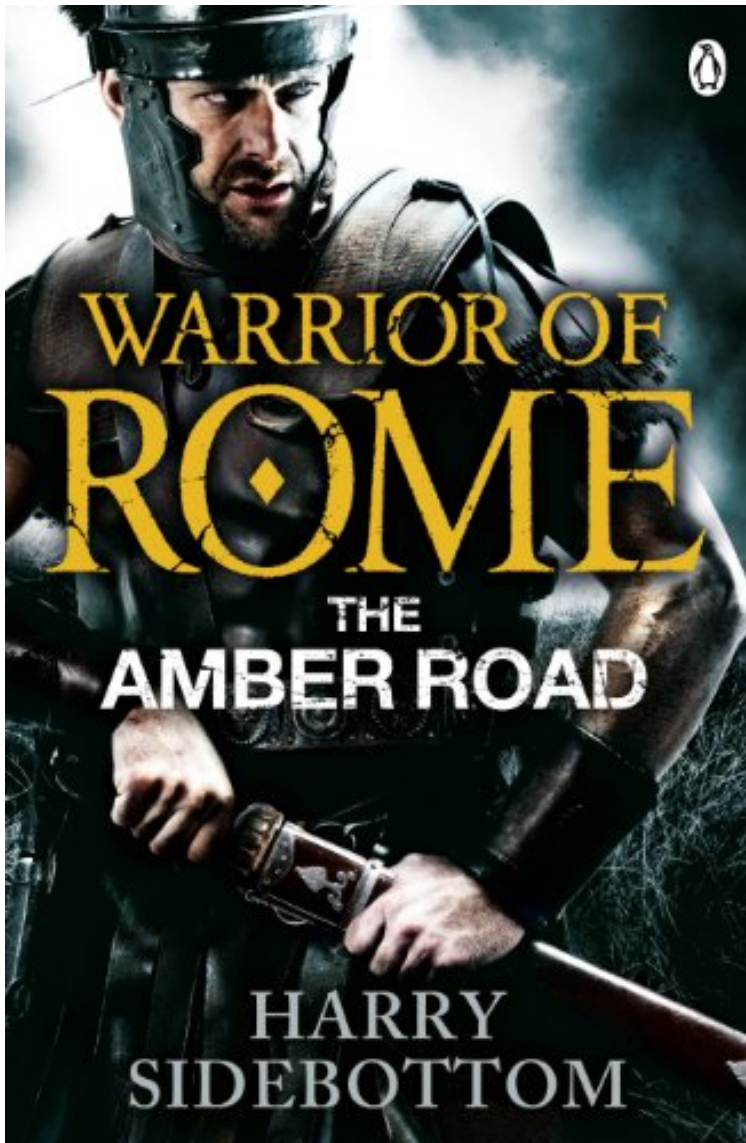


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Warrior of Rome VI: The Amber Road



Par Harry Sidebottom

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurWarrior of Rome: The Amber Road is the sixth book in Harry Sidebottom's Warrior of Rome series. AD 264 - The Roman Empire is torn in two. The western provinces - Gaul, Spain and Britain - have been seized by the pretender Postumus. To the east, on the plains of northern Italy, the armies of the emperor Gallienus muster. War is coming. Everyone must choose a side. On a mission shrouded in secrecy and suspicion, Ballista must journey The Amber Road to the far north to Hyperborea, back to his original home and the people of his birth. A fearsome, masked warlord attacks, bringing fire and sword against the Angles. Yet not all welcome Ballista's return.Does treachery pose the greatest danger? Dr Harry Sidebottom is a leading authority on ancient warfare - he applies his knowledge with a spectacular flair for sheer

explosive action and knuckle-whitening drama. Fans of Bernard Cornwell will love Sidebottom's recreation of the ancient world. Praise for Harry Sidebottom: 'Sidebottom's prose blazes with searing scholarship' The Times 'The best sort of red-blooded historical fiction' Andrew Taylor, author of *The American Boy* Dr.

Harry Sidebottom is Fellow of St Benets Hall, and Lecturer at Lincoln College, Oxford - where he specializes in ancient warfare and classical art. Extrait By the same author *WARRIOR OF ROME: Fire in the East* *King of Kings* *Lion of the Sun* *The Caspian Gates* *The Wolves of the North* Copyright To Peter Cosgrove and Jeremy Tinton *The Himling Dynasty* Prologue *IGallia Belgica, AD262* Afterwards, towns always wear the same scars. It had been too easy, Starkad thought. In the long, long voyage, only one ship had gone missing. There had been no Roman patrol boats in the Gallic Channel, no watchers on the bluffs flanking the estuary. The fishermen's huts where they beached the longboats had been deserted. Not a soul had disturbed them as they laid up the remaining hours of the day. Only their bulky shadows and a vixen about her own murderous business had made witness to their march inland in the treacherous starlight. The small market town of Augusta Ambianorum was unwalled. No geese had cackled, no dogs betrayed the approach. Neither call of nature nor providential deity had pulled a citizen from his slumber to raise the alarm. The sea wolves had ringed the town, a party on each road. When the atheling Arkil was satisfied, he had made the signal. The Angles had set about their rapine with practised enthusiasm and the zeal of men long at sea. After the incomprehensible suddenness of the onset of catastrophe, it had proved a long night for many of the wretched women of the town, all too short and final for some of their men. In the dead, grey half-light before dawn Starkad stood near the ornamental gate and looked back down the main street to the forum. Unlike many of the warriors, he had neither raided into the imperium nor served in the Roman forces before. The buildings were unusual to him: bigger, squarer, made of stone with tiled roofs. Yet otherwise it could have been a settlement on Scandinavia or around the shores of the Suebian Sea. There were all the usual signs of a sacked town: the kicked-in doors, the casually smashed heirlooms, the weeping women, small children wailing, and here and there the splayed, humped dead. The smell of spilt alcohol, of vomit, excrement and blood; the rankness of unwashed men. Starkad thought only a man of no imagination could regard what he and his companions had wrought and not consider the implicit threat to his own family, to his own home. Clumsy and bleary with fatigue and drink, the Angles were shuffling into a column of some one thousand along the wide street. The eorls who commanded the ships chaffed the duguth, and each of the latter did likewise to the ten warriors under them. All were well laden with plunder. They were not taking too many captives with them. These were divided into two groups, one of young women, the other of men of all ages. That night the former had experienced a foretaste of their fate. If the male captives knew what their future held, the cowards among them might envy the lot of the women. The crewmen of Starkad's longship were all present and in some form of order, drawn up roughly five abreast and ten deep. He told his friend Eomer, the duguo of one of the tent-groups of ten, to take over, keep them from more drinking, and he walked off to the head of the column. Arkil was talking to two of the eorls. Like all the Himling dynasty, Arkil was tall, very broad-shouldered, with long, blond hair. Like all the Himlings, his arms were bright with gold. The atheling smiled at Starkad. One of the eorls spoke. Your crew are still slower than mine, Wiglaf said. Starkad shrugged. He is still a puppy. Arkil's tone was light. Twenty-five winters, you could hope for more, Wiglaf replied. I said he was too young to be one of the duguth, let alone an eorl. Starkad smiled in a way he hoped conveyed the gathering senility of his elders. A big man himself, he had some confidence in his own skill at arms and his ability to exact obedience. He did not bother to point out his men had been tasked with the rounding up of prisoners. The chiefs of the other fifteen ships began to come up in ones or twos. Arkil had a few words with each eorl. It was not just stature Arkil had inherited. All the Himlings of Hedinsey had the gift of commanding men in war. It came naturally to them. They were Woden-born. Even Starkad's stepfather, Oslac, quiet, studious man that he was, had led several successful expeditions in his youth. Starkad's thoughts ran from Oslac to his mother, Kadlin, and from her to his father. He did not want to think about his father. Starkad looked at the arch spanning the road. It was a gateway that could not be shut and that connected to no walls, a thing of elaborate impracticality. In the torchlight its relief carvings shifted: men heavily armed Roman-style or stark naked killed trousered warriors whose faces were grotesquely bearded, almost bestial. Why had the townsfolk commissioned such a monument? Presumably they identified with the Roman fighters and had forgotten that once they had been free men, before the legionaries had massacred their trouser-wearing forefathers, taken their weapons and made them pay taxes. Starkad had little but contempt for men who paid others to defend them. It has all been too easy, Starkad said. And you would know, Wiglaf said. Some of the older eorls laughed. The boy might not be wrong. Arkil

was known as a thoughtful man. No one can tell what the Norns have spun. Great misfortune often follows hard on the heels of success. But Morcar and I spied out this place last year on our way back from the west.

We were thorough. Morcar questioned the locals we caught. He did not spare himself. Everyone smiled; some wincing at the thought of the ingenious cruelty Arkil's half-brother delighted in using. Not all the Himlings were gentle. It is fifty miles to Rotomagus, the same to Samarobriua. There are no Roman troops nearer than Gesoriacum, and that is further by road and its harbour has few warships. There was no burning in last night's work. No beacons have been seen. There is no time for a message to reach Gesoriacum and the soldiers to return before we are gone. The chiefs nodded at the sagacity of the atheling. There is nothing at which the gods can complain. We have promised much to Ran that she will spare us her drowning net, and Woden will have the rest and much booty on our return. A low humming of approval at the old, stern ways of blood ran through the leading men. We have done what we can by gods and man, Arkil said. Put out the torches. It is time to get back to the ships. Starkad walked back past the first three crews to his own men.

Although sitting casually, some even prone, they were in rough marching formation. None was drinking more than might be expected. The roped captives were huddled in the street between them and the warriors of the next longboat. At Starkad's command, his followers began to clamber to their feet. They extinguished the torches, hefted their weapons and plunder and shouted at the prisoners until they got up as well. At home the old men said that until the reign of the cyning Hjar, just three generations before, the Angles had gone to war in no great order. They said the Angles had brought discipline back from fighting for the Romans on the distant banks of the Ister in their great wars against the Marcomanni. Starkad found it hard to imagine his people going into battle in a chaotic mass no better than the primitive and savage Scythians or the Finns of the far north. But he had no reason to think either the old men or the travelling scop who came to the halls of the Himlings and sang the deeds of Hjar should lie. A war horn sounded, and the column, somewhat unsteadily, bunching and surging, started forward. The light was strengthening as Starkad emerged from the gate into the necropolis. Like all young well-born men at the court of Isangrim, a little Latin had been drummed into him. The cyning himself could speak the language fluently, and his son Oslac, Starkad's stepfather, was noted for his unusual interest in the poetry of the imperium. Starkad knew what the Romans called their burial grounds, but the previous night the stars had been too dim and his apprehension too tight to take his first view of one. As its name implied, the necropolis was a veritable city of the dead. As well as many sculpted and inscribed gravestones and sarcophagi, some columns and a couple of miniature pyramids, there were lots of small houses for the deceased. They began as soon as the homes of the living ended, and flanked the road as far as could be seen in the gloom. It was all strange to Starkad. The Angles interred their dead in fitting barrows at a suitable distance from their settlements. There was something odd about this Roman necropolis nestling up to the town, something faintly disturbing about building houses for corpses as if they might still be alive. He had heard the southerners believed they would have no afterlife except flitting disembodied through the dark like bats or shadows. He wondered how their young men could bring themselves to endure the arrow storm or stand close to the steel with no hope of their courage and deeds bringing them to Valhalla. As they cleared the necropolis, the horses of the Sun hauled her over the horizon.

The dark fled away from her, as she herself ran from the wolf Skoll. The land spread out around; a cultivated, pleasant place of fields and meadows, rustic tracks and stands of trees. Buildings were dotted here and there; comfortable villas commanding fine views, more humble farms in sheltered spots. It was a fertile land, well worked, and Starkad admired their husbandry. The road stretched on, and the sun shifted up. The morning was going to be hot. It was only five or six miles to the boats, but after the first the raiders were already suffering, their nocturnal excesses catching in their chests, making their feet shamble. Starkad shifted the shield and pack slung over his back. It brought no ease. He did not care. He was happy. His discomfort was a measure of his success, and this road was the start of his journey home. It would be good to be back. There were no problems between him and his stepfather, and he loved his mother. As was the custom of the north, he had spent several years of his youth in the hall of his maternal uncle. Heoroward Paunch-Shaker lived up to his name: a huge, jovial bear of a man, a legendary drinker, and, despite his girth, a warrior to be feared. In most ways he was the father Starkad had never known. It would be good to return to him and to his mother in triumph. And then there was Heoroward's son, Hathkin. Starkad and Hathkin were of an age, had grown up together and could not be closer. Certainly Hathkin meant more to Starkad than the younger half-brother and half-sister his mother had given Oslac. The road breasted a rise. On the reverse slope a broad sward ran down to a line of mature trees. It was in a clearing in this wood the previous night that the vixen had watched their passing. They were getting on for halfway back. Shieldwall! Form on the atheling! Starkad

was repeating the call down the column before he realized its meaning. Shieldwall! Form on the atheling! The threat must be ahead. Starkad calmed himself, thought quickly. His was the fourth crew in the column. He must go to the right. He remembered the prisoners. The fucking prisoners. They were his responsibility. He made rapid calculations. Eomer, your men stay with the prisoners. When the line is formed, bring them up behind us. The command was acknowledged with a wave. The crew in front was already moving off to the left. Starkad gestured to the rest of his men to follow him and set off at an encumbered jog, angling off the road. The grass underfoot was long. It caught at his legs. He hoped he had done the right thing. There were eighty captives. Eomer had ten men. But the prisoners were roped; half of them were women. Starkad put it out of his mind, concentrated on bringing his men to the correct place. There was Wiglaf's red draco, flying bravely. Starkad panted up beside the right hand of Wiglaf's warriors. Blowing hard, like a close-run animal, he motioned his forty men into position. They jostled into a line ten wide and four deep, then dropped their packs and sacks of loot, planted their spears in the ground and took their shields in their left hands. A violent retching, and a man stepped forward and threw up. A moment later another followed. Some

laughed. Starkad's standard-bearer was beside him. He looked up at the white snake his mother and her women had sewn for him. The draco writhed; its tail lashed. Starkad had not noticed the westerly breeze get up. The next crew were shuffling together on his right. So far nothing had gone wrong. Finally he had time to assess the cause of the alarm. The enemy were drawn up in front of the wood. A long line of oval white shields marked with a red design. Steel helmets glittered in the sun, and above them a mass of spearheads. Over all, various standards again, all white and red flew. A knot of horsemen stood out before the centre; a large draco floated over them. There were about two hundred paces of open grassland between the forces. Starkad shaded his tired eyes and peered across the gap. He caught the shimmer of mail between the shields. The enemy were arrayed several ranks deep. He estimated the width of the enemy formation, then stepped forward and looked along the almost-formed Angle shieldwall. Roughly the same width, so the numbers should be about equal. He moved back into his place. The Horned Men, one of the older warriors said to Starkad. Your first Romans, and they turn out to be our cousins. Most auxiliary units of cornuti are recruited in Germania. They may well be Batavians. Starkad grunted. Apart from their shields being oval, not round, and all bearing the same design, they did not look much different to the Angles. A double-strength cohort, should be about a thousand men, added the older man. What sort of child did old Guthlaf take him for? It was not as if he had not stood in the shieldwall and faced the ranks of the fiend before. He could estimate numbers, and an enemy was an enemy. Starkad turned away and pretended to watch Eomer bringing the captives up. Someone is coming over. A lone rider was walking his mount slowly across to where Arkil's big standard the white horse of Hednisey flew at the centre of the line. He held his spear reversed in one hand and some sort of staff in the other. The thing he is carrying is their symbol of a herald.

He wants to be sure we will not kill him out of hand. Starkad was fast running out of patience with Guthlaf. How did they get here? a voice in the ranks asked. Starkad had no idea. Silence in the wall. Let us hear what he has to say. The rider took his time but eventually reined in a short javelin cast from Arkil. The man wore no helmet. He had short, dark hair, and a short, dark beard. To give him his due, he looked composed enough. In the name of Emperor Caesar Marcus Cassianus Latinus Postumus Augustus, Pius Felix, Invictus, Pontifex Maximus, Germanicus Maximus, you Angles are commanded to surrender. He spoke in Latin. His voice carried well. There was a pause. The herald's horse ruckled down its nose. Just when the rider was about to speak again, Arkil took a pace forward. Stand aside, and we will be on our way. Arkil's Latin was heavily accented, but serviceable. That cannot happen. Then you had best go back, and the steel will decide. This does not have to end tragically, Arkil of the Angles. My commander, Marcus Aurelius Dialis, Governor of Germania Inferior, offers you terms. The herald stopped, and again no one spoke. Tell us the terms. Arkil's voice had a sharp edge. This was dragging on too long. Lay down your weapons, leave half your plunder, and you can go on your way. You had best go back. The herald did not move. If you swear a truce and remain where you stand, it may be Governor Dialis will offer more lenient terms. Arkil strode further out from his men. Go back now. If you just Arkil unsheathed his blade. The Himlings possessed several swords of ancient renown. This was Gaois, the growling one, half as old as Woden and responsible for nearly as many deaths. Go back now, Arkil said again. Undiplomatic, but Starkad thought the atheling was right. Time was not on their side. Any moment could see other units of Roman troops appear from any direction. The herald reined his horse around, walked it back towards his line. And no one among the Angles could say he had acted without courage. The prisoners! Arkil roared. One in ten! A lane parted in Starkad's men, and he walked through to the rear. To be an eorl demanded hard choices, and this was one of them.

Starkad stood by Eomer in front of the captives. Him, he pointed, and him. That one He continued until eight men, none young, had been dragged out. Cut the others free. Their bonds gone, the women and younger men stood, irresolute and fearful. Go, Starkad said. They did not move, but gazed at him with round, uncomprehending eyes. He realized he had used his native tongue. Go, he repeated in Latin. Your gods hold their hands over you. Still they did not move. Perhaps they suspected some cruel trick. Go. He pointed in the direction of the town. One individual, then another, tentatively shuffled in the direction they had come. When nothing untoward happened, they moved faster. Others joined in, until they were all running as fast as they could back towards their shattered lives. Starkad jerked his thumb at the eight remaining. Front of the line. They were distributed along the shieldwall. One was Starkad's duty. He did not relish it, but it was a necessity. An eorl had to do what was right by his men and the gods. Arkil began the dedication. Starkad and the others joined in. Ran, goodwife of Aegir Starkad looked down. The man was on his knees, bound. He had grey hair, grey eyes, a gentle, delicate face. Probably he had a wife, most likely a child, certainly he had been someones son. Ran, turn your pale, cold eyes from us Starkad drew his sword. Spare us your drowning net, take these instead. Without hesitation, Starkad swung the blade. The man threw himself sideways. Not quite quick enough. The steel bit into the side of his neck. Blood sprayed bright in the sunshine. The man squealed, high like a pig. He was on the ground, not moving, but not dead. He was moaning. Starkad stepped up, and finished him with two hard, chopping blows to the back of the head. A baying of outrage rolled across from the Roman lines. Starkad cleaned his weapon on the dead mans tunic, and slid it back into its scabbard. Swineheads! Arkil's voice carried along the Angle warhedge of shields. Guthlaf walked a few paces in front and planted himself four-square. Two other experienced warriors went and stood on either side and just behind him. Starkad took his place at Guthlaf's back. His chest felt all tight and hollow at once. His breath was coming fast and shallow. Without thought, he loosened his sword and dagger in their sheaths, touched the piece of amber tied to his scabbard as a healing stone. Taking up his spear, his palm was slick. As each crew shifted into a wedge formation, a song rang out: The sword growls Leaving the sheath, The hand remembers The work of battle. The Swinehead was formed. Starkad had Eomer on one shoulder, his standard-bearer on the other. Buoyed up by the singing and the proximity of his companions, he felt his anxieties slipping away. He would be a man; let down neither his friends nor himself. Advance! Arkil's bellow was followed by the bray of a horn. Normally, those warriors touched by Woden or another god would jump out beyond the formation and dance. Leaping and turning, casting aside their armour, they would draw down into themselves the ferocity of wolf, bear or other fanged, clawed beast. As they worked themselves into a murderous, slathering fury, the hearts of the rest would be lifted. Today there was no time. If one Roman unit could appear, against all expectation, so could more. The Angles had to break the fiend in front of them, and win through to their ships. A low sigh, like a breeze through a field of ripe barley. Soft and deceptively gentle, the Angles began the barritus. As they moved off, the war chant swelled. They raised their shields in front of their mouths; the sound reflected, growing fuller and heavier. Stepping in time, the barritus rose to a rough, fitful roar. It faded, and they could just hear the answering war chant of their enemy. The Angles lifted their voices and, like a great storm, drowned out everything else. The barritus foretold the outcome, and their barritus sounded good; a measure of manhood. Between the nodding helmets of Guthlaf and the front rank, Starkad could see the enemy. They were stationary, close packed, awaiting the onslaught. Their leaders had chosen cohesion over momentum. Downhill, they had made a bad choice. Starkad was glad to be moving. The Angles were picking up speed. Jogging, the thunder of their boots, the rattle of their war gear added to the din of the barritus. Starkad saw Guthlaf lower his spear. Carefully he brought his own down underarm; its point jutted out between Guthlaf and the shield of the man to the old warriors right. They were close, no more than forty paces. Every detail of the shield-burg of the enemy was clear. The front rank were kneeling, spear butts planted, white shields half overlapping. The second rank had brought their shields down over the first, bases locked on to the bosses of those below. A dazzling wall of white wood and red-painted horned beasts. Everywhere wicked, glinting spearheads projected, waiting to tear the life from those the Norns decreed must fall. The Angles broke into a full charge, legs pounding. Thirty paces, twenty. The fearful and the foolishly brave swept along together. The barritus echoed back like a huge wave crashing against a cliff. Something flashed to the right between Starkad and Eomer. Above, the air was full, as the rear ranks of both sides hurled their spears. Screams cut through the clamour. Chin down into chest. No time to think. The noise like nothing else in Middle Earth wood and steel smashing together, buckling, breaking. It hit Starkad before the savage impact jarred up his right arm, into his shoulder, bringing wrenching pain. The haft of his splintered spear was torn from his grip. Full tilt, he ran shield to shield into a cornutus. One of his

own men thumped into his back. Wind knocked out of him. No room to move. The enemy face behind the shield; snarling, brutish. Hot breath in his nostrils. Crushing pain. The enemy falling back and down eyes wide with horror. Guthlaf above him, climbing, scrambling over the locked enemy shields, using their bosses as footholds. Cornuti stabbing up. Guthlaf hacking down, like some demented woodsman. The edifice swaying back, collapsing. The pressure on Starkad easing a fraction. Gasping for air, he dragged his sword free. A shove from behind. Starkad stumbled over the enemy writhing on the grass. Lose your footing here, and you were dead. Friend and foe would trample you to nothing. Shield well up, Starkad thrust down with his sword. The point of the blade met the resistance of a mailcoat. He put his weight on the hilt. The steel broke through the rings and slid into soft flesh. A blade arced down from Starkad's right. Coming over his shield. He hauled his sword up, a clumsy parry with the guard. Something hit the left side of his helmet, hit very hard. Stunned the clangour ringing in his head he staggered, his vision swimming. From all directions the deafening, terrible din of battle. Trapped in a surging crush of bodies. Feet scrabbling, Starkad fought to stay upright in its eddies. A vicious edge of steel bit into the top of his shield, through the leather binding, down into the linden boards. A splinter gashed his forehead. His legs were shaking, so tired. He hunkered down behind his shield. Another blow landed, took out a chunk. He bent his knees, tried to dig in his heels, get a firm stance. He had to fight back, lead by example. He was an eorl. A flash of light to Starkad's right. A ghastly scream. The sword embedded in Eomer's stomach. His friend's face white with shock. The cornutus withdrawing the blade. Eomer crumpling. Starkad twisted, lunged, his body behind the blow. Another scream. Starkad's blade slicing deep across the soldier's thighs, scraping on bone. Starkad and the cornutus tangled together. Starkad shoved him away. He fell. Two neat steps and Starkad brought up his sword. Please. A bloodied hand raised in supplication. Starkad smashed the heavy sword down; one, two, three times. The press was clearing, the movement now all in the direction of the enemy. Out! Out! Out! The triumphant, traditional cry of the Angles rumbled down the hillside, pursued the cornuti as they fled into the wood. Starkad took in the stricken field. Everywhere were discarded and broken spears and swords, shields and helmets, even mailcoats. Everywhere the dead and the dying lay in their own blood and filth, and the living stood bent over with the enormity of it all. A grassy sward reduced to a shambles. But it was over. Now to count the cost. Eomer was sitting, supported by another warrior. His hands were pressed to the jagged hole in his war shirt. The blood was flowing slowly but already had pooled in his lap, clotting the rings of his mail, staining the thighs of his trousers black. I will get No, Eomer gasped. Gut wound. No point. Starkad dropped his sword, got to his knees. He tried to remove his helmet, but the blow had dented it out of shape. Someone levered it off for him. Blood from his forehead ran into Starkad's eyes. Enough to enter Wodens hall. Eomer tried to smile. I hope. Starkad shuffled forward. The other warrior moved, and Starkad cradled his friend. Tell my mother, and Aeva. Eomer winced. Tell them I died well. Starkad buried his head in his friend's neck, crying. Time to go. Guthlaf was standing above them, bloodied but unhurt. The atheling has ordered we move. Five times at the point of the Swinehead and Guthlaf was still alive, this time seemingly unscathed. It should have been him, not Eomer. Starkad could not reply. Time to go, Guthlaf repeated. Starkad sobbed. You are an eorl, Guthlaf said. Show yourself one. Starkad glared, about to curse the old man, curse him to Niflheim and Hel. He is right. Eomer gripped Starkad's arm with a bloody hand. You are my eorl. Do the last thing for me. Starkad shook his head. The Choosers of the Slain will take me. Eomer gripped him harder. Do it, as I love you, do it. Starkad knew they were right. He kissed Eomer, held him close, told him he loved him, whispered Wodens last words to Balder in his ear. Then Starkad drew his knife, and cut his friend's throat. After, Guthlaf helped him to his feet. Leading men is not all feasting and giving gold. You did well. You are eorl to all in the crew. Men were busy all over the meadow. Starkad took his place under his draco. Four of his crew had died in the clash, two had been helped out afterwards. There were six with serious wounds but who could still march. Starkad sent men back to collect such of the plunder as was light and would not hold back their progress. As they did so, he got the remainder in order. Arkil's horn sounded, and the reduced column resumed its limping march to the sea. The trees mature oak and beech made a dappled world of shadow. Under their spreading branches the undergrowth was sparse, but enough to conceal an ambush. Starkad put it out of his thoughts. He had seen Arkil send out scouts. The atheling was a true leader, a true Himling. We must have been seen, said a voice in the ranks. No, Starkad said, they knew Arkil's name. They trudged on, pondering the bad implications of that. Arkil was here last year, with Morcar, Guthlaf said. Starkad smiled, but with no humour. Morcar would have left none alive to say their names. They must have taken Ashheres missing boat, someone said. None with Ashhere would betray us. Starkad was certain. Yet they knew Arkil was coming, Guthlaf said. There was no answer to

that. Through gaps in the foliage a high sky of mackerel-patterned clouds could be seen. Lower, light clouds pushed to the east. A fair wind, if they could make the ships. Not more than three miles to go. Ahead, the column was marching out into the sunlight. Before Starkad reached the edge of the wood, he knew it was not good. A low groan of disappointment from the men at the front. Then he heard Arkil's horn, and the order came back down the track. Shieldwall! Form on the atheling. Last crew as reserve. Wounded form as their rear ranks. Again Starkad brought his men into the warhedge on the right of Wiglaf's crew. They were about twenty paces out of the wood, the reserve at the tree line. This time it was an army they faced. The Romans were drawn up on a gentle hill, a stream at its foot, open country in front, smudges of smoke in the sky behind. Red-crested legionaries in the centre, auxiliaries on either side, all backed by archers. A formidable phalanx, with cavalry further out on both wings. Starkad counted their standards, their frontage, gauged their depth, tried to estimate their numbers. Three thousand or more, perhaps quite a few more, a third of them mounted. In a good position, standing in good order. Well, that would seem to be that, Guthlaf said. Heart and courage. Some of us may win through. Starkad did not believe it, but he felt it was the sort of thing an eorl should say. Heart and courage, some of the men muttered uncertainly. It is no more than a mile to the ships. Starkad added the lie gamely, and none of the duguth or the warriors chose to correct him. The wind sighed through the big trees behind them, hissed sibilant in the jaws of the dracones above. A horse neighed in the enemy array. Another herald. The Roman rode down the slope, forded the stream in a cloud of spray, cantered towards the Angles. Mounted on a magnificent black horse, this was an officer of high rank, his muscled armour gilded and chased. He reined back to a walk, and brought his charger to a standstill about as far as a boy could toss a stone from the shieldwall. Bareheaded, hair and full beard artfully curled, he looked like a portrait on a coin of an emperor from a previous age. Arkil, son of Isangrim. The Roman spoke the language of Germania with an accent from somewhere near the Rhine. You lead brave men. Too brave to waste their lives in a hopeless cause. Arkil stood forth. No man can predict the course of events. He raised his voice. Wyrd will often spare an undoomed man, if his courage is good. The horseman nodded, as if at the wisdom of the lines, then pointed over his shoulder. Your longboats are burned. Beyond the Roman army Starkad could see the smoke had grown into a thick column. It rose vertical, then billowed out to the east. The Augustus Postumus would have men like you in his comitatus, if you would give him your oath. Arkil took off his helmet, so his face could be seen. My father, the Cyning Isangrim, long ago pledged his friendship to your enemy the Augustus Gallienus. Isangrim is leader of our people. It is not for us to go back on the word of our theoden. The black horse tossed its head, and the Roman quieted it with a practised hand. The tyrant in Rome does not merit the friendship of men such as the Himlings of Hedinsey or the brave Angle warriors they lead. Gallienus has treated your half-brother Ballista shamefully. He has shown him no honour for his years of service, no honour for the risks he has run or the wounds he has taken. Instead, it is said, he has sent him into exile in the distant Caucasus mountains, sent him to his death among strangers. At the mention of the hostage, there was a low hooming from the older warriors in the warhedge. Starkad felt his own emotions rise. Gallienus wastes his time in idleness in the baths and bars of Rome. Dressed in jewels and silk as a woman, he leads a comitatus of pimps and catamites. There can be no shame in renouncing the friendship of such a man. What of our booty? Arkil asked. What you left behind on the field of battle beyond the wood will be divided among my soldiers. What you have with you will remain yours. Where would the Augustus Postumus send us? Arkil asked. If you give him your oath, the Augustus Postumus will lead you first against your hereditary foes, the Franks. He will reward you with an open hand. It is in my mind you will not find Postumus lacking in courage. Arkil laughed. That I can see already. Postumus acknowledged this with a civil gesture. The decision is not mine alone, Arkil said. I must consult the eorls. It is a pleasant day. I will wait. The emperor, all alone, sat easy on his horse. Starkad and the other eorls clustered around their atheling. We could kill him, one of the eorls hissed. They would not fight then. Arkil rounded on the man. That is the thought of a nothing. Only a man of no account would think to harm a man who came as a herald, trusting our word. I have no desire to stay here, Wiglaf announced. We should fight. Fight this army, then the army on the Rhine, and on the far banks the Franks? We are far from home, Arkil replied. After we have defeated the fiend in front of us, we should seize a port, take their ships. My old friend Arkil spoke gently the battle madness is on you. If we fight today, we will all dine in Valhalla this evening. A murmur of agreement ran through the ring of eorls. Then it is agreed. Arkil turned back to the emperor, raising his voice. We will serve in your comitatus for two years. Five, Postumus replied equitably. Three, with the same pay as Praetorians. Postumus laughed. The stipendium shall be as you say, and you will receive such donatives as are fitting, but you will serve for five years. Five it is then. Will you swear the military oath on behalf of your

men? Arkil nodded. Then take the sacramentum here in the sight of men and gods. Arkil drew his sword, placed his left hand on its edge, and spoke in Latin. By Jupiter Optimus Maximus and all the gods, I swear to carry out the emperor's commands, never desert the standards or shirk death, to value the safety of the emperor above everything. Five years, if he lived. Watching from the line, Starkad had to reconcile himself to five years before he could hope to return home.

Prologue II
The Island of Abalos in the Suebian Sea,
AD 263
The Roman was very far from home, beyond even the great forests of Germania. He was alone and afraid. This island, which had looked so small when first sighted in the restless grey expanse of the Suebian Sea, now seemed endless. He could run no further. The wood here was mature timber, aspen and birch. There was little underbrush, no obvious place to hide. He looked about. Off to his left a big tree had fallen, its roots fanned up in a rough arch, a damp hollow where they had grown. He hobbled over and huddled there. He listened, but could hear nothing over his own laboured breathing. The thick folds of the toga which had so hampered his flight were hot and heavy. He tugged and pulled until the voluminous thing fell away. Clad in just a sweat-stained under-tunic and sandals, he crouched, fingering the hilt of his knife. It was more suited for peeling an apple than a desperate fight. His breathing quieter, he strained to catch any sounds of pursuit. Nothing except birdsong and the sounds of the wind moving through the trees. He leant back against the roots, exhausted.

Marcus Aurelius Julianus, a Knight of Rome, *Vir Egregius*, reduced to this. Only the gold ring of an equestrian distinguished him from a fugitive slave. When he was young, his father may the earth lay light on him had taken him to Nemi to see the priest-king. They had crossed the fence into the sacred space. It was festooned with strips of material, offerings to Diana of the Lake. They had found the runaway slave. He had emerged from a thicket, suspicious, blade in hand. When he had decided they were not of his own kind come to kill and replace him, he had moved off on the endless, fearful patrol of his haunted, diminutive kingdom. Julianus knew this was all his own fault. He remembered his delight at the invitation. A formal banquet on the Palatine with the emperor himself in attendance was an honour beyond the hopes of most in the equestrian *ordo*. Many of the great had been there: Nummius Ceionius Albinus, Prefect of the City and Consul Ordinarius for the second time; Censorinus the Praetorian Prefect; Plotinus the philosopher; Cominius Priscianus, the new *Studiis*; and several eminent military men, including the Danubians Tacitus and Aurelian and the Egyptian Camsisoleus. Julianus had been on a table higher than some of the principes, no distance from the imperial presence. Gallienus had been wearing a magnificent amber amulet to aid his recovery from tonsillitis. Julianus had admired the piece. The emperor had been graciousness itself, asked if he was interested in amber. A collector himself, and warmed by the Falernian and other noble wines, Julianus had not been able to stop himself expounding on the errors of the Greeks concerning its origins. Liguria, Iberia, Ethiopia, all nonsense, as were Egypt, Numidia and the Pyrenees. The only true amber was washed up on the shores of the Suebian Sea. Julianus had gone on to talk of its colours and properties. And the very next day Censorinus had come to his house. It was not a social call. The Praetorian Prefect carried an imperial command. A discreet diplomatic mission was leaving for the north. Julianus's deep knowledge of amber would act as a Trojan horse. He must have longed to travel to the Suebian Sea, to the fabled Cimbric peninsula and the islands where the precious resin was washed ashore. Now he could fulfil that desire, provide good service to his emperor, and purchase all the amber he might dream about. An imperial command was not to be disobeyed. Too much wine, too much talking hubris, even had combined to lead Julianus to this dismal forest beyond the north wind. Still no untoward sounds, but he could not stay here. Bundling up the toga, he did his best to conceal it under the roots of the tree. The sun was visible through the branches. It was directly overhead, no help in determining his course. There had been a fishing village on the southern coast, seen before they had rounded the headland and run up to the port. With money in his belt, the knife in his hand, he might get a boat. Casting around anxiously, he set off in what he hoped might be the right direction. The wind stirred the branches and the sun dappled down. Julianus slipped from one sylvan glade to another. He had always loathed the countryside. Like most of his acquaintance, he preferred it tamed, the hand of man having transformed it into something like the garden of a villa. It was all very well in bucolic poetry or a Greek novel clean-limbed young goatherds playing their pipes and innocently falling in love. But the reality, even at home in Campania, was threatening, full of outlaws and shepherds, and they amounted to the same thing. He remembered being frightened when his father had taken him to Nemi. But that had been nothing compared with the journey north from the last outpost of the imperium in Pannonia. Eight hundred miles or more through barbaricum. He had been terrified, even in the company of Tattius the ex-centurion and their several slaves. When they had reached the shores of the Suebian Sea nothing had been as literature had led him to expect. There had been no hint of the Hyperborean good fortune of which

Aeschylus had spoken. Contrary to the Odes of Pindar there had been sickness, baneful old age, and toils.

Certainly there had been no avoiding Nemesis. The northern chief they had travelled to see dwelt to the west. Far from conveying them to him, these barbarians had insisted they accompany them to this island. Were they guests or prisoners? Julianus understood little of politics. A bough creaked in the wind. Julianus was alone. What had happened to the others? It had been pure chance he had not been taken as well. He had always suffered from a weak bladder. Waiting to be summoned for their second audience with the sinister chief of this island, Julianus had stepped out of the hovel that formed their lodging. He had been relieving himself not easy in a toga, hard not to splash yourself at a polite distance, when he heard the uproar. At first he had thought it some rough barbarian custom or sport; their ways were unaccountable. Until he had seen Tatius dragged out and knocked to the ground. And then and then the slave tried to protect his master, and the barbarians killed him. Had they killed Tatius as well? Julianus had not stayed to discover. He had gathered up the skirts of his toga and fled into the forest. What had they done with the boy? If he were a hero, he would go back and rescue Giton. The gods knew he loved the boy. But Julianus knew it was not in him. He had done his military service half a lifetime ago. A year as a tribune with Legio II Adiutrix on the

Ister had convinced him his courage was a finite commodity. He was not a hero. He was a 43-year-old landowner who enjoyed poetry and had a taste for pretty boys and fine amber artefacts. Out of breath, Julianus rested against a tree. The sun had shifted. He was heading the right way. Surely not far now to the shore. He was about to set off again when he heard it. A horn, its note deep, full of menace. Hard to tell its direction. Behind, he thought. He plunged forward. Running blindly, feet sinking in the thick leaf mould. A branch whipped his face. He stumbled, lost a sandal. No time to get it. He ran on. Diana of the Lake, save me. A heifer, horns gilded, for you, hold your hands over me. Hercules, saviour of men, my finest piece the red amber with the fly for my safety. A shout harsh, guttural all too near. They had sighted him. Like a hard-pressed beast, Julianus forced himself faster. Splashing through a rivulet, on hands and knees up the far bank. The muscles in his thighs screamed with pain. His breath came in agonized gasps. He detested hunting. Its exertions bored him, and he never failed to feel a pang of sympathy for the cornered quarry. He could not go much further. Soon he would have to turn like a stag at bay, waiting for the sharp teeth of the hounds. A glance over his shoulder. Movement between the tree trunks. They were gaining. A root tripped him. Face first, sprawling in the dirt, then rolling down a slope. Winded, his knife knocked out of his hand. The reek of the forest floor and his own fear. They were all around him, at the top of the incline. Horrible, pale faces, steel in their hands. Why? Why me? I have never harmed you. It was not my choice to come here.

Politics is nothing to me. Tatius, he is the one you want. Take him. The Latin pleas meant nothing to them. They pulled him to his feet, bound his hands behind his back, a rope around his neck. Like a haltered animal, they led him off down a forest track. They offered him no cruelty, just kept him moving.

Occasionally they spoke to each other in grunts he could not comprehend. After a time the woodland changed. Birch and aspen gave way to oak. Julianus could smell open water. The works of man appeared. Not the shaded walks and marble statuary of humanitas. Here and there, in no discernible order, stark poles. On each a skull, dog, horse or human. At the heart of the sacred grove was a clearing, yellow flowers in the grass. The sun glinted on water through a tangle of alder scrub on the far side. Men were waiting there, clustered around a massive idol. The deity was seated, hands in lap. A carved bird perched behind each shoulder. The god was scarred, blind in one eye. The one who called himself Unferth the Amber Lord stood in front of the god. His constant shadow, the Young Lord, as ever with him. The hunters pushed Julianus to his knees before them. The one-eyed divinity looked down implacably over them all. A whimper drew Julianus's attention. Giton, his boy, his beloved, was there. Muddied, huddled off to one side, but alive, seemingly unhurt. The boy was not looking at Julianus, but above his head. Julianus followed his gaze across the open ground. Tatius was alive naked and bloodied, hung in the high branches of an oak. Punishments should fit the offence. The voice of the Amber Lord boomed strangely from behind the metal face mask of his helmet. Those who offend against the people should be made a public example. Deeds of shame should be buried out of the sight of men, stamped down, trodden deep. That he had no idea of the meaning did nothing to lessen Julianus's terror. He thought his bladder would give way, shame him. Take them. Julianus was hauled to his feet. Too frightened to make a sound, he heard Giton pleading. Julianus was manhandled, half dragged down a path through the alders. He lost his other sandal. The rope was cutting into his neck. Reeds then open water ahead. The sky very big above. Bare feet scraping, he was pulled along a wooden walkway out into the marsh at the edge of the lake. He heard a scream, cut off by the sound of something heavy hitting the water. Urine ran hot on his thighs. No, no, I never wanted any part of

it. The men seized him. Thrown forwards, he landed face down in the mud. He twisted, came up spluttering. Hands still tied behind his back. The wattled hurdle loomed over him. He screamed. The hurdle pressed down. The mud and water rose. Julianus held his breath. The water was in his eyes, his ears. Everything went dark. At last, he had to breathe. The water rushed into his throat. He started to die.

PART ONE Oikoumene, (Spring AD264) THE TOWN OF OLBIA TO THE NORTH OF THE BLACK SEA

Some damaged walls and any number of ruins. Ballistas first impression of Olbia was not favourable. The pilot who had come aboard at the Castle of Alector as they left the Euxine had negotiated the long, marshy confluence of the Borysthenes and Hypanis, skilfully avoiding both the shallows and the many rafts of logs being poled downstream, and then taken them up by the far channel of the latter river. Now he was threading their way across through the numerous islets and mudflats. There were duck and geese on the water. Its margins were teeming with waders. Progress was slow, and the passengers on the trireme had plenty of time to view the remote outpost of Hellenism and empire. Another shitehole, said Maximus. Yes, Ballista agreed with his bodyguard. A citadel on a cliff dominated the south of the town. The narrow pediment of a temple and a jumble of other roofs jutted above its curtain wall and rectangular towers. At the northern foot of its slope, quays, slipways and sheds huddled against more walls. Several fishing boats and some local river boats were pulled up out of the water. Near the indigenous craft four small trading vessels from the south and one small warship were moored. Behind the docks the incline was steep. It was terraced, close packed with houses, tiled roofs overlapping, seemingly built on top of each other. A line of mean one-storey dwellings backed on to another low wall, which snaked up towards the gate of the acropolis and marked off the inhabited quarter. Beyond it, away to the north, was desolation. Smoke hung over parts of it. Isolated towers, once part of a much greater defensive circuit, showed here and there through the haze, and a couple of huge conical barrows for the dead had been erected in what once must have been the heart of a thriving Greek polis. Ballista had no more wish to be here than in any of the places he had been since the dreadful events of the previous autumn. It had been months of unhappiness and frustration. From the even more far-flung polis of Tanais they had crossed Lake Maeotis to the faded splendour and vicious political infighting of Panticapaeum, capital of the Roman client kingdom of the Bosporus. From there, just before the close of the sailing season, they had taken ship across the Euxine to Byzantium. At the Hellespont an imperial official had waited, the bearer of new, most unwanted orders. The pleasures of Byzantium the famed seafood and wine, the games and chariot racing, the public displays of wisdom by philosophers and sophists had meant nothing as they were constrained to winter there. Now they were heading north again, misery unabated, vengeance unfulfilled. As the warship edged in to Olbia, a lifetime of training took over and moved Ballistas thoughts from his troubles. A closer study of the acropolis revealed vegetation growing in fissures in both curtain wall and towers. In places some of the dressed stones had fallen, tumbled down the gradient and been replaced with makeshift rubble. Despite this the cliff made the river side of the citadel almost impregnable, if defended with any application. There was nowhere to site artillery against it, no way to bring up rams let alone siege towers, no chance at all of undermining. A storm with ladders would bring incalculable casualties, almost certainly fail. The only access there would be surprise or treachery. Clear fore and aft, the trierarch called. Bring her about. Ropes for mooring. The long galley slowly swung around. Her triple banks of oars took the way off her, and then gently backed her up against a ramshackle jetty. Deck crew jumped ashore and secured the vessel. Others ran out the boarding ladder from one side of her stern ornament. Toga-clad and purposeful, Aulus Voconius Zeno, sometime a Studiis to the emperor Gallienus himself, before that governor of Cilicia, processed down the ramp, his usual display of dignitas only slightly marred by a less than dignified stumble as his feet stepped on the unmoving ground. With even more self-regard, and far more exotic in a floor-length, gold-fringed red cloak over snow-white tunic, the portly eunuch secretary Amantius went next. He, too, was unsteady as his silk slippers trod the dock. Ballista followed with Castricius, who would be his deputy when he assumed command of Zenos escort. The rest of the party, Maximus and Tarchon, the two fighting men from Ballistas familia, and the five slaves, trooped down in the rear. Zeno looked up and down the quayside. He was as clearly unimpressed by what he saw as might be expected in a man who had once advised the emperor on things of culture, and much else more political. We must make our arrival known to the authorities, he announced. You do that, said Ballista. Zeno bridled. Gallienus Augustus has despatched us on an official mission. Tell the local magistrates about the amber, said Ballista. Zeno glowered. As the real mission could not be mentioned, he was unsure what to reply. Take Amantius with you, Ballista continued. The slaves can unload our baggage, look after it until we have been assigned lodgings. The rest of us are going for a drink. Our escort, the crew of that warship from

Moesia Will find us. Ballista spoke over him. Now, I need a drink. Where? Outside a shed, unimpressive even on that waterfront, two elderly men sat drinking. Over there. Zeno and the eunuch swept off, waving away a customs official who tried to speak to them. The telones next approached the men with Ballista. Fuck off, said Maximus. The telones regarded Maximus and the other three armed men, and withdrew. The inside of the bar was bigger than the exterior suggested, although possibly even less appealing. A rough wooden counter ran down the left-hand side. Storage jars sat in holes cut into its surface. Amphorae were stacked behind, and there was an oven next to a closed door at the far end. The only light was from the front door, but nothing looked very clean. Ballista had no intention of eating here. A pitcher of wine, please, one quarter water, he said. The best you have, added Castricius. As they took places at benches around a plank table, the only other customers, six men and two whores sitting together, hard-eyed them. Maximus and Tarchon stared back. Ballista and Castricius pretended not to notice. The best, said the barman. A local speciality. He poured it and they drank. It was not too bad, although it tasted oddly of elderberry. They drank some more. Another, said Maximus. As the barman returned, Ballista checked over the other table. The men wore military-style belts with daggers. They were evidently drunk. It was mid-afternoon. He motioned Maximus to look less challenging. There had been several unpleasant incidents in Byzantium over the winter. Not surprising, given the amount everyone in the familia had been drinking and what had happened before out on the steppes. From where he sat Ballista could see a section of the dockside through the open door. An old fisherman was sitting cross-legged in the spring sunshine, mending his nets. Outwardly at ease, Ballista listened carefully to everything in the bar. The knife men had turned to a loud, drunken conversation among themselves: women, money, drink the usual subjects. They laughed, moronic in their cups. The whores simpered. The violence had retreated from the room. For now, at least. Outside, the fisherman was using pot shards as weights. He must have bored a hole in some, as he was stringing them on to the net. Others, he was tying. Perhaps he had scratched a groove in those, so the sharp edges would not cut the cords. An amphora was easy to break, but when broken its fragments were nearly indestructible. Almost a paradox, Ballista thought. A philosopher could make something of that. Ballista drank more. He felt the wine buzz in his head.

The false wellbeing and confidence of alcohol were creeping over him. The melancholy would come later. Castricius was talking. The short, pointy-faced Roman officer was teasing the other two members of the familia. You pretty barbarian boys had better watch out. Men from Miletus founded Olbia. Brought the love of boys with them. The locals here are addicted to it, like sparrows in their lechery. Their lust will be inflamed at the sight of you two a pretty Hibernian and a tender little Suanian. Maximus and Tarchon gazed back at him with no expression. Each of their lined, battered faces showed its owners forty-odd years. The Hibernian Maximus was missing the end of his nose. I was in Miletus once, Maximus said flatly. Another shithole. There was no obvious catalyst to violence here unless the knife men were locals who might take offence at being dubbed pederasts. The drink in him, Ballista did not care if they did. He would back himself and his three companions against the six opposite. A smallish sailing boat had tied up to the wharves.

Stevedores were bringing off its cargo. Bales of hides were being piled next to boxes of wax, which suggested the coarse grey amphorae contained honey. Guessing the produce of the neighbouring land could not keep Ballista's mind from why he was here. He was going home. Twenty-six winters since he had been taken as a hostage into the Roman imperium. Well over half his time on Middle Earth, and finally he was going back to the lands of his people, to the Angles of the Suebian Sea in the far north. Twenty-six winters waiting to go home. And now he did not want it. Ballista drank more. No, he did want it. Part of him did. He wanted to see his father, his mother. Of course, Eadwulf, the half-brother he had been closest to, would not be there. But he smiled he would see Kadlin, the first girl he had loved. And he could drink again, as he had in his youth, with her brother, Heorowearð. But the north was not where he should be going now. Calgacus his companion and friend was dead murdered last autumn on the Steppe and his killer escaped. In Tanais, Panticapaeum and Byzantium, Ballista had asked everywhere for news. No one knew anything of a Greek called Hippothous. That was what Ballista should be doing scouring the imperium for the Greek bastard. They had taken Hippothous into the familia, and he had killed Calgacus. He had killed many others, but it was Calgacus who counted. Ballista took a long pull from his cup. The flavour of elderberry was getting cloying. Most things did, if you drank enough on an empty stomach. If not hunting Hippothous, he should be at home in Sicily, at home with his wife and sons, keeping them safe. Certainly things had not been right between him and Julia for a long time he was unsure why, it might be his fault. But with his boys it was different. Two winters since he had seen them. Isangrim would be twelve now, his birthday the kalends of this month. Dernhelm turned five last November. The younger would have changed more, maybe out of all

recognition. Poor old Calgacus had loved them. The Caledonian had been a miserable, ugly old bastard. But he had always been there, since Ballista himself was a child. Calgacus had travelled into the imperium with him, served on every distant frontier. Maximus was a good friend. They had been together years. They were close. Castricius less so he was strange. But, on and off, the little Roman had been with him for years, too.

Tarchon the Suanian was loyal, even if often incomprehensible. But none of them was Calgacus. The one man Ballista had talked to in the worst of times, in the most uncertain and unguarded moments. Ballista knew he was already drunk, his thoughts sliding around, maudlin, full of self-pity. Perhaps he should eat. He concentrated, trying to focus on the dock outside. A big trading vessel up from the south had now been pulled in to the side. Dozens of amphorae were being lugged ashore, men everywhere. Incongruous in scarlet cloak and silk slippers, Amantius was weaving his way through the bustle, half imperious, half diffident. The eunuch walked into the bar. Instantly the knife men fell silent, their eyes on the outlandish newcomer. Ho, precious, one called out in rough Greek, we have whores already. They laughed. One made the sign to avert evil. Everyone knew eunuchs were like monkeys or cripples, things of ill omen. Amantius stopped, irresolute. Fuck off, we do not want your kind in here. One of the toughs got up from their table. Apologize. Ballista found himself on his feet, face close to the standing knife man. And who the fuck are you? It takes most men a few moments to work themselves up to violence, at times an unfortunate weakness. Apologize to the eunuch. You can fuck Ballista smashed his cup hard into the mans face. His head snapped around, blood spraying as the shattered earthenware lacerated his skin. He crumpled to the floor, hands to his face. From the right a whore swung a heavy wine jug at Ballista. He swayed back. When it had passed, he punched her in the face. The bones in her nose broke under his fist. She went down. Blade! Maximus yelled. Ballista dropped, turned, tugged his dagger free. As he did so pain lanced through his left arm. He rammed the tip of his weapon up where his assailants stomach should be. Nothing. The man had checked his momentum, stepped away, dropped into a fighting crouch. Ballista did the same, no room for sword-work. Blood ran down his arm. A bad cut high up. There was a sickness deep in his guts. Noise battered his senses. Watch the blade. Watch the blade. The mans dagger weaved like a sightless steel predator scenting warm blood. Ballista felt a wave of nausea rise. Ignoring the pain, he gripped his sword scabbard in his left hand, held it clear of his legs. The man shifted his blade to his left hand, made a pass. Ballista stepped clear, jabbed. The man evaded, passed his weapon back into his right. He had done this before. Watch the blade. At the edge of his vision, Ballista saw the man on the floor move. He took a step towards him. The one on his feet blocked him. Ballista sidestepped away. The din buffeted back from the walls, Ballista and his opponent a pocket of silence in the chaos. The injured man was trying to haul himself up. Ballista had to act. He tossed his dagger in the air, caught its blade on the first rotation, spun it at the standing knife mans face. Surprised, his opponent jerked sideways, off balance, his guard disturbed. Ballista drew his sword, flicked it straight out, lunged. Two quick steps. The heavy spatha battered the dagger aside. Its steel tip ripped in below the chest, two foot of steel following. The man grunted, dropped his weapon, clutched at the blade. Not looking into his face, Ballista twisted his sword, pushed him away, retrieved his spatha, turned to deal with the other on the floor. The man was scuttling off under the table. A crash of splintering wood; light flooded in from another angle. Someone had kicked open the back door. Figures flitted out. The man from the floor last, staggering but fast. Ballista checked the room. His three friends all on their feet, seeming unhurt. The eunuch cowering under a table. The stabbed man at his feet, gasping out his life in a spreading pool of dark blood.

Another very motionless in front of Maximus. A whore unconscious on her back, her face a bloodied ruin. IICAMPANIA IN ITALY The emperor Gallienus stifled a yawn. It had been a long day already, enjoyable but tiring. Having dressed by lamplight, they had mounted up well before dawn. They had ridden through the rich fields of Campania, then up into the foothills of the Apennines, where well-surfaced Roman roads had given way to narrow, rustic paths flanked by stands of oaks. A gentle spring zephyr had played through the foliage and, above, swallows darted high in a perfect blue sky. It had been a good morning for riding. All the imperial party had been on horseback, except for the philosopher Plotinus. Thinking of his years and various ailments, Gallienus had given dispensation for the Platonist to travel in a light, two-wheel carriage. Such consideration was the mark of a civilis princeps. Of course, no emperor but the most civilized of rulers would have embarked on such a day in the first place. His first view of their destination had moved Gallienus to recite Homer: For I know this thing well in my heart, and my mind knows it: There will come a day when sacred Ilion shall perish, And Priam, and the people of Priam of the strong ash spear. The same words of Hector recited by Scipio as he gazed on the ruin of Carthage some four hundred years before. Unsurprisingly, the imperial entourage the philosophers included had shaken back their cloaks and quietly

lauded the appositeness of the quotation. Only Freki the Alamann and the Germanic bodyguards he commanded had not joined in the applause. Paideia meant nothing to them it was doubtful any of them understood Greek but even on a day devoted to culture an emperor could not be without armed guards. The town was a ruin. Its outer wall could just be traced as a low grassy bank from which poked occasional blocks of weathered stone. Inside, the streets were choked with weed-covered rubble. Mature trees grew in what had once been the agora and gymnasium. The walls of few houses remained above a couple of feet. Lonely columns, some at dangerous angles, marked the site of temples long abandoned by gods and men. The citadel had fared a little better. In places, its wall still stood, if insecurely. At its height, their condition defying the ages, loomed one huge tower and a temple to the Egyptian gods. Dark and primordial, it was as if they still waited, for guards, for priests and worshippers. And over everything soared the heights of the Apennines, gorgeous, bright and remote in the spring sunshine. Alighting from his carriage, Plotinus had conducted Gallienus around the site. Supported on one side by his philosophers staff and on the other by Amelius, his fussy, aging chief disciple, Plotinus was indefatigable. In practical demonstration of his belief that the body was no better than a prison, he had made no concessions to the ulcers on his feet. Pushing through undergrowth, clambering around fallen masonry, disturbing small lizards where they basked, throughout the heat of the day he had set out his vision. Courtiers and German bodyguards flagged the latter were never good in hot weather but Plotinus had not let up. Gallienus thought the philosophers old eyes had become less bleared; certainly his voice had gathered strength. Once, this desolation had been a city of the Pythagoreans. Their worn inscriptions and strange symbols were discernible through ivy and moss. In their way they had been seekers after wisdom and the divine. But they had chosen the wrong path. They had erred into dark magic and political tyranny. For these, rightly, they had been condemned. Now, with the favour of the emperor, this place could rise again, rise in justice and truth under the tenets of Plato. It would cost the imperial fiscus little, probably no more than a million sesterces, for contributions had been promised by many affluent followers of Plato. The senators Firmus, Marcellus Orontius and Sabinillus already had pledged large sums. Five thousand settlers were needed. Military veterans would be best, as used to discipline, but landless peasants, members of the urban plebs, even barbarian refugees or prisoners would be acceptable. True philosophy can enlighten the most ignorant, tame the most savage. A select group of eminent philosophers would form the Nocturnal Council. These guardians of virtue would govern the town. Platonopolis would be the wonder of this and future ages a city run by the Laws of Plato, a utopia made real by the paideia of Gallienus Augustus, by the wisdom and learning of the emperor. At last it had been time for the midday meal, and it was Gallienus's turn to amaze. In a shaded olive grove on a slope overlooking the projected city, the emperor had had his servants prepare rustic couches and cedarwood tables spread with out-of-season delicacies. Boys dressed as Pans played pipes, and pretty young shepherdesses tended their artfully groomed flocks. For postprandial rest there were cubicula of roses. No expense had been spared creating this transient ideal of bucolic simplicity. Garlanded and replete, Gallienus lay back, cup in hand, a handsome Greek boy at his feet. Other comely servants glided through the grove, their smooth youth a delicious contrast to the gnarled silver trunks of the trees. Gallienus noted that most of Plotinus's followers exhibited a detachment suitable to their calling. One Diophanes, however, despite his rough cloak and untrimmed beard, appeared far from indifferent to their charms. On the couch next to Gallienus, the elderly senator Tacitus was utterly unmoved by either the pulchritude on display or the food and drink. Solemnly he nibbled at a piece of dry bread, which from time to time he dipped in a little olive oil. The only other items on his plate were a morsel of cold pheasant and some leaves of lettuce. He had drunk just enough watered wine to be polite. He had unbent no more than loosening his sword belt. Gallienus knew all about Tacitus's austere domestic regime. The Danubian subscribed to the belief that lettuce cooled the desires of the flesh he was very opposed to the desires of the flesh. Likewise, Gallienus knew why Tacitus had journeyed from his estate at Interamna and requested permission to be one of the imperial comites today. Naturally a figure of such seniority and influence a powerful military man from the Danube risen to the rank of consul was watched by the frumentarii. The imperial spy in Tacitus's household had given ample forewarning of the request and its reason. Platonopolis had aroused vehement antagonism. Stoics, Cynics, Epicureans, Peripatetics and, of course, latter-day Neo-Pythagoreans had united with Megareans and Cyreneans and followers of doctrines of yet greater obscurity to denounce the whole concept. No sect wanted to see another singled out in imperial favour. They had all been most unphilosophic in their complaints. *Revue de presse* Praise for the Warrior of Rome series: Sidebottoms prose blazes with searing scholarship. The Times Superior. . . fiction, with depth, authenticity and a sense of place. Times Literary Supplement A

storming Roman epic with explosive action and knuckle-whitening drama. The GuardianI dont think Ive ever experienced antiquity so directly: the brutality, the directness of expression and feeling, the deep bonds formed amid unmitigated violence. David Konstan, Professor of Classics, Brown UniversityThe best sort of red-blooded historical fiction. Andrew Taylor, author of *The American Boy*