

THE TREASURE OF JUNO MONETA

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Accursed hunger for gold
— Virgil

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SAMPLE



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I

Green Gnaeus the Great and Greedy held a lottery, and Lucius played it.

Lucius sat at the very top, to avoid the crowds, but the Circus Maximus wasn't fooled by such simple tricks. Despite being the largest arena in Rome, there was never a seat not already occupied by three people and every breath brought with it the stench of a thousand types of sweat. Even Lucius had to plead guilty to the odorous offense. No matter how hard the winter wind bit with its icy fangs, the air was unrelentingly still in the Circus stands. One of many reasons why it was the worst place on Earth.

More by habit than will, Lucius picked some cold, worn quadrans from nearby pockets. The small bronze coins would barely be enough for a day-old loaf, but it made no difference – Lucius was a thief. He felt no shame; it was the only way to survive in Rome. At least, the only way that suited Lucius.

The crowd roared with excitement. It was a chariot race today, just about to begin, and few things were as deafening as the rolling chants of the supporters. But when Green Gnaeus spoke into his cone, they fell into an abrupt silence. Lucius caught every syllable as clearly as if the disgusting little leprechaun spat his venomous words straight into his ear and stirred until the wax

ran out, smudging his cheeks. Everyone played Green Gnaeus' lottery. After all, that's what funded the whole show.

By everyone, Lucius really meant *everyone*. Not just humans. Dwarves, blemmyes, even the creatures whose names Lucius went out of his way to forget, were on a constant quest to poverty in their attempts to hit the right number.

"Seventeen, thirty-two, five, sixty-seven..."

Lucius glanced at his lottery ticket, despite being well aware of his numbers, but with a deep desire that he had misremembered. He hadn't. He never misremembered.

He rose instinctively. Forced himself back down to his seat. He would not run, not today. The chariots were in position, and though Lucius hadn't bet on the winner, he would follow the race with great care. The Plan demanded it.

Maybe today, if she won, Appia could be free. She inhaled the already dust-heavy air and wished that the race would just begin, that the gates in front of her would open wide. Her horses snorted and scraped their hooves, they sensed it wasn't long now. How Appia had never understood.

Appia turned her eyes to the crowd. There, at the bottom, in the best spot, stood a structure supported by marble columns and adorned with a tiled roof. It was Emperor Caligula's personal box, a secluded room shielded from the crammed benches.

The scrawny Emperor had just risen, and the slaves scattered to not block the view. In his grasp he held a handkerchief, the size of which would've been excessive even for a troll with the flu, and in the cloth, the colors of the four teams were represented: red, green, white, and blue.

The Emperor stood there for a few moments – arm out

straight, holding the end of the handkerchief in his clenched fist – and the whole Circus held its breath in anticipation. Then he opened his hand, spread his fingers wide, and the handkerchief fluttered slowly downward. A gust of wind grabbed it and twirled it in the air before it finally settled on the ground, triggering the starting gates to swing open.

The horses bolted forward. Cheers erupted from the crowd and sand flooded Appias' eyes. Already, an enemy chariot tried to ram her against the *spina*, the bronze-dolphin embellished barrier that outlined the center of the track. A collision with it meant certain death. Appia whipped her opponent's face and he withdrew out of reflex. Good, she went back to whip her horses instead. All four felt energetic.

Curve number one was approaching. Appia leaned to the left, steering through the harness that wrapped around her body. It withstood the strain and she emerged from the curve in fifth place. They were eight drivers today, two from each team.

She took a quick look over her shoulder. Her teammate from the White Team had already crashed and lay buried under his horses. Shipwreck, they called it. The pile of death that became an obstacle on the track.

I've always told you, Appia thought, don't go too narrow on the first curve. She was alone now.

She generated a good pace on the straight. Slipped past one in blue whose horses already wearied. Only three left ahead of her. Two red and Hostus, with his beastly black horses.

Second lap. The Reds tried to push Hostus off track, but instead, both of them slammed into the shipwreck. Appia threw herself to the right and managed to dodge disaster. Based on the sounds behind her, not everyone had been as fortunate.

Around her, bits of gravel came pelting from the crowd as they did their best to disturb the remaining competitors. She whipped harder and foam poured from her horses' mouths.

Ahead, Hostus' green clothes fluttered, closer than before – she was gaining on him. Another turn, next lap.

And just like that, she'd reached the race leader.

There he was, the undefeated champion, a porridge-like mess of perspiration and frizzy fair hair. He who utterly dominated the track. Appia needed something special, something extraordinary to beat him.

Still, the crowd was relentless. Their projectiles weren't limited to gravel, whatever they managed to come across was hurled toward the track. From the corner of her eye, she saw something large approaching and made a snap decision.

She dropped her whip and caught the staff. Oak, thick, and heavy.

Most important was the far-left horse, which held the pace and was closest to the *spina* in the curves. Appia rode on Hostus' left side – now, her chance had come.

She slammed her staff right on the muzzle of Hostus' horse. There was a satisfying crack as bones crunched.

Or so it seemed. It was the staff that had actually cracked. The horse shook its head and kept going. *How can it just shake off a blow like that?* Appia thought.

Hostus did not appreciate the attack. He pushed her toward the center, toward the *spina*, and Appia no longer had a whip to protect herself with. She tried defensive maneuvers, she really did, but instead she lost control.

She fell into a massive tumble.

The world now upside down, speed that suddenly felt so much more real. She hung beneath the chariot strapped to the harness, hooves hammering a few feet from her face. A peculiar urge told her to give up, to let herself be dragged along the track and meet her doom. She fought away the thought and used her last strength to reach her waist. The familiar iron of the falx knife against her fingers felt like a blessing from Jupiter himself,

and with two swift slashes she broke free and landed after a few rotations as her horses continued in panic.

Appia waited for the charging chariots to pass before dragging herself to safety. Her throat and lungs burned from grit and dust, body aching and screaming in pain.

She watched the rest of the race from the sidelines. Four out of eight riders failed to reach the end. Her teammate was dead, and she wondered if the two Reds would ever be able to race again. The winner's name was bellowed from the same cone that opened the games: Hostus.

Next time, Appia thought – mind numb from fatigue – next time I'll beat you.

SAMPLE

II

Another day at the Circus, another lottery Lucius played. The numbers had already been announced, but like yesterday, the Plan forced him to stay and watch. He hoped it wouldn't become a new habit. He had enough of those.

The race was replaced with gladiatorial fights, the gladiators brawling in the sand below. Against each other now, the lions were already dead.

“The middle one thinks he'll win, just look how sloppy he holds his sword, but the right one is fifteen times the size. The left guy will just stumble on his unstrapped sandals.”

Lucius glanced at the row in front to see who had provided the analysis. A sciapod. He blocked the sun with his hairy foot – two, three times larger than normal feet – and seemed to revel in the shade it cast. Lucius only ran into sciapods every now and then, but the times he did were quite enough, and he rather wished it was more infrequent than frequent.

“Oh stop it, Kezekem,” the sciapod's human friend said, “you're not fooling me. No way you see people's sandals from here.”

“Yeah-huh *amicus*, I swear,” the sciapod said and wiggled his toes. He was terribly pale, and Lucius wondered if it was due to the lack of sunlight. “I never lie, you know that! But forget

about the sandals then... you've been having the dotty-chills the past year or what? The big one's Flamma, the half-cyclops – he can't lose."

"Stop already. Doesn't matter what you say, I won't change my bet just so you can make some coins."

Lucius, not without trepidation, had prepared to squeeze further down the seats to make a closer inspection of the gladiators and escape the two's chatter, but now he pricked up his ears. All Circus bets went through Green Gnaeus, such was the law. Break it, and you became the one in the sand.

How dare they talk about it? Lucius thought as they continued their discussion about the bet they'd placed between them. *Don't they know there are Praetorians in the crowd?*

Indeed, already two Praetorians came toward them. They cleared the way by stomping their goat legs and shaking their horned heads. The Praetorians were not only the Emperor's personal bodyguards but also responsible for ensuring that the laws of Rome were obeyed.

When the mass of spectators realized what was about to happen, they did not let the human slip away, fearful as they were of the Praetorians' vengeance; they seized his arms and legs and held him firmly in place, ignoring his shrieks of terror. In fact, they acted so carelessly that the Praetorians, upon arrival, found the job more or less done, settling for a few stomps to spare the poor man further suffering.

The sciapod however, was long gone. An advantage, Lucius supposed, of being the most rapid creature in Rome.

The Circus burst into a unanimous cheer. Down in the sand, one sole fighter towered over the cadavers. One of massive size, heavy armor, and but a single eye. Flamma, the half-cyclops, had been victorious.

Lucius remained in his seat long afterwards, pondering. Around him the silence grew as the stands were abandoned. A great number of things had to align for the Plan work, and even then it felt like a gamble. And he hated gambles – that he had Green Gnaeus to thank. In any case, he must tell Pollio, although he had no idea how. If he knew that son of a senator right, he would not only object but scold Lucius for his poor judgment.

When the stands were as good as empty, Lucius left. All he passed were slaves sweeping, a child sobbing with her hands to her face, and finally, the ravens who croaked and squabbled over the remains of that human who thought it wise to circumvent Green Gnaeus' rightful share.

Lucius stepped through the gates of the Circus and found himself in the city he both loved and hated. The city that prepared for nightfall, when people were too tired to watch their pockets, when the shadows were easy to hide in, and when he had his last chance to avoid the night shift.

The city lived and slithered – hideous, foul, snaking – an evening like this more than usual.

When games were held at the Circus, all of Rome was emptied – Lucius enjoyed those moments, when he was practically alone in the City of Seven Hills – but now, people once more flooded the streets with their shoving elbows and bad breaths.

He shivered and hastened his steps. Evening came early in the winter, and the cold weather with it. The wind that swept through the streets of Rome never ceased. Luckily, the Circus Maximus wasn't far from Caelian Hill, where many of the finer families resided. When he'd found Pollio's house, a red behemoth of brick, he threw pebbles at the window shutter until Pollio opened. It was a good habit; otherwise, Lucius might go through a lot of trouble for nothing. Ever since the incident with the tree (which had quickly spread in certain circles), Lucius had

his reputation tainted and thus preferred the facade path when visiting his friend.

He placed his hands and feet carefully on the marble decorations he'd grown so familiar with and began his ascent. Last time the rain had been so heavy he'd slipped; the fall had been no more than ten feet, but the thump had attracted attention from inside and Pollio's father, Annius Vinicianus, chased him off with a vase.

And the senator had the nerve to say that it was *Lucius* who had a bad influence over Pollio.

"I won't do it," Pollio said as Lucius stuck his head over the window frame.

"Let me at least tell you about it before you say that," Lucius said, pulling himself up the last bit and falling onto the mosaic floor. His arms ached; he was not built for this kind of labor.

"No," Pollio said with folded arms and eyes looking down at Lucius, "it doesn't matter what you say. I'm sick of your ideas."

"Pollio, please!" Lucius exclaimed, did a somersault, and climbed up Pollio's wooden sofa. More precisely, the one whose stylishly chiseled ivory pattern showed Romulus and Remus being suckled by the she-wolf – Pollio had so many sofas that it was best to be specific. "I speak of a job the size that makes your ugly nose look like nothing. The job that ends all jobs, immeasurable rewards."

"And you're gonna throw it all away. Like you always do. Gambling."

Lucius sighed and reached for the grapes in the bronze bowl on a nearby table. Pollio always spoke like that, with questions that weren't questions but statements, and Lucius never knew how to respond. He tried denying everything.

"What," he said between bites. "Never happened."

“No? So you didn’t gamble away that bronze statue we stole from the palace last summer? Then where did it go?”

“Too easily recognized. You know we couldn’t keep it.”

“Or when we stole all the togas from the guests at that fancy bathhouse at Esquiline Hill and *poof* the very same day they were gone.”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“Or the hundreds of denarii we snatched from the slave auctioneer last week. In one week Lucius, you gambled away all our earnings in one week.”

Actually, that was for something else entirely, Lucius thought, but didn’t bother to explain. “Okay, I get it. But no, I will not gamble away our money on the lottery. Not this time, I promise.”

“And why would I believe that?”

Lucius rose and placed his hand on Pollio’s shoulder. “Because no one will. The lottery will cease to exist.”

Pollio blinked with his big brown eyes. His face softened and he finally released his crossed arms. He had understood.

“I know,” Lucius said when Pollio opened his mouth. “It’s an incredible task to attempt, but by Dis Pater I promise we’ll make it. Though we will need help.”

“Help?”

“You’ll see,” Lucius said, walking to the window. Outside, the silhouette of the city loomed in the darkness. Hills rose and fell, and between them, houses and aqueducts huddled in a meandering mess. The evening wind beat against his face; time to go.

“I trust you, my friend. So I trust that you trust me.” And Lucius climbed out the window and down the facade.

Appia hunched under the whip. It felt different, being whipped

by her trainer for losing again compared to her whipping her horses, but she supposed it was the same, really. Ratch-ratch, and her back hurt.

“If you lose the next race like you lost yesterday,” her trainer said with a grin that made the boils on his face crack and white pus gently wash over his chins, “you’ll stay after the race as fodder for the lions and lizardwolves.”

Night had fallen when she left. Appia’s team, the Whites, had training facilities and stables on Viminal Hill, so she had to pass the Forum on her way home. The square, which during the day seemed to accommodate all of Rome, was now only populated by a dozen beggars and one or two watchmen-dwarves from the Vigiles who shooed them away. She passed the Temple of Vesta, where the sacred fire always burned, and its flickering light reflected everywhere in the golden statues of the square.

Appia sighed. Every time she saw the busts of the consuls and the generals on their mighty horses, she wished she was as free as them, that she needed not return to her master’s house and could vanish in the thick of Rome. But it didn’t work like that. Her master would find her. He always found runaway slaves.

Suddenly a man blocked her path, a rather short and slender figure. He resembled a weasel.

“Who are you?” Appia asked, and when she saw his blue tunic, she added, “I have no interest in arguing with supporters.”

“Don’t worry. I find very little entertainment from the games of the Circus.”

He swept a black lock of hair over his forehead – perhaps to cover the wart that he had there – and Appia guessed him to be a few years younger than herself. Whatever that meant, Appia thought she was around twenty, but no one had ever told her when she was born.

“My name is Lucius Turpilinus. I have an offer, something I think would suit you.” He awaited her response, but when she stood silent, he pointed with his oddly sore fingers toward Capitoline Hill and the building that stood there as if looking down on the square. “That structure up there, you know what that is?”

“Yeah of course, it’s the Temple of Juno Moneta, dedicated to our greatest goddess.” She grew annoyed with herself. “What’s your point?”

“Well, imagine standing there looking down on Rome and thinking: Wherever I want to go, I’ll go, and no one, not even the Emperor, could stop me. Wouldn’t that be something?”

Appia frowned. “That’s enough. You’re just mocking me. *Bonum vesperum.*”

“*Bonum vesperum*, but meet me here same time tomorrow, and you’ll win freedom and much more at that.”

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