

Manius Caelius, Quintus Virginius, Caius Virginius, Marcus Virginius, Kaeso Aphthorus, Juda, Harkilar, Vipsania, Enid of the Icenii, Tertius Ulpus, Lucius Valerius, Felix, Rasce, Larth, Vibius Minucius, Tacita Minucius, Decipor/Tacitus, Isetnofret, Pomponius Porcus and Sextus are © Joan Jacobsen, 2005.

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I – Ave

Quintus Virginius opened his eyes. He yawned. Long rows of white teeth showed as the wolf sat up, scratching his hair. He grinned slightly. It was a nice morning...he could feel it already. Even before the day had really started, he could feel that this was going to be a good day. He got up, scratching himself through his tunic. Again, he yawned.

One of the household slaves waited at the doorway. Quintus never really bothered getting to know the names of most of the slaves. They weren't important enough furs for him to concern himself with. He did know a few of the older ones in the household. Those who had long since proven their loyalty and value for the family, and who were trusted as a result. But most of them were just faces. This one was no different. A feline of some sort. Quintus shrugged. He didn't treat the slaves badly. He just didn't really *care*. He scratched his neck and blinked the final remains of last night out of his eyes.

"Bring me water, slave. Now. Clean. If you bring me the sludge flowing in the Tiber, I will have you beaten," he said, sternly.

The slave didn't speak. No spoken acknowledgement was necessary. He merely did as he was told.

Quintus smiled to himself and looked out the window. Furs were milling around. His family wasn't rich...not by Roman standards, but they were wealthy enough to be counted amongst the Patricians. Not highly ranked, and not the most influential...not at all in fact...but his father had a seat on the senate, and that certainly opened doors and smoothed relations in itself.

He leaned on the windowsill. He could smell Rome. Then again, any fur with a functioning olfactory organ could smell Rome twenty miles away. It reeked. A million furs, and even with running water and a reasonably functioning sewer system, the city was dirty. At least, his family did not live in the worst parts. He'd seen those from time to time, mostly in passing. It made him wonder how deeply furs would sink to live in the center of civilization. Part of him wondered if it was truly civilization anymore, in those parts of the city.

It wasn't as if today was particularly important. Most days weren't. As his name reminded constantly reminded him, he was the fifth son. Fifth sons either made a career in the Legions or drank away large fortunes. Since he was waiting for his commission, Quintus had never gotten past the drinking-stage. At least not yet. That suited him well enough.

He was 23 years old, though. If he was going to make a career in the legions, it had to be soon. But he trusted his father. The problem, as Quintus saw it, was that unless he was going to end up stuck at some backwater outpost with no chance of promotion, he had to be patient. He could leave for Egypt the next day if that's what he wanted. Oh yes. See the Nile, bask in the glow of the dessert sun, eat dates from the paws of nubile feline servants and slaves...

...get bitten by abnormally large crocodiles...

No thank you. Egypt wasn't the kind of place he wanted to go to. Nothing of importance happened in Egypt anyway. And the province of Africa was even worse. Plenty of action...and a very large chance of getting cut down by some uncivilized fur in dirty rags.

The way he saw it, if he got a posting to the north, he'd see a lot of other furs in dirty rags, but at least those furs had the decency to fight properly. And lose. Most importantly, they consistently lost. Gaul was largely Romanized anyway, and the Gauls really didn't try to fight back in any coordinated manner anymore. The real threat in the north wasn't from Gaul. Hardly even from the savages in Britannia. The only serious threat was from the Germanic tribals, but most of those living close to the border had been bought years ago. They served as buffers now. Clients of Rome...in dirty rags. But effective buffers.

Everyone in Rome still knew about the lost legions. The three full legions that had been wiped out by Arminius under the reign of the Most Glorious Augustus. It wasn't something wise furs spoke about, though. The legions had been lost. Their sacred eagle-

standards, their Aquilas, had been stolen, and as a result, those legions had never been reformed. But since those days, the barbarians had spent most of their time losing their battles against Rome.

As the son of a patrician, Quintus knew he could expect a position of some importance once he joined the Legions. Perhaps a centuriate of his own. That would not be a bad thing. He could lead furs, he felt completely confident of that, and lead them well. But for now, he had to be patient.

The slave came back in, carrying water in a large, flat brass bowl. He placed it, and some linen towels, on Quintus' washing table and backed out of the room without another word.

Quintus looked into the water. A canid face looked back at him. He wasn't a bad looking wolf, he reminded himself. In fact, he could probably easily find a good match before leaving for his posting. Having a female waiting for him at home would be good. He had to start his own household after all. There'd be no inheritance for him, since he was only the fifth in line. At least, what he'd get would be negligible.

Washing and drying himself off, Quintus called for another slave. He needed to get dressed.

###

The doors opened. Three furs were pushed through. One of them whimpered and curled up in the nearest corner. A rodent of some kind, she didn't look a day over 15. The other two, ursines, and brothers from the look of it, weren't much older. They remained on their feet, looking around. There was a look of deep suspicion on their faces.

The cell was dark. It didn't reek though, as one would've expected. It wasn't dank either. There was a smell of fresh straw in the air.

"Where are we? What is this place?" the rodent...a young mouse...asked and peeked out from her corner. She was physically very small, even for her species, and the two ursines would tower over her if they stood up next to her.

"I have no idea," one of the bears answered. "I think we were all blindfolded after being sold."

"*Sold*. Like *property*!" his brother growled. "Our father rules three villages and five more pays homage to him as their overlord and we have been *sold*. The shame of it! How are we going to return home?"

The first bear sighed and shook his head, looking like he was about to answer. Instead, something moved in the darkness. All three furs looked towards it. The mouse curled up tighter in her corner again. A little light seeped in through the door. It was impossible to see anything more than four or five feet into the cell, though. The sound of metal clicking on stone came clearly through the darkness.

"I will answer you. I will tell you how you are to return home," a female voice said.

"How then?" the young bear asked and flexed his fingers.

"Dead. Or showered with honor, prizes and the adulation of the furs you hate the most."

"That would be the Romans," the bear said, grimly. His brother nodded.

Out of the darkness stepped a tall, well built equine. She stood fully a head taller than the two ursines. She looked at them, in turn. Her eyes were hard, but not unkind. Her fur was covered in matte blue tribal markings. She sported a considerable number of scars, as well.

"How come you speak our language?" the mouse answered, curiously, crawling out of her corner. "We're from the lands across the water, all three of us."

"There is a lot land...across a lot of water," the equine said and folded her arms across her chest. "I am Enid. Years ago, I came from the same place you did. Taken captive after a battle. The Romans call our home Britannia."

One of the bears nodded. "They named the land after one of our goddesses then. And I know those markings. You're a servant of the druids! One of their chosen warriors!!" he exclaimed and looked at his brother. "Even the Romans hate fighting them. They say our females are the worst."

"They're right," Enid said, matter-of-factly.

"Why are you working for the Romans then? Why train warriors for them?" the mouse asked, biting her lips. "I don't know how to fight...I won't last long...I know it."

"Then I suggest you find another way of making yourself useful to your new owners. But believe me, unless you hold your body in contempt, you would do well to put aside those thoughts, and let me train you. By the time you earn your freedom, it will either be through an honorable death, gloriously facing an enemy, or walking away as someone who need fear *nothing*. I do not help the Romans, child. I help those they capture. You

can die fast and painfully while they cheer about it, or you can have a chance. What will it be?"

The two bears nodded. "We'll fight."

The mouse sighed and nodded. "If that's the way it must be, then teach me," she said quietly.

Enid nodded again. "Good. Then I *will* teach you. I will teach you how to fight. I will teach you how to kill and how to return to your homes, free furs. Most importantly, I will teach you how to stay alive. Just like I teach everyone who come here and who pays attention. Now, get some rest."

Then she knocked on the door, and was let out. The door was quickly shut again.

"Can we trust her?" the mouse asked and looked at the two bears.

One of them shrugged, not certain. The other nodded.

"I will. I know her markings. I've seen them before, back home. She's Iceni."

"I'll trust her then," the mouse said, quietly. "That's one tribe that won't cave in to Roman demands. Everyone except the Romans themselves knows that. But somehow, I think they'll find out, sooner or later."

The ursine brothers nodded and sat down at last.

###

"Quintus! Get over here," a brusque voice called out.

The young wolf sighed. He wasn't really in the mood for one of his father's lectures about morals. He'd heard it all dozens of times. That spending every night...or at least almost every night...getting drunk in the company of furs of questionable backgrounds wasn't wise.

Who cared about wisdom? He was young and he wanted to live. Besides, he was bored. Getting his commission for the Legions would certainly help alleviate his boredom, but until then, he wanted to spend his time with furs whose company he enjoyed.

"Yes Father...I am on my way," he said, dutifully, and turned towards the voice.

His father, an aged wolf with a perpetual frown on his face, was sitting in the atrium. There was a board-game in front of him. Egyptian 'sennet', in fact. Quintus never really got the hang of it, but his father quite enjoyed the game. In private, naturally. Romans of rank did not play games, officially.

"Have a seat. I wish to speak with you about something," the older wolf said.

Quintus obeyed and took a seat, folding his toga neatly around him in the process. "I hope this is not about the company I keep? We *have* gone over that many times already."

"Show some respect, *pup!*" the old wolf barked. "May Jupiter have mercy on an old wolf. Why did I end up with five sons instead of only four?"

Quintus narrowed his eyes somewhat. He didn't like the sound of that. "That sounds like you on your way to disowning me, Father," he said, tightly.

"No need to go to such...drastic measures, Quintus. You have been given a chance to prove yourself a worthy son of the Virginii. I have received the details of your posting and your assignment as Centurion."

Quintus smiled. In fact, his face almost split in two from it. "That is excellent news, indeed. Can you give me any more details?"

"You will serve in the Legio XVI Gallica, sixth Cohort, fifth Centuriate. You'll have rank of Hastatus Prior, and it took some effort on my part to make sure you didn't start lower than that! Anyway, your soldiers will be awaiting you in twenty four days. You leave the day after tomorrow. Do not disappoint me, Quintus. I put myself out on a limb for you. I am hoping I have not made a mistake," the old wolf grumbled.

"I am honored, Father," was all Quintus could say. The sixth cohort of a renowned legion. The sixth cohort of any legion was made up of those who were considered the 'finest of young males'. It was a posting worthy of his social standing, even if Hastatus Prior was the second lowest centurion-rank available. At least he would be able to work his way up from there, and it *was* a command rank. Finally, things looked like they were going his way.

"You're also in for a very long haul, Quintus. The service is 20 years, you know that. But you can make a career for yourself in the Legions. More than I can really offer you here. This is your opportunity. I expect you to make the most of it, to the honor of your family name."

Quintus merely nodded and made the first move, starting the game.

###

"So...Enid...how are the new arrivals? Any hope for them?"

The voice sounded across the dusty training field in the courtyard of the ludus. Enid turned around and shrugged, looking at a red vixen, approaching her. The newcomer was dressed in training armor and carrying a long wooden spear over her shoulder, she was sweaty and grimy from working out but none of these factors could hide the fact that she was exceedingly beautiful. She moved elegantly, with a light step and a natural fluidity, and what few visible scars she had just made her all the more alluring.

"No better than the usual, since you ask. They get younger and younger," the equine answered and ducked as a wooden sword swung towards her as a result of her own attack against the dummy.

"Where are they from this time? The ones we got last time didn't last long, despite your best efforts," the vixen asked.

"No need to remind me, Vipsania..." Enid sighed. "I don't enjoy seeing any of them die, but the last batch had no discipline. You can't take any Roman street rabble and expect to turn them into Gladiators. It takes more than that. Anyway, they're from Britannia."

"What? Your home?? Ouch...are you going to manage? I mean, you're not the ONLY trainer in this place, y'know," the vixen said and started stretching out, keeping her muscles loosened up so she wouldn't cramp when going back to her training.

Enid sighed and blocked another attack from the dummy. She didn't have to think about it. She'd done this so many times it had become part of her. She shrugged and sidestepped, taking a step backwards to get out of reach of the dummy.

"I'll be fine," she said and looked at the vixen again. "You know...there are times when I feel older than my years. I've seen too much..." she continued while scratching a scar, absently.

The vixen picked up her long, wooden practice spear and flicked it from paw to paw, taking up position in front of the dummy, starting her own routine. High thrust, low slash, parry, parry, lunge, parry. She too clearly moved in a pattern she knew by heart. She was faster than the equine. But her blows were less powerful. She wasn't so much trying to avoid the blows of the dummy, either, since she was well out of reach of it. Instead, she seemed to concentrate on finding openings in the contraptions defenses, making swift stabs whenever possible.

Enid fell quiet and looked around the courtyard of the Ludus again. She could smell the next meal being prepared. She'd long since stopped asking what meat was in the gruel. It didn't do to ask questions you didn't want to know the answer to.

"I heard that the Fabii didn't get to bury the dead last week," she said absently.

Vipsania blinked and nearly got a club to her temple. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean just that. The corpses weren't there. It's not the first time it's happened. When Caligula watches us fight, no one really knows what happens to the dead afterwards," Enid said, and looked back at the vixen.

"That doesn't make sense though. Touching the dead is an unclean act, Enid. I mean...I know you don't really care. You're not Roman. But none of us would willingly touch a corpse. And anyway, who'd take a *dead fur*??"

"What do I know, Vipsania? All I know is that Caligula enjoys combining beast games with gladiator fights," the equine said and began stretching out after her workout.

Vipsania pondered that. What the equine said was true. The emperor usually did combine the fights between gladiators and wild beasts such as crocodiles and ostriches at a Venatio with gladiatorial Munera. A Munera gained its popularity from the pitting of one skilled fighter against another, the Venatio because of the savagery of the beasts. And of course...the poor got the meat from the beasts after a Venatio. It was one of the few ways paupers ever tasted meat. Sometimes, the Ludus got some of it as well, to treat the gladiators to a better-than-usual meal after a particularly good performance. Vipsania had tasted both ostrich and crocodile because of that system. But if the bodies of dead gladiators vanished without a trace after such a double-feature...

Realization struck the vixen and she swallowed, disgusted beyond words.

"Enid...stop right there. That thought is too loathsome to even *consider*. Caligula is the heir to the Great Augustus...he's Imperator...he's Caesar. The priests sing his praises..."

"...and the senators grant him laurels and triumphs for campaigns he never undertakes, while his soldiers walk the beaches near Capua, collecting seashells to present as trophies from 'far off lands', fearful that he'll have them killed anyway. The fur is insane!" the equine said, indifferently.

Vipsania spun around, dodging a swing from the dummy and put a finger to her muzzle. "Enid, shut up. By the mercy of every Roman and Briton god, *shut up* before someone hears you."

Enid cracked her knuckles. "What'll they do to me? Kill me? They'd have to explain why the most popular female gladiator in Rome suddenly stopped fighting. That wouldn't do, Vipsania. There is always another Munera. Always another fight. Always another death. Always someone *elses* death."

"Sometimes, filly, you scare me," the vixen said and sighed. "Just keep it down while I'm around at least. I don't want to be strung up because you happened to speak the truth around someone who can't bear hearing it."

Enid nodded and pointed towards the kitchens. "Shall we go see what they intend to fill in our poor bellies today?"

"After what you just insinuated, Enid...I'd rather not know. It's one thing to eat the remains from a Venatio. Eating ostrich and large reptiles from the provinces...fine. Some of it tastes nice. But the remains from a Munera...Enid...I am not ready to believe we've been eating other furs."

"I sincerely hope you're right," Enid said and looked back to the kitchen again. Her voice dropped to a murmur. "I sincerely hope so."

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The long hallway shone with white marble. Lining the walls, evenly spaced out, tall, spear-armed furs in dark leather cuirasses, wearing purple cloaks and polished shields and helmets stood unmoving. Most of them canid. Not all, but most of them. The hallway was quiet, except for the sound of someone approaching from an adjoining hallway.

Two furs turned a corner. One male, one female ferret. The family resemblance was clear.

The male led the way, head held high. Head crowned in golden laurels. His toga was impeccably draped around his lithe but athletic body. He was attractive. Quite so, in fact.

The female behind him had the same markings, betraying the family connection. She was dressed in an elegantly fitting dress, flowing loosely around her legs and tied with wide, blue silk ribbons around her chest, making the most of her assets. Her head was wrapped in a loose silk scarf, covering her hair.

The first of the guards slammed the buttress of his spear into the marble floor twice and saluted, left paw to his heart.

"ALL HAIL CALIGULA, CAESAR, PROTECTOR OF ROME, CONQUEROR OF ALL HE BEHOLDS, CHOSEN OF THE GODS. AVE IMPERATOR!"

The guard's left arm snapped out in front of himself in salute.

One by one, every guard the couple passed repeated the same sequence of movements and the same words.

The female looked at her brother and chuckled coldly. "Somehow they never seem to pay me the same respect," she said and adjusted the scarf around her hair, flipping it over her muzzle to obscure her face further.

"You are female, Agrippina. Spread your legs, bring pleasure to males, give birth to sons and otherwise, shut up and look beautiful in my presence," her brother said, calmly.

"As you command, mighty Caligula," Agrippina said and bowed her head, with a nasty little glint in her eyes. One her brother at least couldn't see unless he grew eyes in the back of his neck. She felt certain that he hadn't grown that paranoid quite yet.

Just very nearly.

Caligula stopped. He turned and looked coldly at the last of the Praetorian guards lining the walls. They looked remarkably identical. Tall, powerfully built with the best armor available anywhere in the Empire, and with the special purple cape that identified them as Praetorians slung around their shoulders.

The emperor pondered a moment before looking up at the face of the canid.

"Tell me, Praetorian...what country did I conquer yesterday?" he asked, his voice quite serious.

"Sarmatia, Most Glorious Imperator. It was a truly awe inspiring victory. You swept all enemies before you, like Mars himself, come down to the battlefield. Your Legions are busy gathering the plunder for your approval, as we speak, Great Caesar!" the guard answered, immediately and without flinching. Seemingly without blinking.

"Ahh, but Sarmatia is very far away, Praetorian, is it not?"

"Indeed Caesar. Many weeks by sea, through dangerous waters," the guard answered.

"Then how can I have conquered Sarmatia yesterday...and be here today? In Rome? Are you lying to me, Praetorian?" Caligula asked, perfectly calmly.

A single bead of sweat began creeping down the guards' brow. "I wouldn't dare, Mighty Emperor. But to you, all things are possible. What we poor mortals must suffer when traveling, does not apply to Caesar."

"Ahh yes..." Caligula said, nodding thoughtfully. A slight smile played casually across his lips, but his eyes remained as cold and humorless as when he first looked upon the guard. "How very true. Render unto me, and all that...and in this case, I believe that which must be rendered is praise and riches, is that not so?"

"Ave Caesar, your word is law! That which you wish, all Romans must labor ceaselessly to deliver."

"Indeed...indeed..." the ferret said and continued on his way, as if he'd already forgotten the guard.

The canid managed to keep a straight face until the couple was well away, before a look of absolute panic mixed with relief passed over his face.

Caligula didn't notice this...but Agrippina's eyes hadn't left the guard yet.

###

Quintus looked up at the evening sky. The stench of Rome didn't bother him quite so badly tonight. Tomorrow would be his last day in the city, and then he was leaving for Gaul and his future. He knew he'd have some difficulty at first. Not only had he been granted the rank of Centurion, but he wouldn't start at the bottom of the command rung. The fact was, he would start very *nearly* at the bottom, a fact he couldn't help musing slightly about in private, but Hastatus Prior was a higher rank than Hastatus Posterior. The problem with that was that he hadn't moved up through the ranks. He realized he would have to prove himself to his soldiers. Fast. It was a difficult act of balance too. On one paw, starting as Hastatus Posterior would have been pretty awful. Every other Centurion in the entire cohort would have given him a miserable time. At least this way he would have someone below him in rank, on whom to take out his frustrations. On the other, he dreaded what life would have been like if he'd come in and taken over the rank of Primus Pilus...the highest ranked Centurion in a Cohort...without having earned the rank. No one would have ever shown him any kind of respect.

At least he wasn't worried about the challenges of rank. He was well schooled and he was physically fit enough to wrestle any legionnaire to the ground, and he could use a sword as well as any patrician. He hadn't taken a life yet, but the thought was neither

alien, nor offensive to him. No self-respecting son of a patrician family would shrink from killing an enemy, either of his family or of Rome, and Quintus found himself hoping that his unit would see real action. That way, he could get real blood on his paws and win glory and honor for himself on the field of battle. Who knew? He might even secure a higher rank for himself, that way too. But that was still in the future, and tonight, he was simply going to enjoy himself. One last time, he would let himself loose on the night life of Rome.

"SEXTUS! Over here!" he called out, seeing a known face in the throng.

A tall, elegant looking lapine turned around and waved. "Ahh, if it isn't the much famed master of twenty two wine-jars," he grinned.

Quintus groaned. "Give me a break. It's been ages. And you tease me about that every time."

"Well, you can take it. Besides, I'm a sixth son...I've got to take everything my five brothers can throw at me all day, every day. I have to take it out on someone, my lupine friend. And you're the only one I know who can take it," the rabbit said with a glimmer in his eye. "So, are we going to try for twenty three tonight?"

"Well, it's either tonight or never again, Sextus. I got my commission at last! Meet the new Hastatus Prior of Legio XVI Gallica, sixth cohort," Quintus grinned.

Sextus nodded and tapped a finger against his chin. "You know, that means *you* buy the drinks tonight, Centurion. And I'll make sure we have some nice females for company. But you pay for their expertise as well," he said with a crooked grin.

"Aww come on, you're trying to ruin me," Quintus laughed and gave Sextus a light shove.

"You've already been hard at work on that task for years, my friend," Sextus chuckled. "You have something to celebrate. Be gracious about it and pay the tab."

Quintus nodded. It *was* only fair after all. "Let's go. I'm going to miss our times together. But I'm sure you'll get along famously with someone else as well."

"Oh yes...famously," Sextus said, cryptically, smiling that crooked smile again as he followed his friend towards the nearest thermopolium. There was always one of these combined drinking-pits and eateries nearby, and all one had to do to find it was follow the sounds of drunken furs having a good time.

###

It was pitch black in the alleyway. Beyond it lay a part of the slums, known as the Subura, that no sensible fur would be seen in at night. Not unarmed, anyway. And certainly not alone. Groups of furs were milling about out there. Most of them drunk. Some heading home. Others heading to wherever they could sleep that night. Rome itself never slept, though. The two furs meeting in the alleyway were proof of this. They both knew the other one was there. Neither of them introduced themselves. It wasn't necessary.

"Tonight," one voice whispered. It was a soft, female voice.

"As you wish. Clean?" a male voice answered.

"No. Not clean. Anything but clean. Send a message."

"Very well. Payment then."

"The usual fee, the usual place, the usual time," the female said.

There was a mumble of agreement. "Who?"

"Break this when you're done, grind it into dust. It's all on there," the female whispered and something changed paws. It looked like a small, square clay tablet.

"I know who this fur is. I want double my fee! It will be damned dangerous! Getting involved in anything that has to do with a plot against Caesar is not an ordinary job!" the male growled after reading the inscription on the tablet.

"Tripled. Make sure you leave a message no one misunderstands," the female said.

There was a sound of hurried steps. Then the alleyway was deserted once more. Beyond it, someone burst into a loud, lewd and very descriptive drunken song. To make matters worse, whoever was singing couldn't carry the semblance of a tune. The sound of pottery being smashed and something heavy hitting the ground stopped the singing. Everything went quiet again.

###

It was early morning. Somewhere on the outskirts of Rome, a few clucks turned into a ruckus in a henhouse. A moment later, a cockerel stretched its neck and declared that the day had begun. A couple of blocks further into the city, on a marketplace, another

one took up the challenge, and crowed even louder. Moments later, the city was a cacophony of early morning sounds.

It was always the same. Manius stood up from his cot and looked through the iron bars that made up the door in summertime. He could see the Icenian equine was already up and about. It was to be expected.

She trained many of the newcomers. Male or female. Privately, he found it distasteful to have a female teach anyone anything. At least she wasn't Roman. Just a barbarian. Besides, he'd skewer her if he ever had to face her. He knew it wouldn't happen. Males never fought females. It was not acceptable. The gods would not approve. There weren't even that many females fighting as gladiators in the first place.

He wished there were even fewer. None would be a good number, as far as he was concerned. He stretched and ran a paw through his exceedingly wild hair and bared his fangs, angrily. Then he grabbed the bars of his cell and howled.

One of the guards came and let him out. Manius scowled at the fur and headed towards the kitchen.

The snap of a lash stopped him, dead in his tracks. "You know the rules, Manius. Just like anyone else. I don't care how popular you are with the females of Rome. You're a shit, as far as I'm concerned. No gruel until you've completed your morning routines."

Manius turned towards the voice. A young canid with blonde fur looked back at him, holding a scourge in one paw.

"One day, Luceus Valereus...*one day* I will reap your chest open and wash my hair in your hearts blood, for all the lashes you have given me!" Manius snarled, fangs bared.

"And I'll give you more, my little lupine rebel, if you don't immediately spring to it. I run this Ludus. Not you."

Manius hissed in anger and headed towards the training area.

Lucius Valerius looked after the wolf and sighed. He had been taken captive in Iberia during a small insurrection, several years ago and sent as a slave to Rome. He'd been sold to a merchant, living on the Caelian Hill, but that had not ended well. Manius had been completely impossible for the merchant to control, but he was simply too fit to just kill off. Besides, he'd been bought to haul heavy loads around, and he had represented a significant coin-value. Instead, the merchant had put him up for sale as a gladiator

prospect, in order to make good his expenses, and that was where Lucius had found the Iberian. He'd bought Manius, recognizing the ferocity in the wolf's eyes and seeing good muscle-tone for what it was. It had been a profitable investment for him, since Manius had turned out to be a spectacular natural talent, but sometimes, Lucius wondered if it hadn't been better to just put the Iberian down in the first place. He nodded to one of his guards and turned to walk back inside.

The guard picked up a hammer and hit a gong, several times.

Slowly, the Ludus started coming to life.