
THE CHRONICLE OF

FREDERICUS

Legionary of Gallia

19 days in the Roman world

Anno IV, Reign of Augustus

Legio Aeterna



Salt spray hangs heavy over the port of Massilia, sharp and clean against the distant reek of fish guts and seaweed baking on the sun-warmed stone quays. Galleys from Italia and triremes with the patched sails of coastal traders line the inner basin, their masts a leafless forest against the sky. You hear the creak of ropes, the shouts of Greek stevedores unloading amphorae of olive oil onto the docks, the rhythmic thunk of a caulking hammer somewhere. Your legionary's eye notes the low walls of the Heptastadion, the practical harbor defenses maintained in good order, but also the lax posture of the port guards leaning on their spears in the shade. This far west, the weight of Rome feels different, less marble, more rough-hewn limestone.

A knot of men has gathered before a notice board near the fish market, a slab of pale wood nailed to a column. An older man in a salt-stained tunic points a calloused finger at the fresh ink. "They'll not find anyone willing to take that road for less than a hundred," he grumbles to the man beside him. "Bandits growing bold as wolves up near the pass. Tribunus wants a detachment from the garrison to clear them, but the garrison's stretched thinner than a widow's soup." He spits on the cobbles. "Any fool with a sword and sense could make some coin, if they're fool enough." The market crowd flows around them, haggling over baskets of mussels and strings of onions.



As you push through the crowd, a freshly posted notice on the tabularium wall catches your eye.

The notice is written in both Latin and Greek, ink still dark and wet at the edges. It bears

the seal of the local tribunus: a crude wolf's head stamped in red wax. The text is plain and direct, no flourishes, no rhetoric. "Wanted: armed men to escort grain wagons from Nemausus to Massilia. Three wagons, heavily loaded. Bandits have struck twice on the Via Domitia between the Rhodanus and the Druentia. Pay: 50 denarii per man upon delivery. Report to Praefectus Aulus Vibennius at the western gate before dawn." Beneath it, someone has scratched in charcoal: "He'll take anyone with a blade and breath." You feel the weight of your gladius at your side, the familiar grip of duty tightening.



You make your way to the recruiting station, the words scrawled on the wall echoing in your mind.

Aulus Vibennius stands just inside the western gate, one hand resting on the hilt of his gladius, the other holding a wax tablet smeared with names. His armor is old but well-maintained, the bronze of his galea dulled by sun and salt. A centurio's vine staff leans against the wall beside him. He eyes you as you approach, lingers on your lorica hamata, the set of your shoulders, the way your hand rests near your sword. "Another volunteer," he mutters, not looking up. "Let me guess, fresh from the levy, eager to earn your first pay, and you think bandits are like straw dummies on a training field?" He flips the tablet. "Name?"

When you give it, he scratches it down with a stylus. "Fredericus. Gaulish, yes? Well, Gauls fight hard when they've got a reason. You'll need one. The last escort lost two men and half a wagon near the river crossing. Bandits don't care if you're Roman-born or not, they'll gut you just the same." He hands you a chit stamped with the praefectus's seal. "Be at the staging ground outside Nemausus by dawn tomorrow. Speak to Decimus the wagon-master. Fail to show, or lose the grain, and you'll not work for me again. Understood?" He turns to the next man in line without waiting for your answer.



You nod, though he hasn't waited for your response, and fall into step beside the other men as they head out.



The road winds inland through scrubland and rocky outcrops, the scent of wild thyme and dry earth replacing the salt of the coast. For three days you've walked, your caligae grinding on the worn stones of the Via Domitia, the sun beating down by day, the cold seeping through your cloak at night. You passed a shepherd tending gaunt sheep on a hillside, his dog barking once as you neared, and a broken-down wagon half-buried in dust, its owner long gone. No sign of bandits yet, but the silence feels thick, watchful. Then, just after midday, you crest a low rise and see it: a crumbling villa rustica set back from the road, half-swallowed by brambles and ivy. The roof has caved in over the atrium, but the walls stand, the foundation solid. A broken column lies like a fallen tree across the threshold. Lizards dart through cracks in the masonry.

You step through the remains of a colonnade, your boot crunching on shattered tiles. The courtyard is cracked and uneven, weeds pushing up through the mortar. A dry fountain sits in the center, its basin empty, a single olive tree growing crookedly from its rim. The air inside is still and hot, thick with dust. You can see where the peristyle once opened onto the garden, now a tangle of thistles and dead vines. But the cubicula along the west wing are intact, the floor mosaics faded but whole. Someone lived here once. Left in haste, perhaps. No valuables remain, but the place could be made habitable. And it sits just off the road, close enough to watch the Via Domitia, far enough to be unseen.



You drop your pack by the threshold and step through the empty frame of the front door. Inside, the air is cool and smells of damp earth and old decay. The atrium is open to the sky, choked with waist-high nettles and wild poppies that have sprouted between cracked

opus signinum floors. A dry, moss-stained impluvium sits in the center, a single green frog watching you from its rim before it plops into the shallow, murky water. The plaster walls retain faded geometric frescoes, peeled away in places to reveal the rubblework beneath. To your left, a doorway leads to a triclinium, the dining couches long since scavenged for firewood, but the mosaic of a hunting dog remains, its vibrant colors muted by dust. A legionary sees not ruin here, but defensible walls, a roof that can be rebuilt, a courtyard that can be cleared for training.

You walk the perimeter, pressing your palm against the sun-warmed stone of the outer wall, solid, a foot thick, with good sight lines down the hillside toward the road. A collapsed section at the back reveals a forgotten herb garden gone feral, rosemary bushes sprawling through the breach. An olive press, its stone wheel cracked, lies half-buried in weeds near a well, its rope rotted away but the shaft black and deep. The place feels like a promise waiting to be kept: quiet, sheltered, yours. No disputing claimants, no voices but the wind through the pines.



You spend the night in the villa's guest quarters, the stillness a welcome respite from the road's din.

Dawn breaks pale over the Druentia valley as you leave the villa behind, the road climbing gently through olive groves and terraced fields where slaves bend over hoes in the early light. The air carries the scent of damp soil and woodsmoke. As you near Nemausus, the Via Domitia widens, flanked by tombs and shrines draped with garlands of hollyhock and ivy, Compitalia offerings to the lares compitales. A pair of children in rough tunics toss spelt cakes at a wayside altar, chanting in Gaulish. Beyond them, the city rises on the hillside, its stone walls glowing amber in the morning sun, the forum visible at the crest, a bronze eagle atop the basilica catching the first rays.

You pass through the eastern gate without challenge. A vigil nods as you enter, his spear propped against the wall while he chews a piece of flatbread. The streets are quiet but not empty, market stalls are being set up, a baker pulls steaming loaves from his oven, and a water seller calls out from a shaded corner. At the edge of the forum, three grain wagons stand in a row, their axles thick with red clay, sacks piled high and stamped with the seal of the annona. A grizzled man in a leather apron, Decimus, the wagon-master, kicks a wheel, muttering to himself as he checks the lashings.



You watch as Decimus finishes his inspection, his gruff demeanor a testament to years of dealing with fractious drivers and recalcitrant oxen.



The three wagons stand in the merchant quarter, their axles sunk slightly into the mud from last night's rain. Tarpaulins of worn sagum wool cover the grain sacks, lashed tight with hemp rope. You run a calloused hand along the nearest wheel, oak, cracked near the hub but still serviceable. The second wagon's tongue is splintered, hastily patched with a metal strap. A rat scuttles from beneath the third, leaving tiny tracks in the dust. Decimus, the wagon-master, spits into the gutter and mutters, "Took us two days just to load. Bandits burned the last convoy two miles past Arausio. No survivors. You sure you're up for this, legionarius?" He eyes your gladius, then your face. "We leave at first light. No delays."

The Compitalia hums through the city like a fever. Slaves laugh in the streets, some wearing their masters' discarded tunicae, sharing wine at roadside shrines. A donkey draped in ribbons blocks the lane, braying as children tug its ears. The scent of roasting pork drifts from a courtyard where a freedman pounds a drum. But the market stalls are thin, bread prices up, oil rationed. A grain merchant argues with a centurio's assistant, waving a scroll. "No more shipments till after the festival! The roads are ghosts!" Decimus checks the mules' harnesses, his voice low. "We go at dawn. Or not at all."



As the last torches gutter out, you make your way through the deserted streets to the agreed meeting point.

“At first light,” Decimus nods, rubbing his eyes. “Meet here. We’ll need every hand before we cross the Druentia ford.” The city quiets slowly as night settles; the garlands hung for Compitalia flutter in the cool breeze between tightly packed insulae. Light spills from high, narrow windows, and you hear laughter mixed with the rhythmic clatter of dice from a nearby popina. You find a space to rest against the stone wall of a grain store, your scutum propped beside you. The cobbles smell of stale wine and urine. A girl carrying a clay lamp scuttles past, her shadow dancing across the plaster.

Your hand touches the worn grip of your gladius, your mind already picturing the road east. A wagon escort is a chance to prove yourself, to earn more than the recruit’s pay. That thin, clear line between ignotus and a name whispered in the forum. The city sleeps uneasily beneath the watchful stars.



You stand there, watching Decimus work by the faint lamplight, the only sound the clinking of metal and the mule's soft snort.

You approach Decimus, who’s tightening a mule’s girth strap by lamplight. “What’s the pay for this run?” you ask. He doesn’t look up. “Same as always. Five denarii on delivery. Massilia’s praefectus handles it.” You press, “That’s short. Three wagons, bandits on the road, should be eight.” He stops, wipes his hands on his tunic, and fixes you with a flat stare. “You want more? Talk to the praefectus. I just drive the wagons. And if you’re late tomorrow, there’ll be no pay at all, just a flogged backside for deserting a state convoy.” He spits and turns away. The coin in your palm feels lighter than it should.

The slums hum with muffled revelry, Compitalia turning the night into a blur of wine and whispered gossip. A pair of off-duty milites stumble past, one singing a bawdy legionary chant, the other laughing too loud. One eyes your cingulum, the belt of a soldier, and gives a mocking salute. You feel the weight of your rank, thin as the blade at your side. Duty calls at dawn, but respect? That you’ll have to earn.





The first light bleeds gray over the hills as Decimus cracks his whip and the mules lurch forward, their hooves clattering on the wet cobbles. "Took you long enough," he mutters, not turning. Two other guards, hard-faced men with pila slung over their shoulders, fall in behind the last wagon. You take position at the rear, gladius at your side, scutum ready. The city gates creak open under the watch of sleepy vigiles, their torches guttering in the dawn wind. Beyond, the road winds south through vineyards and fallow fields, the Druentia River a silver thread in the mist. A crow calls from a dead olive tree. The escort has begun.



You move ahead of the convoy, your caligae crunching on the frost-rimed road. The fields to either side are fallow, stubble poking through cracked earth, but the ditches are thick with bramble. Your eyes scan the tree line half a mile west, oak and ash huddled around a crumbling watchtower. The wind carries the smell of damp wool and distant woodsmoke. Then, a flicker: movement near the base of the tower. Not birds. Too low. You raise a fist behind you, halt signal, and crouch, hand on gladius. The wagons stop. One of the guards mutters, "Bandits? Or just a shepherd?" But you see it again, dark shapes shifting, not fleeing. The sword's edge has been drawn. Steel will answer steel before this day is done...



You step forward, boots cracking the frost, and roar toward the tree line: "Show yourselves, by Mars and Augustus, or you'll answer to steel!" Your voice echoes across the fields. Silence. Then, a rustle. A figure stumbles from the brush, hands raised. Not a

bandit. A young man, half-starved, draped in a torn sagum. Behind him, two others emerge: a woman clutching a child, their faces smudged with dirt. The man drops to his knees. “We meant no harm, dominus! We’re from the vicus near the old aqueduct, burned out during Compitalia. The vigiles said beggars aren’t allowed in Nemausus during the festival. We’ve been hiding, waiting to cross the road at dawn.” The child whimpers. One of the guards spits. “Festivals for citizens, not peregrini.” Decimus sighs. “Let them pass. We’re late enough.”



You wave the refugees aside, tossing the child a strip of dried meat from your pack. The woman whispers, “May Fortuna favor you, soldier.” You nod and signal the convoy forward. The wagons creak past, wheels sinking slightly in the thawing mud. Decimus mutters, “Soft heart. Soft head. That’s how bandits get bold.” But the guards say nothing, your authority as a legionary, even a recruit, holds weight. As you crest a low rise, the road ahead straightens toward the coast. The sun climbs, burning off mist, and the scent of salt rides the wind. Then, hoofbeats. Three riders in lorica segmentata, red cloaks snapping, Legio II Augusta scouts. Their centurio raises a gauntleted hand in salute. You recognize him: Aulus Vorenus, a hard man, fair but unyielding. He dismounts, eyes scanning your convoy. “Fredericus. You’re out of garrison. Escort duty?” His tone is neutral, but the question carries weight.

You stand straighter. “Grain wagons to Massilia, centurio. Bandits reported near the old watchtower.” He nods, then gestures to the road ahead. “Good. We’ve had reports of latrones near the Salyes border, two farms torched last night. You’ve got steel, you’ve got

wagons. Don't let them think you're easy prey." He eyes your scutum, the Celtic knotwork etched near the boss, your heritage. "You fight for Rome, not for ghosts. Remember that." One of his men tosses you a leather flask. "Drink. Long road." The water is warm, but welcome.



With the flask drained, you swing onto your horse, feeling the weight of the scutum on your back as the riders form up around you.

The riders pull up in a cloud of dust. At their head, Aulus Vorenius, his centurio crest bright, face like sun-baked leather, nods once, sharp and precise. "Fredericus. Still in one piece, I see." He dismounts, boots crunching on the gravel verge. His eyes flick over your escort, the wagons, the nervous mules. "Grain run? Good. The annona can't wait. We've had trouble, Salyes bandits, bold as praetorians, ambushing south of Aquae Sextiae. Burned a mutatio last week. No survivors." He takes a flask from his belt, drinks, then offers it to you. The wine is sharp, sour.

You return the flask. "Any sign of them on the road from Massilia?" Vorenius snorts. "Signs? We found a dead cursor two days back, throat slit, horse gone. They're watching the routes. But you've got numbers. Stick to the high road, keep the sun at your back, and watch the olive groves near the river crossing. That's where they like to strike." He turns to his scouts. "You three, ride ahead, mark the path. Report back if you see smoke or abandoned carts." One of them gestures toward a walled villa nestled in the trees nearby, its garden visible over the praecinctio. "That one's still holding, centurio. Owner's a freedman, loyal to the annona. Might offer water."



Vorenius nods, his eyes scanning the surrounding rooftops, before turning his horse towards the gate and the road that lies beyond.

You return the flask and snap a salute, crisp and tight. Vorenius gives a grunt, approval, as close as he ever offers. "Stay sharp. The Salyes don't take prisoners, only plunder." His scouts wheel about, vanishing down a side track toward the hills. You rejoin the convoy. Decimus cracks his whip, the mules strain, and the wagons groan forward. The road bends through olive groves, their gnarled trunks silver in the midday sun. A few slaves work between the rows, heads down, backs bent. One glances up, just for a moment, and you see the strain in his eyes. Compitalia's joy doesn't reach these fields. The air is heavy with heat and silence. Then, ahead: a bend, a rise, and beyond it, the glint of the sea.



As the city's sounds fade into the darkness, you strain your ears for any sign of movement, the silence oppressive, punctuated only by the distant lapping of the river.



The night settles over Nemausus like a damp cloak. You huddle in the shadow of a shuttered taberna, back against the door, scutum propped beside you like a silent companion. The cobbles leach warmth from your bones. Somewhere down the street, laughter spills from a lit window, Compitalia still lingers in the air, wine and roasted chestnuts on the breeze. A dog barks, then whimpers. You drift, half-awake, to the distant clink of dice and the murmur of a late-night quarrel. The cingulum at your waist bites into your hip. Your fingers brush the hilt of your gladius, habit, not fear. The city breathes around you, indifferent.

Then, boots on stone. Slow. Measured. A shadow cuts across the moonlit lane. Aulus Vorenius pauses ten paces away, his centurio cloak drawn tight. He doesn't speak at first. Just looks at you, your posture, your gear, the way your hand rests on steel. Then a nod. Not kind. Not cold. Acknowledgment. "Still on duty, recruit?" he says, voice low. "Or just bad at choosing beds?" He doesn't wait for an answer. "Aqua Sextiae road's hotter than Vulcan's forge. Sleep with one eye open." He moves on, boots fading into the dark.



As morning breaks, you slip away from the shadows, eyes scanning the streets for signs of life and duty.

The first light bleeds gray across the rooftops. Dew clings to the canvas covers of the grain

wagons. You move slow and quiet, boots crunching on gravel, hand resting on your gladius. The mules stir, snorting in the chill. One wheel has shifted, settled into a rut. You kneel, inspecting the axle. Mud, yes, but also a deep scratch, too straight for natural wear. Sabotage? Or just a careless driver? You rise, scanning the street. Shadows deepen in doorways. Then, shouts. Torchlight flares at the crossroads. A vigil patrol drags a kicking figure from a tavern mouth, his tunic torn, face bloodied. "Deserter!" one calls. "Caught him trying to sell a stolen pilum!" The man spits dirt, eyes wild. A crowd gathers, murmuring. You recognize the cut of his cloak, Legio VI. Not your legion, but still, brother in arms, once.

A voice cuts through the murk. "Fredericus." You turn. Aulus Vorenius steps from the gloom, centurio crest absent, but the bearing unmistakable. He watches the arrest, jaw tight. "You keep watch. Good. Discipline starts with the small things, the axle, the strap, the sentry who blinks." He nods toward the struggling man. "That one? Tiberius, from Hispania. Drunk on Compitalia wine and bad choices. Now he'll swing or row." He turns to you, voice low. "I've word from Aquae Sextiae. An old mine shaft collapsed, ten men trapped. Praefectus is calling for volunteers. Not a glory hunt. A dig. A duty. You want to prove yourself? This is how." He hands you a scrap of wax tablet, still warm from his grip. "Report to the praetorium by third hour. They'll assign tools, a mule, a guide."



You make your way to the praetorium, the weight of your scutum and the warmth of the wax tablet a reminder of the task ahead.

Aulus Vorenius watches you tighten the straps on your scutum. His jaw works, once, twice. "You've got the right of it, Gallus," he says, the old nickname slipping out, son of Gaul, yes, but one who stands his ground. "Duty first. The mine can wait. But the Salyes don't sleep, and neither should your eyes on that road." He claps your shoulder, a rare gesture, then turns to bark at the vigiles hauling the deserter. You nod to Decimus. The whip cracks. The mules pull. The wagons roll.

Dawn stretches long shadows ahead as the road bends south, leaving Nemausus behind. Olive groves give way to open scrubland, the air dry and sharp with thyme. Massilia lies beyond the coastal hills. The wheels creak. Somewhere ahead, bandits watch. Somewhere behind, a mine collapses. But for now, the road is clear, and your duty is written in grain and iron.





The coastal road unwinds like a sun-bleached ribbon. Salt stings your lips. Waves crash below the cliffs, white foam hissing over black rock. Gulls cry. The wagons groan, wheels sinking slightly in the soft sand near the shore. Decimus spits, muttering about tide-rotten timbers. You scan the high ground, scrub oak, thyme, the occasional olive tree clinging to stone. No movement. Yet. A fisherman on the beach waves, then turns his back, Compitalia feasts are inland, and men with grain don't share with strangers. The air smells of brine and hot leather. Your lorica hamata chafes under the sun.

At midday, you reach a crossroads. A wayside shrine to Mercury stands cracked, garlands wilted. A merchant's cart lies overturned, wheels shattered, recent. No body. Just a single sandal in the dust. Decimus reins in the mules. "Bandits don't leave tracks," you mutter. But the wind does. And the sand. You mark the spot on your wax tablet, thumb smudging the line.



The road climbs, then cuts along a limestone ridge. Below, a field of golden wheat ripples in the breeze. Three Gallic farmers stand at a crude wooden barrier, hands calloused, faces drawn. A Roman tax collector in a faded tunica laticlavata jabs a finger at their sacks. "Two modii per acre," he snaps. One farmer spits. "We barely kept seed for planting!" The mule-drawn carts wait, loaded. A child clutches a sickle. The air hums with tension, not bees. Your grain wagons creak to a halt. The taxman eyes your scutum, your gladius. He says nothing. But the farmers do not look at you, only at the road ahead.

Dust coats your tongue. The sun beats down. One farmer, older, his tunic patched at the

shoulder, glances toward your convoy. His lips tighten. The taxman scribbles on a wax tablet, muttering about quotas and annona. A crow lands on a fencepost, watching.



The gates of Arelate loom, flanked by watchful vigiles. The Rhône glints beyond, barges moored thick with grain, timber, and amphorae of wine. The air smells of river mud, baking bread, and the sharp tang of garum from the fish-salting yards. A trumpet sounds, Compitalia revelers spill from a popina, a freedman dancing with his former master, both red-faced and laughing. Your wagons draw stares. A merchant in a dyed tunic eyes the sacks, then you. “That’s good wheat,” he mutters. “Better than what’s selling.” A boy tosses dice near the fountain. The sun beats down. Your caligae crunch on white stone...



The southern gate of Arelate stands open, flanked by sun-bleached statues of Castor and Pollux. Mules jostle in the street, their drivers shouting over the din of the market fair. You guide your grain wagons past a row of dye vats, the air thick with the stench of urine and indigo. A centurio on patrol gives your scutum a cursory glance, no trouble here, not today. The forum buzzes: merchants hawk olive oil from Hispania, a Gaul sells honeyed figs, and a knot of sailors argue over dice. Your mules plod on, eager for rest. The road to Massilia waits beyond the river bend.



The coastal road curves south, hugging the shore where cliffs drop to turquoise coves.

Gulls wheel above fishing boats tacking toward the harbor. The air grows thick with salt and the distant smoke of Massilia's kilns. Your mules plod steadily, hooves crunching on sun-bleached gravel. Olive groves give way to terraced vineyards, their leaves silvered by dust. At the city's northern approach, a praefectus frumenti in a white tunica stands beside a stone marker, clipboard in hand. He frowns at your convoy. "You're late," he says. "We expected this grain yesterday." Behind him, dockworkers unload wheat from a Sardinian barge, another shipment, another delay. The city stirs, alive with Compitalia's echo, but your duty is not yet done.



With the city's Compitalia celebrations in full swing, you finally make your way to the river, where the grain shipments await inspection.

The praefectus frumenti steps forward, his stylus tapping the wax tablet. "Three wagons, all accounted for?" He eyes the dust-caked tarps. "No losses? No bandits?" You nod. He exhales, shoulders relaxing. "Good. Better late than scattered to the winds like last month's convoy." Behind him, slaves begin unloading the sacks, stacking them beside a granary marked with the SPQR stamp. A gull cries. The scent of brine and warm bread drifts from a nearby popina. Then a voice cuts through the harbor din, familiar, sharp, unyielding.

"Fredericus." You turn. Aulus Vorenius, still in his lorica, stands with arms crossed. No smile. No greeting. Just a measured stare. "I heard you took the grain run. Didn't think you'd make it without cutting corners." He steps closer. "But you're here. Wagons intact. That counts for something." He glances at the praefectus, then back to you. "I've got eyes on the Salyes. They hit a tax caravan near Aquae Sextiae last night. You were lucky." His voice drops. "Or smart. Either way, the legions notice."



The memory of the Salyes' raid still fresh, you inspect the wagons with a practiced eye, checking for any signs of tampering or loss.



The granary slaves unhook the mules, their hands moving with practiced speed. You peel back the tarp of the lead wagon, beneath the dust, the wheat looks sound, dry, untouched by rot or damp. No signs of rats, no mold, no foreign grain mixed in. The praefectus frumenti kneels, scoops a handful, rubs it between his fingers. “Good. Better than the Sardinian lot, half of that was weeviled.” He stamps the seal on the ledger. “You’ve done your duty, miles.” He turns to hand the tablet to a clerk, then hesitates. “But the report must go to the praefectus annonae himself. He’s not in the granary. He’s at the forum, hearing testimony about the missing shipment from Aquae Sextiae. You deliver this,” he says, pressing a wax tablet into your palm. “And say it came from me. No delays.”

Aulus Vorenius watches, arms still crossed. His eyes flick to the tablet. “You’re not done yet, recruit,” he mutters. “Grain’s safe, but the road isn’t. The Salyes didn’t vanish. And now two families in the eastern insulae are at each other’s throats, blood feud over a stolen mule, they say. Could be bandits using it as cover. I need eyes on it. You’ve got the legs. And the sword.” He steps closer. “Check the forum. Find the praefectus annonae. Deliver that report. Then come back to me. I’ll have work.”



With your mission clear, you weave through the crowds toward the forum, the sounds and smells of the city guiding you to the praefectus annonae.

The forum of Massilia hums with the clatter of merchants and the scent of frying fish from a nearby popina. The praefectus annonae stands beneath the portico of the basilica, a man in a purple-striped tunica arguing with a grain factor. You approach, tablet in hand. A

lictor steps forward, then recognizes the seal. “Wait.” He speaks to his master. The praefectus turns, sharp eyes, close-cropped beard, a ring of office on his finger. You hand over the wax. He scans it, nods once. “The convoy arrived intact. Good. Better late than lost to bandits, or worse, to corruptio.” He hands it to a scribe. “You’ve done your duty, miles. The grain will feed the city. The legion will hear of this.”

A shadow falls beside you. Aulus Vorenus, flanked by two legionaries in full kit, steps from the crowd. His gaze is steady. “You delivered it. I saw the wagons. No losses?” You confirm. He grunts, approval, rare from him. “Then you’ve earned your stipendium... and your next order.” One of the legionaries, a young recruit with a nervous twitch, mutters something about the Salyes. Vorenus silences him with a look. “We’ve bigger concerns. The eastern street, two families, knives out, over a dead brother. The vigiles are stretched thin. I need men I can trust. Men who finish what they start.”



The market fair spills across the forum at dawn, oil lamps still flickering in the stalls as the first light bleeds over the rooftops. Fishmongers lay out sea bream on beds of ice hauled from the hills. A Syrian spice-seller chants his wares, cinnamon, saffron, pepper, while a Gaulish woman bargains fiercely for a length of red-dyed wool. The air is thick with smoke, sweat, and the tang of garum. You pass a table stacked with leather waterskins, another with sharpened pila tips, standard issue, but well-made. A boy offers mustaceum cakes on a reed tray. Behind the stalls, the basilica doors stand open, scribes already at work.

A shadow falls across the flagstones. Aulus Vorenus steps from the portico, his lorica hamata gleaming dully, gladius at his hip. He scans the crowd, finds you. “Fredericus.” His voice is low, but carries. “The grain was delivered. The praefectus signed for it. But last night, someone broke into the granary seal.” He steps closer. “Not to steal, to replace. Half the Sardinian shipment was swapped. We found husks mixed with sawdust. Someone’s feeding Rome rotten grain and pocketing the difference.” He eyes the bustling market. “And the man who signed off on that shipment? He’s here. Hiding behind a stall, selling ‘fine African wheat’ at half price. Find him. Don’t let him leave the forum.”





The hooded merchant ducks between two stalls, his sack of grain bumping against the leg of a sleeping dog. You follow, stepping over coiled rope and a spilled basket of lentils. He moves fast, not looking back, but you keep him in sight, past the fishmonger's ice trays, around the olive oil casks, toward the edge of the forum where the ground turns muddy from a broken drain. He pauses, glances left and right, then slips behind a canvas awning marked with a faded SPQR stamp, the same seal used on state granaries. A wooden cart sits there, unattended, its tarp half-lifted. Inside, sacks bulge. You crouch, pull back the edge of one. The grain is dark, speckled. Not African wheat. This is old stock, damp, sour-smelling, half-rotted. Your fingers come away sticky. The Fates warned you: the amphora turns. The stores are tested.

A shadow falls across the cart. "So. You found it." Aulus Vorenus stands there, arms crossed, face grim in the morning light. No salute, no smile, just a nod, the kind one soldier gives another who's done the work without needing orders. "I saw you tailing him. Good eye. That grain would've been mixed into the next public dole. Bread that sours the gut, kills the weak." He kicks the sack lightly. "We need proof it came from the granary. Someone inside is swapping it. A clerk? A praefectus on the take? Doesn't matter. We stop it now." His voice is low, urgent. "You saw the seal on the cart? Same as the state stores. But the real crime's in the taste. Crush a kernel. Smell it. Then we take this to the aediles, or we handle it quieter, if you've the stomach."



Aulus Vorenus grips the hilt of his gladius, jaw tight. "By Mars, you say? Mars does not run the annona, miles, discipline does. You think I don't want to gut the swine who dares

poison the people's bread? But this is not a barbarian camp. We are Romans. We follow order." He steps closer, voice low. "That cart? It's bait. They'll send someone to move it before nightfall. We catch the hand, not the shadow. You want to serve Rome? Then stand ready. When the signal comes, you move, fast, clean, and by the book."

The sun dips low, casting long shadows from the basilica columns across the forum. The awning flaps in the evening breeze. Somewhere, a trumpet sounds the third watch.

Vorenius eyes the cart, then you. "Stay sharp. The rot goes deeper than one sack of grain. I've seen this before, in Syria. Same pattern. If we move too soon, the real man behind this vanishes like smoke. And the people starve while he laughs in Roma."



As you scan the crowd, the eastern edge of the forum narrows into a lane slick with fish guts and runoff.

The eastern edge of the forum narrows into a lane slick with fish guts and runoff. You move low, scutum braced, eyes on the alley mouth where the cart sits half-hidden. A drayman curses as his mule balks at the stench. The sun bleeds into dusk, and the oil lamps flicker to life. From the port, a cry, someone arguing over a shipment of barley. Prices are up, you hear, since the news from Alexandria. A thin boy in a patched tunic eyes the cart, then you, then scuttles away. No one moves the grain. Not yet. But the air is tight, like before a storm.

Aulus appears at the corner, one hand raised. He doesn't speak, just nods toward the awning. A shadow shifts behind the canvas. The merchant? Or someone else, taller, cloaked in a sagum that marks him as more than a peddler. The man reaches into the cart, not to haul grain, but to lift a small, sealed pyxus, a wooden box, stamped with a mark you've seen on tax rolls: the cura annonae's seal.





You step from the shadow of a wine cask just as a man in a frayed lacerna tries to slip the wooden box into a donkey's pannier. He freezes. So does the donkey. The man's eyes dart left, toward the port gate, where two vigiles are questioning a fisherman. Too far. You close the distance in three strides, gladius not drawn but hand on hilt. "By order of the praefectus annonae," you say, "that cargo stays." The man swallows. "I'm a porter, dominus. Just moving goods." But his fingers tremble. From the box, a faint, sour stink, rotten grain, mixed with something else. Chalk? Sand? Adulteration. Proof.

A horn sounds from the forum, short, sharp. Vorenius's signal. The vigiles turn. One points. The porter drops the box and bolts. You don't chase. You kneel. The lid is nailed shut, but one corner is loose. You pry it back. Inside: sacks stamped with the granary seal... and beneath them, a wax tablet. Not a ledger. A receipt. Signed with a mark you've seen before, in Vorenius's barracks. A man with rank. A man with access.



You hand the tablet to Aulus Vorenius, his thumb brushing over the scratched markings you copied from the box, three dots and a crescent.

Aulus Vorenius takes the wax tablet without a word, his thumb brushing over the scratched markings you copied from the box, three dots and a crescent, the sigil of the Horreum Publicum. His eyes narrow. "This isn't just theft. This is traceable. Someone inside the granary is marking the loads." He flips the tablet, then hands it back. "Good work. But we're not done. That porter? He's small game. The mark means a clerk, maybe a praefectus subculus. And they'll burn the records by dawn." He gestures toward the back

alleys. “There’s a bathhouse near the old aqueduct, servants from the granary go there. Talk. Listen. Smoke rises where men sweat and boast.”

Steam curls from the bathhouse’s roof as you approach, the scent of sulfur cutting through the fishy damp of the docks. The laconicum is packed, laborers, freedmen, a pair of scribae in damp tunics arguing over a contract. In the corner, a man with flour-dusted hands leans close to a younger boy, whispering, “...not just sand this time, eh? Lime and chalk, that’s the trick, fills the belly, fools the aediles.” He laughs, then sees you. His voice dies. The boy looks down. The man stands, wipes his face, and moves toward the exit.



Steam rises in thick waves from the caldarium, the air heavy with the scent of sulfur and olive oil. You sink into the hot water, muscles loosening, lorica hamata laid aside on a bench. Around you, laborers from the granary scrub soot from their arms, laughing about a dice game lost the night before. One, a broad-shouldered man with a faded tattoo of a wheat sheaf on his forearm, Frumentarius, maybe, leans close to another and mutters, “They’re burning the tallies after dark. Clerk says the praefectus wants it clean by Nones.” The other spits into the water. “Let the city starve. We got ours.” You keep your face slack, eyes half-closed.

A shadow falls across the tiles. A signifer in a well-mended cloak nods at you, recognizing the cut of your cingulum, the way you carry yourself. “Fredericus. Vorenus spoke of you.” He lowers his voice. “He’s watching the granary gate. Says if the fire starts tonight, we move fast. You find anything in here worth reporting?” The steam curls like smoke. Somewhere, a slave drops a bronze pan. The workers don’t flinch.





The steam thickens as a new group enters, their voices sharp over the slap of wet sandals. One man, clean-shaven with a scribe's ink-stained fingers, says, "Laelius wants the ledgers in the west cistern by moonrise. No witnesses." His companion, younger, nervous, replies, "And if the centurio finds out?" The scribe snorts. "Vorenus? He's busy chasing porters. By dawn, no one can prove a thing." They move toward the tepidarium, their words swallowed by the echo of dripping water. You stay low, the heat pricking your skin. Laelius, that name rings. A subpraefectus of the granary, seen once at a levy muster. If he's behind this, the rot goes deep.

A shadow falls across the pool's edge. Aulus Vorenus stands wrapped in a coarse towel, his gaze locking onto yours. No surprise in his eyes, only calculation. He sits on the bench, voice low. "You hear what I think you heard?" He doesn't wait. "Laelius has friends in the cura annonae. We move fast, or we move dead. The cistern they mentioned, it's not for water. It's a hidden archive. We get those tallies before moonrise, or this whole city eats dust and lies."



With the documents safely in hand, you rise dripping, pull on your tunic, and stride from the caldarium into the cooler chambers.

You rise dripping, pull on your tunic, and stride from the caldarium into the cooler chambers, pushing past a mosaic showing Neptune's trident. Outside, the evening air hits your damp skin. You find Aulus Vorenus leaning against the stuccoed wall of a perfume seller's stall, turning a denarius over in his fingers. "Laelius," you say, water still beading

on your brow. “He’s directing it. The tallies are to be burned in the western cistern tonight.” Vorenus pockets the coin, his expression grim. “Laelius. An optio for half a season before they gave him grain.” He looks west, toward the granaries. “The cistern’s guarded, by his men.” His eyes flick to you. You didn’t get names, but you have a place and a time. That is enough. “Fortune favors us. They’ll scurry before a proper symbolum can be inscribed.” He lowers his voice. “Will you stop it?”



Vorenus straightens, eyes narrowing, as he repeats the question, his voice low and even.

Vorenus straightens, eyes narrowing. “Commandeer? You’re a recruit, Fredericus. No vexillum, no primus pilus behind you.” He steps close, voice low. “But you’ve earned trust. I’ll give you imperium for this night, under my name. Take two milites from the praetorium gate. Stop the burning. Bring me the ledgers. And Laelius.” He pulls a small bronze bullae from his belt, his seal. “Show this. They’ll obey. But if you overreach, if you spill blood without cause, you answer to me.” He turns, then pauses. “And Fredericus, do it clean. The city watches.”

The caldarium’s steam still clings to your limbs as you cross the via toward the praetorium. A knot of plebs argues over a sack of barley, prices doubled since the rumor from Alexandria. A child cries. Down the street, a navicularius in a faded blue tunica, Hermes, perhaps, chants sea verses to a bored crowd, coin-box open. The granary looms westward, shadowed. Moonrise nears. You grip the bullae, the metal warm from Vorenus’ belt.



With the symbolum clutched tightly, you march toward the praetorium gate, where two legionaries stand beneath a flickering lampas.



You clutch the bullae and march toward the praetorium gate, where two legionaries stand beneath a flickering lampas. “By order of Centurio Vorenus,” you declare, holding up the seal, “I command your aid, west cistern, evidence seizure.” The taller guard, a grizzled veteranus with a scarred nose, squints at the bronze. “Haven’t seen that mark since Thracia.” He doesn’t move. The younger one shifts, uneasy. “No written tabella? No cornicen call?” A merchant nearby pauses, ear turned. You feel the weight of hesitation, then a voice cuts through. “What’s this? A recruit waving trinkets?” A signifer emerges from the gatehouse, eyes sharp. “Vorenus trusts you? Prove it. Recite his cognomen, and the name of his lost standard.” You freeze. The seal feels cold in your hand. The guards don’t budge.



As the weight of the seal settles in your hand, you raise your eyes to meet the guards' unyielding gaze.

You plant your scutum at your feet, the iron boss catching the torchlight. “The grain’s poisoned,” you say, voice hard. “Men are hungry in Arelate, in Roma. And you stand here questioning a seal? Duty isn’t in the scroll, it’s in the sword.” You lock eyes with the older guard. “You were at Thracia. You know what happens when supply fails. This is that moment. Now.” The younger soldier shifts, hand on his gladius. The signifer steps forward, but before he speaks, a crash echoes from the nearby tavern, a ledger knocked over, ink spilling across the floor. A clerk stumbles back, face pale. “They’ve lit the brazier already, west cistern! The smoke’s rising!”

You dash through the doorway, the sound of alarm and scuffling footsteps echoing behind you.

You turn without waiting, your caligae striking the via in long, hard strides. The younger guard follows, hesitant at first, then firm. The older one mutters, “By Mars’ balls,” and falls in behind. The signifer does not stop you. The western cistern looms ahead, a low stone basin half-collapsed, its mouth dark. Torchlight flickers within. You hear voices, Laelius, sharp and clipped: “Burn the tallies. Then the cart.” You draw your gladius, the iron whispering from the scabbard. The guard raises his shield. You move forward, A shadow detaches from the granary wall. Aulus Vorenus. He does not speak, only nods once, then falls in step beside you, his presence a weight. The cistern’s mouth opens before you, smoke curls from within. Three clerks huddle around a pyre of wax tablets. One holds a taper.



You crash into the cistern mouth, shield slamming aside a burning torch before it touches the stack of wax tablets. Flames leap from a brazier, licking at the first ledger. Two clerks stumble back, Laelius drops his oil flask, cursing. The younger guard tackles one runner; the other slips past, sprinting into the dark. Laelius grabs a hasta from the wall, thrusting wildly. You parry with your gladius, the iron ringing. “The ledgers!” you shout. The guard lunges, knocking the spear aside. You kick over the brazier, coals scatter, hissing in damp straw. The air fills with smoke and the stink of melted wax. Outside, Vorenus appears, arms crossed, watching.

Amidst the chaos of smoke and scattered documents, your eyes lock onto the charred remains of the records.

You wrench the wax tablets from the pile, their edges blackened but legible. Names, dates, shipments, Massilia to Arelate, 12th Kalends, 300 modii, grade B. One bears the same sigil you copied: a serpent coiled around a sheaf. You tuck them into your cingulum, the heat of the cistern searing your back. Outside, the wind carries the scent of salt and smoke. The escaped clerk is gone. But Aulus Vorenius steps from the shadows, his lorica scarred from Germania, his gaze steady. “You kept the record,” he says. “Now we follow the trail. But the man who ran, he’s not just a clerk. He answers to praefectus Lepidus. And Lepidus answers to no one in Massilia.” A young optio approaches, saluting. “Sir. Patrol reports a man matching the description heading east, toward the fairgrounds.”



With the optio's words, your focus narrows to the task at hand, tracking the suspect through the winding streets.

You pull the wax tablets from your belt and hand them to Aulus Vorenius. He takes them without a word, tilting them toward the torchlight. His fingers trace the sigil, the serpent and sheaf, then pause at a marginal note: Praefectus C. Drusus, Portus. His jaw tightens. “Drusus,” he mutters. “He’s supposed to be in Germania.” The wind shifts, carrying the briny tang of the sea and the distant laughter of fairgoers. Vorenius rolls the ledgers tight, securing them with a leather thong. “You did your duty. Better than most recruits. But this isn’t over. That clerk ran east, toward the market. And where there’s one rat, there’s a nest.” He studies you a moment. “You see things. Soldiers miss them. Merchants hide behind them. But you, Gallia-trained, yes? You know the smell of rot before it spreads.”

A flicker in the cistern’s shadow catches your eye, a loose stone near the base of the wall, half-pried up. Beneath it, a small iron key rests, notched strangely, warm to the touch. No sigil, but the metal bears a faint etching: a dolphin leaping over waves. You’ve seen that mark before, on a merchant’s seal at the fairgrounds, the one who sold Punic spices.



You extend your hand, the key's familiar weight a tangible link to the merchant's identity.



You pull the iron key from your cingulum, the dolphin seal cold in your palm. "Do you know this mark, centurio?"

Vorenius takes it, turns it once in the torchlight. His face darkens. "This opens the inner lock at the Punic spice warehouse near the docks. Only three men have one, two are dead, one vanished last moon." He hands it back, voice low. "That clerk didn't run toward the fair. He was meant to run. This was a test. To see who would act. Who would care." He steps closer. "The grain was spoiled. The ledgers burned. But the rot goes higher. If Drusus is involved, this isn't theft. It's sabotage. And if you walk away now, you're just another pair of boots in the mud. But if you stay..." He pauses. "Then you're a soldier."



As you turn from the recruit's determined face, the roar of the nearby Circus Maximus washes over you.

Chariots thunder around the spina, dust rising in golden clouds as the Greens and Blues whip their teams into the final stretch. The roar of the crowd drowns all but the crack of whips and the groan of axles. You push through the throng near the eastern gate, where the scent of cumin and myrrh cuts through sweat and crushed olives. A stall draped in Tyrian purple displays jars of saffron and black pepper, behind it, a Punic merchant with a silvered beard weighs frankincense on a brass scale. His eyes flick to your lorica hamata, then to the dolphin key you hold open in your palm. He doesn't speak. Just taps a finger twice on the counter, once for danger, once for silence.

A man in a faded blue sash lingers at the edge of the stall, pretending to examine a sack of

coriander. Too still. Too aware. The merchant slides a wax tablet across the counter, blank. Then, in a voice like dry reeds, says, “He was here. The clerk. Left before the fire. Knew it would burn.” He glances at the watcher. “But the key opens more than a warehouse. It opens graves.”



You feel the weight of the key settle into your palm, and the afternoon sunlight seems to sharpen around you.

You hold the iron key high, the dolphin seal catching the sun. The merchant’s hands freeze. His eyes narrow, then flick to a boy crouched behind the stall, gone in an instant, darting into the crowd. “That key,” he says in careful Latin, “does not belong to you.” He lowers his voice. “It opens the inner vault. Where we keep the frankincense... and the letters.” He glances east, toward the docks. “The clerk came here. Spoke with a man in a blue sash. Left with a sealed jar. Not spice. Too light.” The roar of the crowd swells as a chariot overturns, sending horses and splinters flying. No one notices the Punic man slide a scrap of papyrus into your palm, crude script: He sails at dusk. Ship: The Silver Eel. “Go,” he whispers. “Before they burn the proof.”



With the papyrus's message burning in your mind, you push through the crowded market stalls toward the docks.



The merchant stares at the key, then at your face. A slow breath escapes him, weary as a

man who's counted the same coins too many times. "Do I want it back?" he says, voice low. "No. I want it gone. Buried. Burned." He wipes his hands on his tunic, steps back from the counter. Behind him, bronze scales sit unused, ledgers sealed with Punic wax. "That key opened more than a vault. It opened mouths. And now... men with blue sashes ask questions. They know the seal. They know me." He leans in. "You carry it, you carry the danger. But if you seek the truth, go to the counting house at dusk. The one behind the old warehouse, where the oil lamps flicker but no one answers the door." His eyes hold yours. "Ask for Gambara. She knew the clerk. She knows what was in the jar."



You turn to Gambara, seated on a low stool beside a locked chest, her fingers tracing the edge of a wax tablet. "The jar," you say. "What was inside?" She looks up, eyes tired, then sighs, the long, slow exhalation of a woman who's carried secrets too long. "Not spice," she says. "Not grain. Not anything that burns or spoils." She glances at the ledger, then back at you. "It was a record. Names. Payments. A list of who took grain that was meant for the legions... and who let it pass." Her voice drops. "The clerk didn't run. He was sent. To hide it. But the man in the blue sash, he wasn't Punic. He wore the mark of the Fures. And now the jar is gone. And so is Sido."

A sudden crash echoes from the courtyard, a dropped amphora, oil pooling across the floor. Gambara flinches. "They're watching," she whispers. "They always are. The Fures don't trade. They take. And now they have the proof." She looks at you, truly looks, for the first time. "If you want to find that jar... you'll need to go where the docks smell of brine and blood. And pray you're not seen entering the warehouse after dark."



The memory of the old man's whispered warning still echoes as you navigate the winding streets toward the warehouse district.

You step into the alley behind the counting house, where three men in dark tunics stand around a brazier, their sashes dyed the deep blue of the Fures. One turns, face sharp, eyes like flint. "You shouldn't be here, miles," he says, not raising his voice. "This is trade. Not your business." The others shift, hands near their belts. The air smells of burnt myrrh and salt. You see the glint of a blade beneath a fold of cloth. The leader takes a step forward. "That jar is sealed. The names inside? Already paid for. Forgotten." He smiles without warmth. "Walk away. Or be forgotten too." The wind rattles a loose shutter. Somewhere, a dog barks.

Gambara's voice cuts through the tension from the doorway. "He knows too much," she says flatly. "And he's not alone." The Fures glance at each other. One mutters, "Then he

dies with the truth.” The leader draws a pugio, short and cruel. The others follow. You hear the rasp of your gladius as you draw it. The alley narrows. No room to run.



The clash of steel on steel rings out, and for a moment, the alley is a world unto itself.



The Fures thug crumples, his blue sash darkening with blood. His knife clatters on the stones. You kick it aside. The other two scatter, no honor among thieves when steel is drawn. A wax tablet slips from the fallen man’s belt, stamped with a dolphin seal half-scorched. You pocket it. The alley reeks of iron and fear. From the docks, a ship’s horn sounds. The warehouse looms ahead, its door ajar, shadows pooling within. Somewhere inside, the jar waits. And with it, the names of those who stole Rome’s grain.



You push the warehouse door wider. Dust swirls in the moonlight slicing through cracks in the roof. Rows of amphorae rise like sentinels, some stamped with the dolphin seal, others daubed with charcoal marks, codes, not trade signs. The air is thick with cumin and damp wood. To the left, a shattered jar lies on the floor, its shards glinting. But the clay body is gone. Only a smear of red wax remains, pressed into the dirt: a partial impression of a signet. You kneel. The wax is warm. Someone was here just now. Behind a stack of crates, a rustle. Not wind. Breath.



You crouch behind the crates, the rough wood scraping your vambrace. There, wedged beneath a loose plank, a ceramic jar, sealed with red wax and stamped with a dolphin encircled by a key. The ledger. You pull it free. Inside, names are etched in fine Punic script: Sosius, Drusus, Tiberius Claudius Labeo, a navarchus of the Classis Misensis. One name stands out: Sido. But not the Sido you know. Gaius Sido, decurion of the vigiles in Ostia. A relative? A namesake? Beneath the jar, a small purse clinks. You open it, ten denarii, fresh-minted, no marks. Payment? Or a bribe left behind? The rustle comes again, softer now. A rat? Or someone holding their breath?

Moonlight catches the edge of a sandal behind the far stack. The warehouse is not empty. You smell sweat and fish oil. Whoever was here didn't leave. They're waiting. Watching. And the seal on the jar, it's still warm.



You press into the shadows behind the crates, the jar clutched tight. The warehouse holds its breath. Then, soft footsteps. A figure slips through the doorway, hooded, boots silent on the stone. He pauses, scanning the room. Not Fures. His gait is too straight, shoulders squared, miles. A legionary? No insignia, but the way he checks the corners, the knife at his belt, the way he flinches at a distant shout, veteran reflexes. He moves toward the shattered jar, kneels, and brushes the wax smear with two fingers. Then he speaks, low, to the dark: "If you're here, show yourself. I won't ask twice." His voice is rough, Gallic accent thick. "I'm not with the Fures. I'm here for Sido."

A creak above. Dust falls. You look up, too late. A tile shifts on the rafters. A shadow

drops, not at you, but between you and the soldier. A woman, face hidden, cloak like a palla, but her stance is tight, ready. She points a slender dagger at the soldier. “You don’t speak his name,” she hisses. “You don’t know him.” The soldier doesn’t flinch. “I served with him at Arelate. He saved my life. Now he’s marked. And so are you.” He glances toward your hiding place. “We’re not alone.”



You step forward, gladius drawn. “Halt, miles.” The word echoes too loud. The hooded man whirls, fast, but you see the shock in his eyes, not fear. He raises empty hands. “Felix sis, brother. I mean no harm.” His voice is rough, but the Latin clean, equestrian or senator’s son, gone to seed. Before you can respond, a pebble skitters behind you. You turn, too slow. A figure darts between the amphorae. The legionary curses, draws his pugio. “They’ve been watching the place. Fures?” You glance down, your scutum caught the edge of a crate as you moved. The clank gave you away. But the jar is still sealed. And the man’s eyes keep flicking to it, not your blade. “That belongs to Gambara,” he says. “She’s in danger.” A pair of boots scrapes stone near the door. Two more shadows. Watching. Waiting.



As you assess the growing threat, you swiftly decide to escape the warehouse.

You bolt from the warehouse, the jar tucked beneath your arm, scutum slapping your back with every stride. The streets of Massilia blur, oil lamps flicker above narrow alleys, the scent of frying chickpeas and brine thick in the air. Behind, a shout. Then another. You glance back, two figures break from the warehouse door, one in legionary boots, the other hooded and swift. You cut through the market square, dodging a pack mule laden with bales of wool. A merchant yells. You don’t stop. The counting house looms ahead, its bronze tablet glowing in the lamplight: GAMBARA, SPICES & LENDS. You crash through the door, Gambara looks up from her ledger, eyes wide. Spurius Avitus, his caligae still dusty from the road, half-rises from a stool, hand on his gladius. “By Mars’ beard,” he growls. You slam the jar onto the table. Gambara’s fingers tremble as she traces the dolphin seal. “You have it,” she whispers. “Then the Fures know too. They’ll come.” Spurius nods toward the street. “And they’re already close.”





You burst into the counting house, breath ragged. Gambara looks up from the ledger, her stylus frozen. Spurius Avitus, standing by the door in worn caligae and a dented helmet, turns with the slow precision of a man who has seen too many ambushes. “They’re coming,” you say. “Two. Armed.” Spurius doesn’t flinch. He slides his gladius a finger’s width from the scabbard. “Front or back?” you ask. “Both,” he mutters. Outside, a shutter slams. The oil lamp flickers. Gambara closes the ledger, wraps it in oiled cloth. “The names... Sido... it’s not who you think. He’s not the man I sent word to.” Her voice is steady, but her hands tremble. “There’s a list. Of vigiles. Paid to look away. And one name, Aulus Vorenius, marked in red.”

The market beyond the shutter grows quiet. Too quiet. A loaf of bread rolls across the cobbles, abandoned. Somewhere, a child cries. Spurius steps to the window, peers through a crack. “One at the front. Hooded. No insignia. But that stance, frumentarius. Grain spies. They’re not Fures. They’re worse.” He turns to you. “You brought the fire to her door. But you’re here. That counts.” He tosses you a spare pugio from the bench. “Hold the alley. I’ll cover the door.”



You move to the rear entrance, back against the wall, gladius ready. The alley beyond is narrow, slick with runoff, shadows pooling between oil-stained walls. You hear footsteps, light, cautious. Then a scrape. A boot on stone. You tense. The door creaks open an inch. You kick it wide, shield forward, only to see a boy, no older than twelve, frozen in fear, a loaf of barley bread clutched to his chest. Behind you, Spurius curses. “Fool!” he barks. “Now they know we’re watching back here.” A whistle splits the night, two sharp notes.

Then silence. Gambara's voice, low and urgent: "They're not Fures. These are piratae. Segestes' men. They've been hunting this ledger for weeks." Spurius steps to the front window, peering through the shutters. "And now they've found us."



You wait, tense, as the figure inches closer, its features slowly becoming clear in the dim light.

You plant your feet, scutum braced, gladius low. The alley breathes, damp, still. Then movement. A shadow peels from the wall. Not a Fures thug. A man in a traveler's cloak, face half-hidden, but the eyes, sharp, familiar. Sido. He raises a hand, palm out.

"Fredericus. Bene valeas." His voice is calm, but the tension in his jaw says otherwise. "You don't want to fight me. And I don't want to run." Behind you, Spurius growls, "He's one of them." Sido doesn't flinch. "I was. Not now." Gambara steps forward, the oiled ledger under her arm. "He brought me the first warning," she says. "About the jar. About them." Sido's gaze flicks to the rear door, then back. "They're not after the key. They're after the names inside. And they'll burn this place to ash to get it." A torch flares at the alley's mouth. Boots. More than two.



The sound of approaching footsteps grows louder, and you prepare for the imminent clash.



You lock shields with Spurius, both of you a wall between Gambara and Sido. The air hums with tension. Spurius spits to the side. "One move, pirate, and I cut you down where

you stand.” Sido doesn’t blink. “I sailed with Vorenius off the Balearics. Ask him if I lie.” From inside the counting house, a clatter, the shutter slams shut as Gambarara bolts it. Then her voice, muffled: “He’s not Fures. He brought the dolphin key to me. Not from them. To me.” Spurius hesitates. You feel it, the shift. The oil lamp inside flickers, casting long shadows through the shutter slats. Somewhere, a dog barks. Then footsteps, boots on stone. Legionary tread. Three figures round the corner, torch held high. The lead optio scans the scene: your stance, Sido’s open palms, Spurius’s half-drawn blade. “Fredericus?” he says. “Centurio Vorenius wants you. Now.”

