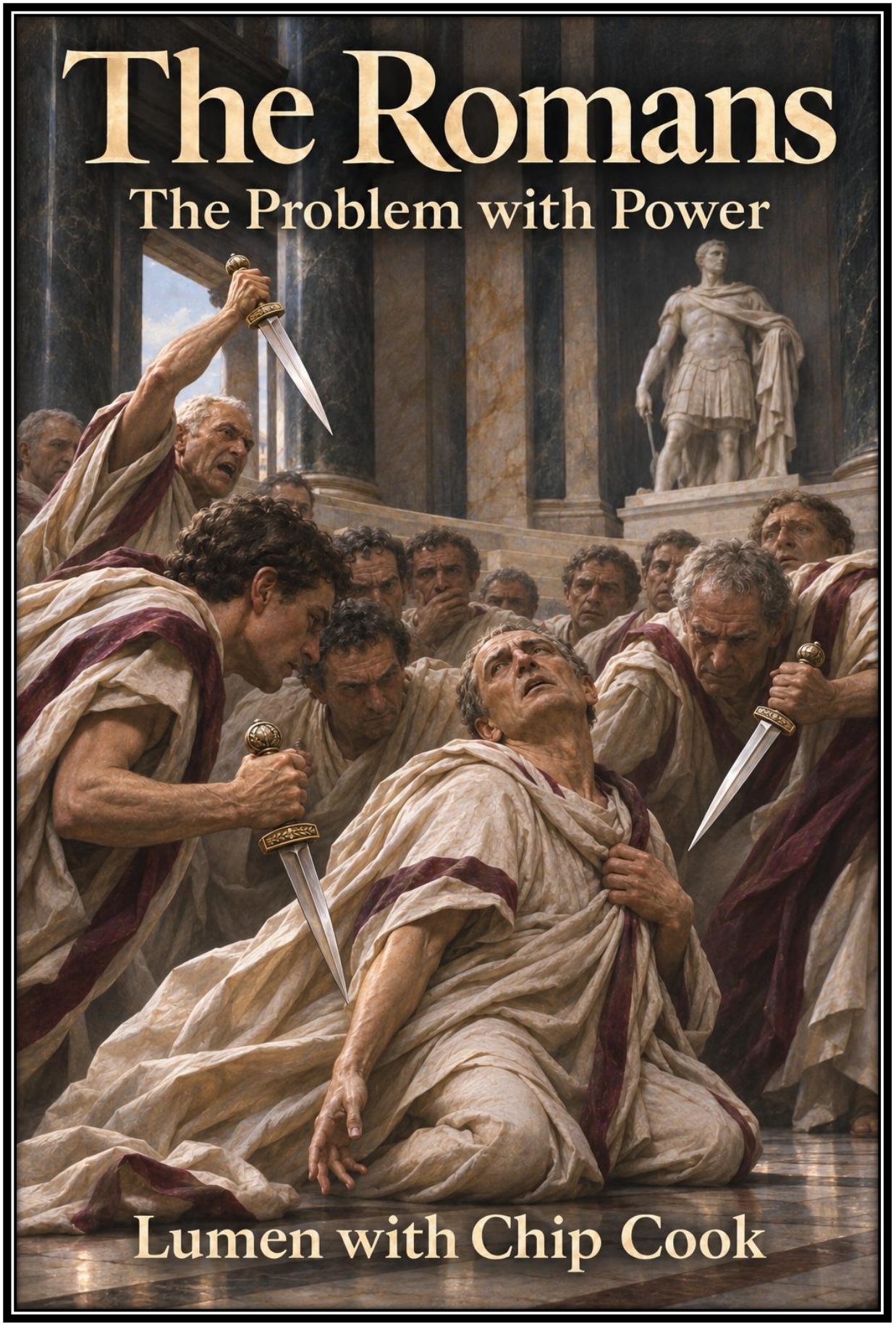

The Romans
The Problem with Power
Lumen with Chip Cook

The Romans

The Problem with Power

ROOTS OF IMAGINATION • BOOK FOURTEEN

Lumen with Chip Cook

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Two Maps

Lumen had come back from Britain with a gate on her mind. It was an ordinary gate, with a worn latch and a lower rail that dragged in wet weather. A Roman surveyor had told the farmer to move it. The farmer had asked where, and the surveyor had pointed across the field.

“What I want to know,” she said, “is who gave him the right to point.”

“Rome,” said the Professor.

Hakan set down his cup. “Which Roman?”

The Professor had been halfway to the cupboard with a stack of maps. He returned to the table. Lumen made room by setting his saucer on top of his notebook.

He unfolded Greece first. A crease ran through the mountains as though someone had improved them with a knife. Lumen knew some of this country already. A short journey on paper might take a long day on foot. A boat could sometimes do more to bring two towns together than a road could. The Greeks had built communities with their own governments, and they had found plenty of reasons to work together. They had also found reasons to make their neighbors work for them.

Hakan opened the other map. In central Italy he put a finger on the Tiber and moved it slowly toward the sea.

“More room to grow food,” he said. “And a river to move it.”

“Also more people already living there,” said Lumen.

The Professor looked from one map to the other. Italy had mountains too, and the plains around Rome had belonged to communities with their own interests. A crossing could bring buyers and sellers together. It could also give whoever held it a say in what passed. He reached for a pencil so he could draw a circle around the place.

Lumen put her finger in the middle. “Let's go before you've made everything Roman.”



What Rome Learned

The bronze vessel was nearly finished. The woman holding it wanted her visitor to see a fault where the light caught the rim. He said he could scarcely see it. She turned the vessel a little.

“Now?”

“Now I can see two.”

She gave him a look of genuine pleasure. He had learned something after all.

From the street came a cart with a wheel that squealed once each turn. The bronze worker knew the man who drove it and how far away he was by the sound. She called to her apprentice to fetch the scrap he had set aside for the repair. The visitor asked whether they intended to charge for the work.

“He brought me charcoal last winter,” she said. “I charged him then.”

They had gone to a city of the Etruscans, north of Rome. The Professor had brought the names of kings. Lumen had gone straight to the workshop. Hakan wanted to know how the metalworker had learned where to put her thumb when she turned a piece toward the light.

Outside, the visitor turned out to have come from Rome. He wanted to order a vessel of his own. He pointed to a decoration that pleased him, then asked whether she could make it cheaper by leaving part of it off. She said she could make it cheaper by making less of it and showed him a smaller vessel. They were still discussing the difference when the cart arrived.

Rome's later stories remembered kings with Etruscan names and celebrated the expulsion of the last king. The Professor told the story of the expulsion as the Romans had handed it down, and left room for what the early evidence could actually tell them. The cities he called Etruscan had their own lives. Roman families could adopt forms of dress, religious practices, or ways of making things from neighbors and go on speaking of those neighbors as enemies when it suited them.

At home, Lumen drew the vessel in the margin of his map. The Professor observed that it was badly out of proportion.

“Can you see the fault on the rim?” she asked.

“That's all I can see.”

“Good. Then it's the right vessel.”



Who Gets Heard

A farmer came to Rome to speak to a man who had promised to speak for him. He was early and stood in the wrong place. By the time he found the right place, the man was late.

“What will you say when he comes?” Lumen asked.

He showed her the line on his tablet. A local official had counted his household for an obligation he thought it had already met. He needed someone with influence to look into it. The tablet would help him remember the words he had practiced. It would be of little use if he couldn't get near the man.

The Professor showed Lumen where people were going. Rome had magistrates and a Senate and assemblies. It had offices whose holders could obstruct one another, and tribunes who in certain circumstances could intervene for citizens. There were rules about who could vote and how votes were counted. A man could possess a right in Rome and still need the means to get there and the leisure to wait.

“Who’s watching your field?” Lumen asked.

“My sister,” the farmer said. “She told me to come back with something better than a promise.”

By noon he caught sight of the man he wanted. The man saw him and raised a hand. He meant to indicate that he remembered him. The farmer took it to mean come here. The misunderstanding carried him halfway through a knot of better-dressed men before anyone could stop him. Then he began to speak, and the man, with everybody looking on, had to listen for a little while.

Back in Monhegan, Hakan asked what had happened to the obligation.

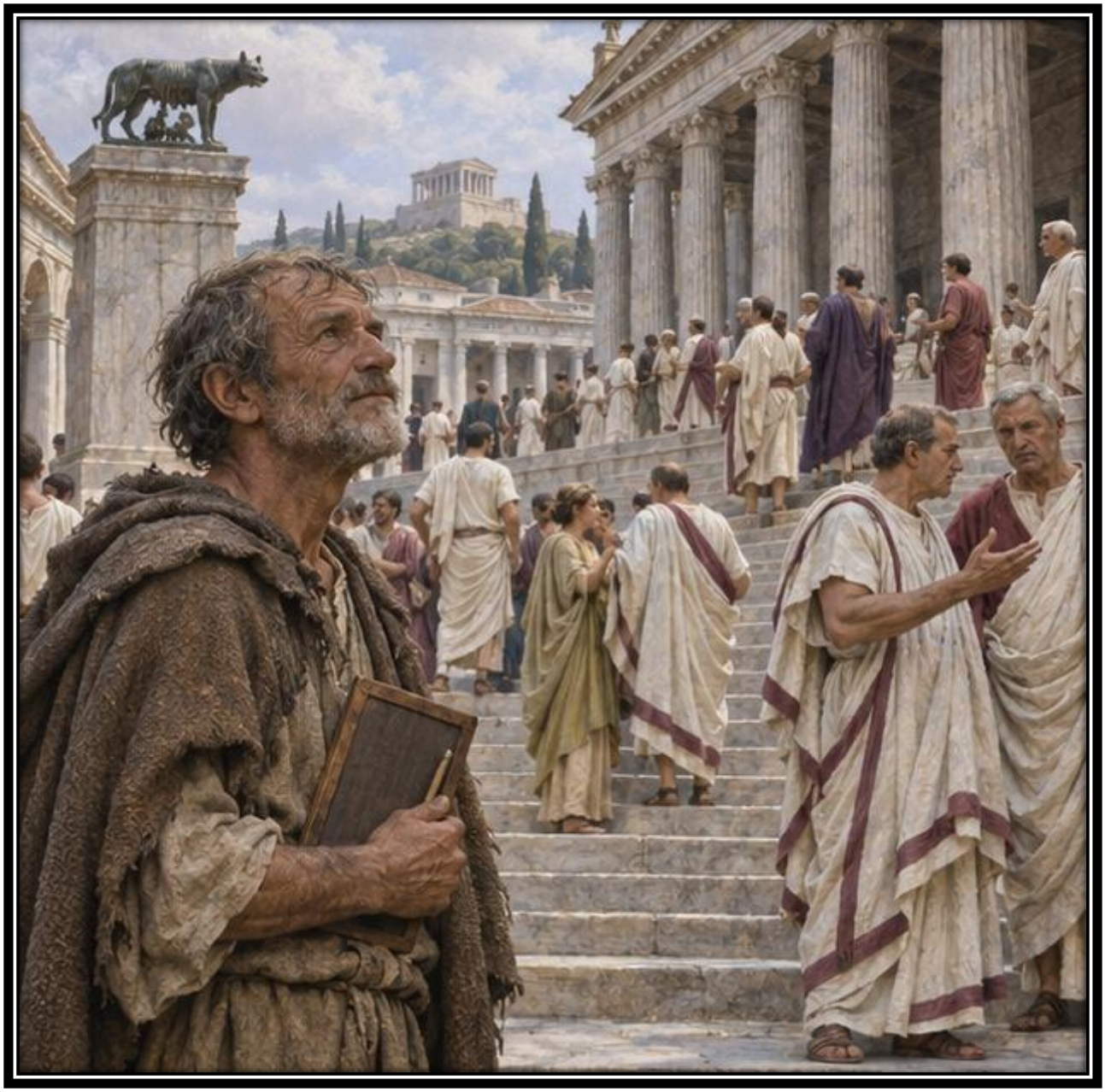
“We left before they settled it,” the Professor said.

“You went all the way to Rome and left before the answer?”

“We'd seen how the Republic worked.”

Lumen put her drawing of the farmer’s tablet beside the map.

“We'd seen how he got a hearing,” she said. “I still want to know what he took home to his sister.”



Across from Carthage

One jar in the row had a hairline crack. The woman tallying cargo marked it and told a man not to load it. He lifted it anyway and came back a moment later with wine seeping down his wrist.

"You could have believed me from over there," she said.

"I could hardly hear you from over there."

"You heard me say not to load it."

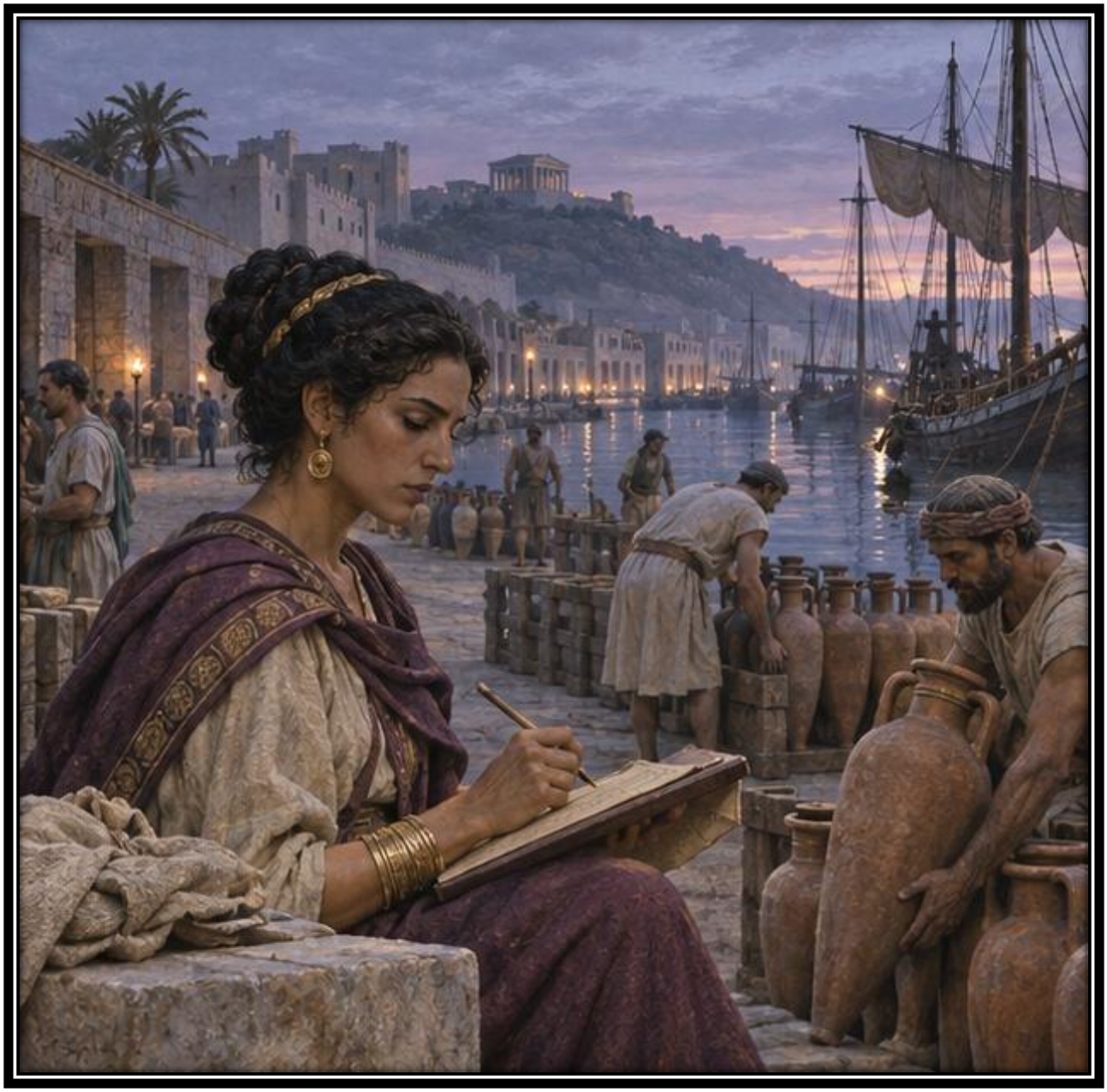
He looked down at his arm. There was very little he could say that would improve the evidence.

The ship was leaving Carthage. Some of the men loading her had been born close enough to walk to the quay that morning. Others knew this harbor by where they could buy bread and where the water was good. A merchant came to ask when his cargo would be ready. The woman told him it would be ready whenever he brought her a jar that would hold it. The merchant went away to involve someone else.

Carthage had its own council, magistrates, and wealthy families. Its ships belonged to a network of ports that had grown over generations. Even people working beside one another at this quay could have divided opinions about what Carthage owed to another city and what that city owed in return. The Professor had spoken before they arrived as if Carthage and Rome had been making their way toward war all along. Now he had to stand out of the way while people moved baskets, checked a line, and set terms for taking goods across water. He changed his mind about where to begin the story. He began with Sicily, where interests collided and the first war between the two powers took hold. Later came another war, this time with Carthage able to draw on power in Iberia and send an army into Italy.

"What did those wars look like from here?" Lumen asked.

From where she stood she could see a family waiting for a boat to finish loading. One of them wanted to say something to a man who was already aboard. Every time the man looked across, somebody between them needed him to move. At last the family raised a hand, and he raised his. The next thing he did was look for a place to put down his bundle.



After Cannae

At the gate of a southern Italian town, one man still expected his nephew to come home. His neighbor had stopped expecting his own son three days before. They made room beside them for a woman who had heard that an army was coming down the road. She had walked out to see which army.

The man who expected his nephew said it was time to talk to Hannibal. They had done what Rome asked. They had sent men. What Rome could claim of them now seemed to him a question that at least deserved an answer.

His neighbor asked what Hannibal would want in exchange for leaving their town alone.

“Ask him,” the first man said.

“And when Rome asks what we said?”

Both were quiet then. The woman said she had come to see whether anyone from the town was coming home. She was prepared to wait out there till dark, if either of them wanted to wait with her. The first man sat beside her. A little later the other man sat too.

Hannibal had crossed the Alps and defeated a Roman army at Cannae. Some Italian communities went over to him. Enough remained with Rome for it to keep fighting. The Professor had intended to explain why Rome's alliances mattered. He had drawn lines to all the places that still sent men or supplies. In the empty space between two lines, Lumen drew the gate.

“You think they stayed because they trusted Rome,” she said.

“Some may have.”

“And some were afraid Rome would come back.”

“Some were afraid Hannibal would stay.”

Hakan took the pencil. “The woman was looking for one man on the road, and here we are giving the entire town a reason.”

In the end Hannibal would be recalled to Africa. Rome’s Scipio defeated him at Zama in 202 BC. Carthage survived that defeat. The Professor paused over that point. There were people born after the second war who grew up and got old before Rome destroyed the city in the third.

Lumen remembered the woman who had found the crack in the jar. She was tempted to put her on the quay on the day of the destruction. Then she counted the years and saw what she had done. The place could be the same and hold none of the people she remembered. Lumen went back to her drawing and made the opening beneath the gate a little wider. At the bottom she put a line for the road, then took it out. The men outside had been close enough to see dust coming from miles away. She wanted to leave them as much of that distance as she could.



Spartacus

The man who owned the farm knew that two people had disappeared between the evening meal and the shutting of the gate. He asked the woman at the doorway if she knew where they had gone. She said she had been putting her child to sleep. This was true.

He told the visitor beside him that people made slavery sound worse than it was. If the people on his farm truly found their lives intolerable, he said, they would choose death. The fact that they wanted to live seemed to satisfy him.

The woman waited for the men to go. Then she lifted the latch and stood a moment in the doorway. Her brother had promised to wait for her on the road. He had said she could bring the child if she could keep him quiet. He had no children. He thought this was an offer she could use.

She went back and touched her son's hair. There was a little patch at the back where he sweated in his sleep. She lifted him and felt him settle into her shoulder. She had carried him many times like this from one place to another, and the weight of him was a thing she could judge exactly. What she couldn't judge was how far she could get before daylight, or whether there would be anywhere for him to sleep when she stopped.

She went out to the road long enough to tell her brother to go. She asked him where he would be when it was safe to come after him. He hadn't thought that far. They stood together without speaking until the child stirred. Then the brother went.

The Professor told Hakan what the slaveholder had said. Hakan asked whether he had said it in front of her. When the Professor said yes, Hakan had to put his cup down.

The revolt had begun among gladiators who escaped from Capua. Spartacus became one of its leaders. People joined from far beyond the original band. Roman writers record armies and commanders and the reprisals after the rebels were defeated. Lumen thought of the two people who had stood on the road. She tried to imagine the brother at the first place he could stop. Then she went back to the woman. Her son was asleep again. She was still awake.



Italy • 49 BC

The Rubicon

The youngest man in the file had been told to keep his feet dry if he could. Everybody who told him this had already stepped in water. He stood at the edge of the low bank and watched the first men go through.

He could see the road back. Its wheel ruts held a little rain. There was nothing about the road to tell him that if he went the way he had been ordered, it would take him into a war against other Romans.

The general was Julius Caesar. In Gaul, men had followed him far from home. At this river the question was whether a commander could bring his army into Italy against the authority arrayed against him in Rome. Caesar could give the order. The young man had to take a step.

At home the Professor told Lumen the stories about what Caesar said before crossing. She let him give her two versions. Then she asked what the young man said.

“Nothing that anyone wrote down,” the Professor replied.

The road behind him led toward years in which he had learned to obey and had perhaps learned to expect that Caesar would see to him afterward. The road ahead was hardly different to look at. He took the step, felt cold water in one shoe, and went on.



Rome • 44 BC

The Ides

A man carrying a message to a senator arrived at the meeting place too late to give it to him. The men on the steps were looking the wrong way for anyone who expected a meeting to be starting. He asked whether the Senate had risen. One man told him to go home.

Inside the Curia of Pompey, the conspirators had surrounded Caesar. He had won his civil war and accepted a dictatorship without a term. Men who feared one ruler could take everything from them had made a decision about what they could take from him. By the time the messenger reached the door, Caesar was on the floor.

Lumen waited on the steps. A senator she had seen going in came past her with an odd, careful gait. He had perhaps expected the crowd to have a question for him. The people nearest him moved aside. The messenger tried to see if this was his man. He was not.

The Professor wanted to know what the conspirators believed would happen after Caesar's death. The ancient writers let him hear something of that. Lumen was more interested in what the frightened men on the steps were to do that afternoon.

Back at the table, he pointed to Rome on the map. “The Republic is still here after Caesar dies.”

“Who can make its rules hold?” she asked.

Outside, the messenger went the long way home to avoid a crowd he could hear gathering. He still had his message. He would be asked for it in the morning by the man who had sent him. He spent the walk trying to think what he would say.



An imagined aftermath in the Curia of Pompey. Plutarch places Caesar's fall at Pompey's statue.

Peace Secured by Victory

A father had lifted his daughter so she could see the figures carved on the Altar of Peace. She could see a child in the procession and wanted to know whether the child on the wall had also been lifted up. Her father said the child had probably been told to stand still for so long that, by the time the stonecutters were done, she would have been quite glad to walk.

The man had been a boy during the civil wars. His mother used to listen at night for footsteps and tell him they were somebody going home. Sometimes they were. When he said he was glad the wars were over, Lumen believed him.

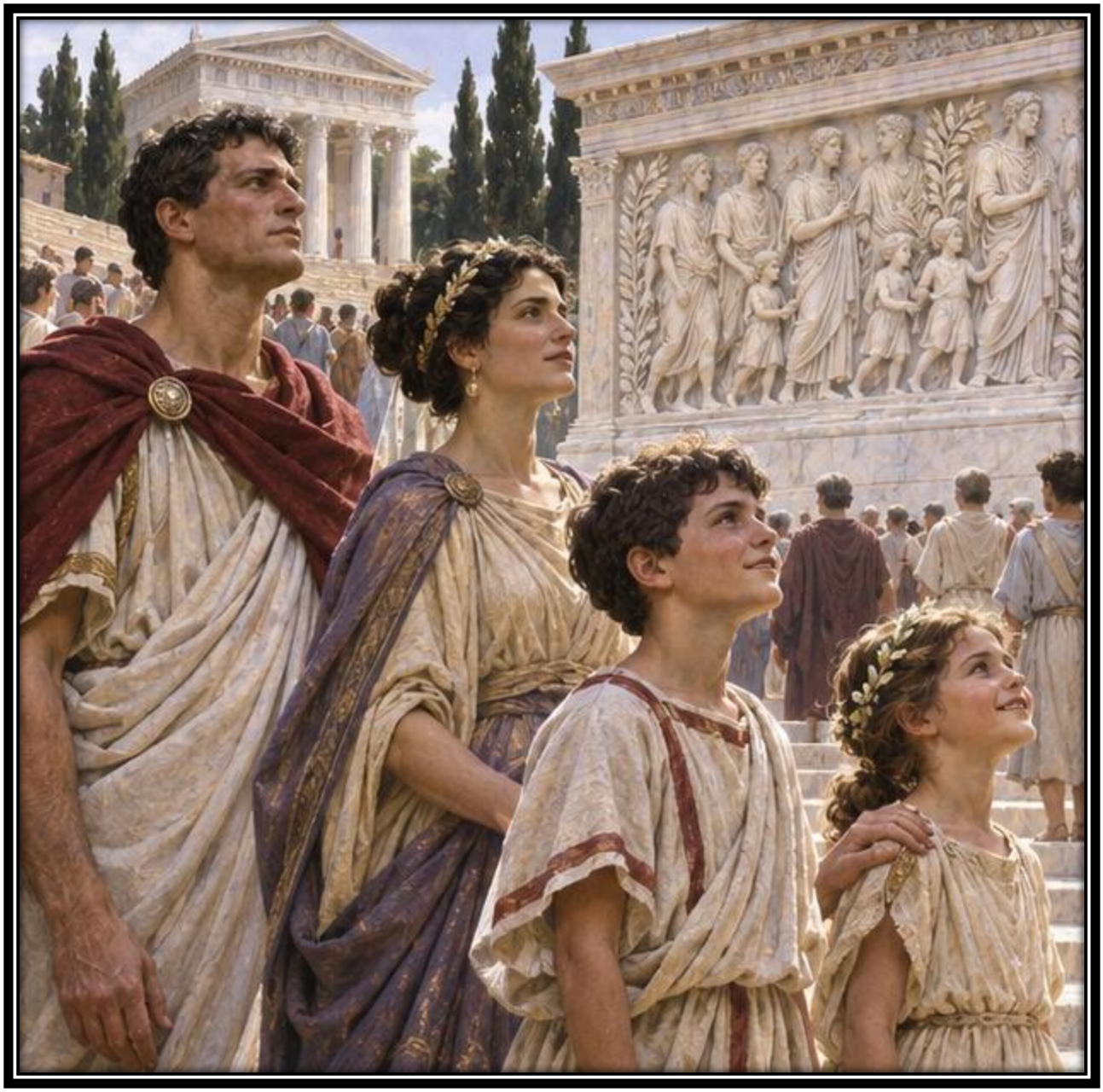
The story from the Senate steps to the altar took years. The Professor laid it out while Hakan cut bread. Caesar's heir Octavian had joined Antony and Lepidus in a triumvirate. Their enemies were publicly named and hunted. That alliance defeated Caesar's killers and came apart in turn. At Actium, Octavian's side defeated Antony and Cleopatra. By the time the Senate gave him the name Augustus, the man who could offer peace had already shown what he was willing to do to win it. Augustus kept familiar offices and returned business to the Senate, while keeping control of the provinces where most of the legions were stationed. In the street the father had needed no lesson in those powers to know what it meant to stop listening for footsteps. The Senate voted the altar after his return from Spain and Gaul. In the account he left of his own achievements, he said that peace won by victory had allowed the gates of Janus to be closed. Hakan read the passage aloud in Monhegan and paused at the point where the two things came together.

"He has a good reason to be glad," the Professor said. "His mother spent years listening for footsteps. I wouldn't ask him to give up a night's sleep to prove a point about the Senate."

"I understand him too," Lumen said. "I want to know who can tell Augustus he's wrong and go home to his children afterward."

"I don't know who could," he said. "I still think the peace was worth something." Lumen nodded. She had asked who could speak, and he had answered as far as he could. The father's relief was still there between them. After a while the Professor asked whether he had set his daughter down.

"Yes," she said. "When he knew she could see."



Caligula

A senator rose with a sentence in mind. While he waited his turn, he discovered he could make it half as long without changing its meaning. He took out another word. That left so little he could no longer tell whether he was still going to say it.

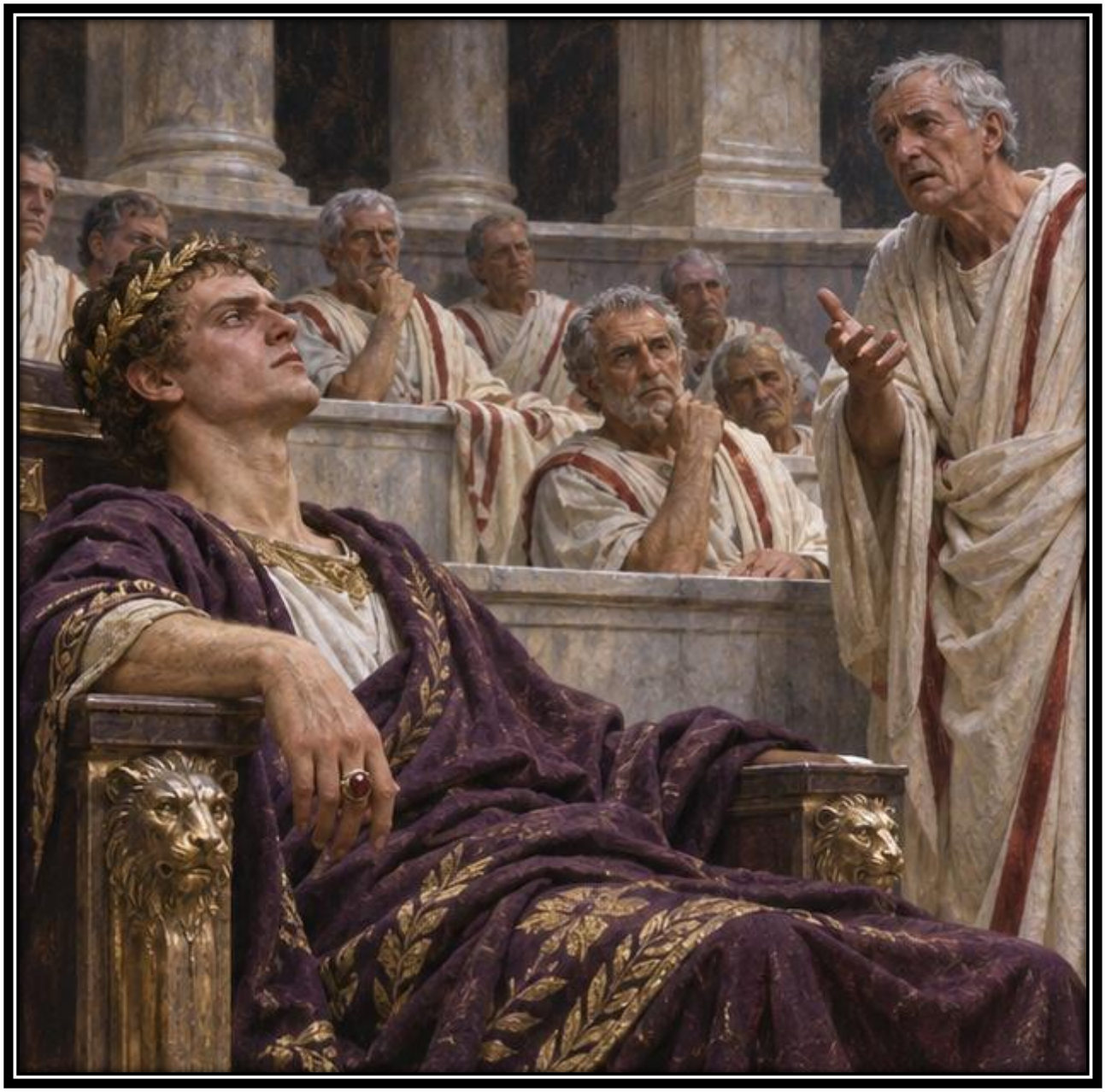
Caligula sat where the senator could see his face. The senator had known the faces of men with power before. He had once sat on a committee where the other men disagreed with him freely. He could sometimes catch the eye of the one most likely to help. Now he caught himself looking at only one face. The man beside him noticed, which made the two of them look away from one another.

The Professor had read stories of Caligula's extravagant and humiliating behavior. Some were told long after the reign. He could show Lumen the passages, but she wanted to see something that would be difficult to put in a book afterward. She waited for the senator to speak.

He said that he was in agreement.

On the stairs afterward another man said there had been nothing to agree to yet. The senator put up both hands. They went down the stairs together and by the bottom were talking about a third man's health.

Caligula was murdered. The soldiers of the imperial guard backed Claudius. The Professor told Hakan that an emperor could be removed and the next decision still turn on where the armed men chose to stand. Hakan asked whether there was a record of what the senator had come to say. Lumen said no. Then she thought that, by the time the man had gone home, he might have been unable to say himself what his first sentence had been.



Nero

The woman sat in the street holding a key. Her daughter asked why she had brought it. She said she had been holding it when they left. It was heavy enough that she kept changing hands.

A man passed with a story about who had started the fire. The woman asked him whether he knew where there was water. He pointed the way he had come, then looked back and said he had meant the other way. The daughter went a few steps with him. He gave her his place in the queue when they reached it.

Years separated Caligula’s death from that morning. Claudius had ruled between the two, and Rome had invaded Britain during his reign. Now Nero ruled. Tacitus tells of measures Nero took to help after the fire, and of rumors that blamed him. He also describes the punishment of Christians, onto whom Nero directed blame. The child's mother knew none of that when she sat down on the stone. She could see smoke. Each time someone offered her a story, she looked past him to see whether her daughter was coming back.

Lumen wanted to know how long the rumor would last. The Professor said it would still be told when the key had rusted away. Then he told her about the people who had been punished. She asked whether the woman in the street would ever know which stories were used against them. He said he didn't know.

Her daughter returned with a little water in a bowl. The woman drank half and handed it back. The girl took the key from her other hand and put it down between them. Neither of them had any use for it. They kept it where they could see it.



The Far Road

The gate was still there. Lumen found the farmer lifting it by the bottom rail with his foot. He had to put his shoulder to the upper rail to make the latch sit down.

The surveyor had come back. He could show where the line on his instructions met the ground. He did so twice. The farmer asked what happened when it rained hard, and the new position put the gate in the part of the field where the cattle sank to the fetlocks. The surveyor said the road would have a ditch. The farmer said the field already had one.

The two men walked as far as the ditch. The surveyor could see that the farmer was right about the low ground. He could also see where the line went. He looked back along it and asked how many days a man would need to move the gate.

“To your mark, or to where it belongs?”

“My mark,” said the surveyor. Then, after looking down again, he asked the farmer to show him his place.

A road could take a letter quickly across country that a man once had to cross with local help. It could take a cart to market. It could take soldiers to ground they had never seen. In the kitchen the Professor said that all three things were worth remembering. Lumen asked if the farmer could refuse. The Professor said he could argue over the position.

“Then that's what he has,” said Lumen. She put a small gate on the map. It was farther along the line than she would have put it yesterday. She left the latch loose in the drawing so the two men could still move it if they found a better spot.

Hakan found the lower Danube on another sheet. Rome under Trajan had taken Dacia across that river. He then ran his finger east toward Syria and south to Egypt. There were places on the map that had once been powerful kingdoms in their own right. Lumen asked how many rooms in Rome it took to decide what happened in all those places. The surveyor had needed only one instruction to move one gate. He and the farmer had needed the better part of a morning to discover where it could go.



Rome • Late second century AD

Commodus

The attendant in the arena passage had a broom and three orders. He was to clear the passage. He was to stay where somebody could find him. He was to keep out of sight when the emperor appeared. He managed the first two by working as far as the last patch of shadow and stopping there.

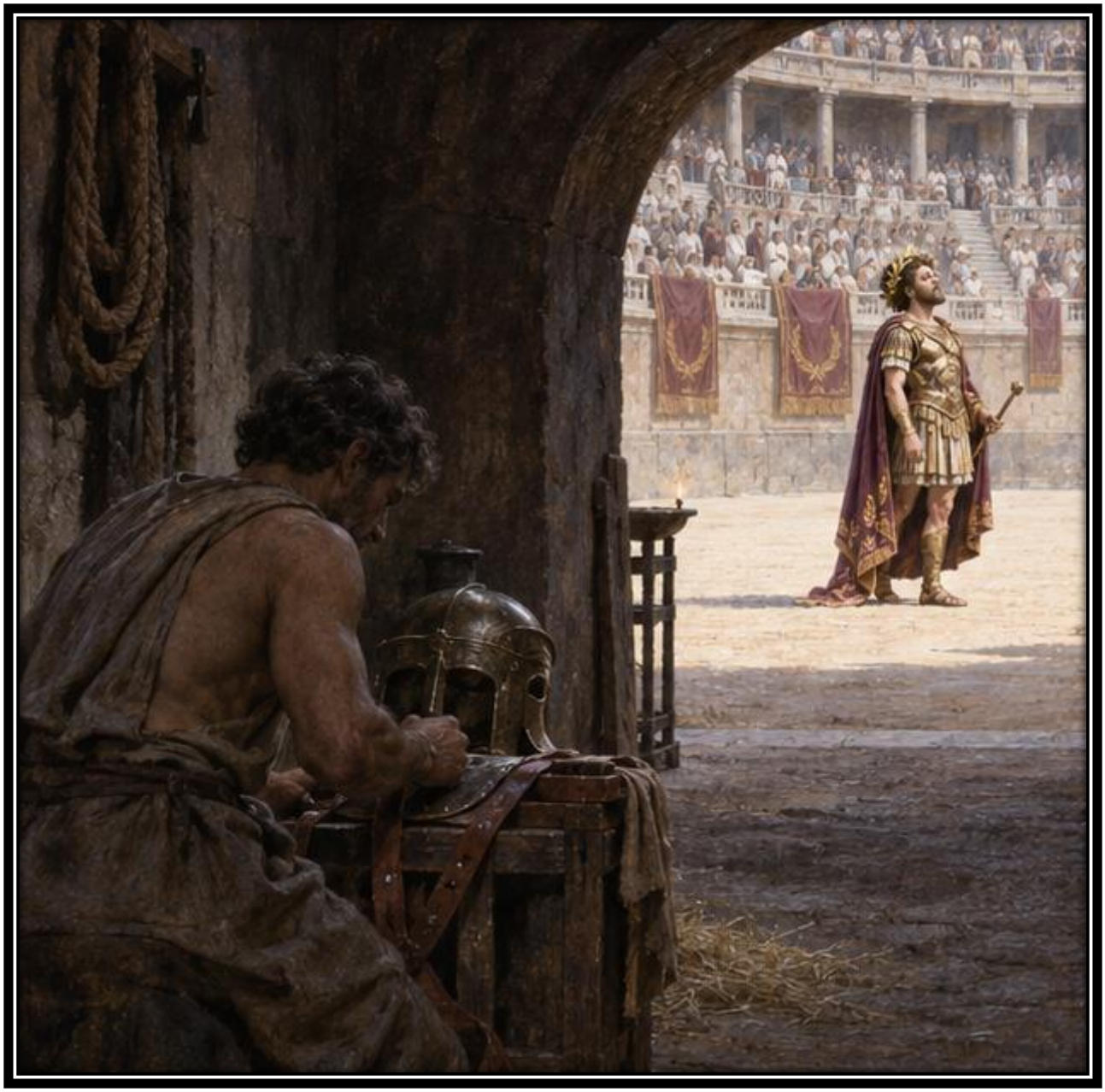
The sound from the arena came into the passage before the light did. Commodus liked to appear before the public in the arena. A senator in the crowd could see other senators out of the corners of his eyes. An attendant could see whether their feet were planted to rise. No two men were quite sure when the rest would begin to applaud.

The Professor had read Cassius Dio's account of watching the emperor perform. Dio was a senator, writing about a man who expected the rank of emperor to turn whatever he did into something others must admire. Lumen wanted to see the man with the broom. He had practiced disappearing so well that even the Professor took a moment to find him.

“What was he afraid of?” Hakan asked when they came back.

“Being noticed before he knew what he was supposed to have done,” Lumen said.

One evening Commodus was killed. The people who had run his household began to deal with the consequences before people elsewhere understood he was dead. Lumen thought again of the attendant. She imagined him coming to work and standing in the same shadow. Until someone told him otherwise, it was still the best place he knew.



An Emperor for How Long

After Commodus's death in AD 192, rival emperors fought for the throne. Septimius Severus prevailed and founded a dynasty. Its last emperor was killed in 235. The clerk opened his tablets during the later upheaval, after people had again had time to get used to orders coming from one place. A courier came in after dark with news that made the clerk pull a tablet from under the one he had been using. He asked whether the new emperor had confirmed the appointment on the bottom tablet. The courier said his instructions were to tell him who the emperor was.

"I'll need to pay the men who brought the grain."

"Yes," said the courier. "I should think you would."

The clerk could not tell whether the courier's ignorance was genuine. He went to bring the man something to eat, since he knew how long a ride he had had. When he returned, the courier was asleep. The clerk put down the bowl and began to scratch out the name at the head of the letter, then stopped. The old name might still be the right one when the letter reached the other end.

Across the third century, civil conflict and rival claims to the throne repeatedly strained the empire. There were invasions and incursions and competing authorities. There were also people who kept accounts, reopened roads, and found ways to keep supplies moving while they waited for better instructions. Diocletian eventually divided the work of ruling among four emperors. After more civil wars, Constantine became sole emperor and gave the empire a new capital at Constantinople. There were stretches of the story in which a Roman official could expect his orders to hold from one year to the next. By the time Gothic families came to the Danube, the eastern emperor was Valens. A man in his position could say yes from a distance. Everything that yes meant would have to be worked out between people who could see the opposite bank.

At the table Hakan asked the Professor whether one man on the throne had been the problem. The Professor said he could think of years in which several men trying to sit on it had been worse. Lumen took the courier's bowl out of the picture she had made in her notebook. Then she drew it back in. She wanted to remember that the clerk had known how to do one thing while he waited for an answer about all the others.



The Other Bank

The woman had packed a small pot inside a larger one. At the water she took the packing out to see whether either had cracked. A child stood between her and the river, watching a boat go over. He had already asked twice whether they were going home. The first time she had told him to hold the bundle. The second time she said she would tell him when she knew.

The arrival of the Huns had driven people from their homes. The family traveled with the Tervingi, the Gothic group whose leaders asked Valens for permission to cross into the Roman Empire. Across the river there were soldiers, men taking orders, and men who could decide whether today's orders applied to the next boat. Valens had said yes to their group. At the landing that answer took the form of a man lifting his arm when there was room.

“Who told him he could let them in?” Lumen asked.

The Professor looked at Hakan. Hakan was watching the boy. The boy had learned which people were going to be called before his family. Each time a bundle was picked up, he moved his own forward a little as though it were already his turn.

Ammianus would tell how food ran short after the crossing and Roman officials exploited the people they had admitted. Two years later the consequences would reach Adrianople. The woman who checked the pots knew she had carried them a long way. She knew they had both survived. When the man on the landing raised his arm, she put the smaller pot back inside the larger one and called the child to come with her.

In Monhegan the Professor turned the map toward himself. Lumen had expected him to put it away. Instead, he turned it until the bank they had been calling the far side was nearest them.

“There,” said Hakan, and put down his cup. “Now we can see where they arrived.”



Historical Notes

The two maps. Greek terrain favored many regional centers. Greek communities were connected through trade, colonization and political alliances. Rome's central Italian setting offered access to farmland and river traffic. Rome extended control through warfare, treaties, colonies and different grants of rights. Geography supplies the setting for these choices.

Etruria and the Republic. Etruscan cities preceded and overlapped Roman expansion, and Roman material and religious culture drew on Etruscan practices. The stories of early Roman kings and the expulsion of Tarquin come down through later accounts. Polybius, writing in the second century BC, describes the Republic through consuls, Senate and people. The farmer and his hearing are fictional.

Carthage and the Punic Wars. The three wars took place in 264–241, 218–201, and 149–146 BC. Hannibal crossed the Alps in the second war and defeated the Romans at Cannae in 216. Some Italian allies defected. Rome retained enough of its alliance network to carry on and ultimately defeated Hannibal at Zama in 202. Rome destroyed Carthage in the third war. The harbor scene and the town at the gate are imagined.

Slavery and Spartacus. Appian and Plutarch wrote about the revolt of 73–71 BC long after it happened. The landowner's defense of slavery is invented. A later Roman parallel is Seneca, Moral Letters 77.14–15. Seneca uses the story of a captured Spartan boy who chooses death over enslavement in a Stoic argument about freedom. The episode does not document a general Roman belief that survival implied consent. In Letter 47 he urges humane treatment while leaving the institution in place. The woman, her brother and her child are fictional.

Caesar and Augustus. Caesar crossed the Rubicon in 49 BC and was assassinated in 44 BC. Accounts differ on the details and his words. The fighting continued. Octavian defeated Antony and Cleopatra's forces at Actium in 31 BC and received the title Augustus in 27 BC. Augustus's own account links the closing of the gates of Janus to peace obtained through victory. The Altar of Augustan Peace was voted in 13 BC.

The imperial court. Ancient authors including Suetonius, Josephus, Tacitus, and Cassius Dio give different kinds of testimony and often write with a view to the emperor's reputation. Tacitus leaves the cause of the Great Fire of AD 64 uncertain. Dio was a senator who describes Commodus in the arena. The senator, family and arena attendant in the narrative are imagined.

From Britain to the Danube. The gate and surveyor are fictional. Rome invaded Britain in AD 43 under Claudius, and its control developed unevenly. The third-century crisis strained the empire, and Diocletian and Constantine reshaped its government. In AD 376, with groups under pressure from the Huns, Valens admitted the Tervingi across the Danube. Ammianus distinguishes them from other Gothic groups seeking entry. Ammianus recounts the exploitation and failures that followed. The family in the crossing scene is fictional. The battle of Adrianople followed in 378.

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