

HARRY SIDEBOTTOM
WARRIOR
OF ROME

PART TWO

'SIDEBOTTOM'S
PROSE BLAZES'
THE TIMES



KING OF KINGS

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Warrior of Rome part II
by
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Prologue: The Syrian Desert between the Euphrates River and the city of Palmyra (Autumn AD256)

They were riding for their lives. The first day in the desert they had pushed hard, but always within their horses' limits. Completely alone, there had been no sign of pursuit. That evening in camp among the muted, tired conversations there had been a fragile mood of optimism. It was smashed beyond recall in the morning.

As they crested a slight ridge Marcus Clodius Ballista, the *Dux Ripae*, pulled his horse to one side off the rough track and let the other thirteen riders and one pack horse pass. He looked back the way they had come. The sun was not up yet, but its beams were beginning to chase away the dark of the night. And there at the centre of the spreading semi-circle of numinous yellow light, just at the point where in a few moments the sun would break the horizon, was a column of dust.

Ballista studied it intensely. The column was dense and isolated. It rose straight and tall, until a breeze in the upper air pulled it away to the south and dissipated it. In the flat, featureless desert it was always difficult to judge distances. Four or five miles away, too far to see what was causing it. But Ballista knew. It was a troop of men. Out here in the deep desert it had to be a troop of mounted men; on horses or camels, or both. Again, the distance was too great to make an accurate estimate of the numbers, but to kick up that amount of dust there had to be four or five times as many as rode with Ballista. That the column of dust did not incline to left or right but seemed to rise up completely straight showed that they were following. With a hollow feeling Ballista accepted it for what it was – the enemy was chasing them, a large body of Sassanid Persian cavalry was on their trail.

Looking round, Ballista realized that those with him had stopped.

Their attention was divided between him and the dust cloud. Ballista pushed them out of his thoughts. He scanned through 360 degrees. Open, slightly undulating desert. Sand with a thick scattering of small and sharp dun-coloured rocks. Enough to hide a myriad scorpions and snakes; nothing to hide a man, let alone fourteen riders and fifteen horses.

Ballista turned and walked his mount to the two Arabs in the centre of the line.

‘Riding hard, how long will it take to reach the mountains?’

‘Two days,’ the girl replied without hesitation. Bathshiba was the daughter of a caravan protector. She had travelled the route before with her late father. Ballista trusted her judgement, but he glanced at the other Arab.

‘Today and tomorrow,’ Haddudad the mercenary said.

With a jingle of horse furniture Turpio, the sole Roman officer under Ballista surviving from the original force, reined in next to them.

‘Two days to the mountains?’ Ballista asked.

Turpio shrugged eloquently. ‘The horses, the enemy and the gods willing.’

Ballista nodded. He raised himself up using the front and rear horns of the saddle. He looked both ways along the line. He had his party’s undivided attention.

‘The reptiles are after us. There are a lot of them. But there is no reason to think they can catch us. They are five miles or more behind. Two days and we are safe in the mountains.’ Ballista felt as much as saw the unspoken objections of Turpio and the two Arabs. He stopped them with a cold glance. ‘Two days and we are safe,’ he repeated. He looked up and down the line. No one else said anything.

With studied calm Ballista walked his horse slowly to the head of the line. He raised his hand and signalled them to ride on. They moved easily into a canter.

Behind them the sun rose over the horizon. Every slight rise in the desert was gilded, every tiny depression a pool of inky black. As they rode, their shadows flickered far out in front as if in a futile attempt to outrun them.

The small column had not gone far when a bad thing happened. There was a shout, abruptly cut off, then a terrible crash. Ballista swung round in the saddle. A trooper and his mount were down; a thrashing tangle of limbs and equipment. The man rolled to one side. The horse came to a halt. The soldier pulled himself on to his hands and knees, still holding his head. The horse tried to rise. It fell back with an almost human cry of pain. Its near foreleg was broken.

Forcing himself not to check the dust cloud of their pursuers, Ballista rattled out some orders. He jumped down from his mount. As endurance was at issue it was vital to take the weight off his horse's back at every opportunity. Maximus, the Hibernian slave who had been Ballista's bodyguard for the last fifteen years, tenderly coaxed the horse to its feet. He talked to it softly in the language of his native island as he unsaddled it and led it off the path. It went with him trustingly, hopping pathetically on its three sound legs.

Ballista turned his eyes away to where his body servant, Calgacus, was removing the load from the one packhorse. The elderly Caledonian had been enslaved by Ballista's father. Since Ballista's childhood in the northern forests, Calgacus had been at his side. Now, with a peevish expression on his ill-favoured face, the Caledonian redistributed as much of the provisions as he could among the riders. Muttering under his breath, he placed what could not be accommodated in a neat pile. He regarded it appraisingly for a moment then pulled up his tunic, pushed down his trousers, and urinated copiously all over the abandoned foodstuffs. 'I hope the Sassanid fuckers enjoy it,' he announced. Despite their extreme fatigue and fear, or maybe because of it, several men laughed.

Maximus walked back looking clean and composed. He picked up the military saddle and slung it over the back of the packhorse, carefully tightening the girths.

Ballista went over to the fallen trooper. He was sitting up. The slave boy Demetrius was mopping a cut on the man's forehead. Ballista began to wonder if his young Greek secretary would have been so solicitous if the soldier had not been so good-looking, before, annoyed with himself, he closed that line of thought.

Together, Ballista and Demetrius got the trooper back on his feet – *Really, I am fine* – then up on to the former packhorse.

Ballista and the others remounted. This time he could not resist looking for the enemy dust. It was appreciably closer. Ballista made the signal and they moved out past where the cavalry horse lay. On top of the spreading pool of dark red arterial blood was a foam of light pink caused by the animal's desperate attempts to breathe through a severed windpipe.

For the most part they cantered, a fast, ground-covering canter. When the horses were blown, Ballista would call out an order and they would dismount, give their mounts a drink – not too much – and let them have a handful of food: bread soaked in watered wine. Then they would walk, leading rein in hand, until the horses had something of their wind back and the riders could climb wearily back into the saddle. With endless repetition the day wore on. They were travelling as fast as they could, pushing the horses to the edge of their stamina, at constant risk of fatigue-induced accident. Yet every time they looked, the dust of their unseen enemy was a little closer.

During one of the spells on foot Bathshiba walked her horse up alongside Ballista. He was unsurprised when Haddudad appeared on his other side. The Arab mercenary's face was inscrutable. Jealous bastard, thought Ballista.

They walked in silence for a time. Ballista looked over at Bathshiba. There was dust in her long black hair, dust smudged across her high cheekbones. Out of the corner of his eye Ballista watched her moving, watched her breasts moving. They were obviously unconstrained under the man's tunic she wore. He found himself thinking about the one time he had seen them; the rounded olive skin, the dark nipples. Allfather, I must be losing my grip, Ballista thought. We are being chased for our lives through this hellish desert and all I am thinking about are this girl's tits. But Allfather, Fulfiller of Desire, what fine tits they were.

'Sorry, what was that?' Ballista realized she had been talking to him.

'I said, "Why did you lie to your men?'" Bathsiba's voice was

pitched low. Above the rattle of equipment, the heavy footfalls and laboured breathing of men and horses, she could not be heard beyond the three of them. 'You have travelled this way before. You know we will not be safe when we reach the mountains. There is only one path through the high country. We could not be easier to follow if we were unrolling a thread behind us.'

'Sometimes a lie can cause the truth.' Ballista grinned. He felt oddly light-headed. 'Ariadne gave Theseus the ball of string to find his way out of the labyrinth when he went in to kill the minotaur. He promised he would marry her. But he abandoned her on the island of Naxos. If he had not lied Ariadne would not have married the god Dionysus, Theseus would not have had a son called Hippolytus, and Euripides could not have written the tragedy of that name.'

Neither Bathshiba nor Haddudad spoke. They were both looking at him strangely. Ballista sighed and started to explain. 'If I had told them the truth – the Persians may well catch and kill us before the mountains, and even if we get that far they will probably kill us anyway – they might have given up, and that would have been the end of things. I gave them some hope to work towards. And who knows, if we get to the mountains, we might make our own safety there.'

Ballista looked closely at Haddudad. 'I remember the road passes through several ravines.' The mercenary merely nodded. 'Are any of them suitable for an ambush?'

Haddudad took his time replying. Ballista and Bathshiba remained silent. The Arab mercenary had served Bathshiba's father for a long time. They knew he was a man whose judgement was sound.

'The Horns of Ammon, not far into the mountains – a good killing ground.'

Ballista signalled it was time to remount. As he hauled his tired frame into the saddle, he leant over and spoke quietly to Haddudad. 'Tell me just before we reach the Horns of Ammon – if we get that far.'

Night fell fast in the desert. One moment the sun was high in the sky, the next it was dipping out of sight. Suddenly Ballista's

companions became black silhouettes and the dark came crowding down. The moon had not yet risen, and, even if the horses had not been fit to drop, it was not thought safe to continue by starlight.

Just off the track, they made camp in near-total darkness. By Ballista's order there were only three shuttered lanterns lit. They were positioned to face west, away from the pursuers, and when the horses were settled they were to be extinguished. Ballista rubbed down his mount, whispering quiet, meaningless endearments in the grey gelding's ears. He had bought Pale Horse in Antioch the year before. The gelding had served him well and he was very fond of the big-hearted animal. The smell of hot horse, as good to Ballista as the scent of grass after rain, and the feel of the powerful muscles under its smooth coat soothed him.

'*Dominus.*' The voice of a trooper leading up his mount broke Ballista's reverie. The soldier said nothing else. There was no need. The man's horse was as lame as a cat. As they so often did when needed, Maximus and Calgacus appeared out of the darkness. Without words, the elderly Caledonian took over seeing to Pale Horse and the bodyguard joined Ballista in checking the other horse. They walked it round, made it trot, inspected its hooves. It was hopeless. It could go no further. With a small jerk of his chin, Ballista indicated to Maximus to lead it away.

The trooper held himself very still, waiting. Only his eyes betrayed his fear.

'We will follow the custom of the desert.' At Ballista's words the man exhaled deeply. 'Tell everyone to gather round.'

Ballista collected his helmet and a pottery wine jar and placed them on the ground next to one of the lanterns, which he opened completely. The small party formed a circle in the light, squatting in the dust. The lantern threw harsh light on to their tense faces, accentuating their features. Somewhere a desert fox barked. It was very quiet afterwards.

Ballista picked up the wine jar, drew the stopper and drank deeply. The wine was rough in his throat. He gave it to the man next to him, who drank and passed it on. Maximus came back and hunkered down.

‘The girl will not be included.’ Ballista’s voice sounded loud to himself.

‘Why not?’

Ballista looked at the trooper who had spoken. ‘I am in command here. I am the one with *imperium*.’

‘We will do what is ordered, and at every command we will be ready.’ The soldier looked down as he flatly intoned the ritual words. Bathshiba got up and walked away.

When the empty jar was passed back to Ballista he dropped it at his feet. He raised his right boot and brought it down on the jar. There was a loud snap then a series of sharp clinks as it shattered. Studying what he was doing, he stamped his heel, three, four more times, breaking the vessel into small shards. He crouched down and selected thirteen similar-sized pieces, which he laid out in a row. He picked up two of them. With one he scratched the single Greek letter *theta* on the other. He scooped up all thirteen shards and dropped them, the twelve blank and the one marked, into his upturned helmet and rattled them around.

Ballista stood and held the helmet. Everyone was watching it as if it contained an asp. In a sense it did. Ballista felt his heart beating hard, his palms sweating as he turned and offered it to the man on his left.

It was the scribe from North Africa, the one they called Hannibal. He did not hesitate. His eyes locked with Ballista’s as he put his hand in the helmet. His fingers closed. He withdrew his fist, turned it over and unclenched it. On his palm lay an unmarked shard. With no show of emotion he dropped it on the ground.

Next was Demetrius. The Greek boy was trembling, his eyes desperate. Ballista wanted to comfort him, but he knew he could not. Demetrius looked to the heavens. His lips mouthed a prayer. He thrust his hand into the helmet, clumsily, almost knocking it from Ballista’s grip. The twelve shards clinked as the boy’s fingers played over them, making his choice. Suddenly he withdrew his hand. In his fingers was an unmarked piece of pottery. Demetrius exhaled, almost a sob, and his eyes misted with tears.

The soldier on Demetrius’ left was called Titus. He had served in Ballista’s horse guards, the *Equites Singulares*, for almost a year.

Ballista knew him for a calm, competent man. Without preamble he took his shard from the helmet. He opened his fist. There was the *theta*. Titus closed his eyes. Then, swallowing hard, he opened them, mastering himself.

A sigh, like a gentle breeze rustling through a field of ripe corn, ran around the circle. Trying hard not to show their relief, the others melted into the night. Titus was left standing with Ballista, Maximus and Calgacus.

Titus smiled a sketchy smile. 'The long day's task is done. Might as well unarm.' He took off his helmet and dropped it, lifted his baldric over his head, unbuckled his sword belt and let them fall too. His fingers fumbled with the laces of his shoulder guards. Without words, Maximus and Calgacus closed in and helped him, lifting the heavy, dragging mailcoat off.

Unarmed, Titus stood for a moment, then bent and retrieved his sword, unsheathing it. He tested its edge and point on his thumb.

'It does not have to be that,' said Ballista.

Titus laughed bitterly. 'A stepmother of a choice. If I run I will die of thirst. If I hide the reptiles will find me, and I have seen what they do to their prisoners – I would like to die with my arse intact. Better the Roman way.'

Ballista nodded.

'Will you help me?'

Ballista nodded again. 'Here?'

Titus shook his head. 'Can we walk?'

The two men left the circle of light. After a time Titus stopped. He accepted a wine skin that Ballista offered and sat down. He took a long pull and handed the drink back as Ballista sat next to him. Back in the camp the lanterns went out one by one.

'Fortune, *Tyche*, is a whore,' Titus said. He took another drink. 'I thought I would die when the city fell. Then I thought I would escape. Fucking whore.'

Ballista said nothing.

'I had a woman back in the city. She will be dead now, or a slave.' Titus unfastened the purse from his belt. He passed it to Ballista. 'The usual – share it out among the boys.'

They sat in silence, drinking until the wine was gone. Titus looked up at the stars. ‘Fuck, let’s get it over with.’

Titus stood up and passed over his sword. He pulled his tunic up, baring his stomach and chest. Ballista stood close in front of him. Titus placed his hands on Ballista’s shoulders. The hilt of the sword in his right hand, Ballista laid the blade flat on his left palm. He brought the point up ever so gently to touch the skin just below Titus’ ribcage, then moved his left hand round behind the soldier’s back.

Ballista did not look away from the other man’s eyes. The smell of sweat was strong in Ballista’s nostrils. Their rasping breathing was as one.

Titus’ fingers dug into Ballista’s shoulders. An almost imperceptible nod, and Titus tried to step forward. Pulling the soldier towards him with his left hand, Ballista put his weight behind the thrust of the sword in his right. There was an infinitesimally slight resistance and then the sword sliced into Titus’ stomach with sickening ease. Titus gasped in agony, his hands automatically clutching for the blade. Ballista felt the hot rush of blood as he smelt its iron tang. A second later there was the smell of piss and shit as Titus voided himself.

‘*Euge*, well done,’ Titus groaned in Greek. ‘Finish it!’

Ballista twisted the blade, withdrew it, and thrust again. Titus’ head jerked back as his body went into spasm. His eyes glazed. His legs gave way, his movements stilled, and he began to slide down the front of Ballista. Letting go of the sword, Ballista used both hands to lower Titus to the ground.

Kneeling, Ballista pulled the sword out from the body. Coils of intestines slithered out with the blade. Shiny, revoltingly white, they looked and smelled like unprepared tripe. Ballista dropped the weapon. With his blood-soaked hands he closed the dead man’s eyes.

‘May the earth lie lightly on you.’

Ballista stood. He was drenched in the blood of the man he had killed. Maximus led several others out of the darkness. They carried entrenching tools. They began to dig a grave. Calgacus put his arm

round Ballista and led him away, quietly soothing him, as he had when he was a child.

Four hours later the moon was up and they were on the move. Ballista was surprised that, after Calgacus had undressed him and cleaned him, he had slept a deep, unhaunted sleep. Wearing new clothes, his armour burnished, he was back on Pale Horse, leading the diminished party towards the west.

One by one the stars faded. When the sun rose again there were the mountains ahead still blue in the distance. And behind was the dust of their hunters. Much nearer now. Not above two miles away.

‘One last ride.’ As Ballista said the words he realized they were double-edged. He thought a quick prayer to Woden, the high god of his homelands. *Allfather, High One, Death Blinder, do not let my careless words rebound on me and mine, get us out of this.* Out loud, he called again, ‘One last ride.’

At the head of the column Ballista set and held the pace at a steady canter. Unlike yesterday, there was no time to dismount, no time to walk and let the horses get their breath back. As the sun arched up into the sky, relentlessly they rode to the west.

Soon the horses were feeling their exertions; nostrils flared, mouths hanging open, strings of spittle flecking the thighs of their riders. All morning they rode, the mountains inching closer. Some god must have held his hands over them. The track was rough, pitted and stony, but there were no cries of alarm; not one animal pulled up lame or went down in a flurry of dust and stones. And then, almost imperceptibly, they were there. The track began to incline up, the stones at its side grew bigger, became boulders. They were in the foothills.

Before the path turned and began to grade its way up the slopes, before the view was blocked, Ballista reined in and looked back. There were the Sassanids, a black line about a mile behind. Now and then sunlight glistened perpendicular on helmets or pieces of armour. Certainly they were within thirteen hundred paces. Ballista could see they were cavalry, not infantry. He had known that already. He estimated there were some fifty or more of them.

There was something odd about them, but there was no time to stop and study more. He coaxed Pale Horse on.

They had to slacken the pace as they climbed. The horses were labouring hard. Yet they had not been in the high country long before Haddudad said, 'The Horns of Ammon.'

They turned left into the defile. The path here was narrow, never more than twenty paces wide. It ran for about two hundred paces between the outcrops that gave the place its name. The cliff on the left was sheer. That on the right rose more gently; a scree-covered slope a man could ascend, lead a horse up, probably ride one down.

'At the far end, where it turns right, out of sight the path doubles back behind the hill,' Haddudad said. 'Place archers up on the right, hold the far end. It is a good killing ground, if we are not too outnumbered.'

As they rode up the defile Ballista retreated into himself, planning, making his dispositions. When they were about fifty paces from the end he stopped and issued his orders. 'I will take Maximus, Calgacus and the girl with me up the hill. She is as good with a bow as a man. The Greek boy can come to hold our horses, and you' – he pointed to one of the two the remaining civilian members of his staff, not the North African scribe – 'will come to relay my orders.' He paused. He looked at Haddudad and Turpio. 'That leaves you two and five men down on the path. Wait round the corner, out of sight until you get my command, then charge down into the reptiles. Those of us above will ride down the slope to take them in the flank.'

Haddudad nodded. Turpio smiled sardonically. The others, exhausted, hollow-eyed, just stared.

Ballista unfastened the black cloak he had been wearing to keep the sun off his armour. He dropped it to the ground. It landed with a puff of dust in the middle of the path. Then he untied poor Titus' purse from his belt. He opened it. There were a lot of coins. A soldier's life savings. He scattered them on the ground just beyond the cloak. As an afterthought he took off his helmet, the distinctive one with the bird-of-prey crest, and tossed that down as well.

Haddudad grinned. 'Cunning as a snake,' he said.

‘Among your people that is probably a compliment,’ Ballista replied.

‘Not always,’ said the Arab.

Ballista raised his voice to reach them all. ‘Are you ready for war?’

‘Ready!’

Three times the call and response, but it was a tired, thin sound, almost lost in the hills.

Turpio brought his horse next to Ballista. Quietly, he recited a poem in Greek.

Don't cry
Over the happy dead
But weep for those who dread
To die.

Ballista smiled and waved them all off to take up their positions.

‘We will do what is ordered, and at every command we will be ready.’

Ballista lay full length on the crest of the hill, an old grey-brown blanket over his shoulders. He had rubbed handfuls of the dun-coloured sand into his hair and over his face. Twenty arrows were planted point down in the ground by his head, looking like a clump of desert grass or camel thorn. Those with him were resting behind the brow of the hill.

Staring at something for a long time in bright sunshine began to have a narcotic effect. The scene seemed to shift and waver, inanimate objects start to move. Twice Ballista had tensed, thinking the moment had come, before realizing his eyes had deceived him. It was not long after noon. They had made good time. The Sassanids must have halted for a rest in the foothills, confident their prey could not escape them.

Ballista blinked the sweat out of his eyes and shifted slightly in the hollow his body had made in the stony ground. He very much doubted this was going to work. Ten fighting men and the girl against at least fifty. Strangely, he did not feel particularly frightened.

He thought of his wife and son and felt an overwhelming sadness that he would not see them again. He imagined them wondering what had happened to him, the pain of never knowing.

A movement, at last. The Sassanid cavalry walked round into the defile and Ballista's heart leaped. He saw what had been odd about their column – each Sassanid led two spare horses. That was how they had narrowed the distance so fast. Sixty horses but only twenty riders. The odds were no worse than two to one. And, Allfather willing, he could improve on that.

The leading Sassanid pointed, called something over his shoulder, and trotted ahead. He reached the things lying in the track and dismounted. Struggling to keep a grip on the reins of his three horses, he crouched down and picked them up.

Ballista grinned a savage grin. The others had not halted. Instead they trotted up and bunched behind the man on foot. Fools, thought Ballista, you deserve to die.

Shrugging off the blanket, Ballista grasped his bow and got to his feet. As he took an arrow and notched it, he heard the others scrambling up to the crest. He drew the composite bow, feeling the string bite into his fingers and the tension mount in the wood, bone and sinew of its belly. Intent on their discoveries, the Sassanids had not noticed him. He selected the man he took to be their leader. Aiming above the bright red trousers and below the yellow hat at the black and white striped tunic, he released. A few seconds later the man was pitched from his horse. Ballista heard the shouts of surprise and fear. He heard those with him release their bows. Another arrow automatically notched, he shot into the bunch of riders, aiming low, hoping if he did not get a rider he would hit a horse. Not looking to see where the arrows struck, he released four or five times more into the group in quick succession.

The floor of the defile was a picture of confusion, bodies of men and animals thrashing, loose horses plunging, crashing into those still under control. Ballista swung his aim to the untouched rear of the column. His first shot missed. His second took a rider's horse in the flank. The beast reared, hurling the warrior backwards to the ground. The other two horses he had been leading bolted.

‘Haddudad, Turpio, now! Demetrius, bring up the horses!’ Ballista yelled over his shoulder. He shot off some more arrows as the crunch and scatter of loose stones grew louder behind him. When the Greek boy appeared with his mount Ballista dropped the bow and vaulted into the saddle. Guiding with his thighs, he set Pale Horse at the slope. From up here it looked far steeper than it had from below, an awkward surface of large slabs of ochre, grey and brown, with patches of treacherous scree.

Ballista leant back against the rear horns of the saddle, dropping the reins, letting Pale Horse find their way. He could hear the others following. Down and off to his right he saw the seven Roman riders, Haddudad and Turpio at their head, thunder into the defile.

As Ballista drew his sword, Pale Horse stumbled. The long cavalry *spatha* nearly slipped from Ballista’s grip. Cursing mechanically, he recovered it and slipped the leather thong tied to the hilt over his wrist. The riders with Haddudad had ploughed into the head of the Sassanid column. They had bowled over or cut down three or four of the easterners, but the lack of space and sheer weight of numbers had brought them to a halt. There were loose Persian horses everywhere. Clouds of dust billowed up the scarred cliff face opposite.

Although taken by surprise and now leaderless, the Sassanids were experienced warriors. They were not ready to run. A Roman trooper with Haddudad toppled from the saddle. An arrow whistled past Ballista. Another landed in front of him, snapping and ricocheting away. Everything hung in the balance.

As Ballista neared the bottom, the closest two Sassanids stuffed their bows back into their cases and tugged their swords free. They were at a standstill. Ballista was moving fast. He wanted to use that. At the last moment he swerved Pale Horse at the warrior to his right. The brave little gelding did not flinch and crashed shoulder to shoulder into the Persian horse. The impact threw Ballista forward in the saddle. But the enemy horse was set back virtually on its quarters, its rider clinging to its mane to keep his seat. Recovering his balance in a moment, Ballista brought his sword across Pale Horse’s neck in a fierce downward cut. The Sassanids

were light cavalry; few of them wore armour. The blade bit deep into the man's shoulder.

Retrieving his sword, Ballista put Pale Horse to cut round the rear of the injured Sassanid's mount to get at the other one. Before he could complete the manoeuvre a third easterner lunged at him from the right. Ballista caught the blade on his own, rolled his wrist to force the Persian's weapon wide and riposted with an underhand cut at the man's face. The Sassanid swayed back. As Ballista's blade sliced harmlessly through the air he felt a searing pain in his left bicep.

Now he was caught between the two Sassanids. With no shield, not even a cloak to guard his left side, Ballista had to try to parry the attacks of both with his sword. He twisted and turned like a baited bear when the dogs close in, steel rang on steel and sparks flew. A hammer-like blow from the right hit Ballista in the ribcage. The Persian's lunge had broken one or two of the mail rings on his coat, forcing the jagged ends into his flesh. But the armour had kept out the point of the blade.

Despite the pain, Ballista forced himself upright and swung a horizontal cut not at the man on his right but at his horse's head. It missed but the animal skittered sideways. Painfully sucking air into his lungs, Ballista swivelled in the saddle, blocked a blow from his left and lashed out with his boot, kicking the Sassanid's mount in the belly. It too gave ground. He had bought himself a few seconds' reprieve.

Ballista looked up. There was nowhere to go. In front of Pale Horse were four or five loose horses, milling, blocking the way. Again, the fierce dark faces closed in. Again, Ballista twisted and turned like a cornered animal. But he was getting slower. His left arm throbbed. His damaged ribs were agony as he moved. It hurt like hell to draw breath.

Just when it seemed that it could only end one way, Maximus appeared. A deft cut, almost faster than the eye could follow, there was a spray of blood and the warrior on Ballista's left toppled from the saddle. No time for thanks, Maximus spurred on and Ballista turned all his attention to his remaining adversary.

After a time, as if by mutual consent Ballista and his opponent backed their horses a pace or two. Panting heavily, each waited for the other to make the next move. The din of combat echoed back from the rocky slopes and the dust rose up like chaff from a threshing floor. Around Ballista and the Persian the hot battle roared, but their perceptions had narrowed to a space little bigger than the reach of their swords. Ballista's left arm was stiff, almost useless. Every breath he took seared his chest. He noted another rider in eastern dress looming up in the murk behind his assailant. Ballista recognized him.

'Anamu!'

Ballista had last seen him just days before, serving as a temporary Roman officer in the defence of his home town, Arete.

'Anamu, you traitor!'

The long, thin face of the man from Arete turned towards Ballista. The wide-spaced eyes showed no surprise. 'It is not my fault,' the man shouted in Greek. 'They have my family. I had to guide them after you.'

Seeing Ballista's distraction, the Sassanid surged forward. Instinct and the memory in his muscles let Ballista flick the blade aside.

Anamu tipped his head back and shouted, loud, in Persian, 'Every man for himself! Run! Save yourselves!' He kicked his horse. It gathered itself and set off. Over his shoulder he called to Ballista again in Greek, 'Not my fault.'

The Sassanid facing Ballista backed his horse again, four, five steps, then hauled on the reins, jerked the beast round and followed Anamu. Suddenly the air was full of high eastern cries. The rattle of hooves echoed round the Horns of Ammon. As one the Persians desperately sought to disengage and spur their way to safety. The fight was over.

Ballista watched the Sassanid cavalry disappear down the defile. His own men were already busy, throwing themselves off their mounts, slitting the throats of the wounded easterners, stripping them, searching for the wealth they were rumoured always to carry.

'Leave one alive,' Ballista shouted. But it was too late.

Haddudad and Turpio arrived and calmly announced the butcher's bill: two troopers dead, two men wounded, including Turpio himself, who had an ugly gash on his left thigh. Ballista thanked them, and all three climbed stiffly to the ground.

Ballista checked over Pale Horse: a graze on the left shoulder, a small nick on the right flank, but otherwise the gelding seemed unharmed. Calgacus appeared with water and strips of clean cloth. He started to bandage Ballista's arm, swearing volubly as his patient kept moving to stroke his mount.

Bathshiba cantered up. Ballista had forgotten all about the girl. She jumped off her horse, ran to Haddudad and threw her arms round his neck. Ballista looked away. Something shining on the ground caught his eye. It was the helmet he had discarded earlier. He went over and picked it up. It was buckled. A horse's hoof had trodden on it. The bird-of-prey crest was bent, twisted out of shape, but it could be repaired.

Dux Ripae
(Autumn AD256–Spring AD257)

TAKE IN A/W

‘Alas, the earth will drink the dark blood of many men.
For this will be the time when the living will call the dead blessed.
They will say it is good to die,
But death will flee from them.
As for you, wretched Syria, I weep for you.’

– *Oracula Sibyllina* XIII, 115–119

I

Ballista wanted to be a good Roman. Woden the Allfather knew he did. But it was difficult. At times like these it was almost impossible. How could they stand the stupid rules and ridiculous rituals, the stifling impediments of civilization? If a wounded man coated in the dust of nineteen days of almost non-stop travel rode up to the imperial palace in Antioch, staggered slightly as he dismounted, and said that he had news for the emperor's ears only, news of the terrible Persian enemy, you would think that the courtiers might usher him without delay into the presence of the Augustus.

'I am most abjectly sorry, most high *Dominus*, but only those specifically invited to the sacred *consilium* of the emperor Valerian Augustus can be admitted.' The fat eunuch was adamant.

'I am Marcus Clodius Ballista, *Dux Ripae*, Commander of the River Banks, *Vir Egregius*, Knight of Rome. I have ridden non-stop from the Euphrates, and I have news of the Sassanid Persian enemy that the emperor needs to hear.' There was a clear dangerous edge to Ballista's voice.

'I could not be more abjectly sorry, most noble *Dux*, but it is impossible.' The eunuch was sweating hard but, metaphorically, he did not lack balls. He was standing his ground.

Ballista could feel his anger rising. He breathed deeply. 'Then pass a message to the emperor that I am outside and need to speak to him and his advisors.'

The eunuch spread his hands wide in a gesture of desolation. 'I fear that it is beyond my powers. Only the *ab Admissionibus* could authorize such a thing.' Rings – gold, amethyst, garnets – glittered on his chubby fingers.

'Then tell the *ab Admissionibus* to give Valerian the message.'

A look of genuine shock appeared on the heavily jowled face – no one in the court would dream of baldly referring to the emperor by just one of his names. 'Oh no, the *ab Admissionibus* is not here.'

Ballista looked around the courtyard. Brick dust hung thick in the air. From somewhere came the sound of hammering. At the foot of the steps stood four *Silentarii*, their title eloquent of their function – no man should disturb the sacred calm of the imperial deliberations. They were backed by a dozen praetorian guardsmen by the great doors at the top of the steps. There was no chance that Ballista could force his way into the imperial presence. He listened to the hammering. Although it was almost a year to the day since Ballista had been at the new imperial palace at Antioch, it was still unfinished and much would have changed. There was no real likelihood that he could expect to find an unguarded way to sneak in among the confusion of builders. He knew that his fatigue was making his grip on his temper tenuous. As he rounded again on the functionary barring his way, the eunuch began to talk.

'Not all members of the *consilium* are here yet. The *ab Admissionibus* is expected at any moment, *Dominus*. Perhaps you might speak to him.' The eunuch's smile was placating; his expression was like that of a dog which fears a beating and bares its teeth.

At Ballista's nod the eunuch quickly turned and waddled away.

Ballista looked at the heavens, then closed his eyes as his tiredness provoked a wave of nausea. 'For fuck's sake,' he said in the language of his native *Germania*.

Opening his eyes, Ballista again looked round the courtyard. The large, dusty square was crowded with men from all over the *imperium* of the Romans. There were men in Roman togas, Greeks in tunics and cloaks, Gauls and Celt-Iberians in trousers. Other

groups clearly came from beyond the borders. There were Indians in turbans, Scythians in tall, pointed hats, Africans in colourful robes. Wherever the emperors went, the business of the empire followed them in the form of innumerable embassies. There were embassies from communities within the empire waiting to ask for benefits, both straightforwardly tangible – relief from taxation or from the billeting of troops – and more symbolic: honorific titles or the right to enlarge their town council. And there were embassies from further away, from the so-called ‘friendly kings’, wanting help against their neighbours or financial subsidies. They always wanted financial subsidies. Now the empire was reeling – attacked on all its frontiers, rebellions breaking out in province after province – those near enough to raid across the borders always got their subsidies.

‘Excuse me.’ Ballista was exhausted. He had not noticed the man approach.

‘I heard you speak in our language.’ The man was smiling the smile of someone who thinks that he has come across one of his own race a long way from home. His accent pointed to one of the southern German tribes, one down by the Danube or the Black Sea. It put Ballista on his guard.

‘I am Videric, son of Fritigern, the King of the Borani. I am my father’s ambassador to the Romans.’

There was a silence. Ballista pulled himself up to his not inconsiderable full height.

‘I am Dernhelm, son of Isangrim, the Warleader of the Angles. The Romans know me as Marcus Clodius Ballista.’

The look on Videric’s face changed to something very different. Automatically, his hand went to his hip, where the hilt of his sword should rest. It was not there. Like Ballista’s, like all other weapons, it had been taken by the praetorians on the front gate.

Two other Borani came up and flanked Videric. The three warriors glowered. They looked much alike: big powerful men, long fair hair to their shoulders, a surfeit of gold rings on their arms.

‘You bastard,’ Videric spat. Ballista stood his ground. ‘You fucking bastard.’

Ballista looked at the three angry men. He had sent his own men, his bodyguard Maximus and the others, to the barracks. He was alone. Yet there was little immediate to worry about. The praetorians did not encourage those waiting in the hope of seeing the emperor to fight among themselves.

‘Last year in the Aegean, two longboats of Borani warriors, and you only spared about a dozen to sell as slaves.’ Videric’s face was very pale.

‘Men die in war. It happens.’ Ballista kept his voice neutral.

‘You shot them down when they could not resist.’

‘They would not surrender.’

Videric stepped forward. One of the other Borani put a hand on his arm to restrain him. Videric gave Ballista a look of complete contempt. ‘And that is why we Borani are here to collect our tribute from the Romans. While you . . .’ Words failed him for a moment. Then he laughed, a harsh snort. ‘While you wait like a slave for your orders. Maybe your Roman master will see you after he has handed his gold to us.’

‘I live in hope,’ Ballista replied.

‘One day we will meet again where there are no Roman guardsmen to protect you. There is a bloodfeud between us.’

‘As I said, I always live in hope.’ Ballista turned his back on them and walked away to the centre of the great courtyard. Wherever you go, old enemies will find you.

A deep metallic boom rang out from the inner gate. Ballista turned. Around him all conversation died as almost everyone turned and gazed up at the gate. High up on the second storey was a gilded statue of a naked man. In his right hand the statue held a tall stake. Nine large golden spheres were suspended at the top of the stake; three more rested at the bottom. Despite his fatigue, Ballista found the mechanical water clock caught his attention. Obviously, one of the spheres slid down at the start of each of the twelve hours of daylight. It was the third hour. Conventionally, this was when the *salutatio*, the time for receiving visitors, ended and the courts began to sit. The autocratic powers of the emperors had long ago blurred such distinctions.

As the reverberations died away a low hum of talk returned. The water clock was new. It had not been there a year earlier. The engineer in Ballista made a mental note to find out how it worked. He looked away, scanning the courtyard. The great fortress-like walls with their embedded Corinthian columns dwarfed the crowd. The Borani were near the inner gate, still gawping up open-mouthed. Ballista moved away towards the outer gate.

A small group of peasants, thin men in much-patched tunics, shifted to one side as Ballista sat on the ground. The big northerner settled himself to wait. His elbows on his knees, his head in his hands, he shut his eyes. The sun was warm on his back. The peasants started talking softly in a language Ballista did not know. He thought it was Syriac.

His mind drifted. Once again he saw the flames engulf the city, the strong south wind pull long streamers of fire into the night sky, the eruption of sparks as a roof gave way. Once again he saw the city of Arete die. The city that he had been charged to defend.

Inexorably, Ballista's thoughts turned to the nightmare flight from Arete. The hellish, relentless pursuit through the desert. His sword slicing into Titus' guts. The trooper gasping out his life breath, The vicious fight at the Horns of Ammon. Then two days crossing the mountains. Hunched in the saddle, sharp, gnawing hunger driving out all other thoughts. Their staggering journey from one brackish watering hole to another.

Ballista's thoughts moved on. Down from the mountains at last. The first Roman-held village. Clean water, food, a bath, the news that the emperor Valerian had set up his court in Antioch. Then on down a broad Roman highway to the caravan city of Palmyra. And there he had left Bathshiba. Left her and Haddudad. It had been a hurried, tense parting for the three of them, with much left unsaid. There had been little time to say anything, and Ballista had lacked the words. He had not known what he wanted to say.

The rest of the journey had been physically easy. Good Roman roads all the way. West from Palmyra to the next great caravan city of Emesa. Then north up the lush valley of the Orontes River. Ballista again felt the motion of the horse under him as they plodded

through the water-meadows towards Antioch, towards the imperial court and the report that he must give today. *The city fell. The Sassanid Persians took it. I failed.*

Click, drag, step. Click, drag, step.

The sounds jerked Ballista awake.

From under the arch of the outer gate came Macrianus. Click went his walking stick, his lame foot dragged, and his sound one took a step. Click, drag, step. The crowds parted as he moved into the courtyard. He was followed at a couple of paces by two other men in togas. In all but one respect they were younger images of himself; the same long, straight nose, the receding chin, the pouches under the eyes. But the sons of Macrianus walked easily. There was a lithe, confident swagger in their step. Ballista had never seen the sons before, but he had met Macrianus once or twice.

Marcus Fulvius Macrianus may have been old and lame, and his low birth was widely known, but he was not to be taken lightly. As *Comes Sacrarum Largitionum*, Count of the Sacred Largess, as well as being in charge of clothing the court, the army and the civil service – the imperial dye works answered to him – he controlled all the money taxes in the *imperium*, the gold and silver mines, the mints that produced the coinage and, most potent of all, he paid both the regular cash salaries of soldiers and officials and the not infrequent donatives to the military. As *Praefectus Annonae*, Prefect of the Grain Supply, he fed the city of Rome and the imperial court. He had agents and depots in every province of the *imperium*. More to the point, he had the ear of the emperors.

Macrianus had risen high. Now he shone in the sunlight, his toga gleaming white, the golden head of Alexander the Great which topped his walking stick flashing. Click, drag, step. Neither he nor his sons looked right or left as they made their way towards the inner gate and the imperial *consilium*.

Ballista hauled himself stiffly to his feet.

‘*Ave, Comes. Ave, Marcus Fulvius Macrianus.*’

Click, drag, step. The lame man paid no attention.

‘*Macrianus.*’ Ballista stepped forward.

‘Out of the way, you filthy barbarian. How dare you address the *Comes Sacrarum Largitionum et Praefectus Anonae*.’ The contempt in the son’s tone was not feigned.

Ballista ignored him. ‘Macrianus, I need to talk to you.’

‘Speak when you are spoken to, you piece of barbarian shit.’ The youth was closing on Ballista.

‘Macrianus, it is me.’

The lame man did not break his slow progress, but he looked at the long-haired, dirty barbarian who was speaking to him. There was no immediate recognition on his face.

‘Macrianus, it is me, Ballista, the *Dux Ripae*. I have news of the Sassanids . . .’ The blow to the left side of his head cut off Ballista’s words. He staggered a few steps to his right.

‘Let this be a lesson to you.’ The youth waded forward, ready to punch again. Ballista crouched, one hand to his temple. He turned slowly, as if dazed, to face his attacker.

When the youth came close enough Ballista lashed out a straight right, hard and fast to the crotch. The youth doubled up, both hands clasping his balls. He tottered three steps backwards. The toga was a ceremonial costume, its very impracticality its point. Romans wore it on special formal days when they were neither doing physical work nor fighting. Now the youth’s toga caught round his legs. He sat down hard.

Ballista straightened up and turned to Macrianus.

‘Macrianus, it is me, Marcus Clodius Ballista, the *Dux Ripae*. You must take me with you into the *consilium*.’

Macrianus had stopped. He stared into Ballista’s eyes. Something more than recognition, some guarded calculation, as if he had never expected to see Ballista again, played across his face.

‘It is vital that I talk to the emperor.’ Ballista heard men running, hobnailed boots pounding, others scrabbling out of the way. He kept his eyes on those of Macrianus. A small smile began to spread across the face of the *Comes Largitionum*.

Ballista was knocked sideways and crashed violently to the ground as the praetorian tackled him. The guardsman rolled off Ballista and got to his feet. Another praetorian arrived. He punched

the butt of his spear into Ballista's back. Despite the sickening surge of pain, the northerner tried to get to his feet.

A blow to the head stopped Ballista. Another to the stomach dropped him to his knees. He covered his head as a flurry of spear butts rained down on his arms and shoulders.

'That's it. Beat the barbarian pig. He threatened the *Comes Sacrarum Largitionum* and attacked my brother Quietus. Beat him senseless, then throw the dog out into the street,' the other young man was shouting.

Ballista was curled up into a ball, the paving slabs gritty under his cheek as he tried to cover himself. After a short time the beating stopped. Ballista heard Macrianus' voice.

'My son, Macrianus the Younger, is right. Now throw him out into the street.'

Strong hands grabbed the northerner and began to drag him to the outer gate. Ballista twisted his head, and got a blow round the ear for his pains. But he saw Macrianus and his two sons resuming their rudely interrupted progress to the imperial *consilium*.

'Macrianus, you cunt, you know that I am the *Dux Ripae*.' Although he must have heard, the Count of the Largess did not pause. Click, drag, step. He vanished up the steps and into the inner gate.

Almost gently, one of the guardsmen punched Ballista in the side of the head.

'Keep a civil tongue in your head when talking to the nobility, you barbarian fucker.'

Ballista ceased to struggle. He let his head loll. The toecaps of his boots were dragging on the ground. Expensive boots – that will do them no good, he thought inconsequentially.

'Halt.' The voice was one accustomed to being obeyed. The praetorians halted. 'Let me see him.'

The guardsmen let go of Ballista, who collapsed on the flagstones.

'Put him on his feet, so that I can see him.'

The rough hands that grasped Ballista were almost solicitous as they manoeuvred him to his feet. Seeing the northerner sway, two of the praetorians supported his arms.

A long, thin face swam into Ballista's view. It came very close,

the big eyes squinting. Ballista thought it was strange: he was so light-headed with fatigue that he felt no real pain. His forehead tickled as blood ran down from a cut on his hairline. He tried to wipe it away with his left hand, but only succeeded in smearing it over more of his face.

‘Gods below, is it really you, Ballista, under all that filth?’

Ballista stared back at the man. The long, thin face was oddly asymmetrical. It looked familiar.

‘Cledonius, it has been a long time.’ Ballista smiled. It hardly hurt at all. Although not a close friend, Cledonius, the *ab Admissionibus*, had long been something of an ally of Ballista’s at the imperial court.

‘What in Hades has happened to you?’ Cledonius sounded genuinely concerned.

‘You mean before the praetorians beat me?’

Cledonius rounded on the praetorians. ‘On whose authority did you do this?’

The praetorians came to attention. ‘The order came from Count of the Largess, *Dominus*.’

Cledonius’ face gave nothing away. Life in the palace did not encourage wearing your heart on your sleeve. He turned back to Ballista.

‘The last I heard ,you were *Dux Ripae*.’ Cledonius opened his mouth to say something else but stopped. Ballista could almost see the thoughts running through the other man’s mind. *You were appointed Dux Ripae. You were ordered to defend the city of Arete from the Sassanids. You are here hundreds of miles away in Antioch, wounded, covered in dirt. The city has fallen. You have failed.*

‘We had better clean you up a bit. Then you can tell the emperor what happened.’ The look on Cledonius’ face now was not all that different from that which had been on Macrianus’ earlier: closed, careful calculation. At an autocrat’s court, advance knowledge could be turned to advantage, but close association with some newsbringers could also be dangerous.

Cledonius made a courtly gesture with his arm. The two Praetorians let go of Ballista and, together, he and Cledonius set

off across the courtyard. The crowds parted. Although his head ached and his shoulders and back were stiff, Ballista found that he could walk quite normally. As they neared the inner gate he saw the three Borani warriors scowling. At the steps the *silentarii* moved aside. The praetorians saluted and swung back the great doors.

Cledonius and Ballista walked through into another courtyard. This one was long and narrow compared with what had gone before. A colonnade of free-standing Corinthian columns linked by arches ran down either side. The doors shut behind them. It was quiet and almost deserted. Their footsteps echoed as they walked. Statues of deified emperors of the past looked down at them. At the far end was the third gate, a relatively modest affair only three or four times the height of a man set in the middle of four more Corinthian columns.

Another squad of praetorians saluted and opened the doors. Cledonius and Ballista passed from the sunlight through into the near-darkness of the imperial vestibule. They stopped, letting their eyes grow accustomed to the gloom. Dark, rich purple hangings seemed to absorb what little light was shed by two rows of golden lamps. The air was heavy with incense.

A fat eunuch approached, his hands decorously hidden in his robes. Ballista was not sure if it was the one he had seen before. Cledonius spoke quietly and the eunuch waddled away.

‘Wait here,’ Cledonius said. ‘The eunuch will bring you some water and towels. Wash the blood off your face. I will come and get you.’ With no further ado the *ab Admissionibus* went on through the hangings at the far end, leaving Ballista alone.

The eunuch returned. Ballista cleaned his face. Wetting his hands, he pushed back his long blond hair. It lay lank on his shoulders. He slapped some of the dust from his tunic and trousers. Most of his body ached. He needed to sleep. It was very quiet in the vestibule. Four praetorians stood to attention. Now and then court functionaries crossed the room with silent, purposeful tread.

Ballista wondered if, at the very limit of his hearing, was the sound of distant hammering. At last, after the endless ride, here he

was. Time to make his report. *The city fell. The Sassanid Persians took it. I failed.* Then the worm of suspicion was back in his mind. *I failed, as you always knew I would.* Men sent on suicide missions can not expect to be welcomed as heroes if they return.

Ballista knew that he had done what he had been sent to do. The *imperium* was being attacked on all sides; its forces were stretched beyond breaking point. North Africa was ablaze with a native revolt led by a charismatic warrior called Faraxen. In the west Valerian's son and co-emperor Gallienus had based himself at Viminacium in a desperate attempt to hold back beyond the Rhine and Danube the hordes of the north – the Franks, Alamanni, Carpi, Iuthungi, Danubian Goths, and many other peoples. Valerian himself had come east to Antioch to try to repel both the barbarians from the Black Sea, the Heruli, Borani, Black Sea Goths and what most saw as the greatest threat of all, the Sassanids from beyond the Euphrates. Yes, Ballista had done what he had been sent to do. He had held up Shapur, the Persian King of Kings, for a whole campaigning season. Through the spring and summer, and into the autumn, the great Sassanid horde had sat before the walls of the city of Arete. They had sweated, laboured and died in their thousands, their every assault thrown back in bloody ruin. Ballista had bought the Romans a year's grace.

But it would have been less embarrassing for the empire if Ballista had died sword in hand in the ruins of Arete. Dead, he could have been a hero. Alive, he was the walking proof of heartless imperial duplicity, a continual reminder that the emperors had cynically sacrificed two units of Roman soldiers and an entire city for the greater good. *You bastards, you lied. There never was a relief force. You sent me there to die.*

The hangings parted and Cledonius reappeared. He gestured Ballista to come. The asymmetrical face was mask-like, revealing not a flicker of emotion. Ballista began to smile at the contrast between the short, neatly trimmed beard and carefully forward-combed hair of the *ab Admissionibus* and his own long, filthy locks and several days' stubble.

The hanging fell behind them and they were plunged into almost

complete darkness. They stood still, just listening to their own breathing.

With no warning, the inner hangings were pulled back and Ballista was momentarily blinded by the rush of light. Squinting, he peered into the audience chamber of Emperor Caesar Publius Licinius Valerianus Augustus, Pontifex Maximus, Pater Patriae, Germanicus Maximus, Invictus, Restitutor Orbis.

As befitted his role as mediator between mankind and the gods, the emperor Valerian appeared suspended in mid-air. He was bathed in bright sunlight from the windows of the great apse where he sat. His toga gleamed painfully white and rays flashed from the golden wreath on his head. The emperor's face was immobile. His gaze was fixed on the distance, over the heads of mere mortals, far beyond the confines of the palace. As the Romans deemed right, the emperor looked as remote as a statue.

As Ballista's eyes adjusted, he saw the low altar where the sacred fire burned at the foot of the steps up to the throne. He took in the Praetorian Prefect, Successianus, standing at the right shoulder of the emperor, the row of secretaries behind his left.

Cledonius touched Ballista's elbow and they set off to walk slowly the length of the long audience chamber. In front of the pillars on either side sat the members of the *consilium*, a dozen or so of the great men of the empire, as still and quiet as cowed schoolboys. Out of the corner of his eye Ballista saw the sons of Macrianus glowering. The face of their father, longer schooled in the ways of the court, was expressionless. Near them, Ballista saw another man he thought that he recognized. The artfully curled hair and beard, the supercilious expression reminded him of someone. In his fatigue the recognition remained tantalizingly out of reach.

They stopped just short of the sacred fire.

'Marcus Clodius Ballista, *Dux Ripae*, Commander of the River Banks, *Vir Egregius*, Knight of Rome.' The voice of the *ab Admissionibus* was reverent but carried well.

Valerian remained motionless, his gaze still far away.

At a sign from Cledonius, Ballista advanced to the foot of the steps and performed *proskynesis*, adoration. Hoping that his reluc-

tance was not evident, the northerner lowered himself to his knees then prostrated himself full length on the floor.

Still Valerian did not look at him. But after a while the emperor held out one of his hands. Ballista got to his feet and, bowing, kissed the proffered heavy gold ring, set with a gem cut with an image of an eagle.

At last the emperor looked down at the man in front of him. The thin, delicate leaves of the golden wreath rustled.

‘Ave, Marcus Clodius Ballista, *carissime Dux Ripae*, my dear Commander of the River Banks.’

Ballista looked up at the emperor. There was the prominent chin, the fleshy cheeks and neck. Now the sparse, carefully groomed moustache and whiskers framed a mouth that was set, eyes that contained no warmth. The word *carissime* was never more of a formality.

The emperor looked at Ballista. The northerner looked back at the emperor. A Roman would have looked away, would have respectfully dropped his eyes. Ballista was buggered if he was going to look away. Motes of dust moved lazily in the sunlight.

At length the elderly emperor nodded, as if to confirm something to himself, and spoke.

‘Marcus Clodius Ballista, tell the sacred *consilium* the things that have happened to you and the things that you have done. Take the floor.’

Ballista carefully walked a few steps backwards, stopping just beyond the low altar of the imperial fire. Cledonius had melted into the background. Ballista was alone in the middle of the chamber. He was very aware of the members of the *consilium* seated on either side, but he kept his gaze and all his attention on the old man on the elevated throne.

What has happened to me! No one knows better than you what has happened to me. You and your son betrayed me. Gave me false promises and sent me to my death. You bastard! Ballista swayed slightly. He was light-headed. He knew that he had to control himself. He started to talk.

‘Last autumn, following the *mandata*, instructions, given to me

by the emperors Valerian and Gallienus, I travelled to the city of Arete on the Euphrates River. I arrived thirteen days before the *kalends* of December. The seasonal rains began the next day. Over the winter I readied the defences of the city. The Sassanid Persians came in April when there was grass for their horses and no more rain to dampen their bows. They were led by Shapur, the King of Kings, in person.'

A faint rustle like a shiver ran through the *consilium* at the mention of the great enemy of Rome, the eastern barbarian who had the audacity to claim equality with the Roman master of the world.

'The Sassanids assaulted the walls first with siege towers, then with a huge ram. We threw them back both times. Many of Shapur's men died. The plain before the city was a charnel house.'

Ballista paused, fighting his weariness to put his memories in order.

'The Sassanids built a siege ramp to overtop our walls. We collapsed it. They undermined a stretch of the city wall and one of the towers, but our earth banks held the defences upright.'

Ballista took a deep breath.

'Shapur ordered one final assault. It failed like the others. Then . . . then, that night, the city was betrayed.'

There was an audible intake of breath from the *consilium*. Even the emperor involuntarily leaned forward. Ballista did not wait for the inevitable question.

'Christians. The Christians were the traitors.'

There was a low babble of voices. Valerian shot a significant look at one of his advisors – which one? Macrianus possibly? – then again nodded as if something had been confirmed to him.

The rising murmur of voices ceased like a lamp snuffed out as a *silentarius* stepped into view.

The emperor sat back on his throne, recomposing himself into a suitably dignified immobility. After a time he spoke.

'The city fell, and you are here.' The imperial voice was neutral.

Ballista felt a hot jet of anger rising in himself. 'With a few companions, I cut my way out of the city. Nothing in my *mandata* said that I had to die there.'

Valerian betrayed no response, but on either side the members of the *consilium* grew even stiller. Ballista was tired and he was angry, but he knew that he had to be very careful or his words would yet see him executed. Everyone waited for the emperor's next words. The emperor's will was law. There was no appeal from his verdict. As a Roman citizen, Ballista would have the advantage of being beheaded and not nailed to a cross.

'Our nature is merciful. We are filled with *clementia*, clemency. Let no one think that we would ever order one of our subjects to his death. We are not an oriental despot like Shapur the Persian, intent on enslaving the world, but the bulwark and embodiment of *libertas*, freedom.' A mutter of assent ran round the *consilium*. 'Who has a question for the *Dux Ripae*?' Valerian gestured.

Ballista half-turned. The man rising to speak was the one who had looked familiar as Ballista entered the audience chamber. That long, artfully curled hair, a short, neatly barbered beard, with at its bottom a ruff of hair teased out – *Allfather, if I were not so tired, I would be able to place this man.*

'What happened to my brother?'

Ballista stared stupidly. His mind was blank.

'My brother, the commander of the legionary detachment in Arete, my brother Marcus Acilius Glabrio.'

Memories flooded into Ballista. He wondered how to say what he had to say.

'My brother?' The voice was tense, impatient.

'Your brother . . . your brother died a hero's death. The Persians were catching us. With one other, your brother said he would delay them. He said that, like Horatius, he would hold the bridge. None of us would have got away without his sacrifice. He died a death worthy of a patrician family of Rome, worthy of the Acilii Glabrones. A hero.'

There was a pause.

'You left him to die.' There was raw fury in the patrician tones. 'A jumped-up barbarian like you left a patrician of Rome to die. You left him to be cut down while you ran away.' The young nobleman's anger choked his words.

‘It was his choice. He volunteered. I did not order him.’ Ballista was not going to let himself be abused by a spoilt, pampered brat of the Roman nobility.

‘You barbarian bastard. You will pay for the death of my brother. I, Gaius Acilius Glabrio, swear it by the gods below.’

The young patrician would have said more, he was even moving towards Ballista, when two *Silentarii* appeared and, without words, herded him back to his seat.

‘If there are no other questions?’ The emperor’s words cut across everyone’s thoughts. ‘Arete has fallen. The road is open for the Persians, to Northern Mesopotamia, to Cappadocia. The time of troubles has returned. Again, as just three years ago, the road lies open for Shapur – to Syria, here to Antioch, to the heart of our empire. Bitter war looms. Each one of us can ponder in private the implications of the news brought by the *Dux Ripae*. We will meet again in four days’ time at the tenth hour in the evening after the *circus*. The *consilium* is over.’

The emperor stood up, and everyone else prostrated themselves as he walked out.

Bitter war looms, thought Ballista. When he faced Shapur again he would not fail. He would not let himself be betrayed again.

As they got to their feet, Cledonius quickly took Ballista’s arm and led him from the audience chamber.

Outside in the sunshine, the *ab Admissionibus* kept them moving at some speed towards the main gate.

‘Impressive, Ballista, most impressive, even by your standards. You have been back at the imperial court for less than a morning and already you have made two lots of extremely dangerous new enemies.’ Cledonius adjusted his grip on the northerner’s arm.

‘First you make an enemy of Macrianus, the *Comes Largitionum*, one of the richest and most powerful men in the empire. A man who has two active and dangerous sons. Then, not content with that, you manage to make Gaius Acilius Glabrio, a strong-willed member of about the noblest family in the *imperium*, to swear an oath of vengeance against you. Very impressive.’

Ballista shrugged. He decided it was not the moment to tell

Cledonius about Videric and the Borani – and, anyway, they were hardly new enemies . . .

‘Luckily for you,’ Cledonius said, as he steered Ballista through the great courtyard, ‘very luckily for you, some of my servants are outside the gate with saddled horses.’

‘What?’ In his surprise Ballista stopped. ‘Are you suggesting that I ride out of the city? What – go into hiding or flee across the borders?’

Cledonius’ long face split into a huge grin. ‘No. I just thought that, in your condition, the horses would make it easier to get across town to see your wife. You did know that she was here in Antioch?’