

Thirty Eight

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Epic Threads

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Artist's Statement

Thirty Eight was inspired by the largely lacking attention given to the lives of lower-class Romans, seeking not only to explore the life of the common folk, but also to place history's rather mythical tales into context. Set in the year 73 BCE, the story aims to provide a glimpse into the mundane, even when much of Rome's history was a whirlwind of action.

The likely exaggerated—or entirely legendary—story of Caesar and the pirates was drawn mainly from the writings of Plutarch, with additional modern support. Within the context of 73 BCE and Caesar's standing in society, it was chosen for its ability to slowly spread as gossip and rumors amongst the lower classes—perhaps gaining new, more dramatic features in the retelling, or later proliferated as propaganda. It serves as an example of the way in which information could have been shared in the more rural environments, and I looked to hint at a similar process with the briefer mention of Spartacus' prophecy—another arguably mythical event.

I hope *Thirty Eight* can offer something engaging and fairly light-hearted in the family's moment of humble life, with a taste of farming gossip and the inevitable sharing of stories.

Thirty Eight

THE year was 73 BCE, and the late summer months had brought their staggering heat into the Tiber Valley.¹ It rolled in invisible waves, seeping into the soil and wetting the skin of men still at work—though the sky was nearly darkened, slaves and owners alike remained scattered in the fields.²

Marcus Ovidius had just returned from a local marketplace, relieved of the heat only a fraction under the setting sun. With him he brought a cooking pot for his wife, found amongst the tangle of *tabernae*³ and other stalls.⁴ As he crossed the farm's modest courtyard,⁵ his daughter, Ovidia, sprung from her place and hurried over, eager to share what she learned that day.⁶

"Dear Ovidia," he said, gently patting her head. Once she shifted away, Ovidius moved to greet his wife, his gaze drifting to the blackening fields. He would soon usher the two inside for the night—he had yet to unload his bags and needed to find where his son was undoubtedly still at work.⁷



"Father," Gaius, the son and first-born child of Ovidius asked, "Was there nothing to be heard at the market today?"

Ovidius was sitting with his wife next to the bed mats of their children, lined side by side in the small *cubiculum*.⁸ There were a few small toys littered about the room—wooden animals⁹ Gaius was now too old for, and a collection of tiny, carved figures with which Ovidia was infatuated—though it was otherwise empty. The house was beginning to cool off as evening sank deeper, and the family was finally settled enough to begin going to sleep. Still, Gaius often wished to hear of the stories and gossips their *paterfamilias*¹⁰ overheard outside the farm, and Ovidia was no less enthused by the tales he spun.

The two watched with rapt attention as he leaned forward, humming lightly and feigning thought. Suddenly, and with a spark in his eyes, he played at remembering and hushed his voice as if it were a secret.

"There's talk," he drawled, "of some great revolt happening somewhere in the South."¹¹

Gaius frowned, apparently displeased by this. "But, father," he complained, "That's boring!"

Indeed, following the death of Sulla¹² a number of years prior, they were no strangers to hearing of disturbances and revolt. While frightening and captivating at first, these stories quickly became a bore for the boy. But Ovidius chuckled, taken aback by such a plain thought from his own son.

"What if I told you this, then?" he began anew, "They say the leader of this revolt, a gladiator of the name Spartacus, is fated to meet a terrible end."¹³

¹The Tiber Valley was one of a few particularly fertile areas for farming. For further reading, see Roselaar, 419.

²On warmer days, work may have continued after dark. See Roselaar, 423.

³*Tabernae* (sing. *taberna*) were small retail shops, typically built into residential buildings: see Hirth, 296.

⁴Markets would have also supplied specialized, often metal, tools and other items. See Roselaar, 423.

⁵Vitruvius, 6.6.1: Vitruvius provides insights into the (ideal) architecture of the Roman farmhouse—particularly, the courtyard should correlate in size to the number of cattle.

⁶Children were encouraged to begin language learning at home: see Dolansky, 121. This may have been a feature of wealthier families, while a farming family perhaps focused more on practical skills.

⁷Children of lower classes were expected to contribute early on: see Jeppesen-Wigelsworth, 107.

⁸*Cubicula* were essentially equivalent to bedrooms: see Jeppesen-Wigelsworth, 110.

⁹Play was a method of education for children of all classes. See Dolansky, 121.

¹⁰*Paterfamilias* refers to the male figure of authority in the household: see Jeppesen-Wigelsworth, 95.

¹¹The slave revolt of Spartacus, beginning in 73 BCE. See Shaw, 130.

¹²Kamm, 32.

¹³For more on the alleged prophecy of Spartacus, see Shaw, 132.

Ovidia's eyes widened. Her brother was now clearly interested.

"What will happen to him, father?" she asked, kneading at the thin bed sheet with her hands. "Will he die?"

Nearly at the same time, Gaius demanded, "How do they know it?"

"Who knows what will happen," Ovidius shrugged, proudly leaning back on his arms, pleased at having found something to entertain them. Turning to Gaius, he said, "They say that his wife can see things—things we can't. One night, they say, a big snake wrapped up around his head. She declared it was a sign of some great power that will bring his most awful end."¹⁴

Although Ovidia was now tightly squeezing the fabric, face bordering on something like fear, Gaius had once again become disinterested. Such a story did not appeal to him anymore.

"Father," he pleaded, "Is there nothing else? What of the pirates?"

By now, it had surely been a few weeks of hearing bits and fragments reporting the kidnapping of a young patrician by the name Gaius Julius Caesar.¹⁵ It had in fact been a year or so prior that Ovidius first heard whispers of the capture, though they had developed into bustling new rumors as of late.

"Ah," he acquiesced, "That is what you want to hear, then?"

Gaius nodded fervently, tucking his knobby knees up to his chest and listening with renewed vigour; Ovidia, on the contrary, had at some point slumped backwards, on the brink of sleep.

Being the farming man he was, his language was not of an educated nature—rambling and stuttering, and certainly not lacking in inconsistencies.¹⁶ Yet, for all this, Gaius swore the shadows in the *cubiculum* were moving, taking shape and morphing into figures. The flickering light of the oil lamp hardly illuminated the room, projecting the boy's imagination and soon changing into something else entirely.

"They say he's a good public speaker. He was travelling to sharpen his skill," Ovidius began. "But on his way, he was captured by a bloodthirsty lot of pirates..."¹⁷

He was talking quieter now, Ovidia practically asleep and his wife now lying beside her.¹⁸ Thus the two sat in the dim light, Gaius caught on every word as if it were indeed a great poet to whom he listened. His father told him of the pirates' demand: 20 talents of silver for his release¹⁹—a shocking price to young Gaius, but the Cilician pirates were a rugged and aggressive bunch, and they knew such a profit could be made.

Much to Gaius' surprise and delight, Caesar merely laughed at this. 'It is clear that you know not whom you've captured,' he proclaimed, Ovidius deepening his voice. 'For I am worth far more than that!'

And so Caesar sent his company to instead collect 50 talents²⁰ from neighbouring towns while he stayed captive aboard the ship—captive, yet of most amusement to the pirates. For thirty eight days he entertained them,²¹ reciting poetry and using them as practice for his public speaking.²²

It was a peculiar relationship, often feeling as if he weren't their prisoner at all. When they were too noisy, or particularly bothersome while he was trying to sleep, he would simply holler to keep it down.²³ When one of the oafs would interrupt or badger him for his speaking, he regularly responded in laughing

¹⁴Shaw, 132.

¹⁵Plutarch, 1.8.

¹⁶For more on the qualities and development of vulgar Latin, see Abbott, 60.

¹⁷Caesar, travelling to Rhodes to study under Apollonius Molon, was allegedly captured near Pharmacusa. See Kamm, 33–34.

¹⁸Families of this socio-economic class may all have slept in the same room: see Jeppesen-Wigelsworth, 111.

¹⁹Plutarch, 2.1.

²⁰Plutarch, 2.1.

²¹Plutarch, 2.3.

²²Kamm, 34.

²³Plutarch, 2.2.

threat; ‘You illiterate barbarians,’²⁴ he accused, holding onto a post as the boat rocked, ‘I will have you hanging by your mangy necks once I am freed!’²⁵

“But they were taken with his threats,” Ovidius said, “And found joy in provoking him.”

The pirates indeed mocked the man, often insulting his intelligence and likening him to a troublesome child. When he joined in their more athletic endeavours they took pleasure in besting him, even if he couldn’t appear more unbothered. It was only once his companions returned with the ransom money that the pirates came to regret this, for Caesar made good on his mirthful promises.

“What did he do?” Gaius whispered, his knees hugged so tightly to himself Ovidius feared he may break something. “Did he hang them?”

“Not exactly,” his father said, face halfway shrouded in the dark room. Having been set free soon after the payment, Caesar sailed back swiftly and caught the pirates practically where he left them. He then imprisoned them, hoping to entrust their punishment to a man named Junius.²⁶ Finding little help there—the man was more concerned with the ransom sum—Caesar took matters into his own hands and crucified them all.²⁷

“All of them?” Gaius gasped, staring with wide eyes at Ovidius.

“All of them,” he replied, shifting from where he had been sitting. As he situated himself on his own mat, his wife now motionless beside their daughter, he told Gaius to blow out the oil lamp. “Sleep now, boy.”

²⁴Plutarch, 2.4.

²⁵Plutarch, 2.4.

²⁶According to Plutarch, 2.6, Junius was the governor of Asia.

²⁷Though there are discrepancies, it is suggested Caesar exercised a small mercy and first had their throats slit. See Kamm, 34.

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