

5 Captured

The sound of running feet and Lavinia's voice calling 'Fire!' made Marinetta jump up from her couch at once. Her father went to the window and pulled aside the curtain. 'The stables are on fire!' he shouted. 'Quickly, fetch water from the well!'

'My horse!' cried Lucius. 'Vesta!'

They ran from the house as Lavinia came in. 'Don't go outside!' she cried, too late to stop them.

Lucius raced towards the stables where they could hear the frantic whinnying of the horses. Marinetta ran with him. Thick smoke stung their eyes and made them cough. They both stumbled inside and opened the stall doors for the panicking

horses. Lucius tried to catch Vesta's tether and calm her, but both animals galloped out of the door immediately.

'Look!' said Marinetta.

The stable boy lay on the floor. Together they dragged him outside.

'I think he is dead,' said Lucius. He knelt down and touched the boy's head. Then he looked at his hand. It was red with blood. 'This is no accidental fire. Someone has done this deliberately.'

Lucius looked up at the sound of hooves. Through the smoke came men on horses. He stood up and pulled Marinetta by the hand. 'Attack!' he yelled as he saw his uncle coming towards him carrying buckets of water. 'Behind you! Watch out!'

Titus dropped the buckets and turned round. The first horseman was almost on top of him. Reaching up, he pulled on the rein as the rider swept past. The rider raised his arm and felled him to the ground.

Marinetta was roughly hauled up by the next rider and carried away.

Lucius ran to help his uncle who had managed to half sit up. 'I can't stand,' he

gasped. 'I turned on my leg as I fell.'
Lucius ducked as another horseman came close, whirling a sword over his head.
'We are outnumbered,' said Titus. 'Run, boy, run!'

'No, never,' replied Lucius.

His uncle groaned and slid back on to the ground. Cedric ran towards them. 'It has happened,' he said. 'As I predicted!' He looked around him wildly. 'Where is Marinetta?'

'There!' shouted Lucius. Marinetta was struggling with the rider who had carried her off. She was fighting furiously, kicking and scratching at his face. The horse reared as its rider lost control, and Marinetta fell on to the grass.

'You fight well,' said Lucius as he helped her to her feet.

But the fight was soon over. They were heavily outnumbered by the raiding party. Some men encircled them, while others looted the house. Lavinia was chased outside. Both she and Marinetta turned their heads away as burning brands were tossed into their beloved home.

The leader of the raiding party rode up to inspect them. He wore plaid trousers laced from knee to ankle, and a deerskin tunic. His hair was braided in two long plaits, which hung down his back.

'Leave the old man and the woman,' he ordered. 'Take the others.'

'My daughter!' Cedric cried. He held out his arms as Marinetta was dragged away. 'Marinetta... My daughter!'

Marinetta, Lucius and Titus's hands were tied. They were slung across the horses, and the group set off to the north east, loaded down with stolen treasures, gold, silverware and arms.

After travelling for an hour or so, they stopped when it was completely dark. Lucius strained to see what was happening. They had been following the line of the great ditch on the south side of the Wall for the last mile or so. He realised that they were now at one of the Vallum crossings. He saw two men slip away from the party towards the crossing gateway there. Perhaps he could alert the sentries? If he kicked his leg against the flank of his pony, would the

noise the animal might make carry over such a distance?

As if sensing his thoughts, one of the other tribesmen moved nearer to him. He pulled a grimy knife from the belt at his waist. 'This knife slits throats if you make a sound,' he hissed.

'I am not afraid to die,' said Lucius proudly.

The man looked at him. Then he grasped Marinetta roughly by the hair and pulled her head back. 'Her throat,' he said craftily. 'Any noise and I slit *her* throat.'

Lucius gritted his teeth and lay still.

After about a quarter of an hour the two tribesmen returned, and the horses were led forward through the now-open gate, under the archway and on to the Military Way. As they turned west on the marching road, Lucius felt sick to his stomach, for he knew that murder had been done. Then he saw the outline of a milecastle on the Wall just ahead. 'Ha!' he thought. 'Now they shall see the might of Rome, when they try to cross the great Wall of Hadrian.'

Again the party stopped, and the two

tribesmen went forward, but this time not so quietly. They seemed to be expected, as the gate opened at once. Lucius felt then as though he had been struck a physical blow. He was close to weeping as he saw Roman soldiers usher the enemy into the courtyard, and through the impregnable frontier Wall of the Empire. There was a tower above the second archway of the milecastle, but no sentry challenged them as they filed underneath.

'Treachery! Bribery and treachery!' The words choked in Lucius's throat.

They were now on the narrow pathway of the Berm, on the north side of the Wall. The prisoners and booty were lifted off the horses, and then the soldiers led the horses back through the gate. Lucius, Marinetta and Titus were roughly pushed from the narrow path down into the forward defence ditch. There were tribesmen waiting there, and also on the glacis slope facing them. Tribesmen with fast ponies. In a very little time they were moving swiftly north into the wild territories of Caledonia.

Many miles later, at the edge of a wood,

they made camp for the night. The prisoners were dumped in a heap on the ground, hands still tied together. The rogues must feel secure, thought Lucius, as he watched them light their fire. The men no longer spoke in low tones, but he could not make any sense of what they were saying. He whispered to Marinetta to ask her if she knew. The surly one with the knife kicked him.

'Quiet,' he snarled. 'You speak. You die.' He threw some food at their feet.

'The child shivers. She is cold, give her my cloak,' said Titus.

'Let her shiver.'

'As you wish,' Titus shrugged. He folded his cloak and tucked it under his head. 'She will be of less value to you suffering from a chill.'

The man leaned down and, pulling the cloak roughly away, he threw it towards Marinetta.

'Cover Marinetta with my cloak, nephew,' Lucius's uncle told him.

Lucius kept his eyes downcast as he carefully wrapped Marinetta in his uncle's

cloak. Although his eyes did not meet his uncle's, he knew his intention. They had to retrieve the message from the cloak. When the raiders reached their tribal home they would share out the goods. A fine woollen cloak would be a prized possession. The coded message was sure to be found, and they would all be slaughtered as spies.

'Get away from her!' The tribesman kicked Lucius again.

Lucius rolled over on the earth and then sat up slowly. He glanced at Marinetta. Her complexion was pale, but she had a set expression on her face, as if she were determined not to show weakness. He dared not speak to her, not even in a whisper.

Would she understand why his uncle wanted her to have his cloak? Would Marinetta remember about the secret message and where it was hidden?