

CALIGULA REINCARNATE

KILLER WITH A THOUSAND FACES

By
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1854, Saint Joseph, Louisiana

He knew who he was. One instant, a barefoot twelve-year-old following a rutted dirt road to the Mississippi River, the next, someone completely different. Looking down, beyond mismatched knee patches on faded overalls, dust-covered his bare black feet. He stopped swishing a cane pole through tall weeds browned by a hot summer and carried the pole more spear-like.

He planned to meet Pete and Woodrow at the abandoned river barge landing, catch some catfish, swim, then sneak by the back of the Saint Jo Mercantile where black male slaves sometimes played dice for Liberty Head pennies. As he formed those thoughts, a slight pressure built at the base of his skull. It expanded up the back of his head, moved forward, then exploded in a flash of cognitive light, and he knew who he was. The leisurely plans changed. Just like that.

Awareness of his true self always came as mental lightning, always at puberty. He knew two lives, his real one, the person he once was, and the young boy's life in which he was bottled until this moment. He could recall every detail of his own life up until the moment of his first death. He knew everything about his new life—which wasn't hopeful. The fifth child of a Louisiana slave, his father, kept him chopping sugar cane, which allowed no time for education. He could not remember anything about the other lives between his original life and this poor peasant's. They were leaves on a tree, forgotten and replaced hundreds of times.

Maybe it was possible to change this boy's destiny. He might make it work, to turn this poor slave's life into something enjoyable. He felt he accomplished it before, but it required strength and cunning. But why waste time?

Reaching the disused river barge dock, he decided. At least he would have some fun first. He walked out on the rotting planks and sat dangling his feet in the muddy water, waiting.

"Woodrow, can I go swimmin' witcha? I won't tell on you if you let me."

It was a little girl's voice, Woodrow's sister. The more, the merrier, he thought.

He stood facing the shore watching them top the bank. Woodrow carried two fishing poles in one hand and a rusty trowel in the other.

"Pete ain't comin'. His ma caught him skippin' Sunday school," Woodrow said. "I had to bring Ruthie or I couldn't come neither," he added apologetically.

The plantation masters who owned them were Christians and gave everyone the day off on Sunday provided they attend church. Of course, the slaves had to build their own church building, but when it was finished, the plantation owners provided a piano.

Looking at the two of them against a cloudless blue sky, he saw coal black, close-cropped hair over large, excited dark eyes. The anticipation of fun and adventure in the boy's reminded of his youth, and his trusting sister.

"That's all right, she can dig worms while we fish," he grinned, coming toward them.

"Unh-unh," Ruthie said, screwing up her face, "I ain't diggin' no worms."

"All right then, you go in the field and bring back some grasshoppers and crickets. They make good bait. Me and Woodrow will get the worms."

"What can I put them in?" she asked with childish curiosity.

Both boys looked up and down the shore. Before the new dock opened in St Joseph, this had been a well-traveled place. Discarded items littered the area.

"There's a bottle. Use it." Woodrow pointed toward a brown glass vessel half buried in mud.

The little girl ran over and pried it up.

"It's broke," she said, holding the bottle up. "See."

The neck of the bottle was gone, creating a jagged hole.

"Just be careful, that's all. Them bugs ain't able to get out," her brother responded.

She nodded and moved up the bank holding the bottle away from her. When she disappeared into the field, Woodrow said, "Let's see. Seems there was good worms by them trees." He pointed downstream.

"I'll dig if you untwist the poles," he said to Woodrow. "Hand me the trowel."

Woodrow passed it to him. Its rusty narrow blade had been bent and straightened. The wooden handle was split, held together by bailing wire. He hefted it, looking at the point.

Woodrow squatted and, holding the hook carefully, started untangling the line on a pole.

"Hey, Woodrow, ever see one of them birds before?"

Woodrow looked at the sky beyond his friend to see. He turned toward Woodrow. The hand clenched the trowel in an iron grip. Shooting forward with sickening accuracy, the rusty point entered Woodrow's left eye, sunk an inch, struck skull and stopped. The blow knocked the boy over.

Sprawled on his back, reaching for his wounded eye, Woodrow screamed as blood welled and gushed on the dock. Straddling Woodrow, he kicked the other boy's crotch several times. He kneeled, lifted the dripping trowel high and plunged it into Woodrow's throat below the Adam's apple.

Woodrow gagged, clutched at his neck and tried to roll away. Crimson fountained across the attacker's chest.

He brought the trowel down three more times, mangling Woodrow's neck when the high-pitched scream started.

Ruthie stood, horror-frozen, holding the broken bottle. She screamed and screamed a little girl's life or death siren.

The boy, sticky with blood, left the quivering corpse and lunged toward the girl. One stride, two strides, three strides, he slipped going up the bank. Amazingly the girl had not moved. She stood screaming.

As he lost his footing, their eyes met. Something registered, and Ruthie turned to run, but too late. He had her black pigtail hair before she had gone ten feet. Kicking, screaming, sobbing, he dragged her toward the river. At the levy's crest, he turned her around, yanked down on her hair exposing her throat and thrust the wicked tool up into the flesh beneath her lower jaw. He jerked it free and stabbed her below the sternum. When the silent body sagged, he released the tightly braided hair, and she crumpled down the slope.

He examined the debris along the shore. He found a stone anchor with five feet of frayed dry rotted rope braided to an iron ring.

Struggling, he brought the twenty-pound anchor to the dock. Calmly, he untangled the fishing line from the three poles and removed Woodrow's belt. He brought Ruthie's body and laid it on the dock next to her brother's. The oozing viscous blood felt oddly wonderful and reminded him of better times. Moving purposefully, the thin smile never leaving his face, he tied the bodies together at the ankles then to his ankle. Using the belt, he fixed the knotted fishing line and his ankle to the anchor. He checked it to make sure the knots were tight.

Confident everything would hold long enough, he pushed the bodies into the water. The current immediately pulled them, and he struggled to maintain balance. Finally, bent over, tethered by the belt and rope, he lifted the anchor chest high and heaved it into the river. He followed as it sank, dragging the bodies beneath the muddy waters.

His eyes were opened wide, staring at the cloudy brown water. The anchor hit bottom, Woodrow's bloodless face bobbed accusingly close to his own then swirled down. The sight of Woodrow made his smile bigger, letting out some of the air that stuffed his cheeks.

Yes, maybe he could have made something from this peasant's life. But black slaves were considered less than human, much like in his original life. No, it was better this way. They might find the bodies—an insoluble mystery, three murdered children. Who would be blamed? Oh, so sad.

He saw the sun above the murky water. For an instant, he thought about trying to unfasten the anchor, but only an instant. Old instincts die hard. He opened his mouth and watched the bubbles rise.

I told you, long ago: I have existed from the morning of the world, and I shall exist until the last star falls from the night. Although I have taken this form, I am all men as I am no man and therefore I am a God.

Caligula laughed.

New York City, 2012

Sarah sighed, hoping to sleep on the plane. But by the time she slumped into a taxi at LaGuardia, her stomach was locked, her shoulders tense and her thoughts dark. “Salisbury, on 57th,” she said, adding, “between 6th and 7th.”

She always said these words to the yellow cab drivers she drew in the taxi queue. These simple instructions informed the usually foreign driver that she knew the city and they could not get away with shenanigans.

The darkness was Sarah’s constant companion these days. So many bad things happened in the last few months, it was hard to imagine anything worse—but she did anyway. Her mind explored one doomed possibility after another. Each concluded in a swelling wave of anxiety. Her therapist had taught her ways, in addition to medications, to help break the mental cycle. Today nothing worked.

She knew something bad was going to happen. Her husband, Harris, walked out the last time the feeling was this strong. After seven years, he just stood in the hall for a few seconds, then left. Those seconds seemed eternal. Sarah wanted desperately to say something, but they had been through so much. She couldn’t think of anything new to say. He didn’t even slam the door. He gave her no reason to be angry, which, of course, made her furious.

After moments of fuming, she realized she didn’t know what to do. She couldn’t begin to get her mind around the idea of no longer having Harris in her life. However, she deserved it.

In the morning, Sarah Warner folded the newspaper, counted out a \$2.25 tip, exactly fifteen percent of the bill, and left the coffee shop. With a day to kill between meetings, she planned to visit some museums.

Outside, slick with mist, Sarah opened her umbrella and flagged a taxi.

"Metropolitan Museum," she said shaking her closed umbrella as she slid into the back seat. Yellow eyes in the rearview mirror measured Sarah's for an instant. The driver nodded, turned on the meter and pulled into the traffic.

Fear and suspicion radiated from the driver's eyes. Four cabbies, throats cut and drained of blood, waited patiently for the police to find them over the last month. The guy had a right to be suspicious. Thinking of the serial killings strengthened Sarah’s foreboding.

Sarah closed her eyes, inhaled through her nose, held the breath to a count of four then slowly let it out through slightly parted lips. She relaxed, a little.

She wondered about yesterday’s meeting. In one respect, the meeting had gone better than hoped. It had not turned into a shouting match. Her client, George Caruthers, CEO of Caruthers Industries, remained calm at his end of the polished conference table. Flanked on either side of the table by two daughters and a dozen executives, Caruthers’ hooded eyes followed every move as Sarah summarized the thick document she created, detailing the pros and cons of competing with the Chinese in the home entertainment industry. As expected, the cons overwhelmed the pros.

Caruthers was a feisty old warrior who wanted badly to get back in the game with the Chinese. Alone in this desire, all his executives, advisors and daughters counseled against it. Hiring Sarah's consulting firm was their way of laying the old man's dream to rest. He listened, less than happy as Sarah's presentation echoed his own company's findings.

Sarah tipped the driver seventy-five cents, slightly more than 15 percent, and hurried up the stairs to the Metropolitan Museum.

Inside she crossed the impressive great hall, paid admission and decided to visit 20th Century art first. A bust caught her attention as she passed through the Roman sculpture exhibit. A marble head, atop a pedestal, glowed under a small spotlight. Almost the countenance of a boy, empty eyes stared from five feet away. The face somehow compelled Warner to step closer to the pallid face in the halogen beam’s harsh light.

Fine-featured, almost feminine, the face held the slightest smile. Sarah could not decide if it was a knowing smile, a cruel one, or both.

Other people milled in the area, but Sarah felt isolated from sight and sound. Something about the two-thousand-year-old marble face transfixed her. Her stomach knotted, her heart thumped faster. She knew the feeling all too well—something bad was about to happen, something damned bad.

A half step closer, trance-like, her hand reached out, as if on its own and stroked the cool stone cheek with the back of her fingers. A tiny spark buzzed her knuckles. No more than static electricity from carpet, but her surprised and assaulted hand jerked away.

Her reaction to touching the statue was not at all what she expected.

She looked at her hand, then back at the marble head. For the first time, she read the plaque on the pedestal, "Emperor Gaius Caesar - Caligula."

Sarah Warner moved on. She spent over an hour marveling at the works of Matisse, Picasso, Monet, and Braque. She felt a little better as she left the museum, the morning dread and depression lifting a little.

Outside, the clouds had evaporated like her earlier fears. Warner hailed a cab, mouthing the word taxi.

"Taxi? Cab, car, automobile, vehicle. Ah, vehiculum."

Warner jerked her head to see the speaker. She was alone.

"What the hell?" she puzzled.

The voice came again, "Hel? Underworld, Dante's Inferno. Inferorum, Hades."

Warner suddenly realized the voice was inside her head, loud and clear. She looked to see if anyone stared at her.

A taxi pulled to a stop, and a bewildered Sarah Warner got in. "Salisbury Hotel. West 57th, between 6th and 7th," Sarah said, looking to see if somehow the voice was a trickster.

The voice in her head spoke. "Hotel, motel, hostel, hospitality house. Ah, hospitium."

Sarah looked in the mirror to see if the driver was watching. He was not.

When she entered her hotel room, Sarah was concerned. The voice had rattled off a dozen strings of related words in the taxi, each connected to some word she thought.

She stretched out on the bed, massaging the bridge of her nose. What was happening? The possibilities were limited. Had her depression-driven anxiety crossed a psychotic line into madness? Not likely, maybe the exhaustion and stress were finally too much. A mind can only tolerate so much sadness and depression.

She developed symptoms of anxiety before. Once, an odd phrase continuously ran through her mind: *the end is the beginning; the beginning is old*. She had no idea what it meant, or why she thought it in the first place, but once it came into her head, it repeated itself over and over. The internal voice was probably an advanced version of this recurring phrase symptom. She rose, retrieved her cell phone and made a note to call her doctor. A stiff drink might help her sleep and chase away this ghost voice.

"Spiritus," the voice said.

This really annoyed her. Sarah decided a nap might offer a cure.

When she woke, the voice was back at once. Sarah sat pinched-faced during dinner, concentrating, trying to avoid thinking. It didn't help. Running rampant, the voice strung words together one after another. At one point, the waiter even asked Sarah if she was all right. Feeling pale, Sarah only nodded and ordered another glass of house cabernet.

Sarah bought a bottle of Barola, an Italian red wine, on 6th Avenue on the way back to her room. The entire walk back from the restaurant, the voice chattered constantly and began responding to visual input as well as Sarah's thoughts.

Warner poured the red wine into one of the hotel glasses and sipped with purpose. Normally she had a two-glass limit. She hoped a third or fourth might silence the voice.

After a few minutes of relaxation, she downed the last of the second glass and got ready for bed. It appeared to be working. The voice was silent. Slipping between the sheets, she willed herself, part by part, to relax. With the final Caruthers meeting in the morning, she could ill afford a night of insomnia.

"Insomnia," the voice repeated.

Sarah's alarm clock sounded at six a.m. She sat on the edge of the bed waiting.

No disembodied voice said good morning.

She went to the bathroom, brushed her teeth and dressed in jogging clothes. After five minutes of stretching, she left the hotel and began her run.

Hitting a rhythm, her mind drifted to the morning meeting. Not much more than a formality, it would end the relationship between her firm and Caruthers Electronics. The old man's disappointment bothered her. Sarah understood. It bothered her to watch the last of America's manufacturing base eroding. She stopped wrestling with it long ago. Foreign government subsidies and unfair tariffs, endless cheap labor, the most corrupt Congress in history, and a dozen other factors made manufacturing in the U.S. a losing battle. It would be suicide for Caruthers and negligent for her to recommend any American company jump into making electronic devices and televisions that filled American households. The Chinese would simply crush anyone who tried.

Precisely one hour later, her route brought her back to the hotel. Upstairs, she turned the television to a morning talk show while she cooled down.

The perky talking head was interviewing a spokesperson for Feng Shui Corporation. Only five years ago, Feng Shui bought control of three of the largest electronic companies in South Korea. Last week they unveiled a new sound system that, with only two speakers, combined to produce authentic surround sound. Feng Shui had licensed it to America's largest manufacturer of computer games, which was, of course, Chinese-owned with factories in Mexico.

"Say what you like," Warner said to herself, "the Chinese are damned clever."

"Chinese. Chinese? Ah, Seres," the voice spoke for the first time that day, slicing through the word like a cold sword.

"Crap," Warner sighed, shaking her head.

"Crap. Crapula. Hangover?" The voice sounded puzzled.

Warner decided to see a psychologist when she reached home. She refused sedatives or antidepressants because they slowed her work, but maybe she overestimated her ability to cope. She knew Max's exit, and the associated guilt sent her into a murderous downward spiral. Its impact was far more than she imagined. Forcing herself to ignore the awakened voice, she showered.

The conference room was crowded. George Caruthers sat at the head of the table beneath a painting of Aldus Caruthers, his grandfather, and company founder. Leaning forward, body coiled, right hand's fingers drumming the hard surface, the old man waited until everyone sat.

As the last chair slid forward, Caruthers rose. He stood behind his chair, hands resting on its high back, his keen eyes moving from face to face. His daughters were pensive.

"I am not a happy man," he began. Crossing his arms, walking down the length of the table, he continued, "Not happy at all."

Warner watched the old man. It seemed odd to have so many people involved in what she thought was a formality.

Caruthers looked at the portrait behind his chair. "My grandfather was a fighter. He started this company with nothing but will and cleverness. My father fought to make the company grow by outsmarting the competition." He looked over the table of silent executives. In a soft voice, he went on, "I like to think I'm a fighter too."

"Before coming to my family's business, I spent two years in a different fight. Two years fighting frostbite and hunger, but mostly fighting Chinese in North Korea. We fought overwhelming numbers of them. They came at us in human waves. Finally, when reinforcements arrived, we pushed them back and

prevented the South Koreans falling victims of communism. It cost many good men's lives, men I will never forget. The price was high, but we paid it. We emerged from that war the strongest nation in history.

"I cannot tell you how disgusted it makes me when I see signs and ads for products made in China. These are the same companies that made planes and tanks to kill Americans."

Pausing, he looked up and down the table, throwing a curious glance at Warner before finishing his sweep. "I know, you think I'm a crazy old man for wanting to compete with the Chinese. But I'm telling you, they never stopped fighting the war. When they didn't win by driving their treads over us, they switched to a different theater, that's all. Now they are winning by reducing our industrial capacity to near zero and squeezing our wealth, the nation's vitality, from us."

Sarah was having trouble paying attention. The voice in her head was incessant. The term schizophrenia had blossomed in her mind, and the implications made her clammy. She tried to focus on Caruthers' words as the voice ran berserk, sometimes almost making sense. Even worse, the voice had an accent—something unusual, something almost Mediterranean.

"Tough as I like to think I am," the old man's voice grew soft again. "I'm not a fool." He looked at his daughters then at Sarah. "I want to thank you, Ms. Warner. You've done an excellent job. I want to thank my daughters for being wise and stubborn enough to insist on proving how dangerous it would be for Caruthers Electronics to tool up for the home electronics industry. I want to..."

Warner sat up, eyes flicking left then right. The voice had spoken to her. Not a string of synonyms or some unrelated phrase. It had addressed her. She began to consider she really was crazy.

"Warner," the voice said.

Sarah looked down at her hands, wishing this were over, wanting to run from the room.

"Hear me, Warner." The accent was thick, definitely but oddly Mediterranean.

Sarah placed her hand over her mouth, staring at the table and thinking, "Get a grip."

"Warner, talk to me. I can help."

Jesus, Sarah thought, I am crazy.

"From Jerusalem? Can it be the same man?" The voice sounded curious, then forceful, "Warner, talk to me. Now! I can help you and the old man."

"What?" Sarah screamed inside the walls of her mind. "I am insane."

"Not so, Warner. I will explain later but now listen. The old man is ending."

When Sarah responded by blanking her mind and inhaling deeply through her nose, the voice said, "Fine, do not talk to me. I will talk to you. Maybe you will not act, but I know you hear."

"The old man, Caruthers, wants to compete with these Chinese. If you help him, you will profit. I know a way he can compete."

"Absolutely insane," Warner sighed mentally.

"Insanus absolutus? No, Warner, you are not. Listen to me. I can help you profit. If, when I finish, you think I am crazy, I will speak no more. But if you help Caruthers compete with the Chinese, then you must help me do one thing. Agreed?"

"Okay, Warner," Warner said to herself, "make me a profit." Schizophrenics were famous for hearing voices, God, or Napoleon. Hers was some uber-consultant.

"Good," the voice said, "listen closely and answer questions as they arise, but most important for this to work, there must be maximum secrecy. Tell no one but the old man."

As the voice spoke, Warner found herself nodding agreement. After a few moments, Sarah's face wore a wide smile.

"Ms. Warner?" Caruthers stood beside his chair, concern in his voice.

Sarah looked up. Startled by the mental dialogue, she was embarrassed she had no idea what he had just said. Everyone was staring at her. She smiled weakly and said, "I'm sorry, you were saying?"

Caruthers harrumphed. "I was saying, Ms. Warner, your company's report is excellent and thorough. It echoes my own company's findings. I am sorry we couldn't figure out how to make the idea

work. It would have been a great undertaking. But if it's not viable, then we must get on with other business. If you don't mind, I'd like to say goodbye and continue with the meeting."

"I'm sorry," Sarah said getting to her feet, automatically gathering her papers and briefcase. Caruthers reached to shake hands.

Sarah hated shaking hands. Touching others tapped into her and weakened her. It was one of the reasons her husband left her. She avoided the handshake by looking toward and hefting the briefcase and load of reports she held in both hands.

Caruthers open the conference room door. As Sarah passed through, his fingers touched the back of her hand. Mild nausea swept through her. An instant migraine sprang into existence.

She knew Caruthers, nearly everything about him. One of the things the touch revealed: Caruthers was dying, cancer, six months to a year, the doctor told him.

Sarah planned to exit the meeting without mentioning anything the voice told her when Caruthers was speaking. But she now saw Caruthers as a good man, a man who wanted to make an important mark before he died, a mark that would earn him a footnote in history. Caruthers felt like a failure. He had not recognized the Chinese economic threat until too late. Now his three-generation company found itself in dire straits.

Sarah, literally feeling the sadness of the old man, built up courage and said, "Mr. Caruthers, there might be a possibility." Her voice was hushed.

They stepped outside the room, Caruthers still holding the door.

Caruthers waited expectantly. When Warner didn't continue, he said, "Well, go on. You obviously have my attention."

"Not here," Sarah whispered. The people at the table watched them. "I'll call you in a day or two after I've put everything together. And please, keep this just between you and me," Sarah said.

The old man looked puzzled but nodded and said, "I'll call you. My wife and I are off to a three-month alternative health sabbatical. I'm not allowed electronics. I'll call you when I return."

1888, London

Fritz said his farewells and left the Admiralty House. The dinner was a long boring exercise in polite, meaningless small talk with British government officials, politicians, and military. This was his third trip across the channel in as many months to sell munitions to the Royal Navy. He hoped it would be his last, at least for a while. Regardless of their overdone hospitality for him, he tired quickly of London and all things British. He preferred simplicity: empirical decree instead of negotiations. Unfortunately, as powerful a position his company held in world armaments, his powers fell far short of an emperor's.

He exited the Ripley Building that housed the Admiralty House mansion, placed his black derby square on his head and stepped up into his private coach. His coach, a masterwork of distinguished design in the finest black leather, and his personal driver were unloaded on the dock before he debarked the family yacht, *Zugig*, a hundred-and-fifty-foot sail and steamer containing the finest of everything nautical money could buy. The ship's interior made the coach look shabby by comparison.

Fritz always traveled with his personal driver. Fritz's propensity for unusual and socially unacceptable sexual exploits was whispered widely. His family's prominence and influence more than shielded him; it kept him out of prison.

The coach wheels rattled over cobblestone as the vehicle turned onto Whitechapel High Street. Though early November, the early morning hour was not cold but presented a wispy fog. Fritz questioned the value of his topcoat, then decided to keep it. He reached inside a compartment in the carriage door and retrieved a canvas package.

The coach stopped at the pre-arranged destination at 1:30 a.m. Fritz stepped lightly from the coach, waved to the driver who continued along High Street. Fritz studied the corner then walked along Commercial Street West, toward the seedier section of Whitechapel, filled with poverty, petty criminals, and drunken, syphilitic prostitutes who plied their wares for next to nothing.

Fritz walked, passing an unsavory stumbling drunkard urinating in an alley entrance, two more curled on the filthy cobblestones—unconscious or dead, it mattered not though no one would know until sunrise. He came to a pub occupied by a few locals and entered. There he bought a round of horrible British beer for the house. Studying the patrons, he did not see what he wanted; he downed two swallows of beer in the less than clean glass and departed sans fanfare.

Further down the street, he saw someone with potential for an adventure: a drunken prostitute saying goodnight to a man leaning against a wall before she walked toward Fritz.

As she approached, Fritz stood erect, arms at his sides, smiled and waited for her to be close enough to hear him.

Her smile broadened as she approached on unsteady legs.

George Hutchinson stood buttoning the fly of his dirty, stained trousers. He'd just stepped out of the Ten Bells Pub for a badly needed piss and some fresh air to clear his head. The smoky bar weakened his eyes, which welcomed the moist fog.

A girl he knew came up to him. He knew her name but could not recall it. She was mid-twenties in age and prettier than most of the other whores who found their way to Whitechapel. He thought about having a go with her then realized he didn't have enough money.

"Hello, George," she said, words slightly slurred.

The girl knew him, but he still could not remember her name. He nodded and tipped his non-existent hat.

"Can I borrow six-pence?" she asked.

"Wish I could, darling, but I've just spent my last pennies in the Ten Bells. Sorry," George answered.

"Well," she replied, "I'll see you later. I have to go find some money."

She continued along her current course.

George saw her stop to chat with a man in a long coat and a derby hat. He thought he wore a mustache, but the fog made it difficult to see.

The man said something to her. They began laughing. The man put his hand on her shoulder offering quiet words. The woman laughed again, nodded yes, took his arm and, together, they walked toward George who still bumbled with the last button on his pants.

As they neared, George heard the man say, "Then you will be alright with what I've told you?"

The woman, making an effort not to stagger and sway into her new companion said, "All right, my dear. Come along, and you'll be comfortable."

George saw the man sported a thick mustache, looked foreign, maybe Jewish, and carried a small canvas package in his left hand. George watched them until they turned into Miller's Court. He reentered the Ten Bells Pub to spend his final coins.

Inside the woman's ten-by-twelve-foot rented room, she lit a lantern that curled sooty black smoke upwards. She sat on the edge of the narrow bed pressed against a wall as she began to disrobe.

Fritz watched, thinking she was not nearly so ugly as he pictured.

He removed his hat and topcoat, folded them neatly and placed them in a straight-backed chair's seat on the crowded wall. He removed his suit jacket, shirt and trousers then placed them on the same chair.

She sat naked on the bed, expectantly waiting for him to leap on top of her and, sometime within the following three minutes, release his load into her.

Fritz did not know her name, nor she his. He removed a wallet from his inside jacket pocket, extracted a five-pound note and held it toward her with his left hand. His right hand was otherwise engaged behind him, opening the small package.

Her eyes widened like an owl at the sight of the five-pound note offered her. "Oh, my love, I am going to make you very comfortable." She reached to take the money and smiled.

Fritz, wearing nothing but calf-high socks and braces, filled with lust, fell on her. Not for sex, this lust was of another kind.

His left hand released the bill and covered her mouth.

She was surprised but not shocked; many higher-class customers enjoyed rough play. She was, however, terrified as his right hand flashed forward holding a gleaming blade. The razor-sharp edge found her throat and sliced straight to the bone. The left side of her neck exploded with blood.

If possible, her eyes grew larger, filled with terror of impending death.

She tried to scream but now she was pressed against the bed, his full weight on her, and his hand covered her mouth. She struggled, she tried to bite him but found the blade slicing through the other side of her neck unleashing a new geyser of blood.

She went cold and limp. She thought she might be dead already. The man above pressed down, hard, covering her mouth, making it impossible to open. She thought she heard rather than felt her jawbone snap.

She stopped moving.

Fritz looked into her eyes. The lamplight danced in her dying eyes, and he watched death growing as they glazed.

He regretted not having medical training. He loved this part of his work but wanted it to be more art than butchery.

His Uncle Tiberius, the man who raised him after his father's death, enjoyed taking his only nephew on day trips. Several times the two visited the abattoir where, the first few times, they watched the butchers slaughter and bleed pigs and cows. His uncle told him it would help him grow accustomed to the smell of blood, as the coppery fragrance would become all too common after he became an adult. Later, as he aged, his uncle allowed him to work with the butchers as they killed, sliced and removed

organs from the hapless animals. He found it pleasurable, more than he cared to admit, even to his uncle. Of course, in that life, his original existence, he came to love the red elixir of life. But that was then; this was now.

With what skill he possessed, Fritz began to carve the slaughtered animal spread on the blood-soaked bed. Her eyes glazed more quickly than he liked, robbing him of one of this pastime's pleasures.

Fritz cleaned himself as best he could, paying particular attention to his hands and head. Fully dressed at 4:30 a.m., Fritz quietly let himself out of the small apartment. He walked briskly back to the corner of Whitechapel High Street and Commercial Street where he waited nearly fifteen minutes for his coach. He finished work early.

Next day, the rent collector informed the London Police they found the mutilated remains of the prostitute who lived in Miller's Court.

The police described the grisly scene as the worst ever in memory:

The room was sparse: opposite of the door was the fire-grate; to the left, a broken window and, to the right, the table and bed. *The Fisherman's Widow* hung over the mantelpiece. A cupboard stood in the corner. At the foot of the bed, a chair upon which laid folded clothes.

The body lay in the middle of the bed. The shoulders were flat, but the body leaned toward the left side of the bed. The head was turned toward the left shoulder, facing the windows. The right arm stretched across the body with the right hand in the opened abdominal cavity. The left arm, partly removed from the body, was on the bed, bent at the elbow, and the fingers clenched. Spread apart, her left leg was flat on the bed, the right leg slightly elevated due to the leaning of the body.

The murderer stripped the thighs and emptied the abdominal cavity. The breasts were cut off, arms mutilated, facial features removed and the neck cut to the vertebrae.

The killer placed uterus, kidneys, and one breast under the head. The other breast covered the right foot. Her liver was laying between the feet. Intestines were displayed on the right side of the body. The removed flesh from the abdomen and thighs sat on the table. The heart was absent from the room.

Blood saturated the bed clothing and the right corner of the bed. About two square feet of blood was below the bed. The wall by the right bedstead was splattered with several large areas of blood.

Aboard the *Zugig*, bound for Amsterdam, Fritz locked himself in the master suite, cut the tailors' labels from the clothes he'd worn in the apartment at Miller's Court. He opened a porthole and, in the middle of the night, tossed his ensemble from the murder scene into the rough waves, waiting a full minute between articles. Next, he threw the murder weapon and surgical tools used to make his anatomical art through the porthole one by one. Finally, placing the clothing labels cut from his clothes into a brass ashtray, Fritz added a little kerosene. Fritz watched the last existing evidence of his connection to Mary Kelly, Jack the Ripper's final victim in Whitechapel, turn to ash, which went out the porthole as well, a sort of burial at sea.

In Amsterdam, Fritz rode in his coach to the small rail station near the town of Overamstel. He boarded his private railcar while his coach and horses were loaded onto a specially designed flatbed railcar containing a heated barn and a cozy apartment for his driver.

Once aboard and secured, the small locomotive, called a shunter, moved the train to a track-switching station where it connected to the next passing express train to Essen.

In Essen, Fritz's hometown, he did not wait for his private coach to unload but boarded another family carriage waiting at the station. His final destination was his home, the Villa Hugel, an 81,000-square-foot mansion containing 269 rooms, sitting on nearly seventy acres. Fritz's father Alfred constructed the home in 1873 as the family home for generations to come.

After his father's passing in 1887, Fritz took the helm of Freidrich Krupp AG, the largest company in Europe. The steel empire began in 1587 during the Black Plague when Arndt Krupp joined the trades guild in Essen. For several years before arriving in Essen, the Krupp family bought the property of village blacksmiths killed by the plague. The family essentially created a de facto franchise as new smiths replaced the dead ones to operate the acquired property and equipment to forge metal for

local needs, as well as consistent products for the military. The Krupps supplied dependable, quality raw materials, specifications, and molds. Government contracts for swords, bayonets, rank insignia, uniform buttons, guns, and bullets quickly poured money into the Krupp coffers.

By the time Fritz Friedrich Alfred Krupp took over the business, they were known as the Cannon Kings and employed forty thousand workers in various factories and forges located in the Rhine-Ruhr Valley.

Fritz's father was known as Heir Krupp since his nineteenth birthday and considered a hard man by his workers, competitors, and customers. Those who knew him considered him a fair man. Fritz, on the other hand, was almost nothing like his father.

Fritz did not spend long hours on dusty factory floors or in meetings about solving technical problems. Fritz believed that if the factory managers could not produce their quotas of consistent quality product, they were to be given two warnings then replaced the next time the issue arose. Krupp Industries did not suffer under Fritz's laissez-faire management. Quite the opposite in fact. Fritz became the master of the soft, manipulative, sublime sale on a global basis.

His recent trip to England provided huge orders for Krupp's new nickel-plated naval munitions, with the understanding Krupp would not sell to any other nation. Krupp added the further caveat that Krupp would not sell any other nations the new nickel shells so long as England purchased 80% of Krupp's capacity.

By 1890, two things happened; Krupp Industries perfected chromium steel that could withstand the hits from England's nickel-plated shells and was, additionally, a much lighter armor plating. This, of course, Fritz sold to the German and French war departments.

The second thing that occurred in 1890 was Fritz's decision to begin vacationing on the Mediterranean island of Capri, off the coast of Naples. Though he never visited before, he somehow knew it would be the perfect resort for him to recover from his hard work. Besides, the Krupp family brought in an estimated income of more than ten million dollars annually. Fritz was the wealthiest man in Europe and wanted to reap its fruits.

Fritz established a permanent residence, a floor of the Quisisana Hotel. He purchased from the Italian government a beautiful tidal grotto at the base of the cliff below the hotel then ordered the Via Krupp, a switch-back paved road, allowing people and supplies to descend the one-hundred-foot cliff face to the grotto's amazing, clear blue water and avoid taking a long boat trip.

For six or eight months of each year, Fritz worked the family business selling more lethal shells to nations needing to penetrate another navy's superior armor which also came from Krupp factories. The rest of the time Fritz spent on Capri, creating a personal paradise to fill his every wish, no matter how perverse.

While on Capri, Fritz moved about incognito. People who knew him said he knew the island as if he had been born there. While not born on the island, he spent the formative years of his original life learning from Uncle Tiberius.

Fritz kept two yachts busy shuttling guests back and forth between Capri and Naples. Not every guest made the return trip.

Known locally as Grotta di Fra Felice, Fritz had the two openings allowing seawater to flow in and out, fitted with shuttered, movable steel gates which prevented passing boats from seeing in.

The grotto was spectacularly outfitted inside. Colored quartz sconces allowed blue, red and yellow lights to shimmer, dance and reflect off the calm, clear blue waters. Small floating bungalows, anchored and moored to the grotto's walls, occupied the perimeter. These seven structures were connected by three-meter-wide wooden walkways, allowing passage completely around the grotto as well as providing seating and lounges for larger parties.

Fritz's friends, those lucky enough to enjoy one of his rare public gatherings in the grotto, called it nothing less than magical, a surreal underworld where guests would not be surprised to find mythical creatures in the waters or on the narrow stone shelves surrounding it.

The grotto's grandeur more often provided a setting for private affairs where Fritz could uncage his secret lust and pleasures. Sometimes, as many as four times a week, Fritz would hire local fishermen's sons to entertain and pleasure him. Mostly, even if the boys spoke about their experience, their fathers stayed silent as the money paid to each child was near half a year's earnings for the fisherman's family. On two occasions, Fritz received a letter delivered to the hotel. Handwritten, the letters threatened to expose the amoral and illegal homosexual activities in the grotto.

The first occasion, Fritz sent his coachman to the address with a bag full of five lire silver coins to settle the complaint.

The second letter appeared to have been written for the fisherman by a person of at least a little education. It implied knowledge of the first letter's resolution and a thinly veiled threat of revelation if sufficient compensation was not forthcoming in the next week. Dispatched with a second bag full of silver coins, the coachman met a small, well dressed for the Capri fishing village, man with dirty fingernails. Fritz's coachman nearly lost composure and snapped the man's neck when the scrawny hands opened the bag, and he looked in then dumped the silver on the ground at the coachman's feet.

"This is not nearly enough. Ten times this amount, I want ten times this amount or I will go to the authorities." The man spoke the phrase in severely mispronounced German then stood glaring at the coachman.

The brave but stupid little man stood in the doorway as the coachman found and returned each silver coin to the bag.

The coachman rose and stared down at the scrawny man whose head was a foot lower than his own.

The silence broke when the man blurted angrily, "Ten times this amount." His mispronunciations and his inflection to convey anger did not fit the statement.

The second morning after the altercation, the fisherman's wife discovered the bag of money on her doorstep. She did not yet know she was a widow.

Much less frequently than his fishermen's sons' parties, Fritz imported prostitutes from Naples, Salerno, and Sorrento. Usually women, but sometimes, good-looking young Italian men seeking adventure.

These events were not galas, but rather murder scenes, pure and simple. Each victim consumed a powerful sedative while drinking wine as Fritz casually provided a tour of the grotto. By the time they reached the last bungalow, Fritz usually needed to help them sit before they fainted.

The charming host helped them into a wooden, reclined lounge chair where they dropped into a deep sleep. When they awoke, their arms, legs, ankles, hips, shoulders, and foreheads were secured to the chair by tightened rope. Once revived enough to become aware of their surroundings, they spotted a table placed next to their chair. It contained a silver tray holding neatly laid out knives, surgical instruments, and a butcher's bone saw.

In the seclusion and privacy of the grotto, Fritz did not have to rush his art. The victim could die a slower, more natural death, as the screaming didn't bother Fritz in the least. Sometimes, if the screams were loud enough, Fritz would applaud and praise his subject for their enthusiasm.

By morning, the disemboweled organs and butchered limbs drifted in the tide several miles offshore. The sharks and other sea creatures were kind enough to eat most of it, and within a day the victim's remains were fecal matter ejected from some sea creature.

Fritz enjoyed nature, in fact, he was an amateur oceanographer. He looked forward to spending the rest of his life in this personal paradise.

As rich and powerful as Fritz might have been, he was no match for the Catholic Church.

The local political parties and authorities on Capri turned a blind eye even as reports of Fritz's homosexual activities became frequent and widespread. By June of 1902, the cat was out of the bag when a vengeful language teacher and homosexual, who had been shunned and fired by Fritz, went to a Neapolitan newspaper and offered evidence of Fritz's despicable behavior. The paper published an

article, then two more papers investigated and produced their own stories. Shortly after that, the Vatican sent emissaries to the political powers of Capri and compelled them to exile this terrible sinner, no matter his wealth.

Fritz returned home waiting for the local indignation among Capri's population to die down. Unfortunately, news stories reached Germany and the Catholic newspaper, Augsburg Postzeitung, published an article based on the Italian papers' reports in August.

In early October 1902, Margarethe von Ende, Fritz's wife, received a package containing photographs of her beloved Fritz cavorting, nude, with numerous little boys. She quickly contacted Kaiser Wilhelm, a family friend, asking his intervention to avoid ruining the business's reputation. Concerned about scandalizing his sole arms supplier, Wilhelm ordered Margarethe's arrest and placed her in an insane asylum.

Even that drastic action could not hold back the surging tide of outrage. More articles found their way into print, some offering grainy photographs and on November 22, 1902, a week after the photos appeared, Fritz died. The cause of death never revealed, popular theories include: he killed himself with poison; his brother, and successor of Krupp Industries, Alfred, did him in; or Kaiser Wilhelm ordered his assassination to keep Krupp Industries out of the scandal.

Many of the most powerful people in Europe attended Fritz's funeral. After, gathering at the Villa Hugel, the attendees spoke in whispers about their friend, the wealthiest man in Europe and, though his spiritual convictions did not include Christianity, he believed firmly in reincarnation.

April 2012, Dallas

On the afternoon flight to Dallas, Sarah had the most amazing conversation of her life—with herself. The thickly-accented voice had run nonstop since leaving the meeting. Sarah Warner, ninety percent sure schizophrenic would roll off her doctor's tongue, refused to answer the insistent voice.

Once belted into her seat on the aircraft, a worried Sarah tried to sleep.

"Warner." The voice was tentative?

No answer. Sarah breathed in deeply through her nose and held it to the count of four.

"My plan is a good one, yes?" the voice asked. "You will see, Caruthers will get to compete favorably with the Chinese, you will profit, and I will get your help. All parties get what they want, the essential element to any successful venture. Do you agree?"

No answer. Sarah parted her lips and slowly exhaled.

"If the plan is to work, you will have to provide more answers so you must speak to me," the voice soothed and coaxed.

"I will not talk to you," Sarah thought, squeezing her eyes closed.

"Why? I have given you a good business plan. I must have your help." The voice edged with exasperation.

"Because," Sarah answered, "You are me, and only crazy people talk to themselves. As long as I don't, then I can cling to the hope I am not completely insane."

"Insanus absolutus? Warner, I have said you are not. Besides, I am not you. I am in your mind, but we are different people. Your help will allow you to be free of me."

"No." Sarah tried to blank her mind.

"Very well, don't speak but please listen. I will tell you a story. When it ends, you will know you are not insane.

"My name is Marcus Antonius. I am Roman, a merchant by profession. I had just returned to Rome from a three-year voyage and was surprised to find myself invited to sit with the Emperor at the great circus. Though I had been away from Rome, there were rumors about Emperor Gaius. I was delighted when my friend, Cornelius Sabinus, arrived at my home to accompany me to the games. He had risen in the ranks to tribunus laticlavus, commander of a legion, but currently assigned as a counsel to the Senate. I looked forward to renewing our friendship. He could also tell me the truth about Gaius. But Cornelius was furtive. He spoke little on the way to the circus. When I asked after the emperor, he looked to find any listening ears, then whispered, 'Be careful my friend.'

"This is what happened.

Rome 41 AD

Marcus Antonius saw the madness in his emperor's eyes at once. Emperor Gaius slouched in his seat, overlooking the great arena. Studying Marcus from a slightly balding head supported by a thin neck, Gaius extended a hairy hand for Marcus to kiss. Marcus' lips touched the curly-haired, doughy flesh as he knelt deeply.

The Circus Maximus overflowed with one hundred and fifty thousand spectators. The emperor's box squirmed with the wealthy and privileged. Gaius' immediate coterie examined Marcus with side-glances and closed whispers. Caesar's German bodyguards towered over everyone, sullen eyes watching. Though many of them didn't understand everything spoken, they missed nothing.

Two men flanked Caesar: a handsome young Roman on the left side and a visitor from a far land on the other.

"So, you are the famous peddler." Gaius smiled showing no teeth. "My poets sing you have brought back half the world's wealth."

Still kneeling, Marcus remembered Cornelius's caution. Without raising his eyes, he answered, "Greatest and most powerful of all emperors, living god of Rome, I wish it were so, but sadly, I have only a modest profit for three years of journeys."

"How disappointing. Rome could use the taxes from half the world's wealth. You have paid your taxes, haven't you? However modest?" Gaius leaned forward, eyes narrowed. It was impossible to tell if he were serious or joking.

"My ships were met at the docks, glorious Caesar. I am only too happy to contribute my share to support your great works."

"We shall see. We shall see," Gaius laughed. "Oh rise, Marcus Antonius. I tire of looking down at you. Come sit beside me and speak of your journey." The emperor patted the seat occupied by a handsome young Roman.

Marcus noticed a legion commander, a legate, sitting behind the young man. Their resemblance was so strong they had to be father and son.

"Make room for our new friend," Gaius ordered, shooting a mean glance. As the young man rose to relinquish his place, Gaius spoke to Marcus. "This is Aesius Proculus. Isn't he magnificent? The ladies call him Giant Cupid." Danger danced in the emperor's eyes.

The young man moved back a row, squeezing in next to his father. Marcus paused for an introduction to the foreigner at Gaius's left. When none came, he took the seat.

Gaius turned in his seat and leaned uncomfortably close to Marcus' face. "I am told you are among Rome's shrewdest merchants. Tell me the secret to success. I am curious why a man would spend three years among barbarians for a modest profit."

"I am afraid, Great Caesar, your compliment is not founded." Be careful, Marcus reminded himself. "I load my ships with Roman metal and glassware and sail until I find a buyer. This last trip the buyer was in Egypt. There I bought ivory, medicines, spices, and linen, then traveled to Greece where I converted it to textiles, lumber, and gold. Those I traded in Carthage for salt, figs, and marble which went to Syracuse for sulfur, horses, and gold."

"Yes, yes, I see," Gaius waved his hand, bored with details, "but tell me of Britannia?"

Marcus sensed danger in the question. He knew the story of Gaius's abortive attempt to invade the island. He hesitated then answered feigning ignorance, "In Britannia, I sold my cargo and bought tin, copper, and iron to bring back to Rome for metal wares."

Gaius's voice rose an octave. "I hear the people there are rebellious. They have no respect for Rome. Tell me of them, Antonius. You must know. You were there for half a year."

Marcus was surprised at Gaius's knowledge of his activities. He thought before answering. The emperor's face clouded. "Yes, Lord Caesar, I was there and saw much. The people are proud, but they spoke no disrespect for Rome."

"Of course not," Gaius spat venomously, "they know all good Romans would report their treason. They are barbarians, and someday I will tread on their necks." Gaius paused, a mean smile cracking his pallid face. "Yes, what they need is The Little Boot grinding them into submission." He threw back his head and laughed. After an uncomfortable pause, others joined in laughter at his joke, The Little Boot, Caligula, his nickname. No one but he and his closest relatives dare let it pass their lips.

Wiping tears from his eyes, the mood lightened, he asked, "Tell me, Antonius, why did you stay so long in Britannia?"

Gaius had exhibited so much knowledge of his activities, Marcus dared not lie. "It is embarrassing, great Caesar, I was smitten by a woman of great skill and could not bring myself to leave for six months."

The emperor's eyes narrowed. "Was she better than the women of Rome?"

"I am certain not, Caesar, but please forgive me. I had been at sea, away from my wife and the women of Rome for two years. I had forgotten how wonderful our women are. She was from the far north of Britannia from a fierce barbaric people. She had recently been captured into slavery but became a freeman. She beguiled me and her physical beauty pleased me easily and often. Learning of her people's crafts in magic, I began to suspect she used potions on me," he added knowing Caligula's penchant for magic and poisons.

Caligula sat back. "Are you interested in magic?"

"No, great one, I am too simple to understand such things." Marcus wanted to be away from this dangerous moment.

"Too simple? I wonder." Caligula pointed to the foreigner to his left. The stranger, coarse black hair pulled tightly back and tied into a tail, fixed intelligent black eyes on Marcus.

"This is Okuni-Nushi, my greatest magician." Caligula introduced the Asian as if he were a pet.

The Asian man nodded slightly.

Marcus had met men from as far east as Cathay. But none exactly like this one. There were similarities but, if possible, this one was even more alien.

"Ah, former Consul Longinus," Caligula sighed, recognizing a man followed by a small entourage making their way up the steps. "He will want to bore me with matters of state."

Without taking his eyes from the approaching figure, Caligula called to Cornelius. "Tribunus, get your friend and sit behind me. I may wish to speak further with him, so stay close."

Glad to lose Caligula's focus, Marcus stood. Watching Longinus, Caligula half-whispered, half-hissed, "Okuni sees trouble, Marcus Antonius. He dreamed my spirit sails a sea of treason. Be careful who you talk to, Marcus, there are traitors spreading lies, but Caesar's net is wide, these poisonous fish will be caught—and gutted."

Longinus bowed deeply. It was an effort for the old man. Caesar kept him bent low for nearly a half minute exchanging greetings before Caligula allowed Longinus to sit at his side. They spoke in hushed whispers, Caligula's eyes constantly darting to see if anyone dared listen.

Moments later, the charioteers for the first race paraded around the arena. Caligula favored the green team and requested them to use his favorite horse, the spoiled Incitatus.

The green team finished second. The emperor lost a bet.

As dozens of attendants came out to smooth the sand for the next race, Caligula called the captain of his German guards. He whispered something and sent him on an errand. Moments later, he turned and addressed the young Aesius Proculus.

"Giant Cupid, I am so delighted you joined us today. Your Emperor wants you to favor us with your gladiatorial skills. Would you be so kind?" Caligula crooned with mock kindness.

Blood drained from the young man's face. Glancing at his father, he saw the legate's pathetic, helpless eyes locked with Caligula's. Behind him, six huge German warriors stood, swords drawn in salute.

With no choice, Aesius stood and allowed the giant men to escort him toward the arena.

Caligula gave one last merciless look at the legate then turned back in his chair laughing, "Let's see if Cupid's dart is a match for a secutor."

Circus directors moved among the people announcing the next event. Moments later, Aesius Proculus stepped onto the arena floor. Nude except for a large diaper, he carried no shield, only three iron throwing darts.

Ridiculed by his dress, he held his head high and marched across the sand. When he reached the place nearest Caligula's seat, he stopped, stood at rigid attention and snapped his fist to his chest in salute.

Marcus could not be sure whether the boy saluted his emperor or his father.

Moments later, shins and sword arm armored, a secutor carrying a large shield and a broadsword arrived and stood next to the giant Cupid.

They waited for Caesar's sign to initiate combat. In the silence, a voice yelled, "Take away his shield!" Another voice echoed the request, then another.

Caligula rose, looking curiously over the sea of subjects. He thought for a moment then nodded to the secutor who let the shield drop. Caligula gave the sign.

The two men faced and saluted each other, then began in earnest.

The secutor was good; his second thrusts produced a minor wound on Aesius's left arm. All Aesius could do was try to stay away, praying for a miracle.

Caligula turned to the legate. "Will you bet on Aesius? Perhaps ten thousand sesterces?"

A brutish German hand, heavy on each shoulder, the legate looked down at his feet, helpless in the face of tyranny.

Caesar looked around. "Quickly, someone must be willing to bet on Giant Cupid. He's so strong and handsome. All the women love him. Surely someone will support his cause."

He turned his mad eyes on Marcus. "What about you, peddler? How about a modest bet from your modest profits? Surely you wouldn't refuse your emperor."

There was madness in the air. Cornelius shot a warning glance at his friend. Marcus could easily afford ten thousand sesterces, besides he already hated Caligula. "Yes, Caesar, I will support Aesius."

"Wonderful!" Caligula clapped his hands together, "A million sesterces." The emperor's eyes smiled at Marcus like a cat eyeing a wounded mouse.

Wounded twice more, Aesius's diaper came loose, and he fought nude, trying only to avoid his opponent's expert moves.

The sword flashed, and a ruby seam split on the young man's thigh. He limped back, the secutor pressing in.

The crowd booed. Caligula joined in, thinking they jeered the retreating Aesius.

Marcus had never hated anyone or anything so much as he hated Caligula at this moment. If he believed in the gods, he would have prayed to strike the emperor dead.

The booing stopped as Aesius sank a barbed dart into the triceps of his adversary's sword arm.

The secutor quickly switched the sword to his left hand. Aesius, hopeful for the first time, took advantage of the maneuver to launch his second dart. He threw it underhanded, sinking its point into the secutor's groin.

Realizing death would claim him if the secutor recovered, Aesius hurled his last dart. It struck the secutor's chest below the armor covering his left shoulder. Aesius leaped into hand-to-hand combat. The sword caught him again as they grappled. Both men crimson with smeared blood rolled, punched and kicked—anything to gain an advantage. Aesius gripped the secutor's left wrist, keeping the sword away.

The weapon came loose and skittered across the reddened sand. Both men reached for it. Neither gained it.

Climbing on top, Aesius grabbed the protruding dart from the secutor's right arm and jerked it out. The warrior screamed as muscle and flesh came away. Aesius plunged it into the man's chest. He tried to pull it out, but the barb had passed bone and lodged. Putting all his weight on it, Aesius pushed it deeper.

The secutor cried out and clutched the dart in his chest. Aesius rolled away, retrieved the sword then straddled the dying man. Naked, smeared with blood, he placed the sword's point in the hollow of the secutor's throat and waited.

The crowd roared approval.

A livid Caesar rose from his seat screaming, "Aesius Proculus is guilty of treason! He has plotted the assassination of Caesar! Arrest him."

A dozen Praetorian guardsmen ran onto the arena. Angry and disgusted, Aesius threw down the sword and strode toward Caligula, leaving red tracks in the sand. The guards followed quickly behind.

Aesius stopped in front of Caligula, stood at attention and saluted as before. "I do not know who has spread these lies. I am innocent. I swear before Emperor Gaius Caesar, I am innocent. I swear before Rome and its gods, I am innocent!"

Caligula snapped orders to the captain of his bodyguards, and a contingent of Germans hurried away. He leaned forward. "It is easy to say you are innocent, but I have evidence, Aesius Proculus, condemning evidence."

The Germans emerged in the arena and surrounded the bloodied man. Caligula's mood changed abruptly, becoming lighthearted as if the whole business were a prank. "I am Caesar Gaius, ruler of all men, living god of Rome. I could have you put to death now at my whim." Looking around he went on, "But I am merciful and fair. You shall have a chance to answer these charges, but first, you must descend."

The Germans moved Aesius off the hot sands through a heavy wooden door.

Marcus could barely contain himself. At best he wanted to leave, be away from this madman; at worst he wanted to stick a dagger through the monster's neck. Cornelius touched his arm in warning.

The Germans re-emerged in the arena, dragging a drooping bloodied Aesius between them. He wore a new oversized diaper.

Gaius leaned over, looking down at the suffering man. Aesius's eyes rolled up as he fought to remain conscious.

"Aesius Proculus, you stand accused of treason to Rome and plotting the assassination of your emperor by none other than the august Consul Longinus," Caligula smirked as the old Consul shot a surprised and amazed look.

"If you deny this, swear now by your emperor, by Rome and its gods. Take this oath, and I will set you free."

Aesius managed only weak choking, gagging sounds. His torn-out tongue lay in the sand behind the wooden door.