

Silentium

By Marcellus Durrell

On a hillock behind the abandoned vineyard, Legate Lucanius stands beside his horse and watches the man in the wine-dark tunic run towards him. The man is clearly not a soldier. He runs erratically across the wet ground like he's never run before in his entire life, and he trips over his own feet twice, both times scrambling back up to quickly resume his graceless scamper. When his brimless cap slips off, he stops to pick it up and comically slaps it back onto his head, and in doing so gets mud on his face and neck. When it falls off a second time, he just leaves it.

Lucanius stands in the shade of two ash trees and is tempted to laugh. The man is a quarter mile away, on the other side of the vineyard, and is probably unaware that Lucanius is there. He runs from the direction of Hannibal's camp. His tunic, dark as dried blood, identifies him as one of Hannibal's low-level functionaries, a scribe or a corn counter. Lucanius knows he must be cautious, however, because the Poeni are crafty. This could be intended as a distraction.

"Centurion," Lucanius says. "Come see this."

Vitellius knows that if Lucanius addresses him by his rank, instead of by his name, that the enemy is in sight. He climbs up the hillock and stands at the legate's side.

"Think it's a trick?" says Lucanius.

"Knowing the Poeni, sir?" says Vitellius. "*Everything* they do is a trick."

"True. Post sentries," says Lucanius. "In all four directions."

"Already done, sir," says Vitellius.

"Forgive me, Centurion," says Lucanius. "I always forget how good you are at this."

Vitellius tries not to roll his eyes. Lucanius, a young aristocrat given the rank of legate without having a minute of military experience, always forgets that when any Roman unit stops for a rest break, even a short one, sentries are *always* posted in all four directions. But at least Lucanius tries to be a good officer. Too many of these patrician fig-wits just go through the motions.

"He's being chased," says Vitellius.

"Think so?" replies Lucanius. "There's no one behind him."

“He keeps looking back,” replies the centurion, “like he expects to see somebody.”

As soon as these words hit the air, a Numidian horseman rides at full gallop from behind a thick strand of trees. The horse almost loses its footing in the mud, but it soon turns in the direction of the running man—and the Romans. Vitellius goes back to his forty men, who are behind the hillock and not yet visible to the horseman or the running man. “Enemy horseman spotted,” he says. “Archer. There could be more. On your feet, boys. Ready *testudo*! Except you three, come with me.”

Vitellius returns to the hillock with his three men and stands next to Lucanius. The running man is less than a hundred and fifty yards away now, close enough for the Romans to see the desperate terror in his face. Three more horsemen have joined the chase, bearing down on their quarry, who has run up one of the rows of the vineyard.

The running man seems to have made a fatal error: once he enters one of the vineyard’s rows, he cannot move laterally, only forward, with nowhere to take cover or evade the horsemen. The riders smile triumphantly when they realize they are about to run the man down. But they, too, miscalculate: there has been rain here for three straight days, and the lead horse’s front legs sink a foot deep into the mud. The beast refuses to go on, shrilling in pain and terror and causing the other horsemen to pull up. The running man is able to slog on—in the mud, he’s even slower than he was before, but at least he’s moving—and he quickly learns that if he sticks close to the vines on either side, the ground is firmer than in the muddy centre of the row. He’s not running anymore, just plodding forward, but he still puts distance between himself and his pursuers, who now shout at each other. Lucanius does not need to understand their language to know that they are blaming each other.

One horseman has a golden crest on his helmet, an indicator of rank, and he shouts for the others to stop talking and start circumventing the vineyard, knowing that the fleeing man can only go in one direction. But the riders suddenly halt when one of them spots Lucanius’s red mantle. He alerts the other horsemen. Even though they only see Lucanius, Vitellius, and three other men, they know that there are more soldiers nearby because Romans never travel in small numbers in broad daylight.

A horseman shoots an arrow at the running man and a second horseman does the same. The officer howls at them to stop. Their orders, Lucanius now knows, are to take

the man alive. One of the arrows sinks into the muddy ground but the second one hits the running man in the back of his right calf. He yowls and falls face forward, getting even more mud on his arms and face, but he reaches back, pulls the arrow out, and pulls himself back up onto his feet to resume his escape, slowed down so much by the leg wound and the mud that what he does now is a limping trudge. The horsemen then abandon the hobbling man and turn back towards their own camp.

The running man hobbles towards the Romans and is less than twenty-five yards from the hillock when a javelin, thrown by Vitellius before Lucanius can stop him, hits the running man in the left shoulder.

“What are you doing, Centurion?” says Lucanius. “If the Poeni want him alive, then we do too!”

“He ain’t dead, sir,” says Vitellius with a grin. “Wasn’t tryna’ kill ‘im. Just wanted to get ‘is attention.”

“Don’t throw another,” says Lucanius, not wanting to admit how impressed he is with the accuracy of the throw.

The running man somehow stays on his feet, screams in agony, then pulls the javelin out and drops it on the ground. He slows down even more but does not stop, and Lucanius is amazed that this desk-kisser can still run after being wounded twice. Few men could.

“No shoot at me!” the running man yells. “I Roman! No javelin! No shoot! I Roman!”

“With that Gallic accent, sir,” says Vitellius, “he sure as fuck ain’t Roman.”

“Please, sirs, please! I’m Roman!” shouts the running man. “Please don’t kill me! I’m Roman!” His Gallic accent has vanished and his Latin is suddenly perfect. He keeps moving towards the Romans, scrambles up the hillock and drops to his knees beside them. Vitellius orders two of his men to grab the prisoner’s arms. He’s young, maybe early twenties, and has a scraggly beard that a true Roman would scrape off.

“Thank the gods!” the man says. “I never thought I’d be free again! Thank you!” He weeps like he’s just been rescued.

“Well, you ain’t exactly free now, pal,” says Vitellius, who pulls a brooch, shaped like a silver elephant-tusk, from the man’s tunic front. He hands it up to Lucanius. Both men recognize it as a Poenic military decoration and wonder why a civilian has one.

“I found that,” says the prisoner. “I don’t have any money, so I plan to sell it as soon as I can.”

“Then why were you *wearing* it?” asks Lucanius.

“You wouldn’t believe, sirs,” says the prisoner, “how much the Poeni are impressed by it. Made me popular with the ladies. As you can see, sirs, I need all the help I can get.” He then winks at the Romans.

The Romans are wary. This is not the first Poeni operative to get close to the Romans by claiming to be Roman himself. Just a few nights earlier, a man whose nose and ears had been sliced off approached a Roman cavalry patrol, claiming to have escaped Hannibal’s torturers. He wore Roman armour, missing only the helmet, spoke perfect Latin, and his wounds were fresh. While the Romans treated his wounds and vented their outrage, Poeni horsemen surrounded the patrol and killed all but three of the sixteen Roman horsemen. The noseless and earless man then scurried like a night rat back to the Poeni camp.

“I’m Roman, sirs,” says the no-longer-running man. “Born and raised in Rome. You can’t imagine how happy I am to be back.”

Lucanius really wants to believe the man. Muddy and bloody, he certainly seems to be telling the truth. He is also well aware that the capture of this man, whether he’s really Roman or just another Poeni operative, will be good for his own career, once he ascertains that this isn’t another enemy ruse.

Blood soaks the left side of the man’s tunic and also covers his right calf. He groans but does not resist as the soldiers search him and find a small vial of liquid and a dagger. There is caked blood on the hilt, several hours old and not from the man’s two new wounds.

“Hey now, *puero bello*,” asks Vitellius, holding up the dagger. “What you plannin’ to do with this?”

The young man’s eyes flash anger. “If you don’t know what a dagger is for,” he snaps, “then how the fuck did you ever make centurion?”

Vitellius slaps the man’s face, hard. Only the soldiers holding him in place prevent him from falling over sideways. “When I ask you a question, asshole,” says Vitellius, “you answer it. Unnerstand?”

“Understood, Centurion,” the man replies, grimacing. “Apologies. I’m under some duress at the moment, wounded twice and not expecting to be maltreated by the men I consider my rescuers. Forgive me for forgetting that you must suspect everyone these days. If I were you, I’d suspect me too. Poeni cunning is limitless.”

Lucanius notes how sharply the man becomes angry, and then how quickly his anger seems to vanish. Mastering emotions is a useful skill and a sign of a sharp mind.

“So: dagger,” says Vitellius. “Why you got it?”

“I carry the dagger, Centurion,” says the man, “because amongst the Poeni, one’s greatest danger is often the other Poeni. They all have daggers too.”

“What’s in the vial?” asks Lucanius.

“Cyanide,” says the man. “I would’ve swallowed it if the horsemen caught me instead of you.”

“Why?” asks Vitellius. “Ain’t you one of them?”

“Gods no, sir,” says the man. “If they took me alive, they’d put me on a cross.”

“Why did you first address us in a Gaulish accent?” says Lucanius.

“A reflex, sir,” says the man. “I would not have survived my Poeni captivity if they knew I was Roman, so I pretended to be a Gaul. I had to learn to speak Latin, my first language, with a fake accent—which also means I had to speak Gallic *without* a Roman accent. I found out early what the Poeni do to Romans.”

“Which is?” asks Lucanius.

“Romans are murdered, sir, one way or another,” says the man. “Always savagely and never quickly. I see it happen a dozen times, Roman prisoners beaten or tortured to death. And the Pukes were doing this long before the two nations were even at war.”

“Your name?” says Lucanius.

“The Poeni know me as Cormac of Massilia,” the man says, “because I pretended to be a Gaul, but I was nicknamed Elby.”

“Elby?” scoffs Vitellius. “What kinda bullshit name is ‘at?’”

“Derived from the letters L.B., sir, short for ‘language boy.’ They call me that because I am talented in languages. I was on Hannibal’s staff as one of his official translators. He commands a lot of mercenaries, who speak many different languages, so translators are essential. My real name is Marcus Quinctius Cincinnatus.”

“Cincinnatus?” says Vitellius. “You sayin’ you’re descended from one of our most famous generals?”

“Not by blood, sir. One of my ancestors was a Hellenic slave, freed by his master Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus during the general’s lifetime. But I’m a freeborn Roman, sirs, a citizen, and I bear the name with pride.”

“As you should,” says Lucianus. The words *during the general’s lifetime* are, if true, highly meaningful: they indicate a slave who is manumitted as a reward for outstanding service, and not part of a mass manumission stipulated in his master’s will for all of his slaves regardless of their character or abilities.

“Beg pardon, sir,” says Marcus. “May I have some wine?”

The soldiers let go of Marcus’s arms to let him take the wineskin Lucianus hands him. He removes the cork and sniffs it. “From the vineyards of Long-Haired Gaul,” Marcus says with some reverence. “The good stuff.” Marcus takes a short sip of the wine, then pours a little of it on his shoulder wound, grimaces, then pours some on his lower leg wound and grimaces again. The wine will help prevent infection. After this initial questioning, Lucianus will take Marcus to the nearest field medical tent.

The residents of Rome’s oldest neighbourhoods all have their own little dialects. When Marcus speaks, Vitellius hears traces of a Caelian Hill accent—longer ‘a’ sounds and a slight tonal uptick at the end of every sentence. Lucianus hears it too, but neither man is yet convinced that their prisoner is who he says he is. He has, after all, already demonstrated some skill in affecting accents.

“You ever live in Rome?” asks Vitellius.

“Yes sir,” says Marcus. “Born there, lived in the city until I was sixteen.”

“Where?” says Vitellius.

“Near the top of the Caelian Hill,” says Marcus. “At one time, my father had a textile shop there.”

“Pretty fancy neighbourhood,” says Vitellius. “Rich family?”

“No sir,” says Marcus. “For my family, wealth was aspirational rather than an actual. Father was a silk importer and believed his shop had to be near the people who could afford his prices.”

“Is he still in business?” asks Lucianus.

“No sir,” Marcus says. “My mother, sister and I ran the shop while my father travelled around looking for cheap silk. Turns out the people who could afford his prices didn’t want his crappy silk—they wanted the good stuff that we didn’t carry. Then Father disappeared altogether. Um—how much of this do you want to hear, sirs? I will gladly speak my own language to fellow Romans all night long, because I haven’t done it in years. I’ll tell you my whole life story, if want to hear it. I have nothing to hide and will gladly tell you all I know.”

“Who do you work for?” asks Vitellius.

“Work for, sir?” says Marcus. “For Hannibal Barca himself. I was on his team of diplomats and translators.”

“No, that’s not what he means,” asks Lucanius. “If you’re one of our spies, just tell us who you report to and I’ll have him confirm your identity.”

“I don’t report to anyone, sirs,” says Marcus, “except—now—the two of you. Seven years ago, I was enslaved and sold to the Poeni. I survived only because I concealed my true origin. Sirs, may I have some water?”

It is only now that Vitellius notices that the back of Marcus’s wine-dark tunic is darker in some places. The swirling designs in the dark linen make the bloodstains hard to spot. He touches Marcus on the back, just hard enough to confirm that the wounds are real. Marcus cringes.

“Looks like you been worked over pretty good there,” says Vitellius.

“Five lashes, sir, four days ago,” says Marcus. “Probably infected now. Could I have some more wine for my back wounds? And perhaps some assistance pouring it on the right places?”

Vitellius looks at Lucanius, who nods. Vitellius begins to peel Marcus’s tunic off of his back but it sticks to the untreated wounds. Marcus grimaces and bears it. The centurion gives the tunic a good yank and pulls it up around Marcus’s shoulders. Vitellius smells rot, as the wounds have already begun to fester. Yet it could still be part of a ruse. Poeni trickery does tend to be thorough.

But no more questions for the moment. Marcus, after having the wounds on his back torn open, is in so much pain that he can’t speak coherently.