

TREASURE HUNT

His hands clung the top of the door frame, knuckles straining white. He released his grip, slowly lowered his arms, massaged his left temple, blew out hard and turned from the sun. He was outraged.

She knew it would only get worse and looked down to avoid eye contact. If he couldn't see her face perhaps it wouldn't happen. She hoped so. Her red hair tumbled over her face as a delicate finger pushed her specs back onto the bridge of her nose. The tall, thin angular youth on her left, shuffled, looked embarrassed, picked his nose and said nothing.

Cressardini dressed in dirty linen trousers, knee pads and a t-shirt with sweat stains creeping out from under his arms, threw his baseball cap on the floor, brushed both palms over his temples, pushing sweat and sun cream over his short greying hair. Suddenly a fist hit the table. Cups, pens, plastic markers all jumped in unison. His arm swept left, scattering papers onto the floor. An open laptop, spinning like a car in the wet, slid to a halt at the edge of the table.

“No, No, No.”

The words crashed out of the portakabin into the quarry. The workmen paused, giving each other knowing looks.

“This is a serious archaeological study”, he gripped his head in both hands, “Not some self-glorifying treasure hunt.”

“Not” was spat out with all the venom his English, developed over several years of study at Manchester University in England, would allow. She forced herself to glance up, gently touched his arm and whisper, . “Bruno.”

The response was curt as he grabbed the table with both hands, “Caroline, this is Herculaneum.” Her eyes returned to the floor, “Herculaneum”, he emphasised every syllable, “I’m sponsored by the Lecliffe Humanities Institute to undertake scientific archaeological studies.”

He paused and stared at the table; then continued slowly, precisely, his left hand pounding in time to his words, “This is the first large scale work on the site in decades. We bring the past to life with careful research and reconstruction. The LHI expects results from me. Scott can’t just take half the work-force off treasure hunting.”

She nodded but her eyes never left the floor. He folded his arms, “And certainly not without my permission.”

Caroline Sivas permitted herself the faintest of smiles. In reality she loved it when he was passionate about his work. She just wished this didn’t spill over into a temperamental outburst. But it often did and she longed to put an end to that.

Cressardini glared at the youth, “What do you have to say?”

“Um, well I guess he should have asked.” Mark Lecliffe

tried to look cool, surreptitiously rolled some dry snot between his fingers and let it fall to the floor. Cressardini nodded but continued to glare. He considered the tall middle-aged man, once athletic but now overweight and was certain his parents did not have this display in mind when they said, "Travel to Europe in the vacation. Take in some culture. See our good friend Professor Bruno Cressardini at Chieti Scalo on the Italian Adriatic."

Having a good time certainly was on Mark's mind. But it did not include standing in a hot dusty quarry listening to someone he hardly knew yelling and screaming. Cressardini finally broke the moment of silence, "Well, where is he?"

"The far corner of the main site, in the Palestra just off the Decumanus Maximus. Under Erculano."

Caroline smoothed her hair back and tucked some strands behind her left ear.

Cressardini waved his palms upwards like a footballer missing an open goal, "How can he be in the gymnasium under the new town?"

In truth any new dig would have to be under Erculano, the town that had grown up on the buried remains of Herculaneum.

Caroline tried to defuse the situation by lightly touching his shoulder, "Calm down Bruno. He found a tunnel using the ground penetrating radar."

Cressardini threw his head back, raised his arms to the

portakabin roof and bellowed, “Fantastic. All we need. A Rocco Alcubierre wild goose chase followed by fifteen metres of volcanic tephra and the town of Erculano falling into the site. Just brilliant.”

“Bruno you know that can’t happen. The European Union has paid for a huge wall to be built at the end of the site to prevent it.”

Ignoring Caroline’s remark, Cressardini continued, “Do you have any idea how long I had to argue with the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei? Even then they wouldn’t let me work on the main site.”

He grabbed the table again and leant towards her, “Now I’ll have them crawling all over me.”

His head dropped and he stared at the table once more. Eventually he looked out towards the quarry wall, screwed up his face and mimicked the superintendent’s high pitched nasal voice, “I told the committee of the Preservation Trust you couldn’t be trusted.”

He turned back to her, “Just imagine Jan Lucco Guanni gloating.”

Caroline started to reply but Cressardini bent down, snatched his cap, swept out of the portakabin and strode off across the floor of the quarry. Caroline and Mark glanced at each other and dutifully followed. He marched them past the archaeological remains resting under their red metal roofs that protected them from sun and rain and stormed up the steep quarry ramp at a surprisingly

fast pace, shot through the open electronic gates and turned right onto the narrow Via Mare, then left through a second gate into the main site.

WILD GOOSE

Cressardini strode straight past the guard standing in the office doorway by the gate. She turned to follow him as fast as her uniform, at least one size too small, would allow. Caroline, who'd almost caught up, smiled and shrugged; the woman nodded, raised her eyes to the sky and relaxed back into the doorway.

The trio overtook a party of school children milling about next to the closed museum, crossed the line of cypress trees, turned left down a ramp and marched over the footbridge that bounced with every step. It led them to the second storey of a building above the quayside warehouses on the main Herculaneum site.

Mark Lecliffe was sweating and out of breath, "What's with this Alcubierre stuff?"

Caroline paused, turned to him, and shook her head. Her wide brimmed hat almost fell off. Holding it with one hand, she wagged a finger at him, "Look I know you're only here for a vacation but I do hope you're going to impress your parents by learning something about archaeology."

She wanted to add, "*And life*" but thought better of it, "Rocco Alcubierre worked on behalf of the Kings of Naples. In the eighteenth century he dug tunnels into the site. Everything they found they looted. Well at least by modern standards. Now nobody knows where the tunnels

are. Bruno thinks Scott has found one of these tunnels. He'll look really foolish if this is the case, especially as the rest of the team from the dig has wandered off to join Scott."

Mark nodded, "I get the picture."

Cressardini turned and snapped again, "You two, hurry. I am putting an end to this nonsense."

They turned right, over a short stretch of white mosaic flooring in front of a green courtyard with a few small trees, pushed past a group of tourists standing in the remains of a building, then turned left onto a narrow road with raised pavements on either side. The *Cardo IV Inferiore* stretched up a slight hill for about one hundred and twenty metres past the ruins on either side, all frozen in time by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD and yet somehow trapping the afternoon heat at ground level. Mark commented to no one in particular, noticing that each house was numbered, some with a little name tag next to it, "Some of these buildings are starting to crumble."

Caroline slowed to let Mark catch up; she looked at him but also kept her eye on Cressardini, "They are and that's why the work of the Preservation Trust is vital. But what's really important about this site is the way the volcanic ash has preserved material like wood and papyrus. Although it was all carbonised, burnt if you like, as the hot ash cloud raced through the town, we can still recover it. Pieces of furniture, even libraries, have been identified."

Mark tripped on a stone, looked back at it, "Papyrus, writing paper of the time."

Caroline smiled and patted his back, "You're learning."

Cressardini, t-shirt soaked in sweat paused to mutter to himself, "I spend years on background research. Produce maps. Put forward project plans. Mark out grids. I carefully document soil layers. I collect, catalogue and date artefacts. Then months, years of lab analysis. Papers. Learned Societies. Debates. Arguments."

He turned to the other two and stabbed his finger at them, "And what does this damn cowboy do?"

The walls of the buildings absorbed the sound yet still Caroline winced. A party of tourists looked over, whispered and pointed. Oblivious, Cressardini continued his march past Trellis House. Mark walked under the balcony which stretched out over the pavement supported on brick columns. Caroline touched his arm and pointed at the window, "There's an example of a preserved wood staircase."

Lines of school children snaked in and out of the buildings, as the pair continued up the hill, crossed the road on a small metal footbridge between the two pavements, and followed Cressardini along the Decumano Inferiore.

"So, Caroline." Mark's face was covered in beads of sweat.

“Yes?”

“How far can the ground penetrating radar, er, penetrate?” He blushed as he realised what he was doing with his arms to emphasise his question. Caroline attempted to respond with a straight face, “Tephra, the material that erupted from the volcano, has a consistency between concrete and shale. So I guess anywhere between one and ten metres”, before dissolving into a fit of the giggles, “Sorry, the images need careful interpretation because of all the walls that were buried by the ash. The buildings here are very densely packed together. But Scott is a real wizard at identifying the important features.”

About ten metres further on they hit a T-junction with the Cardo V Inferiore. On the right was a small building with a U-shaped counter of broken marble inlaid with five clay amphora, “There you go Mark – fast food”, Caroline pointed to the counter.

“OK – Big Mac, large fries and a diet coke.”

In a gesture he hoped would amuse her he leant over the counter as if offering money.

“Closer than you think. Everyone ate out for lunch and burgers were definitely on the menu. But you would have asked for *isicia omentata*. The buildings in this area were probably holiday lets and we are right opposite the gym entrance, so a good place for business. This was probably a serve yourself salad bar. Come on, let’s catch up with Bruno.”

They stepped up between two columns and through a metal barred gate into the gymnasium, most of which still remained buried. Through an entrance lobby they turned left onto a cinder path flanked by a colonnade of brick pillars covered in fluted plaster to make them look like marble. High above were the pines along the footpath that marked the old entrance into the site. Something that looked like the mouth of a tomb gaped from the smooth sloping tephra wall. Caroline nodded, "It's a passage way cut into the volcanic ash that leads to a cross-shaped swimming pool yet to be fully uncovered."

Ahead of them was a dark doorway above which was a balcony with three arched rooms. Cressardini had disappeared right at the end of the path.

They walked to the end and Mark peered through the doorway. He was surprised by a covered walkway with what looked like a series of shops set into the back wall. He turned back to Caroline, "Cool. A shopping mall. I wonder what they sold there?"

She smiled but looked anxiously over the security fence to her right. Mark's thoughts were interrupted by Cressardini shouting. He turned and helped Caroline over the scaffolding fence and then climbed over himself. They walked past a deep narrow concrete tank with round holes around the bottom. High above them a few people walked over the arched footbridge on their way to lunch in Erculano.

"Bit narrow for swimming."

“Fish breeding tank.”

But Caroline had lost interest in Mark’s education as the shouting from the end of the site grew louder. They climbed over another scaffolding fence and went through a three pillar colonnade next to the windows of the shopping street and rounded a wall at the far corner of the site.

With the back of a hand Scott wiped the sweat from his forehead as he stood in front of Cressardini. Streaks of sweat had carved channels in the dust on his face. At just over six foot, Scott Michael Dowling was the same height as Cressardini, but with broader shoulders, heavier muscles and carrying more weight than in his youth, he was the larger man. His grey hair was hidden under a grubby cotton head scarf tied like a pirate’s. They were a pair of gunfighters confronting each other in the afternoon sun. Cressardini drew first, jabbing his finger wildly. His anger was now a roaring flame, spittle boiled from his mouth, “Who the hell do you think you are! Taking away the team. On some ridiculous wild goose chase. You’re not fit to be on the site.”

Distressed to see him in such a state, Caroline tried to intervene, “Bruno, please. You’re making a spectacle of yourself.” She grabbed his arm but Cressardini snatched it away and glared at her.

Scott saw the opportunity, hung his left arm over Cressardini’s shoulder and offered him a bottle, “Water, old friend?” Cressardini pushed Scott away then snatched the bottle, stared at him, and finally took a drink. Using the bottle as a pointer to wave at

Scott, he shouted, "This is not acceptable!"

"Maybe, but I think I've discovered something unusual."

He looked at Cressardini, raised his eyebrows and nodded his head in an exaggerated manner. Cressardini continued to stare, then squinted and paused. Experience had taught him to listen to Scott. "Fool's gold. Wild goose." Yet he was no longer shouting.

Scott beckoned him and Cressardini, fire fading, followed, "Your limp's bad today, Scott."

"Yeah, left knee is sore from crawling around in the tunnel."

In truth, his passion for rugby, played until his fiftieth birthday, had permanently damaged it. But rugby had taken him all over the world. First playing, now watching. He described being a front row forward as the closest thing to ancient battle a modern man could experience. To feel, touch, taste your opponent. To gouge, hit, occasionally bite. To be close enough to taste your opponent's breath. Cressardini mocked Scott for imagining himself as a Roman soldier, saying he wouldn't have survived the training in the Roman Army, never mind close contact with the enemy. He laughed out loud when Scott announced he'd joined a re-enactment group. That was fantasy; only archaeology could tell you what things were really like.

Like an old couple after a row they walked, arms around shoulders, towards a group of people standing at the cliff

face.

“Look Bruno, I suspect this is an extraordinary find.”

The group parted to reveal a low and narrow tunnel entrance at the foot of the fifteen metre cliff of ash, pumice and rock topped by the odd tree. Just wide enough for one man, a dim electric light glimmered from inside. Picks, shovels and several rubber baskets leant against the cliff face. They stepped over a box covered by a sheet and a small generator that noisily hummed. Cressardini gasped and rubbed the back of his neck, “I can’t believe you are on this site.”

He stared in disbelief at the tools, “I hope you had permission from the Archaeological Superintendent or the Preservation Trust to do this, Scott.”

Scott snorted, “Yeah, yeah, whatever.”

His north of England accent revealed his utter contempt for committees, “Last week we were using the ground penetrating radar along the bottom of the cliff to map out the buildings beyond. I decided to crawl down to the end of this tunnel to get further into the ash.”

He pointed to the arched brick roof of the tunnel about one metre off the ground, “It’s the ceiling of a passage way filled with ash. Goes into the cliff about another two metres before turning left. I put the GPR on the wall at the bend. The images showed a vertical shaft about two metres deeper into the cliff. It heads up towards Erculano. At the bottom of the shaft was a

small chamber. There were some other anomalies there. I felt it warranted immediate exploration. We assembled the kit.”

A broad smile crossed his face, “I can’t honestly see the point of all that expensive surveillance equipment on the new wall because we sneaked the GPR and tools on site using the workman’s lift. From the old footpath at the far end of the gymnasium. There’s no one manning the old entrance and it was a doddle to get the key for the lift.”

OUR TUNNEL

Cressardini looked shocked, closed his eyes and slowly shook his head. Scott snorted again, “Don’t worry, no walls were hurt in the production of this trench - well one, slightly.”

Cressardini’s reply was tinged with despair, disappointment and resignation, “This is bad. It is archaeological vandalism. It is appalling. It’s a circus. It’s unprofessional. For what? Just a legacy of the Bourbon Kings.”

“Hmm, maybe. But look at these.”

Scott held out a handful of small coins. Cressardini rubbed one with his finger.

“Nice specimen. A coin from the Hadrianic period. What’s its provenance?”

Scott grinned, Cressardini was hooked, “Towards the bottom of the vertical shaft is a platform, about two metres off the floor, cut back into the ash. They were there”, he paused for effect, “Together with a small shrine. We can’t tell who to yet and...”

Cressardini raised the water bottle to cut him off abruptly and passed the coins to Caroline, “These are coins of the Principate if I’m not mistaken. Covering a period between Nero and Antonius Pius.”

She handed them to Mark. Determined to prove he was not the tourist she thought, he inspected them with a small

lens taken from his pocket, “Nero, Domitian, Nerva and Antonius Pius. Wow, four from Trajan’s era. I don’t recognise these.”

Caroline was startled and genuinely impressed. She smiled and nodded her approval, “That’s good. The others are Vespasian, Vitellius and Galba. Only Otho is missing. The last few were from a period when four Generals were appointed Emperor at the same time, each elected by a different army. Together the coins cover a period from 54 to 161 AD.”

Mark was puzzled and intrigued, “Why would someone dig down and set up a shrine to these Emperors?”

What were coins struck fifty years after the destruction of Herculaneum doing here? Cressardini massaged his temple again.

“Emperor or Imperator simply meant Commander in Chief. More correctly they were sovereigns; it was about power invested in the individual. However, to maintain the appearance of the Republic they were known as Princeps or First Citizen. They believed they were defending the Republic and wouldn’t have recognised the concept of Empire as we know it.”

Scott lifted the sheet uncovering a box, “Well, whatever they were defending, I think I may be able to say who set up the shrine, or at least show you where to look.”

He carefully lifted what look like a battered dark black box

of chocolates. Cressardini gasped, “Blessed Virgin.”

The rest of the group wandered over to look.

“It’s a vellum codex bound in leather and tied with a cord. The cord’s broken. And the leather is damaged, but there is clearly Latin script on the vellum - four columns to each page. Most codices have eight leaves but this has thirty. Very unusual for the era. Very expensive to create.”

Mark looked over his shoulder, “It’s not carbonised, so this means it was put here after the eruption.”

Cressardini and Caroline stared at each other. Scott gave Mark the thumbs up, “Spot on! Vellum will last for thousands of years, but the coins give the clue as to exactly when it was put here. Anyhow the volcanic ash seems to have preserved the chest very well.”

Cressardini and Caroline spoke in unison, “The chest?”

“Yes the codex had fallen out of a chest. The lead cover and the wood of the chest have deteriorated somewhat. There are five more codices in the chest.”

Scott carefully covered the codex up with the cloth. Mark shook his head, “What’s vellum?”

Cressardini rubbed the stubble on his chin, “Calf skin that has been soaked, limed, scraped, then dried under tension. It’s like paper but lasts a very long time. It was the Roll Royce of writing material at that time. The codex is the forerunner of a modern book. Whoever did this was

seriously wealthy.”

A broad grin crossed his face and dispersed any lingering tension. Perhaps the end could justify the means?

“Well, Scott, the circus stops now. I want a detailed account of stratigraphy, artefacts and spatial relationships. Get a tent up.”

Scott bowed and waved at the others, but they already had the tent kit out.

“I want a database set up, photography and blast...” Cressardini stopped mid-sentence and the smile left his face, “I’ll have to talk to the committee.” After a moment he became animated again, “Hey you, get this area taped off. I can’t wait to see Jan Lucco’s face.”

He turned to Scott, took a drink from the plastic bottle and poured the rest over his head, “OK. It looks promising. Can I get down the passage to see the chest? Look I’ve still got my knee pads on.”

“Tight squeeze but yes. We’ve got some timber in to support the roof. I reckon it will take a week to get the chests out.”

Cressardini raised his eyebrows. “Chests?”

Scott nodded, “Yes, I think there are twelve in total.”

“Mother of God. Scott, I think we may have the result the Lecliffe Humanities Institute was looking for.”

Scott forced a short laugh; Cressardini had already assumed it as his find, “We may have that result.”

Cressardini’s phone rang. He looked at the name on the screen, grimaced and waved for silence, “Jan Lucco, how are... What, he said what?”, he shook his head, “No, I don’t have a Memorandum of Understanding. No, no project plan”, he looked up to the sky, “No, it hasn’t been approved by the site committee.”

He paused before giving an exasperated sigh, “No, you haven’t given me a permit. Stop asking me questions you already know the answers to.”

Cressardini started winding his index finger at the phone, spinning the yarn. Scott stifled a chuckle then checked the footbridge to make sure Jan Lucco wasn’t looking down at them. Cressardini continued, “Yes, you are the Archaeological Superintendent. Dig? No, we were just testing the GPR.”

His eyes narrowed and he glared at the phone, “What? I don’t give a fig what the Preservation Trust thinks.”

He held the phone away from his ear and stared at it. Finally, he growled, “Jan Lucco shut up. Shut up. Just get down here”, with a last shake of the head he added, “You are about to become the most famous Superintendent ever. Yes, you heard correctly.”

He switched off the phone and looked up to the top of the cliff, “Another fish takes the hook. He’s coming.”

Scott laughed, rinsed his mouth with water and spat it onto the dusty ground, “Want to come and play in my tunnel Professor?”

“Our tunnel, Scott, our tunnel.”

CHIETI SCALO

A year had tumbled past since the find at Herculaneum. A year devoted mainly to laboratory work, cataloguing, preserving and translating. A year of arguing with the board of the Herculaneum Preservation Trust without ever saying what had been found.

Soon after the discovery, the Preservation Trust set up a subcommittee to examine the unauthorised excavation work. Jan Lucco had made sure that the subcommittee still hadn't reached any conclusions and that the local Mayor and the Regional Administration quickly lost interest in the reports of vandalism on the precious site.

Two papers on the translation of the first five codices, with Jan Lucco Guanni as co-author, had been submitted for peer review and publication to the International Journal of Archaeology. The master stroke came when Cressardini invited Jan Lucco to chair this year's annual Symposium on Mediterranean Archaeology at Chieti University.

Chieti, or more precisely Chieti Scalo, was the location of the main campus of the G. d'Annunzio University. Although Roman ruins were scattered around the town, the town centre had a medieval character. By contrast Pescara, fifteen kilometres east on the Adriatic Coast and the home of Gabriele d'Annunzio, the international literary figure after whom the University took its name, was popular mainly for its large shopping complexes. Most of the students spent their leisure time in Pescara.

On the afternoon of the symposium, Bruno Cressardini

and Caroline Sivas strolled arm in arm across fields of burnt weeds, the only remnants of the year's agricultural activity. Except for curious flies nothing stirred; it was still too hot even at five o'clock on this July afternoon.

Since the events of the previous year, Bruno's researcher had taken over his life and his apartment and he loved her for it. The pair hurried through a farmyard but the chained guard dog didn't even move. They slowed again then turned right onto the main road. Chieti University campus was on their left.

The university access road, the first section of which doubled as a car park, ran parallel to the main road. Like the rows of an amphitheatre, the other university buildings formed the backdrop to the Lecliffe Humanities Centre, which was set in the middle of a large grassed area. The centre consisted of a six storey concrete and glass building, with wide spiral staircases climbing up the four round towers at each corner. The Vice Chancellor's offices were on the top floor. Cressardini told anyone who would listen that it looked more like a French football stadium.

Caroline rested her head on his shoulder as they slowed to a stroll, "You seem very calm Bruno."

"It's been a good year."

"I meant about tonight's presentation. Where's Scott?"

"I don't think he is going to make it."

Caroline pulled slightly away from his side and twisted

towards him, “What? He’s the main speaker at the guest lecture.”

Cressardini smiled, “I know what to say. It’ll be fine.”

Caroline was not reassured – so unlike Bruno, no tension, no edge. He got a text message, glanced at it, smiled and nodded. She pulled his arm, “Bruno, the Symposium on Mediterranean Archaeology is an important meeting. Hosting SOMA at your university is a big deal and the guest lecture is very important, particularly as Jan Lucco is chairing.”

She tried to emphasise the word “important”. Cressardini smiled and kissed her on the cheek, “It’ll be OK.” He laughed, “In fact they won’t know what’s hit them.”

Caroline shook her long red hair. Now she really was worried.

They dodged past a gardener watering the lawns, and crossed the grass to the main building. Cressardini helped her through the revolving door and into the cool lobby. The large space was filled with the hum of delegates chatting, wine glasses in hand. Members of the Preservation Trust huddled in a group in the far corner. One pointed at Cressardini and their huddle tightened. Cressardini nodded at one or two delegates.

The delegates were eagerly awaiting the guest lecture. Since Professor Scott Dowling had a reputation as a highly entertaining lecturer the undergraduates were also there in force, for once foregoing the attractions of Pescara.

Caroline and Cressardini entered the auditorium. At the front was a rostrum with a table, lectern for the speaker, a large screen and a technician who was busy adjusting the sound.

A small smartly dressed figure sporting a neat grey beard stepped forward and offered his hand and in a familiar high pitched nasal voice enquired, "Bruno, how are you?"

"Jan Lucco." Cressardini bowed, "Well."

They embraced, You know Caroline."

Jan Lucco kissed her hand. She blushed.

"Jan Lucco, I'm afraid Scott can't make it."

He shrugged, "Oh well, never mind."

Caroline was astonished. Never mind? When your guest lecturer doesn't turn up? But before she could say anything Cressardini headed off towards the toilet. She gave a brief smile to Jan Lucco and sat down at the end of a row. She rummaged in her handbag for a comb and tidied her hair, feeling increasingly anxious.

Tongues had been loosened by a couple of glasses of wine and the buzz of over two hundred chatting people began to fill the auditorium. Caroline could see the group from the Preservation Trust sitting towards the back and concluded that they planned to sweep out during the presentation, having made a statement denouncing archaeological vandalism.

Professor Rizio Eleni-Marcy, the tall, muscular Chair of the Herculaneum Preservation Trust, stared at her over his half-moon specs. Elegantly dressed, full of self-importance, hair neatly slicked back, the only thing that spoiled the sophisticated image was his flattened and bent nose, the product of a brief but successful amateur boxing career. She smiled. He nodded and adjusted his oversized bow tie, then turned to his colleagues. Her smile faded as she looked down. She felt an empty sickness grow inside her. This was all going wrong, she just knew it.

THE LECTURE

Cressardini re-entered the room and made his way on to the stage. Caroline was shocked. She hadn't realised how much he had aged. He was bent over, his jacket tight and his shoulders moving awkwardly.

“I must get him to exercise more.” Jan Lucco banged a glass on the table and the buzz in the room faded.

“Colleagues, welcome to the fifteenth SOMA guest lecture. Tonight I am pleased to say we have a joint presentation from Professors Dowling and Cressardini on recent finds at the Herculaneum excavation. You may have heard rumour and speculation but tonight all will be revealed.”

He paused and scanned the room, took off his glasses and twirled them with his fingers, “Can I remind you to turn off your mobile phone? If it rings during the lecture, that will be ten Euros to my favourite charity. If you then spend two minutes rummaging in a bag trying to find it, it will be twenty.”

As laughter rippled through the audience he turned to Cressardini and nodded.

Cressardini adjusted his tie, coughed, gripped the lectern with both hands and began to talk, “I would like to thank SOMA and Professor Guanni for this opportunity to speak tonight. I would also like to thank the Lecliffé Humanities Institute for its ongoing support.”

He scanned the audience, adjusted his glasses with his right

hand, coughed, “I’m afraid that Professor Dowling cannot be with us this evening, so this will be a solo affair.”

A low groan swept round the audience. Scott was definitely the main attraction, although Cressardini, too, was an excellent speaker.

“Still, I have plenty of slides.”

He pointed to the screen as the first slide, an aerial view of Herculaneum, appeared. Professor Eleni-Marcy lent forward, hand over his mouth and turned to his Preservation Trust colleagues, “Oh no, death by a thousand slides” and stifled a large pantomime yawn. The group sniggered. Caroline glared across at them and Eleni-Marcy bowed. She tried to look angry and turned to the front.

Bruno went through a series of uninteresting slides detailing where the find was made and giving several coordinates of its position: a base map of the site with portion of the site excavated; a steel ranging pole, with it red and white stripes; a toblerone scale rule. His joke about using the toblerone rule for scale drawings and not for eating fell horribly flat.

Caroline shook her head and sneaked a glance at Professor Eleni-Marcy. He was staring at the ceiling. Bruno intoned to the screen, “A grid is established over the site with string held by large nails or stakes. A datum point or point of reference is identified with measurements taken from that point.”

Caroline anxiously pushed her hair behind her ear; he never talked to the screen, always to the audience. “Bruno” she whispered. The word was loud enough for people close by to hear.

Now slides of ground penetrating radar. A slide on the radar range equation analysis. Several people in the audience shrugged their shoulders, not even remotely interested. Finally, a grey slide with several fragmented wavy black lines spread across it. The radar echo itself. Completely meaningless to most of the audience.

Eleni-Marcy studied his watch. The Preservation Trust group was openly chatting. The rest of the audience began to fidget.

Several slides followed, showing stratigraphy, the different soil layers of the site. Then a slide of the basic tool for digging, a five inch pointing trowel and a Munsell Colour Chart providing standard names for the soil colours. Professor Eleni-Marcy snorted loudly, “PowerPoint toxicity” His head dropped to the side and his tongue fell from the corner of his mouth. The group around him started to snigger again. In the rest of the audience one or two people had now closed their eyes.

Next came several slides of faunal analysis; the study of animal bones demonstrated a breed of cattle not seen in Europe for over a thousand years. Together with the coins and other artefacts it dated the find to about the second century CE. This was confirmed by radiocarbon and potassium-argon dating techniques.

Cressardini continued to stumble through the slides. Caroline couldn't understand and anxiety threatened to overwhelm her as she looked around the audience. Small groups began to whisper comments. The group from the Preservation Trust yawned, coughed and shuffled. One kicked over a glass which broke. Several members of the audience turned to see what had happened. The general level of noise rose. Caroline tried to catch Bruno's eye, gave up and looked down at her hand as it gripped her skirt.

Cressardini paused, "The short of it is we found a large collection of well- preserved vellum codices written by a Roman Equestrian. They were buried in the second century AD. It was a dedication to his family who were killed in the 79 AD eruption of Vesuvius and to the one god who governed all his actions."

Professor Eleni-Marcy lent across to his colleagues, "Oh really. Christians were tortured and persecuted then. I hardly think that a Roman Knight would be openly worshipping as a Christian in the early second century AD. Ridiculous. Cressardini has really lost it this time."

His acolytes nodded. Cressardini continued, "We've spent the last year analysing the find. Together with Professor Guanni", he turned and Jan Lucco bowed his head slowly, "We've submitted a series of articles to the International Journal of Archaeology and I'm pleased to say two of these have now been accepted for publication."

The noise in the audience faded away. Professor Rizio Eleni-Marcy looked as though he had been struck by a

vicious left hook. A member of his party leant over, “Isn’t that the leading journal in this field, and doesn’t take any old rubbish. A paper has to be reviewed by at least three experts before being accepted. Did you know anything about this?”

Professor Eleni-Marcy fixed him with piercing eyes, “Shut up, shut the hell up.”

Cressardini continued but his presentation was now more authoritative, “We’ve identified a man born into a middle class family in Spain. The family moved to Italy, to Herculaneum. Following the eruption, he joined the merchant navy and sailed the Indian Ocean for two years. He made at least two trips to Sri Lanka or Taprobane as it was called then. His remaining family became wealthy dealing in spices and bricks.”

A slide showed trading routes from the Red Sea into the Indian Ocean.

“However, whilst they lived in Rome he chose to serve in the Roman Army for nearly forty years. He was based in Britain for some time. He fought in Scotland, and then stayed at York or Eburacum. He also fought in present day Romania. To get there he probably left Italy from Pescara and will almost certainly have passed through Chieti. His home was on the Croatian island of Hvar in the Adriatic, then known as Pharia.”

A slide plotted a route from York in northern England, across the Channel and through France, into Germany and along the Rhine before sweeping south and crossing the

Alps into Italy. A satellite photo of the Adriatic appeared. Cressardini paused and regarded the sea of faces looking back at him.

“He spent considerable time based on the Danube in Hungary, Bulgaria and Serbia.”

Another slide showed roads along the Danube, crossing into Romania and up into the Carpathian Mountains.

“This find is unique as it is the only known journal of a front line Roman soldier. I would like to share it with you.”

Caroline murmured. “Bruno, you were playing with the audience.”

She sighed with relief and turned towards Eleni-Marcy but he was glaring fixedly at Cressardini.

MY TALE

No one in the audience noticed the bent figure in the grey hooded cloak enter via the side door and shuffle across the stage. In a single motion, without looking up, the figure pulled out a twisted wooden stick with a lump at the end, struck Cressardini across the shoulders and returned it under the cloak. Cressardini collapsed behind the lectern.

The audience gasped. A woman screamed. All eyes were riveted to the rostrum. Caroline stood up, her body trembling. The figure approached the microphone and in a clear voice that she instantly recognised snapped, “Be silent and listen.”

Without looking up, the figure continued, “I am Quintus Vederius Ligustus, son of Gaius of the Quirna tribe, known as the hero of Bodotria. I am a Roman soldier who has had the honour of serving four Princeps.”

The figure paused; the head turned to look around the audience but the face remained hidden, “I can say, as an old man for whom death is a close companion, that the greatest of all was Trajan. General, Caesar, son of the Divine Nerva, Nerva Trajan, the best Augustus, Germanicus, Dacius, Parthicus, High Priest, holding twenty-one powers of a Tribune, thirteen times claimed Commander in Chief by the army, six times Consul, Father of the Country. I met him at the time of his fourth tribunician power and fifth consulship and fought under him until his death. We weren't great friends; he was my commander. He is a divinity.”

Jan Lucco helped a dazed looking Cressardini off the stage and out of a side door. Caroline turned and went to the back of the hall. The audience's eyes were fixed on the front. She pushed through the door and was shocked to come face to face with eight fully dressed Roman Legionaries. In front of her, dressed as a deputy centurion, was Mark Lecliffe. He nodded, "Ave Citizen."

Her mouth opened but she was so shocked that nothing came out. She suddenly felt sick. Still staring at the soldiers she backed round the corner. Having pulled the cushion from under his jacket, Bruno changed into a white toga with a wide purple stripe and gold shawl. Jan Lucco had already changed into a white toga with a similar purple stripe.

"Bruno", Caroline's heart was still racing and the feeling of nausea strengthened so it came out more like a squeak.

"Sorry, couldn't tell you. It was our little surprise. We thought we would do a re-enactment of our findings. Scott is going to recount the story; we're going to act parts. I am Emperor Trajan and Jan Lucco is Gnaeus Pompeius Longinus."

He broke into a broad grin; Jan Lucco bowed and kissed her hand. Caroline pulled it sharply away, "Bruno, I thought you'd been hurt. You idiot."

"No, all planned."

He smiled, gave her a hug and signalled Jan Lucco towards the hall, "Caroline, go and sit down or you'll miss the

show.”

He looked down the corridor and waved. “Ready guys.”

The Legionaries nodded and dispersed to the doors. With the door slightly ajar Cressardini listened to the story from the figure on the stage and waited for his cue.

“Since my seventy fifth year, in dedication to the sacred memory of my family, killed in the heat of Vulcan’s forge, I have committed to writing the recollections of my life. Close your eyes. Imagine, if you can, a summer evening on the terrace of my villa on the island of Pharia. A warm breeze brings the scent of pine through the trees. With a cup of fine wine to help me, my secretary reads the notes I made during my army career. Here detailed, there just flashes of half remembered battles. Then I dictate whilst my secretary writes by candle light.”

Without looking up he rubbed his eyes, “As I am no longer able to read, at the end of each week my secretary reads my words out to me. It brings it all to life again. Such adventures. Such men have I known.”

The figure’s head bowed in remembrance. He raised the stick and hit the table. The audience jumped. Immediately the doors flew open and the Legionaries, two to each door, entered. They drew their swords, pointed them at the figure on the platform and, as one, hit their shields. Some of the audience got up as if to leave.

“Stay and no harm shall befall you. Attempt to leave and my guards will cut you down.”

Indeed, they looked as though they might.

“Silence for Trajan, Optimus Princeps, the greatest first citizen.”

To the left Cressardini and Jan Lucco entered the hall. Cressardini bent his elbow and, with his hand raised, beckoned to the audience. The Legionaries cheered and shouted.

The audience sat in stunned silence. Slowly the undergraduate students joined in the shouting and cheering which spread until finally the whole audience picked it up. Professor Eleni-Marcy simply scowled.

The Emperor Trajan beckoned with his hands to encourage the audience further. Finally, Cressardini sat down. He raised his hands to calm the audience and nodded at the cloaked figure on the stage. The wooden stick hit the table again. The noise faded away and the room became silent.

“In honour of first citizen Trajan, I will recall for you a period when our lives first came together. A time when I was able to serve the Princeps as a soldier of Rome.”

The figure suddenly straightened and tore off the cloak to reveal Scott Dowling dressed as a full centurion. He beckoned to the audience with his left hand, “Come with me.”

They burst into applause. Even the Preservation Trust

group were sitting upright looking straight back at him.

“Enjoy my tale as a dedication to a most powerful god.”
With emphasis on “powerful”, he stood stiffly to attention.
“Mars Ultor.”

Scott relaxed and slowly scanned the audience. He drew his sword and pointed at them, “To Father Mars, the god of vengeance.”