

The King of the Grove

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He had only been in Rome for a year when Rufus decided that he had to get out. Anything - even death - was preferable to this so-called life. He had made up his mind to run away and take his chances on the road, without proof of his freedom and knowing full well what that meant.

Rufus was barely seventeen but had seen a lot in his short life, so the other slaves' scare stories of what the masters did to runaways didn't put him off. Afterall, what was the threat of being branded with the word 'fugitive' on the forehead, compared with watching your father killed next to you in the battle line, skewered by a Roman pilum and screaming for your help? And what was so terrifying about the threat of being whipped raw, compared with the reality of seeing your village burned, your mother and sister sold in front of you? No, even being put to death as a runaway slave would be a victory compared to the alternative. *At least it would be freedom of a kind*, he told himself.

He sat at the rough table in the bustling slave kitchen and carefully guarded his bowl of stew with his elbows, chewing thoughtfully on the gristle of - Rufus couldn't identify the stringy meat. Rabbit? Rat? He swallowed anyway, in need of the energy at the end of a day's relentless work. One thing he knew for sure: he would not tolerate another moment in that infernal basement, pumping the furnace bellows for hour after hour until his shoulders ached and he could no longer lift his arms above his head. And for what? So that on the off-chance the mistress wandered into the bathrooms, her feet wouldn't feel the cold of an unheated stone floor. He shook his head to himself in silent disbelief. Is this what his life was to be? A bellows-boy whose only reason for existing was to sweat all day to slightly warm the soles of a rich lady's feet for a few seconds? He had lived with too much freedom for his first fifteen years to ever be able to accept that as his future.

Rufus's left elbow jogged inwards as another slave pushed his way onto the crowded bench to sit next to him. He looked up in annoyance and saw a face he recognised.

'Alright, Pasty?' it whispered with a gap-toothed grin.

'Don't call me that' Rufus hissed back in his improving Latin.

'Don't be so pasty then' the other slave replied, still grinning. He was a few years older than Rufus, a thick brush of black hair framing a bronzed, weathered face. 'You're lucky you don't work out in the gardens like me. You'd be fried to death in an afternoon!'

It was true, Rufus wasn't suited to the harsh mid-summer of Rome. Whenever he ventured outside to the woodstore, he wasn't sure which was hotter: the garden or the furnace room. His pale white skin came from the far north beyond the ocean, a country where you stood more chance of drowning in the rain than getting sunburn.

'I'm go to do it, Leander' he said from the side of his mouth, keeping his eyes on his bowl.

'Tonight.'

'Tonight?' the garden slave said with a chuckle. 'Nah, you don't want to do that my red-haired friend. And it's *going to not go*'. Rufus didn't dare turn to Leander for an explanation and had to wait for him to chew and swallow a lump of the mystery meat first. 'Stupid to think about *going* tonight' the slave eventually continued. 'You won't even get out of the city. Gates closed at dusk. They'll have you strung up by your ankles before sun-up.'

'Fine,' Rufus replied. 'First thing in the morning then.'

'That's a better idea' Leander offered, 'but not much better. Where're you going? How are you going to live?'

'I've no...' he groped for the right word - '...idea. Where would you go?'

Leander turned his head to look Rufus in the eye, risking the overseer's cane and answering with a rapid, clearly rehearsed plan of action.

'Me? I'd walk off-road by night to Brundisium. Talk my way on board one of the traders in the harbour, a Greek one, work my passage. Jump ship first chance I got, make my way along the coast to my people's country north of Epirus.' His eyes were distant. After a second he shrugged and carried on. 'Except that I wouldn't go in the first place. It's suicide. And it's not so bad here.' Leander took another big spoonful of stew and ate it with exaggerated pleasure to emphasise his point. Rufus didn't agree and his voice rose with frustration.

'Well I can't stick it anymore. I don't care what they do to me! I'd rather die than stay, got it?'

'Alright, alright!' Leander said softly. 'Keep it down, OK? Last thing you want is a crack on the head for breaking kitchen rules.' He glanced over his shoulder but the overseer was busy chatting up the cook.

'Look,' he continued, 'if you're serious, I have heard of this one thing you could try.'

Rufus nodded intently. 'It's more of a legend really, just something that I've heard the others talk about to cheer each other up, but there must be some truth in it.'

'Go on' Rufus urged him.

'I don't know what it was like where you came from,' he began 'but here they have these important priests, men who lead sacrifices and festivals and stuff. One per god, and they've got hundreds of those!'

'Same as at home', Rufus said. 'We called them druids'. Leander nodded in understanding.

'Same with us too. Same everywhere, I reckon. Well, apparently there's this important priest that lives not far from Rome, a day's walk south is what they say, in this sacred grove next to a lake called Diana's Mirror.'

Rufus nodded dumbly, wondering where this was all leading. Leander shot another quick look at the distracted overseer before resuming his tale. 'This priest is called 'the King of the Grove' and they say he lives like a king too - big house, anything he wants to eat, never has to do any work, plenty of girls...' The Greek's eyes grew distant again.

'So what?'

'Well, that's the funny thing, this 'king' is actually one of us - a slave. It's a law of their religion or something - this particular priest has to be a slave, can't be a Roman.'

Rufus was unimpressed.

'And I'm supposed to throw myself on this King's mercy, am I? Become his bellows-boy rather than theirs?' he jerked his head in the direction of the upper levels of the house. 'Live another ten years breaking my back every day for a bowl of rat stew?'

Leander hushed him, frustrated.

'Listen will you, rather than getting uppity? You Britons are crazy!' He shook his head, pausing for a few seconds to eat another spoonful of his dinner and check that the overseer was still occupied. 'I'm pretty sure it's rabbit. And anyway, you interrupted before the important bit'

'And what's that?'

'You could become the King yourself!'

'I don't understand' said Rufus.

'No, you really don't, do you?' his friend mocked. 'Any slave can become King of the Grove and live a life of luxury, comfort and ease, you see. Any one of us' he said, gesturing with his spoon around the table.

'And how does that happen? How do you get to be King of the Grove?' Rufus asked, his cooling stew now forgotten.

'This is where these Romans' twisted sense of humour comes in. They've managed to turn this sacred priesthood into a nasty little joke on us'. Leander stopped to eat again, deliberately dragging out Rufus's curiosity.

'Any slave can be the King of the Grove, even little old you' he repeated. 'You just have to kill the current king.' Rufus's face did not show any fear or disappointment at this revelation.

Perhaps he hadn't understood the full implications, thought Leander.

'And the temple is at the lake called Diana's Mirror, they say?'

'That's right' Leander grinned again 'You just need to escape the city, find the lake and temple without being recaptured, kill the king - who must have killed the guy before him, remember, as well as...'. The Greek was cut off and the smile wiped from his face as the overseer's cane swooshed and landed with a painful crack across his back. Rufus ducked involuntarily.

'No talking!' the man barked and the table fell into chastened silence. The two slaves didn't get another chance to speak that night.

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Getting out of the house had been easier than he had hoped. Rufus had simply got up at dawn, adopted a confident stride and walked up to the porter who sat on a stool next to the rear door. He caught the man's eye, yawned and lifted the basket he had stolen from the kitchen. The porter grunted in recognition: one of the junior slaves being sent on an early errand. He unlocked and opened the door. And that was it - Rufus was suddenly standing in the morning light of a Roman street wondering what to do with his illusionary freedom. '*South*' he thought, noticing where the sun was rising and heading off in the appropriate direction.

A child of the forest and hillside, this was Rufus's first time navigating the streets of a city alone. Luckily for him, it was mostly asleep: still too early for the carters and their oxen to be allowed to rumble around running over inattentive pedestrians, and several hours before its criminal element would crawl down from the slums into the smarter districts to prey on tourists and newcomers. He saw a few other early risers - mostly slaves on genuine minor missions from their masters - but they ignored Rufus entirely. Coming to a wider

thoroughfare heading south-east, he reasoned that it was likely to lead somewhere important, and was rewarded after fifteen minutes of walking with the sight of the massive city walls, pierced by the road which ran through a looming stone arch, its wooden gates standing open.

He was staring slack-jawed at the scale of the arch above his head when one of the guards prodded him in the chest with the butt of his short spear.

'Wakey-wakey country boy. No time for standing around in the big city. Where're you off to so early?'

Rufus stared at the man dumbly, his brain juggling the still-unfamiliar language.

'Jupiter's balls,' the soldier swore under his breath, 'Bloody immigrants!' He switched tone and speed accordingly: 'Where - are - you - going - slave?' Rufus had by now gathered his wits sufficiently to answer.

'Sorry - lobster.' The guard looked blank. 'They sent me for lobster. Told me go to Ostia?' He hefted his basket again for emphasis.

'You're on the wrong road for the port' the man replied, a little less gruffly. 'You want the Trigemina gate, not this one. Out there -' he pointed south through the gate, 'you'll only find dead people, not dead lobsters'. The slave boy hadn't planned on this and glanced around in half-understood confusion, his mouth open again. He looked very young and lost, and very far from home. The gate guard took pity. 'Look, you *can* go this way, it's just a bit longer. There's a cut-across to the Ostia road after a mile or so. Walk south until you see the big tomb of Priscilla. You can't miss it.' Rufus nodded his thanks and walked through the gate, trying to keep the spring of success out of his step.

'At this rate,' he thought with excitement *'I'll be the King of the Grove before sunset.'*

He walked briskly all morning, noting - and ignoring - the turn off at the Tomb of Priscilla. The road was lined with monuments to rich, dead Romans, both sides competing for ever-more lavish and impressive houses for the bones of the world's ruling families. Traffic flowed steadily towards the city - people pushing barrows filled with vegetables, men driving pairs of oxen pulling wide wooden carts stacked with goods of all types, the occasional messenger clattering by on horseback. Rufus kept his eyes low and did his best to disappear into the background, just another unimportant domestic on his way somewhere to get something for someone. The gaps between tombs grew wider the further he travelled from the city walls, the green fields and hills of the country spreading out on either side. He did not stop walking all morning, pausing only as the sun reached its high point, to drink his stolen wine and eat his stolen bread in the shade of an ancient cypress tree. Rufus ditched the basket, thinking that he could just as plausibly be carrying a piece of news to his master, if challenged.

Occasionally, he took the risk of asking for directions when his path crossed with some traveller who looked like they posed no threat. He came across one such in the early afternoon, an old woman leading a goat. A local, he gambled. Her thicker accent proved him right, but made it harder for him to make sense of some of her words.

"The Mirror of Diana?" she ruminated, squinting up at the pale, foreign-looking boy who'd got the lake's name backwards. "Not far, not far. First go past the big lake, the Albanus. Diana's Mirror is a couple of miles further on."

"Thank you," he replied and then by way of explanation, "I have to deliver a message to my master there. It's important." The old woman nodded.

"They usually say that," she said. Rufus thought he must have misheard the woman's country accent, or that something he'd said had been in such poor Latin that she was confused.

“Why is the lake called that?” he asked, to deflect his embarrassment at not having understood.

“Wait until the moon rises, then you’ll see” she said, more cryptically than he thought was necessary. Rufus had picked up enough of Roman culture from conversations with other slaves to know that the goddess Diana was ‘the hunter’. He didn’t get the moon reference though.

“Thanks again,” he said. She smiled and gave his upper arm a motherly pat.

“May Diana protect you from what is to come.”

He reached the ‘big lake’ around an hour later, in that suffocating part of the afternoon when the heat has been building up all day and the evening’s cool is still some distance off. Rufus left the road and walked down to the shore, the wide turquoise expanse of water overlooked by the mountain that wrapped around it. Several other over-heated travellers had done the same. Without bothering to strip off his sticky tunic, he entered the shallows and felt the magical renewing effect of cold water on hot, grimy skin. He ducked his head several times, the chill of the lake soothing the throbbing he could already sense from his burned neck and forehead. In that moment, gazing up at the distant forested mountain and the blazing blue summer sky, he felt a kind of freedom that he could not remember from his former life, before the war had changed everything.

The clothes on his back were dry within minutes of Rufus resuming his walk south. His sandals took slightly longer, but soon even their damp squeaks of protest died down. Traffic was lighter now, as afternoon wore on towards evening, the magnetic pull of the city waning until the next morning. The old woman with the goat was as good as her word and soon Rufus saw the glint of another large body of water appear in the distance, between the trees lining the road. As he neared, he could see how the lake got part of its name, its oval shape

and colour resembling a polished metal hand-mirror. His mind jumped back to a memory of his mother, who had been so proud of the mirror she had owned - *so Roman!* she'd said. Like the lake in which he had cooled off, Diana's Mirror was fringed with steeply sloping woods, building almost to cliffs on its northern shore. And it was to that part of the lake that he must head, Rufus knew as soon as he spotted the shining white marble of a huge building visible from all the way across the lake. He may have been a barbarian boy from the backwaters of the Empire, but he knew that only the most important buildings were made from that glossy, white stone.

The climb through the woods to the highest point of the lake shore was tougher than he was expecting and Rufus had to stop and rest several times. He cut through the trees rather than following the road, aware that he was steadily approaching the point of danger. He'd eaten little and walked all day in the heat, the strong arms that working the bellows had given him of no use in climbing hills. By the time Rufus neared the top, the shadows were twice as long as the trees that made them and the sun was close to setting. He became aware of voices in the near-distance, men talking and joking with each other. *Must be close now*, he reasoned, stooping into a crouch and moving stealthily towards the sound, as if he were back hunting deer in a British thicket.

The forest undergrowth allowed him to approach invisibly, close enough to see without being seen. The voices belonged to a group of men, clearly soldiers by the uniformity of their armour and weapons. They wore no helmets, and dark green tunics covered their breastplates. Rufus counted six in total, standing in a casual circle next to a cart that he recognised with a shiver of horror. The cart itself wasn't frightening - just a fully-enclosed wooden box on wheels, with a door at the back containing a small, barred window - but what it represented was truly terrifying to someone who'd spent three months being transported to

Rome in one. As Rufus fought the urge to creep away until it was safe to break into a run, two more soldiers emerged from the growing gloom, each with one arm of an unconscious man firmly gripped just below the shoulder. Rufus froze to the spot. The man's feet trailed behind as the soldiers half-dragged him towards the cart, and blood dripped from his hairline. Another soldier unlocked and opened the cart's door and helped the pair to hoist the bleeding man carelessly inside. The snap and click of the lock as the door slammed shut hit Rufus like a physical blow and he rocked back on his heels.

'Is that the last of the day?' one of the men asked.

'Must be' someone else remarked. 'Be too dark for anyone to find the road up now. Not without crashing around in the woods.'

'Ok,' a third soldier said with authority, 'Let's knock it on the head for the day. Call in the scouts, Optio.' The second speaker spread two fingers in his mouth and made three piercing whistles that carried far across the hillside. Rufus guessed that 'Optio' was a rank, not the man's name.

'What's the total?' the man in charge asked the Optio.

'Seventeen, sir'.

'Just two off the record' the senior officer said thoughtfully. 'Must really suck to be a slave in summer, I guess!' His men broke out into guffaws and sniggers at their boss's joke. Rufus felt dread creep over him like a cloud covering the sun. The officer banged the pommel of his sword hard on the back of the cart. 'Take 'em back to Rome, Optio' he commanded. The man saluted and jumped up into the driver's position. With a crack of the whip, the cart's wheels began to turn as the oxen reluctantly began their long plod north.

'And straight back from the slave market, understood?' the officer called after them. 'No time-wasting in the brothel!' The soldiers laughed again and the Optio raised his hand in a cheerful wave and disappeared down the hill.

Rufus squatted behind his shield of undergrowth, processing what he had just seen. The prison-cart was full of seventeen... what? Slaves? That seemed to be the implication, if he'd understood correctly what the soldiers had said. Why were these men up here collecting slaves? Where had they all come from? What did this mean for his dream of becoming the King of the Grove? He'd never imagined that the temple would be guarded. That seemed like a naive assumption now, he realised. His train of thought was interrupted before it could get any further as he was suddenly seized by both arms and yanked violently backwards. 'One more hiding here!' his captor shouted to the circle of soldiers. 'Just a kid, listening to you all.'

'Gods damn it!' the officer swore, looking to see if the Optio and his cart were still in sight. 'Well done, Scout. Good to see at least one of my men is awake.' The cart was well out of recall range. He weighed up his options, balancing the inconvenience of a nighttime prisoner against his value come the morning.

'Shall I slit his throat, Sir?' the scout asked, hand on the hilt of a knife. The officer paused for an instant as time stood still for Rufus.

'No, knock him out, tie him up and bring him with us' he concluded. 'He can spend the night on the guardroom floor listening to you lot snore.' Rufus was spared the sound of another round of sycophantic laughter from the soldiers by a blow to the top of his head that made his sight flash intensely with golden light before darkness descended.

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It was the smell of roasting pork that first crept into Rufus's consciousness and told him that he was still alive. That sensation was rapidly joined by waves of pain behind his eyes and across his skull. The dull throb of his sunburn came in a distant third, barely noticeable against the backdrop of the white-hot jabs he felt when he tried to crack an eyelid open. After

a few minutes, this became less intensely painful and he was able to grab brief glimpses of his surroundings. Laying on his side, hands bound behind him, he could see the backs of the soldiers huddled around a firepit in the centre of what seemed to be a large wooden hut, smokey and damp at the same time. One man was slicing meat from the carcass of a small boar and passing it out to his rowdy companions who waited impatiently with iron plates. Served, they made their way one by one to a table with benches on which stood a large jug and several rough cups. Rufus knew he couldn't just lie there and accept whatever fate had in store. He decided to wait until the men had finished eating, thinking that they would be less likely to react violently if their stomachs were full. He used the time to test his bonds (tight and unbreakable) and to haul himself into an upright sitting position. The soldiers didn't notice, or didn't care, busy eating, drinking and bantering with each other. Their officer was nowhere to be seen.

When he judged that they were finished, Rufus spoke up in what he thought of as his most manly voice.

'You should let me go before it's too late. You're going to be in trouble if I don't deliver my message to my master.' The man nearest to him half turned and flung a gnawed bone at the boy.

'Shut it, fugitive.'

'I'm not sure what I've done wrong or why you've tied me up, but I must get my message to my master. Please. Listen to me!' His voice had lost most of its imagined manliness. The soldier turned completely to address Rufus head-on.

'We've heard it all before, fugitive, so you can drop the act. There's only one reason slaves come up this hill and it's not out of a sense of loyalty to their masters.' Rufus had nothing to say in response and dropped his head. The man continued to bait him. 'That's what I thought

- gutless, like all the rest.' He threw another filthy bone, which bounced off Rufus's swollen and burned forehead, and went back to the raucous conversation around the table.

An hour later, the table began to drift off one by one to their bunks at the far end of the room. Rufus's tormenter stopped and stooped over him on his way to bed. He was slightly drunk and, as is the case with some men, had grown less aggressive with the alcohol.

'Thought you'd have a go at being King of the Grove did you?' he asked in a mocking tone.

Rufus said nothing in reply but stared fiercely at the man, who carried on with more friendliness in his voice. 'They're usually bigger than you, mind. You know the type: think they're a bit handy with a sword, nasty temper on 'em, ideas above their station. Have to hurt some of them real bad before they give up. But they all get caught in the rat-trap and sent back in the end.'

'Sent back?' said Rufus, his voice boyish again from the fear of returning to the house, the bellows, his pointless, suffering slave life.

'Yeah,' the man confirmed. 'Sold back to their owner, or sold on to someone else if we can't work out where they're from. After a solid beating of course. Nice little earner for everyone involved.' He smiled humourlessly, baring several blackened teeth. 'Why else do you think the army keeps us up here?'

It suddenly became clear to Rufus how cruel a joke this all was, just as Leander had unwittingly warned him. It made perfect sense when you thought about it: slaves would always try and run away, it was the only sane choice. There were lots of ways to try and prevent this, but nothing that would stop a determined runaway. At least, nothing as cheap and effective as spreading a legend about a slave-king that would be whispered between the hopeless in every house in the city. The story would relentlessly draw escapees into one

place, to be easily picked off one at a time and recycled back into the system. And for a profit too.

'The rat-trap' Rufus said, smiling to himself in appreciation of the simplicity and neatness of the story of the King of the Grove - it promised the ultimate escape, and just a day's easy walk from Rome! 'So, you caught seventeen escaped slaves today?' he asked.

'Eighteen' the soldier corrected, pointing an unsteady finger at Rufus.

'And the King of the Grove, that's just a story, right?'

'A story?' The man appeared baffled by the question. 'No story, boy. He's as real as you or me. He's down there -' he jerked his thumb over his shoulder '- a quarter mile down the cliff in the grandest temple I ever saw outside of the city. Big bastard too. Arms like tree-trunks. Barrelled straight through six of us when he turned up a couple of years back.' He laughed at the memory returning. 'He made absolute mincemeat out of the old king an' all. Took his head clean off... I made a lot of money taking bets that day. Trust me, you're better off being sent back to wherever you ran from.'

Rufus felt the faint glimmer of something like hope again. If the King was real, then surely he had to try?

'So, he's been king ever since? No one has challenged him?'

'Oh, plenty have challenged him!' the soldier laughed. 'We can't catch them all. Don't want to either, else we'd have nothing to bet on. Reckon he's probably killed one a week, on average. The ones that swim the lake are hardest for us to intercept. They don't last very long though, knacker themselves out you see? Not much sport in that for us, can't get good odds on them. The best fights are the ones we arrange now and then, when a particularly promising challenger turns up.'

'What odds would you give me?'

The soldier began to laugh, then squinted appraisingly at Rufus.

'Now? In the condition you're in? Without a weapon? Five hundred to one' he pronounced.

'As good as dead.'

'I'm pretty lethal with a bow,' Rufus said quietly, so that only the soldier could hear. 'That'd make me a much safer bet, if you could get one to me.'

The man paused and considered the deal that was being offered, then stood up and shouted to his companions.

'Hey, lads. The kid's willing to give it a go. Who wants to put a Sestertius on him at 500-1? Amazing payout if the boy manages it somehow!' The others scoffed, uninterested in risking their money on such a clear no-hoper.

'You must think we were born yesterday, Cassius!'

The soldier-turned-bookie altered his approach. 'OK, so who wants to bet against my ten Sesterti that say he's going to do it?' This was more attractive and their laughs of derision turned to accusations that Cassius knew something that they didn't.

But before long, the other soldiers were competing to push silver and gold coins into the man's hands, betting their pay that Rufus was about to get quickly and messily killed by the King of the Grove.

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Cassius whispered instructions to him on the short walk from the guard hut to the cliff.

'He killed an archer last week, down by the shoreline. Body was still there on the last supply drop, so that's your best bet.' Rufus was about to reply when one of the other men caught up, preventing any further conversation between the pair.

'Here, take this' the other soldier ordered sternly, thrusting a tree branch into Rufus's hands.

'What is it?'

'It's a branch, what's it look like?' Rufus didn't know what to say to this so the man continued.

'You're supposed to break a bough from the sacred tree in the grove before you can challenge the king. Didn't they tell you that part?' The soldier saw the boy's uncomprehending face and explained in an exasperated tone: 'Look, I dunno why, it's just something to do with religion, OK? All I know is that we're the ones that get in trouble every time that bloody tree threatens to die because some fool of a slave has torn another bit off it. So just take this branch and don't go pulling any live ones off, got it?' Rufus nodded. *And I thought I had problems*, he said to himself.

Three men lowered Rufus jerkily down the sheer face of the cliff, the rope tied under his armpits. It wasn't a particularly long drop, but certainly long enough to break the legs of anyone who tried to jump down to the temple complex below, probably enough to kill them too. Thickly veiled by trees, the marble buildings clustered together in the semi-circle of land between the rocky cliff and the edge of the lake, inaccessible without a rope, a boat, or a lengthy swim. The moon had now risen and, though it was a few days off being full, it reflected back off the still surface of the water like a mirror - *Diana's Mirror*, Rufus realised. The burnished bronze roof of the biggest building shone like a beacon in the woods below. The rope twisted as he descended and spun in lazy circles, one moment seeing the lake, the next face-to-face with the huge head of one of the statues that filled the thirty-foot niches in the cliff face. A line of gods silently overlooking Diana's temple, and the King of the Grove somewhere within it.

Moments later he thumped to the ground and slipped the rope over his shoulders. It was quickly hauled back in by the soldiers, their white faces dimly visible far above. They hadn't left Rufus any instructions about how to get back up, because that wasn't one of the two

possible outcomes in his future now. He considered the bough of the sacred tree in his hands and wondered if he should just throw it away. *Now's not the time to anger any of their gods*, he decided, keeping hold of the branch. The grove began a few feet from the foot of the cliff, the tall dark pines growing closely together and obscuring the buildings that had been so clear on the journey down the cliff moments before. Rufus tried to remember their layout and plot a course to the lakeside that would avoid them. The night was still and without even a breeze through the trees to cover any noise he might make, so he carefully and quietly edged his way towards the water.

He heard it before he saw it, the ripples of the lake lapping patiently on the pebbly shore, and seconds later the glimmer of the moon on the water came into view. There was enough reflected light for Rufus to pick out and immediately recognise the shape of a mouldering body laying on the ground a few feet from the water's edge, just as Cassius had described it. It was only a short distance away, but the light was as much a curse as a blessing now that he needed to venture out of cover. No trees grew where the lake met the land, and a green loamy expanse of grass, moss and ferns led a hundred yards up to the steps of the temple. Rufus looked at the building, its impassive columns looming above the trees that surrounded it, the spaces between them containing only empty darkness. Crouched low, he drew on his boyhood years of stalking wildlife to move as silently and quickly as possible, knowing that movement as much as sound could give him away. Rufus was soon at the body and threw himself down alongside it, catching his breath and listening. Nothing reached his ears but the repetitive rhythm of the waves. His nose, however, filled with the grim, sickly stench of the aging corpse. Trying to breathe only through his mouth, Rufus stretched a hand carefully across. He felt around the body - disturbingly soft to his touch - for the things he needed. It was laying on its face, so noiselessly extracting three arrows from the quiver was simple. *If three aren't enough, no amount of arrows will help*. Risking a glance over the rotting archer's

form, he saw the man's bow in his shrivelled hand. In one movement, he rose back into a crouch, scooped up the weapon and made a stealthy dash to the relative safety of the treeline.

His back to a tree and his eyes moving between the body, the temple and the trees that fringed it, Rufus waited for any sign that he had been seen. Nothing moved. The black voids between the temple's columns remained empty and the monstrous King had not appeared to see who violated his grove this time. Rufus slowly exhaled. Testing the bowstring with his thumb, he was unsurprised that it had grown slack with time and moisture. He jammed the bow's end into the hard ground and bent it so that the string could be looped and tightened. Nocking one of his arrows onto the damaged bowstring, he could see straight away that the weapon's accuracy and power could not be trusted. He'd need to get up close to have any chance of hitting something.

Rufus stood for an instant on the brink of the decision, hesitating in the security of the sleeping grove. *Oh well*, he reasoned, *nothing for it now but to see what happens. I'm not going back*. He crept forwards towards the steps of the temple, stolen bow half-drawn, his step steady and heart beating deafeningly in his ears. A raised dais at the foot of the steps held an ornate statue of what could only be Diana, goddess of the hunt, two short throwing spears in hand. Golden arrows nestled in a quiver over her shoulder and a golden cloak billowed dramatically out behind that. A purple ribbon tied her hair into a practical style and echoed the colour of the half-length hunting boots she wore. Behind the statue, a curving wall held carved symbols in relief, representing what must be the three aspects of her god-hood, Rufus saw: the hunting wood, a crescent moon, and two crossed lines. He puzzled momentarily over the final image, then shrugged and advanced cautiously to the foot of the temple steps.

As he moved one silent pace at a time up the steps, Rufus saw that the internal space of the temple was actually quite small, the back wall visible in the dim moonlight. He reached the top and stood motionless between red-plastered pillars that dwarfed him. The temple's inner walls and altar were adorned with the rich gifts of pilgrims - tridents of bronze, piles of coins, inscribed tablets of silver - but no sign of any priest. Rufus sat down on the top step with his back to the temple and looked at the shining lake spread out below. *What now?* He considered investigating every corner of the complex, but felt safer high up on the steps of the deserted temple gazing at the lake.

He had no way of tracking time passing beyond the slow track of the moon and the stars across the wheel of the skyline before him, but at some point Rufus became dimly aware of a howling, shrieking terror of a noise, far away behind him and indistinct. *A fox? Perhaps.* He strained his ears for a minute but the grove had returned to silence. The moon was waning and the pre-dawn in the east had just begun to put the lowest stars to death, when a second noise broke the calm. This one was more of a thud, like an axe going into a tree. *Not a fox,* he thought, jumping to his feet. The sound had come from the same direction, behind and to the right. Rufus moved stealthily down the steps and entered the wood in his defensive half-crouch.

The second, clearer thud came a few seconds later and helped steer his course through the trees. He picked his feet carefully through the undergrowth, trying to place each step on solid earth rather than crackling bracken or a bone-dry twig. The dense wood was very dark, the moonlight struggling to penetrate the foliage above. Rufus continued as quickly as he dared but soon lost track how far he'd come. *Had he somehow missed the mystery woodcutter?* Then, as if sent by the goddess of the wood, a third guiding thud boomed from the right, only

a few yards away. Rufus inched towards a slightly lighter patch - the trees thinned and the edge of a clearing emerged. He stayed back in the shadows trying to make out what it contained. The dying moon revealed a single tree growing in the dead centre of a circle of empty ground. Around this tree a massive figure of a man patrolled, an equally gargantuan sword raised in one meaty hand, the other constantly moving between his face, hair and belt as if checking something vital was in place. He wore a short, once-white tunic, his beard grew unchecked towards his powerful chest, and his eyes were ringed with dark circles. All the while he kept the tree at his back as if protecting it. As he skittered sideways, the man muttered reassuringly to himself.

'You're OK now. Too late for visitors. You're OK. You're OK.'

Rufus hardly breathed, consciously suppressing every noise under his control. He was sure that he was invisible against the black of the forest murk, but couldn't prevent his heart leaping in his chest every time the circling figure turned in his direction. After a few seconds, the man changed his mantra.

'Sleep soon, maybe. Safe tonight. Sleep soon.'

Just when Rufus thought that he had settled into a regular pattern around the tree, without warning, the King of the Grove (*who else could it be?*) screamed in anguish and swung his enormous sword at the tree. It bit into the bark with a deafening thud that cracked back in echo off the wall of trees surrounding the clearing. Chunks of wood splintered off the trunk but Rufus could see that it would be the work of ten thousand nights to do any real damage to the ancient, sacred tree. The king fell to his knees sobbing, head slowly tapping against the base of the tree trunk, his sword forgotten and both hands in his hair. *This is it*, thought Rufus. *He's lost his mind. I'll never get a better chance.* He stepped out of the black of the wood and into the dimming circle of light, drawing back the bow string as he slowly crept forwards.

Fifteen paces away from the broken figure of Diana's high priest he stopped, sure that he couldn't miss from there. His left elbow stiffened and eased backwards, increasing the tension on the bowstring until the head of the arrow almost touched the knuckles of the hand gripping the bow. Rufus paused, looking pityingly at the big man crouched and rocking beneath the grove's sacred tree. He didn't look much like a king right now. *What could bring a man like that to... to this?* he wondered. As if he'd spoken the words out loud, the King whipped around in terror, locking eyes with the boy with the bow a few feet in front of him. His hand searched blindly for the hilt of his sword.

'Too soon!' he gibbered, wagging a finger, 'Too soon! You can't kill me, you haven't got a bough from the tree! It won't count!'

Without lowering the bow, Rufus nodded left and down, where the branch the soldier had given him was visible, tucked into his belt across his back. The King opened his mouth again and then, with nothing to say, shut it. He let his head fall backwards and breathed out in a long sigh that rattled into a deep laugh of genuine mirth. *Totally nuts*, Rufus thought. *Must be the loneliness.*

'It's all yours, boy' the King eventually said when his chuckle subsided, his face transformed with the smile of a man ten years younger. 'For all the good it'll do you. And thank you.'

'What do you mean?' Rufus asked, perplexed. 'What the hell do you -' but he didn't get to finish his question, the treacherous bowstring slipping out of his distracted fingers with a sudden twang. The arrow leapt forwards, corkscrewing wildly across the short distance between the two escaped slaves, and buried itself in the giant man's chest with a unique thud of its own. The king's eyes bulged but his smile remained fixed. Rufus threw the bow away and ran forward. Grabbing the king by the shoulders, he demanded an answer.

'What do you mean? Tell me!' But the king was beyond speech now, dark blood bubbling up between the teeth of his deathly grin, eyes losing focus for the final time.

Rufus let him go and collapsed to the ground, trying to make sense of the king's dying words - this king who looked like a beggar. This king who clearly spent his nights - and his days? - relentlessly defending his throne from a never-ending succession of challengers, each one younger and more hungry than the last. A half-life lived in the twilight of perpetual fear. *What kind of kingdom was that? What kind of freedom?*

And then it all made instant, terrifying sense to Rufus. He saw with horrible clarity what the next, the final, weeks - months - perhaps even years of his life would be like as the King of the Grove. A waking nightmare of paranoia and doubt, only ever able to delay the inevitable.

This really was the cruelest of jokes to play on a slave. Without stopping to look back at the man he'd just freed, he ran without care for the noise he made or the branches scratching his face, until he arrived at the lake's edge. Diving in, he struck out with the last of his strength for the far shore. *Perhaps I can sneak back into the house without even having been missed*, his tired mind tried to reassure him. *There are worse things than the bellows and rat stew.*

* * * * *

The characters above are all fictional, but the escaped slave-turned-priest of Diana was a real thing, as was the method of applying for the job. 'The Rex Nemorensis' (King of the Grove) is mentioned by several classical sources, including Strabo's [Geography](#) and Suetonius's [Life of Caligula](#).

The historian J.G. Frazer wrote about the his interpretation of this myth is his book '[The Golden Bough](#)', Chapter 1 of which (p35 onwards) contains an explanation of the priest-murder cult at the heart of the story you've just read.

I've no idea if the city of Rome used this suspiciously convenient local myth as a low effort method of recapturing escaped slaves, but it would have made sense to station a small number of troops there to see who turned up looking to become the next King. The true horror of life as a Rex Nemorensis can only be imagined, thankfully.

This story is extracted from the forthcoming collection 'Six Nasty, Brutish and Short Stories from Ancient Rome' by Ed McWatt. Find out more at www.edmcwatt.com