

The Horse Coin – Chapter 1

Marcus Severinus crouched low against Tanet's mane, hugging his shield close against the wind. It was cold waiting for the signal; dankly cold, as mid-December afternoons in the Colony most often were. The mist blowing up from the estuary drifted across the parade ground, turning the riders of the second team a hundred yards to his left to ghosts, bringing with it the eerie piping of the marsh birds. Annwn voices, the British called them: the voices of the dead beyond the firelight.

Tanet shifted beneath him and he reached down to fondle her ears, quieting her. He glanced towards the distant platform where his father stood with the new governor.

Mothers, he prayed, don't let me fumble! Grant me a good Knot!

'Happy birthday, Nero bloody Caesar!' Behind his shoulder the veteran Tirintius leaned over and spat into the half-frozen mud. 'Sweet Mothers alive! For a horse lover the overbred bastard chose a damn silly month to be born in!'

Severinus's lips twisted in a grin. 'It's too cold for treason,' he said.

'Treason be damned.' Tirintius edged his horse forward until its muzzle rested against Tanet's flank. 'Riding the Knot's hard enough at the best of times, and with this mist it's murder.'

'We'll manage.' Severinus's grin widened and the strap of his cavalry helmet rubbed against the underside of his jaw.

'Will we so, boy?' Tirintius's teeth flashed behind his own helmet. 'There'll be spears adrift today, you mark me, and with the governor watching that's not good.' He spat again. 'Mind you, give it ten more minutes and the bugger won't see a thing.'

Beside the platform the low sun had caught on bronze as the signaller raised his trumpet.

'Here we go,' Severinus said.

Tirintius grunted and pulled his horse back. 'Thank bloody Jupiter! Hey! Try not to fall off, all right?'

The trumpet sounded. Severinus steadied himself as the line of horsemen behind him shifted with a rattle of shield on shield as their ranks closed. His left hand dropped to the holster that lay against Tanet's flank, pulling out one of the javelins, transferring it to his right and checking that the others would not snag. The mare began to fidget, and he pulled her in sharply.

Two heartbeats to go; one...

The trumpet blared again. Heart pounding, he crouched low in the saddle and dug in his heels. Tanet sprang away from the line, reaching for the gallop. Gripping her sides with his knees, he glanced over his left shoulder. The chaser from the other team was

fifty strides behind and closing, his javelin raised; too far yet for a cast, but like Tirintius Pontius had been one of his father's best, and when he did throw he wouldn't miss. Severinus slackened his left rein, freeing his shield arm.

Pontius rose, his body moving back then forward. The javelin came straight and hard. Severinus twisted round to meet it, raising his shield, and the blunted point thudded against the boss, jarring every bone in his arm from wrist to shoulder.

One down. The next would be more difficult.

The turn was only a few strides ahead. He crouched even lower, his chest hard against the horns of the saddle, right knee poised to drive into Tanet's ribs, both eyes on the chaser. Two strides from the mark he saw Pontius lift. The javelin struck as he hit the turn, his knee jammed against the mare's flank, bringing her round. Its six-foot shaft caught the shield-rim's leading edge with a screaming slither of wood on metal as it shot past his exposed neck...

Close! Far too close! Severinus was sweating as he pulled hard on Tanet's left rein, his knee still pressed against her side. He threw himself backwards and the mare's hindquarters dropped. She twisted round, her hooves scattering clods of earth. Digging both heels in, he gave her her head and sent her flying towards where the first of the targets sat his horse, waiting.

Two strides to wipe the sweat from his eyes; another three, to bring him into range...

Matching his movements with Tanet's and bracing his thighs against the saddle-horns, he rose and threw. The first javelin struck the target's shield-boss square, the second, two breaths behind it, a hand-span within the rim. Then he was past. Two hits, both clean: not bad, not good. Tirintius would score three at least. He might even...

Something flickered at the edge of his vision.

Mothers! Fool!

He whipped round and raised his shield a heartbeat before the second chaser's javelin slammed into it. The force of the blow knocked him sideways and he caught at the saddle-horn to steady himself, his knees locking against the mare's ribs.

Careless! Careless and stupid!

At least Tanet had not broken stride. Raising his hand, he wiped the sweat away and glanced ahead. The second target was almost in range: old Verus, his shield already raised. Severinus shook his head to clear it and reached into the holster, touching the shafts in their dividing pockets. Four more, but there would only be time for two; three if the Mothers were kind...

He pulled the first clear, rose and threw, already reaching for the second, then a third. One and two hit clean a hand-span from the boss, three was snatched, but Verus shifted into its path and it clipped the edge of the shield-rim to count for a third. Then he was past, breathing hard, tugging on the right rein. His knees and his heels

slackened their grip, allowing Tanet to slow, and he brought her in a long arc round the platform to the right to take up his final position at the Knot's end.

He was shaking. Well, he hadn't disgraced himself at least: five hits. Five!

While his breathing slowed, Severinus watched the others of the troop, strung out behind him, complete their own runs. Some managed six hits, but the mist was closing in. Most of the tail-enders - and there were good riders among them - managed only four. Five javelins on the mark was the best run he'd ever made. His father would be impressed.

More important, so might Paullinus.