

THE SCAR GATHERER

Extract from *The Leopard in the Golden Cage*

This extract is from chapter 3, when Joe has an experience common to everyone in the Roman world:

"Shall we go down to the beach?" Lucy called to Joe.

"Actually -" He felt his cheeks turn red. "Before we do, is there a toilet somewhere?"

"It's fine to pee in the bushes. Almost everyone does that here."

Joe ran to catch her up. "I need more than a pee," he muttered.

Lucy laughed. "You can do that in the bushes too. Plenty do."

"Really?" Joe pulled a face. "That's a bit gross, isn't it?"

"Gross?"

"Nasty, I mean. Unhygienic. Isn't there somewhere proper to go, with so many people living here?"

She stood still. "There is. Do you really want me to take you all the way up there? It's behind the bath house."

"Yes, please." Joe dug his toe into the grass. She probably thought he was being pathetic, but he didn't want to get caught wandering around without her. Goodness knows what might happen.

"I don't know why you're being so fussy!" Lucy stumped back up the lawn.

They went back round the western end of the south wing, and along the side of the formal gardens once more. From the main hall came the sound of singing and someone strumming on what sounded to Joe like some kind of guitar.

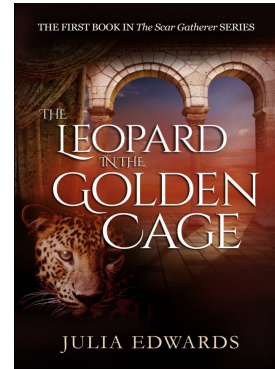
"It's over there." Lucy pointed to a long low building in the south eastern corner of the compound. "It's communal, so if anyone comes in, remember that you can't speak!"

Hesitantly, Joe went over to the building. Without Lucy beside him, he felt exposed and vulnerable. He glanced over his shoulder, but she was looking the other way. There was no-one else to be seen.

Inside the building, it was much less dark than Joe had expected. The roofs which stretched out from either side didn't meet in the middle, so you could see the sky. They sloped in the opposite direction from the usual way, too, making a shape which would have been a 'V' if they had joined.

Along the two long walls were raised benches, and down the middle of the floor was a long trough flowing with water. Every couple of metres, there was a large container with a bundle of sticks standing in it, like the handles of giant paintbrushes left in giant jars. Joe looked around and wondered what to do. He should have asked Lucy to explain before he came in. But it seemed so stupid, having to ask for help to go to the loo.

He walked down to the far end of the building and climbed the step to one of the raised benches. There was a large, round hole every metre or so along the bench that he hadn't been able to see from the floor. That made it much more obvious, he thought with relief.



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He pulled down the linen shorts he seemed to be wearing under his tunic, and sat down over one of the holes. The use of the sticks and water was still unclear. He waited quietly to see if someone else would come in and show him.

After a minute or so, a man appeared in the doorway and came and sat down half way along the opposite wall. Seeing Joe, he raised his hand. "Ave."

Joe raised his hand and nodded, but said nothing, conscious of Lucy's reminder. He watched the man covertly, to see whether he would use the sticks or the water. Sure enough, the man leaned forward and took a stick from the container nearest him. On the end of it was a piece of sponge. The man dipped this into the water, shook it, wiped his backside with it, rinsed it in the water once more, and put it back in the container.

Joe gaped.

The man stood up and pulled up his underclothes. "Vale," he said, and left.

Joe leaned over to the container in front of him and picked out the cleanest looking stick. The sponge attached to it was still dripping with water from the bottom of the container. It didn't look too clean. He put it back and tried another, and then another.

Finally, when he had examined and rejected every single one, he picked a stick at random, waggled the sponge hard in the water trough, and used it to clean himself. His stomach turned at the thought of using something that so many other people had already used before him. Perhaps a bush wasn't such a bad thing after all. At least the leaf you used would be your own.

"There you are!" Lucy exclaimed as he emerged. "I was starting to think you'd fallen in."

Joe laughed sheepishly.

"It does happen, you know," she said, without a flicker of a smile. "People drown. Not a nice way to die!"

"My God! No!" Horror gripped Joe's throat. "Let's go, shall we?" He hurried ahead of her back along the side of the bath house, keen to get as far away as he could.

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