

## OSTIA AND ROME, OCTOBER AD 34

**W**ITH THE SUDDEN, harsh rasp of flint striking iron, a cascade of sparks penetrated the thick gloom, falling, like a shooting-star shower in miniature, into a tinderbox. A quick series of soft exhalations to encourage the dry shreds of cloth and fine woodchippings to start smouldering were successful and soon a tiny flame illumined the scarred, ex-boxer's face of Marcus Salvius Magnus.

One of his two companions, an ox-like man whose shaven head was sheened in sweat, reflecting the tinder's weak glow, handed Magnus a small earthenware lamp.

Magnus held the oil-soaked wick to his flame and in an instant the lamp flickered alight but its radiance failed to reach the walls or the ceiling of the cavernous chamber filled with dark piles of imported goods, other than the corner in which they were standing. Exotic smells of eastern origin pervaded the warehouse's dry, warm atmosphere. 'Thanks, Sextus.'

Magnus listened for a few moments to the constant drone of shouts, laughter, orders, thumping and grinding that came from the harbour of the port of Ostia, just the other side of the building's iron-reinforced wooden double-doors. Satisfied that their presence was undetected, he kept his voice low as he touched his flame to both of his companions' lamps. 'All right, lads, keep the lamps away from the main doors so the guards outside don't see a flicker; keep very quiet and let's find what we came for as quickly as possible. Cassandros, you take the left. I'll do the centre and, Sextus, you search the right-hand side.'

As he stood facing Magnus, Sextus looked at his hands and attempted to work out which part of the warehouse he should be heading to; his forehead creased into a concentrated frown.

'Over there, Sextus,' Magnus hissed, pointing his lamp helpfully to his right as Cassandros moved off.

Sextus looked quizzically at his left hand and shook his head, clearly bewildered. 'Right you are, Magnus.'

'And don't forget that the things we're looking for should be wrapped in sackcloth and are thin, resinous-smelling tablets no more than a foot long and half that wide.'

'Look for tablets in sackcloth; right you are, Magnus,' Sextus rumbled, inwardly digesting his orders as he lumbered off into the gloom, his lamp throwing a Titanesque, flickering shadow of his bulk over the bare brick wall.

'Keep your voice down.' Magnus shook his head, wondering if his subordinate was up to the task, and decided that if the search was unsuccessful, Sextus' area would be subjected to a rigorous second sweep. However, what Sextus lacked in brains was amply made up for in strength and loyalty, which made him a valuable member of the South Quirinal Crossroads Brotherhood of which Magnus was the *patronus* – the leader.

Magnus began searching through sacks, relying more on his sense of smell than the lamp as the warehouse was evidently the property of a merchant who specialized in the import of Eastern spices, dried fruit, honey and, of course, the objective of their break-in. As he opened yet another sack, this one containing sweet-scented cinnamon bark, Magnus cursed the debt of honour that he owed to his patron, the senator Gaius Vespasius Pollo, which had obliged him to come down to the port of Ostia, the ravenous mouth of Rome. Through that mouth passed every commodity that could be bought anywhere in the world, be it silk from a land so distant that no one was certain of its name, or vividly coloured birds that could talk and seemed to live forever, or that which Magnus now sought: the resin of an Eastern flower that could unlock the realm of Morpheus.

Just why Senator Pollo wanted this substance that was only used in medicine – and then solely by the few who could afford exorbitant expense – and exactly why he preferred to have Magnus steal it rather than purchase it on the open market, Magnus neither knew nor cared. What mattered to him was to find it, then climb back up the rope that dangled from a hole in the corner of the ceiling to leave the vicinity as soon as possible before they attracted the attention of the guards outside or of the Ostia Vigiles. Like their counterparts in Rome, the ex-slaves who made up the Vigiles were not known for their kindness or courtesy to thieves.

Magnus rummaged through another sack, this one containing large nuts of a sort that he was unfamiliar with. He was beginning to wonder if the senator's information was correct and the resin really was in this warehouse.

'I've found the right sack, I think,' Cassandros hissed from his side of the building. 'It certainly smells right.'

Magnus made his way over as quickly as the gloom allowed, to find Cassandros examining a collection of two dozen or so dark resinous tablets; a smile cracked his full Greek-style beard which half concealed a vicious scar on his left cheek. He held out the prize as Magnus approached. 'I reckon this must be it, brother.'

Magnus took the proffered bundle, smelt it and then pinched one of the tablets: it was hard and yet had some give in it. 'I believe you're right, brother.'

'Are you going to try a bit to make sure?'

'Bollocks I am; I ain't ill so I ain't about to take any medicine.'

'I heard it was good fun, especially if you're enjoying a firm hard body at the same time.'

Magnus grunted as he wrapped the tablets back in the sackcloth. 'And I heard that it just took your mind off things whilst a doctor sawed your leg off. Anyway, not being Greek, I prefer my bodies soft and giving and I just happen to have one waiting for me back at our crossroads tavern. So, brothers, let's get out of here as I'm keen to test just how soft and giving that body is.'

Magnus' breath came in sharp gasps as he hauled himself up the last few feet of rope to scramble through the hole in the ceiling, into the attic; he felt the strong right hand of the brother waiting there clasp his wrist. 'Thanks, Marius.' He looked through the opening they had knocked in the wall and on into the gloom of the neighbouring attic. 'Any sound from back there?'

'Nothing to worry about, Magnus.' Marius wiped the sweat from his brow with his left forearm; the stump at its end was bound with leather. 'I went back and listened at

the side door and whilst I was there it was checked – Vigiles, I assume – but as it was locked they moved on.’

Magnus felt the key hanging from his belt. ‘Servius did well to get the copy made.’ Magnus knew that was an understatement; exactly how Servius, his counsellor and second in command of the Brotherhood, had got a copy of the only key to the side door of the end warehouse in this terrace he did not know, but acquisition and information were his areas of expertise, honed by over forty years of life in Rome’s underworld. What Magnus did know was that it had not been cheap; however, Senator Pollo had financed the deal without seeming to care about the price, such was his desire for success and secrecy in this venture.

As Marius hauled Cassandros out of the hole, Magnus crawled into the next attic, holding the lamp up. Ahead, through the beams supporting the terracotta roof tiles, was another wall with a gap punched through it; a couple of rats scurried in the gloom. He looked back. ‘Hurry up, Sextus.’

‘Give us a hand, Marius,’ Sextus quipped as he struggled to squeeze his huge frame through the hole.

‘Very funny, brother. It’s still another couple of months to the Saturnalia and yet you’re already practising your joke.’

Sextus rumbled a deep laugh as he grabbed Marius’ hand and pulled himself clear of the hole.

‘Keep it down, lads,’ Magnus hissed. ‘Pull up the sack and then replace the floor. The senator was very particular about no one noticing there has been a break-in until the theft is discovered.’

Magnus took the sack, unfastened it from the end of the rope and gave it to Sextus, pointing to the heavy tool they had used to dislodge the bricks. ‘Bring the sledgehammer as well, Sextus.’

Marius and Cassandros replaced the two wooden boards that ran between the substantial ceiling beams, leaving them unnailed for fear of making unnecessary noise.

Satisfied that the boards had been relaid and their temporary removal would go unnoticed from the warehouse below, Magnus moved on. Keeping low, he scuttled across the second attic and through the wall, then passed across a third attic to the hole in the floor at the far corner through which they had accessed the space beneath the roof. The head of the military-issue scaling ladder, used for their ascent, rested against the wall just below floor level.

‘Down you go, brother,’ he whispered as Sextus joined him, sack and sledgehammer grasped in one massive hand.

With surprising agility, Sextus descended into the dark. Magnus sent the other two brothers down before placing the two loose floorboards on their sides at the edge of the hole. Feeling for the ladder with his foot, he descended a few rungs until his head was just below the level of the floor. He pulled the two floorboards over and shifted them until one fell neatly into place with the other on top of it. Pulling the second board across the remaining gap, he descended another rung, then reached up and, with his fingertips, adjusted the lie of the board until it clicked snugly into the hole.

‘Bring the ladder, brothers,’ Magnus ordered as he hit the ground. Padding over to the door, he pulled the key from his belt and slipped it into the lock, turning it with a metallic clunk that resounded off the walls with increasing volume but then was drowned by the door’s squeak as it swung open a fraction. Magnus grimaced, then peered out towards the harbour just twenty paces away to his right. Even though it was the sixth hour of the night the dockside still teemed with people, silhouetted in the

light of hundreds of blazing torches as they unloaded scores of merchant ships that bobbed placidly at wooden jetties. Day and night had no meaning in Ostia. Rome's appetite was insatiable and so, to prevent her from crying out with hunger, the business of landing her sustenance never paused, not even for a moment. He stuck his head round the door and looked left, up the street away from the harbour; no one was too close. Opposite was another door in a brick wall; the mirror image end of another terrace of warehouses. After a further quick glance right, he threw the door wide open. 'Quick, lads, but don't run, it'll draw attention to us.' He stood back so that his brothers could file through and then stepped out into the street, closing and locking the door behind him.

Walking swiftly, Magnus followed his companions left and then right into the street running behind the warehouses. Parallel with the harbour, it was lit only by the dim light oozing from open-fronted taverns and peopled by shadows. Drunken cries and raucous singing echoed up the high walls and the aroma of grilled meat mingled with those of sweat, urine and rotting refuse. Halfway to its end Magnus paused; a group of eight men in silhouette had turned into the street and were marching in two columns up the raised pavement towards him. 'Shit! We can't turn round. It would be too obvious. We brazen it out if we're stopped, all right, lads?'

The brothers mumbled their agreement and followed their leader towards the representatives of the only real law enforcement in Ostia.

Magnus came to a set of three stones set in the road, placed there so that pedestrians could cross to the other side without soiling their feet, and positioned so that carts could still pass between them. 'Marius and Cassandros, drop the ladder and stay on this side. Sextus, follow me.' He crossed the street with Sextus carrying the sack as the Vigiles' optio noticed the ladder discarded by Marius and Cassandros. 'Don't look back, Sextus.' Magnus increased his pace as he heard the optio order his brothers across the street to halt and explain just why they had abandoned a perfectly good military scaling ladder at the sight of him and his men.

Magnus barged through a group of carousing sailors who thought better of taking exception to his manners at the sight of Sextus bearing down on them with a sledgehammer in his hand.

Then there came the sudden shout that he was dreading: 'Halt!'

Magnus walked even faster.

'You! Big man with the sack and your mate, halt!'

Magnus glanced round to see four of the Vigiles break into a run, heading towards him across the stepping stones, pulling their heavy cudgels from their belts whilst their comrades chased after Cassandros and Marius, who had used the distraction to hare off in the opposite direction. 'Run!' He sprinted away with Sextus in train, barrelling down the pavement regardless of other users who, in the main, ended up sprawled in the filth on the road.

Racing down the street, Magnus felt his chest tighten with every urgent pace and became horribly aware of his forty-four years. Very few of his brothers were under forty, most having served their twenty-five years under the Eagles or, as in Marius' case, in the navy. He threw another look over his shoulder and saw that the much younger Vigiles were gaining. 'We'll have to turn and fight them, Sextus.' He looked up and saw the end of the street. 'You go left and then turn straight back at them; I'll go right.'

Sextus nodded, frowning, looking at the sack in one hand and the sledgehammer in the other as he pounded along.

‘That way,’ Magnus shouted, pointing to the left. He hurtled right, round the corner, then immediately turned and, putting his shoulder down, ran back to it as two of the Vigiles charged round. With a crack of ribs and a stunted grunt, Magnus’ shoulder rammed into one of his pursuers’ chests, catapulting him back and felling him like a sacrificed beast. The other man sprinted on a few more paces before realising what had happened; he stopped and turned. But Magnus was ready for him and snatched at his right wrist as the Vigile raised his club. Holding it in an iron grasp, he forced it down and round. The Vigile’s breath puffed warm on Magnus’ face, wine and onion clinging to it, as the man was slowly forced down. His left hand lashed out at Magnus, cracking a tight-fisted punch into his cheekbone that caused light to flash across his eyes and his grip to loosen just enough for the Vigile to raise his arm a fraction. Realising that in a protracted trial of strength the younger man would get the better of him, Magnus jerked his knee up into his genitals and felt the satisfying squash of a testicle. The wind fled from his opponent as his eyes popped and his mouth opened in a silent scream; his legs buckled and he collapsed to the ground, clutching his groin. Allowing himself one stout kick at the man’s face as he passed, Magnus picked up his cudgel and ran on to where Sextus was grappling with his second assailant; the first lay staring sightlessly at the night sky, his mouth and nose pulverised by a huge blow from the sledgehammer.

Without pausing in his stride, Magnus slammed the heavy club over the back of Sextus’ opponent’s head and felt the skull crack; the man went limp in Sextus’ arms.

‘Time to go, Sextus, my lad,’ Magnus shouted as he picked up the sack and pelted towards the crowded port.

‘Magnus!’ Gaius Vespasius Pollo boomed, looking up from the breakfast he was obviously enjoying, next to the log fire crackling in the hearth of his atrium. He did not rise but indicated with a chubby, beringed hand that Magnus should take the chair opposite. ‘You were successful, I trust?’ He placed half a hard-boiled egg into his mouth and chewed vigorously, causing his jowls and chins to wobble.

Magnus handed his cloak to the young, blond doorkeeper and crossed the dimly lit atrium; the first signs of dawn could be seen in the courtyard garden through the window. ‘We were, senator.’ He sat, accepting a cup of warm, watered wine from another very attractive Germanic-looking slave boy.

‘You’ve not brought it with you, have you?’

‘Of course not, sir.’ Magnus took a slug of his drink. ‘I left it at the Brotherhood tavern. I stopped there before coming over to you for a bit of er ... refreshment, if you take my meaning?’

Gaius chuckled and cast an admiring eye at the boy waiting on them. ‘I’m sure I do. How many tablets were there?’

‘A couple of dozen.’

‘More than expected; I assume you’ve kept a little something for yourself as commission?’

‘Just the one tablet.’

‘A fair price; but don’t let it be known.’ Gaius pulled a ringlet of carefully tonged dyed-black hair from in front of his eyes and fixed Magnus with a hard stare. ‘Were you seen?’

Magnus placed his cup down on the table between them. ‘Yes and no. We were challenged but only after we left the warehouse; all the lads got away – just. One lad was a bit too enthusiastic with a hammer and brought about an early demise to one of the Vigiles; but that might turn out to be a good thing.’

‘How so?’

‘Well, we left no sign of a break-in so the prefect of Ostia will only be concerned with who sent one of his ex-slave thugs to meet the Ferryman.’

‘Yes, but it would have been better to have had no fuss at all.’

‘Granted, but when the theft is noticed, if the owner reports it to the authorities, they’ll be too busy looking for a Vigiles murderer to care that much.’

Gaius raised a finely plucked eyebrow and slipped an olive between his moist lips. ‘I very much doubt that; not when they realise who the owner is.’

Magnus felt his insides lurch. ‘You said that it was no one important.’

‘Well, he’s not – in terms of Roman politics, that is. However, he does have some influential friends in the imperial household.’

‘Who is he?’

‘The Jewish Prince, Herod Agrippa.’

‘I heard that he’d fled Rome because of debt.’

‘He came back just recently; he managed to organise a very successful embassy of Parthian dissidents, which got him back in favour but not out of debt. The Emperor Tiberius rewarded him by making him tutor to his grandson, Tiberius Gemellus. So, in case the prefect takes a highly placed complaint of theft seriously and on the outside chance that you or one of your lads was recognised, I suggest you move the tablets out of your place to somewhere less obvious.’

Magnus downed the rest of his cup and held it out to be replenished. ‘Can’t you just dispose of them?’

‘I’m afraid not, Magnus; not yet. But I’ll send a message soon, telling you what I want done with them.’ Gaius heaved his massive bulk up from the chair, his tunic straining to contain copious folds of flesh, and stood whilst a third slave boy – equally as pretty – began draping his toga about him. ‘Now, I must greet the rest of my clients and then I’ve an appointment to see the Lady Antonia before I go to the Senate.’

‘She’s wanting a favour?’

‘No, I need her to return one. I’m hoping that as sister-in-law to Tiberius she can persuade him to grant my nephew, Vespasian, a travel permit to Egypt so that he can do some business there on his way back from Cyrenaica, once he’s finished his year as quaestor. As you know, senators are forbidden to enter that bounteous province without the Emperor’s permission and he doesn’t give that too easily.’

‘You’ll need to have done something very substantial for her to get that.’

Gaius smiled; his face aglow with firelight. ‘I already have, thanks to you, Magnus. What you stole was the very generous commission that Herod Agrippa received from the dissident Parthians for brokering their embassy. Antonia is going to sell it to recoup some of the considerable debt that he still owes her. You may find she’s in such a good mood that you’ll get a summons.’