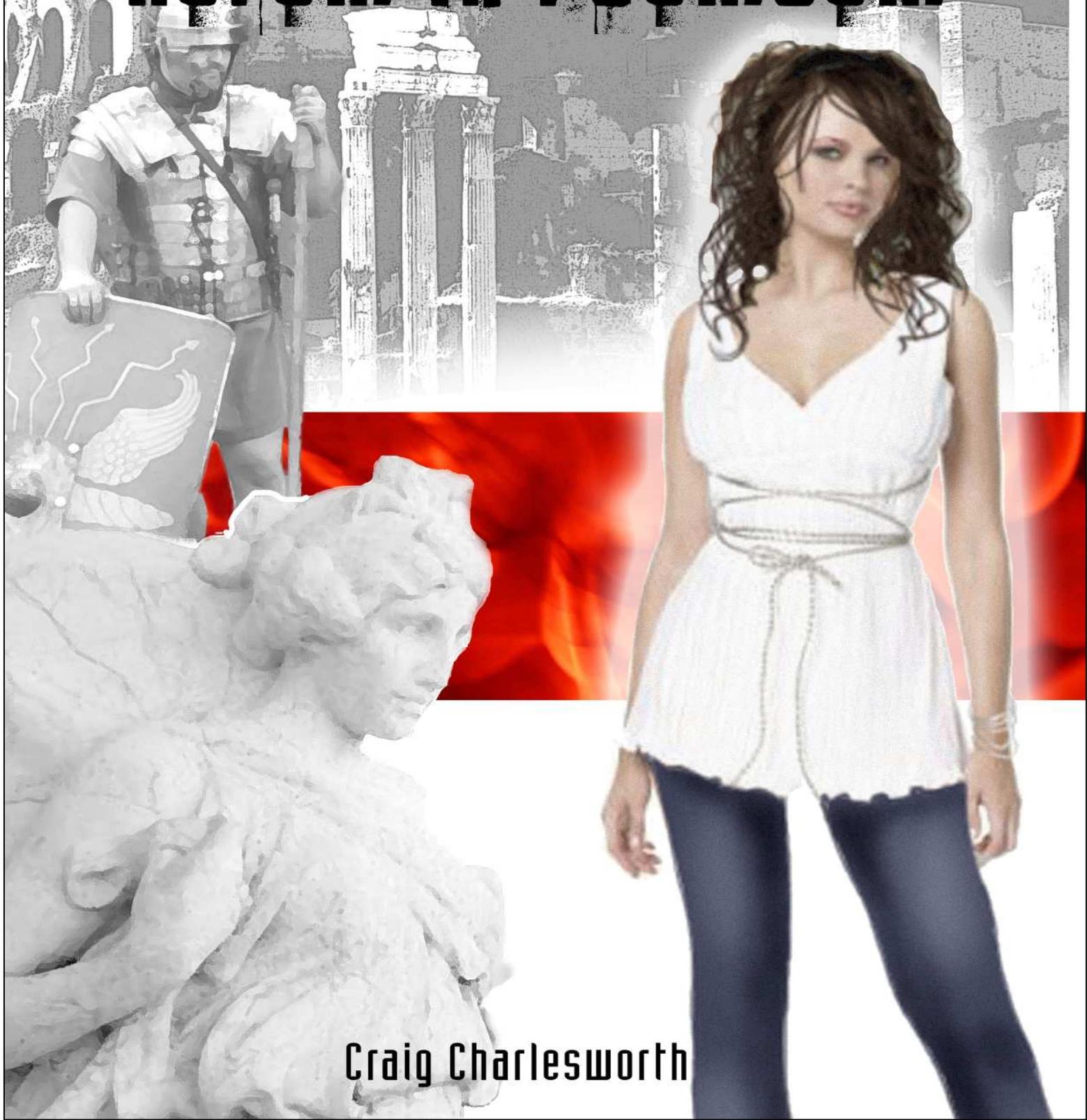


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**AURUM IN PLUMBUM**



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*"For Grandma Olive (1924-2008)"*



It was night, and the city was still. Through a cloudless sky, moonlight fell in golden drops - illuminating cobbled streets scattered with the charred remains of old-style wooden buildings interspersed with the half-finished brick and mortar structures which were to replace them. Occasionally a stray dog would drift through the scene in search of discarded food, but invariably they left no less hungry. Otherwise, nothing stirred.

Until, that is, the faint but recognisable shape of two young men clad in the uniform of the Watch strolled into view, speaking loudly and both taking occasional mouthfuls of wine from a clay gourd. "Rubbish!" yelled the taller of the two, who had long fair hair and a face which, though clearly that of a young man, was creased and weathered by many years spent out of doors in all weathers. "You're speaking treason you know, Cornelius. It'll get you into trouble one of these days."

His companion, Cornelius, sighed deeply. "I'm only telling you what I heard, Marcus. It was all over the Campus Martius today. Nero started the great fire, that's the rumour."

Marcus stopped in his tracks. "Look, my friend," he said, not unkindly, "The fire was started by Christians. Everyone knows that. They've long since been put to death and there's an end of it. If you ask me, it's about time someone started weeding out these weird cults. There's far too many of them about and you know the Gods don't like it."

Cornelius looked at his friend with a smile. "Well," he began, taking a warming mouthful of wine to lubricate his vocal chords, "I dare say the Gods aren't too happy about your precious Nero robbing the temples. Wouldn't you agree?"

Marcus stopped again to consider this. He looked Cornelius up and down slowly, taking in the closely cropped black hair and wiry body. At just five feet and two inches Cornelius was nobody's idea of an ideal watchman, and yet through sheer determination and tenaciousness he had carved out a successful career in his chosen field, though it had been at the cost of his personal life, for at 32 he had neither a wife nor a child to return to after a hard night's work keeping the peace. It was at times like this that Marcus was reminded how intelligent and resourceful his friend and partner was - he had been backed into a corner and could not continue the debate without appearing to deride either his Emperor, whom he feared above all else in this life, or his Gods, whom he feared in the next. Eventually he replied "Ah, but Nero takes those riches for the glory of Rome. One might even say that he is doing the Gods' bidding, by using their wealth to help their chosen people."

Cornelius laughed and handed over the gourd. "You have an answer for everything, don't you Marcus? You never seem to doubt yourself for a moment."

"What doubt could there be?" said Marcus, blankly. "Now look for a moment at these new buildings. Houses made out of brick. That's quite a feat of engineering and technology that is. And its *Roman* technology isn't it? Given to us by the Gods because we are the people they have chosen to rule over all others. Surely that's proof enough even for a cynic like you, Cornelius. The Gods are on the side of Rome, my friend. It's the foreigners and these Christians that have to watch out."

Marcus thought long and hard about how to respond to this but he never got the chance, for moments later the sound of smashing crockery and raised voices alerted the watchmen to a disturbance breaking out nearby.

The sounds came from a local inn, run by a small, rat-like man named Decius. It appeared that a soldier from the local garrison had been refused service, and was making his displeasure known to Decius by dismantling his bar piece by piece. With a sigh the two watchmen went about their work, Marcus attempting to calm the soldier, while Cornelius dealt with Decius in an attempt to defuse the situation. In truth, Cornelius secretly hoped that the fight would continue - an hour or so at the local jail booking in a couple of

prisoners would be a welcome break from patrolling the freezing cold streets – but he did his best to remain professional and do his duty.

It was at this moment, as Marcus attempted to move the soldier on, that a deafening noise resounded throughout the otherwise deserted street. Cornelius looked up and saw Marcus stagger for a moment before falling to the ground. A rage gripped him and he advanced menacingly on the soldier, who began to back away with a look of abject terror in his eyes.

“What did you do?” demanded Cornelius. “What the Hell did you do?”

“Nothing!” protested the soldier pathetically. “There was a flash from over there and then that noise... and he just fell over.”

Cornelius followed the soldier’s gaze to the top of a small tower over on the other side of the street. As much as he did not trust the soldier’s story, he could not escape the feeling that some black shape was moving around up there – possibly a person. He tried to work out whether it would have been possible for someone to throw a projectile from that distance with that degree of accuracy. It seemed to him unlikely, but with the soldier going nowhere (a group of regulars had by now surrounded and were threatening him with acts of extreme physical discourtesy should he attempt to leave) and Marcus prone on the ground bleeding from an obvious head injury, he supposed that he should have a look before the suspect had a chance to escape.

There was only one entrance to the tower, and Cornelius was sure he saw no one leave via it as he ran across the street. Throwing open the door, he sprinted up the stairs and finally reached the very top of the tower to be confronted with... nothing. There was no person, no animal. And yet the more he thought about it, the more certain he was that he had seen something up here. But what was that smell? Cornelius was surprised to find he did not recognise it – he had been in virtually every part of the city and thought he had smelled just about all the smells Rome had to offer, and yet he could not place this.

Cornelius was about to leave when the moonlight caught something in the corner of his eye. It appeared to be small, and made of metal. Cornelius cautiously walked over to it and picked it up. It was indeed metallic, and warm as if only recently forged. It was about an inch and a half long and tapered to a point at one end. Confused, Cornelius slipped the object into his pocket and trudged back down the steps to the inn where he fully expected to find that Marcus had come around, probably slightly embarrassed at having been caught out like an inexperienced rookie.

It was no small surprise, then, when he arrived back to find the form of Marcus still lying prone on the floor of the inn and a group of gawkers standing around in a hushed silence. Sensing trouble, he shoved his way through the awed crowd. There was his friend, face down in a fast-spreading pool of thick, deep red blood. Cornelius fell to his knees and turned Marcus around. And then he saw it.

In the middle of Marcus’s forehead there was a hole, roughly an inch across. From it poured a seemingly endless flow of blood while brain matter, thick with skull fragments, congealed around it.

The next thing Cornelius knew he was outside in the street vomiting noisily.

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The TARDIS hung noiselessly in the kaleidoscopic whirl of the vortex. Inside, in a high-backed chair, sat the Doctor. He was dressed elegantly in evening wear, and was reading from the *Satyricon*. At his feet, Silver played happily with Mortimer, dangling an unusually large stuffed mouse in front of him on a string and attempting to pull it away before the

alien cat's razor-sharp claws destroyed it. The impression was of a family spending the evening together, the relaxed atmosphere heightened by the low hum of the time rotor and the warm glow from the many roundels that covered the walls of the console room.

"Have you done your homework yet?" asked the Doctor, not looking up from his book. He gestured toward a pile of books which included Augustus' *Res Gestae*, Gibbon's *The Decline And Fall Of The Roman Empire* and various volumes of *Asterix And Obelix*.

"Do I have to?" Silver complained loudly. "I always find history is so much more vivid if you just get out there and experience it for yourself rather than reading all about it first."

The Doctor harrumphed and disappeared again behind his book. After a few moments, Silver spoke again. "Can I assume from the reading material you've selected that we're going to ancient Rome?" she asked.

The Doctor lowered the book again and his moustache bristled with annoyance. "I've already told you that. I was there a few centuries ago and now I want to go back and check on how things are progressing."

"What kind of things?" asked Silver, suddenly interested. Mortimer, unhappy at the cessation of their game, pawed her leg and mewed.

"Just a few things regarding Emperor Nero," sighed the Doctor. He looked about to speak again when the time rotor stopped and a thumping noise announced that they had arrived. With a sigh, the Doctor put down his book and stood up. He crossed to the interior door and returned a moment later carrying a beautiful silk dress which Silver recognised from lazy afternoons watching *Ben Hur* as being in the traditional Roman style. He threw it toward her and whilst he turned around and busied himself at the console she slipped off her t-shirt and jeans and put it on. It came with a pair of sandals and was held in place by a brooch and a belt which wound around her waist. Both the brooch and the belt buckle were made of gold and were in the shape of Ouroborus, the symbol of a snake eating its own tail. She coughed to let the Doctor know that it was safe to turn around. Upon seeing his companion so attired, the Doctor's grumpiness alleviated and, for the first time in a while, Silver thought she caught the slight trace of a proud smile. The Doctor then reached into his substantial pockets and produced a small leather pouch, the contents of which he emptied out into his hand. There lay three silver coins of varying sizes, along with several copper coins which were all the same basic size and shape.

"I thought it might be prudent to provide you with some financial wherewithal, in case we should find ourselves separated for any reason," said the Doctor. He pointed at the copper coins and took a deep breath. "That is an *as*," - he ignored Silver's stifled snigger - "which is the base unit of currency. The smallest of the silver coins is a *sestertius*, which is worth two and a half asses. The next largest is the *quinarius* - that's five asses or two *sestertii*. And the largest is a *denarius* which is of course ten asses, four *sestertii* or two *quinarii*. I hope that's clear." With that he dropped the coinage back into the pouch, thrust it into Silver's outstretched hand and turned toward the doors. Silver was about to protest when she realised the futility of it and followed the Doctor.

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Followed by Mortimer, Silver emerged blinking into the baking sunshine of a Mediterranean afternoon. The familiar Police Box shape of the TARDIS was perched at a jaunty angle on the crest of a large grassy hill, beyond which spread miles of golden cornfields interspersed with sprawling villas owned by the gentry who farmed the land. "It's beautiful," she gasped.

"Quite," agreed the Doctor. "And all maintained with slave labour."

Silver glanced sideways at her friend but if the comment had been intended as a rebuke then his face did not betray it. Silver turned to face the other way and realised with a gasp that the hill overlooked the whole of Rome. It was a bizarre sight - the great stone structures of the temples and palaces still standing proudly among the ruins of thousands of smaller wooden structures which had been reduced to little more than charred detritus. Dotted around the city though were all kinds of building projects, new brick structures beginning to thrust up through the decimated wastes like blooming flowers.

"What happened?" she asked shakily.

The Doctor joined her staring out over the city. "There was a fire," he said. "You should have read the history books I gave you, that would have explained everything. The last time I was here my presence risked changing history so that the fire did not occur. I had to give matters a gentle push in the right direction, and now I've come back just to check that things have been put back on the right track. It looks like they have."

Silver gasped. "But the destruction..."

The Doctor sighed, "Nothing compared to the destruction that would have resulted if I'd allowed the course of history to be altered so dramatically. Or so I believed then."

Pricked by feelings of sympathy, Silver smiled at the Doctor and his mood lightened. "Well," he said, "I suppose we'd better start walking. It seemed to me best to leave the TARDIS out of the way here than try and park it in the middle of the city."

Silver looked around and realised that the city was actually surrounded by seven large hills, each roughly equal in height. "How will we know which hill?" she asked.

The Doctor chuckled to himself. "Silver, you may not have been here before but I have. These hills are all perfectly distinctive. This one is Viminal Hill, it's known for being quiet and for the fact that hardly anyone ever comes here, which is why I thought that it would be a good place to leave the TARDIS. Over there," - he pointed across the city to the hills beyond - "is Capitoline Hill, where the senate sits. There are also some temples there. Then there's Aventine Hill and Palatine Hill. Those are where Romulus and Remus lived."

Silver looked at him with a wry smile. "Aren't those planets in Star Trek?" she asked, her voice heavy with mock ignorance.

The Doctor smiled back and began marching down the hill. "Oh, for a travelling companion with a classical education!" Silver heard him laugh as she and Mortimer followed swiftly behind.

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At the foot of the hill lay a succession of narrow streets comprised mainly of burnt out wooden buildings inhabited by pale, starved looking figures who peered out occasionally from blackened doorways. As they walked, the Doctor attempted to take Silver's mind off what was clearly a shocking humanitarian crisis by giving her some further historical detail.

"Nero's rebuilding project is proceeding apace," he observed, staring at a large stone tower being erected nearby. "That's all as it should be."

Silver sighed. "But who's helping these people in the meantime?"

"No one. Least of all their Emperor." said the Doctor sadly. "Nero wants Rome rebuilt certainly, but he wants it to be a monument to him and the glory of his reign. He's building statues, theatres, arenas... but not affordable housing. He's mad, and he's leaving his people to die."

"But surely it wouldn't take too much out of his budget to build a few shelters, just so that these people aren't all dead come winter?"

The Doctor chuckled grimly. "Too much indeed, for Nero. He wants the new Rome to be made from the finest materials - marble, mainly - and is employing the newest technologies in the field of construction. It's costing a fortune, and it's bankrupting the city."

"So how is he affording it?"

"Well, he's already ransacked the empire for gold, jewels and other natural resources. But although the money is coming in, it's not coming in quickly enough. It takes time to dig the gold out of the ground and ship it. Nero needs ready cash, and he's robbing his own city to get it."

Not for the first time that day, Silver looked appalled. "What do you mean?"

"He's realized that there's a source of revenue just sitting around in Rome - the temples. He's sacking them for their gold and jewels which are supposed to be gifts and dedications to the Gods."

"I bet that's making him popular."

"Let's just say he's not on the theological community's Saturnalia card list, if that's what you mean. But it's not doing much for his standing with the general populace, either. He's not going to be in charge for much longer - and it's all going to end rather badly for him I'm afraid."

Silver was slightly ashamed to find that she was not at all sorry. They walked on a little way in silence, before the narrow streets opened out onto a large open square, dominated on one side by a large marble temple, a circular building whose entrance was supported by a series of ornate Corinthian columns. Before it was a tall statue of an ugly, hunchbacked creature wielding a spear which the Doctor explained was Hephaestus, son of Hera, the God of Fire. Clearly the temple was dedicated to him, but something was amiss.

A large, angry crowd had gathered and a number of what Silver took for priests were gesticulating wildly at a group of soldiers who were carrying chests full of gold out of the temple and loading them into a waiting cart. In the cart were more soldiers - their armour glinting in the sun and wickedly sharp looking short swords drawn ready to subdue the crowd should the mood turn any uglier than it already was. As Silver and the Doctor watched, an elderly priest attempted to physically restrain one of the soldiers from going about his business and was shoved roughly to the floor. The surrounding soldiers laughed as the old man struggled to get up, and the crowd - although still cowed by the soldier's weaponry, surged forward ever so slightly.

Silver had had enough and made to push her way through the crowd and help the old man up, but the Doctor put a restraining hand on her shoulder. She turned to look at him and he gestured upward, toward the upper levels of the temple. At first she wasn't sure what he was pointing at, but then she noticed that at one of the glassless windows something was flashing in the sunlight. She turned to ask the Doctor what was going on, and it was at about that time that the world went crazy.

First a loud bang echoed throughout the square, sending the assembled citizens into a panic. Like frightened cattle they began running away, stumbling and getting in each other's way. Silver and the Doctor stood impassively as the panicked populace surged around them and Mortimer sheltered under the Doctor's feet, his lengthy tail safely tucked away. When at last the crowd had dispersed it was clear that all but one of the soldiers had also left, leaving the Doctor and Silver alone with the priests. The soldier who remained did not look like he was going to be particularly talkative - he lay prone on the steps of the temple, blood running in thick red rivers down the steps, originating from a dreadful wound

to his head. Slowly the Doctor ascended the steps and examined the soldier. The back of his head was missing, and large, thick lumps of brain matter were attempting to make their escape. The priests were huddled together, clearly terrified but unwilling to desert the temple where many of them had spent most of their lives. Silver, avoiding the body as best she could, also climbed the steps, Mortimer in her arms. When she reached the top, the Doctor was already deep in conversation with the priests. He waved her over and, leaving the old men for a moment, whispered conspiratorially.

"They're terrified."

"Well so they should be," observed Silver. "What the Hell happened?"

The Doctor mused on this question for a moment. "I have a theory, but it seems completely insane even to me. I know what they think," - he motioned toward the priests - "they tell me that the Gods are angry at Nero's desecration of their temples. They also tell me this isn't the first time this kind of thing has happened. It's been going on for months, apparently. All started with a member of the watch who was killed whilst attending a brawl inside a tavern."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Well, I think we can rule out divine retribution. There was someone up in the temple, you saw that as well as me - and since he or she hasn't come out yet we can assume that they're still in there. You and Mortimer stay here; I'm going to take a look."

With that, he departed for the temple at a run. Silver cradled Mortimer in her arms and smiled nervously at the staring priests. "Well," she whispered to the cat, "looks like it's just you and me for a while."

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Inside the air was cooler, but had a musty smell about it. The Doctor rushed past statues, fountains and priceless objects, and rushed up a small, narrow staircase to the higher level. He emerged at one end of a short corridor with four doors leading off from it. Recalling that the figure at the window had been at the far right window, the Doctor headed for the corresponding door and flung it open.

Inside was a utilitarian room - a bare stone floor adorned only by a small, roughly woven woollen rug. There was a small wooden chair and a desk arranged in one corner, along with a pile of books which the Doctor recognised as the work of various Greek and Arab scholars, the books presumably having been acquired by the empire during their conquests. The Doctor crossed quickly to the window and peered out. Just as he had suspected, the window was set back a little from the enormous entrance, and afforded a clear view of the steps. He could see Silver and Mortimer, as well as the soldier's corpse, but not the priests who had presumably retreated inside. He waved to Silver, who took a moment to spot him. When she did, she dropped Mortimer and began waving back with both hands. Smiling, he stepped back from the window and sniffed the air. There was definitely something there. Cordite?

Now utterly intrigued, the Doctor pulled from his jacket pocket a small portable radiation detector and swept the room. Once again, his guess proved correct. The radiation levels in the room were still well below safe levels but were significantly higher than normal background amounts. Suddenly his attention was caught by a small metal object in the corner of the room. He was just about to pick it up when the door burst open and in rushed about a dozen men all wearing the uniform of the watch. Several were brandishing wickedly sharp looking short swords, and all were scowling at the Doctor in a very disconcerting manner.

"Ah," said the Doctor confidently. "Good to see you. Now, I believe the killer was..." he was cut off swiftly as the captain of the watch gripped him tightly by the throat. "Would you mind not doing that?" gurgled the Doctor. "It's restricting my breathing somewhat..."

The man's grip was released and the Doctor crumpled to the floor, gasping and clutching at his throat, around which several angry red welts had begun to appear. The captain bent low and fixed the Doctor in the eyes. "I don't know how you killed those people, old man," he said, spittle flying from his mouth as he sought to suppress his rage and remain professional, "whether it was magic or something else. But by the Gods, I'll see you punished for it."

With that he gestured to two of his men who gripped the Doctor tightly and bundled him bodily from the room as he continued to protest his innocence.

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Silver had seen the men enter the temple, and of course had tried to signal the danger to the Doctor. Her heart sank as she saw her friend being frogmarched from the building surrounded by armed men. She hurled herself at one of the nearest men and attempted to push her way through to the Doctor but was batted lazily aside by an arm as thick as a small tree trunk. She landed with a bump on the marble steps and glared at the backs of the disappearing men. Suddenly with a cry that was painful to the ears, the furry form of Mortimer leaped past her. As the rearmost watchman turned around to see what all the noise was about, he found himself with a large, and very angry, alien cat sinking its claws into the soft flesh of his face. With a yelp, he ripped Mortimer away and tossed him to ground. For a moment, it looked as if the man was about to draw his sword and run Mortimer through, but instead he simply sneered at the oversized feline and hurried off to join his colleagues, wiping blood from his face with a thick woollen sleeve as he went.

After catching his breath, Mortimer stood up and sauntered unsteadily over to his mistress, who was herself nursing a painful backside. Seeing that attempting to rescue their friend was a fruitless pursuit, she rounded instead on the small gathering of priests who were huddled together by the door.

"Why didn't you say anything?" she yelled. "You know he went up there *after* the murder! You know he was only trying to help! All you had to do was tell those idiots they've got the wrong man!"

Terrified, the priests made a break for the safety of the temple, shutting the door and dragging across the heavy iron bolts behind them. A fuming Silver aimed a kick at the door, only to wish she hadn't when her toes connected with solid oak shipped especially from Britain. Cursing, she scooped Mortimer up in her arms and began walking, having not the faintest idea where she was going. She had not taken more than three steps when the heavens opened and a heavy rain began to fall, soaking into the natural fibres and making the thing unbearably heavy. "Well," she sighed to no one in particular, "that just about does it."

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An hour later she was sitting in a tavern supping listlessly at a flagon of something green and herby which tasted nothing like any beer she had ever tasted in her own time but did seem to have some warming property and had, at any rate, only cost a couple of asses. She was the only woman in the tavern, and was attracting bemused stares from much of the regular clientele - particularly a handsome, olive skinned man who was standing at the bar.

Obviously noting how flustered she looked, he flashed a winning grin at her. She smiled back weakly and went back to attempting to dry out Mortimer with her dress - a difficult task given that it was still thoroughly soaked itself.

When she looked up she was shocked to see that the man had sat down opposite her, grin still fixed in place. In no mood for this kind of thing, Silver greeted him with a curt "Can I help you?"

The man spoke with a thick accent which Silver could not place. "It's more what I can do for you, actually," he beamed. "I was just having a drink over at the bar and I noticed you looked a little lost. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"I'm fine, thanks," said Silver icily.

"Yes," laughed the man, "I can see that. So where are you and your... err... *cat* staying tonight?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but we'll be staying here tonight."

"Is that right?" said the man, running his fingers through his thick black hair. "And how much money do you have?"

For the first time, Silver looked slightly unsure of herself, and even (though she would not admit it) glad of someone's help. She opened her purse and tipped the contents out onto the table. The man eyed them carefully, before standing up and declaring "Well, if you're looking for food and lodging that'll last you at least two or three days. After that you'll be off home I suppose. Well," - he stood up and made to leave - "as long as that's all sorted out I'll leave you alone. Sorry to have bothered you."

"Wait!" Silver was surprised by the desperation in her own voice. "I... I don't have anywhere else to go. I'm kind of new in town."

The man sat down again and laughed. "Yes, I can see that." He seemed to consider something for a moment before extending his hand with a smile. Silver looked unsure for a moment before taking it. "It's okay, I don't bite," the man said. "My name is Cassius. Look, I know it's difficult to know who to trust, especially for a young girl all on her own in the big city for the first time. But if you're interested I have a villa not far from here where I stay when I'm in Rome on business. You're welcome to stay there for as long as you need."

Silver considered this for a moment. She didn't know this man from Adam - how on earth could she trust him? Then again, she had to consider the possibility that the Doctor wasn't coming back. What if something happened to him and she was stuck here forever? Sure, she could go back to the TARDIS, but she suspected she could spend a lifetime trying to work out how to operate the machine without ever getting near to home. If she stayed at the inn, she could miss this chance. Then where would she go when the money ran out? She couldn't get a job - she doubted very much whether any of the skills she had acquired in her life would be transferable to the kind of employment that would be obtainable here. And no job meant no home, and no home - in a society without even the most basic welfare system - meant being found frozen solid face down in the gutter when winter came. She looked Cassius up and down again.

"So where is this villa?" she sighed.

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The fist landed hard on the wooden table, the sound of the impact resounding around the small, dimly-lit room. The Doctor looked up at the Captain with a smile. "I'm sure that must have hurt," he said kindly. "Would you like a mint humbug?"

His face flushed with anger, the Captain knocked away the proffered paper bag with the back of his hand. "Look," he said, "Doctor whoever-you-are, I want you to tell me how

you killed those people. If you don't talk, it'll only take one word from me and my men will have it out of you the hard way." He jerked his thumb toward a pile of evil looking torture devices rusting away in the corner of the room.

The Doctor laughed. "You're welcome to try," he said, "but don't you find torture an ineffective way of gleaning information? With a red hot poker thrust up my backside I'd say anything to get you to stop, wouldn't I? Whether it was true or not I'd tell you whatever I thought you wanted to hear. No, Captain, I think we're best off all round just having a quiet chat about the matter."

The Captain's face turned from red to purple to a shade of puce unique in nature, all in the space of a second. Swallowing his anger, he sat down at the table with his head in his hands. "Listen," he said after a while. "If you didn't kill those people, then who did? We know the killer was seen in the window. We know no one left the temple. And we know that when we arrived you were alone in the corresponding room. It doesn't look good does it?"

"But if you took a moment to ask the priests, they would tell you that I was outside when the killing took place. That rather pokes a hole in your argument, doesn't it?"

"Ah," said the Captain triumphantly, "but anyone with strong enough magical powers to kill someone from that distance would have no problem being seen in two places at once."

This time it was the Doctor's turn to look exasperated. "I believe," he said at last, "that I'd like to go back to my cell. Think things over a bit."

The Captain looked him up and down darkly. "Fair enough," he sneered. "It'll take a few minutes to heat up the pokers anyway."

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The Doctor paced the floor of his cramped cell impatiently. He eyed the lock and fingered the selection of picks in his pocket. He was certain that he could have it open in a moment, but where would he go then? Even if he could formulate a way of getting out of the building without being seen he would have to deal with the burly looking young man who had been posted as a guard. He sat down on the bed and began going through his options again.

Suddenly, he heard a voice from over by the cell door say "How did you do it then?"

The Doctor looked over and saw that the young guard was pressed up against the bars, tears in his eyes. "How did you do it?" the man said again. "How did you kill my friend?"

As kindly as he could, the Doctor said "I didn't kill anyone. As I've been trying to explain to your boss, you've got the wrong man I'm afraid. In fact, I'm probably just as curious to find the killer as you are. I believe he may have a weapon which is very dangerous."

The young man scoffed and turned around, presenting the Doctor with his back. But the Doctor's interest had been piqued and he pressed on. "What was your friend's name?" he asked.

His back still pressed against the bars of the cell door, the guard answered, "Marcus."

The Doctor pressed further still. "Would you like to tell me what happened to Marcus?"

"We were dealing with a brawl at a tavern. He fell, and I saw someone in a building over the road. When I got there, there was no one. When I got back to the tavern he was dead. But then you know all that, because you killed him."

The Doctor ignored the remark. "Tell me, when you entered the building across the street did you notice a smell you didn't recognise?"

The guard slowly turned around and looked the Doctor in the eye. "How did you know that? If you weren't there?" he asked.

"Just a lucky guess" said the Doctor, flashing his most winning smile. "And tell me, did you by any chance find a small piece of metal in the room?"

The young guard said nothing, but his face betrayed him. The Doctor's eyes narrowed. "And now the sixty-four thousand dollar question - do you still have it?"

The guard still said nothing - but he reached below his chest plate and pulled out a short leather cord which he had been wearing as a necklace. With a sharp tug he pulled it from his neck and gingerly handed it to the Doctor. Hanging from it was a small metallic item - unmistakably a shell casing from a high powered rifle of some kind. The Doctor pocketed the item and smiled at the guard. "I think it's time we were introduced. My name is the Doctor."

He pushed his hand through the bars, inviting the young man to shake it. He didn't, but he did say falteringly, "My name is Cornelius."

The Doctor visibly relaxed. "Hello Cornelius," he said, "You know, I really do want to help you. I think I can find the man who killed your friend, and all those other people. If you trust me."

Cornelius eyed the Doctor closely. "The Captain says you are a wizard. How do I know that you aren't trying to put a spell on me? To make me believe you so that I let you go?"

"You don't," came the reply. "For all you know I *could* be a wizard. But tell me, Cornelius, if I were a powerful enough magician to be able to kill people from a distance or be seen in two places at once, why wouldn't I simply kill you, melt the lock out of the door and walk out through the wall?"

Cornelius considered this for a moment, before shrugging to indicate that, whilst he remained unconvinced, he could see the logic in the Doctor's argument. Realising this was as much as he was going to get for now, the Doctor produced the shell casing and showed it to Cornelius. "Have you ever seen anything like this before?" he asked.

Cornelius took it and examined it closely just as he had done a hundred times since that fateful night. But just as before, he was sure he had never seen anything like it before and he said so. "Well," said the Doctor. "This comes from a weapon. A new kind of weapon - one that won't become common for many, many years. I'm very interested to find out what it's doing here and who is using it."

"What kind of weapon?" asked Cornelius, aghast.

The Doctor thought for a moment about how he could explain this in terms his new friend would understand. "You've seen a catapult haven't you?" Cornelius nodded. "Well," the Doctor went on, "Imagine a device which works like a catapult but is small enough to be held by a man, and accurate enough to be able to pick out a specific target in a large crowd."

The colour drained from Cornelius' face. "But if anyone had a weapon like that they would be invincible!" he cried.

The Doctor chuckled to himself. "Not quite, I hope," he said. "Look, this proves that the killer is a man. A very clever man, with access to things that he shouldn't have access to, but a man nonetheless. Not a wizard and certainly not a God."

At that moment the door flew open and in burst the captain, looking more angry than ever. He was followed by a tall, reedy man dressed in finery which stood in stark contrast to his utilitarian surroundings. His head was covered in a light coating of dry, wiry

grey hair and his hawk-like face burned with a fierce intensity. "This," said the Captain to the Doctor, "is Senator Lucan. He has ordered your immediate release."

"Oh?" said the Doctor quizzically. "And why should he do that?"

Lucan drew himself up to his full, impressive, height before speaking. "It is the view of the senate and of the people of Rome that these killings are divine retribution for the desecration and theft which Emperor Nero has ordered. With that in mind, it seems unnecessary to subject the prisoner to further inconvenience."

The Captain unlocked the cell and held open the door as the Doctor stepped out. "Thank you," said the Doctor. "It seems common sense has prevailed at last."

Lucan bowed slightly and said "I apologise, sir, for the overzealousness of the good Captain and his men."

"Oh, there's nothing to apologise for," smiled the Doctor. "I've found it all rather instructive in fact," he said, eyeing Cornelius slyly.

"Well then that's settled." said Lucan. "I should advise you to go home and forget all about this business. You can trust that the senate will deal with the matter." Though his words were friendly, there was an edge of menace in Lucan's tone. Ignoring this, the Doctor nodded to the three men and left.

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It was night when Cornelius left the guard house and went off duty. It had been a long, hard day and he needed a stiff drink. There was an ale house only three streets away, but he had stopped frequenting them since the death of Marcus. Instead, he would visit the local wine seller and do his drinking at home.

He was just passing a darkened alley when his arm was gripped by an unseen hand. He wheeled around, reaching instinctively for his sword, and was about to strike when, in the half light, he recognised his assailant.

"Doctor?" he gasped. "Didn't the Senator tell you to go home and forget about it?"

The Doctor looked grim. "Have you forgotten about it, Cornelius? Have you forgotten your friend?"

"Of course not!" spat the watchman. "But the Senate is involved now. As far as we're concerned, the matter is over."

The Doctor frowned and crossed his arms. "But what if it isn't over? A man died today, Cornelius. Another man killed by this mysterious assailant. I don't believe it's over. I think this will go on and on and on until the killer is satisfied, which may be never. Or until someone puts a stop to it."

"Someone like us, you mean?"

The Doctor's face split into a wide grin. "That's more like it. You feel like some unpaid overtime?"

He didn't, but Cornelius couldn't help but smile at the older man's infectious enthusiasm. "So where to first?" he asked.

"Back to the temple," said the Doctor, "there may have been a clue that we've overlooked and as the most recent crime scene it's also the freshest and least disturbed. Oh, and on the way I'd appreciate it if you could look out for a young girl carrying an uncommonly large cat." The Doctor sighed. "I seem to have lost them again."

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Silver had to admit, Cassius was quite the charmer – and this villa of his, all opulent white stone and marble, was magnificent. She popped another grape into her mouth and leaned back into her expansive, plush chair as she watched him pour them each another goblet of wine. Mortimer was at her feet, lapping happily at a saucer of milk.

“Here you go,” said Cassius, handing her a goblet, “This’ll warm you up.” Silver knew she really shouldn’t – she was beginning to feel quite tipsy already – but she took it anyway and began gulping down the sweet, sticky liquid. Cassius sat down opposite her and began sipping delicately at his own goblet.

“So what business are you in, exactly?” asked Silver between mouthfuls.

Cassius smiled roguishly. “Oh, a bit of this and a bit of that. I solve problems, mainly.”

Silver laughed involuntarily. “What kind of problems?” she asked.

Cassius set down his goblet and fixed her with a serious gaze. “Well, if you were in business, say, you might hire me to help you... eliminate the competition.”

Silver nodded, understanding. “So you’re like some kind of... freelance trouble-shooter? I didn’t know there was much call for that kind of thing around here.”

“Oh, I’m quite unique in my field, I think you’ll find.” came the response.

Silver smiled. “Of course you are.” She laughed. This wine was going straight to her head. But it sure was warming her up.

Now that she looked at him he certainly was a good looking guy. His body was toned and muscular, and though he was a fair few years older than her his boyish, friendly demeanour reminded her of some of her male friends back home – except that he seemed possessed of a determination and focus which they could never hope to emulate. Perhaps, Silver mused, he was in the market for a wife?

He broke the silence first. “So where are you from, my dear? Africa? Asia? Not, I think, Britannia?”

Silver mused on this for a moment before answering “I’m not really from anywhere. I’m a traveller. But I suppose you could say Mortimer and I might be staying here for a good long while.”

“Oh,” said Cassius, a slight edge beginning to creep into his voice, “longer than you’d imagine, I should think.”

Silver giggled. “Whatever do you mean?” she asked, but even as she spoke the words the world began to lose its focus and swim around her. Too much wine, she thought. Maybe it was time for bed. But as she tried to get up she simply collapsed forward onto the extravagant mosaic floor. As everything turned to black around her, the last thing she saw was Mortimer, passed out upon the floor with an upended bowl of milk – the thick, creamy liquid spreading out to envelope her.

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It was dark when Silver awoke, though whether it was still the same night or she had slept right through the next day she could not tell. She was lying on a large bed, surrounded by soft feather pillows. The sleeping form of Mortimer lay beside her, snoring loudly.

It was only when Silver tried to get up that she realised that she was firmly tied to the bed by thick leather cords around her wrists and ankles. Gripped by sudden panic, she began thrashing around in a desperate effort to get free, but her bonds were too tight and after a moment she gave up and sank back into the soft embrace of the bed. She looked around to see if she could gain any clues about where she was or what was happening, but the bed was surrounded by thick cotton drapes through which only vague shapes were

discernable in the flickering candlelight. She and Mortimer were, it seemed, quite cut off from the rest of the world in this sinister, if comfortable, cocoon.

Suddenly, there was movement and the sound of footsteps on the tiled floor. Silver stifled a scream as the drapes were roughly pulled back, and the face of Cassius leered at her through the half light.

The air of boyish charm had evaporated, and his face was now set in a cruel mask. He still wore the traditional Roman toga, but around his waist was a leather belt from which hung holsters containing a 9mm automatic and a stubby laser pistol. In his hand was a large, wickedly sharp looking hunting knife.

"What are you doing?" asked Silver, attempting, only partially successfully, to keep the terror from her voice. "Who *are* you?"

Cassius laughed cruelly. "I'm exactly what I told you. How did you put it? A freelance trouble-shooter. But don't play dumb with me - you know full well who I am. Just as I know who you are."

Silver gulped audibly. "What do you mean?"

Cassius sat down on the edge of the bed and edged closer. "Do you know how long I've been on the run? Always looking over my shoulder, knowing that your people were after me? After all these years I can smell you people a mile away. So are you with the CIA or are you a human Time Agent? I only ask out of interest, it won't make any difference to the outcome of this little interview."

Tears were beginning to well in Silver's eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about!" she yelled.

Cassius sighed deeply. "Well, that's a shame. You see, I know you know something, and I have to find out what that something is. I rather liked you, and I had hoped that you'd make things easy on yourself so that I wouldn't have to hurt you any more than necessary." He waved the knife lazily in her face. "But I see you are determined to resist me, so let me ask you this," - he leaned forward and ran the sharp edge of the knife along her cheek, drawing a little blood - "which eye would you say you'd miss the least?"

Silver spat in his face. The bubbly white globule ran down his cheek and splashed wetly onto an expensive looking pillow. With a wolfish grin, Cassius wiped the residue away with the back of his hand and leaned in again. "Actually, forget what I said about not wanting to hurt you. Now that it comes to it, I think I'm going to enjoy this," he laughed, as the knife came down towards her and Silver screamed the longest, loudest scream she had ever screamed.

She was still screaming moments later when she realised that nothing had happened. There was no pain, no blood and all her body parts appeared to be more or less intact. Gingerly, she opened an eye and saw Cassius eyeing a gold fob watch which he then stuffed inside his robes. He laughed at her puzzled reaction, and ran a hand gently along her face. "I'm sorry, my dear," he said. "I'm afraid I'm rather late keeping an appointment. You'll just have to wait, I'm afraid."

With that, he turned and marched out, letting the drapes fall over the bed again behind him. Silver fought to regain her composure, regulating her breathing and blinking the tears from her eyes. As far as she was able, she turned to look at Mortimer. The cat still slumbered contentedly, purring occasionally.

"Trust you to sleep through the whole thing," sighed Silver.

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"So what exactly are we looking for?" said Cornelius, fatigue and tiredness creeping into his

voice. He continued leafing through a thick book written in Greek before tossing it listlessly back into the pile.

The Doctor smiled encouragingly over at him. "We'll know when we find it," he said cheerily. He was undertaking an examination of the floor with some kind of lens set within a circular metal frame with a wooden handle, the like of which Cornelius had never seen.

Cornelius sighed and returned to his search. He had been very sceptical about breaking into the temple, but accepted the Doctor's argument that as the killer's last known location it was important to take another, more thorough, look. So far though, they had been going over the place with a fine tooth comb and Cornelius had discovered nothing but a slight feeling of unease that the Gods might not take too kindly to him breaking into and ransacking their house. He wandered over to the window and began to wonder what the chances were that he would be getting some sleep tonight. Not much, he supposed, since he was back on duty first thing in the morning.

As he watched the scene below, he saw two figures approach from opposite ends of the street. One was a youngish man with thick black hair and a muscular frame. The other was much older, and as he came closer Cornelius began to realise that he recognised the man. "Doctor!" he hissed as quietly as he could.

In a moment, the Doctor was at his side, peering out into the dimly lit street. He stared intently at the older man before looking at Cornelius with a raised eyebrow and mouthing the word "Lucan?"

Cornelius nodded. As the two men approached, the Doctor licked his fingers and quickly extinguished the candle he had earlier lit. Then he and Cornelius crouched behind the window-sill and listened.

Fortunately, the two men stopped almost directly underneath the window. "Greetings!" said Lucan to his friend. The younger man smiled back but said nothing. Lucan smiled and produced from within his robe a small leather pouch which jingled as he tossed it through the air. It landed at the younger man's feet with a solid thump, and the young man bent to pick it up. He weighed it in his hand and, seemingly satisfied, stuffed it within his own robes.

"So," he said in a businesslike manner, "Where do you want me next?"

Lucan looked him up and down with mild disdain before replying. "Actually, things are moving quickly. There may be a new task for you soon. One worthy of your... talents."

The younger man laughed. "You just name the time and place, my friend. Let me worry about the rest."

Lucan's eyes seared with anger for a moment, but he remained composed. "Let's be clear, friend. I don't like you or what you do. This is all being done for the greater good – but you are still a killer."

The younger man laughed. "I don't ask you to like me, old man. Just to pay me. But I'll give you some free advice. Keep those kinds of remarks to yourself. Or maybe you'll learn firsthand what I'm capable of. For the greater good, of course."

Lucan blanched. Eventually he managed to say, "Return home. You will be kept informed of events, and when the time is right you will receive instructions as to your next target."

At that, the young man smiled and walked away. Lucan stood for a moment, watching his back recede into the distance. His face remained unreadable as he turned and marched off back in the direction he had come.

As the two men left, Cornelius glanced at the Doctor. "What shall we do?" he hissed, still afraid of being overheard even now.

The Doctor considered this for a moment. “Go after the younger man. But be careful – if I’m right, he is extremely dangerous. I will follow Lucan and see what can be learned from him. I’ll meet you outside here at dawn.”

With a silent nod, the two men went their separate ways, Cornelius hugging the shadows and keeping one hand firmly on his sword.

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Silver didn’t know how long her captor had been gone when she heard the front door of the villa slam, signalling his return. It was still dark, so she guessed no more than an hour or so. Terror gripped her – with Cassius back in the house, her mind was inexorably drawn back to the desperate situation she was in. She had been lucky last time. Surely now no mysterious appointments would keep her from whatever little games Cassius had in mind. Sure enough, within moments the door to her room was opened and closed softly and a series of light footsteps announced that the master of the house was here with her. The drapes were once again thrust open and, just as earlier, the leering form of Cassius hung over her.

“Well, well, well,” he said. “It seems things are moving up a gear, just as I predicted. Soon I’ll be out of here, and well out of the reach of your friends.”

Silver sighed and spoke to Cassius in the slow, deliberate tone one uses when addressing a mad person. “But I already told you, I’m just a traveller. I don’t know anything and I’m not working for anyone!”

Cassius stood up from the bed and regarded her for a moment. “Frankly, it really doesn’t seem to matter anymore whether or not you’re telling the truth. Either way, you’ll be dead by morning. And I will be on my way to the job of a lifetime, unless I miss my guess.”

Silver recoiled. “But why kill me? I don’t know anything about you! I can’t really talk can I?”

Cassius again produced the hunting knife and began picking the dirt from under his fingernails with it. “I don’t like leaving witnesses. It gets messy. Besides, killing you will be pleasure, not work. So far I’ve just been taking pot shots at these backwards little people. But,” – he waved the knife through the air like a paintbrush, or a conductor’s baton – “I’m an artist, my dear Silver. And I’ve been starved of a piece of quality canvas such as you to work on for such a long time.”

He advanced on her brandishing the weapon once more. “Close your eyes, my dear,” he said, grinning maniacally, “I’m sorry to say this is *really* going to hurt...”

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The Doctor moved silently through burnt out streets, hugging the shadows of wrecked buildings as he went. Lucan was moving quickly, and keeping up with him whilst taking care not to give away his own position was a delicate balancing act. They wound through the deserted streets in a westerly direction, heading all the time toward the looming Capitoline Hill.

The path up the hill was steep and winding, and afforded the Doctor little cover beside a few small temples and statues. All the time, barely visible in the moonlight, the vast form of the Senate building stood like an unmovable monolith. His mind focused entirely on his mission, the Doctor strode on. The entrance to the apparently deserted Senate was up a flight of stone steps flanked by a succession of marble pillars. Looking

around furtively, Lucan hurriedly ascended the steps and disappeared inside. The Doctor slipped off his shoes and proceeded in his socks, taking cover behind each of the large pillars in turn, just in case his quarry should unexpectedly return. When he reached the entrance without incident, he stole quickly and quietly inside.

The debating hall of the Senate building was a vast indoor amphitheatre with circular stone benches for the senators all facing toward a floor beautifully decorated with several complex, intertwined mosaics from which many of the great politicians and orators of their era had spoken. The Doctor crawled behind a pillar and peered over toward Lucan. As he watched, several other men emerged from the shadows and took seats near to the floor, where they could clearly hear Lucan speak.

"My friends," Lucan began as the Doctor edged closer still in order to hear, "Our plans proceed apace. Another killing has taken place today. Whispers are being heard in ale houses and public baths all across Rome. Soon these people will gain in boldness. Whispers will become long, loud cries for the blood of Nero!"

One of the other men, a corpulent middle-aged fellow in a shabby, frayed toga, leaned in toward Lucan. "I'm afraid we don't share your optimism, Senator Lucan. We have been discussing matters in your absence. Things are moving too slowly for our tastes. We feel that we should proceed on to the... contingency plan."

Lucan sat down. "I thought you might feel this way. I said so to friend Cassius when I met him tonight." He sat down and wrung his hands nervously. "Is this how you all feel?"

A small sea of faces nodded in unison. A hawk-faced elderly man at the back of the group yelled "Death! Death to the Emperor!" and was greeted with admonishing stares from his co-conspirators for his over enthusiasm. He sank back into his seat and did not speak again.

Lucan rubbed his face thoughtfully. "Tomorrow night," he said at length, "the Emperor is to appear in person at the Theatre of Marcellus. Cassius is ready, he needs only the word. But I must insist that the democratic process is seen to be done. Would those happy to carry the motion raise their hands?" Every man present immediately thrust their hand into the air. Lucan smiled and went on. "And those opposed?"

Not a single hand was raised. Lucan shuffled some papers and stood up. "Then the will of the Senate shall be done," he said quietly, before melting into the shadows and disappearing. The Doctor watched from his hiding place as, one by one, each of the conspirators in turn left without a further word. Soon the Doctor was quite alone.

"Well," he said to himself, "that *is* interesting."

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Cornelius was crouched behind a shrub outside the villa's only illuminated window, his breathing ragged and shallow. He had followed his quarry silently through deserted streets before arriving here, and now he had arrived he was unsure of what to do. He had intended only to follow the mysterious figure and observe his actions without intervening, but now as he lay hidden he could hear the sound of raised voices. He was tussling with the question of whether to risk a look when a lung-bursting scream shattered the still night air. Without thinking, Cornelius burst through the open window, finding himself in an opulently furnished bedroom. On the bed lay a young girl, jet black hair falling over her face which was screwed into a mask of abject terror, and... something that looked like a giant cat. Surely, he thought, these must be the pair that the Doctor had instructed him to look out for. Beside the bed was the man he had been sent to follow. He was crouched over the girl, a wickedly sharp knife in his hand, and had clearly been about to do her some mischief but

was now staring incredulously at the intruder instead. For a moment, nothing happened. Then, as is often the way, everything happened at once.

Cornelius went for his sword - as he did so the stranger hurled a wickedly sharp knife at his throat. His survival instinct working overtime, Cornelius hurled himself to the floor a fraction of a second before the knife sliced through the air above his head - taking a lock of his chestnut hair with it - and embedded itself with a thud in the far wall. Cornelius leaped for his attacker, who caught him in mid-air and hurled him onto the bed, where he landed directly on top of the young girl. Cornelius shook his head and looked down into the eyes young lady, just had time to notice her deep brown eyes staring into his before she shouted "Watch out, you idiot!" and, with a twist, deposited him in a crumpled heap on the floor just as the plaster frieze on the wall behind exploded, showering Cornelius and the girl with plaster. Cornelius wheeled round to see the stranger brandishing some kind of metal tube in his direction. Instinctively realizing that it was a weapon of some kind (perhaps even that which the Doctor had told him of) the watchman launched himself at his assailant.

The tube cracked once. A priceless vase shattered on the bedside table.

The tube cracked again. This time Cornelius's arm was grazed. Pain shot through him, but he did not stop. He hit the stranger like an express train; knocking the weapon from his hand and hearing it clatter across the mosaic floor. His fist connected with the stranger's jaw, sending waves of pain stabbing through his injured arm, but he continued punching. Suddenly the stranger hit back, catching Cornelius a glancing blow on the temple. The second punch caught him on the nose, causing him to squeal with pain and fall backward, exposed. The stranger was on his feet and advancing on him, but Cornelius's combat training took over. He kicked out with his left foot, the heavy leather boot making contact with soft flesh over the exposed shin. The stranger stopped in his tracks and another kick, this time in a sideward motion, had him on his back again. Cornelius spotted his stubby sword lying near the foot of the bed, and in a single motion reached over, grasped it in his blood-soaked hand and swung around to strike his enemy.

But the stranger was holding in his hand a small wooden box which he was caressing between his hands. Thinking that this could be another weapon, Cornelius paused for just long enough.

"Too slow!" smiled the stranger sadistically as he disappeared into a haze of blue light.

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"Ow!"

Cornelius glowered at Silver as she shrugged apologetically and continued stitching his arm with the first aid materials the Doctor had procured from the TARDIS. The Doctor himself was mopping blood from Cornelius's chin. The Time Lord looked closely at his new friend's nose and smiled warmly. "Well," he said cheerfully, "nothing broken. Although it'll be sore for a while."

Silver snipped the last stitch with a pair of scissors and admired her handiwork. "So," she said impatiently, "Now that's all sorted, who wants to give me some explanations?"

The Doctor looked around Cornelius's sparsely furnished home as he thought about where to begin. The house was small, squat and made of stone, which explained how it had survived the devastation wrought by the fire. Cornelius had explained that the house had been bequeathed to him by his mother and father, and that he preferred to stay there than

to billet with the other members of the watch. All in all it was not a bad little place - there was even rudimentary central heating, which was why Mortimer was curled up contentedly on the stone floor enjoying a nap. He had only recently shaken off the effects of the drugs and the Doctor was impressed by his ability to fall asleep again so quickly.

At length the Doctor sat down on a rough wooden stool and looked first at Silver, then Cornelius. "Well," he began, "from what I've pieced together myself and what you and Cornelius have been able to tell me about this Cassius fellow, I believe I can begin to put the whole thing together. There is a group within the Senate who are unhappy with Nero. Can't say I blame them, his leadership has been less than impeccable. But their methods I cannot condone. Too cowardly to simply get the military onside and attempt to stage a coup themselves, they have tried to stir up ill-will among the populous. They have taken advantage of Nero's sacking of the temples to convince the people that the Gods are angry. And that is where Cassius comes in."

Cornelius looked confused. "But who *is* this Cassius?" he asked.

The Doctor smiled. "A very good question. I have my suspicions, but nothing definite. I think we can take it as read that his name is *not* Cassius, at any rate. Where he procured these weapons must remain a mystery for the time being. The fact that he has them is quite enough of a problem to be going on with. Now, based on the conversation I overheard last night, the Senators involved have been passing off his murders as the work of angry deities. But they're getting impatient and have now decided to go for a more direct approach. They are going to have Cassius *shoot* Nero."

Silver raised an eyebrow. "And I suppose we have to stop him, right?"

The Doctor beamed. "Gold star for you!" he laughed. "Fortunately I know where all this will be taking place. With Cornelius's local knowledge we should be able to sort this out and be back to the TARDIS in time for tea."

Silver was struck by an idea. "But he must be storing the weapons at his villa, and he'll need to go back for them if he's planning a shooting tonight. Why can't we wait for him there and stop him?"

The Doctor dismissed the idea with a wave of the hand. "Two reasons. One, he has this device with which he could escape quite easily. I believe it is something called a hopper - it's Gallifreyan technology, almost a hand-held TARDIS but it's dirty - kicks out massive amounts of radiation, which is what I detected at the temple. Doesn't have anything like the features of my machine, but it does mean cornering him is going to be tricky unless we can contrive some way of separating him from it. Secondly, he's clearly very shrewd. He must know that the villa could be compromised and have a contingency plan. I suspect there's a cache of weapons stored elsewhere in the city - and with the murder planned for tonight, we don't have time to look for it. Our only real option is to meet him at the theatre."

"Theatre?" said Cornelius blankly.

"Oh, didn't I mention it?" grinned the Doctor. "Better get your glad rags on Cornelius."

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Cornelius's breath crystallized in the cold evening air as he paced up and down outside the entrance to the theatre. Various members of the city's elite had been spotted entering, including Lucan and several more of the Senators that the Doctor had seen, but there remained no sign of Cassius. The Doctor and Silver - who was carrying a drowsy Mortimer

in her arms - strolled over from where they too had been keeping an eye out. "No sign of our man?" asked the Doctor impatiently.

"Not yet." sighed Cornelius. "Perhaps we've frightened him into calling the whole thing off?"

The Doctor considered this. "I don't think so," he said at length, "Did you see Lucan smiling as he went in? He obviously still thinks everything is going ahead. No.... the only explanation is that Cassius is not going to be inside the theatre when it happens."

Suddenly the sound of chatter from within the vast open-air theatre stopped. The sound of trumpets rang out like a peal of thunder.

"What does that mean?" asked Silver nervously.

"I suppose it means Nero has taken to the stage." mused the Doctor darkly. "Here, I'll give you a boost - you try and see what's going on."

With an audible grunt, he hoisted Silver into the air, just high enough for her to peer over the stone wall surrounding the venue. "What can you see?" he asked breathlessly.

Silver looked around for a moment, squinting into the distance. "There's a guy on the stage." she said.

The Doctor, now visibly flagging, wheezed back, "What does he look like?"

"I don't know. He's covered in makeup and wearing weird robes. He's waving some kind of scepter about and shouting. He looks kind of pale and sweaty; I don't think that's just the makeup because his hands are like that too. Short-ish black hair... and he's wearing one of those laurel wreath things on his head."

At that, the Doctor dropped Silver heavily to the ground and stood panting as she glared at him angrily. "I'm not *that* heavy." she spat venomously.

But the Doctor was not listening. "That's Nero alright," he panted. "We're running out of time. Silver, what could you see of the layout of the theatre?"

Silver, still rubbing her backside, said "It was open air. Built on a slope, so each row of seats was naturally higher than the last. The seating was circular and at the lowest point, in the centre, there was a stage and a kind of pit."

The Doctor digested the information. "An open air amphitheatre," he mused. "The natural slope means that the stage will be visible from any sufficiently tall buildings in the area - Cassius *won't* have to be inside the theatre."

Cornelius looked around despondently at the nearby streets, full of lavishly opulent - and very tall - dwellings and places of business. "But this is the Merchant's quarter. There are many tall buildings - how do we know which one he is in?"

They began scanning the buildings in the area, but none yielded any clues. "A door-to-door search?" suggested Silver.

The Doctor shook his head. "No time. Nero will only be on stage from a few minutes more. We need to work it out."

Silver looked aghast. "How?"

The Doctor rubbed his temples and began ticking off the buildings one by one. "That one, that one and that one are too far away or too obstructed for even an expert marksman like our man to get a clear shot. Those two are too close - the angle would be too shallow to get a good view over the wall. That one is too small. Those" - he gestured to two buildings at either end of the street - "are too far over to the side to give a good view. Of the three that remain, it can't be that one since it's still open for business. All of which leaves that one," - he pointed toward a grand, three storey building with gleaming marble steps - "or that one," - he gestured toward a shabby warehouse which stood looking slightly shameful, between two much more lavish affairs.

Silver smiled. "Very clever. But we don't have time to check both."

"We don't have to. From what you've told me Cassius is a psychopath and a narcissist. He won't be in the warehouse."

Silver looked worried. "You sure?"

"As sure as I can be. Cornelius, you come with me - Silver, you and Mortimer stay here!"

With that, the Doctor and Cornelius set off at speed and, pausing only so that the Doctor could work his magic on the locked door, entered the building.

Silver and Mortimer were left quite alone, only the sound of Nero's oration wafting almost imperceptibly along the deserted street. Suddenly, something across the street caught Silver's eye. There, in third floor window of the deserted warehouse was a figure. As Silver watched, transfixed, she saw the fading sunlight glint from a highly polished lens.

"Come on Mortimer," she said, scooping up the cat in her arms. "We're going in."

\*\*\*\*\*

The door of the warehouse had been broken off its hinges before being balanced back in place in order to give the impression that all was well. Silver pushed it aside and was immediately hit by the smell of damp and the extreme cold. She remembered Cornelius's cozy little home with its under floor heating and wished fervently that she was still there.

Quietly, almost not daring to breathe, Silver and Mortimer ascended the stairs. She finally reached the top of the rickety, warped staircase and found herself facing a wooden trapdoor leading up to the third floor. She poked it delicately and found that it opened quite easily. Terrified but exhilarated, she poked it open a little further in order to allow her to see through the gap. She scanned the room for a second before her gaze alighted on the large window which fronted onto the street.

There stood Cassius. He was no longer wearing his robes, instead being kitted out in Kevlar body armour. Various handguns and knives were fastened around his waist and legs, and he was hunched over a high-powered sniper rifle, peering occasionally down the telescopic sight and making adjustments in preparation. Soundlessly, Silver squeezed herself through the trapdoor and set Mortimer down on the floor. There was a slight thunk as the trapdoor closed behind her but Cassius was too engrossed in his preparations to notice it. Silver crouched catlike while she pondered what to do.

And then the decision was made for her. A beeping filled the air, Cassius checked a digital wristwatch and hunched over the gun.

This was it. It was now or never. Silver, throwing caution to the wind, threw herself at the assassin.

\*\*\*\*\*

In the theatre a packed audience watched, politely appalled, as their Emperor paraded on the stage, treating them (in the loosest sense of the word) to a display of his acting prowess. With added songs.

As they watched, a loud crack, amplified by the theatre's natural acoustics, rang out around them. On stage, an unseen force tore Nero's scepter from his hand. In a heartbeat, he had picked it back up and continued. History tells us no more of the matter, although some scholars believe that Nero beat his wife to death after she dared to refer to the incident afterward.

\*\*\*\*\*

The shot rang out around the street. Engaged in a fruitless search of the other building the Doctor froze, unable to believe what he had heard.

"I got it wrong." he said quietly.

"What?" said Cassius, his face draining of color.

"I got it wrong!" yelled the Doctor. "He was in the warehouse! Come on, it might not be too late!"

They set off as fast as their legs would carry them.

\*\*\*\*\*

Cassius and Silver tussled on the floor. He was much stronger than she was, but a combination of adrenaline and abject terror was giving Silver reserves of strength she never knew she had. Mortimer was doing his bit too, protecting his mistress by attacking Cassius's face with a ferocity which belied his recent docility. Already the assassin's face was awash with blood coming from a multitude of cuts and scratches. At last Silver's strength failed her, and a swift kick to the abdomen sent her reeling across the floor.

Cassius, mopping the blood from his face and kicking aside the hissing Mortimer, stood over his winded opponent and drew a gleaming handgun from his belt holster. "Now," he said grimly, "I'm going to finish what I started."

And then everything went mad. Mortimer launched himself at Cassius's gun hand. He was beaten to it by the enraged form of Cornelius, who charged like a bull through the trapdoor and cannoned into Cassius. Cornelius's fists beat a bloody tattoo against the face of his enemy, as the Doctor followed him through the trapdoor and crouched at the side of Silver.

"What took you so long?" coughed Silver.

"I'm sorry," said the Doctor earnestly. "But then I did tell you to stay put, so really it's your own fault." He winked cheekily at Silver's appalled reaction.

"Did I save the Emperor?" asked Silver.

The Doctor got up and crossed to the window, stepping over the brawling Cornelius and Cassius as he went, and returned in a moment. "He's still going through the routine, boring the pants off everyone present. So, yes. It looks like you saved a Roman Emperor. Well done." He touched her tenderly on the nose, then stood up and spoke authoritatively to Cornelius. "I think he's had enough."

Cornelius stopped punching and looked down at the stricken form of Cassius. He had mainly beaten the face, Cassius's strange armour having hurt his hand when he's tried to work over the body. Nevertheless, despite being covered in a fair amount of blood, Cassius was still fully conscious and even smiling. As Cornelius stood, Cassius moved with lightning reactions, grabbing from within the pocket of his combat trousers the small, box shaped device he had used the previous night. Before he could activate it, the Doctor batted it from his hand with his cane, then stooped and picked it up.

"I think I'll look after this." he said grimly.

Cassius made a noise somewhere between a cough and a laugh. "Well," he said, "it seems you've got me good and proper."

"Well," replied the Doctor, "yes. But there are a few points that need clearing up. For one, I assume we can now drop the pretence that you are a Roman merchant called Cassius. Would you care to satisfy my curiosity as to your real identity?"

Cassius shook his head. "I have to maintain some air of mystery you know." he laughed.

"Well then," said the Doctor feigning defeat, "I'll just have to guess. Is it... Balthazar?"

The prone man's eyes lit up as he looked over toward his enemy. "Yes it is. Which would make you...?"

"The Doctor." was the curt reply.

"Ah," laughed the man now identified as Balthazar. "Send a renegade to catch a renegade eh?"

"Something like that," said the Doctor distractedly. "Silver, Cornelius, allow me to introduce Balthazar Malleus - once the youngest Time Lord ever to sit on the High Council. Now a thief, terrorist, extortionist and - it seems - he's added temporal political assassination to his skill set. He is the most wanted criminal in the universe, hunted by the Celestial Intervention Agency, the Time Agency and a dozen other organizations."

"As were you at one time, if I recall." spat Malleus.

"I'm talking now." smiled the Doctor politely. "So here's the plan. We incapacitate him, we get him back to the TARDIS, and we zip him straight back to Gallifrey to stand trial. Any questions?"

Silver and Cornelius shook their heads dumbly. "Good!" grinned the Doctor.

Malleus shifted his weight over onto his side, the better to fix the Doctor with his gaze. "Don't you think you're forgetting something?" he asked.

"I don't think so." replied the Doctor.

"As well as all the other achievements you listed, I used to be in an Omega Scout. And you know the motto." He pulled a second hopper unit from a pocket on his sleeve. "Always be prepared."

The Doctor, Silver and Cornelius all made to grab their prisoner, but with a final sneer he glowed blue, then disappeared once more.

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Silver sat recovering on the ground as the patrons of the Theatre of Marcellus emptied out onto the streets. Among them was an extremely worried looking Lucan, though Silver's suggestion that they apprehend him was rejected by the Doctor. "Do you know what it takes to stay alive as a Roman Emperor?" he asked.

"No." replied Silver sullenly.

"Well, a sense of morality that allows for mass murder, thievery, rape and arson is one thing. Being certifiably insane is another. But the best way is to always know your enemy. Nero knows who the conspirators are, or he will very soon."

"And then?"

"And then they die in ways you wouldn't want to know about. Well, I think our work here is done. Goodbye Cornelius."

The Doctor extended his hand. Cornelius shook it, but still looked sullen. "You know, Nero *is* a monster. I might not agree with what those Senators did, but that doesn't mean I didn't agree with their ideas."

The Doctor patted him on the back. "Welcome to the world of moral uncertainty." he said. "You did a good thing today, Cornelius. You saved my friend. And, in the process, you

saved Nero. It's for history to judge whether that was right or wrong, but I don't think history will remember the involvement of a young watchman in all this. In fact, if I have my way history won't remember much about this episode at all."

With that, he gestured to Silver and Mortimer. Silver hugged Cornelius and kissed him on the cheek, causing him all manner of embarrassment which he tried to hide by giving Mortimer a farewell pat on the head. Then, with a wave, Cornelius's three new friends walked out of his life forever.

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Silver, Mortimer and the Doctor trudged uphill toward the TARDIS in silence. They reached the door and the Doctor opened it, Mortimer trotting inside looking very pleased with himself. Before entering, Silver turned and looked at the Doctor. "He's still out there, you know. He could be anywhere, doing anything."

The Doctor considered this. "We stopped him this time. That's enough for now. I'm sure we'll run into him again one of these days."

Silver glowered. "Oh? What are the chances of that?"

The Doctor smiled broadly. "Well, ask me next time we're in Dallas, 1963."

Silver grinned and went inside. With a final look about, the Doctor followed, closing the door firmly behind him.



# THE DOCTOR WHO PROJECT



Nero's Rome is in tatters - devastated by fire,  
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With Silver lined up as the killer's next victim,  
and Nero himself in danger,  
time is a luxury the Doctor and his new friend Cornelius do not have.

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