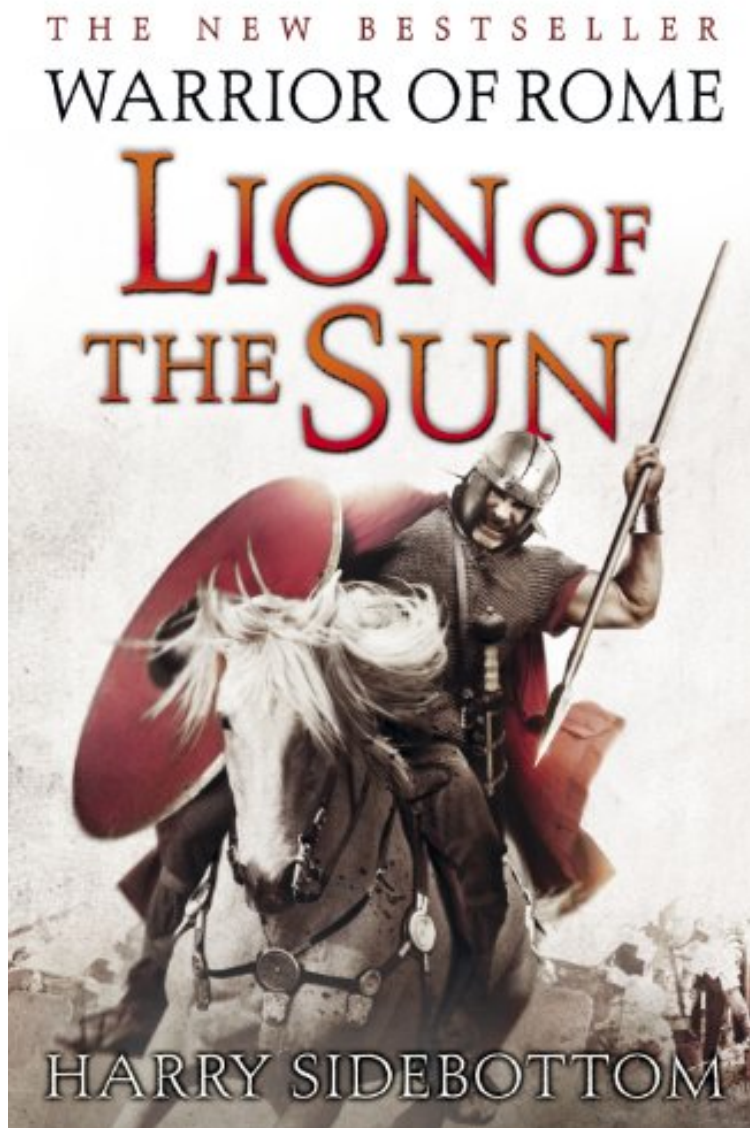


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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurWarrior of Rome III: Lion of the Sun by Harry Sidebottom is the bestselling third instalment in the Warrior of Rome series.Mesopotamia, AD 260Betrayed by his most trusted adviser, the Roman Emperor Valerian has been captured by the Sassanid barbarians. The shame of the vanquished beats down mercilessly like the white sun, as the frail old emperor prostrates himself before Shapur, King of Kings. Ballista looks on helplessly, but vows under his breath to avenge those who have brought the empire to the brink of destruction with their treachery. One day, maybe not soon, but one day, I will kill you . . . But first he must decide what price he will pay for his own freedom. Only the fearless and only those whom the gods will spare from hell can now save the empire from a catastrophic ending.Ballista, the Warrior of Rome,

faces his greatest challenge yet. Dr Harry Sidebottom is a leading authority on ancient warfare - he applies his knowledge with a spectacular flair for sheer explosive action and knuckle-whitening drama. Fans of Bernard Cornwell will love Sidebottom's recreation of the ancient world. Praise for Harry Sidebottom: 'Sidebottom's prose blazes with searing scholarship' The Times 'The best sort of red-blooded historical fiction' Andrew Taylor, author of *The American Boy* Dr. Harry Sidebottom is Fellow of St Benets Hall, and Lecturer at Lincoln College, Oxford - where he specializes in ancient warfare and classical art. Extrait By the same author WARRIOR OF ROME BOOK ONE Fire in the East WARRIOR OF ROME BOOK TWO King of Kings Copyright To Lisa, with all my love Gone is the trust to be placed in oaths; I cannot understand if the gods you swore by then no longer rule, or if men live by new standards of what is right? Euripides, *Medea*, 49094 Prologue Mesopotamia, North of the City of Carrhae, Spring AD260

The emperor blinked as he stepped out into the bright sunshine. He seemed to wince as the court official called out his full title in Latin. Imperator Caesar Publius Licinius Valerianus Augustus, Pius Felix, Pater Patriae, Germanicus Maximus, Invictus, Restitutor Orbis. At a sign, a horse was led forward. Its bridle shone with silver and gold, and its trappings were imperial purple. Needing no prompting, the elderly emperor walked to where the horse waited. As so many times before in the last few days, he got down on one knee, then the other. With a momentary pause, which might be excused in someone his age, he got down on all fours, his elbows in the dust. What seemed an age passed. The horse shifted and exhaled through its lips, the noise loud in the quiet camp. The sun was hot on the emperor's back. The sound of another man walking towards the horse broke the near-silence. Out of the corner of his eye, the emperor could see two purple boots. Deliberately, the left one was raised and placed on his neck. As many times before, its owner let some of his weight come down through the boot before he spoke. This is the truth, not what the Romans depict in their sculptures and paintings, he declared, then swung himself into the saddle, his weight hard upon his imperial mounting block. I am the Mazda-worshipping divine Shapur, King of Kings of Aryans and non-Aryans, of the race of the gods, son of the Mazda-worshipping divine Ardashir, King of Kings of the Aryans, of the race of the gods, grandson of the King Papak, of the house of Sasan; I am the lord of the Aryan nation. You mighty, look on my works and tremble. Ballista, the Roman general from beyond the borders in the far north, lay full length in the dust and watched. His reluctant proskynesis, or posture of adoration, was enforced by guards and the threat of a beating or worse and echoed by the rest of the Roman high command. Successianus the Praetorian Prefect, Cledonius the ab Admissionibus, Camillus the commander of Legio VI Gallicana everyone of importance who had been with the field army they were all there. The world had been turned upside down, the whole cosmos was shaken. For the first time, a Roman emperor had been captured by the barbarians. Ballista could feel the outrage and horror of his commilitones as they were forced to witness the humiliation of Valerian the pious, lucky, invincible emperor of the Romans, the restorer of the world on his knees and dressed as a slave. Four days earlier, Valerian had been captured. He had been betrayed by the companion he most trusted, the Comes Sacrarum Largitionum Macrianus the Lambe. The Count of the Sacred Largess had arranged everything. His younger son, Quietus, had led the aged emperor and his army into a trap and then abandoned them. Ballista, belly to the ground, furious in his abasement, thought of the repulsive youth Quietus, by now safely back in the Roman city of Samosata, and he repeated to himself a vow he had made twice before: One day, maybe not soon, but one day, I will kill you. Shapur caracoled his mount, its hooves plunging and stamping dangerously close to the elderly man on the ground. Then the Sassanid King of Kings paced his horse along the line of his own courtiers, noblemen and priests and rode away, laughing. Slowly, heavily, Valerian began to get to his feet. The butts of spears, freely wielded, encouraged the Comites Augusti to do the same. As he hauled himself up, Ballista looked at the Sassanid courtiers. There, prominent among the priests, was the Persian youth whom Ballista had known as Bagoas when the boy had been his slave. How the wheel of fortune turns. Was the youth smiling at him behind that black beard? The sight of Bagoas turned Ballista's thoughts to his familia. Had his ex-slaves Calgacus, Maximus and Demetrius made it to safety? Were they now also safe in Samosata? Or were they already on the road to Antioch? Antioch, where Ballista's two young sons and wife waited, all unaware. The pain of thinking of them was almost unbearable. Ballista spoke in his heart to the high god of his northern youth: Allfather, Death-blinder, Deep Hood, Fulfiller of Desire, Woden-born as I am, hear my prayer: I will give whatever is necessary, do whatever it takes, but let me return to them return to them whatever the cost. PART ONE Captivus (The East, Spring/Summer AD260) What is it like to lose one's native land? Is it a grievous loss? Euripides, *Phoenissae*, 3878 I Maximus lay motionless watching the Persians. They were in front of and below him, towards the middle of the small upland meadow where three

paths came together. They were not above forty paces away. He could see them clearly: in the pale moonlight, men and horses were solid, dark-grey silhouettes. There were twenty-one Sassanid cavalymen. Maximus had counted them several times. The Sassanids were confident. They had dismounted and were talking quietly. They were unavoidably in the way. Maximus raised his eyes to check the position of the sickle-shaped, three-night-old moon. There was not much of the night left. With northern Mesopotamia overrun with Persian patrols, Maximus and the others had to be safe behind the walls of Zeugma by dawn. There was no time to retrace their steps or to cast about for another path which ran eastwest through the high country. If the Persians did not move on within half an hour, the Romans would have to try and fight their way through. It did not promise well. They were outnumbered three to one. Demetrius had never been much of a one in a fight, and old Calgacus was wounded. Sure, but it did not promise well at all. Moving slowly, hardly moving his head a fraction, Maximus looked over at Calgacus. The old Caledonian was lying on his left side, favouring his bandaged right arm. His great domed, balding skull blended well with the white rocks. Maximus was fond of Calgacus. They had been together a long time nineteen years, since Maximus had been bought in as a slave bodyguard to the familia of Ballista. Of course, Calgacus had been with Ballista since the latter's childhood among the Angles of Germania. Calgacus was a sound man. Maximus was fond of him, although not as fond as he would be of a good hunting dog. Maximus studied his companion, the dark lines of his wrinkled forehead and the black pools of his sunken cheeks. Truth be told, Maximus was worried. Sure, Calgacus was tough. But he had seemed old nearly twenty years before. Now he was wounded, and the last four days must have taken it out of the old bastard. Four days earlier, they had watched Ballista ride out from the trapped army, one of the five comites accompanying the emperor Valerian to his ill-fated meeting with the Sassanid King of Kings Shapur. They had done what their patronus Ballista had commanded. As the imperial party rode west, they had crossed the perimeter to the south and doubled back behind the eastern slope of the hill. The small group of horsemen Maximus, Calgacus and Demetrius, Ballista's Greek secretary, along with eight Dalmatian troopers had made no great distance north when they were challenged by a Sassanid picket. Maximus, the only one who could speak Persian, had shouted out the password, which Ballista had discovered from Quietus, the traitor who had led the Roman army into the trap: Peroz-Shapur. The Sassanids were suspicious. They had been told to let through only one party of Roman horsemen heading north and shouting, The victory of Shapur, and one had already passed. Yet they drew back, their dark eyes scowling, their hands on their weapons. Maximus and the others had ridden on. Not too fast, so as not to look as if they were fleeing; not too slowly as to appear to be flaunting themselves. Against every instinct for self-preservation, they kept to a gentle canter. Behind them, a lone rider, baggy clothes flapping, horse kicking up puffs of dust, had raced across the plain. He spurred up to the Persian picket. There was gesticulating, shouting. The easterners kicked their boots into the flanks of their horses. They gave tongue to a high, ululating cry. The chase was on. Pushing hard, Maximus and the others had galloped out of the valley of tears. They did not see Valerian, Ballista and the other comites hauled from their mounts and, dusty and bloodied, hustled away into captivity. They had no time to spare a glance for the remainder of the Roman field army of the east, surrounded and hopeless on the hill. They had a large party of Sassanid light cavalry only just over two bowshots behind them. They rode hard to the hills of the north-west. Darkness had saved them. It seemed an eon coming, then all at once it was there. A dark, dark night; the night before the new moon. Calgacus, whom Ballista had chosen to be in charge, had ordered them to double-back to the south-east. After a time, he had found a place for them to lie up. The land here was rolling hills, sometimes bunching into mountains. On the flank of one of these lay a hollow, deep and wide enough to hide eleven men and horses. There was a small stream nearby. As he rubbed down Pale Horse, the mount that Ballista had entrusted to him, Maximus approved of the Caledonians choice. His hands working hard, he tried not to think about the grey geldings owner; once his owner, now his patronus, the friend he had left behind. Maximus had been woken the following morning by the sound of goat bells. Despite the many years since he had been taken as a slave out of his native Hibernia and brought to the southlands, goat bells somehow still sounded exotic. Although alien, they were usually reassuring, speaking of a gentle, timeless Mediterranean order. That morning, they had not been. They were drawing closer. Looking round, Maximus saw that everyone other than old Calgacus was still asleep. The Caledonian was stretched out on the ground, peering over the lip of their hiding place. Maximus had scrambled up next to him and risked a quick look over the top. It was a small flock, no more than twenty head, strung out behind a lead animal. They were coming to the stream to drink. The purposeful tread of the leader would take them right by the hollow, would give the goatherd a perfect view of the fugitives. Maximus had been surprised when Calgacus

gestured for him to go to the far end of the hollow. The goats were close, the tinkling of their bells loud. As Maximus moved past, two or three of the Dalmatians stirred. He motioned them to silence. In position now, he looked back at Calgacus. Unhurriedly, Calgacus rose to his feet and stepped up over the lip of the hollow. He stood still, hands empty by his sides. Pulling himself up, Maximus peeked over the top. Through the legs of the animals, he saw the goatherd. He was an elderly man with a huge beard and the air of a patriarch. He was leaning on a staff, calmly regarding Calgacus. The goatherd's untroubled manner suggested that ugly old

Caledonians or even daemons popped up out of every other gully he passed. Good day, grandfather, said Calgacus. For a time the goatherd did not respond. Maximus had begun to wonder if he did not speak Greek.

He was wearing baggy eastern-style trousers, but then, everyone in Mesopotamia did. Good day, my child, the local replied at last. Maximus felt an urge to laugh building inside him. Is it safe to be out with the goats with the Sassanids all around? The goatherd considered Calgacus's question, weighing it up. I keep to the higher hills. The goats must drink. If the Persians see me, they may not kill me. What can you do? The local had his back almost completely to Maximus. Now the latter saw the point of Calgacus's silent instruction.

Quietly, he stood. As Calgacus glanced over, he touched the hilt of his sword. There was a pause before the

Caledonian gave a tiny shake of his head. May the gods hold their hands over you, grandfather, said Calgacus. With due deliberation, the goatherd turned his patriarchal gaze first on Maximus then back to Calgacus. I think they may do already. The staff tapped the lead goat on the rump. The herder turned to go.

Above the swelling tinkle of bells, he called back, May the gods hold their hands over you, my children.

Maximus stepped over to Calgacus. If they catch him, the reptiles will torture him. Not many men could keep a secret under that. The old Caledonian shrugged. What can you do? Maximus laughed. How true, my child, how true. Shut the fuck up, and take the next watch, replied Calgacus affably. They had saddled up at dusk. With the true night came thousands of stars and the thinnest of thin new moons. According to the ways of his people, Maximus made a wish on the new moon, a wish he could never divulge, for certain to do so would spoil its purpose. Calgacus had led them to the north-west. With two riders out in front, they took it easy. There could not be many miles to the Euphrates. Unless the Sassanids intervened, they would be in

Samosata well before dawn. They had been travelling for some hours, their hopes rising, when, as the malignant gods willed it, the intervention came. A Persian challenge, loud in the night. A cry of alarm, then further shouts in an eastern-sounding language. Calgacus circled his arm, wheeling the tiny column; everyone booted their horses. All around was the rattle of hooves, the ringing of equipment and, from behind, the roar of pursuit. Maximus had sensed as much as seen the solid black line of an arrow as it shot past him, accelerating ahead into the night. A second later, he had heard the wisp of an arrow passing.

Momentarily, he wondered if it was another unseen arrow or the sound of the first. Shrugging this germ of a huge idea out of his mind, he slung his shield over his back. As he rode, it banged painfully into his neck and back. At this short range, an arrow would probably punch clean through its linden boards, but somehow its

weight and discomfort made him feel a little better. They galloped on, over the pale, rolling hills, round dark, up-thrust mountains, past gloomy vineyards and orchards, through burnt hamlets and by abandoned farms. They crashed through small, upland streams; their beds stony, the water no more than hoof-high. It is hard to outride men in fear for their lives. The clamour of pursuit had dropped back, faded to inaudibility

beneath the sounds of their own movement. One more rise, and Calgacus signalled a halt. All the men dropped to the ground, taking the weight from their horses' backs. Maximus looked round, counting. There were too few men in the pale light, just seven of them. Four of the Dalmatian troopers were gone. Had they

been killed? Had they been taken? Or had they chosen a different path, either heroically, to lead the Sassanids away, or out of ignorance and terror? Neither Maximus nor anyone else in the party would ever know. They had vanished in the night. Calgacus had handed his reins to the Greek boy Demetrius and was walking back to the brow of the hill. Hurriedly, Maximus did the same. Keeping low, they gazed back the way they had come. The Sassanids had not given up. Not much above half a mile to the north, strung out at no great interval, torches flared across the hills. Persistent fuckers, said Maximus. Aye, agreed Calgacus.

Having lost sight of us, they have thrown out a cordon to sweep the country. In silence the two men watched the easterners ride over the hills towards them. The undulating line of torches resembled a great snake coiling sideways, a huge mythical draco. If they want to stay in touch with each other, they will have to go slowly, said Maximus. It will be fine for us. Maybe, said Calgacus, but if they get close we will try the trick Ballista used the time we were chased before the siege of Arete. Memories jumbled into Maximus's thoughts: waiting in a stand of trees down by the river, the smell of mud, a scatter of stones, a desperate fight in a gully. When Romulus died, said Calgacus patiently. Maximus was grateful for the hint. Although the

Hibernian had a high opinion of himself, it did not run to priding himself on his powers of recall. On that occasion, Ballista had tied a lantern to a packhorse. His standard bearer Romulus was to lead the Persians away while the rest of Ballistas men rode to safety. After a time, Romulus was to turn the packhorse loose and make his escape, but something had gone wrong. He must have left it too late. Antigonus had come across Romulus a few days later or what was left of him staked out and mutilated. It had not ended well for Antigonus either: not long afterwards, a stone shot by a siege engine had taken his head off. Now, Maximus felt a rush of pity for his companions who had been lost along the way. He steadied himself. As he had sometimes heard Ballista say: Men die in war. It happens. The seven remaining horsemen had pushed south. They rode hard, but not flat out. The stars wheeled and the moon tracked across the sky. There was no need for dangerous tricks with lanterns. Gradually, the lights of the Sassanids had fallen behind. After a time they could be seen no more. Calgacus had kept them moving, when they could, avoiding the skyline, always aiming south-west. When dawns rosy fingers showed in the sky, the elderly Caledonian had begun to hunt for a place to lie up. Eventually, when the sun was almost up, he turned aside into an olive grove which ran up the flank of a hill. They had dismounted and pushed through straggly vines and up under the trees. The dappled sunlight was warm on Maximus face when Calgacus shook him awake. Unnecessarily, the Caledonian had put his finger to his lips. Silently, Maximus rose and followed him to a space where the gnarled silver-grey trunks were more widely spaced. They looked down to the valley floor. One thin column of dust followed by a wide, dense one. A solitary rider was being hunted down by at least thirty horsemen. No one in the olive grove spoke. In the randomness of his fear, the hunted man was riding directly towards them. The eye of Cronus is on us, muttered Demetrius. The others said nothing. As the fugitive drew closer, they saw that he wore a light-blue tunic. Gods below, said Maximus, its one of ours. The lost Dalmatian trooper was almost in arrow shot when his horse stumbled. The man lost his seat, slid forward down the animals neck. Trying to regain its balance, the horse plunged. The trooper fell. His momentum made him bounce once, high in the air, then, limbs flailing, he crashed to the ground. He scrambled to his feet, his pursuers surging all around him. There was a moment of stillness: the Dalmatian stood, the Sassanids in a ring around him. The troopers horse ran away to the right. One of the Sassanids followed to catch it. Slowly, almost apologetically, the trooper drew his sword. He threw it down. The mounted men laughed. One spurred forward. The trooper turned, started to run. A long blade flashed in the sun. There was a scream, a spray of bright blood, and the Dalmatian fell. The Sassanid cantered back into the circle. The wounded man got to his feet again. Another horseman rushed in. Again the flash of a blade. More blood, and again the man went down. Maximus looked across at Calgacus. The Caledonian shook his head. After the third pass, the Dalmatian remained on the ground, curled up, his arms covering his head. Their sport spoilt, the Sassanids called out insults, imprecations. Their prey remained down in the reddened dust. The Sassanid who had gone to the right returned, leading the troopers horse. One in the ring of horsemen called an order, and the men unslung their bows. Another word of command and they drew and released. Almost as one, the arrowheads thumped into the Dalmatians body. The watchers on the hill had not moved. A Persian slid from the saddle. Tossing his reins to a companion, he walked over to the corpse. With his boot on the body, he pulled out the arrows. The shaft of one had snapped; the others he handed back to their owners. The riders laughed and joked, teasing each other about their shooting. One carefully tied back his long hair with a bright strip of material. Maximus became aware of his sword in his hand. He had no memory of unsheathing it. He held it behind his back so that it would not catch the sun. He forced himself to look away, at the others. Their whole attention was on the foot of the hill. They were all willing the enemy to leave. Finally, when the watchers had thought they could bear no more, when even discovery and doomed violence had seemed better than the agony of waiting, a Persian shouted a word of command. The easterner on foot remounted, and the troop trotted off the way they had come. Around him, Maximus had heard several men exhale noisily. He realized that he was one of them. Bastards, he said. Calgacus had not taken his eyes off the Sassanids. And would our boys have behaved better? Maximus shrugged. It had not proved easy to sleep having just seen one of their commilitones killed in cold blood, his butchered remains lying in view. Calgacus had moved the men further up the hill. It had done no good. A careless glance through the green leaves still revealed a glimpse of soiled blue tunic. The Greek youth Demetrius had said they should retrieve the mans body, offer him proper burial, at least a coin for the ferryman. Calgacus had overruled him. The Persians might return, they would be suspicious. But, Demetrius had argued, others might be drawn to the sight. Calgacus shrugged: it was the lesser of two evils. Twilight had found them more than ready to move. Calgacus had outlined the new plan. Since the gods clearly did not care for the idea of them reaching Samosata in the north, they would go west

to Zeugma. They would soon come to a broad, high plain, almost twenty miles across, then a range of hills from which the Euphrates would be visible. They could do it in one night. Once in Zeugma, they would be safe. They had passed through the town on the march out. Its walls were sound, manned by the four thousand men of Legio IIII Scythica and another six thousand regulars. Best of all, they were commanded by the ex-consul Valens, and he was no friend of either the Sassanids nor treacherous bastards like Quietus, his brother Macrianus and their scheming father Macrianus the Lambe. Calgacus had been about to give the word to set off when, boots slipping in the powdery soil, Demetrius ran up through the trees. When he reached them, he doubled up, panting like a dog after a run in the hot sun. One of the troopers, a good-looking man, helped him up into the saddle. Just a coin, a handful of dust. Demetrius spoke to Calgacus, his tone defensive. I know if the reptiles come it will show that we have been here. But I had to. I could not let his soul wander for ever. Calgacus just nodded and gave the word to move out. It had taken much longer to reach the plain than the Caledonian had suggested. When they did, it seemed to stretch on without end. On and on they had ridden, the stars high above as distant and heartless as the eyes of a triumphant mob. On either side, flat, grey nothingness. The men were bone-tired. They had lived with constant fear for too long. In the face of the plains immensity, even Maximus had felt his composure slipping, his mind summoning up ghastly imaginings. After a time, it had seemed to him that it was the plain that moved while they stood still. It was like those stories Demetrius told: they were already dead, their sins on earth had been judged. They had been sent to Tartarus and it was their fate to ride this dark plain for ever, never reaching safety, never again seeing the sun. Yet the grey light of pre-dawn had come all too soon. It revealed the hills in the west, but they were still a way off. All around them lay the emptiness of the plain. There were a few shrubs, the odd wind-bent tree; nothing to hide them. About a mile ahead, stark and incongruous, was a lone building. Anyone with any pretensions to fieldcraft knows not to hide in a solitary building; it is the first place searchers will look. Nevertheless, Calgacus led them straight towards it. There was nowhere else. The building was a large, rectangular mud-brick barn. It had contained animals and people but now it stood empty. They led their horses in by the one, wide door. Inside, they hoisted a lookout up on to the beams. Some of the tiles were missing; Calgacus pushed out a few more in order to be able to see all around. The elevation increased the depth of his view. The other men rubbed down their horses and searched for food. There was none. There was a well outside, but there was always the possibility that it might be poisoned. They still had water in their bottles, but they had eaten their last scraps of food the night before. They could cut grass for the horses, but the men would have to go hungry. Maximus had taken the second watch. He had to shift around the roof to keep an eye on all approaches, and it was just as well: falling asleep would bring with it the risk of a nasty fall. Another of Demetrius's stories floated into the Hibernians mind. On Circes island, one of Odysseus's crew had fallen asleep on the roof of the palace. He had tumbled off and broken his neck. Sometimes when Demetrius told the story, the man had been bewitched and turned into a pig. There was a thought roast pork: hot, blistered crackling, the fat running down your chin. Infernal gods, Maximus was hungry. Somewhat distracted by the demands of his stomach, it had taken Maximus a few moments to take on board what his eyes were seeing. The peasant couple with the donkey, the man riding, the woman walking behind, were quite close by. Maximus dropped down from the beams. He woke Demetrius and gave him a leg-up into the roof. Turning, he found Calgacus on his feet. A word or two of explanation passed between the two men, and they walked outside. At the sight of the strangers, the peasant stopped his donkey with a word and his wife, her eyes downcast and inattentive, with a stick. His tattooed face registered no surprise. Like the goatherd the other day, thought Maximus, they bred them incurious out here. Good day, grandfather, Calgacus said in Greek. The peasant replied with a muted flow of words in a language neither of the other men understood. Now they were closer, they could see that it was not tattoos on the man's face but dirt ingrained in every line. Maximus tried a greeting in Persian. An emotion seemed to run across the peasant's face. It was gone before Maximus was even sure it had been there. Quietly the woman began to sob. The peasant hit her with his stick. With gestures and broken sentences in a range of languages, Maximus asked if the couple had any food. The man's response, which involved much eloquent waving of hands and minimal grunting of incomprehensible words, was an extended denial. As far as Maximus could make out, riders had come from the east; they had taken all the food, beaten the peasant and his wife. They had done something else, too, taken something, a child. Boy or girl, it would have not gone well for them. The woman started to weep again. She quietened at the sight of the stick. Calgacus invited them into the barn. The peasant made it clear that he and his wife would remain outside. There they sat, hands on their knees, up against the wall of what could well have been their own home. As the sun arced across the sky,

they moved around to keep in the shade. At intervals, the woman wept. Depending on how his emotions took him, the peasant would either soothe or threaten her. Maximus spent much of the day watching them, grieving for their naked misery. Even a man of violence such as himself could sometimes see the evil, naked face of the god of war Mars, Ares, Woden, call him what you will: war is hell. As the day faded, the men had tacked up, led their horses outside and swung into their saddles. Calgacus led them off to the west. Neither the peasant nor his wife showed any emotion at their departure. Finally they had reached the hills. Finding an upward path despite the darkness, they took it. As the rocky slopes cut down their vision, they proceeded cautiously, placing two men out on point duty, fifty or more paces in front. And then they had come across the Persians. Maximus looked away from Calgacus and back down at the enemy. The Sassanids were relaxed, perfectly unaware that they were being observed. They stood around where the three paths met, passing a wineskin back and forth. One of them raised his voice in song: Dreaming when Dawns left hand was in the sky I heard a Voice within the tavern cry, Awake my Little ones, and fill the Cup Before Lifes Liquor in its Cup be dry. The Persians laughed. Thats it, you goat-eyed bastards, thought Maximus, drink up every drop. Before Dawns left hand is anywhere in the sky, in the next quarter of an hour, if you dont move, we are going to try and kill you and we want you as drunk as possible when the sharp steel gets close. Even if they did move, it was quite likely there would be a fight. If the Sassanids took the path to the north, all well and good. If they went west, the Romans might hope to follow and, once out of the hills, somewhere down on the narrow plain before the Euphrates, slip past into Zeugma. But if the Sassanids rode east, then there was no choice, there must be bloodshed. One of the dark-grey shadows changed shape: a Persian leapt up into his saddle. He too sang, a voice less mellifluous than that of the first, but with a ring of authority: And, as the cock crew, those who stood before The Tavern shouted Open then the Door! You know how little while we have to stay, And, once departed, may return no more. The Sassanids all mounted. They milled, sorting themselves into position. Maximus, palms slick, held his breath. The eastern troop clattered off to the north. II Demetrius, as so often, was at the back holding the horses. As well as his own and Calgacuss mounts, he had the reins of the grey gelding Ballista had insisted that Maximus ride. In the near-darkness, every time Pale Horse shifted, stamped a hoof or just breathed loudly, thoughts of the animals owner crowded, insistent and importuning, into Demetriuss mind. There was pity, a terrible aching pity, for the big blond barbarian who had once owned the young Greek as surely as he had owned the horse. And there was gratitude. Enslavement and his first three years of servitude were things Demetrius preferred not to think about. It had been such a bad time that usually he found it easier to give out, sometimes even to pretend to himself that he had been born into slavery if you have known nothing else, how can it be that bad? After three years he had been purchased as a secretary to Ballista. The big barbarian had treated him well for nine years. He had given Demetrius no reason to dwell on the old saying A slave should not wait for his masters hand. Finally, four days earlier, on a burnt hillside, surrounded by the remnants of a defeated army, Ballista had given Demetrius the thing he wanted above all others: his freedom. A noise from further up the path brought Demetrius back to the fearful present. He could see nothing. The narrow upland path was blocked by the remaining four Dalmatian troopers and their horses. The stars and young moon gave little light. Suddenly, there was a rattle of dislodged stones. Fear rose inside him, gripping his throat as he watched the troopers ready their weapons. Easy, boys. Maximuss words were soft. The troopers relaxed. Demetrius sighed with relief. They mounted up and got moving. They rode across a small meadow where three paths came together. Demetrius balled his fist, thumb between index and forefinger, in a symbolic gesture to avert evil. Crossroads were always bad places; you only had to think of Oedipus encountering his father. A crossroads where three paths converged, and darkness; it was hard to imagine a situation more likely to draw the terrible three-headed goddess Hecate or her dreadful minions up from the underworld. After they had traversed the meadow, the hills rose up again. In the unearthly light, the white rocks and black shadows rendered the slopes into shattered or crazed mosaics. Demetrius rode just behind Calgacus and Maximus. He felt safer near them. The soft gleam of Pale Horse sent his thoughts back to Ballista. How had it gone for him at the hands of the Persians? The northerner had defied Shapur the King of Kings for months at Arete, had slaughtered thousands of his warriors below the city walls. He had routed a Sassanid army at Circesium the waters of the Chaboras had run red with eastern blood. Worse, much worse, he had defiled the sacredness of fire, which the Zoroastrian Sassanids worshipped, by burning the corpses of their dead after the battle. It was unlikely things had gone well for him. Maximus and Calgacus had their heads together and were muttering low. The Hibernian pulled Pale Horse out of line. As he passed, Demetrius smiled over. Maximus made no response; his eyes were far away, as distant as those of a distracted child.

The grey horse standing there turned Demetrius's thoughts yet again to Ballista. On that scorched hillside, moments before they had left, Ballista had embraced Maximus, had whispered something in his ear. The Hibernian had promised he would die before he let anyone harm Ballista's two sons. At the memory, Demetrius felt a stab of jealousy. He pushed it away as unworthy. He was not a fighter. He did not have man-killing hands. Of course Ballista would ask his old companion in arms to put his body between the hostile blades and the bodies of his sons. Isangrim had just turned eight and Dernhelm was not yet two; both were beautiful, and both now fatherless. A flash of movement to his right caught Demetrius's eye. He stared hard. Nothing: just rocks and shadows. He was looking away when he glimpsed it again. Yes, there it was. High up on the slope. About a discus throw away. A movement. Then he saw it clearly: a dark figure, a man on foot moving parallel to them. Demetrius looked round at his companions. No one else seemed aware of the follower on the hill. Maximus was nowhere in sight. When Demetrius looked back, it took a few moments to spot the shadow again. There he was. Shabby, grey-black clothes, with maybe a hint of red. He flitted from rock to rock. No noise came down from him. With a chill in his heart, Demetrius saw the follower's face was dark, terribly dark. It was black. Grey-eyed Athena watch over us, he mouthed. This was no mortal that stalked them but a daemon or ghost. Some ghosts were thin, insubstantial wraiths. If you tried to grab them, they slipped through your arms like smoke. Such ghosts were an annoyance, but they could not harm you. The daemon on the hill was not one of them. This ghost was one of the terrible ones. This was an embodied daemon, something terrible and dangerous, something like Lykas, who had slain old and young alike in Temesa; like Polykritos the Aitolian, who after nine months had risen from his tomb to seize his hermaphrodite son and tear him limb from limb, then devoured his body. Demetrius fought down the rising tide of horrible ghost stories within him. Sometimes wide reading and a retentive memory could be a curse. He peered wildly about. The faces of the others betrayed nothing. Where was Maximus? Demetrius, urging his mount forward to come alongside Calgacus, gazed again at the thing on the hill. As he did so, it changed shape, dropping to all fours. Swiftly, it ran like a wolf or a dog to the next cover. From out of the darkness, clear even above the noise of the horsemen, came the bray of a donkey. The beast reared up, briefly standing on two legs looking around, sniffing the air before slipping to the ground and slithering like a snake behind a rock. Pallas Athena and all the gods of Olympus hold your hands over us. Demetrius was too scared to pray out loud. This was worse than a daemon. Far, far worse. They were being stalked by a shape-changing empusa, one of Hecates' ghastly servants from the underworld. Hecate, the dark goddess, none of whose desires were ever denied by Zeus. Demetrius had read in Philostratus that the holy man Apollonius of Tyana had once routed an empusa with just a shout. Demetrius was too scared to shout. Anyway, would a shout not bring the Sassanids down on them? The young Greek leant over, almost overbalancing from the saddle in his anxiety. He grabbed Calgacus's arm. Quiet, you young fool, the Caledonian hissed. Eyes wide, Demetrius gazed, silent but uncomprehending. Why was Calgacus doing nothing? Where was Maximus? Why did these barbarians not do something? Had they no concept of what an empusa could do? As they rode slowly on, Demetrius saw that Calgacus was watching the thing on the hill out of the corner of his eye. The Caledonian was rigid with expectation. His mount tossed its head as it sensed the tension. Up on the hill, higher up the slope, there was another movement. Another dark shape slipped over the skyline. It crept slowly down towards where the first was hidden. Could there be two of the creatures? Darkness, fatigue and fear were taking their toll on Demetrius. Gods below, what if the things hunted in packs? The first dark shape must have heard or sensed something. It suddenly stood and scanned the hillside. Then, quick as a flash, it sprang and raced away to the west. The other figure leapt up in pursuit. Stones slid out from under their feet. Dislodging others, they bounced in showers down towards the path. Calgacus booted his horse. It clattered down the path. After about fifty paces, the Caledonian brought it skidding to a halt. Belying his age, he threw himself off its back, tugged a couple of javelins from the holster on the saddle and started up the slope to cut off the fugitive. Seeing the new threat, the fugitive tried to veer back up the incline. It was no good: the second figure was already in position, ready to block any escape in that direction. Like Celtic hounds, the two pursuers coursed their prey over the stony slope. They turned him this way and that, ever closing. Stop or I will run you through, Calgacus yelled in Greek. His prey raced on. The old Caledonian drew back his arm and cast a mighty throw. The javelin winged over the fugitive's shoulder. A spark flashed as it glanced off a rock. The fugitive pulled up dead in his tracks. Calgacus grabbed his arms, twisted them behind his back, pushed him down towards the waiting horsemen. Maximus rejoined the men moments later. Fuck, that nearly killed me, he panted. Relieved beyond words, Demetrius studied the prisoner. No feast for the eyes, but he was no daemon or empusa: he was a small man, face blackened, wearing the pelt of a dark-grey wolf

and a cap of weasel skin. He too was breathing heavily. Quickly and efficiently, Maximus searched the prisoner for weapons. Finding none, he stepped back and kicked the mans legs from under him. Dont kill me! Dear gods, please dont kill me! The man spoke in Latin. It was oddly accented, like something unpractised. He was terrified. He cowered on the ground, teeth chattering. Courage, said Maximus. Death is your last worry. I am just a soldier, a Roman like you. Please dont kill me! Name? Rank? Unit? Maximus snapped out the questions. Titus Esuvius, miles, Legio III Scythica. Dont hurt me. The words tumbled out.

You are a deserter. No, no, Dominus, a scout. I am a scout. What are you doing out here? The prisoner gulped. Just trying to get back to Zeugma. Please, take me with you. Where have you come from? Maximuss questions were relentless. Again the swallowing, the slight hesitation. From the field army. Please, take me with you. Maximus glanced at Calgacus, jerked his head. The Caledonian roughly hauled the prisoner to his feet, pinned his arms behind his back. Maximus drew his sword. The blade of the short gladius shone in the pale light. Time to tell the truth. The man sobbed. I am. Please believe me. I have a family, dont hurt me. Tell me, said Maximus, have you ever been drawn to eastern religion? As he spoke, he moved forward and deftly, with one hand, unbuckled the mans belt. Fear and incomprehension played across the prisoners face. He shook his head. No, never. I dont understand. Two tugs and the mans trousers and undergarment were round his knees. No interest in, say, the goddess Artargatis? No yearning to take a trip to her temple at Hierapolis? Suspicion clouded the mans face. No, I no, never. Pity, considering whats going to happen to you. Maximus reached out and grasped the mans testicles. With the other hand, he showed him the sword. The man whimpered. They make a good living, her devotees, the Galli. Of course, they castrate themselves. And I think they use a stone blade, flint most likely. But mutatis mutandis if you survive, Im sure theyll take you in. The man was making incoherent begging noises. Now, what is it to be? Are you going to tell me the truth, or is it off to Hierapolis for you? As if a dam had broken, the words poured out. My name really is Titus Esuvius. I was born in Lutetia in Gaul. I was with a cavalry ala. We came out east for the campaign of Gordian III. I I did something wrong. I had to desert. Been with the Sassanids for years married, got a Persian family. The Lord Suren himself ordered me to Zeugma to spy out the defences. What could I do? I had no choice. Please, let me live. I want to see my children again. The stream of words was cut off when one of the Dalmatian troopers led his horse up from the rear. The reptiles are coming. The prisoner wriggled free of Calgacus. He threw himself on his knees. Please, leave me here bound and gagged I wont tell them anything. No more words. Maximuss face was set. Just as the man reached up a hand to grasp Maximuss chin in supplication, the Hibernians sword swung. A flashing hack caught the prisoner square across the neck. Blood sprayed hot. Mount up, said Calgacus. Demetrius stood near the corpse with the half-severed neck. Maximus was cleaning his blade on the dead mans wolfskin. You promised him his life, the Greek said. No, I said death was his last worry. Maximus swung up on to Pale Horse. Is that not so for all of us? They were riding flat out, the Sassanids hard on their heels. The thunder of their passing echoed back from the stony slopes on either side. At least it was simple, thought Maximus, just two choices: run or fight. No need to be thinking of clever tricks with decoys, lanterns or anything else. Nowhere to hide and nowhere to go but down the one track: just run or fight. The track twisted and turned, rose and fell as it graded across the hills. It was narrow, the surface loose and uneven. The hooves of the horses scabbled as they slid around sharp corners. More than once, riders had to grab the twin front horns of their cavalry saddles to prevent themselves being thrown. A couple of times Demetrius was nearly on the floor. The young Greek was no centaur. This cannot go on, thought Maximus. Ease up, Calgacus, he called. The body of the spy will have delayed them. Ease up, or therell be a fall, probably a pile-up. The Caledonian considered then brought his mount down to a fast canter. Maximus looked up at the sky. The night was rushing on, not much of it left. But they must be getting to the edge of the hills. After that, just a small plain, four or five miles across, and they would be safe behind the walls of Zeugma. The small figure was standing in the middle of the track as they came round the corner. Maximus and Calgacus pulled hard on their reins, thighs braced firm into the leather and wood of their saddles. They swerved round the obstruction as they drew to a stop. Behind was confusion. Demetriuss mount barged into the back of Pale Horse. Miraculously, no one had ridden down the child. Maximus scanned the slopes all around. No movement. Nothing. It couldnt be a trap. He swung a leg over Pale Horses neck and dropped to the ground. The child was a fine-looking boy, about eight years old. He had a heavy, fine neck ornament. He was crying. My mother has gone. She was scared. She said I was too slow. She has gone. Maximus held out his arms. The child hesitated for a second. Maximus knew that his battered face, the tip of his nose missing, was unlikely to be reassuring. He scooped the boy up. The child buried his face in the Hibernians shoulder. My father is on the Boule of Zeugma. He is a rich man. He will

reward you. The boy chattered in Greek. We best be moving, Calgacus said. Maximus put the boy on Pale Horse then jumped up behind him. They headed off. They had not gone far when they heard the sounds of pursuit: high, keen cries, the low rumble of many horses. Calgacus pushed the pace. The horses were slow to respond. They were as tired as the men. These four days had taken it out of them all. From the crest of a rise,

Maximus glimpsed the flat, empty greyness of the plain below; it wasn't far ahead. As the track dropped down behind him, a troopers mount stumbled. In its fatigue, it almost went crashing. If it had, it would have brought others down with it. This is no good, thought Maximus. If were out on the open plain on spent horses, the Persians will run us down as easy as catching mackerel. The horses were labouring up a straight incline. It ran for about fifty paces. The hill on the left reared up into a small, sheer cliff. Stones fallen from its face were scattered across the track. Near the top of the incline, a sizeable pile narrowed the path to single file. As good a place as any, thought Maximus. He pulled over, indicated to Calgacus to join him, and waved the others past. I think Ill be staying here a while. Maximus jumped down. He unhooked his shield from the saddle. Change horses and take the child. Calgacus said nothing. Stiffly, he dismounted, collected his own shield and, while Maximus held the heads of both horses, climbed up on the grey gelding behind the boy.

You sure? Calgacus asked. Sure. Maximus looked up at the Caledonian. Back before we left the army, I promised Ballista Id look after his boys. That is on you now. Aye, it is. Calgacus did not meet Maximuss eyes. His gaze wandered over the face of the cliff. The noise of the pursuit was clear. Say goodbye to Demetrius for me. I will. Calgacus untied the bowcase and quiver from Pale Horses saddle. He threw them down to Maximus. Keep mine as well. The noise of the pursuit swelled. Calgacus gathered Pale Horses reins, turned his head and moved on. His eyes still did not meet Maximuss but continued to look here and there over the cliff. Left alone, Maximus worked swiftly. He led the horse a little way beyond the large pile of fallen stones and, with a strip of leather, hobbled its front legs. He scooped up Calgacuss bow and quiver together with his own. He ran back and took his stand half behind the mound. He drew his sword and put it and his shield in front of him, near to hand on the ground. He propped up the quivers so he could easily reach the arrows, and the spare bow beside them. He selected an arrow, examined the straightness of its shaft, tested its point. Satisfied, he notched it, half drew his bow and sighted down the track. As he waited, time played strange tricks on Maximus. It slowed down; stopped altogether. Each breath seemed to take an age. The noise of the Sassanids grew louder, but they did not appear. The sounds seemed to fade. Maximus relaxed the bow. He counted his arrows: twenty. He looked at the stars, as unknowable as the hearts of men. They were paling. It was nearly dawn. The first two Sassanids took him by surprise. They turned the corner side by side, at a good canter. Maximus drew the bow. He aimed at the one to his right, deliberately low, intending to hit the horse. He released. Having grabbed another arrow, he saw the horse was down, its rider rolling in the dust. He shot at the other and missed. He shot again. The arrow buried itself into the horses chest. The animal somersaulted forward, its rider catapulted over its head. He crunched hard into the stony path. Another Sassanid had negotiated the first fallen horse. Sword out, he was urging his mount up the incline. Calmly, deliberately, Maximus shot him. The arrow plucked him off his horses back. The smell of blood strong in its nostrils, equine cries of pain loud in its ears, the horse bolted up past Maximus and away. The remaining Sassanids at the foot of the incline were at a standstill, unsure how many were against them, uncertain whether to go forward or withdraw. Maximus drew and released again and again. The deadly shafts whistled through the pale-grey light of pre-dawn. An easterner on foot was rushing at him from the left. Maximus dropped his bow. He crouched to scoop up his sword and his opponent loomed over him. The Sassanid held his sword over his head in a two-handed grip. The long blade started to come down in a great sweep like an axe. Uncoiling, sword out in front, Maximus drove himself forward under the blow. The sharp point of the Hibernians gladius drove into the stomach of the Sassanid. The two men were pressed together. There was a slaughterhouse stench. Maximus pushed the still-gasping easterner away. The Sassanids drew back out of sight. Under his shield, peering round the stones, Maximus could see two dead horses and two dead men. Nothing else. He counted his remaining arrows: eight. He wondered whether to run for it. Had he bought enough time for the others? No time now. A rising war cry. The Sassanids were coming again.

Maximus put down the shield, sprang to his feet and drew his bow. The Persians thundered into sight. Maximus released. He grabbed another arrow. Working as fast as he could, he poured missiles down into the enemy. An arrow sliced a hands breadth past his head. This time, the easterners at the rear were shooting over the heads of the ones in front. Maximus released again. A Persian horse went down. He shot once more. He missed. He reached for another arrow. There were none left. He took up sword and shield. There was no stopping them this time. The Sassanids were almost on him. He could see the flaring nostrils of their mounts,

hear the snap of the long streamers they wore. A small stone bounced off his helmet. He glanced up. A shower of stones was falling. Above that, the air was full of rocks. Maximus turned and ran. Stones and rocks slewed off the ground all around him. One caught him a painful blow on the shoulder. Behind him there was an awful roaring, a grinding. He had moved beyond the torrent of debris. Maximus stopped and looked back. The track was invisible behind a thick cloud of dust. He stood staring stupidly at it. Beside him, his horse whinnied, struggling against its hobble. Maximus walked over. He found he still had his sword in his hand. He sheathed it. He must have dropped his shield. He calmed the horse, untied its hobble, climbed on its back. The dust had started to drift away: the track was almost obliterated under the landslide. The Sassanids were gone; either crushed or fled. A noise above him made Maximus look up at the top of the cliff. An ugly face gingerly peered over the edge. Seeing the Hibernian, it broke into a huge smile. Try not to look so surprised. Who did you expect would save someone like you? Surely you don't think the gods love you enough to cause a landslide? I am not really sure I do, said Calgacus. And now I have to find my way down again. III His back to the wall, Ballista could not move. His thighs were pinned by those of two other men, the tribune Marcus Accius on his left, Camillus of the VI Gallicana on his right. Ballista could feel the heat coming from their bodies. His own was dripping with sweat. The air was thick and he was finding it hard to breathe. Ballista had always feared confined spaces. The subterranean cell was tiny. The majority of the senior officers of the Roman field army had been pushed into it and there was barely enough space for them all to sit. Ballista badly needed to stretch his legs, to check his cut and bloodied feet, but there was no room. The dignitas of Rome was humbled, the emperor Valerian captured, his entire army dead or surrendered. Almost all the high command had been herded like slaves into this stinking prison almost all: Valerian and his ab Admissionibus Cledonius were not there. They had been taken elsewhere, to endure further humiliations, to be gloated over at leisure. And Turpio was not there either. He was dead. Ballista had taken a last look at his friend as they left the valley of tears, a last look at his decapitated head stark on a pike. From somewhere in the crush of bodies came the voice of the Praetorian Prefect Successianus. Discipline, we must keep our discipline. These cock-sucking Sassanid reptiles do not know disciplina. Keep our disciplina and we can beat them. Over and over he muttered it. Ballista thought Successianus might be losing his mind. If so, it would be no wonder. The march south could have robbed any man of his reason. It had been two days of hell. The line of prisoners had been driven along by blows, from whips, the butts of spears and the flats of blades, sometimes the edges. Valerian had been at the head of the line, dressed as a slave, a crown of thorns digging into his aged head. His officers, loaded with chains, followed him. Their boots had been taken and they had stumbled as the sharp rocks tore their feet. Behind them had trudged the long tail of the rank and file. It had been hot, unbearably hot. Overhead, the sun was merciless. Swirling clouds of dust had blinded them, lodged in their throats, threatened to choke them. They had been terribly thirsty. Once a day they had been driven like cattle to water. Many had not had a chance to drink before they were beaten onwards. Twice, rounds of stale bread were thrown to them. Some had been too far gone to eat; others had fought over these scraps. Degradation had been added to cruelty. If a man fell out to relieve himself, the Sassanids amused themselves by jeering and throwing stones as he squatted. When a man collapsed, he was beaten to his feet. If he did not rise quickly enough, he was summarily killed. The ordinary milites had suffered worse than the officers. No residual eastern respect for rank had protected them. If a young soldier's looks, not totally obscured by the dirt and suffering, happened to catch the eye of a guard, he was hauled out of the ranks. Held down, often in full view, he was raped, sometimes repeatedly. After the assault, the victim was left lying in the dirt. Some staggered back to the column; others remained prone in the dirt. Ballista had watched as one, a fresh-faced youth not yet twenty, covered his head and waited to die. Not long after setting out, they had come upon a dry stream and the march was stopped. Glorious in purple and white raiment, with streamers floating behind, the Sassanid King of Kings had ridden up to inspect the stream. After consultation with some of his courtiers, Shapur had ordered a squad of legionaries to be forced down into the low watercourse. The banks had been ringed with horsemen. The Romans had fallen to their knees, arms out in supplication. It had done no good. To the accompaniment of mocking laughter, the defenceless men were riddled with arrows. An imperious order, a flurry of blows, and the column had been forced to march over the still-bleeding bodies of their comrades. Towards the end of the first day, they reached Edessa. The white-walled city was still holding out. The ragged line of captives was halted within arrow shot, their abjectness displayed to the defenders. Near Ballista, a tribune had wept at the tantalizing closeness of safety. Valerian had been escorted up to the eastern gate. Under duress, the elderly emperor had called for the governor. When he appeared, Valerian commanded him to surrender the city. High on the

battlements, Aurelius Dasius put his fingers to his lips and blew a kiss. Having performed proskynesis, the governor snapped a military salute and wordlessly turned away. The second day, they had been marched down to Carrhae. Across the flat plain, the city rose like a platform in the distance. Word ran down the column that Carrhae had opened its gates to the Persians. A few miles short of the city, they were brought to a halt by the temple of Nikal, the bride of Sin. The sanctuary of the moon goddess and her powerful consort was a hive of peaceful activity. Under watchful Persian eyes, local priests scurried around the banks of the sacred lake. Soon a great fire was lit and a holocaust committed. It had been hard to choose which was the more tormenting, the smell of whole animals roasting or the sight of the unattainable clear waters of the lake.

A Sassanid noble had ridden up to the bedraggled Roman officers. Laughing, he had called out in Greek, See, we treat you, our honoured guests, like the gods. They too dine on the smoke of sacrifice. The ordinary milites had been left outside the city walls. The officers were marched under an ornate gateway, through streets where the citizens were encouraged to jeer and throw things, then manhandled into the cramped, airless cell. Disciplina In the gloom, the Praetorian Prefects mutterings ran on. Ballistas legs were seized with cramp. Apologizing to Aurelian, the young Italian prefect wedged in front of him, Ballista painfully flexed them. He was weary to the bone. He wanted to shut his eyes, but he knew that when he opened them again the airless press of bodies and his inability to move would cause a wave of panic that might engulf him. On the march he had been glad enough not to be one of the rank and file, but now he would have given a lot to be with them. At least they had the night air on their faces and the delicious luxury of just a little unrestricted movement. There was the screech of a drawn bolt, and the door swung open. Two easterners, long swords in hand, scanned the crush. Which one of you is Ballista? Unwillingly, Ballista raised his hand. This was not a good turn of events. The Roman general who had slaughtered so many easterners at Arete, had defeated a Sassanid army at Circesium and had then in their eyes committed the terrible sacrilege of burning their bodies could expect only harsh hospitality from the King of Kings. You come with us. It took some time for Ballista to get out of the cell. First he had to get to his feet. This involved levering himself up by using the wall. Then the Roman officers had to clamber on top of one another, all dignitas dispelled, to clear a path. As the door shut, Ballista heard Successianus. Disciplina, keep your disciplina, the Praetorian Prefect repeated. Fuck you and your Roman disciplina, Ballista thought. I was born a warrior of the Angles. We have our own ways of facing down fear. Allfather, Deep Hood, Death-blinder, Woden-born as I am, do not let me disgrace myself or my forefathers. Two guards took Ballistas arms. Two more, weapons drawn, followed. Ballista felt the cuts on the soles of his feet open as he shuffled along. The chains fastened to his ankles threatened to trip him at every step. Movement made the manacles on his wrists and the weight of the chain that linked them hurt like all hell. He was hustled along corridor after corridor through the palace cellars. At first he tried to memorize every turn. Then he realized he had forgotten the route they had taken in getting to the cell. After that, he concentrated on not giving way to his fear. The guards opened the door to another cell. They pushed him inside, surprisingly gently. He did not fall full length, merely staggered. The door was shut. The bolts slammed. Standing still, Ballista took stock. The cell smelled musty but clean. There were no windows, so it was completely dark. Squatting into position for an ungainly crawl, Ballista explored his new prison: about six paces by six, bare earth floor, rough stone walls, nothing movable, nothing that could be used as a weapon. With a grunt of effort, Ballista settled himself against a wall. He tried to make himself as comfortable as possible, easing the metal away from the abrasions and sores on his wrists and ankles. Now he was alone he missed the companionship of the other officers. At least they had all been in it together. Ballista was tired. His fatigue was a mine that each of the last two days had dug deeper, the tunnel burrowing away from the light, the air even harder to breathe. He thought of Julia, his wife, of Isangrim and Dernhelm, his two beautiful sons. He imagined their pain when news reached Antioch of the disaster. If he died, would they ever hear of it? Or would he just be gone, his end an empty space their minds would fill with terrible tortures and pain? Shutting his eyes, Ballista promised himself that if there were a chance no matter what it took, no matter at what cost to himself he would get back to them. The door crashed open and Ballista was temporarily blinded by the light. Two easterners entered and put lamps on the floor. Someone laughed outside. The door shut. Ballista peered up at the two men. The younger, he half recognized. The man was dressed in the garb of a Persian nobleman, his face made up, kohl around his eyes. He exuded a smug air of self-controlled menace. The older wore more outlandish clothes, a jacket with empty, hanging sleeves and a fur cloak, and had strange braids in his hair. Ballista did not know him. The stranger stepped over to Ballista and kicked him. The blow landed on his arms. The man shouted something in a language Ballista had never heard and kicked out again. On your feet, the Sassanid by the door said, in

Persian. Ballista stayed where he was. He peered out from behind his raised arms, trying to look confused, helpless. Latin, I only speak Latin. The Sassanid moved from the door. He leant down, bringing his face close. He did look very familiar. Smiling unpleasantly, he spoke. We have met before. The first time, at Arete, your excellent command of my language tricked me into letting you escape. I vowed there would be a reckoning. The second time, not long ago, your status as an ambassador robbed me of my revenge. *Revue de presse*"A starring Roman epic with explosive action and knuckle-whitening drama." *The Guardian*"Harry Sidebottom's epic tale starts with a chilling assassination and goes on, and up, from there." Mary Beard, author of *The Roman Triumph*"A book to keep you up well past your bedtime." *Evening Standard*