# *Conticinium*

[04:21 hours]

*'A strong correlation has been found between the magnitude of eruptions and the length of the preceding interval of repose. Almost all very large, historic eruptions have come from volcanoes that have been dormant for centuries.'*

*Jacques-Marie Bardintzeff, Alexander R. McBirney,*
Volcanology *(second edition)*

They left the aqueduct two hours before dawn, climbing by moonlight into the hills overlooking the port – six men in single file, the engineer leading. He had turfed them out of their beds himself – all stiff limbs and sullen, bleary faces – and now he could hear them complaining about him behind his back, their voices carrying louder than they realised in the warm, still air.

'A fool's errand,' somebody muttered.

'Boys should stick to their books,' said another.

He lengthened his stride.

Let them prattle, he thought.

Already he could feel the heat of the morning beginning to build, the promise of another day without rain. He was younger than most of his work gang, and shorter than any of them: a compact, muscled figure with cropped brown hair. The shafts of the tools he carried slung across his shoulder – a heavy, bronze-headed axe and a wooden shovel – chafed against his sunburnt neck. Still, he forced himself to stretch his bare legs as far as they would reach, mounting swiftly from foothold to foothold, and only when he was high above Misenum, at a place where the track forked, did he set down his burdens and wait for the others to catch up.

He wiped the sweat from his eyes on the sleeve of his tunic. Such shimmering, feverish heavens they had here in the south! Even this close to daybreak, a great hemisphere of stars swept down to the horizon. He could see the horns of Taurus, and the belt and sword of the Hunter; there was Saturn, and also the Bear, and the constellation they called the Vintager, which always rose for Caesar on the twenty-second day of August, following the Festival of Vinalia, and signalled that it was time to harvest the wine. Tomorrow night the moon would be full. He raised his hand to the sky, his blunt-tipped fingers black and sharp against the glittering constellations – spread them, clenched them, spread them again – and for a moment it seemed to him that he was the shadow, the nothing; the light was the substance.

From down in the harbour came the splash of oars as the night watch rowed between the moored triremes. The yellow lanterns of a couple of fishing boats winked across the bay. A dog barked and another answered. And then the voices of the labourers slowly climbing the path beneath him: the harsh local accent of Corax the overseer – *'Look, our new aquarius is waving at the stars!'* – and the slaves and the free men, equals for once in their resentment if nothing else, panting for breath and sniggering.

The engineer dropped his hand. 'At least,' he said, 'with such a sky, we have no need of torches.' Suddenly he was vigorous again, stooping to collect his tools, hoisting them back on to his shoulder. 'We must keep moving.' He frowned into the darkness. One path would take them westwards, skirting the edge of the naval base. The other led north, towards the seaside resort of Baiae. 'I think this is where we turn.'

'He thinks,' sneered Corax.

The engineer had decided the previous day that the best way to treat the overseer was to ignore him. Without a word he put his back to the sea and the stars, and began ascending the black mass of the hillside. What was leadership, after all, but the blind choice of one route over another and the confident pretence that the decision was based on reason?

The path here was steeper. He had to scramble up it sideways, sometimes using his free hand to pull himself along, his feet skidding, sending showers of loose stones rattling away in the darkness. People stared

at these brown hills, scorched by summer brushfires, and thought they were as dry as deserts, but the engineer knew differently. Even so, he felt his earlier assurance beginning to weaken, and he tried to remember how the path had appeared in the glare of yesterday afternoon, when he had first reconnoitred it. The twisting track, barely wide enough for a mule. The swathes of scorched grass. And then, at a place where the ground levelled out, flecks of pale green in the blackness – signs of life that turned out to be shoots of ivy reaching towards a boulder.

After going halfway up an incline and then coming down again, he stopped and turned slowly in a full circle. Either his eyes were getting used to it, or dawn was close now, in which case they were almost out of time. The others had halted behind him. He could hear their heavy breathing. Here was another story for them to take back to Misenum – how their new young aquarius had dragged them from their beds and marched them into the hills in the middle of the night, and all *on a fool's errand*. There was a taste of ash in his mouth.

'Are we lost, pretty boy?'

Corax's mocking voice again.

He made the mistake of rising to the bait: 'I'm looking for a rock.'

This time they did not even try to hide their laughter.

'He's running around like a mouse in a pisspot!'

'I know it's here somewhere. I marked it with chalk.'

More laughter – and at that he wheeled on them: the squat and broad-shouldered Corax; Becco, the long-

nose, who was a plasterer; the chubby one, Musa, whose skill was laying bricks; and the two slaves, Polites and Corvinus. Even their indistinct shapes seemed to mock him. 'Laugh. Good. But I promise you this: either we find it before dawn or we shall all be back here tomorrow night. Including you, Gavius Corax. Only next time make sure you're sober.'

Silence. Then Corax spat and took a half-step forward and the engineer braced himself for a fight. They had been building up to this for three days now, ever since he had arrived in Misenum. Not an hour had passed without Corax trying to undermine him in front of the men.

And if we fight, thought the engineer, he will win – it's five against one – and they will throw my body over the cliff and say I slipped in the darkness. But how will that go down in Rome – if a second aquarius of the Aqua Augusta is lost in less than a fortnight?

For a long instant they faced one another, no more than a pace between them, so close that the engineer could smell the stale wine on the older man's breath. But then one of the others – it was Becco – gave an excited shout and pointed.

Just visible behind Corax's shoulder was a rock, marked neatly in its centre by a thick white cross.

Attilius was the engineer's name – Marcus Attilius Primus, to lay it out in full, but plain Attilius would have satisfied him. A practical man, he had never

had much time for all these fancy handles his fellow countrymen went in for. ('Lupus', 'Panthera', 'Pulcher' – 'Wolf', 'Leopard', 'Beauty' – who in hell did they think they were kidding?) Besides, what name was more honourable in the history of his profession than that of the *gens* Attilia, aqueduct engineers for four generations? His great-grandfather had been recruited by Marcus Agrippa from the ballista section of Legion XII 'Fulminata' and set to work building the Aqua Julia. His grandfather had planned the Anio Novus. His father had completed the Aqua Claudia, bringing her into the Esquiline Hill over seven miles of arches, and laying her, on the day of her dedication, like a silver carpet at the feet of the Emperor. Now he, at twenty-seven, had been sent south to Campania and given command of the Aqua Augusta.

A dynasty built on water!

He squinted into the darkness. Oh, but she was a mighty piece of work, the Augusta – one of the greatest feats of engineering ever accomplished. It was going to be an honour to command her. Somewhere far out there, on the opposite side of the bay, high in the pine-forested mountains of the Appenninus, the aqueduct captured the springs of the Serinus and bore the water westwards – channelled it along sinuous underground passages, carried it over ravines on top of tiered arcades, forced it across valleys through massive syphons – all the way down to the plains of Campania, then around the far side of Mount Vesuvius, then south to the coast at Neapolis, and finally along the spine of the Misenum

peninsula to the dusty naval town, a distance of some sixty miles, with a mean drop along her entire length of just two inches every one hundred yards. She was the longest aqueduct in the world, longer even than the great aqueducts of Rome and far more complex, for whereas her sisters in the north fed one city only, the Augusta's serpentine conduit – the matrix, as they called it: the motherline – suckled no fewer than nine towns around the Bay of Neapolis: Pompeii first, at the end of a long spur, then Nola, Acerrae, Atella, Neapolis, Puteoli, Cumae, Baiae and finally Misenum.

And this was the problem, in the engineer's opinion. She had to do too much. Rome, after all, had more than half a dozen aqueducts: if one failed the others could make up the deficit. But there was no reserve supply down here, especially not in this drought, now dragging into its third month. Wells that had provided water for generations had turned into tubes of dust. Streams had dried up. River beds had become tracks for farmers to drive their beasts along to market. Even the Augusta was showing signs of exhaustion, the level of her enormous reservoir dropping hourly, and it was this which had brought him out on to the hillside in the time before dawn when he ought to have been in bed.

From the leather pouch on his belt Attilius withdrew a small block of polished cedar with a chin rest carved into one side of it. The grain of the wood had been rubbed smooth and bright by the skin of his ancestors. His great-grandfather was said to have been given it as

a talisman by Vitruvius, architect to the Divine Augustus, and the old man had maintained that the spirit of Neptune, god of water, lived within it. Attilius had no time for gods – boys with wings on their feet, women riding dolphins, greybeards hurling bolts of lightning off the tops of mountains in fits of temper – these were stories for children, not men. He placed his faith instead in stones and water, and in the daily miracle that came from mixing two parts of slaked lime to five parts of puteolanum – the local red sand – conjuring up a substance that would set underwater with a consistency harder than rock.

But still – it was a fool who denied the existence of luck, and if this family heirloom could bring him that . . . He ran his finger around its edge. He would try anything once.

He had left his rolls of Vitruvius behind in Rome. Not that it mattered. They had been hammered into him since childhood, as other boys learnt their Virgil. He could still recite entire passages by heart.

*'These are the growing things to be found which are signs of water: slender rushes, wild willow, alder, chaste berry, ivy, and other things of this sort, which cannot occur on their own without moisture . . .'*

'Corax over there,' ordered Attilius. 'Corvinus there. Becco, take the pole and mark the place I tell you. You two: keep your eyes open.'

Corax gave him a look as he passed.

'Later,' said Attilius. The overseer stank of resentment almost as strongly as he reeked of wine, but there

would be time enough to settle their quarrel when they got back to Misenum. For now they would have to hurry.

A grey gauze had filtered out the stars. The moon had dipped. Fifteen miles to the east, at the mid-point of the bay, the forested pyramid of Mount Vesuvius was becoming visible. The sun would rise behind it.

*'This is how to test for water: lie face down, before sunrise, in the places where the search is to be made, and with your chin set on the ground and propped, survey these regions. In this way the line of sight will not wander higher than it should, because the chin will be motionless . . .'*

Attilius knelt on the singed grass, leant forward, and arranged the block in line with the chalk cross, fifty paces distant. Then he set his chin on the rest and spread his arms. The ground was still warm from yesterday. Particles of ash wafted into his face as he stretched out. No dew. Seventy-eight days without rain. The world was burning up. At the fringe of his eyeline he saw Corax make an obscene gesture, thrusting out his groin – 'Our aquarius has no wife, so he tries to fuck Mother Earth instead!' – and then, away to his right, Vesuvius darkened and light shot from the edge of it. A shaft of heat struck Attilius's cheek. He had to bring up his hand to shield his face from the dazzle as he squinted across the hillside.

*'In those places where moisture can be seen curling and rising into the air, dig on the spot, because this sign cannot occur in a dry location . . .'*

You saw it quickly, his father used to tell him, or you

did not see it at all. He tried to scan the ground rapidly and methodically, shifting his gaze from one section of the land to the next. But it all seemed to run together – parched browns and greys and streaks of reddish earth, already beginning to waver in the sun. His vision blurred. He raised himself on his elbows and wiped each eye with a forefinger and settled his chin again.

*There!*

As thin as a fishing line it was – not 'curling' or 'rising' as Vitruvius promised, but snagging, close to the ground, as if a hook were caught on a rock and someone were jerking it. It zig-zagged towards him. And vanished. He yelled and pointed – 'There, Becco, there!' – and the plasterer lumbered towards the spot. 'Back. Yes. There. Mark it.'

He scrambled to his feet and hurried towards them, brushing the red dirt and black ash from the front of his tunic, smiling, holding the magical block of cedar aloft. The three had gathered around the place and Becco was trying to jam the pole into the earth, but the ground was too hard to sink it far enough.

Attilius was triumphant. 'You saw it? You must have seen it. You were closer than I.'

They stared at him blankly.

'It was curious, did you notice? It rose like this.' He made a series of horizontal chops at the air with the flat of his hand. 'Like steam coming off a cauldron that's being shaken.'

He looked from one to another, his smile fixed at first, then shrinking.

Corax shook his head. 'Your eyes are playing tricks on you, pretty boy. There's no spring up here. I told you. I've known these hills for twenty years.'

'And I'm telling you I saw it.'

'Smoke.' Corax stamped his foot on the dry earth, raising a cloud of dust. 'A brush fire can burn underground for days.'

'I know smoke. I know vapour. This was vapour.'

They were shamming blindness. They had to be. Attilius dropped to his knees and patted the dry red earth. Then he started digging with his bare hands, working his fingers under the rocks and tossing them aside, tugging at a long, charred tuber which refused to come away. Something had emerged from here. He was sure of it. Why had the ivy come back to life so quickly if there was no spring?

He said, without turning round, 'Fetch the tools.'

'Aquarius –'

*'Fetch the tools!'*

They dug all morning, as the sun climbed slowly above the blue furnace of the bay, melting from yellow disc to gaseous white star. The ground creaked and tautened in the heat, like the bowstring of one of his great-grandfather's giant siege engines.

Once, a boy passed them, dragging an emaciated goat by a rope halter toward the town. He was the only person they saw. Misenum itself lay hidden from view just beyond the cliff edge. Occasionally its sounds

floated up to them – shouts of command from the military school, hammering and sawing from the shipyards.

Attilius, an old straw hat pulled low over his face, worked hardest of all. Even when the others crept off occasionally to sprawl in whatever patches of shade they could find, he continued to swing his axe. The shaft was slippery with his sweat and hard to grip. His palms blistered. His tunic stuck to him like a second skin. But he would not show weakness in front of the men. Even Corax shut up after a while.

The crater they eventually excavated was twice as deep as a man's height, and broad enough for two of them to work in. And there was a spring there, right enough, but it retreated whenever they came close. They would dig. The rusty soil at the bottom of the hole would turn damp. And then it would bake dry again in the sunlight. They would excavate another layer and the same process would recur.

Only at the tenth hour, when the sun had passed its zenith, did Attilius at last acknowledge defeat. He watched a final stain of water dwindle and evaporate, then flung his axe over the lip of the pit and hauled himself after it. He pulled off his hat and fanned his burning cheeks. Corax sat on a rock and watched him. For the first time Attilius noticed he was bare-headed.

He said, 'You'll boil your brains in this heat.' He uncorked his waterskin and tipped a little into his hand, splashed it on to his face and the back of his neck, then drank. It was hot – as unrefreshing as swallowing blood.

'I was born here. Heat doesn't bother me. In

Campania we call this cool.' Corax hawked and spat. He tilted his broad chin towards the hole. 'What do we do with this?'

Attilius glanced at it – an ugly gash in the hillside, great mounds of earth heaped all around it. His monument. His folly. 'We'll leave it as it is,' he said. 'Have it covered with planks. When it rains, the spring will rise. You'll see.'

'When it rains, we won't need a spring.'

A fair point, Attilius had to concede.

'We could run a pipe from it,' he said thoughtfully. He was a romantic when it came to water. In his imagination, a whole pastoral idyll suddenly began to take shape. 'We could irrigate this entire hillside. There could be lemon groves up here. Olives. It could be terraced. Vines –'

'Vines!' Corax shook his head. 'So now we're farmers! Listen to me, young expert from Rome. Let me tell you something. The Aqua Augusta hasn't failed in more than a century. And she isn't going to fail now. Not even with you in charge.'

'We hope.' The engineer finished the last of his water. He could feel himself blushing scarlet with humiliation, but the heat hid his shame. He planted his straw hat firmly on his head and pulled down the brim to protect his face. 'All right, Corax, get the men together. We've done here for the day.'

He collected his tools and set off without waiting for the others. They could find their own way back.

He had to watch where he put his feet. Each step

sent a scattering of lizards rustling away into the dry undergrowth. It was more Africa than Italy, he thought, and when he reached the coastal path, Misenum appeared beneath him, shimmering in the haze of heat like an oasis town, pulsing – or so it seemed to him – in time with the cicadas.

The headquarters of the western imperial fleet was a triumph of Man over Nature, for by rights no town should exist here. There was no river to support her, few wells or springs. Yet the Divine Augustus had decreed that the Empire needed a port from which to control the Mediterranean, and here she was, the embodiment of Roman power: the glittering silver discs of her inner and outer harbours, the golden beaks and fan-tail sterns of fifty warships glinting in the late afternoon sun, the dusty brown parade ground of the military school, the red-tiled roofs and the whitewashed walls of the civilian town rising above the spiky forest of masts in the shipyard.

Ten thousand sailors and another ten thousand citizens were crammed into a narrow strip of land with no fresh water to speak of. Only the aqueduct had made Misenum possible.

He thought again of the curious motion of the vapour, and the way the spring had seemed to run back into the rock. A strange country, this. He looked ruefully at his blistered hands.

*'A fool's errand –'*

He shook his head, blinking his eyes to clear them of sweat, and resumed his weary trudge down to the town.

# *Hora undecima*

[17:42 hours]

*'A question of practical importance to forecasting is how much time elapses between an injection of new magma and an ensuing eruption. In many volcanoes, this time interval may be measured in weeks or months, but in others it seems to be much shorter, possibly days or hours.'*

Volcanology *(second edition)*

At the Villa Hortensia, the great coastal residence on the northern outskirts of Misenum, they were preparing to put a slave to death. They were going to feed him to the eels.

It was not an unknown practice in that part of Italy, where so many of the huge houses around the Bay of Neapolis had their own elaborate fish farms. The new owner of the Villa Hortensia, the millionaire Numerius Popidius Ampliatus, had first heard the story as a boy – of how the Augustan aristocrat, Vedius Pollio, would

hurl clumsy servants into his eel pond as a punishment for breaking dishes – and he often referred to it admiringly as the perfect illustration of what it was to have power. Power, and imagination, and wit, and a certain *style*.

So when, many years later, Ampliatus, too, came to possess a fishery – just a few miles down the coast from Vedius Pollio's old place at Pausilypon – and when one of his slaves also destroyed something of rare value, the precedent naturally came back into his mind. Ampliatus had been born a slave himself; this was how he thought an aristocrat ought to behave.

The man was duly stripped to his loincloth, had his hands tied behind his back and was marched down to the edge of the sea. A knife was run down both of his calves, to draw an attractive amount of blood, and he was also doused with vinegar, which was said to drive the eels mad.

It was late afternoon, very hot.

The eels had their own large pen, built well away from the other fish ponds to keep them segregated, reached by a narrow concrete gangway extending out into the bay. These eels were morays, notorious for their aggression, their bodies as long as a man's and as wide as a human trunk, with flat heads, wide snouts and razor teeth. The villa's fishery was a hundred and fifty years old and nobody knew how many lurked in the labyrinth of tunnels and in the shady areas built into the bottom of the pond. Scores, certainly; probably hundreds. The more ancient eels were monsters and

several wore jewellery. One, which had a gold earring fitted to its pectoral fin, was said to have been a favourite of the Emperor Nero.

The morays were a particular terror to this slave because – Ampliatus savoured the irony – it had long been his responsibility to feed them, and he was shouting and struggling even before he was forced on to the gangway. He had seen the eels in action every morning when he threw in their meal of fish heads and chicken entrails – the way the surface of the water flickered, then roiled as they sensed the arrival of the blood, and the way they came darting out of their hiding-places to fight over their food, tearing it to pieces.

At the eleventh hour, despite the sweltering heat, Ampliatus himself promenaded down from the villa to watch, attended by his teenaged son, Celsinus, together with his household steward, Scutarius, a few of his business clients (who had followed him from Pompeii and had been hanging around since dawn in the hope of dinner), and a crowd of about a hundred of his other male slaves who he had decided would profit by witnessing the spectacle. His wife and daughter he had ordered to remain indoors: this was not a sight for women. A large chair was set up for him, with smaller ones for his guests. He did not even know the errant slave's name. He had come as part of a job lot with the fish ponds when Ampliatus had bought the villa, for a cool ten million, earlier in the year.

All manner of fish were kept, at vast expense, along the shoreline of the house – sea bass, with their woolly-

white flesh; grey mullet, that required high walls around their pond to prevent them leaping to freedom; flatfish and parrot fish and giltheads; lampreys and congers and hake.

But by far the most expensive of Ampliatus's aquatic treasures – he trembled to think how much he had paid for them, and he did not even much like fish – were the red mullet, the delicate and whiskered goatfish, notoriously difficult to keep, whose colours ran from pale pink to orange. And it was these that the slave had killed. Whether by malice or incompetence, Ampliatus did not know, nor care, but there they were: clustered together in death as they had been in life, a multi-hued carpet floating on the surface of their pond, discovered earlier that afternoon. A few had still been alive when Ampliatus was shown the scene, but they had died even as he watched, turning like leaves in the depths of the pool and rising to join the others. Poisoned, every one. They would have fetched six thousand apiece at current market prices – one mullet being worth five times as much as the miserable slave who was supposed to look after them – and now they were fit only for the fire. Ampliatus had pronounced sentence immediately: 'Throw him to the eels!'

The slave was screaming as they dragged and prodded him towards the edge of the pool. It was not his fault, he was shouting. It was not the food. It was the water. They should fetch the aquarius.

The aquarius!

Ampliatus screwed up his eyes against the glare of

the sea. It was hard to make out the shapes of the writhing slave and of the two others holding him, or of the fourth, who held a boat-hook like a lance and was jabbing it into the doomed man's back – mere stick-figures, all of them, in the haze of the heat and the sparkling waves. He raised his arm in the manner of an emperor, his fist clenched, his thumb parallel with the ground. He felt godlike in his power, yet full of simple human curiosity. For a moment he waited, tasting the sensation, then abruptly he twisted his wrist and jammed his thumb upward. Let him have it!

The piercing cries of the slave teetering on the edge of the eel-pond carried up from the seafront, across the terraces, over the swimming pool and into the silent house where the women were hiding.

Corelia Ampliata had run to her bedroom, thrown herself down on the mattress, and pulled her pillow over her head, but there was no escaping the sound. Unlike her father, she knew the slave's name – Hipponax, a Greek – and also the name of his mother, Atia, who worked in the kitchens, and whose lamentations, once they started, were even more terrible than his. Unable to bear the screams for more than a few moments, she sprang up again and ran through the deserted villa to find the wailing woman, who had sunk against a column in the cloistered garden.

Seeing Corelia, Atia clutched at her young mistress's hem and began weeping at her slippered feet, repeating

over and over that her son was innocent, that he had shouted to her as he was being carried away – it was the water, the water, there was something wrong with the water. Why would nobody listen to him?

Corelia stroked Atia's grey hair and tried to make such soothing noises as she could. There was little else that she could do. Useless to appeal to her father for clemency – she knew that. He listened to nobody, least of all to a woman, and least of all women to his daughter, from whom he expected an unquestioning obedience – an intervention from her would only make the death of the slave doubly certain. To Atia's pleas she could only reply that there was nothing she could do.

At this, the old woman – in truth she was in her forties, but Corelia thought of slave years as being like dog years, and she appeared at least sixty – suddenly broke away and roughly dried her eyes on her arm.

'I must find help.'

'Atia, Atia,' said Corelia gently, 'who will give it?'

'He shouted for the aquarius. Didn't you hear him? I shall fetch the aquarius.'

'And where is he?'

'He may be at the aqueduct down the hill, where the watermen work.'

She was on her feet now, trembling but determined, looking around her wildly. Her eyes were red, her dress and hair disordered. She looked like a madwoman and Corelia saw at once that no one would pay her any attention. They would laugh at her, or drive her off with stones.

'I'll come with you,' she said, and as another terrible scream rose from the waterfront Corelia gathered up her skirts with one hand, grabbed the old woman's wrist with the other and together they fled through the garden, past the empty porter's stool, out of the side door, and into the dazzling heat of the public road.

The terminus of the Aqua Augusta was a vast underground reservoir, a few hundred paces south of the Villa Hortensia, hewn into the slope overlooking the port and known, for as long as anyone could remember, as the Piscina Mirabilis – The Pool of Wonders.

Viewed from the outside, there was nothing particularly wonderful about her and most of the citizens of Misenum passed her without a second glance. She appeared on the surface as a low, flat-roofed building of red brick, festooned with pale-green ivy, a city block long and half a block wide, surrounded by shops and storerooms, bars and apartments, hidden away in the dusty back streets above the naval base.

Only at night, when the noise of the traffic and the shouts of the tradesmen had fallen silent, was it possible to hear the low, subterranean thunder of falling water, and only if you went into the yard, unlocked the narrow wooden door and descended a few steps into the Piscina itself was it possible to appreciate the reservoir's full glory. The vaulted roof was supported by forty-eight pillars, each more than fifty feet high – although most of their length was submerged by the waters of

the reservoir – and the echo of the aqueduct hammering into the surface was enough to shake your bones.

The engineer could stand here, listening and lost in thought, for hours. The percussion of the Augusta sounded in his ears not as a dull and continuous roar but as the notes of a gigantic water-organ: the music of civilisation. There were air shafts in the Piscina's roof, and in the afternoons, when the foaming spray leapt in the sunlight and rainbows danced between the pillars – or in the evenings, when he locked up for the night and the flame of his torch shone across the smooth black surface like gold splashed on ebony – in those moments, he felt himself to be not in a reservoir at all, but in a temple dedicated to the only god worth believing in.

Attilius's first impulse on coming down from the hills and into the yard at the end of that afternoon was to check the level of the reservoir. It had become his obsession. But when he tried the door he found it was locked and then he remembered that Corax was carrying the key on his belt. He was so tired that for once he thought no more about it. He could hear the distant rumble of the Augusta – she was running: that was all that counted – and later, when he came to analyse his actions, he decided he could not really reproach himself for any dereliction of duty. There was nothing he could have done. Events would have worked out differently for him personally, that was true – but that hardly mattered in the larger context of the crisis.

So he turned away from the Piscina and glanced