

LORETICUS

**LOST EMPEROR
TRILOGY**

BOOK I

LORETICUS

J.B. LUCAS

First published in Great Britain in 2017 by J.B. Lucas
via Type & Tell

Copyright © 2017 J.B. Lucas

The moral right of J.B. Lucas to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

All rights reserved. Neither the whole nor any part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, without permission in writing from the author.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-78745-025-7

Type & Tell hereby exclude all liability to the extent permitted by law for any errors or omissions in this book and for any costs, expenses, damages and losses (including but not limited to any direct, indirect or consequential losses, loss of profit, loss of reputation and all interest, penalties and legal costs (calculated on a full indemnity basis) and all other professional costs and expenses) suffered or incurred by a third party relying on any information contained in this book.

Type & Tell

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J.B. Lucas has lived and studied in eight different countries so far. Passionate about high politics, he studied the inner workings of the European Union as an undergrad with a view to eventually working in the arena of international border disputes. His career has taken a different route, but he is still writing about the obsession that has captivated him his entire life – the tectonic movements of states.

He now resides in the darkest depths of leafy West London, where he writes using the inspiration of the India–Pakistan split, the founding of Israel, the identity crisis of Brexit and the maelstrom within the EU.

Loreticus is his debut novel.

Chapter 1

The priest stood alone in the chapel, calling prayers to a congregation that had fled and would never come home. He snapped wrists as he chimed the hand bells in an ancient rhythm, shooting their peals through sunlit dust in to the deep, cool corners.

Round notes bounced out of the temple's open doors, hitting the wood and brick of the cooling buildings in the dusk. They continued, muffled now, down the broken-toothed path of the alleyway, which stood as a dark frame to the glowing palace, basking with its height and age in the last half hour of the sun. Shadows crept from the edge of the town to the centre, the paths and the passageways filling quickly, the boulevards fighting to keep light.

And thus every evening settled across the capital, and shutters clacked as cool breezes came to disturb sleeping children. Old soldiers, now lamp lighters, limped down dry streets, leaning on sun-hot bricks to ignite the braziers on corners. Visitors would comment that the lights seemed premature, extravagant in the still golden light. But the

locals knew how quickly the sun fell behind the mountains and how hurriedly the shadows and cold flooded in like a breaking wave.

The district around the Red Palace was a marketplace, crammed with ancient family stalls. At this time of evening they were all noiseless, the fruit stamped into the ground for flies and mice to feast on, the blood from the butchers driving up a briny smell, which hung in the nostrils.

Behind the painted towers and the high, crenellated corners of the palace loomed those black-purple clouds on the mountains. On a particularly haunted night you might see a flick and a flash of lightning, but the sound and the moisture never made its way to the capital. This was a dry land, a dusty land, and its people were not meant for the damnation smudged into those peaks.

Of the many active soldiers who roamed the quiet streets of the wealth-crusted city, none were more imposing than the royal guard. They were off duty that night as the young emperor was safely behind the steep walls of the palace. Many were eating or laughing with their families. Others were out, draped in no more than a tunic and carrying nothing more fearsome than a regimental dagger. The streets had been safe for five years, since the expulsion of the zealot insurgents, and the population had short enough memories.

Statian was the captain of the guard, reporting directly to the head of the entire palace military. He was tall, elegant, settled in his own skin and was a man who bent the air around him as if his lean, thickly muscled frame weighed more than it should. He had fought in this neighbourhood

every day of that dark year of civil war as the Butcher's men burned down the streets during the Terror. The temperature of those fires rose as the emperor punished the religious community, and the Butcher in turn spilled the blood of the empire's own soldiers across the city.

"Long may he rot over the mountains," muttered Statian to himself as he turned down a silent street full of memories. This lane had once been a frequent bottleneck of violence. Such is the irony of life that as Statian contemplated how each side had used this urban trap time and again, he was too far away in reminiscence to digest the present.

Without warning a hulk stepped out of an ink-black shadow, just as Statian's soldiers had done a decade before. Statian jolted into a sickly realisation of his complacency. The thug in front of him was too confident and professional to be a mugger, and he was too quiet to be anything other than a distraction. The palace guard turned hastily, the edge of his blade shushing as it drew past the scabbard lip. First there was no one behind him, then there was. From the side, a small ghost jumped and split open the veins on his elegant, unshaven neck with a whetted stiletto.

Statian knew he was done as soon as he felt the stinging, and he didn't fight. He wanted to nod at the man out of respect for such a professional delivery, but he was probably nodding already without knowing it. Humour, even in his last moments.

The small man stood back, his form unsubstantial against a failing sun and the chill dusk. He delved into a pouch on his belt, then threw something gold over Statian's head.

"Don't spend it here. You know what's next?"

It seemed the thug gave a nod, because the man turned and simply disappeared. There was a shuffle, a wheeze and then a colossal grab of the back of his tunic. Statian, the tall and dapper guards' captain, was hoisted and draped over the thug's shoulder. His head bounced in step, blood ran over his upside-down face and his mind faded away.

Chapter 2

The Red Palace was a small town unto itself. Residential plots rubbed shoulders with administrative offices, squeezing the beautiful and influential people in to a space which, had it been less jumbled, would have taken no more than a half hour to cross on foot.

If a visitor were to enter via the heavily guarded door from the market, through walls as thick as a house and as old as the empire itself, she would undoubtedly be important. The first impression was of a small, perfect reception garden. Here thick-trunked trees sheltered the visitor from the late-morning sun, jasmine and lavender scented the air throughout the afternoon. Four grand arches, stacked two-by-two on top of each other, lifted the face of the entrance building which stared down as she walked further.

During the day the gate was usually open, or at least it had been since the end of the civil war. At the end of this simple antechamber was a choice. Take the left door and

she would turn to the administrative heart of the empire, where hundreds of thousands of salaries were calculated, where maps were drawn, where taxes were collected and judgements given. Turn right, and the visitor would enter the important part of the Red Palace.

Loreticus's rooms were situated at the top of a tower in the important part. There should have been a warning sign outside his rooms, stating "Life is imperfect, and we need not accept this". It was a lament, not a criticism. If the visitor was unaware of this and on the wrong side of that invisible dictum, then she might be quickly dismissed back down the stairs.

If she had enquired about the occupant of these rooms, there would have been a mixed collection of opinions, all of which were right from their own perspective. Most ladies and young men found him charming, despite his fifty-something years. Children found him approachable and engaging, and servants seem to forget their subservience around him. But to be a man or woman of influence or pride in his presence was tantamount to a challenge.

If the visitor had anything to offer Loreticus in his work of defending the empire and its ancient ruling family, then it was likely that he would welcome her conversation. However, if the visitor truly did have anything of worth, it was more likely that a boy or old lady or run-of-the-mill merchant would have tugged at her sleeve the day before in the middle of the street to tell her that she was someone that "someone wanted to talk to".

But were the visitor someone of influence, it would be rare that Loreticus would face her directly, rather

offering a gaze both direct and indirect. There was a sensation that he was always looking down from a slightly higher vantage point, despite his average build. It was nothing that Loreticus said, or implied, but it was a spirit which came over him. Legends were tattooed across his demeanour, telling of his deeds in the civil war a decade ago, and the bitter compromise he was instructed to make on behalf of the old emperor. The visitor might also feel there was ample opportunity to strike this man in his quiet contemplation, but the testament of his still being alive after so much turmoil offered the best counsel not to try.

And so Loreticus was in his quiet contemplation now, looking through a narrow window at a column of white bonfire smoke from the gardens. The window stood five storeys off the ground, and as such enjoyed a rare pure breeze, which touched Loreticus's skin in sporadic, gentle breaths. As he turned, his gaze came back into the room and turned once more proud and impenetrable. His right eye was still in the sun and stayed wide open, his left shaded and partially closed. This splitting of the man by the soft shadow spoke more to his person than any words could.

His gaze of vexation fell on his assistant, who once again had managed to hit a nerve. Pello was not a person that Loreticus plied his tricks on. He was not a threat, a man of influence or a person of interest. He was the quirky son of a cousin to whom Loreticus had owed a favour. He lived his life in lists, something which Loreticus liked, but his head often remained in some vaporous world when his thoughts should have been in the room.

Everything that morning was hushed. Loreticus's

rooms were never a centre of rambunctious activity, but the line of bludgeoned and cold bodies that he and Pello hosted soaked in any fugitive sound. This silence was now sharpened by Loreticus's irritation. Pello had the talent of speaking when his master was just starting a statement.

"Gods be damned. I was trying to lay the logic out loud," Loreticus snapped.

"Sorry," returned Pello, pulling his face into a rictus of guilt.

"You always do it."

"Sorry."

"I was summarising our predicament for your notes. The emperor was allegedly with his mistress last night and now he's nowhere. His guards were murdered. We have no other candidate of royal blood. The thick-headed generals will have to take charge."

Pello always drew his thoughts on paper in the style of a knotted string. Each knot gathered existing threads and scattered resultant questions to the next range of knots. Loreticus looked over at his work.

On the left was a scribbled black ball with "Emperor kidnapped/murdered/runs away", with each option on separate lines. Underneath was "Bodyguards murdered" and "Unknown man murdered". To the right of this ball and its options was a large blank expanse of paper. Pello scribbled a knot with the question, "Who's in charge now?"

"We have Ferran," offered Pello. They contemplated each other for a moment, and the unspoken rebuttal hung in the air as an unnecessary rebuke. "Why the generals instead?"

"Ferran might be my friend, but he's a lazy oaf. Between

him, Antron and Iskandar, they command three of the four armies. There are very few men who have a natural authority to bring those scoundrels into line and so one or more of them needs to be on the seat. So better a partnership between them than the three of them squabbling,” said Loreticus. “Our problem is that they only have the talent to destroy, not build something to last. If the generals go to war, it’s a catastrophe for the country. But it seems inevitable. If the Emperor Marcan has been kidnapped, they have an excuse; if he’s been assassinated, they have an obligation of honour. War would be the end of our empire.”

He wrote the notes in his knot-map:

Kidnapped = war (bad)

Murdered = war (catastrophic)

Disappeared/drunk = to be determined

“I don’t understand, sir,” interrupted Pello. “We’ve always been very successful at war.”

“Not this time. We’re broke and we’ve got no-one nearby to invade other than the zealots. All our trade left when the religious community took it with them. So, it can’t be the generals on the throne and Marcan has caused a scandal and disappeared. It seems that no-one is going to fix this mess unless we sort it out. No, there’s no simple route back to where we were without Marcan in the palace.” He pointed at Pello’s paper and waited, listening to the scratching of the quill. He thumped the base of his fist in to his palm. “We must find him, protect him and return him to his throne. If he’s still alive. But it still niggles me why Antron deigns to share the power with his rivals. I would have thought he would have taken it alone.”

There was a movement of air in the room as a breeze found its way in. A newly mounted mirror caught the sun and sent blinding rays around the room. Modern décor, modern pains.

Pello had drawn a knot in the middle of the paper, with the title “Return of Loreticus’s preferred emperor”.

“Change that,” snapped Loreticus. “Take out my name and put in ‘rightful emperor’.”

Pello did as ordered. Loreticus looked back out over the buildings. The phraseology was not an issue, he knew. It was the unconnected knots between Pello’s growing cluster on the left and the solitary one in the middle. A lack of logic, and a lack of a plan.

“So strange it happened on a day like today,” opined Pello, looking up and out at the sky, mimicking Loreticus’s pose. The painted red stain on the outside of the building curled around the edges of the window. Clatters of broken speech lifted from the market in the street, the shouts of the traders robbed of their urgency by the height of the tower. He was right. The rhythm of normalcy sounded alien to Loreticus.

Loreticus sighed and sat down at his desk again. Three obvious possibilities to cause the emperor’s disappearance, any of which would cause chaos. Either there would be war because of an assassination by the zealots; or a war because the three generals, Antron, Iskandar and Ferran, had assumed control of the throne and didn’t know how to do anything else; or peace because the Emperor Marcan would be found drunk or hiding in a cupboard somewhere. Loreticus thought could he manage Marcan, because he was a deeply flawed man and a poor emperor. He could

not help but believe once Marcan had understood the need for reunification, he would act on it. If the generals stayed in control of the throne, the threat of an impoverished country would cause them to race to ransack every neighbouring country. Another decade of war caused by shallow men who knew no different.

In front of Loreticus lay the wreckage of the slipshod palace coup by an unknown enemy. Slipshod, but still successful. He glanced at the mess, stood up, flushed his mind to clarity, and moved forward to the line of murdered guards. Throats cut, hair matted, skin marbled. He leant over the captain of the troop, someone who was well known in court and had even protected Loreticus on several missions. The old spymaster looked for a moment with compassion, then assumed a detachment, and once again went about a repugnant task on behalf of an oblivious monarch.

There were none of the heroic deaths frozen in the paintings around the building. This was simply a grotesque slaughter carried out by professionals on the orders of fools. Loreticus took a breath. He sniffed, opening his nostrils which had collapsed with the summer dust. He immediately regretted it. The air held a flat, gamy odour from the bodies. He didn't like the smell of mortality. It gave too close a connection to the animal world.

The long gash in the neck of one of the corpses had opened in a straight line, concentrating the colour of life into the inner flesh and greying the skin beyond it. This deep cut gave the neck an extra length and it gaped as the head rested off centre. This was the effort of a forceful killer.

"Professional work," muttered Loreticus as he walked along the row. He kept his voice steady whilst his stomach rolled. He wished for once his mind might master the horrific sights to which he was constantly exposed. "Four look like they were done by the same man and the rest by two or more who learned from him. The cuts are the same style but less exact and less deep."

Pello walked behind him, skin white and lips blue. His ankles wobbled as he made notes in his idiosyncratic way, walking and writing, rarely looking up from the papers. Loreticus could imagine Pello fainting during a haircut.

"Statian," Pello stated. Pello's quill had stopped scratching. They stared at the face, which lay crown towards them.

"Yes. Our friend Statian. Where was he found? Please say not in his house with his family."

"No, sir. He was left outside our door," said Pello plainly.

"Outside our door? Just here?" Loreticus felt his stomach constrict. "Five floors up? I didn't see any blood."

"No, there wasn't any. It was very tidy."

The spymaster was shaken. Normally Loreticus was the predator, the one with the might of the empire behind him. This was carried out by someone with knowledge, access and an agenda against him specifically.

"On that note, why did you have the others brought all the way up here? It must have been exhausting for whomever did it."

"Oh, I didn't want to have to keep walking up and down the stairs today," replied Pello without a trace of guilt. Loreticus stared at him for a moment, orienting himself to the idea that this was logic rather than laziness on the

part of the boy.

"Well, I suppose that it maintains some sense of privacy," he muttered.

"It doesn't look like Statian," said Pello, drawing his attention back to the face.

Loreticus paused, now realising the horrible newness of the situation for Pello. His junior's pale cheeks evoked his own virgin investigation of a violent death.

"Have you seen a dead man before?"

"Not up close," replied the boy. "And not in a room with more dead than live people."

Loreticus nodded and gestured for him to sit at the room's writing desk. He resisted an urge to rub Pello's shoulder in sympathy.

"Draft a message from an alias to Javus to ask whether the fanatics had a hand in this," he instructed. Pello tucked away his scraps of paper entitled "Assassination Investigation Project" and drew out a fresh sheet.

"Yes, sir." A pause as he scrawled the date and one of his master's spare identities. "Do you think he would tell us if the Butcher had been involved?"

"If he knew," replied Loreticus, and instinctively checked for anyone else in the room. "And stop calling Talio 'The Butcher'. I've managed to drop the habit after ten years and your repetition isn't going to help."

The row of corpses lined up. An acquaintance murdered and dumped at his door. These were ugly recurrences of the events of the civil war.

"It is uncomfortably convenient that it happened last night. Today I was due to meet the emperor and the generals to explain my case for a rapprochement with the

zealots.” He looked down at the row of bodies, willing himself not to check any were spying on him. “There’s one missing from here. I couldn’t bear to have him laid out with the others. A tall man with brown hair. I’ve asked the physicians to wash him down to see if there is anything we might recognise.”

“Could it be Marcan?” asked Pello, filling out new knots on his large string of logic again.

“No,” replied Loreticus. “I feel something inside me that Marcan is still alive. He has great tasks ahead of him.”

“Bringing the country back together will be a victory, sir,” stated Pello.

“Yes, it will. And I think this emperor might have been willing had he known the state of the finances. As soon as the clerks see we’re running out of money, they look after their own wages first and the soldiers’ last.”

“So the clerks might have killed the guards?”

“No, you plum,” snapped Loreticus. “But these two things surely aren’t a coincidence. Marcan disappears, his bodyguards are murdered. That much is tight logic. Whether it had anything to do with the conversation planned for today is the crucial question.”

“Why, Loreticus?”

“It shows who benefits. An unstable empire benefits the zealots in their new country, but simply killing the emperor benefits those who inherit the throne – in other words, the Imperial Cousin Ferran or General Antron. It’s a ridiculous situation.” Another sigh. “All I want is a peaceful city and short-sighted people spend their time tearing up maps.”

Pello moved to the desk, scrawling a large knot between

the cluster on the left and the one in the middle. Pello wrote "Who benefits?" above and put a column of dashes next to it. Loreticus watched him, knowing that he would fill out that list with names as they occurred to him. The boy's pale tunic glowed in the light from the window, making Pello look up again at the clear blue sky. Loreticus followed his gaze. The heavens stretched in their perfection to the mountains at the edge of the kingdom, the great looming slopes.

"It really is strange it all happened on such a quiet day," he said.

Loreticus considered him once more, then said, "Go and get changed for the reception tonight. Be back here in an hour with a clear head on your shoulders."

Chapter 3

The fashion in the capital was to hold parties timed precisely for when the sun went down. The light was hypnotic, a delicate blend of heat and gold, and the common philosophy was that this twilight calmed the spirit and encouraged fraternity between even the grubbiest of rivals. And so it was tonight, with the three vainglorious generals acting as a fraternity of hosts.

Loreticus and Pello arrived perfectly on time, when there were enough cliques to flit between but not enough of a crowd to get wedged against any one of them. Loreticus smiled, his perfumed grey hair styled tightly against his skull, his lips and tongue moist with a deep-red wine as he kissed wives, hugged husbands and clapped sons on the shoulder. He was in demand, and sometimes a queue formed near him as people looked to his tall figure as a safe harbour in the current storm.

Loreticus wasn't one of those guests who were cynical and half-hearted about an invitation only to remember how much they enjoyed company when they arrived. He was a committed misery and exuded joviality as only self-

aware depressives could.

Smiling, smiling, he waded through the people, walking obliviously into deep conversations with a delightful comment irrelevant to any past dialogue. After each greeting, Pello corrected his clothes from behind, and flattened any loose hair.

Loreticus reached the end of the hall, sucked in a lungful of air and let his smile drop.

“How are we doing, dear Pello?”

“One-third of the triangle, Loreticus. Avoid General Iskandar, straight line to General Antron, a few nice words about how tall he looks, spin to the Imperial Cousin Ferran to tell him how funny he is, and then home.”

The older man nodded, palmed his hair back above each ear and looked out at the crowd. From anyone other than Pello, these would have been words seeped in sarcasm, but the boy was deadpan and unfortunately all too accurate.

Antron was on the balcony, letting the falling sun lift the military gold from his cloak's clasp. He was laughing a little too noisily, moving a little stiffly and all round smiling too much. Loreticus noticed with a certain disapproval that Antron's cloak was the wrong style for the occasion.

Had Loreticus's late wife been here, his discomfort would have amused her. Now the recollection of her filled him with remorse. All these people were still here, populating the world with their chatter, their white teeth and togas and smooth hair, their perfume and the chink of glasses touching. The noise of blended conversations was overwhelming.

“Back at it,” he said and wound up a momentum to start walking.

"Hello! Hello!" he called to the bankers and the doctors. He smiled so easily and so convincingly that his eyes closed behind his thick black lashes and people wondered how he saw to walk.

He glided past General Iskandar, who deigned not to notice him as Loreticus squeezed the hand of a chubby duke and took a hug from his tall, angular wife. The Imperial Cousin Ferran was on the third leg of his route, the one which took him back to the door, and when their eyes met there was a brief, not unwelcome nod of lifelong acquaintances. The three generals looked like wolves amongst these negligent sheep. Loreticus noted the way that Iskandar avoided any chance of catching the eye of Ferran or Antron. Subconsciously they had split the room and the crowd, who flocked to bleat around each of them.

"Normally it is a snarling battle with these three unchaperoned in the room together. Either there's an invisible chaperone, or I'm missing something?" Loreticus mused to Pello.

"Well, they seem to be keeping their distance from each other," replied the young man. "Divide and conquer the masses, et cetera." Loreticus watched him from the side of his eyes. Pello's pensiveness either meant a question or a conclusion. "Could it be that these three generals came together for the sake of the empire in a time of need? Buried their differences and formed a partnership?"

"Perhaps," said Loreticus. "Their new camaraderie is certainly welcome. The question is whether they had any hand in the chaos."

Antron, content in his role of host, cut another conversation short to wait as Loreticus crossed the last

few steps.

“So what do I call you now, Antron? Generalissimo? Emperor? Prince?” asked Loreticus.

“Good god, Loreticus, your small talk seems to dry up if the other person lacks breasts. *You* call me Antron, like you always have and you always will.”

A moment in which Antron’s eyes couldn’t quite connect with Loreticus’s. They were exactly the same age, peers from the academies of their youth all the way to fighting shoulder by shoulder every day during the civil war. But somehow Loreticus was settled in his skin, whilst Antron was still growing. It was this innate unease which had created a distance between them, and it was perhaps the bond between Antron and Iskandar.

“What a view!” exclaimed Antron, looping his arm around Loreticus’s ribs. “What an incredible sight. The capital.”

He opened his arms to encompass the great city which tumbled out from under the lip of the balcony. All roads pointed to the palace, with the grand, palm-covered main street, the corda, striking its mercantile path between the heavy gates and skirting past the palace one block away.

“Yes, I’ve always loved this aspect.”

“Of course,” said Antron, his smile undiminished, “You know this view well.”

“I do. The old emperor’s favourite place, other than his garden.”

“Well, not many people had been here before we invited them tonight. There was quite a lot of excitement.” He looked around behind them at the filling room. “Very excited.”

As Loreticus looked out across his home town, a sudden feeling that Antron might throw him five or six storeys down to the flagstone courtyard made him turn with an unusual paranoia. General Antron was a clumsy creature, an oik despite his glamorous family.

We invited them, repeated Loreticus to himself with an inward snarl. He unsheathed a smile for Antron and opened a different conversation.

"Are you already moving in?" he asked, indicating the gaudy display of trinkets. The general had them displayed as talking points along the far end of the balcony, where he seemed to be receiving the worthier guests that night.

"I don't know whether you and I have ever been that close now I consider it, Loreticus," he began. His sharp Adam's apple bounced in his veined throat as he swallowed a decision. "I have a . . . prize, let's call it. One of the hardest times for me was when I led out my army against another tribe the week after Marcan took the throne. Another emperor, another barbarian. My life was repetitive to the point of worthlessness. Perhaps there had been valour and glory in my ascent, but now I was simply all-powerful as a military man. Of course, Iskandar is the greatest general in the empire's history, but where am I in those books? An easily forgotten peer of his at best. And then my view changed and I no longer saw the next rival as someone new, but simply the same man I had fought thirty years ago, just in different armour with a different army."

Loreticus examined the man as he hesitated before his next thought. He was a unique and impressive man, imposing, assured, and in any age other than when Iskandar stood near him, he would have been celebrated

as a military genius. But to Loreticus, Antron only survived on one plane, that of battlefields. Perhaps they were incredibly complex and Antron's gift was in the deep, precarious strategy which had led him so far. Loreticus doubted it. Antron was a physical man who presumed that the tangible outweighed intelligence.

"Do you know my darkest secret yet, spymaster?" He watched Loreticus with his face partially turned away, as if he had suffered a recent slap.

"Your collection of skulls? All of the chieftains that you'd conquered, the men you've killed in hand-to-hand fights."

Antron raised his eyebrows and nodded with a strange satisfaction.

"Very good," he said. "Very close. I'll spend the rest of the night working out which of my most trusted servants told you. Is that as much as you know, or can you speculate?"

"A mountain of skulls? An ossuary with a mosaic of a map? A dining room kitted out with furniture made of the larger specimens? A suit of armour made from the bones of vanquished enemies?"

Antron laughed. "No, none of those, although I shouldn't pretend that they are all beyond me. Blood and guts and the pressure of leadership can scar a man inside, Loreticus. If you fail, I take over, and I took over a lot when you failed with the zealots. No, I have become an artist of sorts and my old enemies are helping me in my endeavours. Between us, we are creating the shape of my lifelong enemy." He looked deeply at Loreticus, wondering how best to explain, or perhaps considering whether he knew all of his secrets already. The spymaster's face was expressionless, other than a mild frown. He couldn't

help but fear what Antron was about to say. "So I've had a sculptor build me a golem, a skeleton of my foe using broken remnants of my past enemies. The skull is that of a huge warrior I defeated when I was young, the bones of the hands came from an eastern lord who you might remember tried to challenged the family. His spine comes from everywhere, made up of knuckle bones, vertebrae, anything I could find. My problem was that by the time I'd finished his human form, I still had a dozen years and two dozen foes to commemorate. That's when I realised that he was a demon, and we built grand wings and a wicked tail. And now I've almost finished, but for the final piece. I don't think that I shall take to the battlefield again. If I did, it would be vanity not necessity."

"You've almost finished?" asked Loreticus. "So it shall remain incomplete? Rather unlike you, Antron."

"Ah, I didn't say that," replied the general. "I had been saving the tip of the tail for someone in particular and now it seems that it might need a substitute."

They looked at each other in silence, Loreticus feeling the pounding of his heart increase as he wrestled to understand the violence in the man in front of him. Even if he had seen the battles, lived the fighting, it was hard for Loreticus to put a shape to bloodshed, let alone identify the traits of a violent person in a face.

"Oh," he said abruptly, as if catching the thread of the whole conversation. "Am I the tip of your tail?"

Antron shrugged. "Not at the moment," he said. "You would be a good fit though."

"Antron," chided Loreticus in mock bravery, "you know that I've never been one for volunteering. Polishing up my

punch bowl to wear as a helmet to war, no, not for me.”

“No, to you the secrets of the lords and ladies and the tender exchange of coin.”

“Indeed, well put.” Loreticus looked around the bobbing and chattering heads, eager to find a change of topic. Something made him fear finishing the conversation in case it had repercussions with this madman that he hadn’t previously considered. “Is Princess Alba coming tonight?”

“I doubt it.” Antron turned to face the crowd, now looking in the opposite direction to Loreticus, but still close enough for the spymaster to feel the breeze from his movements. “If Alba did come, I’m sure it would only be to wish you a happy birthday.”

Loreticus raised his eyebrows and turned his face to the general.

“Oh, you’re not the only one with informers in the palace, dear Loreticus. Many happy returns! Should I announce it to the crowd?”

Loreticus smiled, turning back to look out at the mountains as the sun began to fall.

“No, please don’t. If I wanted a public display of adoration, then I would have paid for it.”

Antron nodded, steering the spymaster with a hand which turned into a clasp. The general’s grip was like stone, cold, rough, unhuman. It held the chill of violence in each of his flat-ended fingers.

They turned their backs on the dusk-sunk city and to the wide opening which led from the pale marble floor of the balcony on to the chequered tiles of the room.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” called Antron. Conversations quieted immediately, and a breathing hush kept the room.

“It is with immense pleasure that I should remind you that it is Loreticus’s birthday today!” An impulsive round of applause, hundreds of eyes prodding Loreticus’s face for an expression. “Let us all raise our glasses and sing for his rude health over the next year.” He turned, hugged the taller man with a flawless gesture of friendship and led the crowd in a cheerful rendition of the traditional song.

Loreticus looked around the room, over the faces of the new people of note, the generals, their bankers, their wives and friends, the gleaming gold, the new haircuts and blunt perfumes, the clothes that were a little too colourful. And he smiled so wide that his eyes closed.

The room was fresh, quiet after the party. Outside a nocturnal bird whistled occasionally, answered by a distant partner his hearing couldn’t reach. Loreticus ran his fingers over the smooth surface of the kitchen table, tracing letters and names in the fine dust. The sharp moonlight sketched the edges in the room, the plates and the cups on the side which the servants had left without packing. Pans were stacked, clay jars lined up.

In this kitchen, he was still in the company of Dhalia, his wife, as her ghost drifted between the table and the counter cheerfully, making the servants laugh, berating Loreticus with her wise humour, driving life and breath into every corner of the large room. She, her world, her life was never complete. There were always things that could be done to make it more beautiful and to prepare it for their pending family. Let her worry about what happens in the home, she had told him. His job was to keep her neighbourhood safe.

Dhalia had lost her brother and her father in the Terror, horrific wounds in a family which had been closer and more welcoming than any other he had visited. Even with this shadow in her mind, she had embraced Loreticus into her life with all of the risk and the blood and the sins that he carried in his role. She had ignored the worst of his deeds, instead celebrating the mind of a good man. He had always prepared for the day he would leave her a widow.

And now he sat in their empty home, a house which he hadn't slept in since she had died. His promise to keep the city safe was the only thing that stopped him from leaning his face against the cool wood of the table and exhaling his last breath. He would make her proud.

But he sat there, a deep and crippling emptiness behind his ribs as he pushed back the water swelling in his eyes. He knew with every bone in him that Marcan was dead. He had seen the shape of the corpse, the colour of the hair, the shape of the fingernails. It was his job to recognise someone disguised.

So why couldn't he just join Dhalia now? Because he would be a failure forever, and although she would love him, she would not be proud of him. And with that small turn of logic, he stood up and wiped his eye before the tear fell messily, and he closed the window shutters, and he left and locked the door.

The night was colder than when he had come from the party. The torches were burning and the two guards marched quietly behind him as they made their way along the wide avenue. He had a solution, but it would be possibly the greatest crime in the history of the empire, and he needed an accomplice.

Loreticus knew the layout of the palace in detail from the vantage point of where he now lived and worked. Evenings had been spent poring over the feuds between generations of builders below as they scattered perspectives and angles in between the gardens and squares of the palace grounds. He could have easily walked to the princess's apartments through the private routes, trailing the corridors and the walkways. But today an inexplicable fear made him want to enter from the less toxic environment of the public street. By the door was a vast circular portrait of the Emperor Marcan, the sharp family nose honed slightly to fit. It had been carved at the start of his reign, two summers ago, before the constant anxiety stole his hair and left him wrinkles as payment. A tall, bronzed guard stood impeccably to attention by the emperor's face, and he nodded as he recognised Loreticus.

The guard knocked with the heel of his hand, and Loreticus peered through the keyhole as he waited. Framed against a pale vanilla sky was the dome, his own tower just behind the metal edge. This was the start of the reign of his third emperor, and the trend was downhill. He hadn't started with a high benchmark, but Loreticus now longed for those easier, earlier days.

Another guard, quite interchangeable with his colleague outside, let Loreticus in. They walked down a shaded path between sets of columns and under a grand arched ceiling, the floor paved in giant grey and white squares.

Then under the towering arches which formed the terminus of other tunnels, and out on to a flat lawn which was peppered with gnarly, warped trees. Under one stood Alba, the princess of the empire. She was slender and tall,

her hips cocked as she contemplated something in her hands. As usual, she was alone.

His footsteps must have alerted her to his arrival and she turned, dropping the leaf that she had been skinning with her nails. A white smile played out across her face. Loreticus stopped, folded his arms and watched her fondly, admiring the way her eyes curved when she smiled, the way her lips revealed a little too much of her gums. She walked over to him.

"It seems that people always tend to leave us," he said.

"What can we do?" Alba asked. "He's gone, someone else won and if he ever comes back the generals will kill him. There is a healthy chance that they'll kill you too in the next day or two. If you don't get to them first of course."

They smiled.

"Sun, silence and happiness," she said with a broad reach of her arms.

"Well, let's see about that killing bit. You have your father's gift for paranoia and drama." He pulled out a chair for her. "Life is very disordered. Should I offer you condolences or..." She shook her head. "Do you know what helped me through the last year on my own?" Loreticus sat opposite her. "Continuing to act in a way Dhalia would have wanted. I always wanted a glorious capital where people were safe and wealthy, and families could grow up without the fear of violence." He smiled, an expression which this morning was rich in disappointment. "I don't think that these three fools will help me to that end. I'm looking for a way to correct the situation."

"I'm surprised that you helped my father for so long then."

"Because he made a bad choice at the end?" he asked, surprised.

"Because he was a messy ruler," she replied.

"No, it was all to the same result. The generals know nothing about earning, only about taking. They'll bankrupt the kingdom within a year and we'll have a barbarian on the throne soon after. We need a wiser man in charge."

"Someone you can control? I have no respect for Antron," she said, in quiet tones. "I'm told all the fun people were at his party, and yet he somehow managed to turn it into a very dull affair. So who would you have rule us now, dear Loreticus?"

"Marcan."

She beheld him with a blunt anger. "You wanted him gone as well, and don't pretend that you didn't. If it wasn't for you and me, I'd have pinned you as the first suspect. And now Marcan is gone, probably dead, and you have no idea where he is," she said. "Anyway, he is certainly not deserving."

"We always think badly about the person running things. I know that you two were at odds towards the end, we need Marcan on the throne, but a more commendable version of the old one."

"Why can't we just find someone deserving?" she asked. "If my father had been the wise man everyone claims he was, I should have been allowed on the throne. But none of these generals are ready for that."

"No," said Loreticus, turning to look away. "They're not ready for that. We'll find a deserving Marcan." He pinched and twisted his fingertips together, as if screwing something up. "Everyone thinks that it all hangs

on the fate of a single person– the king, the emperor, the general . . .”

“The spymaster,” she said.

He smiled and shrugged.

“If I brought back someone more deserving, would you trust my choice?”

“I would have to, I suppose,” she said. “So you already think that I am a widow?”

“No,” he replied. “I don’t think that you need to be.”

Alba folded her arms, crossed her legs and looked at him. He could hear her mind moving, following where his logic led.

“What a strange option to offer,” she said. “I presume that you expect my approval in that decision?”

He nodded, then stood and delved into a pocket.

“Do you recognise this?” He held up a small gold necklace ‘with a broken centrepiece; a significant sliver had been cut or carved out of it and wings spread symmetrically either side of the gap.

“No. Should I?”

“I don’t know. It was found near a murdered man. I think that it was dropped by a zealot. Ugly business.” He pushed it back into his pocket.

“Well, Loreticus, ever the cheerful visitor with a few black clouds in his pocket. Tell me something to cheer me up, and not something I already know.” She examined him quickly, checking that she hadn’t been too insensitive. “You do like the chance to wallow. Tell me something to cheer us both up.”

“The Lady Durring sprained her buttock with her lover. She told her husband that it was a horse that he had given

her as a present and therefore it was all his fault. The poor man was distraught with guilt," he concluded, shaking his head. "I didn't know whether to let him in on the secret or to let him suffer as recompense for being such a fool."

"He doesn't know?"

"No, he doesn't. Nobody does."

"But for you and your minions," said Alba with a smile. "Which one of you was her lover?"

He was distracted for a moment by a gardener lighting a small pile of leaves. A fine line of white smoke rose unbroken in the air, whisked away where the breeze dashed over the palace walls. Something in the acrid smell had brought him out of the moment and he had forgotten what they had been talking about.

"How are you?" he asked.

"Sick of everything," she said. "I am so damned lonely. You know the old phrase – if life is hard, blame your parents?"

"Don't swear and stop talking to your old maid."

"Sorry. But I am lonely. At least when he was here, I was living in some vicarious fashion. Now I am both unwelcome and unavailable. I am the widowed empress and I'm not even twenty-five. Can you imagine such a curse?"

"What can I do? You know that I am completely at your disposal. You're my only family left in the world," said Loreticus.

"And you the same," Alba continued. "It's in my blood to help the families of the empire prosper. There'll be a way for me to be involved before too long. Your peers prefer political fist fights to empire building. Just so pedestrian."

She punctuated the last three words with a melodramatic flourish. "And what of your two little friends?"

"I don't call them friends. They are the people I have known the longest. And who are still alive. And life does go on for so damned long."

"So, 'friends' then. I don't know many people who like their friends. And don't swear." She took a drink and then fixed him with the same stern expression that she had used when she used to call him Uncle Loreticus. "So, we rebuild this mess before it collapses completely?"

"Exactly," he said. "Do you trust me?"

"Of course."

"Then be patient a little bit. I would do anything for this empire," he stated and drew one hand in a sweep which took in the hidden buildings behind the wall.

"Would you, Loreticus?" She regarded him. "Be careful of offering that. I'm furious at Ferran and his buddies and I'd have their heads on spikes if I could. Would you kill them all for me?"

Loreticus gave her an uneasy look. "Well . . . If the situation called for it, I'd do what needs to be done. You really can't ask those questions as the princess, even in jest. I really don't care for violence. It ruins my appetite, which is meagre enough already."

"Of course, I was joking," she said. "Anyway you don't kill people. You make them disappear. Much cleaner! Much more elegant, as befits the famous Loreticus."

He clapped his hands as if dusting them off and smiled broadly. He said, "It allows me to keep my morality. What the eyes don't see, the heart can't judge."