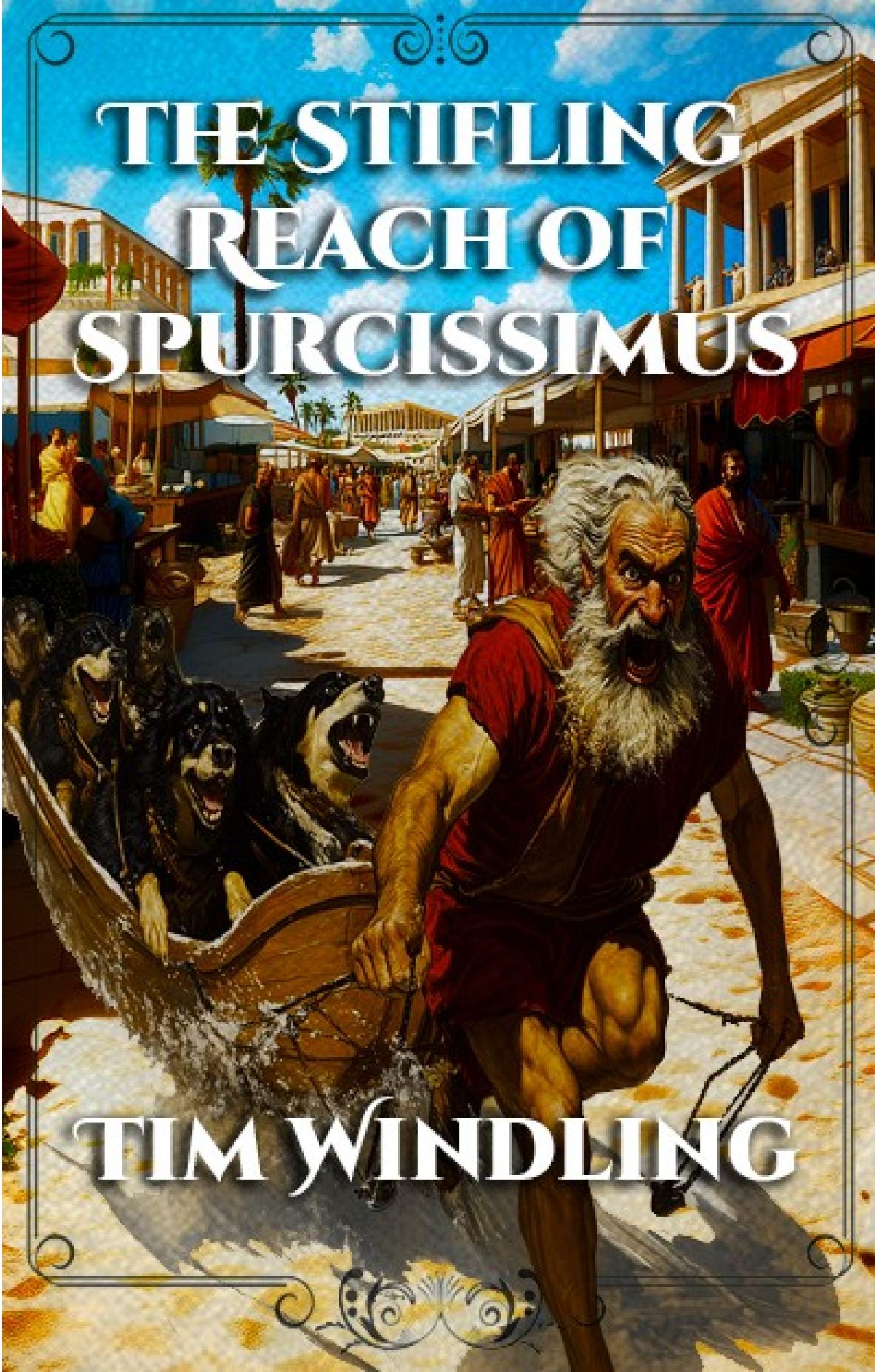


# THE STIFLING REACH OF SPURCISSIMUS

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# The Stifling Reach of Spurcissimus

A Short Story  
by Tim Windling

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‘Spurcissimus/Sled’ and ‘The City’ created from *Midjourney* prompts,  
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Synopsis - *A stupid, frustrated emperor of Greco-Roman times is determined to rid the streets Spurcissimus (a vagabond that spurns all laws and traditions) by any means necessary.*

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# The story

ouncing on his toes, Prodgnes marched through the street with decapitation on his mind. Leniency had always been his majesty's fatal flaw—at least, that's what he believed. If it wasn't leniency or kindness that allowed the vagrant to desecrate his laws, what else could it be? Guards and councillors were in tow and fortified his surroundings. He felt lightheaded; thoughts of Spurcissimus becoming one head lighter produced a grin across his stupid face. Defiance must be met by punishment.

“Your Majesty, are you sure this is wise? As I've already tried to expl...”

“Yes, yes. Uprising this, rioting that,” Prodgnes turned to his envoy, swatting the air as he cut them off, “This beggar will vacate my city today, either of his own accord or as a corpse.”

Dry, brittle earth crunched beneath their caligae as the mist of the Atecho River stuck to their morning sweat. The scent of sea salt penetrated their nostrils. A vermillion sunrise peaked above the horizon, as the light partitioned through the tall buildings. Fur and wool formed the basis of the king's royal dress. Diamonds and sapphires weighed him down. They constantly reminded him not to wear such expensive jewels around crowds, but he wanted his subjects to see his wealth on display.

Suari, head of the king's council and chief policymaker, rushed to his ruler's side. He pulled the hem of his robes over his knees to increase his speed.

“Sire, You know how popular he is. Remember what happened last time we 'got rid' of him?”

“Would you like to join him, Suari?”

The man's face turned scarlet, “No. Please, Your Majesty. It's ju—”

A look from his sovereign told him to drop the subject. Of course, Prodgnes remembered what happened last time. He always remembered when someone tried to make him a fool. When they last attempted a physical extraction, they took their second whack at removing Spurcissimus from Balina—their first attempt failed when he found his way out of slavery.

Four years out on the outer islands, working for a sugar plantation. As Prodgnes remembered it, Bliss had never been so sweet. Then one day, the skinny geezer washed to shore to the dismay of the crown. The waves couldn't quench his stench. Briskly, he returned to parading around once again in his cotton nappy. Chains and gauntlets dangled by his wrists for another two years.

How he escaped was a marvel; how he survived was an enigma. Fines were once again being delivered for spouting out sacrilegious trifles and ridiculing what he called 'mumbo jumbo superstitions'; most rational humans called it the legal code.

"And that was our first attempt. Things were so much worse during the second round," Suari reminded him.

The procession followed their monarch through the market district. Crowds would generally fill the streets but they established a morning curfew. A few citizens hadn't taken it to heart and scattered when seeing the procession. Merchants trying to make a living saw their ruler and brought him free samples of their goods, leaving their stalls in the hands of their young children or wives. Sweet honey, Jewellery, fermented fish, pork, legumes, carved olive oil jars, bottles of vinegar, figs and varied types of spiced wine, were all offered to him on bent knees.

"Try my sourdough, Sire. It is the finest bread in all Balina."

Tossing the baker aside, the guards took what they pleased and harassed those remaining to vacate the area.

"Where is he? I know this is where he delivers his speeches. From this pulpit." Arranged by raising a platform, the stage sat unused in the middle of the square.

"They have him ready to be executed in the next district. He chooses not to leave"

"Excellent." They marched on, a bounce back in his step.

Their second attempt merited being considerably more sinister. Deep underneath Castle Balina, lay a series of tunnels that hold the worst of the kingdom's prisoners. The garrison piled them together like chickens in a cage and fed them brine from their desalination efforts. They had sentenced Spucissimus to the sewage pits below. Fecal matter, urine, blood, and other fluids rose to his waist.

Parading through the city for King Prodgnes' fifteenth-year jubilee, the vagrant made his triumphant return. Spurcissimus gave the supreme ruler a royal one-finger salute while riding a skiff pulled by a pack of street dogs. The crowd tried not to turn on their sovereign, but an explosion of laughter filled the air when he traded places with one of the beats and started pulling the dinghy with his teeth.

ARRRUUUUUUUOOOO, he howled with the pack.

“Maybe, we turn around and head towards the castle, Sire?” A simple look from his liege told him he was pushing his luck. The neighbourhood had come out in full force. Most had their arms crossed, a wrinkled nose, and tight eyes.

“Ah, there he is. Well done, gentlemen.” The soldiers built the guillotine on a similar dais as the last district. Smoke from torches filled the air.

“Proddy?” He had a rough, grisly voice as if he lived at either end of silence and screams; nothing in between. Matted hair clung to his back and shoulders; his beard contained droplets of dried soup vegetables and bread crumbs. He tried to turn his head to look at the king but found it difficult with his arms tied behind him. Prodgnes hated the nickname and would be glad when it died off, “Here to see me off then?”

“Haven’t I always?”

“Ay, that you’ve done. Lots of people come to see little ol’ me.” Looking over the crowd, Prodgnes wondered if he should have heeded his advisors. His citizens gave him blank stares with tightened eyes above small mouths. They weren’t pressing, but he could sense the tension. Gazing at the executioner, he gave a simple nod. Oxygen drained from his attache’s lungs.

“Any final words?”

“Don’t let your mind wander, your majesty. It is too small to be left alone.” A quick chuckle came across the stage before they attempted to morph their mistake into a cough.

“Do it.” The headsman prepared his machine.

*Clunk!*

That’s all it took.

A collective gasp fell over the crowd as the head plopped into the bucket.

“Well done, excellent work. I couldn’t have done it better myself.” Spurcissimus hadn’t perfected all the king’s gestures, but he had enough talent to fool these buffoons. Wearing clothing felt terrible against his skin, and he

especially hated wool, but a role needed a costume. The royal regalia was all he had to work with, “Make sure that head finds its way on a pike.”

Why should anyone suspect they had traded places? He looked identical to his little brother once he had tidied and polished. Plus, his glamour could soothe those who looked too close.

“I wish you wouldn’t have done that, sire.” Suari said, “You don’t know the headaches you’ve caused me.” They walked off the platform and headed toward the castle. The sun had risen; the skin around his neck had become itchy from the UV rays.

“You? What about him?” He laughed at his joke, pointing toward the basket, “Trust me, everything will be smoother from here on.”

“As you say, Your Majesty.”

## Author Bio



Timothy (Tim) Windling was born and raised in London, Ontario. He writes speculative pulp, bouncing between science-fiction and fantasy. When he isn't writing, you can find him playing guitar or video games, watching too much YouTube, or reading a book. Currently, he hosts 'Breakfast Sprints' for the Toronto SFF Writer's Group online.

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