



'ENTHRALLING'
DAILY EXPRESS

RUSO

AND THE
DEMENTED
DOCTOR

R. S. DOWNIE

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Ruso and the Demented Doctor
by
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He had not expected to be afraid. He had been fasting for three days, and still the gods had not answered. The certainty had not come. But he had made a vow and he must keep it. Now, while he still had the strength.

He glanced around the empty house. He was sorry about that barrel of beer only half drunk. About the stock of baskets that were several weeks' work and that he might never now sell at market.

He had nothing else to regret. Perhaps, if the gods were kind, he would be drinking that beer at breakfast tomorrow with his honour restored. Or perhaps he would have joined his friends in the next world.

He would give the soldier a chance, of course. Make one final request for him to do as the law demanded. After that, both their fates would lie in the hands of the gods.

He closed the door of his house and tied it shut, perhaps for the last time. He walked across and checked that the water-trough was full. The pony would be all right for three, perhaps four days. Somebody would probably steal her before then anyway.

He pulled the gate shut out of habit, although there was nothing to escape and little for any wandering animals to eat in there. Then he set off to walk to Coria, find that foreign bastard and teach him the meaning of respect.

I

Many miles south of Coria, Ruso gathered both reins into his left hand, reached down into the saddlebag and took out the pie he had saved from last night. The secret of happiness, he reflected as he munched on the pie, was to enjoy simple pleasures. A good meal. A warm, dry goatskin tent shared with men who neither snored, passed excessive amounts of wind nor imagined that he might want to stay awake listening to jokes. Or symptoms. Last night he had slept the sleep of a happy man.

Ruso had now been in Britannia for eight months, most of them winter. He had learned why the province's only contribution to fashion was a thick cloak designed to keep out the rain. Rain was not a bad thing, of course, as his brother had reminded him on more than one occasion. But his brother was a farmer and he was talking about proper rain – the sort that cascaded from the heavens to water the earth and fill the aqueducts and wash the drains. British rain was rarely that simple. For days on end, instead of falling, it simply hung around in the air like a wife waiting for you to notice she was sulking.

Still, with commendable optimism, the locals were planning to celebrate the arrival of summer in a few days' time. And, as if the gods had finally relented, the polished armour plates of the column stretching along the road before him glittered beneath a cheering spring sun.

Ruso wondered how the soldiers stationed up on the border would greet the arrival of men from the Twentieth

Legion: men who were better trained, better equipped and better paid. No doubt the officers would make fine speeches about their united mission to keep the Britons in order, leaving the quarrels to the lower ranks, and Ruso to patch up the losers.

In the meantime, though, he was not busy. Any man incapable of several days' march had been left behind in Deva. The shining armour in front of him was protecting one hundred and seventy healthy men at the peak of their physical prowess. Even the most resentful of local taxpayers would keep their weapons and their opinions hidden at the sight of a force this size, and it was hard to see how a soldier could acquire any injury worse than blisters by observing a steady pace along a straight road. Ruso suppressed a smile. For a few precious days of holiday, he was enjoying the anonymity of being a traveller instead of a military –

'Doctor!'

His first instinct was to snatch a last mouthful of pie.

'Doctor Gaius Petreius Ruso, sir?'

Since his other hand was holding the reins, Ruso raised the crumbling pastry in acknowledgement before nudging the horse to the edge of the road, where there was room to halt without obstructing the rest of the column. Moments later he found himself looking down at three people.

Between two legionaries stood a figure that gave the unusual and interesting impression of being two halves of different people stuck together along an unsteady vertical line. Most of the left half, apart from the hand and forearm, was clean. The right half, to the obvious distaste of the soldier restraining that side, was coated with thick mud. There was a bloodied scrape across the clean cheek and a loop of hair stuck out above the one plait that remained blonde, making the owner's head appear lopsided. Despite

these indignities, the young woman had drawn herself up to her full height and stood with head erect. The glint in the eyes, the colour of which Ruso had never found a satisfactory word to describe – but when he did, it would be something to do with the sea – suggested someone would soon be sorry for this.

All three watched as Ruso finished his mouthful and reluctantly rewrapped and consigned the rest of his snack to the saddlebag. Finally he said, ‘Tilla.’

‘It is me, my lord,’ the young woman agreed.

Ruso glanced from one soldier to the other, noting that the junior of the two had been given the muddy side. ‘Explain.’

‘She says she’s with you, sir,’ said the man on the clean side.

‘Why is she like this?’

As the man said, ‘Fighting, sir,’ she twisted to one side and spat on the ground. The soldier jerked her by the arm. ‘Behave!’

‘You can let go of her,’ said Ruso, bending to unstrap his waterskin. ‘Rinse the mud out of your mouth, Tilla. And watch where you spit. I have told you about this before.’

As Tilla wiped her face and took a long swig from the waterskin, a second and considerably cleaner female appeared, breathless from running up the hill.

‘There she is!’ shrieked the woman. ‘Thief! Where’s our money?’ Her attempt to grab the blonde plait was foiled by the legionaries.

Ruso looked at his slave. ‘Are you a thief, Tilla?’

‘She is the thief, my lord,’ his housekeeper replied. ‘Ask her what she charges for bread.’

‘Nobody else is complaining!’ cried the other woman. ‘Look! Can you see anybody complaining?’ She turned back

to wave an arm towards the motley trail of mule-handlers and bag-carriers, merchants' carts and civilians shuffling up the hill in the wake of the soldiers. 'I'm an honest trader, sir!' continued the woman, now addressing Ruso. 'My man stays up half the night baking, we take the trouble to come out here to offer a service to travellers, and then *she* comes along and decides to help herself. And when we ask for our money all we get is these two ugly great bruisers telling us to clear off!'

If the ugly great bruisers were insulted, they managed not to show it.

'You seem to have thrown her in the ditch,' pointed out Ruso, faintly recalling a fat man behind a food stall – the first for miles – at the junction they had just passed. 'I think that's enough punishment, don't you?'

The woman hesitated, as if she were pondering further and more imaginative suggestions. Finally she said, 'We want our money, sir. It's only fair.'

Ruso turned to Tilla. 'Where's the bread now?'

Tilla shrugged. 'I think, in the ditch.'

'That's not our fault, is it, sir?' put in the woman.

Ruso was not going to enter into a debate about whose fault it was. 'How much was it worth?'

There was a pause while the woman appeared to be assessing his outfit and his horse. Finally she said, 'Half a denarius will cover it, sir.'

'She is a liar!' put in Tilla, as if this were not obvious even to Ruso.

He reached for his purse. 'Let me tell you what is going to happen here,' he said to the woman. 'I will give you one sesterce, which is –'

'Is too much!' said Tilla.

'Which is more than the bread was worth,' continued Ruso, ignoring her. 'My housekeeper will apologize to you –'

‘I am not sorry!’

‘She will apologize to you,’ he repeated, ‘and you will go back to your stall and continue charging exorbitant sums of money to travellers who were foolish enough not to buy before they set out.’

Ruso dismissed the grinning soldiers with a tip that was not enough to buy their silence but might limit the scurrilous nature of their exaggerations when they told the story around tonight’s camp fires. The women seemed less satisfied, but that was hardly surprising. Ruso had long ago learned that the pleasing of women was a tricky business.

By now the bulk of the legionaries had gone on far ahead, followed by a plodding train of Army pack-ponies laden with tents and millstones and all the other equipment too heavy to be carried on poles on the soldiers’ backs. Behind them was the unofficial straggle of camp followers.

Ruso turned to Tilla. ‘Walk alongside me,’ he ordered, adding quickly, ‘Clean side in.’ She sidestepped around the tail of the horse and came forward to walk at its shoulder. Ruso leaned down and said in a voice which would not be overheard, ‘None of the other civilians is causing trouble, Tilla. What is the matter with you?’

‘I am hungry, my lord.’

‘I gave you money for food.’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘Was it not enough?’

‘It was enough, yes.’

She ventured no further information. Ruso straightened up. He was not in the mood for the I-will-only-answer-the-question-you-ask-me game. He was in the mood for a peaceful morning and some more of last night’s chicken in pastry, which he now retrieved and began to eat. He glanced sideways. Tilla was watching. He did not offer her any.

They continued in silence along the straight track up and down yet another wooded hill. British hills, it seemed, were as melancholic as British rain. Instead of poking bold fingers of rock up into the clouds they lay lumpy and morose under damp green blankets, occasionally stirring themselves to roll vaguely skywards and then giving up and sliding into the next valley.

Somewhere amongst those hills lay the northern edge of the Empire, and even further north, beyond the supposedly friendly tribes living along the border, rose wild, cold mountains full of barbarians who had never been conquered and now never would be. Unless, of course, the new Emperor had a sudden fit of ambition and gave the order to march north and have another crack at them. But so far Hadrian had shown no signs of spoiling for a fight. In fact, he had already withdrawn his forces from several provinces he considered untenable. Britannia remained unfinished business: an island only half-conquered, and Ruso had not found it easy to explain to his puzzled housemate back in Deva why he had volunteered to go and peer over the edge into the other half.

‘The north? Holy Jupiter, man, you don’t want to go up there!’ Valens’ handsome face had appeared to register genuine concern at his colleague’s plans. ‘It’s at – it’s *beyond* the edge of the civilized world. Why d’you think we send foreigners up there to run it?’

Ruso had poured himself more wine and observed, ‘When you think about it, we’re all foreigners here. Except the Britons, of course.’

‘You know what I mean. Troops who are used to those sorts of conditions. The sort of chap who tramps bare-chested through bogs and picks his teeth with a knife. They bring them in from Germania, or Gaul, or somewhere.’

'I'm from Gaul,' Ruso reminded him.

'Yes, but you're from the warm end. You're practically one of us.' This was evidently intended as a compliment. 'I know you haven't exactly shone here in Deva, after all that business with the barmaids –'

'This has got nothing to do with barmaids,' Ruso assured him. 'You know I spent half of yesterday afternoon waiting for a bunch of men who didn't turn up?'

'I believe you did mention it once or twice.'

'And it's not the first time, either. So I tracked down their centurion today. Apparently he and his cronies have been telling the men they can go for first aid training if they want to.'

'If they *want to*?'

'Of course they don't want to. They want to spend their spare time sleeping and fishing and visiting their girlfriends.'

'I hope he apologized.'

'No. He said he couldn't see the point of teaching ordinary soldiers first aid. He said it's like teaching sailors to swim – just prolongs the agony.'

Valens shook his head sadly. 'You really shouldn't let a few ignorant centurions banish you to the –' He was interrupted by a crash from the kitchen and a stream of British that had the unmistakable intonation of a curse. He glanced at the door 'I suppose you're intending to take the lovely Tilla as well?'

'Of course.'

'That *is* bad news. I shall miss her unique style of household management.' Valens peered down at his dinner-bowl and prodded at something with the end of his spoon. 'I wonder what this was when it was alive?' He held it up towards the window to examine it, then flicked it off the spoon and on to the floor. One of the dogs trotted forward

to examine it. ‘So,’ continued Valens. ‘Where exactly is this unholy outer region?’

‘It’s a fort called Ulucium. Apparently you go up to Coria and turn left at the border.’

‘You’re going to some flea-bitten outpost beyond the last supply depot?’

‘I’m told the area’s very beautiful.’

‘Really? By whom?’

Ruso shrugged. ‘Just generally . . . by people who’ve been there.’ He took refuge in another draught of wine.

Valens shook his head. ‘Oh, Ruso. When I told you women like to be listened to, I didn’t mean you should take any notice of what they say. Of course Tilla says it’s very beautiful. She probably wants to go home to visit all her little girly friends so they can paint their faces blue and dance around the cooking-pot singing ancestor songs. You didn’t promise you’d take her home?’

‘It’s only for a few months. There’s a couple of centuries going up to help revamp the fort, fix their plumbing and encourage the taxpayers.’

‘You did! You promised her, didn’t you?’

Ruso scratched the back of his ear. ‘I think I may have done,’ he confessed. ‘It seemed like a good idea at the time.’

Ruso took another mouthful of cold pie and wondered whether he should have listened to Valens rather than Tilla. From what he could gather, the principal activities of Tilla’s tribe were farming and fighting, fuelled by rambling tales about glorious ancestors and a belief that things you couldn’t see were just as real as things you could. None of this had mattered much down in the relatively civilized confines of Deva, but as they travelled further north, Tilla’s behaviour had definitely begun to deteriorate.

Ruso glanced downwards. Tilla’s muddy tunic was flapping

heavily around her ankles. Thick brown liquid squelched out of her boots with every step.

He sighed and balanced the remains of the pie on the front of the saddle. He reached out and touched her cheek just above the scrape. 'I'll clean that up when we stop. Are you hurt anywhere else?'

'It was a soft landing, my lord. I do not see him coming, or I would fight back.'

Ruso was not as sorry about this as his housekeeper seemed to be. 'Why didn't you buy food before we set out this morning?'

'There was a woman in labour in the night. I forgot.'

'One of the soldiers' women?'

'Yes.'

'What on earth was she doing travelling in that condition?'

Tilla shrugged. 'When a man marches away, who knows if he will come back? He might find a new woman. The Army might send him across the sea. Then what will she do?'

Ruso, who had no idea what she might do, said, 'So what happened to her?'

His slave jerked a thumb backwards over her shoulder. 'She is giving her daughter a bumpy welcome on a cart.'

'She's a very lucky woman,' observed Ruso.

'The goddess has been kind to her.'

Ruso retrieved the crumbling remains of the snack and passed them across. 'It's a bit dry, sorry.'

She wiped her mouth and hands on a clean patch of tunic before accepting it. 'Thank you, my lord.'

'There's to be no more stealing from now on, Tilla. Is that quite clear?' He gestured towards the mud. 'You see where it leads.'

A smile revealed white teeth in the unusually brown face.

‘I know where it leads.’ She patted the outside of her thigh. From beneath her clothing he heard the chink of money. Ruso was not impressed. ‘I had to pay that woman more than you saved to get you out of trouble,’ he said.

Tilla eyed him for a moment as if she were considering a reply, then crammed the remains of the food into her mouth, dropped into a crouch at the roadside and began to scabble about under her clothing. Ruso glanced around to see one or two people watching, and decided the most dignified reaction was to ride on and pretend he had not noticed.

Moments later he heard her running up behind him. He turned. ‘Was that really necessary?’

She nodded and drew breath before announcing, ‘I have been waiting a long time to tell you something, my lord.’

A sudden and deeply worrying thought crossed Ruso’s mind. A thought he had been trying to ignore for some months.

He had been careful. Extremely careful. Far more careful than his slave, who on first being introduced to modern methods of contraception had fallen into a fit of disrespectful and uncontrollable laughter. He had insisted, of course, citing three years of successfully child-free marriage – something Tilla evidently thought was nothing to boast about. He had finally persuaded her to complete her part by squatting on the floor, taking a cold drink and sneezing, but over the months Tilla had proved just as reluctant as Claudia to face the chill of a winter bedroom. Her sneezing, too, had shown a disappointing lack of commitment. He had given up trying to argue with her. Now he supposed he was going to have to face the consequences.

The horse, sensing his tension through the reins, tossed its head.

‘Do you really think,’ Ruso said, ‘that this is the best time to tell me?’

‘No, but you must know one day, and you will be happy.’

‘I see.’

‘Close your eyes, my lord.’

‘What for?’

‘It is nothing bad.’

‘But why –’

‘Is nobody looking.’

Ruso glanced around to verify this before obeying. As the view faded away he was conscious of his body shifting with the pace of the horse. Something touched his thigh with a chink, and rested there.

‘Is for you, my lord.’

He opened his eyes. Hooked over one of the front saddle-horns was the leather purse he had given her for the house-keeping money. He felt the muscles in his shoulders relax. Whatever this was, it was not what he had feared.

As he lifted the purse he glanced at his slave. Tilla was watching him and looking very pleased with herself.

He loosened the drawstring, slid two fingers into the pouch and pulled out a large warm coin. ‘What’s this?’

‘A sesterce.’

‘I can see that.’ He really must have a word with Tilla about this literal interpretation of questions. It was bordering on insolence, but so far he had failed to find a way to phrase the reprimand that did not suggest he could have worded his questions better. ‘Why,’ he tried again, framing the sentence with care, ‘are you stealing when you have this much cash?’

Her smile broadened. ‘I know my lord has no money.’

‘That’s my business, not yours. You aren’t going to help by pinching bread and getting into fights.’

She pointed at the purse. 'All for you.'

Ruso tugged at the drawstring and peered inside.

'Gods above!' he exclaimed, weighing the purse in his hand again. He lowered it quickly as an Army slave leading a string of pack-ponies looked across to see what was happening. When the man had lost interest he investigated the contents of the purse again and leaned down to murmur, 'This is a lot of money. Where did you get it?'

Tilla's shrug turned into an expansive gesture that suggested the coins had mysteriously fallen upon her in a shower of rain.

'This can't possibly belong to you!'

'I save up.'

Ruso frowned. He had little spare cash. He had certainly not offered any of it to his slave. He assumed she was sometimes paid for helping to deliver babies, and it was quite normal for slaves to try and build up enough funds to buy their freedom. But why would she hand him her personal savings? Besides, this was too much for a handful of babies, no matter how grateful their parents. He glanced at her. 'Tilla, how have you . . .' The answer crept up on him as he spoke, stifling the final words of the question.

Tilla had become his housekeeper not long after his arrival in Britannia. Since she knew more about shopping than he did – in fact almost everyone knew more about shopping than he did – he had never bothered to inquire too deeply into the relationship between cash and catering. He had begun by insisting that she render a weekly account. But after the first week she seemed to have forgotten about it and he had been too busy to insist. In any case, what was the point of having a slave to look after the house if he still had to do all the thinking himself?

A voice rose unbidden from the depths of his memory.

For goodness' sake, Gaius, it said. If it weren't for me the staff would walk all over us!

He was glad Claudia was not here to see him now.

'Tilla,' he murmured, 'Tell me you don't make a habit of stealing.'

She looked surprised. 'Oh no, my lord.'

'Good. So what is this?'

'I am your servant,' she continued. 'I will not let you be cheated.'

'What?'

'I make things fair.'

'Are you telling me,' said Ruso, glancing round again to make sure he could not be overheard, 'that if you don't approve of the price you help yourself?'

'Is not right that people grow fat on cheating when my lord is a good man and has no –'

'That's hardly the point, Tilla!' Ruso sat back in the saddle, frowned at the whiskery ears of his horse and wondered how to explain something so fundamental it had never occurred to him to question it. 'Ever since I began my work as a doctor,' he observed, 'I have done my best to build up a good reputation.'

'Yes, my lord.'

'I want men to say, *there is Gaius Petreius Ruso, the Medicus who can be trusted.*'

'Yes, my lord.'

'*He doesn't pretend to know everything but he does his best for his patients.*'

'Yes, my lord.'

'This has been my ambition.'

'Yes, my lord.'

'If it ever becomes my ambition to have them say, *there is*

Gaius Petreius Ruso, the man who sends his servant out to steal for him, I will let you know.'

'I understand this,' came the reply. 'I am doing it before you tell me.'

Felix was going to have to do something about the native. The man had been pestering him for days. Now he had stepped right up to the table in front of everyone in Susanna's and started jabbering again about honour. About the law. About compensation. Felix had explained, politely, that he couldn't be breaking his promise because he'd never made one.

That was when the native had begun to shout about cows. Felix began to lose patience with him. He didn't have one cow to hand over, let alone five, even if he'd wanted to. 'Sorry, pal. It's not that I don't want to help, but it's not really my problem, is it?'

Any normal native would have shut up and slunk off home to his smoky house and his skinny children, glad that he hadn't been taken outside for a beating. This one started yelling about gods and shame and vengeance.

Felix held his hands up. 'Look, pal, I've said it nicely. I'm sorry if you think I've been ploughing your field, but she never said a word about you to me. You can have her. I'll back off.'

Instead of calming down the native had tried to climb over the table and grab him. The other lads had thrown the man out into the street. What had he been thinking of? One basket-maker taking on four Batavian infantrymen? Especially four Batavian infantrymen who found themselves in a bar where the beer had run out. When he came back for more, already with one eye swelling up and blood dribbling from a split lip, they were all so surprised that they burst out laughing.

They were pretty soft with him, considering. They left him in a fit state to run away, still shouting to the street that everyone would see what happened around here to men who didn't honour their debts.

More beer arrived. They were still laughing and searching for imaginary cows under the table when they heard the trumpet announcing the approach of curfew. The others got to their feet. Felix glanced across to where Dari the waitress was showing more than a glimpse of cleavage as she stretched forward to clear tables. 'I'll be in later,' he said. 'I've got some business.'

When they had gone, Felix slid his arm around Dari's waist. 'You're not going to let me down, are you?' he said.

From the way the Medicus was hunched over the writing-tablet Tilla guessed he was either making the wax speak to his brother across the sea or doing his accounts. She restrained an urge to stride across the bedroom, wrench the stylus out of his hand and poke him in the eye with it.

As far as she had been able to work out, the Medicus' family lived in a fine house whose roof baked beneath the everlasting sunshine of southern Gaul, while its foundations stood in a deep and perilous pool of debt. When she had found this out she had felt sorry for him. She knew that he sent most of his money home to his brother, and she knew that it was never enough. In the same way, she knew, she could never fully repay what she owed him for saving her life. More than once, while he frowned over the latest letter from the brother, she had slipped away and brought out the purse from its hiding place, secretly adding up how much she had saved for him and imagining his pleasure when she presented it.

But now he had taken the money that she had spent months building up for him and squandered half of it on the best room that the surprised innkeeper could offer. Worse, the smug expression on his face as he had patted the fine large bed suggested he expected her to be grateful. It was one of those moments when, no matter how loyal she knew she should feel towards this man, she found him utterly exasperating.

She had squinted at the covers and said, 'There will be bugs.'

He had assured her that this room was usually kept aside for important travellers.

‘Rich men’s bugs,’ she had said, surveying the painted walls and the rug beside the bed.

‘Sleep on the floor, then,’ he had replied. ‘The bugs and I will have a quiet night.’ But she had seen him opening a bag from his medical case and sprinkling something under the bedding. As if that would make any difference.

The water in which she was standing was like gritty brown soup. She balanced on one foot while she rinsed the other with fresh water from the jug. Brown smudges mingled with older, unknowable stains on the linen of the innkeeper’s towel.

She did not want to curl up with the Medicus in that borrowed bed, bugs or no bugs. She would rather have been outside in the yard, bedding down under the canopy of the hired cart in the company of the woman who had just had the baby. It was not wise for any woman to be left with only a boy driver for protection in a place like this. Especially not a woman with a new baby. But the Medicus’ patience had been wearing thin today, and by the end of the journey she had felt too tired and dirty to point out to him that Lydia’s needs were just as important as his own.

Instead she had waited obediently for him outside the Army transit camp, feeling the mud stiffen on her skin, ignoring the curious passers-by and the loudmouths who thought their comments were funny. By the time he had finished doing whatever it was soldiers did and they had walked down to the inn, the lamps were being lit.

The inn’s bath-house had turned out to be a small and not very clean set of rooms occupied by sweaty latecomers scraping off the dirt of their day’s journey. She had only paused long enough to collect water and towels. So now

here they both were, trapped in a costly privacy neither of them seemed to be enjoying.

The Medicus was still sitting on the rented bed, scratching out his letters by the light of the lamp. He would certainly not be telling his brother how much money he had just handed over to the landlord of the Golden Fleece.

Tilla reached for her clean undertunic and dragged it over her head. He had not thanked her for saving him from cheats and liars. He had not even thanked her for the money. No matter what he used it for now, the gift was spoiled.

She unwrapped the towel from around her hair. A silent blaze of white appeared around the window-shutters. In less than a heartbeat it pulsed again and was gone.

The Medicus glanced up. ‘Was that lightning?’

‘Yes.’ There. Now she could not be accused of refusing to speak to him.

He went back to his writing. He began adding up on his fingers and muttering. Accounts, then. That was one of the odd things about Romans. Everything was valued in useless metal discs.

She had never stolen any real wealth. Nothing anyone could actually use – tools or cows or a winter seed-store or clothes to keep the cold out. All she had done was to even up the barter occasionally so that the Medicus got a fair deal. And yes, she had included the money she had been given for helping three new lives safely into this world. He had taken it without a thought, and wasted it.

There was a distant rumble of thunder. She began to rub the wet snakes of her hair with the towel. She hoped Lydia and the baby were safe. Her man had rushed across to admire his new daughter this morning before the march set off, but now he would be sharing a tent with the other soldiers. He had promised the driver extra money to make

sure the cart in which his new family was sleeping was parked somewhere secure overnight. The boy, who knew the road, had agreed to bring it into the yard at the inn.

Tilla wrung drips out of the ends of her hair and felt ashamed. At the very least, she should have taken the trouble to check that the driver had followed his orders.

She glanced at the big bed and the wooden chest in which her meagre possessions would have fitted twenty times over. This was not right. She and the Medicus, two healthy adults, had all this to themselves. They were safe from thieves behind a barred door. Meanwhile outside, a newborn baby and its mother were huddled under the canopy of a hired cart that smelled of old vegetables.

Tilla got to her feet and tossed the damp towels into the corner. Behind the window, lightning flashed and vanished. Giving the bed a wide berth, she went across and unlatched the shutters. As she pushed them open a crash of thunder made her flinch. She stretched one arm out between the window-bars, flexing the stiff fingers of her right hand into the chilly air. The first drops of rain struck cold on her skin.

She would go and invite them in. The Medicus, whose duty it was to help people, would not be able to turn them out in the storm. It would be a good use of the money. And it would serve him right.

‘Close the window, will you?’

She fastened the shutters as ordered. Then, ignoring his ‘Where are you going dressed like that?’ she snatched up her shawl and hurried out of the room.

By the time Tilla had found the yard door and struggled with the fastenings, the storm was overhead. Rain was beating on the roofs and spluttering in the drains. No one else was about. Staff, guests and slaves would be huddled in their rooms, praying for the storm to pass safely over them. From the shelter of the doorway she squinted out into the blustery dark, trying to distinguish the shapes of the vehicles lined up along the far side.

‘Lydia?’

Another flash of lightning captured pale streaks of rain in mid-fall and veiled everything beyond them. She had barely counted five paces when she had to clap her hands over her ears. She shook her head like a dog as the thunder drilled through her skull.

When it was over she shouted, ‘Lydia! Are you out here?’

There was no answer.

The spatter of raindrops on tarpaulin told her she was nearing the vehicles. She ducked round to shelter between the first hulk and the wall, and called in Latin, ‘Are you there? Lydia? Don’t be afraid. Is the midwife. Come indoors with me.’

Still no reply. She moved on, calling at the second shape and then waiting for more thunder to die away before trying the third. It seemed smaller, more like the cart her patient had hired, but in the dark it was difficult to tell. Whatever it was, no one was replying from inside. There was nobody else out here.

Tilla shivered. Her wet scalp felt as though it was shrinking in the cold. She pulled the shawl further over her head and told herself the woman must be safe indoors with the baby. She had worried for nothing. Surely not even the most money-grabbing of innkeepers would turn away a newly delivered mother in a storm. Only her guilt-ridden midwife was alone in the dark, getting wet. Unless, of course, the driver had not brought the cart into the yard at all. Lydia could be anywhere amongst the houses huddling around the Army's camp.

Wrinkling her nose at the stench of flooded drains, Tilla turned to splash back across the courtyard and stubbed her toe. Her feet were so cold that the pain took a couple of paces to register. When it did, it reached her mind at the same time as the thought that there was still one thing she could do to help the mother and baby.

Raising her hands to the gods roaring in the sky, she cried in the language they had given to her people, 'Great Taranis, god of the thunder, come to visit us this night! I am your servant, here to greet you!'

The rain lashed at her face. She stood with her arms stretched out, trying not to shiver. Perhaps she had said the wrong things. Prayer was a difficult business at the best of times, and even harder when the worshipper was growing numb with cold. 'Listen to me, great god of thunder!' she shouted into the rain. 'I have no gift today, but I will make one if you keep safe the woman Lydia and the —'

She was silenced by a white flash that left her blinking, staring, wiping the water out of her eyes, unable to take in what she had just seen. Summoning her courage, she peered into the darkness and called, 'Who is there? What are you? Speak to me!'

Something brushed against her. She shrank away, lost her

footing and landed with a splash. She lay with her hands over her ears as another crash of thunder buffeted the yard.

When the thunder god's voice rolled away she scrambled to her feet. Someone was calling out. It was not the strange creature she had seen in the lightning. It was a recognizable voice, speaking in Latin, and definitely not heavenly.

'Tilla, where the hell are you? What are you doing?'

She turned towards the Medicus. 'I am looking for someone who is not here!'

She heard the splash of approaching footsteps. She felt herself seized and lifted and pressed against his warmth as he carried her back towards the safety of the doorway.

He said, 'Who were you talking to?'

Tilla closed her eyes, picturing the creature who had the form and face of a young man, but growing from his head there had definitely been . . . 'You will not believe me,' she said.

They both lurched sideways as the Medicus kicked the door open. 'Try me.'

She saw again the angles of the antlers picked out in the harsh light. *Antlers*. The sign of Cernunnos, king of the beasts. But she had seen the hand on the wheel of the cart . . . The wheel was the sign of Taranis, ruler of the thunder. She did not know whom her prayer had conjured in the yard. But she knew what. As the Medicus stumped up the stairs she whispered, 'It is a powerful god.'

Centurion Audax of the Tenth Batavians had stumbled over nasty things in back alleys before, but none quite like this. He took a step backwards, unable to believe what he was looking at. Then, glancing around to see if anyone else was watching, he unfurled his cloak and bent to drape it over what remained of Felix the trumpeter.

The only sign of life in the street was the huddled figure of a woman making an early start out of town with a bundle on her back. A swelling chorus of birdsong was heralding a clear dawn. The rest of Coria was either still in bed or yawning over its breakfast.

Audax rapped on the door of the butcher's shop. 'Go over to the fort,' he ordered the bleary-eyed slave who finally responded to his knocking. 'Tell them Audax needs Officer Metellus down here straight away. And tell him I said to come alone.'

He tramped back through the stink of the alley and crouched beside the body, pulling out a fold in the cloak to hide another inch of pale leg. It was pointless, but until Metellus turned up he did not know what else he could do.

It was a while before he noticed the drawing. Scratched in charcoal on the plastered wall above Felix's body was a crude sketch of a man. Audax scowled. Whoever had done it wasn't much of an artist. He supposed those things that looked like two trees sprouting from the man's head were meant to be antlers. It was not a good picture, but that didn't matter. It didn't have to be a good picture to make a great deal of mischief.

Last night's storm seemed to have washed the sky clean, but already a stiff breeze was blowing fresh clouds in from the west. Beneath them, a cavalry outrider had stationed himself in a dramatic pose on the top of a distant hill from whence he could see not only the column but also the approach of any potential marauders. Ruso, whose horse was shambling along as if it were asleep, wished he could join him. Instead he was expected to keep pace with infantry. The goods convoy the infantry was escorting on this last-but-one stage of their journey included a wagon carrying lead for replumbing Ulucium's leaky latrines, so the pace of the column was excruciatingly slow.

Ruso rubbed at an itch on his elbow, muttered, 'Pick your feet up, will you?' to the horse and urged it into a trot. As he passed up the hill along the column he scanned the glum faces of the Twentieth. The prospect of drying out in Coria this evening seemed to offer little cheer. It occurred to him, not for the first time, that the man who invented a tent that could fend off rising as well as falling water would have a statue erected in his honour in every Army camp in the Empire.

Finally spotting the soldier he wanted, Ruso allowed his mount to relax into a walk. 'Morning, Albanus.'

A slight figure in a damp tunic looked up from the ranks. 'Good morning, sir.'

The clerk did not look quite as weary today. Ruso suspected Albanus had suffered on this march. No matter how

keen a man might be, and how regularly he attended physical training, a life of writing letters and organizing medical records was a poor preparation for carrying a full pack across the hills in all weathers for days on end. Rubbing his elbow again, Ruso said, 'Just as well nobody called me out last night, eh?'

'Very lucky, sir.'

He wondered what Albanus would think if he knew that he had been paid with Tilla's stolen money for being willing to get up and fetch Ruso – who should have been in one of the tents – if a doctor were needed. 'I don't suppose you got much sleep anyway,' he ventured.

Albanus smiled. 'Oh, I was fine, sir. My mother says I've always been the same. Once I'm off nothing ever wakes –' He stopped.

Ruso hid his amusement. 'I see.'

'I would have got up, sir, of course –'

'I'm sure you would,' said Ruso, truthfully. There was no fun in teasing Albanus. It was like poking a kitten with a stick. He slapped at his elbow. The itch shrank away for a few seconds, then crept back.

The road was still running along high ground, offering views to either side which would have been dramatic had there been anything new to look at. But even native house fires were no longer a novelty. There was another one now. A fresh plume of thick black smoke rushing skywards from a settlement in the middle distance. It was hardly surprising that people who insisted on lighting fires in the middle of thatched huts would have mishaps, but as they drew closer he could make out a squad of men clad in armour marching away down the valley, ignoring the frantic figures who were trying to beat out the flames.

It occurred to him that perhaps some of the other fires

had not been accidents either. Everyone said the natives were more difficult to manage in the north.

Eventually the disaster, or warning, or revenge, or whatever it was, became no more than a smudge of smoke on the horizon behind him. The scenery was back to green waves spattered with isolated forts, brown sheep, skinny cows and round huts with no flames leaping from the thatch. Ruso yawned. He had not slept well.

Tilla had finally consented to join him in the bed, but his efforts to warm her up had led to an unexpected cry of 'Cernunnos!' at a crucial moment, and somehow despite her insistence that this was the name of the god she had seen in the yard, it had still put him off his stroke. Unabashed, she had proceeded to speculate about what this divine visitation might mean. His insistence on resuming his own more earthly visitation was greeted with tolerance rather than enthusiasm.

She had woken him again in the middle of the night, babbling in British. It was a moment before he realized she was talking in her sleep, no doubt to some god with antlers. After she fell silent he had lain awake in the dark, telling himself that it was completely irrational to be jealous of a trick of the light, and that he was only starting to wonder if she really had seen something because he was not properly awake himself.

Another itch had sprouted in the hollow between his shoulder blades. When the column stopped for water he would have to dig out his baggage and try and find some calming ointment. In the meantime, his fingers slid up between two of the layers of iron plates, but they were now trapped at an awkward angle and he could not move them enough to have any effect. Twisting sideways, he tried plung-

ing the hand down the back of his neck instead. The probing fingers fell just short of their destination.

Several instruments that would have done the job were in his medical case, but that was back on one of the carts. He tried grabbing the top and bottom of his tunic, and pulling it taut whilst wriggling against it like a cow trying to scratch itself on a gate. That did not work either.

Finally he thumped at his back with his fist before turning to see that several of the legionaries tramping up the slope beside him were watching with interest. Amongst them was his clerk.

‘Are you all right, sir?’

‘Fine, thank you, Albanus.’ He wondered whether to add, ‘Just doing some morning stretches,’ but decided that would make it worse.

He urged the horse forward, musing upon the pointlessness of formal education. Instead of wasting time arguing over dilemmas unrelated to real life, bright young minds should be set useful questions. Questions such as: *A man is offered a chance to share a room with a bad-tempered woman and several biting insects, or a tent with his comrades and a large quantity of rainwater. Which should he choose?*

Moments later he was level with a centurion whose nose appeared to have been attached to his face as an afterthought. This was Postumus, the man in whose tent he had failed to appear last night. Ruso was anticipating some cutting comment on his absence, but Postumus was busy scowling at the horizon.

‘Cheeky sod,’ Postumus observed.

Following the centurion’s gaze, Ruso saw the lone rider still silhouetted against the gathering clouds. ‘There’s something to be said for joining the cavalry,’ he said.

‘He’s not cavalry.’

‘No?’ At this distance, it was impossible to make out whether the horseman was carrying weapons. ‘Who is he, then?’

‘That’s exactly what he wants us to ask.’

‘Ah,’ said Ruso, surprised to find he had fallen into some sort of trap. Then, as the outline of the horse narrowed and began to sink into the rise of the hill, ‘He’s going.’

‘He’ll pop up again further along,’ said Postumus. ‘Always where we can see him and always just out of range. He’s following us.’

‘I’ve seen him before,’ said Ruso.

‘One of the patrols went after him yesterday and he outran them. Vanished into the woods and couldn’t be tracked.’

‘What do you think he wants?’

‘Well, he’s not a lookout,’ said Postumus. ‘They’d use some snot-nosed little goat-herd for that.’

‘They?’

‘The natives,’ said Postumus. ‘I reckon all that one wants is to get on our nerves.’

‘Ah.’

‘Which is why, for the time being, we’re ignoring him.’

‘Right,’ said Ruso, guessing that the watcher’s presence had been the cause of yesterday’s unexplained order to don helmets. ‘So we *do* know who he is.’

‘If you’d been where you were supposed to be last night, you’d know what I know. Nice and cosy up at the inn, were you?’

‘Very,’ said Ruso, suddenly unable to resist wriggling under his armour. ‘Kind of you to ask.’

Postumus was looking at him oddly. ‘Something the matter with you?’

‘Me? No.’

‘Uh.’

They rode on in silence for a while, then Postumus said, ‘You haven’t heard what’s going on, then?’

‘What?’

‘You might want to think about making an offering to Fortuna next time you get a chance,’ added Postumus. ‘Or whatever god you think might be listening up here.’

‘I’ll bear it in mind,’ promised Ruso, deducing that he was being punished for sleeping under a solid roof last night.

‘Not that our lads are worried,’ added Postumus.

‘Of course not,’ agreed Ruso.

‘But the units stationed up here are pretty jumpy.’

Ruso felt his resolve slipping away. Eventually he said, ‘What aren’t we worried about, exactly?’

‘You really want to know?’

‘Go on then.’

‘The story I heard . . .’

The story Postumus had heard began with an Army transport convoy making its way to a base at the opposite end of the border. The convoy had been delayed by a breakdown and was still an hour away as darkness fell. They were making good progress when a sudden shower of burning arrows rained down on the carts, and a fire broke out in the straw packing round a consignment of oil jars. Postumus described what ensued as ‘a fine old fry-up’ and in the chaos that followed nobody noticed that the guards on the rear vehicle had been knifed and the cargo stolen. Nobody could remember seeing any of the attackers.

‘So next morning they do a security round-up, and most of the natives don’t know a thing, as usual. But after a bit of expert prompting they start talking about a strange figure riding past in the half-light, and they swear he had antlers and he’s a messenger from the gods.’

‘Antlers?’

‘Nobody took much notice until a couple of the guards on the transport said they saw the same thing, only they didn’t speak up in case people thought they were crazy.’

‘It was dark when they saw this – thing?’

‘But every one of them described it the same way. That’s not all. There’s an outpost where the whole unit fell ill, including the medic.’

Ruso ignored the jibe.

‘Turned out there was a dead wolf in the water channel,’ said Postumus. ‘But it couldn’t have got in there by itself. Someone had replaced the cover stone and laid a set of antlers on top. Then there’s a tax collector who got ambushed. He saw him too.’

‘Who’s going to believe a tax collector?’

The centurion grunted. ‘I’m just telling you what I heard. Don’t say I didn’t warn you. But, like I said, I don’t reckon matey on the horse is anything to worry about.’

‘No,’ agreed Ruso. ‘The lack of antlers would seem to support you there.’

‘I reckon,’ continued Postumus, ‘That he’s some scabby little Brit who thinks he’s clever. We’ll go across and give him a surprise later on. When we’re good and ready.’

Privately Ruso thought that if the scabby little Brit really were clever, he would play along with the rumours by strapping something spiky to his head. Deciding not to bother Postumus with this thought, he said, ‘So we’ve been sent up here to steady a few nerves.’

‘*I’ve* been sent,’ corrected Postumus, edging his horse sideways to steer around a minor landslip where the kerb had begun to collapse into the ditch. ‘I heard *you* volunteered. Don’t know what the hell for. Specially with that girl of yours.’

‘I heard there’s more action up on the border,’ said Ruso, not keen to get into a discussion about Tilla.

A grin made its way around the nose. ‘Not enough bodies for you back at base, eh?’

Ruso sighed. He had never wanted to get tangled up in that business of the murdered barmaid. Now, no matter how often he denied it, it seemed everyone in the Twentieth Legion knew him as the Medicus with as much interest in dead patients as live ones. ‘Last month,’ he explained, ‘a man turned up on my doorstep with the corpse of his girlfriend’s cat and asked me to find out who’d poisoned it.’

‘And did you?’

‘No.’

‘Heard you didn’t have much luck pinning down who killed that barmaid, either.’

‘I don’t investigate dead cats,’ said Ruso, who knew far more about the barmaid than Postumus suspected. ‘I’ve got better things to do.’

‘Well perhaps you can track down matey with the antlers.’ Postumus was scanning the horizon, presumably looking out for the scabby little Brit so he could carry on ignoring him.

Ruso let the centurion ride on ahead before making another futile attempt to scratch his back. There was a suspicious tickling sensation on the lower right-hand side of his ribcage now. Almost as irritating as the itching was the fact that he had not noticed any of this until after they had set out this morning. Otherwise he would have cornered that lying innkeeper and demanded a refund.

For a moment he had been alarmed by the way Postumus’ stories echoed Tilla’s. Now, thinking about it logically, he realized that Tilla must have heard those same tales from other travellers. Her vision in the yard last night had not been an apparition sent to inspire her or to terrorize the

Army, but the result of frightening rumours working on the uneducated native imagination. The only mysterious creature at the inn had been the common but strangely invisible bed-bug – and if she did not mention the bites, neither would he. She would only gloat.

Officer Metellus was able to name Felix's murderer by the start of the third watch. It was a native. His identification had not been difficult, since he was not the brightest of men. Plenty of people had heard him pick a quarrel with his victim in a local snack bar only hours before the body was found. Several of the witnesses could remember the exact wording of the threats he had made.

Unfortunately, as Prefect Decianus of the Tenth Batavians observed over his lunch tray, naming the murderer did not solve the problem.

'We'll pick him up soon, sir,' promised Metellus, who had not been invited to share the frugal offering of bread and black olives. 'All our contacts know who to look for, and I've got men watching the house.'

Decianus tore a chunk off the bread. 'Audax wants to round up twenty natives and execute one every watch until someone tells us where he is.'

Metellus frowned. 'I don't think the Governor would approve, sir. His orders are —'

'I don't need you to tell me what the Governor's orders are, Metellus. Obviously we aren't going to do that. At least, not without approval. I'll send a message down and see what he says.'

'I've already done that.'

Decianus glanced at him. 'I don't suppose we'll get much of an answer till he gets here to see for himself. And I want to have this cleared up by that time anyway.' He dropped the bread back on to the tray. 'Where's the body now?'

'In the mortuary. Audax is guarding the door. Nobody else has been allowed anywhere near it.'

Decianus pondered that for a moment. 'What are the men saying?' Metellus said, 'We're putting it out that it was just a quarrel in a bar, sir.'

'And do they believe it?'

'Probably not.'

'I want it made absolutely clear that we're dealing with a simple back-street brawl. There's nothing mysterious about the way the native cursed our man, and there is no connection between this business and anything else they may have heard.'

'I'll do my best, sir,' agreed Metellus. 'But judging by the number of civilians out there queuing to make devotions to the gods, it's not going to be easy.'

Decianus sighed. 'Tell me this isn't happening, Metellus.'

'It'll be better when we arrest the native, sir.'

'It'll be better when you find our missing item.'

Metellus said, 'It's nowhere in his house. I've got two men covering the road between here and there, and another three covering the streets, spreading out from where the body was found.' He raised a hand to silence the objection the Prefect was about to make. 'It's all right, I haven't told them anything. Their orders are to search for evidence of anything the native might have stolen from the victim, then bring it back and say nothing.'

Decianus picked up an olive, examined it for a moment, then flung it back into the bowl. It bounced off the rim, missed the desk and skittered across the floorboards. 'We should have seen this coming.'

'My people can't be everywhere, sir. The native wasn't on our list as anybody important.'

As Decianus was saying, 'Well, he's found a way of making himself important now,' there was a knock on his office door. Apparently the fort doctor wished to speak with him urgently.

Decianus frowned. 'I suppose he's come to complain about having a centurion keeping him out of his mortuary.'

The young soldier in the doorway hesitated, evidently not sure

whether the Prefect was always right or whether his staff were expected to warn him when he wasn't. Finally he said, 'Not exactly, sir.'

Decianus brushed breadcrumbs from his tunic. He had not been impressed by Doctor Thessalus' recent performance. The man was due to be replaced in a few days, when the Governor arrived, and Decianus was not sorry. 'Very well,' he said, sliding the tray aside. 'Send him in.'

The state in which Thessalus appeared before him did nothing to improve his opinion. 'Stand easy,' he ordered.

Thessalus, who had not been standing as straight as he might, relaxed even further. The glare of the guard who had marched him in suggested that he would very much like to seize this excuse for an officer and straighten him up again.

Thessalus seemed to be having difficulty staying awake. He squeezed his eyes shut and then opened them again. Decianus followed his gaze and saw that a fly had settled on the tray and was now busy cleaning its back legs. Decianus dismissed the guard and waved away the fly. Metellus, who had retreated to sit in the corner, said nothing.

'So, doctor,' said Decianus, 'tell me what's so urgent.'

'Yes, sir,' agreed the doctor. 'Right away, sir.' The silence which followed was broken by a hiccup. 'Oops,' he said, a faint grin creasing his thin face. 'Sorry, sir.'

Decianus reflected that it was very early in the day to be drunk. He nodded to Metellus, who approached the doctor and leaned close to repeat the order into his ear.

Thessalus' smile faltered. He blinked several times. His mouth opened, closed again and then, in an accent that betrayed a better education than everyone else in the room, offered the words, 'I've come to confess to a murder, sir.'

Decianus leaned his elbows on the desk, placed his fingertips together and eyed the unsteady Thessalus over the top of them. 'You might want to reconsider what you've just said, doctor.'

The young man rubbed his unshaven jaw and appeared to be

pondering this question. Then he said, 'No, sir. I have to tell the truth. I was the man who killed Felix.'

Decianus sighed. 'We already know who killed Felix, Thessalus. It wasn't you.'

The dark eyes widened. 'Holy gods! That wasn't Felix?' The fingers that rose towards his mouth were trembling. 'This is even worse than I thought. Is there another man missing, sir?'

A swift glance at Metellus assured Decianus that there was not. 'What,' he said, 'exactly, do you think you did to Felix?'

Thessalus swallowed. His eyes attempted to focus on the edge of the desk. Finally he said, 'I think I may have, ah — I may have . . .' The words had failed, but the meaning of the collision between the outer edge of the hand and the back of the neck was unmistakable.

Decianus glanced at Metellus again, then returned his attention to the doctor.

'Tell me what you did with the body.'

Thessalus appeared to be pondering the meaning of this question. Finally he said, 'The local people believe the soul resides in the head, sir.'

'I see. So where is the soul of Felix residing now?'

'They take the enemy's head home with them. They keep it on display as a trophy. Sometimes they make a cup out of the skull and drink from it.'

'That was years ago,' put in Metellus. 'Even the northerners don't get up to that sort of thing now.'

Instead of replying, Thessalus swayed alarmingly and grabbed hold of the desk for support.

'Stand up straight, man! Why on earth would you want to murder Felix?'

Thessalus' eyes closed. His knees buckled. His body slumped to the floor.

'He's relieved of duty,' said Decianus, leaning over the desk to peer at him. 'He's to be confined to quarters until further notice. And he's not to talk to anyone.'

When the semi-conscious doctor had been dragged out, Decianus turned to Metellus. 'Search his rooms.'

'It can't have been him, sir. He's not the type.'

'Then how does he know?'

There was a soft tap at the door. A servant scurried in and removed the tray. When he had gone, Metellus said, 'Audax must have talked.'

'That doesn't seem likely.'

'Well it wasn't me, and it wasn't you either.'

Decianus looked him in the eye. 'It might have been better to tell the truth in the first place.'

'You're doing the right thing, sir,' Metellus assured him. 'We'll keep Thessalus quiet, arrest the native and it'll all blow over.'

'It had better blow over before the Governor gets here.'

'Do you want some ideas for the funeral speech?'

Decianus scowled at him. 'No,' he said. 'I want you to concentrate on keeping this thing under control.'

When he was alone, Decianus walked across to the small wooden shrine on the side wall of his office, sprinkled some more incense in the burner, and prayed that this mess was not about to get considerably worse.