to provide materials for siege works. The river was polluted with the corpses of both sides.

The siege was making no progress. The walls could not be breached; there were not enough siege engines, the defenders were too effective. Each attempt to storm the walls with siege ladders and mobile towers ended in bloody failure.

Yet you could not fault the big man's courage. Every day the Emperor Maximinus Thrax would ride around the town, well

within bowshot range of the enemy, calling out encouragement to his men in the siege lines. As he passed through the ranks he promised them the town and everyone in it to do with as they pleased. While his courage had never been in doubt, his judgement had always been suspect. Now with every new reverse he became more savage. Like a wounded animal or, as many said, like the half-barbarian peasant he would always remain, he struck out at those around him. The officers who led the doomed attempts to scale the wall were executed in ever more inventive ways. Especial ingenuity was reserved for those from the nobility.

Ballista was even more hungry, thirsty and dirty than most. He was a tall youth, only sixteen winters and over six foot, and still growing. No one felt the lack of food more keenly than he did. His long blond hair hung lank down his back. A residual squeamishness held him back from washing on the riverbank. Since yesterday, a smell of burning, a reek of charred flesh, had joined the other odours which hung about him.

Despite both his youth and his status as a diplomatic hostage for his tribe, it had been considered by everyone the right thing that one of his birth, one of the Woden-born, should lead one of the units of German irregulars. The Romans had calculated the height of the wall, they had issued ladders of the correct length and, with Ballista at the front, the five hundred or so expendable barbarians had been sent off. The men had advanced at a jog, bent forward into the storm of missiles. The large bodies of the Germans and their lack of armour had made them good targets. Again and again there was a sickening sound as a missile struck home. They had fallen in droves. The survivors had pushed on in brave style. Soon the smooth walls had towered above them. More had fallen as they put aside their shields to raise the ladders.

Ballista had been one of the first to mount. He had started to climb one-handed, his shield held above him, his sword still in its scabbard. A falling stone had hit the shield, almost knocking him off the ladder. The noise was indescribable. He saw a long pole appear over the wall and push out over the next ladder along. At the end of the pole was a large amphora. Slowly the pole was

turned, the amphora tipped, and a flaming mixture of pitch and oil, sulphur and bitumen poured like rain on to the men on the ladder. Men screamed, their clothes burning and shrinking, clinging to them, their flesh roasting. One after another they fell from the ladder. The incendiary liquid splashed out over those at its foot. They beat at the flames with their hands, rolled themselves on the ground. There was no way to put out the flames.

When Ballista looked up there was another amphora above his head, its pole beginning to turn. With no hesitation Ballista threw himself from the ladder. He landed hard. For a moment he thought that his ankle was broken or turned and that he would be burnt alive. But self-preservation had overcome the pain and, yelling for his men to follow him, he ran away.

Ballista had been thinking for some time that a conspiracy was inevitable. Impressed as he was by Roman discipline, no body of fighting men would put up with this siege for long. And after the disaster that day, he had not been surprised when he was approached.

Now, as he waited to play his part, he realized the depth of his fear. He had no wish to play the hero. Yet he had no real choice. If he did nothing, either Maximinus Thrax would execute him or the conspirators murder him.

The conspirators had been right. There were very few guards around the imperial tent. Many of those present were asleep. It was the drowsy time just after midday. The time when the siege paused. The time when the emperor and his son rested.

A nod from one of the conspirators, and Ballista set off towards the huge purple tent with the standards outside. Suddenly he was very aware of what a beautiful day it was; a perfect Italian early June day, hot with a light breeze. A honey bee buzzed across his path. Swallows were wheeling high above.

A praetorian guardsman blocked Ballista's way with his spear. 'Where do you think you are going, barbarian?'

'I need to talk to the emperor.' Ballista spoke reasonable if heavily accented Latin.

'Who does not?' The praetorian was uninterested. 'Now fuck off, boy.'

'I have information of a conspiracy against him.' Ballista dropped his voice. 'Some of the officers, the nobles, are plotting to kill him.' He watched the guardsman's evident indecision. The potential danger of not passing on to a suspicious and vengeful emperor news of a possible conspiracy eventually overcame the natural fear of waking an increasingly short-tempered and violent man for whom things were not going well.

'Wait here.' The praetorian summoned a fellow soldier to watch the barbarian and disappeared into the tent.

He reappeared in short order and told the other praetorian to disarm and search the barbarian youth. Having given up his sword and dagger, Ballista was ushered into the tent; first into an ante-chamber, then into the inner sanctum.

At first, Ballista could see little. The purple gloom in the depths of the tent was profound after the bright sunlight outside. As his eyes adjusted he made out the sacred fire that is always carried before the reigning emperor burning low on its portable altar. Then he could see a large campbed. From it rose the huge pale face of the Emperor Caius Julius Verus Maximinus, commonly known as Maximinus Thrax, Maximinus the Thracian. Around his neck glittered the famous golden torque which he had won for his valour as a private soldier from the Emperor Septimius Severus.

From the far corner of the tent a voice snapped, 'Perform adoration, *proskynesis*.' As Ballista was pushed forward on to his knees by the praetorian, he saw Maximinus Thrax's handsome son walk out of the darkness. Ballista reluctantly prostrated himself on the ground, then, as Maximinus Thrax held out his hand, kissed a heavy gold ring set with a gemstone cut with an image of an eagle.

Maximinus Thrax sat on the edge of the campbed. He was wearing just a simple white tunic. His son stood by his side, wearing his customary, elaborately ornamented, breastplate and ornamental silver sword, its handle in the shape of the head of an eagle. Ballista remained on his knees.

'Gods, he stinks,' said the son, putting a perfumed cloth to his nose. His father waved a hand to silence him.

'You know of a plot on my life.' Maximinus Thrax's great grey eyes looked into Ballista's face. 'Who are the traitors?'

'The officers, most of the tribunes and a few of the centurions, of Legio II Parthica, *Dominus*.'

'Name them.'

Ballista looked reluctant.

'Do not keep my father waiting. Name them,' said the son.

'They are powerful men. They have many friends, much influence. If they hear that I have denounced them, they will do me harm.'

The big man laughed, a horrible grating sound. 'If what you say is true, they will be in no position to harm you or anyone else. If what you say is not true, what they might want to do to you will be the least of your concerns.'

Ballista slowly named a string of names. 'Flavius Vopiscus, Julius Capitolinus, Aelius Lampridius.' There were twelve names in all. That they were the real names of the men in the conspiracy hardly mattered at this stage.

'How do you know these men want to kill me? What proof do you have?'

'They asked me to join them.' Ballista spoke loudly, hoping to distract attention from the growing noise outside. 'I asked them for written instructions. I have them here.'

'What is that row?' Maximinus Thrax bellowed, his face twitching with habitual irritation. 'Praetorian, tell them to be quiet.' He held out a huge hand for the documents that Ballista proffered.

'As you can see –' Ballista continued.

'Silence,' ordered the emperor.

Rather than abating, the noise outside the tent grew. Maximinus Thrax, his face now contorted with rage, turned to his son. 'Get out there and tell them to shut the fuck up.'

Maximinus Thrax read on. Then a surge of noise made him lift his pale face. On it Ballista read the first glimmer of suspicion.

Ballista leapt to his feet. He grabbed the portable altar bearing

the sacred fire and swung it at the emperor's head. Maximinus Thrax caught Ballista's wrist with an unbelievably strong grip. With his free hand he punched him in the face. The youth's head snapped back. The big man hit him in the stomach. Ballista collapsed in a heap. With one hand the emperor pulled Ballista back to his feet. He brought his face, a face like a rock, close to Ballista's. His breath stank of garlic.

'You will die slowly, you little fucker.'

Maximinus Thrax threw Ballista away almost casually. The youth crashed through some chairs and overturned a camp table.

As the emperor picked up his sword and headed towards the door, Ballista desperately tried to get some breath in his lungs and struggle to his feet. He looked around for a weapon. Seeing none, he picked up a stylus from a writing desk and stumbled after the emperor.

From the antechamber, the whole scene outside was framed and brightly lit as if it were a painting in a temple or portico. In the distance, most of the praetorians were running. But some had joined the legionaries of Legio II and were pulling the imperial portraits down from the standards. Nearer, there was a thrashing tumult of bodies. Just beyond the threshold was the mighty back of Maximinus Thrax. Sword in hand, his huge head turned this way and that.

The tumult stopped, and above the crowd rose the severed head of Maximinus Thrax's son, stuck on a spear. Even smeared by dirt and blood it was still beautiful.

The noise the emperor made was not human. Before the big man could move, Ballista launched himself unsteadily at his back. Like a beast hunter in the arena trying to despatch a bull, Ballista stabbed the stylus down into Maximinus Thrax's neck. With one mighty sweep of his arm, the big man smashed Ballista back across the antechamber. The emperor turned, pulled out the stylus and hurled it, bloodied, at Ballista. His sword raised, he advanced.

The youth scrabbled to his feet, grabbed a chair, held it in front of him as a makeshift shield and backed away.

'You treacherous little fucker, you gave me your oath – you took

the military oath, the *sacramentum*.' Blood was flowing freely down the emperor's neck, but it did not seem to be slowing him down. With two strokes of the sword he smashed the chair to pieces.

Ballista twisted to avoid the blow but felt searing agony as the sword thrust scraped down his ribs. On the floor now, holding his arms to the wound, Ballista tried to shuffle backwards. Maximinus Thrax stood over him, readying himself to deliver the killing blow.

The thrown spear punched into the emperor's unprotected back. He staggered an involuntary step forward. Another spear slammed into his back. He took another step, then tipped over, landing on Ballista. His enormous weight was crushing the youth. His breath, hot and rank, was on Ballista's cheek. His fingers came up to gouge the boy's eyes.

Somehow, the stylus was back in Ballista's right hand. With a strength born of desperation the youth drove it into the emperor's throat. Blood sprayed out. The emperor's fingers jerked back. Blood stung Ballista's eyes.

'I will see you again.' The big man uttered his final threat with a hideous grin, blood gurgling and foaming from his twisted mouth.

Ballista watched as they pulled the body outside. There they fell on it like a pack of hounds breaking up its quarry. His head was hacked off and, like that of his son, hoisted on a spear. The huge body was left for anyone to trample on and desecrate, for the birds and dogs to tear to pieces.

Much later, the heads of Maximinus Thrax and his son were sent to Rome to be publicly exhibited. What was left of their bodies was thrown in the river to deny them burial, to deny rest to their spirits.

Navigatio

(Autumn AD255)



I

By the time the warship had cleared the harbour breakwater of Brundisium, the spies had found each other. They sat on the deck, inconspicuous among the men of the *Dux Ripae*. From their position near the prow they looked back down the narrow hull of the galley to where, over one hundred feet away, stood the object of their professional attention.

'Sodding barbarian. All three of us just to watch one sodding barbarian. Ridiculous.' The *frumentarius* spoke quietly, lips barely moving.

The speaker's accent pointed to the slums of the Subura in the teeming valley between two of the seven hills of eternal Rome. His origins may have been low but, as a *frumentarius*, he and his two colleagues were among the most feared men in the Roman Empire, the *imperium*. As *frumentarii* their title should have implied that they had something to do with grain distribution or army rations. No one fell for that. It was like calling the wild Black Sea 'the hospitable sea', or the daemons of retribution 'the kindly ones'. From the most patrician consular in Rome to the lowliest slave in a far-flung province like one of the Britannias, the *frumentarii* were known and hated for what they really were – the emperor's secret police: his spies, his assassins, his knife men – at least, they were known collectively. They were a special army unit, its members transferred out of other units, its camp on the Caelian Hill. Individually, the

frumentarii were seldom known at all. It was said that, if you recognized a *frumentarius*, it was because he wanted you to, and then it was too late.

'I don't know,' said one of the others. 'It might be a good idea. Barbarians are naturally untrustworthy, and often as cunning as you can imagine.' His voice summoned up the sun-drenched mountains and plains of the far west; the provinces of Further Spain or even Lusitania, where the Atlantic broke against the shore.

'Bollocks,' said the third. 'OK, they are all untrustworthy bashtards. They have been lying since they could crawl. But the northern ones, like this bashtard, are thick, slow as you like. Your northerners are big, ferocious and stupid, while your easteners are small, sly and shit shcared of anything.' The intermittent slurring showed that his first language was not Latin but Punic, from North Africa; the tongue spoken almost half a millennium ago by Hannibal, the great enemy of Rome.

All the men on deck and the crew below fell silent as Marcus Clodius Ballista, *Vir Egregius*, Knight of Rome, and *Dux Ripae*, Commander of the Riverbanks, raised his arms to the heavens to begin the usual ritual at the start of a voyage. The water was calm here at the threshold of the sea, where the sheltered waters of Brundisium harbour met the Adriatic. With its outstretched oars at rest, the galley lay like a huge insect on the surface of the waters. In good Latin, which nevertheless had a twang of the forests and marshes of the far north, Ballista began to intone the traditional words:

'Jupiter, king of the gods, hold your hands over this ship and all who sail in her. Neptune, god of the sea, hold your hands over this ship and all who sail in her. *Tyche*, spirit of the ship, hold your hands over us.' He took a large, finely worked golden bowl from an attendant and, slowly, with due ceremony, poured three libations of wine into the sea, emptying it.

Someone sneezed. Ballista held his outstretched pose. The sneeze had been unmistakable, undeniable. No one moved or spoke. Everyone knew that the worst omen for a sea journey, the clearest possible indication of the displeasure of the gods, was if someone

sneezed during the rituals which marked the departure. Still Ballista held his pose. The ceremony should be over. An air of expectation and tension spread through the ship. Then, with a powerful flick of the wrist, Ballista sent the bowl flying through the air. There was a collective sigh as it splashed into the water. It glittered for a moment below the surface, and then was gone for ever.

'Typical fucking barbarian,' said the *frumentarius* from the Subura. 'Always the big, stupid gesture. It cannot take away the omen, nothing can.'

'That bowl would have bought a nice bit of land back home,' said the North African.

'He probably stole the thing in the first place,' replied the Spaniard, reverting to their previous topic. 'Sure, northern barbarians might be stupid, but treason comes as naturally to them as to any easterner.'

Treason was the reason the *frumentarii* existed. The old saying of the emperor Domitian, that no one believed a plot against the emperor was real until he was assassinated, most certainly did not apply to them. Their thoughts were suffused with treason, plot and counter-plot; their ruthless combination of secrecy, efficiency and obsession guaranteed that they were hated.

The captain of the warship, having asked Ballista's permission, called for silence prior to getting underway, and the three *frumentarii* were left to their own thoughts. They each had much to think about. Which one of them had been set the task of reporting on the others? Or was there a fourth *frumentarius* among the men of the *Dux Ripae*, so deep undercover they had not spotted him?

Demetrius sat at the feet of Ballista, whom in his native Greek he called *kyrios*, 'master'. Yet again he thanked his own daemon for guiding his recent path. It would be hard to imagine a better *kyrios*. 'A slave should not wait for his master's hand,' ran the old saying. Ballista had not raised his hand in the four years since the *kyrios's* wife had purchased Demetrius as his new secretary, one among many wedding presents. Demetrius's previous owners had had no such compunction about using their fists, or doing far worse.

The *kyrios* had looked magnificent just now as he made his vows and threw the heavy golden bowl into the sea. It had been a gesture worthy of the Greek boy's hero, Alexander the Great himself. It had been an impulsive gesture of generosity, piety and contempt for material wealth. He had given his own wealth to the gods for the good of them all, to avert the omen of the sneeze.

Demetrius considered that there was much of Alexander about Ballista: the cleanshaven face; the golden hair pulled back, standing up like a lion's mane and falling in curls on either side of the wide brow; the broad shoulders and straight, clean limbs. Of course Ballista was taller; Alexander had been famously short. And then there were the eyes. Alexander's had been disconcertingly of different colours; Ballista's were a deep, dark blue.

Demetrius balled his fist, thumb between index and forefinger, to avert the evil eye, as the thought struck him that Ballista must be about thirty-two, the age at which Alexander had died.

He watched uncomprehendingly as the ship got underway. Officers bellowed orders, a piper blew shrill notes, sailors pulled on mystifying patterns of ropes and from below came the grunts of the rowers, the splash of the oars and the sound of the hull gathering pace through the water. Nothing in the great historians of the immortal Greek past – Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon – had prepared the bookish young slave for the deafening noise of a galley.

Demetrius looked up at his *kyrios*. Ballista's hands were unmoving, seemingly clenched around the ends of the ivory arms of the folding *curule* chair, a Roman symbol of his high office. His face was still; he stared straight ahead, as if part of a painting. Demetrius half wondered if the *kyrios* was a bad sailor. Did he get seasick? Had he ever sailed further than the short crossing from the toe of Italy to Sicily? After a moment's reflection, Demetrius dismissed such ideas of human frailty from his mind. He knew what oppressed his *kyrios*. It was none other than Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and her mischievous son Eros: Ballista was missing his wife.

The marriage of Ballista and the *kyria,* Julia, had not started as a love match. It was an arrangement, like all of those of the elite. A family of senators at the top of the social pyramid yet short of

money and influence gave their daughter to a rising military officer. Admittedly, he was of barbarian origins. But he was a Roman citizen, a member of the equestrian order, the rank just below the senators themselves. He had distinguished himself in campaigns on the Danube, among the islands in the distant Ocean and in North Africa, where he had won the Mural Crown for being the first man on to the walls of an enemy town. More importantly, he had been educated at the imperial court and was a favourite of the then emperor, Gallus. If he was a barbarian, at least he was the son of a king, who had come to Rome as a diplomatic hostage.

With the marriage, Julia's family gained present influence at court and, with luck, future wealth. Ballista gained respectability. From such a conventional opening, Demetrius had watched love grow. So deeply had the arrows of Eros struck the *kyrios* that he did not have sex with any of the maidservants, even when his wife was confined bearing their son; a thing often remarked in the servants' quarters, especially given his barbarian origins, with all they implied about lust and lack of self-control.

Demetrius would try and provide the companionship his *kyrios* so greatly needed, he would be at his side throughout the mission – a mission the very thought of which turned his stomach. How far would they have to travel towards the rising sun, across stormy seas and wild lands? And what horrors would await them at the edge of the known world? The young slave thanked his Greek god Zeus he was under the protection of a soldier of Rome like Ballista.

What a pantomime, thought Ballista. An absolute bloody pantomime. So someone had sneezed. It was hardly surprising that, among the three hundred men on the ship, one would have a cold. If the gods had wanted to send an omen, there had to be a clearer way.

Ballista very much doubted that those Greek philosophers he had heard about could be right that all the different gods known to all the different races of man were really all the same just with different names. Jupiter, the Roman king of the gods, seemed very different to Woden, the king of the gods of his childhood and youth among his own people, the Angles. Of course, there were

similarities. They both liked dressing up in disguise. They both enjoyed screwing mortal girls. They were both nasty if you crossed them. But there were big differences. Jupiter liked screwing mortal boys, and that sort of thing did not go down at all well with Woden. Jupiter seemed rather less malevolent than Woden. The Romans believed that, if approached in the right way, with the right offerings, Jupiter might actually come and help you. It was highly unlikely that Woden would do the same. Even if you were one of his descendants – Woden-born, as Ballista himself was – probably the best you could hope from the Allfather was that he would leave you alone until your final battle. Then, if you fought like a hero, he might send forth his shield maidens to carry you to Valhallah. All of which left Ballista wondering why he had dedicated that golden bowl. With a heavy sigh, he decided to think about something else. Theology was not for him.

He turned his thoughts to his mission. It was reasonably straightforward. By the standards of the Roman imperial bureaucracy, it was *very* straightforward. He had been appointed the new *Dux Ripae*, commander of all the Roman forces on the banks of the rivers Euphrates and Tigris and all the land in between. The title was rather grander on paper than in reality. Three years ago, the Sassanid Persians, the new and aggressive empire to the east, had attacked Rome's eastern territories. Burning with religious fervour, hordes of their horsemen had swept up the riverbanks through Mesopotamia and on into Syria. Before returning laden with plundered treasures, driving their captives before them, they had watered their horses by the Mediterranean sea. Thus, now there were next to no Roman forces for the new *Dux Ripae* to command.

The specifics of Ballista's instructions, his *mandata*, perforce revealed the feeble state of Roman power in the east. He was commanded to proceed to the city of Arete, in the Province of 'Hollow Syria' (Coele Syria), at the easternmost reaches of the *imperium*. There he was to ready the city to withstand siege by the Sassanids, a siege which was expected to fall the following year. There were only two units of regular Roman troops at his command, a detachment, a *vexillatio*, of legionary heavy infantry from Legio IIII Scythica of

about one thousand men, and an auxiliary *cohors* of both mounted and foot bowmen, again of about a thousand men. He had been instructed to raise what local levies he could in Arete and to ask the client kings of the nearby cities of Emesa and Palmyra for troops, although, of course, not to the detriment of their own defence. He was to hold Arete until he was relieved by an imperial field army commanded by the emperor Valerian himself. To facilitate the arrival of the field army, he had been further instructed to look to the defence of the main port of Syria, Seleuceia in Pieria, and the provincial capital, Antioch. In the absence of the governor of Coele Syria, the *Dux Ripae* was to have the full powers of a governor. When the governor was present, the *Dux* was bound to defer to him.

Ballista found himself grimly smiling at the absurdities of his instructions, absurdities typical of military missions planned by politicians. The potential for confusion between himself and the governor of Coele Syria was immense. And how could he, with the completely inadequate forces allotted him and whatever local peasants he could conscript, while under siege by a huge Persian army in Arete, also defend at least two other cities?

He had been honoured to be summoned to the presence of the emperors Valerian and Gallienus. The imperial father and son had spoken most kindly to him. He admired both men. Valerian had signed Ballista's *mandata* and invested him with the office of *Dux Ripae* with his own hand. But it could not be said that the mission was anything other than ill conceived and under resourced: too little time, and too few men in too vast an area. In more emotive terms, it looked much like a death sentence.

In the last, rushed three weeks before leaving Italy, Ballista had found out what he could about the distant city of Arete. It was on the western bank of the Euphrates, some fifty miles below the confluence of the Euphrates and the Chaboras. It was said that its walls were well founded and that, on three sides, sheer cliffs made it impregnable. Apart from a couple of insignificant watch towers, it was the last outpost of the *imperium Romanum*. Arete was the first place a Sassanid Persian army advancing up the Euphrates would reach. It would bear the full force of an attack.

Such history of the city as Ballista had been able to discover did not inspire much confidence. Originally founded by one of the successors of Alexander the Great, it had fallen first to the Parthians, then to the Romans then, only two years ago, to the Sassanid Persians, who had overthrown the Parthians. As soon as the main Persian army had withdrawn to their heartlands in the south-east, the locals, with help from some Roman units, had risen up and massacred the garrison the Sassanids had left behind. Its walls and cliffs notwithstanding, clearly the city had its weaknesses. Ballista could find what they were when he was on the ground, when he reached Syria. The commander of the auxiliary *cohors* stationed at Arete had instructions to meet him at the port of Seleuceia in Pieria.

Nothing was ever quite as it seemed with the Romans. Certain questions ran through Ballista's mind. How did the emperors know that the Sassanids would invade the following spring? And that they would take the Euphrates route rather than one of those to the north? If the military intelligence was sound, why was there no sign that an imperial field army was being mobilized? Closer to home, why had Ballista been chosen as *Dux Ripae*? He did have a certain reputation as a siege commander – five years ago he had been with Gallus in the north at the successful defence of the city of Novae against the Goths; before that he had taken various native settlements both in the far west and in the Atlas mountains – but he had never been to the east. Why had the emperors not sent either of their most experienced siege engineers? Both Bonitus and Celsus knew the east well.

If only he had been allowed to bring Julia with him. As she had been born into an old senatorial family, the labyrinth of politics at the Roman imperial court, so impenetrable to Ballista, were second nature to her. She could have cut to the heart of the ever-shifting patterns of patronage and intrigue, could have blown away the fog of unknowing that surrounded her husband.

Thinking of Julia brought a pang of longing, acute and physical – her tumbling ebony hair, eyes so dark as to appear black, the swell of her breasts, the flare of her hips. Ballista felt alone. He

would miss her physically. But, more, he would miss her companionship, that and the heart-melting prattle of their infant son.

Ballista had asked permission for them to accompany him. Refusing the request, Valerian had pointed to the manifest dangers of the mission. But all knew there was another reason for the refusal: the emperors' need to hold hostages to ensure the good behaviour of their military commanders. Too many generals of the last generation had gone into revolt.

Ballista knew that he would feel lonely, despite being surrounded by people. He had a staff of fifteen men: four scribes, six messengers, two heralds, two *haruspices*, to read the omens, and Mamurra, his *praefectus fabrum*, chief engineer. In accordance with Roman law, he had chosen them from central lists of officially approved members of these professions, but he knew none of them, not even Mamurra, personally. It was in the natural course of things that some of these men would be *frumentarii*.

As well as his official staff, he had some of his own household with him – Calgacus, his body servant, Maximus, his bodyguard, and Demetrius, his secretary. That he had appointed the young Greek youth who now sat at his feet to run his headquarters, to be his *accensus*, would be resented by all the official staff, but he needed someone he felt he could trust. In Roman terms, they were part of his *familia* but, to Ballista, they seemed a poor substitute for his real family.

Something unusual about the motion of the ship caught Ballista's attention. Its familiar smells – pine from the pitch used to seal the hull, mutton fat from the tallow used to waterproof the leather oar sockets, and stale and fresh human sweat – reminded him of his youth on the wild northern ocean. This *trireme Concordia*, with its 180 rowers on three levels, its two masts, its two huge steering oars, 20 deck crew and some 70 marines, was an altogether more sophisticated vessel than any longboat from his youth. It was a racehorse to their pack animal. Yet, like a racehorse, it was bred for one thing, and that was speed and manœuvrability in smooth seas. If the sea turned rough, Ballista knew he would be safer in a primitive northern longboat.

The wind had backed in a southerly direction and was picking up. Already the sea was rising into ugly, choppy cross-waves which were catching the beam of the *trireme*, making it difficult for the rowers to clear their oars and giving the vessel the beginnings of an uncomfortable lurch. On the horizon to the south, dark stormclouds were building. Ballista now realized that the captain and helmsman had been deep in conversation for some time. As he looked at them, they came to a decision. They exchanged a final few words, both nodded, and the captain walked the few feet back to Ballista.

'The weather is turning, *Dominus*.'

'What do you recommend?' replied Ballista.

'As our course was to sail due east to rise Cape Acroceraunia and then coast south to Corcyra, as the gods would have it we are roughly midway between Italy and Greece. As we cannot hope to run for shelter, if the storm comes, we must run before it.'

'Take what actions you think fit.'

'Yes, *Dominus*. Could I ask that you order your staff to move away from the masts?'

As Demetrius scrabbled across the deck to pass the order, the captain again briefly conferred with the helmsman, then issued a volley of commands. The deckhands and marines, having herded the staff to the side rails, efficiently lowered the mainyard by some four or five feet on the mast. Ballista approved. The ship would need to catch enough wind to give her steerage way, but too much would make her hard to control.

The *trireme* was now lurching violently, and the captain gave the order to bring her round to run to the north. The helmsman called to the rowing master and the bow officer and then, at his signal, all three called to the rowers, the piper squeaked and the helmsman pulled on the steering oars. Tilting alarmingly, the galley came round to her new heading. On a further volley of orders the mainsail was set, tightly brailed up to show only a small area of canvas, and the oars on the lower two levels were drawn inboard.

Now the vessel's motion was a more manageable fore and aft lift. The carpenter appeared up the ladder and made his report to the captain.

'Three oars on the starboard broken. Quite a bit of water came inboard as the dry wood on the starboard went underwater, but the pumps are working, and the planks should swell and cut off the flow on their own.'

'Get plenty of replacement oars to hand. This might be a bit bumpy.' The carpenter sketched a salute and disappeared below.

It was the last hour of the day when the full force of the storm hit. The sky became as dark as Hades, blue-black with an unearthly yellow tinge, the wind screamed, the air was full of flying water, and the ship pitched savagely forward, her stern clear of the sea. Ballista saw two of his staff sliding across the deck. One was caught by the arm of a sailor. The other slammed into the rail. Above the howl of the elements, he could hear a man screaming in agony. He saw two main dangers. A wave could break clean over the ship, the pumps would fail, the vessel would become waterlogged, unresponsive to the helm, and then, sooner or later, turn broadside on to the storm and roll over. Or she might pitch pole, a wave lift her stern so high and drive her prow so deep that she would be upended or forced down beneath the waves. At least the latter would be quicker. Ballista wished he could stand, holding on firmly and letting his body try to move with the motion of the ship. But, just as in battle, an example had to be set, and he had to remain in his chair of office. He saw now why they had bolted it so securely to the deck. He looked down and realized that the boy Demetrius was clinging to his legs in the classic pose of a suppliant. He squeezed the boy's shoulder.

The captain dragged himself aft. Holding fast to the sternpost, he bawled the ritual words: 'Alexander lives and reigns.' As if in rejection, a jagged bolt of lightning flashed into the sea to port and a thunderclap boomed. Timing the fall of the deck, the captain half ran half slid to Ballista. All deference to rank gone, he grabbed the *curule* throne and Ballista's arm. 'Got to keep just enough way to steer. The real danger is if a steering oar breaks. Unless the storm gets worse. We should pray to our gods.'

Ballista thought of Ran, the grim sea goddess of the north, with

her drowning net, and decided that things were bad enough already.

'Are there any islands to the north that we might get in the lee of?' he shouted.

'If the storm drives us far enough north, and we are not yet with Neptune, there are the islands of Diomedes. But . . . in the circumstances . . . it may be best for us not to go there.'

Demetrius started to yell. His dark eyes were bright with terror, his words barely audible.

'. . . Stupid stories. A Greek . . . blown into the deep sea . . . islands no one has seen, full of satyrs, horses' tails growing out of their arses, huge pricks . . . threw them a slave girl . . . raped her all over . . . their only way to escape . . . swore it was true.'

'Who knows what is true . . .' shouted the captain, and disappeared forward.

At dawn, three days after the storm first hit and two days overdue, the imperial *trireme* the *Concordia* rounded the headland and pulled into the tiny semicircular harbour of Cassiope on the island of Corcyra. The sea reflected the perfect blue of a Mediterranean sky. The merest hint of the dying night's offshore breeze blew into their faces.

'Not a good start to your voyage, *Dominus*,' said the captain.

'It would have been a great deal worse without your seamanship and that of your crew,' replied Ballista.

The captain nodded acknowledgement of the compliment. Barbarian he might be, but this *Dux* had good manners. He was no coward either. He had not put a foot wrong during the storm. At times he had almost seemed to be enjoying it, grinning like a madman.

'The ship is much knocked about. I am afraid that it will be at least four days before we can put back to sea.'

'It cannot be helped,' said Ballista. 'When she is repaired, how long will it take us to get to Syria?'

'Down the west coast of Greece, across the Aegean by way of Delos, across open sea from Rhodes to Cyprus, then open sea again from Cyprus to Syria . . .' The captain frowned in thought. '. . . At

this time of year . . .' His face cleared. 'If the weather is perfect, nothing breaks on the ship, the men stay healthy, and we never stay ashore in any place for more than one night, I will have you in Syria in just twenty days, mid-October.'

'How often does a voyage go that well?' Ballista asked.

'I have rounded Cape Tainaron more than fifty times, and so far, never . . .'

Ballista laughed and turned to Mamurra, '*Praefectus*, get the staff together, and get them quartered in the posting-house of the *cursus publicus*. It's up on that hill to the left somewhere. You will need the *diplomata*, the official passes. Take my body servant with you.'

'Yes, *Dominus*.'

'Demetrius, come with me.'

Without being ordered, his bodyguard, Maximus, also fell in behind Ballista. They said nothing but exchanged a rueful grin. 'First, we will visit the injured.'

Thankfully, no one had been killed or lost overboard. The eight injured men were lying on the deck towards the prow: five rowers, two deckhands and one of Ballista's staff, a messenger. All had broken bones. A doctor had already been sent for. Ballista's was a courtesy call. A word or two with each, a few low-denomination coins, and it was over. It was necessary; Ballista had to travel to Syria with this crew.

Ballista stretched and yawned. No one had got much sleep since the night of the storm. He looked around, squinting in the bright early morning sunshine. Every detail of the bleak, ochre mountains of Epirus could be made out a couple of miles away, across the Ionian Straits. He ran his hand over four days' growth of beard and through his hair, which stood up stiff from his head, full of sea salt. He knew he must look like everyone's memory of every statue of a northern barbarian they had ever seen – although, in the vast majority of statues, the northern barbarian was either in chains or dying. But before he could shave and bathe, there was one more duty to perform.

'That must be the temple of Zeus, just up there.'

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The priests of Zeus were waiting on the steps of the temple. They had seen the battered *trireme* pull into harbour. They could not have been more welcoming. Ballista produced some high-denomination coins, and the priests produced the necessary incense and a sacrificial sheep to fulfil the vows for safe landfall which Ballista had very publicly made at the height of the storm. One of the priests inspected the sheep's liver and pronounced it auspicious. The gods would enjoy dining off the smoke from the burnt bones wrapped in fat while the priests enjoyed a more substantial roast meal later. That Ballista generously waived his rights to a portion was generally thought pleasing to man and gods.

As they left the temple, one of those small, silly problems that come with travel occurred. The three of them were alone, and none of them knew precisely where the posting-house was.

'I have no intention of spending all morning wandering over those hills,' said Ballista. 'Maximus, would you walk down to the *Concordia* and get some directions?'

Once the bodyguard was out of earshot, Ballista turned to Demetrius. 'I thought I would wait until we were alone. What was all that stuff you were ranting during the storm about myths and islands full of rapists?'

'I . . . do not remember, *Kyrios*.' The youth's dark eyes avoided Ballista's gaze. Ballista remained silent and then, suddenly, the boy started talking hurriedly, the words tumbling out. 'I was scared, talking nonsense, just because I was frightened – the noise, the water. I thought we were going to die.'

Ballista looked steadily at him. 'The captain was talking about the islands of Diomedes when you started. What was he saying?'

'I do not know, *Kyrios*.'

'Demetrius, the last time I checked, you were my slave, my property. Did not one of your beloved ancient writers describe a slave as "a tool with a voice"? Tell me what the captain and you were talking about.'

'He was going to tell you the myth of the island of Diomedes. I wanted to stop him. So I interrupted him and told the story of the island of satyrs. It is in *The Description of Greece* by Pausanias.

I meant to show that, seductive as they are – even men as educated as the writer Pausanias have fallen for them – all such stories are unlikely to be true.' The boy stopped, embarrassed.

'So what is the myth of the islands of Diomedes?'

The boy's cheeks flushed. 'It is just a silly story.'

'Tell me,' commanded Ballista.

'Some say that after the Trojan War the Greek hero Diomedes did not go home but settled on two remote islands in the Adriatic. There is a sanctuary there dedicated to him. All round it sit large birds with big, sharp beaks. The legend has it that, when a Greek lands, the birds remain calm. But if a barbarian should try to land, they fly out and dive through the air trying to kill him. It is said they are the companions of Diomedes, who were transformed into birds.'

'And you wanted to spare my feelings?' Ballista threw his head back and laughed. 'Obviously, no one has told you. In my barbarian tribe, we do not really go in for feelings – or only when very drunk.'