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Written by Robert Fabbri

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MASTERS OF ROME

ROBERT
FABBRI



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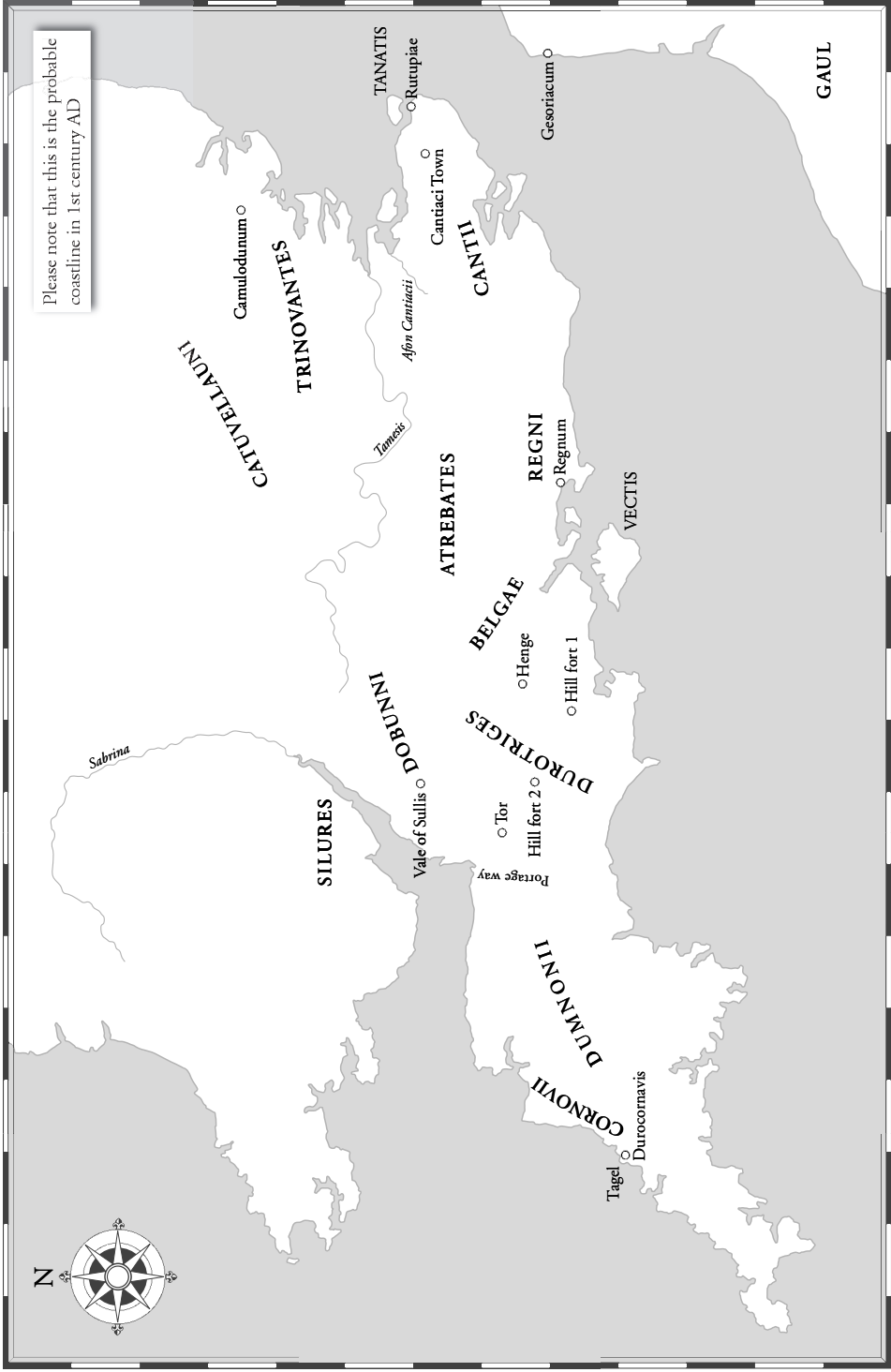
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For my friends through life:
Jon Watson-Miller, Matthew Pinhey, Rupert White
and Cris Grundy; thank you, chaps.

And in memory of Steve Le Butt 1961–2013
who sailed west before us.

Please note that this is the probable coastline in 1st century AD



PROLOGUE



BRITANNIA, MARCH AD 45

THE FOG THICKENED, forcing the turma of thirty-two legionary cavalry to slow their mounts to a walk. The snorts of the horses and jangle of harnesses were deadened, swallowed up by the thick atmosphere enshrouding the small detachment.

Titus Flavius Sabinus pulled his damp cloak tighter around his shoulders, inwardly cursing the foul northern climate and his direct superior, General Aulus Plautius, commander of the Roman invasion force in Britannia, for summoning him to a briefing in such conditions.

Sabinus had been surprised by the summons. When the messenger, a tribune on Plautius' staff, arrived with a native guide the previous evening at the XIII Gemina's winter camp on the middle reaches of the Tamesis River, Sabinus had expected him to be bringing his final orders for the coming season's campaign. Why Plautius should order him to travel almost eighty miles south to meet him at the winter quarters of the II Augusta, his brother Vespasian's legion, seemed strange just a month after the legates of all four legions in the new province had met with their general at his headquarters at Camulodunum.

Unsurprisingly, the tribune, a young man in his late teens whom Sabinus had known by sight for the last two years since the invasion, had been unable to enlighten him as to the reason for this unexpected extra meeting. Sabinus remembered that during his four years serving in the same rank, in Pannonia and Africa, he was very rarely favoured with any detail by his commanding officers; a thin-stripe military tribune from the equestrian class was the lowest of the officer ranks, there to learn and obey without question. However, the scroll the young man bore was sealed with Plautius' personal seal, giving Sabinus no choice but to curse and comply; Plautius was not a man to tolerate insubordination or tardiness.

Reluctantly leaving his newly arrived senior tribune, Gaius Petronius Arbitrator, in command of the XIII Gemina, Sabinus had ridden south that morning with an escort, the tribune and his guide, into a clear dawn that promised a chill but bright day. It had not been until they had started to climb, in the early afternoon, up onto the plain that they were now traversing that the fog had started to descend.

Sabinus glanced at the native guide, a middle-aged, ruddy-faced man riding to his right on a stocky pony; he seemed unperturbed by the conditions. 'Can you still find your way in this?'

The guide nodded; his long, drooping moustache swayed beneath his chin. 'This is Dobunni land, my tribe; I've hunted up here since I could first ride. The plain is reasonably flat and featureless; we only have to keep our course just west of south and we will come down into the Durotriges' territory, behind the Roman line of advance. Then tomorrow we have a half-day's ride to the legion's camp on the coast.'

Ignoring the fact that the man had not addressed him as 'sir' or indeed shown any respect for his rank whatsoever, Sabinus turned to the young tribune riding on his left. 'Do you trust his ability, Alienus?'

Alienus' youthful face creased into a frown of respect. 'Absolutely, sir; he got me to your camp without once changing direction. I don't know how he does it.'

Sabinus stared at the young man for a few moments and decided that his opinion was worthless. 'We'll camp here for the night.'

The guide turned towards Sabinus in alarm. 'We mustn't sleep out on the plain at night.'

'Why not? One damp hollow is as good as another.'

'Not here; there're spirits of the Lost Dead roaming the plain throughout the night, searching for a body to bring them back to this world.'

'Bollocks!' Sabinus' bravado was tinged slightly by his realisation that he had neglected to make the appropriate sacrifice to his guardian god, Mithras, upon departure that morning, owing to the lack of a suitable bull in the XIII Gemina's camp; he had

substituted a ram but had ridden through the gates feeling less than happy with his offering.

The guide pressed his point. 'We can be off the plain in an hour or two and then we'll cross a river. The dead won't follow us after that – they can't cross water.'

'Besides, General Plautius was adamant that we should be with him soon after midday tomorrow,' Alienus reminded him. 'We need to carry on for as long as we can, sir.'

'You don't like the sound of the Lost Dead, tribune?'

Alienus hung his head. 'Not overmuch, sir.'

'Perhaps an encounter with them would toughen you up.'

Alienus made no reply.

Sabinus glanced over his shoulder; he could, again, just see the end of their short column, as the fog seemed to be thinning somewhat. 'Very well, we'll press on, but not because of any fear of the dead but rather so as not to be late for the general.' The truth was that the superstitious part of Sabinus' mind feared the supernatural as much as the practical part feared the wrath of Plautius should he be kept waiting too long, so he was relieved that he had been able to retract his order in a face-saving manner. It would not do to have people think that he gave any credence to the many stories of the spirits and ghosts that were said to inhabit this strange island; but he did not like the sound of the Lost Dead and, even less, the thought of spending the night in their dominion. During his time on this northern isle he had heard many such stories, enough to believe there to be a grain of truth in at least some of them.

Since the fall of Camulodunum and the surrender of the tribes in the southeast of Britannia, eighteen months previously, Sabinus had led the XIII Gemina and its auxiliary cohorts steadily east and north. Plautius had ordered him to secure the central lowlands of the island whilst the VIII Hispana headed up the east coast and Vespasian's II Augusta fought its way west between the Tamesis and the sea. The XX Legion had been kept in reserve to consolidate the ground already won and ready to support any legion that found itself in trouble.

It had been slow work as the tribes had learnt from the mistakes of Caratacus and his brother, Togodumnus, who had

tried to take the legions head-on, soon after the initial invasion, and throw them back using their superior numbers; this tactic had failed disastrously. In two days, as they tried to halt the Roman advance at a river, the Afon Cantiacii, they had lost over forty thousand warriors including Togodumnus. This had crushed the Britons' resolve in the southeastern corner of the island and most had capitulated soon after. Caratacus, however, had not. He had fled west with over twenty thousand warriors and had become a rallying point for all those who refused to accept Roman domination.

A light breeze picked up, gusting east to west across their line of travel, swirling the mist and clearing a swathe off to Sabinus' right. He pulled himself up in his saddle, feeling a relief that visibility had cleared, if only by a few score paces in one direction. He began to mutter a prayer to Mithras to shine his light through the gloom of this fog-bound island and help him to ... he caught a fleeting glimpse out of the corner of his eye, he turned to look but it was gone, the wind sucked the mist back in and doubt clouded his mind as to whether it was a movement he had seen or it was just his imagination feeding off the tales of horror that were hard to banish from his head. The stories could never be unheard.

During the two months that Plautius had been forced, for political reasons, to pause north of the Tamesis, waiting for the Emperor Claudius to arrive and take the credit and glory for the fall of Camulodunum, the XIII Gemina had probed west along the river. It was at this time that Sabinus first began to hear reports from his officers of strange apparitions and unnatural occurrences: a legionary had been found, barely alive, flayed and yet still in uniform; his dying words had been of daemons that sucked the flesh from his limbs. Another had been found dead, drained of blood, and yet with no wound on his body or trace of the life-giving fluid seeping into the ground close by. Spectral figures in long, luminous robes that glowed with an unnatural fluorescence were sighted regularly, especially near to the mounds covering the tombs of the ancients and the many henges of both stone and wood that seemed to be, along with the sacred groves, centres for the Britons' barbarous religion.

At first Sabinus had put this down to the overactive imaginations of superstitious soldiers but, after Claudius' departure, he led his legion further inland for the final month of the campaigning season and had felt something that he had never been aware of anywhere else. He could only describe it as an ancient presence. That – and the disembodied howls and cries that plagued their nights – had convinced him that there was a power here that he did not understand; a power that was linked to the land where, no matter how strongly he was protected by the light of his lord Mithras, he was an interloper.

The following year they had carried on moving slowly inland, investing hill-forts one by one and fighting off raids on their supply lines and ambushes on their columns by Caratacus' warriors. The further they went the greater grew his feeling of unease and it was almost with relief that he withdrew his legion back south to their winter quarters on the Tamesis at the end of that season. He had brought up the subject with Vespasian last month, when the legates had met with Plautius at Camulodunum to discuss the next season's campaign, but his brother had dismissed his fears as soldiers' yarns; and yet there had been a look in his eyes that had led Sabinus to believe that he too felt a similar unease.

Sabinus tried to put his worries to one side as the column rode on slowly across the plain studded with tufts of rough grass. The breeze strengthened, shifting the fog, tugging it this way and that in wispy tendrils so that occasionally visibility improved enough to see the way ahead until, a few moments later, another gust would cause their view to be clouded again.

To force his mind away from the superstitious depths that the eerie conditions had taken it to, Sabinus glanced sidelong at Alienus and studied him. He noticed a ruddiness to his cheeks and a certain stubbornness to his nose and, although his face was quite slender, he thought that his family must have some Celtic blood. That would explain his cognomen, Alienus: foreigner. But then, he reflected, what family from northern or, for that matter, central Italia did not? His own roundish face and bulbous nose could hardly be described as classically Latin. 'Are your people from the north of Italia, Alienus?'

‘Hmm?’ The young tribune blinked his eyes as if emerging from a private reverie. ‘I’m sorry, sir, what did you say?’

Sabinus repeated the question.

‘No, sir; I’m from the south coast of Britannia. I’m the grandson of Verica, King of the confederated tribes of the Atrebates and the Regni. My Britannic name is also Verica after my grandfather.’

Sabinus was surprised. ‘Your Latin is excellent.’

‘Thank you, sir. My grandfather fled to Rome five years ago, after Caratacus had dispossessed him of his kingdom, and he took me with him. Like all Britannic princes in the south, I’d already had a good education in Latin and so I soon became fluent.’

‘And Claudius granted you citizenship?’

‘Yes, and equestrian rank. I took the name Tiberius Claudius and then added the cognomen Alienus because it amused me and so I became Roman as my grandfather wanted. General Plautius took me onto his staff as a favour to him so that I could begin to make my way up the various offices and perhaps even become a senator. I’d be the first Briton to do so.’

Sabinus nodded his approval at this thoroughly Roman ambition. ‘I was sorry to hear of Verica’s death. Just last month, wasn’t it?’

‘He was old and expected to die; he had no regrets. He’d reclaimed his kingdom, been made a formal client-king of Rome and had ensured a strong heir in his nephew, Cogidubnus.’

‘Why not his grandson?’

Alienus smiled. ‘He said I was too young, the people wouldn’t accept me and I understand that: how could a nineteen-year-old who hasn’t been seen by his people in five years rule? Cogidubnus is also seen as a man who stood up to Rome before he was subdued by her; I on the other hand am seen as a man who voluntarily joined Rome’s legions.’

‘So you’ll go to Rome after you’ve ...’ A freshening gust cleared the fog around them, momentarily unveiling a burial mound not ten paces away to the left; the words died in Sabinus’ throat as the breeze blew the vapour back, shrouding the tomb once again but leaving its image burnt in his mind.

Dark murmurs and muttering came from the column behind – clearly he had not been the only one to witness the ill-omened sight. When he glanced back he saw more than a few of the troopers had their thumbs clutched in their right hands and were spitting on the ground to avert the evil-eye. A barked order from decurion Atilius brought his men back to order but the damage to their already fragile morale was done and they cast nervous looks to either side as the thinning fog billowed around them, fearful as to what it might reveal next. Amongst the Romans only Alienus seemed unruffled by travelling so close to the mound, which struck Sabinus as odd seeing as he had shown a natural disinclination to remain too long in the vicinity of the Lost Dead.

Another swirl in the fog, up ahead, drove that thought from Sabinus' mind; his heart skipped a beat. A giant's leg, solid and broad, appeared in their path as if the monster had taken a great step towards them and planted it there that instant – yet there had been no trembling of the earth and no booming report of the footstep. Then the second leg materialised through the miasma, equally silent. Shocked troopers hauled on their mounts' reins, causing many to rear and whinny, shattering the silence. Sabinus looked up in alarm; the lower torso was becoming visible but above the waist was still lost in the fog. Another leg on either side emerged; there were at least three of the monstrosities lined against them.

Sabinus drew his sword and glanced over his shoulder. 'Atilius, form two lines. Stay together!' he bellowed at his escort as panic mounted. Turning back to face the threat, he gasped; the breeze stiffened; more legs appeared to either side and they were all connected by one long lower abdomen that was not flesh and bone but stone – cut and shaped stone slabs of great magnitude. Sabinus realised that he was gazing at a henge, a stone henge; the biggest that he had seen.

Calming his horse he turned to the guide to find him missing. 'Shit! Alienus?' He could see no sign of the young tribune either. Behind him the decurion was managing to restore some order amongst the troopers. Then, to his left, Sabinus glimpsed two horses galloping away through the mist; as they disappeared,

spectral figures materialised, moving towards them, now visible, now not. He felt cold dread rise in his belly; that glimpse of movement had not been a figment of a wild imagination. He looked the other way; scores more of the ethereal shapes, indistinct in the eddying mist, seeming to glide over the veiled ground, were heading their way.

They were surrounded.

When the first slingshots cracked into the turma from both sides, Sabinus felt an illogical relief: it was not the Lost Dead that faced them but men, live men who could be fought and killed.

The screaming started; but it was bestial, not human. The slingers were aiming low, at the horses' legs; they had not come to deal out death, Sabinus realised, but to take captives.

'Atilius!' Sabinus roared, pointing his sword north, back the way they came. 'Our only chance is to ride through them together.'

Atilius yelled at his men to turn; the turma struggled to form line in the hail of shot thwacking in from both sides. Five horses were already down, writhing in shattered-bone agony, their dismounted riders, screaming, struggling to clamber up behind one of their comrades. Two more horses fell thrashing to the ground, hurling one trooper clear but crushing the other; he lay still, his head at an unnatural angle. The unseated man rose shakily to his feet to be punched back, with a sharp howl, arms flailing, body arched over buckled knees, crashing to the ground with a pulped hole where his nose had been.

Sabinus urged his mount forward. 'With me!' Risking the uneven ground he drove his horse into a canter; the surviving troopers followed, unsheathing their cavalry *spathæ* ready to cleave their way through their tormentors, who were now less than fifty paces away.

Another hail of slingshot scythed through their ranks, bringing down six horses, head first, their muzzles ploughing into the grass as their splintered forelegs collapsed beneath them; the riders cried to their comrades not to leave them behind. But their pleas were in vain.

A shot fizzed past Sabinus' knee; the slingers were still aiming low. He kicked his heels and slapped the flat of his blade hard on

his mount's rump; the beast burst into a gallop. The slingers turned and fled. Sabinus' heart raced, stimulated by hope. But in the instant that he thought they would run their attackers down a new terror sprang from the ground: a double line of spearmen, concealed until now, raised themselves up to kneel on one leg; each supported a long, ash-shafted boar-hunting spear, their butts wedged in the turf and the leaf-shaped, iron heads aimed at the horses' chests.

With no time to react, the turma ploughed into the bristling hedge of honed iron. The blades sliced into taut equine muscle, crunched through bone to burst into the cavity housing vital organs beyond. Blood, pressurised by huge hearts working to the limit, exploded from the ghastly rents in the beasts' chests as they impaled themselves, their momentum forcing in the spearheads until they came to a juddering, haft-bending halt on the iron crosspieces at their base.

Sabinus was flung forward onto his mount's neck, his red-plumed helmet spinning away over the enemy line. An instant later he was hurled back as the stricken animal reared, shrieking in agony, yanking the embedded spear from the grip of its blood-spattered wielder and cracking the skull of the man next to him as the beast twisted in its torment.

Landing with a lung-emptying crunch on his back, Sabinus just had the presence of mind to roll to one side as the dying horse crumpled onto its rump and then tumbled backwards, its legs scabbling weakly in the air as if it were trying to canter its last.

Sabinus pulled himself to his knees, gasping for breath, and felt his head crack; a white light streaked across his vision. As he faded into unconsciousness he realised the bitter irony of being led into a trap by a spy passing himself off as a Roman called 'Alienus'.

It was a scream that brought Sabinus back to consciousness: a scream of fear, not of pain. He opened his eyes but could see only thick stems of rough grass; he was on his belly, his hands fastened behind his back. His head throbbed. The scream stopped and he could hear a low chanting.

Trying to ease himself over, he felt his stomach churn and then convulse. A gush of thin vomit sprayed onto the grass; its sour taste lingered on his tongue and its reek, as it dribbled out of his nostrils, turned his insides again, forcing him to heave once more.

Breathing fast and shallow he forced himself onto his back, spitting out the residue of the noisome fluid. The fog had lifted and the sun was setting. He raised his head; he was within the henge. Blurred figures were moving around. The scream resumed, drowning the chant. One of the figures raised an arm, paused, and then brought it crashing down; the scream was abruptly curtailed, replaced by a long croaking gurgle and then silence.

He felt the temperature suddenly drop. Now his eyes had begun to focus he could make out the figures. They were filthy. Their hair, dishevelled and matted into clumps, fell halfway down their backs; their beards, twisted into strands, were equally long. They each wore a single, long-sleeved garment, belted at the waist and reaching their ankles, that may have at one time been white but now looked as if patches of mould and mildew had been allowed to fester on them for years.

Sabinus shivered and let his head slump back onto the grass with a groan; if there was one thing that he feared more than the spirits of this land, it was their servants: the druids.

‘You’re awake then, legate,’ a voice said with remarkable cheerfulness.

Sabinus turned to see Alienus walking towards him. ‘You treacherous little cunt!’

‘Hardly; to be treacherous you have to betray your own people. You can’t accuse me of that; I’m a prince of the Atrebates.’ Alienus squatted down next to him. ‘Not all of us have bowed the knee to Rome like my cowardly grandfather or my vainglorious cousin who has stolen my birthright and now rules in my place; they’ve brought shame to my people. Caradoc, or Caratacus as you call him, may have been my people’s enemy but he at least stands up to the invaders. He’s of our blood and would preserve our ways and our gods, and for that he deserves our support to throw you back into the sea.’

‘So that you can carry on your petty squabbles living on the fringes of the world?’

‘It may be the fringes of YOUR world, but this island is our whole world and before you came we were free to organise our lives according to our own laws and customs. Can you blame us for wanting to keep it that way?’

‘No, but you’re being impractical.’ Sabinus shivered again, his toes were frozen. ‘Rome has come to stay and you’ll cause the death of many of your people realising that.’

‘Not now that we have you.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Today is the spring equinox; the few survivors from your escort have wetted the altars of our gods with their blood in honour of the day – but not you. You’re the one we came for. We knew that to get you, it had to be before you went out on campaign. You wouldn’t have believed a summons from Plautius after.’

Sabinus’ teeth started to chatter as a deep chill crept up his legs. ‘How did you forge his seal?’

‘If you have access to documents with his seal intact on it then it’s not that difficult; you’ve got three months to work it out.’

‘What for? Why not just kill me now?’

‘Oh, you’re too precious for that. It would be a waste. The druids have decided that the most potent sacrifice to offer the gods on behalf of Caratacus – to strengthen him in his struggle – is a Roman legate.’ Alienus raised his eyebrows and pointed at Sabinus with a half-smile. ‘That would be you.’ He indicated with his head towards the druids who were standing in the golden rays of the setting sun that flooded through two of the arches in the henge to exactly illuminate the altar stone. ‘And Myrddin, the head of their order, who knows about these things, has decided that the most auspicious day and location for that sacrifice will be the summer solstice in the grove of the sacred springs.’

Sabinus looked over to the druids as they continued their chant and realised that no heat was coming off the sun’s rays but, rather, a cold power, filled with malice, emanated from the group, chilling its way up him like a series of freezing breaths; and

yet Alienus seemed unaffected. Sabinus' mind started to slow, rendering it incapable of questioning. His eyes began to frost over; with a final effort he spat a weak globule of vomit-tainted saliva into the spy's face. 'I'll be gone by then. My brother will come for me.'

Alienus wiped his cheek with the back of his hand, smiling without humour. 'Don't worry, Myrddin wants me to ensure that he does come and that he brings his doomed legion with him. I think you'll agree that two legates would be much more powerful than one; and a brace of brothers would be the most potent sacrifice to win the gods' favour for the army that Caratacus is now assembling. And Myrddin always gets what he wants.'

Sabinus' vision went white as the coldness settled on his heart; he felt a malevolent presence draw him away from consciousness and he screamed until he was deafened. But no sound emerged from his frozen lips.