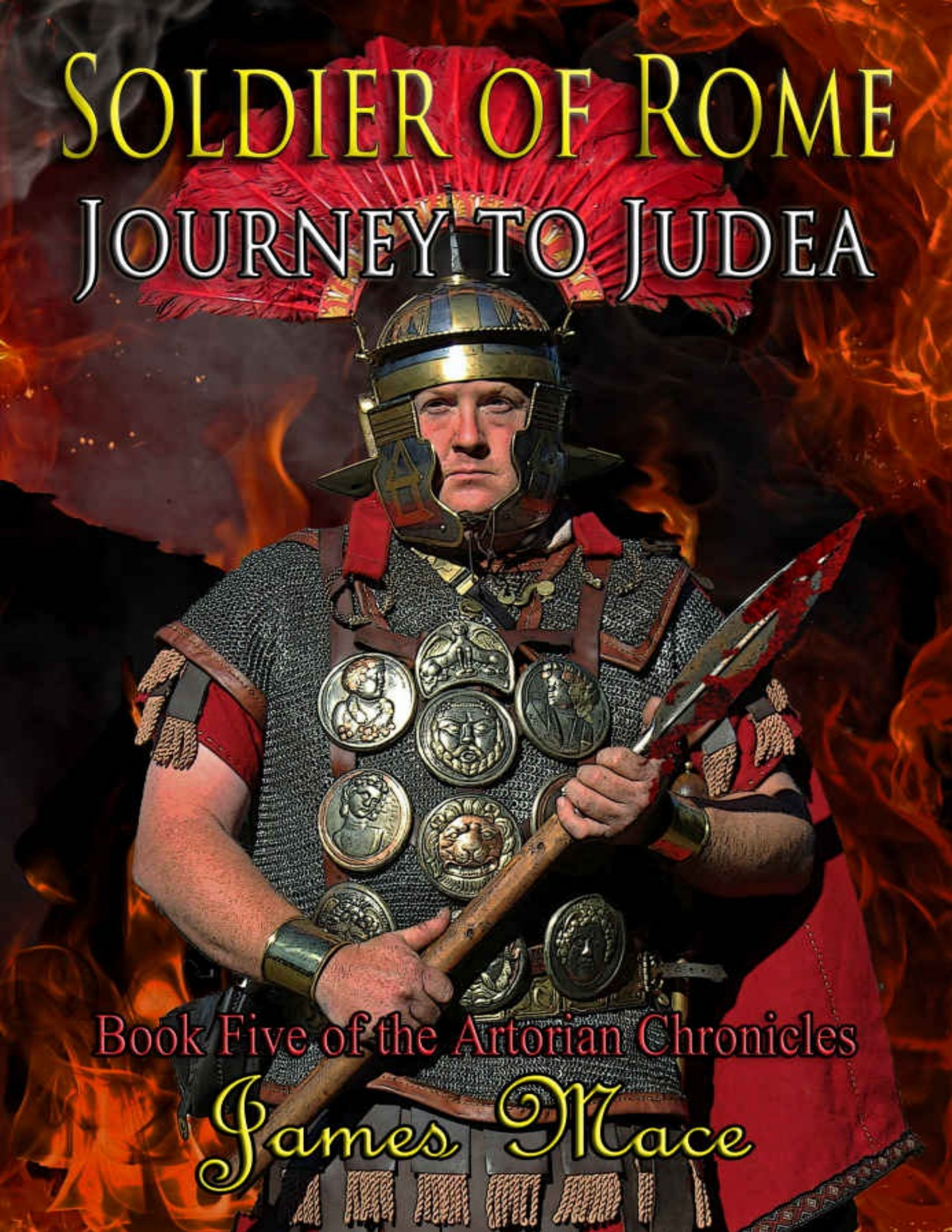
Soldier of Rome

Journey to Judea



Book Five of the Artorian Chronicles

James Mace

Soldier of Rome

Journey to Judea

Book Five of the Artorian Chronicles

James Mace

Electronic Edition Copyright © 2013 by James Mace

All rights reserved as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system without the prior permission of the publisher.

Certain characters and events portrayed in this book are based on actual persons and events but are used fictitiously.

Legionary Books
Meridian, Idaho 83642, USA
http://www.legionarybooks.net

First eBook Edition: 2013

Published in the United States of America
Legionary Books

Catch a dream and you don't know what it means
Give up your life, live for the King

- Axel Rudi Pell

Dedicated in memory of

Major Robert Elwood Cutler, U.S. Air Force
1952 – 2011
My Friend and Mentor

The Works of James Mace

Note: In each series or combination of series', all works are listed in chronological sequence

The Artorian Chronicles
Soldier of Rome: The Legionary
Soldier of Rome: The Sacrovir Revolt
Soldier of Rome: Heir to Rebellion
Soldier of Rome: The Centurion
*Empire Betrayed: The Fall of Sejanus
Soldier of Rome: Journey to Judea
Soldier of Rome: The Last Campaign

*Centurion Valens and the Empress of Death
*Slaves of Fear: A Land Unconquered

The Great Jewish Revolt and Year of the Four Emperors
Soldier of Rome: Rebellion in Judea
Soldier of Rome: Vespasian's Fury
Soldier of Rome: Reign of the Tyrants
Soldier of Rome: Rise of the Flavians
Soldier of Rome: The Fall of Jerusalem

Napoleonic Era
Forlorn Hope: The Storming of Badajoz
I Stood with Wellington
Courage, Marshal Ney

The Anglo-Zulu War
Brutal Valour: The Tragedy of Isandlwana
Crucible of Honour: The Battle of Rorke's Drift
Lost Souls: The Forgotten Heroes of Eshowe

* Stand-alone novel or novella

Table of Contents

Preface
Cast of Characters
Roman Military Ranks
Prolog: The Passing of Livia
Chapter I: Incursion on the Rhine
Chapter II: Unrest in the East
Chapter III: The Hand of the Emperor
Chapter IV: Seasons End
Chapter V: New Horizons
Chapter VI: Changing of the Guard
Chapter VII: Across the Empire
Chapter VIII: Family Matters
Chapter IX: Ghosts of the Past
Chapter X: Casting Off
Chapter XI: Sea of Evil
Chapter XII: Black Devil Ship
Chapter XIII: Lost and Damned
Chapter XIV: Friends, Old and New
Chapter XV: Strange Traditions
Chapter XVI: To Jerusalem
Chapter XVII: Unworthy Allies
Chapter XVIII: A Whisper of Death
Chapter XIX: The Fall of Sejanus
Chapter XX: Horsemen under the Bull
Chapter XXI: Punish and Enslave
Chapter XXII: Disciples of Love and Hate
Chapter XXIII: Before the Pain
Chapter XXIV: Render Unto Caesar
Chapter XXV: Curse of the Damned
Chapter XXVI: Die by the Blade
Chapter XXVII: Execution of the Mind
Chapter XXVIII: Unholy Hatred
Chapter XXIX: Paid in Blood
Chapter XXX: Live for the King

Chapter XXXI: Days of Rage
Chapter XXXII: Bitter Departures
Chapter XXXIII: Death is Just the Beginning
Chapter XXXIV: End of Days
Epilog

Preface

The year is 31 A.D. It is five years into the Judean governorship of Pontius Pilate and the province ever stands on the edge of a knife. The Jewish religious leaders, the Sanhedrin, use their patronage with the Emperor to vent the slightest grievance, and the people themselves burn with a hatred for Rome. Pilate's only military forces are Samaritan auxiliaries, little more than an undisciplined mob that abuse and torment the populace.

The Emperor Tiberius finally relents and assigns to Judea a single cohort of legionaries to restore order. Pilate tasks his old friend, Centurion Artorius, to command the First Italic Cohort. Though sad to leave the Rhine and the Twentieth Legion after sixteen years, Artorius relishes the chance for adventure in the East. With him will be some old friends, Magnus, Praxus, Valens, and Justus Longinus. In the scorching desert they will encounter bandits, a mad king, his evil seductress stepdaughter, numerous messianic prophets, and unreliable allies, all underscored by the beginnings of a zealot rebellion.

Cast of Characters

Soldiers:

Titus Artorius Justus – Centurion Pilus Prior, Commander of the First Volunteer Cohort
Magnus Flavianus – Artorius' best friend and a centurion within the cohort
Gaius Praxus – A centurion within the cohort
Justus Longinus – An old friend of Artorius and Pontius Pilate, he serves as a centurion in the cohort
Lucius Cornelius – An optio from the Praetorian Guard, selected to be one of Artorius' Centurions
Marcus Julius – Another optio who is selected to be a centurion within the cohort
Tiberius Valens – Optio of the First Century
Felix – Tesserarius of the First Century
Tiberius Stoppello – Commander in the Roman Navy
Hansi Flavianus – Magnus' brother, he is a crewman under Commander Stoppello
Abenader – An auxilia centurion, commander of the Jerusalem garrison

Noble Romans:

Tiberius Julius Caesar – Emperor of Rome
Livia Augusta – Mother of Tiberius and widow of Emperor Augustus Caesar
Claudius – Nephew of Tiberius and Grandson of Livia / suffers from lameness and speech impediment
Lucius Aelius Sejanus – Commanding Prefect of the Praetorian Guard, he is Tiberius' most trusted advisor
Aelia Paetina – Wife of Claudius and sister of Sejanus
Pontius Pilate – Procurator of Judea, old friend of Artorius and Justus, as well as a protégé of Sejanus
Claudia Procula – Wife of Pontius Pilate
Diana Procula – Wife of Artorius and sister of Claudia Procula

Jews:

Herod Antipas – Ruler of Galilee, son of Herod the Great
Marcus Julius Agrippa – Also known as Herod Agrippa, he is the nephew of Herod Antipas, who was raised in Rome and is close with Tiberius
Joseph Caiaphas – A Jewish priest and leader of the Sanhedrin
Annas – A member of the Sanhedrin
Jesus bar Abbas – Also known simply as 'Barabbas,' he is a leader amongst the zealots who seek to overthrow Roman rule by force
Jesus of Nazareth – A teacher whose followers think might be the prophesized Messiah, his message is of peace and understanding
Salome – Stepdaughter of Herod Antipas

Roman Military Ranks

Legionary – Every citizen of the plebian class who enlisted in the legions started off as a legionary. Duration of service during the early empire was twenty years. Barring any promotions that would dictate otherwise, this normally consisted of sixteen years in the ranks, with another four either on lighter duties, or as part of the First Cohort. Legionaries served not only as the heart of the legion's fighting force, they were also used for many building and construction projects.

Decanus – Also referred to interchangeably as a *sergeant* in the series, decanus was the first rank of authority that a legionary could be promoted to. Much like a modern-day sergeant, the decanus was the first-line leader of legionaries. He supervised training, as well as enforced personal hygiene and maintenance of equipment. On campaign he was in charge of getting the section's tent erected, along with the fortifications of the camp.

Tesserarius – The first of the *Principal* ranks, the tesserarius primarily oversaw the fatigue and guard duties for the century. He maintained the duty roster and was also keeper of the watch word. On a normal day he could be found supervising work details or checking on the guard posts.

Signifier – He was the treasurer for the century and was in charge of all pay issues, so was much-loved on pay days. On campaign he carried the century's standard (signum) into battle. This was used not only as a rallying point, but also as a visual means of communication. Traditionally he wore a bear's hide over his helmet, draped around the shoulders of his armor. (A signifier wearing a wolf skin is a Hollywood invention). Because of his high level of responsibility, the signifier is third-in-command of the century.

Optio – The term *optio* literally means *'chosen one'* for he was personally chosen by the centurion to serve as his deputy. He would oversee all training within the century, to include that of new recruits. In battle, the optio would either stand behind the formation, keeping troops on line and in formation, or he would stand on the extreme left, able to coordinate with adjacent units.

Aquilifer – This man was a senior signifier bearing the eagle standard of a legion. (*aquila* means eagle). This standard was the most important

possession of the legion – losing it brought shame and humiliation to the entire legion. This position carried great honor, though it is debatable whether or not he wore any headdress or animal skin. It is known that he carried a small, circular shield called a *parma* instead of the legionary scutum.

Centurion – In addition to being its commander, the centurion was known to be the bravest and most tactically sound man within the century. While a stern disciplinarian, and at times harsh, it is borne of a genuine compassion for his men. The centurion knew that only through hard discipline and sound training could his men survive in battle. He was always on the extreme right of the front rank in battle; thereby placing himself in the most precarious position on the line. Mortality rates were high amongst centurions because they would sacrifice their own safety for that of their men.

Centurion Pilus Prior – Commander of a cohort of six centuries, the centurion pilus prior was a man of considerable influence and responsibility. He not only had to be able to command a century on a line of battle, but he had to be able to maneuver his cohort as a single unit. Such men were often given independent commands over small garrisons or on low-level conflicts. A Centurion Pilus Prior could also be tasked with diplomatic duties; such was the respect foreign princes held for them. At this level, a soldier had to focus not just on his abilities as a leader of fighting men, but on his skills at diplomacy and politics.

Centurion Primus Ordo – The elite First Cohort's Centuries were commanded by a centurion primus ordo. Though the number of soldiers under their direct command was fewer, these men were senior in rank to the centurion pilus prior. Men were often selected for these positions based on vast experience and for being the best tacticians in the legion. As such, part of the duty of a centurion primus ordo was acting as a strategic and tactical advisor to the commanding general. Generals such as Caesar, Marius, Tiberius, and Agrippa were successful in part because they had a strong circle of First Cohort Centurions advising them.

Centurion Primus Pilus – Also referred to as the *chief* or *master* centurion, this is the pinnacle of the career of a Roman soldier. Though socially subordinate to the tribunes, the centurion primus pilus possessed more power and influence than any and was, in fact, third-in-command of the entire legion. He was also the commander of the elite First Cohort in battle. Upon retirement, a centurion primus pilus (and possibly centurions of lesser

ranks as well) was elevated into the patrician class of society. He could then stand for public office, and his sons would be eligible for appointments as tribunes. Even while still serving in the ranks, a centurion primus pilus was allowed to wear the narrow purple stripe of a patrician on his toga; such was the respect Roman society held for them.

Tribune – Tribunes came from the patrician class, often serving only six month tours with the legions. Though there were exceptions, many tribunes stayed on the line only long enough to complete their tour of duty before going on to a better assignment. Primarily serving as staff officers for the commanding legate, a tribune would sometimes be given command of auxiliary troops if he proved himself a capable leader. Most were looking for a career in politics, though they knew they had to get as much experience as they could out of their time in the legions. In *Soldier of Rome*, Pontius Pilate is an example of a tribune who elects to stay with the legions for as long as he is able, preferring the life of a soldier to the soft comforts of a political magistrate.

Laticlavian Tribune – Most commonly referred to as the *chief* tribune, he was a young man of the senatorial class starting off his career. Second-in-command of the legion, his responsibility was incredible, though he was often aided by the master centurion, who would act as a mentor. A soldier's performance as chief tribune would determine whether or not he would be fit to command a legion of his own someday. Given the importance of military success to the future senator's career, he would no doubt make every effort to prove himself competent and valiant in battle.

Legate – The legate was a senator who had already spent time in the legions as a laticlavian tribune and had proven himself worthy of command. Of all the possible offices that a nobleman could hold, none was dearer to a Roman than command of her armies.

Legion Infantry Strength (estimated)

Legionaries – 3,780
First Cohort Legionaries – 700
Decanii – 610
Tesserarii – 59
Signifiers – 59
Options – 59
Aquilifer - 1

Centurions – 45 (approximately 80 men to a century)
Centurions Pilus Prior – 9
Centurions Primus Ordo – 4
Centurion Primus Pilus – 1
Tribunes – 6
Chief Tribune – 1
Legate – 1

Prolog: The Passing of Livia

The Imperial Palace, Rome
September, 29 A.D.
***

Livia is dying.

The loud banging on the door to his house had startled Claudius. Though he hated being woken in the middle of the night, he knew that it could only mean something dire for his slumber to be disturbed. As he rubbed his hand over his sleepy eyes, his instincts told him it must have something to do with his grandmother, Livia, the empress dowager. Though viewed as a stuttering imbecile by many, as Livia's only surviving grandson and with his uncle away, he would be the first notified if there were any drastic changes in her health.

His perpetual limp made progress slow, and it was his wife, Aelia, who read the one-line note that was handed to her by an imperial messenger. Without a word, she handed the parchment to her husband. As he read, the words struck Claudius hard. Though he had spent most of his life living in fear of his grandmother, during the last four years they had grown surprisingly close. Her absent son, Emperor Tiberius, now lived in self-imposed isolation on the Isle of Capri. In truth, he had been estranged from his mother years before his departure. Seven years earlier, when Livia had fallen ill, Tiberius put aside his personal animosity and immediately rushed to her side. This time there would be no return of her wayward son.

In some small way, Livia managed to find solace in the company of the lone surviving grandson that Tiberius denied her. Her younger son, Drusus Nero, who was Claudius' father, had passed into the afterlife nearly forty years before, when Claudius was an infant.

"The m…mother of our empire is dying," he said quietly to himself. He had been around the Empress dowager his entire life, yet it was only when Livia's time had grown so late did the two finally understand each other. It had been over dinner with just the two of them. A few goblets of wine brought Claudius' guard down and his grandmother realized her suspicion.

Though his afflictions were real, all his life he'd exaggerated his stutter and limp so that he'd be thought a fool and left alone.

"Go to her," Aelia insisted. "Her son will not come, and it would not be fitting for an empress to die alone."

Claudius nodded and quickly made for the door, almost forgetting to throw a tunic on as a slave hurried after him with some clothes. A pair of praetorian guardsmen awaited him.

"We're here to escort you to the palace, sir," one of the men spoke. He was an optio by the name of Cornelius. Many of the guardsmen viewed Claudius with contempt; Cornelius was one of the few who recognized him for his strength of mind and character. "There's a litter waiting for you."

"M…much obliged," Claudius replied as limped towards the curtained litter, borne by a dozen slaves.

The praetorian optio walked alongside, and he sought to take Claudius' mind off his grandmother's failing health with conversation. "I served under your brother," he stated.

Claudius' brother was the late great general, Germanicus Caesar. "Yes," Claudius acknowledged. In truth, it pained him to talk about his brother, who'd been murdered ten years earlier while serving in the east.

"I was fortunate to have been with the praetorian cohorts that fought beside him at both Idistaviso, as well as the siege of Angrivarii," the optio continued, unaware of the vexation this brought to Claudius, whose face was hidden in the dark behind the partially drawn curtain of the litter. "He led the assault on the stronghold without donning his helmet, that way all the lads could see him. By Mars, he was the bravest of us all!"

"That he was," Claudius said quietly, allowing himself a brief smile at more pleasant memories. Germanicus and Claudius were so completely different in both physical appearance and demeanor that one could scarcely believe they were brothers. Germanicus had been a physical specimen, devoid of any of his younger brother's deficiencies. He was well-spoken, highly intelligent with a natural apt for military prowess. Trained in the art of war under Tiberius, he'd shared the same distinction in that in his years of command he not once lost a major battle.

Oddly enough, Claudius had never envied Germanicus, even when the latter was awarded the first Triumph in a generation for destroying the Germanic Alliance and avenging the disaster of Teutoburger Wald. Germanicus had been one of the few to recognize his brother's true qualities

and, in fact, he was one of the few people Claudius had never stammered around. But now he was gone.

Premature deaths seemed to haunt the imperial household, as Claudius' cousin and the emperor's only son, Drusus, had died of a mysterious illness just a few years later. And Claudius' own son had been just a boy of four when he choked to death. Such thoughts made him fear greatly for his unborn child. He had only just found out that Aelia was pregnant, and unpleasant reckonings plagued him as the litter made its way through the night, despite the well-intentioned banter of Cornelius.

"Here we are, sir," the praetorian said as the slaves bearing the litter came to a sudden halt, jolting Claudius awake. Cornelius extended a hand and helped him from the litter.

Claudius then took a deep breath and sighed as he ascended the steps leading into the imperial palace.

It should have come as no surprise that Livia Augusta was breathing her last. At her extremely advanced age she had seen more than most would in ten lifetimes. Most had forgotten that she had been married to Tiberius Claudius Nero, who despite having served as Quaestor to Julius Caesar, sided with his assassins, the Optimates, in their civil war against Caesar's nephew, Octavian. Livia had been forced to flee with her husband and infant son in wake of Octavian's onslaught against the Optimates. As fugitives, they had journeyed all throughout what was still known as The Roman Republic. Their exploits, now forgotten, would have been worthy of Homer!

After the warring factions reconciled, Livia and her husband returned to Rome. Even after all these years she could still remember the charming young man who had so recently been their enemy and the reason for their exile. What was intriguing was that Octavian was completely enamored with her, despite the fact that she was six months pregnant with her second child. Octavian's own wife, Scribonia, was about to give birth to his daughter, Julia. Through much intrigue, her husband had been compelled by Octavian to divorce her. Their separation was amicable, even friendly. Nero even gave Livia away at her wedding to Octavian, which happened just three days after their son, Drusus, was born. During this time, Livia never imagined that the young man she had married would in just a few years become master of the known world.

Her sons would not come to live with her until the death of their father,

though they were still very young. Octavian would raise them as his own, along with his own daughter. In the years that followed, Livia would watch as her husband rose in prominence; and following the defeat and subsequent death of his rivals, Antony and Cleopatra, he became the most powerful man in Rome. He became known as *Augustus*, or *majestic*. Though he would avoid titles such as 'king', he was now sole ruler of what history would call the Roman Empire. Within the span of just fifteen years, Livia had gone from fugitive to Empress of Rome.

For more than forty years Livia would serve Rome beside her husband, though often out of the public eye. It was she who convinced Augustus to send Germanicus to the Rhine after the disaster in Teutoburger Wald, rather than the volatile and inexperienced Posthumous Agrippa. Livia had secretly shuddered at the thought of what further disasters would have befallen the Empire had Posthumous been left to command the eight legions charged with unleashing Roman vengeance upon the barbarians. And yet despite her lifelong service to Rome, Livia's influence was abruptly halted upon the death of Augustus and the rise of her son, Tiberius. It was a constant source of bitter irony between the two that if not for Livia's substantial influence over Augustus, Tiberius may never have become emperor at all. The truth was, Tiberius had never wanted the imperial mantle. One could argue that his estrangement from his mother was born out of resentment for being saddled with the burden of ultimate power.

The room was dark, with the empress dowager only allowing a small oil lamp on a nearby table. It was the end of an era as Livia's life slowly gave way. The powerful soul that had both inspired and terrified many lay trapped in the frail and dying body of an extremely old woman. Above all else, Livia's spirit was tired.

She fought to hang on for just a little while, for she had one last task to complete. Then she would be ready to face Charon, on the River Styx, who would take her to the afterlife. She fought for breath, her vision starting to fade slightly, as the door opened and her grandson stumbled in.

"G…grandmother," Claudius stuttered, rushing to her side. He took her hand in his and shuddered as it was already cold. He then looked around, puzzled. "W…where is my uncle? Capri is but a couple days from here by ship. He should be here with you!"

"He will not come," Livia reply, sadly shaking her head. "I lost my son

years ago. Now that my time is nearly done, he will be glad to finally be rid of me." A single tear ran down her cheek. Livia had been stoic most of her life, but now she was finally unashamed by the tears that came. "He loathes me now as much as he once loved me."

"I have spoken to some of my friends in the senate," Claudius said, reassuringly. "Caecina Severus and several others have agreed to press for your deification."

"That's very kind of you," the dying empress replied. Her voice was raspy, and Claudius struggled to hear her. "It was kind, but in vain. You forget that Tiberius holds the Tribunician power of veto. Even if the senate votes unanimously in favor of my becoming a goddess, he will simply cast his veto and nullify it. I hear he plans to void my will as well. Livia Augusta will simply pass into the afterlife a mere mortal, no more worthy than a Sicilian whore."

It broke Claudius' heart to hear how his uncle could be so heartless towards his mother. Though Claudius' relationship with his own mother, Antonia, had been tumultuous at best, he still loved her and would never dream of hurting her. Tiberius seemed to go out of his way to injure Livia.

"Uncle has named both Gemellus and Gaius Caligula as his joint heirs," he replied, referring to Tiberius' grandson and great-nephew. "I will speak with them and see if perhaps…"

"Ha!" Livia interrupted before succumbing to a brief coughing fit. "Gemellus is still but a child, and he is not even mentioned in the sibylline prophecies. Gaius Caligula? He'll try and deify himself before he ever thinks about his great-grandmother!"

"What can I do then?" Claudius was beside himself. His grandmother wished more than anything to be with Augustus in the next life, and that could never happen as long as she was but a simple mortal. Despite his own reluctance regarding deification while he lived, soon after his passing, the senate had voted unanimously to make Augustus Caesar a god. Even Tiberius had voiced his support for the measure, yet he would never allow his mother to receive such divine honors.

"You forget the rest of the prophecy," Livia chastised. The prophecy she spoke of was written by the divine Sibyl many years before and kept locked away by order of Augustus. Besides Livia, Claudius was now one of the very few who even knew of its existence. It foretold the rise of both Tiberius and Gaius Caligula, further elaborating that Caligula would not sit on the imperial

throne for long. What had startled Augustus, causing him to lock away the book lest it cause a panic amongst certain members of the imperial house, was that after a brief reign, Caligula would be succeeded by none other than his Uncle Claudius.

"You are the last truly noble member left of the Julio-Claudians," Livia continued. "I always thought you a fool, but I later realized it was all of us who had been fooled. Your destiny will be revealed to you when you least expect it. Don't forget your promise!"

"N…never!" Claudius said with an involuntary twitch of his head. "I promise that Augustus himself will lead you through the gates of paradise." Though he had no delusions of becoming emperor, he was determined that Livia Augusta be given justice in the next life.

His grandmother gave a resigned nod. Her eyes twitched and her breath became shallow and labored. "Stay with me," she said quietly. "Stay with me until the end and place a coin in my mouth for the ferryman." It did not take long.

Claudius, ever the sentimental, wept openly as he watched his grandmother close her eyes and slowly allow her spirit to leave her body. After her last breath gave out, he reached into his toga with a trembling hand and took out a single coin, which he placed in her mouth. He stayed by her side for some time, lamenting that Livia Augusta, Mother of the Empire, had been left utterly alone at the end.

Chapter I: Incursion on the Rhine

Fortress of the Twentieth Legion, Cologne, Germania
March, 31 A.D.
***

“Bastards never learn,” a legionary growled as he huddled under his cloak. Though the frost was off the ground and spring had come once again to the Rhine, the perpetual dampness made the still-present cold cling to the shivering soldiers that lay hidden behind the embankment.

“When one is without food, the risk of death by the sword is still preferable to that of starvation,” Optio Praxus reasoned as he walked behind the line of soldiers.

Spring was a time when trouble would strike the borders of the Empire. The previous fall’s lackluster harvest, combined with an unusually harsh winter had left many in want of food and other resources. It had also led to an increase in raids from across the Rhine. Though the region had been largely pacified since the campaigns of Germanicus Caesar fifteen years earlier, the deprivation of the tribal peoples just outside of the Empire had emboldened many to raid the more fertile lands west of the Rhine.

“I’ll spill their guts and then warm my hands in their blood,” the legionary said as he rubbed his hands together and breathed on them in emphasis. Praxus ignored the man and took an assessment of the farm settlement.

They were just a few miles southeast of the Roman fortress at Cologne. The complex consisted of about half a dozen dwellings with thatched roofs, a kraal for livestock, and a large silo full of grain. With but a handful of farmers residing there with their families, it was an easy target for starving bands of marauders. A few days before, an auxiliary patrol had encountered a band of raiders as they fell upon the farms. So fast and so great were their numbers that the auxiliaries were quickly overrun and forced to withdraw; leaving four dead behind. Fearing the threat of additional Roman forces in the area, the barbarians had panicked and fled.

In response to the raid, Centurion Pilus Prior Dominus, Commander of the Twentieth Legion’s Third Cohort, dispatched one of his centuries to the settlement. A routine patrol would normally consist of an eight-man squad of

legionaries or auxiliaries. However, given the size of the raid and the losses already suffered, a stronger show of force was needed. The Roman governor had been harried with numerous complaints from locals, demanding that Rome make good on its promise of protection. The Third and Fourth Cohorts had been tasked with dealing with the situation, and Dominus knew the magnitude of what was at stake. He wanted the raiders destroyed! His remaining centuries, as well as those of the Fourth Cohort, were dispatched to various settlements and small farming villages in the region.

Soon after receiving their orders, the Second Century, under the command of Centurion Titus Artorius Justus, left the fortress under the cover of night. They had made the final mile of their trek off the main road, keeping to the trees, lest unfriendly eyes spot them. The embankment sloped down from the far side of the farming settlement, where a small stream trickled. It was here that Artorius had his men bivouac for the remainder of the night.

Dawn had come, and while most of the century lay hidden behind the embankment, a single squad walked about the settlement, coming upon the spot where the auxiliaries had been beaten back. Enemy spies would not be alarmed by the presence of a few Roman soldiers; in fact, it was to be expected following a raid from across the Rhine.

“These people never learn,” a legionary reiterated as he gazed at the body of a slain auxiliary. “The locals could have at least had the decency to bury him.”

The man’s corpse had been stripped of armor, weapons, and anything of value. His body was sprawled on its back, head turned to the side, tongue sticking grotesquely between his teeth, eyes open and vacant. Flies had started to gather in the pool of dried blood that saturated his slashed throat. The bodies of the other three had been taken away to be burned; however, this poor fellow had been left to rot in the dense undergrowth along the river. It was only when the corpse started to stink that he’d been found.

“They’ll learn a permanent lesson soon enough,” his decanus replied. The two men immediately snapped to attention as they saw their commanding officer, Centurion Artorius, approaching.

“Pickets are positioned within the tree line, sir,” the decanus said. Artorius nodded in reply. “There’s a narrow ford that makes for a perfect crossing point. Though they got the jump on our auxiliaries, they were spooked enough that they left without taking hardly a thing from the settlement.”

“A scouting mission,” Artorius grumbled.

“Then you think they’ll attack again, sir?” the legionary asked.

“I hope so,” the centurion said as he turned and walked away.

Though their commander’s face was stone serious, the decanus could not help but grin at the remark. Like his cohort commander, Artorius understood the need to teach the raiding barbarians, as well as the indigenous peoples, a lesson in Roman power.

“Then centurion enjoys killing, does he?” the legionary asked once he felt Artorius was out of earshot. The young man had only been in the legions for six months and was barely out of recruit training. Like most, he’d stumbled many times when learning weapons drill and marching; as a result suffering centurion’s wrath, along with that of his training officers. It was something every young man who joined the Roman army went through, but the legionary still caught himself cringing when his centurion approached.

“No,” his squad leader replied, shaking his head. “He hates it. Many days he curses the gods that he is so damned efficient at it.”

Though the legionary only saw his commanding officer perhaps twice a week during battle drills, his reputation was legendary. Despite being the youngest centurion within the Twentieth Legion, Artorius had held his command for six years. Given how quickly he accelerated through the ranks, it surprised many of his men that he was not on the short list for promotion to cohort commander.

Artorius reckoned he would get the chance soon to prove his killing efficiency, as well as testing that of his men. It was their second night at this settlement, and he knew that sooner or later the raiders would strike.

“They have to return,” he told his optio, Gaius Praxus. “That last raid was just a reconnaissance mission. Were it not, I doubt they would have fled in the face of less than a dozen auxiliaries.”

Praxus remained silent. The two senior leaders of the Second Century were feeling the same agitation as their men.

“With such a large supply of grain,” Praxus at last replied, “to say nothing of the handful of cattle and goats, it is too ripe of a target to be ignored. I wonder how Magnus and the Fourth Cohort are faring.”

“His men are still fairly raw and inexperienced,” Artorius noted. “I think a clash with the chance to bloody their weapons will do them some good.”

Centurion Magnus Flavianus was a close friend of both men. He’d come

up through the ranks with Artorius. After the legion's Fourth Cohort met disaster at the Battle of Braduhenna, Magnus had been selected as one of the centurions to lead the reconstituted unit.

"The pickets have been instructed not to engage the enemy directly," the decanus from the patrol squad said as he joined the two senior leaders.

The men assigned this duty had the most difficult task of all, particularly regarding their need to remain hidden in the dense undergrowth along the river, unable to move about freely. Artorius made certain only the best disciplined men were posted here, with the previous pickets being relieved just before the predawn cast its glow through the dense mass of trees.

"Have designated runners been assigned to notify us when the enemy is spotted?" the centurion asked.

"Yes, sir," the decanus confirmed. "They also know they are to provide the blocking force to prevent any raiders from escaping back across the river."

Aside from the pickets he posted to watch for movement on the far side of the river, his men had remained mostly hidden, encamped in the small defilade just on the other side of the road that ran past the settlement. Though the farmers had wished to send their wives and children away, Artorius had forbidden it, as he wanted everything to have the appearance of normality. The Roman governor made it clear to the legions that he wanted the raiders wiped out, not scared away. Artorius' men mostly slept during the day, and their chief enemy proved to be boredom. Two of his men had already felt the lash of his vine stick for fighting amongst themselves. The sooner they had an actual enemy to battle, the better.

As the day wore on, Artorius elected to take another walk through the settlement. As he reasoned that a raid during the daytime was highly unlikely, he allowed his men not on picket duty to remove their armor. He strolled along the dirt path between thatched houses, the ground still damp as the sun did not penetrate through the tall trees until near midday. He'd left his armor with his century, his centurion's belt and his sword hanging from his left hip being the only indicators of his rank. The smell of livestock was strong, and he caught the aroma of the grain silo as he walked past. The Gallic farmers went about their business, most paying him no attention. Though he hoped the presence of Roman soldiers so close would instill feelings of safety, there was an air of overwhelming fear amongst the populace.

"Soldier!" a man said in heavily accented Latin behind Artorius.

The centurion turned to face him.

He was a farmer, though with his more brightly colored tunic and breaches, along with his well-groomed hair and shaven face, he appeared to be a man of greater importance.

“What is it?” Artorius asked.

“I trust your men will be able to protect us,” the man, who Artorius surmised to be the village leader, stated. “During the last raid I recognized some of the men or at least was able to see what tribe they belong to. They are Marsi, same as my people.”

“The Marsi were all but annihilated during the last Germanic War,” the centurion affirmed. “With their lands so close to the border, they would not dare risk a renewed call of Roman vengeance.”

“It has been fifteen years since then,” the village leader observed. “Mallovendus, our chief who attained peace with Rome in exchange for the return of a lost imperial eagle, has since passed on to the halls of our ancestors. His sons have fallen from favor, and those who now lead the Marsi curse those of us who live across the Rhine within the boundaries of who they view, still, as our most hated enemy.”

“The senate granted you lands on the border to prevent conflict with the native Gauls,” Artorius said. “It was also with the intent that having the same tribal peoples directly on both sides of the empire’s border would create a sense of peace and harmony.”

“Your senate’s intent may have been noble,” the man replied, “yet, sadly, it has had the opposite effect. We who seek Roman community and protection have been branded as traitors. They do not just want our food stores, they wish for our deaths.”

“It is they who will pay the price in blood,” Artorius promised. As he left the man and returned to his century, he furrowed his brow in contemplation. Though it affirmed his suspicions that the raiders would certainly return, it troubled him to think more substantial troubles may be brewing.

“The Germanic tribes will always be trouble,” Praxus conjectured when Artorius told him of his concerns. “Why do you think we live in one of the only double-legion fortresses in the whole of the empire?”

“True,” Artorius concurred. “One does not post ten-thousand men, especially legionaries, in a single place without reason. Still, it does wear on me from time-to-time. As our soldier said a while ago, these bastards never learn.”

The remainder of the day passed without incident, and it was well into night when the Marsi raiders returned. The legionary runner sent from the pickets somehow managed to make his way back to the century without causing a commotion. It was only when he reached the embankment that he lost his footing and pitched headlong over the side in a crash of armor and weapons. A few stifled chuckles were heard from amongst the legionaries lying against the slope. Their demeanor immediately changed when they understood why he'd come.

"Sir," the runner said as quietly as he could, once he found Centurion Artorius. "The raiders are coming."

"Any idea on their strength?" Praxus asked as squad leaders started to rouse their sleeping men.

"No," the soldier replied. "It is so bloody dark in the thicket that we can't see a thing. However, we could hear them. They're not making any attempts at being quiet. There must be a lot of them. The sounds of the river would mask the approach of a smaller force. They'll be on the settlement in a matter of minutes."

"Whatever their numbers, we will stop them," Artorius asserted. He then turned to his optio. "Praxus, get our flanking forces set."

"I still don't agree with you only taking two squads with you," the optio remarked as he signaled for decanii to have their men make ready.

Most of the century would fan out in either direction in order to envelope the raiders and prevent them from escaping. With another squad still on picket duty and providing their blocking force, that left Artorius with only sixteen men.

"When I'm a bloodied corpse, you can say you were right," the centurion retorted. "Now move!" It was rare for him to give such a biting rebuke to his second-in-command, who was also a close friend. However, he was facing an enemy of unknown strength, with many of his own men having never seen combat. This was not the time for indecisiveness.

The raiding force proved to be far larger than Artorius had anticipated. At first all he could see was a handful of shadows moving amongst the homesteads, some heading for the kraal, the rest for the grain silo. He took a deep breath and squeezed the upper arm of the soldier lying to his left. This noiseless signal was passed down the line and everyone stood with shields and javelins ready.

As his men quickly stepped off and advanced towards the settlement they heard the sounds of doors being smashed and screams coming from within. There were now numerous shadows rushing about and the flash of torches was glaring in the blackness.

"Impudent bastards," Artorius growled. He had hoped to get as close as possible to the enemy before making his presence known, but now he had no choice but to distract the raiders, lest they wipe out the settlement. *"Advance!"*

Though his shouted order would alert his men moving to flank the enemy that the situation now called for speed, it also let the enemy know he was coming. Shouts in a foreign tongue echoed in the night, and it was only when those bearing torches came into view that the light cast on the field let Artorius know just how badly he was outnumbered. There was nothing for it. As a horde of what he figured were at least a hundred men bore down on them, he quickened his step and shouted his next order. *"Javelins…throw!"*

His men unleashed their heavy javelins, which tore into the bodies of the oncoming raiders. Some managed to block the incoming missiles, though their shields were rendered useless as a result. Others fell with their guts ran through, tumbling to the ground in overwhelming agony. There was no time for further orders and without waiting for the centurion's command, every legionary quickly drew his gladius.

"Orb formation!" Artorius shouted.

With only sixteen men, he knew he had no chance of holding a battle line against the mass of barbarians whose clubs and spears were already slamming into the wall of legionary shields. His men quickly formed a circle, keeping their shields together as they suddenly found themselves in a fight for their lives. In the flashes of torchlight, he could see the looks of glee on the faces of the barbarians as they hoped to add nearly a score of legionaries, not mention a centurion, to their trophies of plunder.

One man swung a club which banged repeatedly off Artorius' shield. The barbarian's one eye was clouded and white, the other red as he howled in a berserker rage. The centurion tilted his shield and hammered the raider in the gut with the bottom edge, causing him to double over. Before he could finish the man, a spear caught him in the cheek guard of his helmet, knocking him back. Artorius regained his footing and brought his shield up as the spearman thrust his weapon at his face once more. With only brief glimmers of torchlight it was difficult for him to see anything. He thrust his gladius

randomly in the direction that the enemy blows were coming from. He heard a shriek as the point of his sword impacted what he guessed was the man's forearm.

As his men battled against the onslaught, panicked cries echoed from amongst the barbarian warriors. They soon fled in all directions as legionaries from Artorius' century bore down on their flanks. They had elected not to employ their javelins, lest they risk hitting their own men. The darkness worked to their advantage, as the raiders were unaware that they had the Romans outnumbered.

Artorius and his men breathed a collective sigh of relief as the enemy fled towards the river. More than a dozen lay dead and another six had been captured. As he scanned the scene, his heart leapt into his throat. Lying on the ground in a pool of blood was one of his legionaries. The man had been stabbed in the throat; one of the few places their armor could not protect them.

"Damn it all," the centurion swore under his breath. A pair of legionaries were kneeling next to the dead man. Artorius knelt down to get a look at the soldier's face. He recognized him as one of the newest recruits who had just completed training the month prior. Artorius looked down and shook his head. Regardless of whether it was a new recruit or veteran soldier he had known for years, he always took the loss of one of his men hard.

"At least he got one of the bastards before they took him," one of the legionaries said, picking up the dead man's gladius which was soaked in blood.

"Send a runner back to the fort," Artorius ordered a nearby decanus. "Inform Centurion Dominus of the raid."

"Yes, sir."

Artorius then placed a hand briefly on the slain legionary's shoulder before rising. The man's companions were already making a litter, using fallen branches, as well as his cloak, to carry the body back to the fortress, where he would be given proper honors by his fellow legionaries.

"Artorius!"

The centurion looked over to see it was Praxus, shouting for him. His old friend was waving to him from over at one of the farm houses. "You'd better take a look at this."

Artorius let out a sigh and feared the worst as he followed Praxus into the house. Inside, a farmer, his wife, and teenage son lay dead. Farm tools lay

next to the bodies, showing that they had fought in vain to defend their home. The cry of a baby forewarned Artorius. Next to the bed in the back room was a crib. Praxus held the torch over, letting the light cast its glow on the sobbing infant.

"Can't be more than a week old," the optio observed. "I'll have the lads check the other houses, see if there are any relations living in the settlement that can care for it." Praxus handed his torch to a legionary and picked the child up, consoling it as best he could. Artorius was no good with children and was glad his optio took the initiative with the now-orphaned baby.

The centurion walked outside to see the half dozen prisoners on their knees as the farmers slowly emerged from their homes. One gave a loud cry as he ran over to where Praxus emerged, holding the now quiet child. He looked at the optio, who quietly shook his head. The farmer's eyes filled with tears as he rushed into the house, quickly emitting a howl of sorrow as his wife took the baby from Praxus. The other families gathered around, holding each other close in the eerie scene that played out under the torchlight.

"Only one house was breached, sir," Sergeant Felix reported. Artorius nodded in reply. He looked over as the sobbing farmer emerged from the house and noted that the man now carried a short scythe in his hand.

"Bastards killed my sister!" he cried as his wife embraced him while still carrying the infant. The man then looked over at Artorius accusingly. "The legions were supposed to protect us from this!"

The centurion did not reply, though he kept his gaze fixed on the man.

The enraged farmer then pushed his wife aside and with his eyes locked on Artorius he started to walk very quickly towards where the centurion stood behind the prisoners, who were on their knees with their hands bound behind their backs. A legionary made to step between them, but was stayed by Artorius' hand.

"Let him have this," he said quietly. He then nodded to the farmer, whose red face twisted into a snarl of pure hatred.

The man stood over one of the prisoners, whose hands were bound behind his back. The raider defiantly spat on his feet, uttering dark words in a tongue the centurion could not understand. With a scream of both sorrow and rage the farmer swung his scythe in a hard swing which severed the prisoner's arm above the elbow. The raider's scream pierced through the night as his severed limb hung off his side, the twitching hand still tied to its mate. Gouts of blood spurted forth as the farmer went into a frenzy, slashing away at the stricken

man. His scythe tore into the raider's torso, smashed his face as the blade cleaved through the bone, and finally, with a series of blows he severed the man's head.

As the mutilated body of the raider lay thrashing in a growing pool of blood and bodily fluids, the farmer stood trembling with tears streaming down his face. Artorius signaled to a pair of legionaries, who quickly took the scythe from him and guided the man away. He then looked back at the corpses of their slain enemies.

"Hang the bodies from trees on the far side of the river," he ordered. "Let them serve as a warning to those who would threaten the peace of Rome."

While two dozen men carried out the macabre task, the rest of the century began the task of collecting their equipment and making ready for the march back to Cologne. Artorius always donned the lorica segmentata plate armor worn by legionaries, as opposed to the more traditional hamata chain or squamata scale worn by his fellow centurions, only the transverse crest on his helmet called attention to his rank. His belt was also devoid of the hanging leather strips covered in small metal discs that his men wore. As he dug through his leather pack, he pulled out a harness bearing all of his phalerae, the embossed decorations that denoted his campaign medals and other awards. Though campaign decorations were awarded to all soldiers who fought, only centurions and, in some cases, options were allowed to wear them over their armor. Artorius found them to be an unnecessary encumbrance, never wearing them in battle. As it was, he felt he should look the part of a proper centurion for the march back to the fortress. His superiors harried him enough as it was for wearing a common ranker's armor, despite Artorius' assertion that it provided better protection.

"Soldier!" the voice of the village chief alerted him as he cinched up the straps on his phalerae harness. The man's face was one of sadness, but also of understanding.

"We did what we could," Artorius said as he put on his helmet. "I am sorry for the loss your people suffered."

"They are very bitter," the chief acknowledged. "They say that Rome has failed to protect us."

"Did they not see the body of my slain legionary?" Artorius snapped. "He gave his life protecting them! And rest assured, Rome does not allow such incursions to remain unpunished."

Chapter II: Unrest in the East

Governor's Palace, Caesarea, Judea
***

Pontius Pilate quickly read over the letter he had dictated to his freedman clerk before signing his name to it. He then handed it back to the man, who rolled it up before dripping candle wax onto the overlap, which Pilate then pressed the seal on his ring into. He then took the scroll and handed it to a waiting imperial messenger, who saluted and abruptly left. Pilate then dismissed the clerk and sat behind his desk. All the while, the commander of the Jerusalem garrison, an auxilia centurion named Abenader, stood silent.

Though Jerusalem was the capital of the province, like previous procurators, Pontius Pilate had elected to rule from the coastal city of Caesarea. In the five years of his governorship, he had scarcely been able to so much as set foot in Jerusalem without offending the entire populace. Images of the Emperor Tiberius, which his troops had paraded through the streets, had caused gross offence, as it violated the Jewish customs regarding idolatry. What surprised Pilate was that the emperor had sided with the Jews in the matter, rather than his appointed procurator, ordering him not to parade his images through the cities again. At least in Caesarea there was a sense of what Pilate viewed as civilization. As a major costal trading port, it was full of persons from the whole of the Empire, with a population of more Alexandrian Greeks than Jews.

As Pilate mostly visited the Judean capitol only during the Passover week in spring, he had left the day-to-day running of the city to the Jewish city council, the Roman-appointed high priest, as well as the auxiliary garrison. He had summoned his garrison commander in part to reprimand him for lapses of discipline within his men, but also to seek his input on the message he had just sent to Sejanus.

"You disapprove of my requesting legionary support," Pilate observed after allowing for an awkward silence.

"If I may be blunt, sir," the auxilia centurion began, "my men are able to control the streets of Jerusalem. I fail to see why we must be usurped by the legions."

“Your men can scarcely police themselves,” Pilate replied coldly. “They are undisciplined, cannot follow simple instructions, and have damn near provoked rebellion on numerous occasions.”

“The Jews are a hard people to control,” Abenader persisted. “Sometimes unorthodox methods are necessary.”

“I’m not arguing that,” Pilate said. “However, they disobeyed a direct order to not use lethal force against an unruly crowd, only to fall upon them with their swords. Were they threatened or if the people had turned exceedingly violent, I would not have faulted them for their actions. As it was, there was no escalation of force at all; they simply drew their gladii and started killing! It was also not the first time such gross lapses in discipline have occurred and it is inexcusable.”

Though he would not say so openly, Pilate sympathized with Abenader. He had served for over twenty-five years and was by no means incompetent as an officer. However, the procurator also knew the quality of men that the auxilia centurion had to deal with. Were they citizens, they would have been rejected for service in the legions. Discipline was practically nonexistent, and while Abenader may have been a capable officer, his subordinate leaders were just as unruly as their men. The problem was that there was little he could do in terms of discipline. Even if he were to remove one from his leadership position, there were few viable candidates to replace him. No Jew would consent to serve in the ranks of the Roman army in any capacity. Conversely, the Samaritans, with whom the Jews shared a mutual antipathy, were all too eager to enlist.

“The stability of this province is constantly on the edge of a knife,” Pilate continued. “The Jews, Samaritans, and other races of this region are in a constant state of tension.”

“Tensions could be eased if the emperor would simply crack down on Jewish monotheism,” Abenader lamented. Though a Roman citizen, he was ethnically a Samaritan and carried the same inborn bias and racism. “Seventy-million in the empire from every nation, ethnicity, and culture in the known world, and yet this one insignificant sect is alone given an exemption when it comes to paying homage to the Roman pantheon.”

“You forget, Tiberius is a close personal friend of the Jewish king’s nephew, Herod Agrippa,” Pilate explained. “Agrippa was raised in the imperial household and was like a brother to the emperor’s son, Drusus Caesar. Even with Drusus gone, Tiberius still views Agrippa like a son. It

would not surprise me if he is eventually installed as a client king of the entire province."

"And because of Agrippa, Tiberius feels compelled to allow the Jews to openly worship their lone deity," the centurion observed. "What should have been viewed as a show of clemency has instead given rise to sedition and arrogance amongst the Jews."

"I'm not arguing the volatility of the Jewish people," Pilate said. "However, neither you nor I can convince the emperor to alter his policy towards them. It is already too late. Most peoples within the empire are able to contentedly worship their own gods and pay respect to those of Rome simultaneously. Not the Jews. They are truly monotheistic, and if Tiberius were to make any attempt at forcing the statues of our gods upon them now, there would be open rebellion. Let us not forget that he would not even allow me to carry his own image through the streets, as it offended the people."

"They should be exterminated like we did to Carthage," Abenader growled.

Pilate's face twitched at the thought. Carthage was Rome's arch nemesis for hundreds of years before its final destruction. That had been two-hundred years prior, when the Roman Republic was still going through its expansion and quest for supremacy in the Mediterranean.

"Hardly a fitting comparison," he retorted, "comparing a tiny province of zealous theocrats to the most powerful nation Rome ever faced. Whatever your personal feelings are towards the Jews, we have an obligation to extend the rule of Rome, enforcing justice through stern temperance. Your auxiliaries are the first line of that enforcement within the most populous city of the entire region, and in the concept of order and justice they have failed. They need the influence of professional soldiers who will lead by their example. It is time Judea was placed under the discipline of the legions."

Pilate sat and brooded after he dismissed Abenader. Despite all the research and preparations he'd made before even coming to Judea, the province had proven far more difficult to govern than he'd imagined. A previous governor named Rufus, who'd held the posting a decade prior to Pilate, had warned him that he'd be understaffed, underfunded, and that the quality of the troops under his command would be deplorable even under ideal conditions. In all of these Rufus had proven correct. The number of clerks, administrators, and other officials needed to effectively run the province was substantially greater than the allotment given to him to fund

these positions. Pilate's own salary was quite substantial, perhaps as a means of pacifying him. And while he'd hoped to fill his coffers even further during his tenure, he had wisely elected to use some of his own funds to shore up some of his critical staffing shortages. He had also taken on numerous tasks himself that would normally be delegated to subordinates. As such, the stress of governance took its toll on him far more than if he'd been given one of the far larger provinces such as Gaul or Hispania. However, given that he was an equite, there were very few postings he could take; the large, well-funded provisional governorships reserved for those of the senatorial class.

What had been particularly maddening was the lack of staff personnel who had experience within Judea. It was impossible for Pilate to learn all there was to know about the people he was to govern within the few months between when he was notified of his assignment until he arrived to relieve his predecessor, Valerius Gratus. Though Pilate had spent time in Syria with the Twelfth Legion, he had never been to neighboring Judea and, in fact, had never dealt with the Jews at all during his previous time in the east. Most of the experienced bureaucrats had departed with Gratus, leaving his successor with an untrained staff ignorant of the customs and intricacies of the Jews.

During his eleven-year prefecture, Gratus had kept the Jewish opposition disorganized by making frequent changes as to who held the high priesthood. It was an unusual cultural crossover, with the most influential man within the Judaic hierarchy appointed by the pagan Roman magistrate. As such, those within the Sanhedrin were forced to placate both their people as well as their hated Roman overlords if they wished to advance politically. No less than five men had held the posting during Gratus' tenure; the last, a man named Joseph Caiaphas, being the only one to last more than a year. Pilate's rapport with Caiaphas was tenuous at best. Over the past five years the two had quarreled more often than not, yet Pilate did not dare replace him, as any viable candidates within the Sanhedrin were even more volatile than Caiaphas. Pilate made a mental note to himself that the next time the two met, he needed to make certain his Jewish high priest was reminded as to who really controlled the province.



The flames of the funeral pyre bit into the damp wood, causing billowing clouds of black smoke. Artorius had made certain that proper respects were

made for his fallen soldier, though he lamented that given the extremely short tenure the young man had served in the ranks, most would scarcely remember his name. The body was slowly being fully consumed by the now roaring flames, the stench of burning flesh nearly causing Artorius to retch. Those who spoke of the nobility of a valiant man's funeral pyre had never dealt with the pungent smell of a burning corpse. The oratory had been conducted prior to the burning, with Artorius calling the slain legionary's name three times, in a tradition that went back further than any could recall. Satisfied that all had been done to honor the fallen, he turned to face his men, who were stoically standing in a large column, decanii on their right, the signifier in front, and Optio Praxus in the back.

"Century!" he shouted. *"Dismissed!"* As he removed his helmet and ran his fingers through his thick, black hair, he saw a young legionary approaching him. Though he did not know the soldier's name, he knew he was from Dominus' century, and surmised that he was acting as the cohort commander's aide that week.

"Sir," the legionary said with a sharp salute. "Centurion Dominus sends for you."

Artorius did not bother returning to the barracks to remove his armor, instead making his way a few buildings over to where the Third Cohort's First Century was billeted. Daily operations were often conducted by the optio and principal officers, as the centurion was also in command of the entire cohort. Artorius removed his helmet and stepped into the outer office, the signifier, who was doing administrative tasks at his desk, standing as he came in.

"Sir," the man said with a nod. There was little he could say.

All knew about the Second Century's skirmish with the raiders, and the smell of smoke from the funeral pyre clung to the centurion. Artorius returned the nod, gave a single knock on the door to Dominus' office and let himself in.

Centurion Pilus Prior Dominus was an able enough cohort commander, even though he did not hold the same level of respect that his legendary predecessor, Marcus Vitruvius had. Vitruvius, who had long been Artorius' mentor, was killed at the Battle of Braduhenna three years prior while attempting to break through the lines of the enemy force that had them surrounded. Before his death, he'd never been so much as scratched in battle.

“Artorius,” he said as his fellow centurion closed the door behind him. “I am sorry for your loss, but know that the information you gathered from the raid will prove invaluable.”

“I agree,” Artorius replied. “I’ve had the prisoners taken to the stockade to await interrogation. I expect the torture experts will verify what we already suspect.”

“Yes,” Dominus said while looking over a scroll he held. He then looked up once more at his centurion. “Well, I have no doubt that the legate will order a punitive expedition across the Rhine. Pity that you will not be with us.” Before Artorius could question him further, Dominus handed him the scroll that bore the imperial seal.

Chapter III: The Emperor’s Hand

The Imperial Estates of Villa Jovis, Isle of Capri
***

Storms of winter’s death throes always wrecked havoc on the Mediterranean. Tiberius watched as the Roman warship heaved in the deep rolling waves, a brave group of men dropping into a small rowboat to make their way to the Emperor’s private dock. Though there were public docks at the busy port, correspondence from Sejanus came via this small alcove that few knew existed.

For even in self-imposed exile on the Isle of Capri, from these treacherous waters Tiberius controlled the vastness that was the Roman Empire. One such boat had been smashed to pieces in the surf the week before, though as a stroke of good fortune a couple of the bodies had washed ashore, one of which still had the satchel bearing the imperial correspondence. The men of this particular venture had better luck. Their boat slammed hard into the dock but stayed afloat. Men were waiting on the pier, ready to tie off the ropes that would secure the boat in place. Satisfied that there would be no further mishaps, the emperor retired to his study to await the messengers.

Tiberius Julius Caesar was now seventy-two years of age and had ruled the Roman Empire for seventeen of those. For him it was a hateful existence. Never had he desired to take the reins of ultimate power once Augustus passed into eternity. In truth, he would have rather met his fate in battle years ago in places he conquered like Pannonia or Dalmatia. He despised politics and felt that the only true calling for a Roman noble was leading her armies into battle. He detested those pompous fools in the senate who took it upon themselves to decide the fate of citizens in far off regions such as Syria and Judea, when they themselves had never left the soft comforts of their own estates. It was regarding Judea that the man who he referred to as ‘the partner in my labors’ wished to address.

“Messages from the Consul Lucius Aelius Sejanus to his Imperial Highness, Tiberius Julius Caesar,” the messenger stated with a sharp salute which the emperor returned.

A clerk then took the satchel of scrolls and started to hand them to Tiberius, who silently read through each in turn.

The messenger was a young man in his early twenties who was visiting Capri for the first time. He appeared to be extremely nervous in the presence of the master of Rome. Despite his advanced age, the emperor still emulated power. Yet there was an ever-growing paradox regarding the man who had once been one of Rome's greatest generals.

Doubtless the messenger had been listening to all the gossips for years, about how Tiberius was growing ever more tyrannical and living in despondency with a fetish for young boys. Such abominable stories were pure fabrication, as he would soon see. The residents of the isle consisted of praetorian guardsmen, philosophers, scholars, freedmen clerks, and slaves. A number of prostitutes also resided there, though these were predominantly for the entertainment of the praetorians. The emperor had his personal favorites that he liked to indulge in on occasion. However, most of his days were spent with men of learning who were in some cases older than he. Though he appreciated their company, there was no affection, no friendship there. Despite being surrounded by hundreds on a daily basis, Emperor Tiberius Caesar was the loneliest man in the empire.

"Pontius Pilate is once again asking for a legion," the emperor observed out loud.

The freedman clerk snorted in reply. "He's been asking for legionaries since he took over Judea."

"Yes, but this time he seems to have finally convinced Sejanus to throw his support behind the notion." Tiberius handed the scroll to the clerk. It read:

To the Emperor Tiberius Julius Caesar Augustus, greetings,

While I know this subject has been broached on numerous occasions regarding the repeated requests by our Judean Procurator, Pontius Pilate, regarding the supplementation of his garrison with legionaries, it is after much contemplation that I think we should partially cede to his request. I must be candid and state that despite your eminence's affections for the Judean prince, Herod Agrippa, the land of the Jews is, and always will be, one of extreme volatility. While I mean no disrespect towards the Syrian Legate, Lamia; his assertion that he can put down any potential troubles with

his eastern legions leaves open the possibility that the entire Judean province could be overrun by insurrectionists before his forces have time to mobilize. Doubtless the inexhaustible number of Jewish zealots are aware of this. Were they ever able to mass their numbers, they could overrun Jerusalem as well as our capital at Caesarea in the hopes of suing for peace soon after. They must never be given the opportunity to entertain such thoughts.

The other issue at hand is the very troops Pilate has at his disposal. As the Judeans are an extremely arrogant people who, as a whole, would never stoop to working for the Roman government, the few who have volunteered are from the lowest dregs of society; hate-filled men whose loyalty is measured in coin and drink. He has, therefore, had to rely heavily on Samaritan auxiliaries. As you are well aware, the animosity between Jew and Samaritan goes back millennia. The only people the Judeans hate more than us are the Samaritans, and the feeling is reciprocated. The auxiliaries are unorganized, undisciplined, and have ruled through brutality and terror.

Their officers are little better and have, on more than one occasion, outright ignored Pilate's orders. Their commander, an auxilia Centurion named Abenader, means well enough, but he is largely ineffective at keeping his subordinates in line. Case in point, the protests that began after Pilate used temple funds for the new aqueduct. Pilate specifically ordered his men to use clubs only to disperse the crowd. As noted in the complaint sent from the Sanhedrin, the auxiliaries used their swords to scatter the crowd, killing dozens. Yet with the shortage of suitable men to serve as officers, Pilate could do little but verbally chastise those responsible. I am confident that had his men been legionaries they could have handled the mob efficiently and without needless bloodshed.

Therefore, in the interest of maintaining good order in the province, as well as empowering the procurator to better enforce our will, I recommend we grant Pilate a legion. I understand this is technically illegal in that as an equite Pilate is ineligible to command a legion; therefore, I suggest we place the legion under Legate Lamia and operationally attach it to Judea under Pilate. This should clear up any legal ramifications.

Your humble colleague,

Lucius Aelius Sejanus

It was no small irony that as an equite himself, Sejanus' appointment as joint consul with Tiberius was also technically illegal. He was of the lesser nobility, commander of the praetorian guard, and now sharing in power with the emperor himself. Had the senate showed any stomach and stood up to Tiberius when he made the appointment, he would have withdrawn it. As it was, the senate was mostly spineless old men who were more afraid of gaining the emperor's displeasure than they were of enforcing Roman law. There were exceptions; an up and coming legate named Vitellius being one. Tiberius tried to make certain that those whose appointments to governorships he approved were not only capable of independent rule, but also courageous enough to let the emperor know when they felt he was wrong. Though Vitellius had not gone as far as to oppose Sejanus' appointment as consul; doubtless he would be outraged to have an equite in command of a legion.

"Mmm, so what will you tell Sejanus?" The voice of Gaius Caligula startled the emperor.

"I told you never to read over my shoulder like that!" Tiberius snapped, causing Caligula to bow low.

"Apologies, uncle," he replied. "Merely concerned over the welfare of our dear eastern provinces."

"Yes," Tiberius snorted. "I forgot you spent a lot of time there in your youth."

"Oh yes," his great-nephew replied with a grin. "Delicious place, the east; I was practically raised there. Such a fitting jewel in the crown of our beloved empire."

Tiberius was at times uncertain as to why he kept Gaius Caligula so close to him on Capri. Personally, he found him to be utterly repulsive; nothing at all like his revered father, the late Germanicus Caesar. His two older brothers had been convicted of plotting against the emperor, as was their mother, Agrippina. Along with Gaius, only his sisters, Julia Drusilla and Julia Livilla, remained unscathed by the family scandals. All three were kept on Capri, and in many circles viewed as little more than prisoners of the emperor.

That Tiberius may be planning on grooming Caligula as a potential heir scarcely entered anyone's minds. Tiberius was, after all, only Rome's second emperor, and there was little precedent when it came to naming a successor. If the empire had, in fact, evolved into a type of hereditary monarchy, then the only viable candidates were Tiberius' twelve-year old grandson,

Gemellus, and Gaius Caligula. There were factions who pressed for the recognizing of Tiberius' nephew, Claudius, as a potential heir. Though the brother of Germanicus, the fact that he was a stuttering invalid made Tiberius dismiss him completely.

"So tell me, uncle," Caligula persisted, "What will you tell Sejanus about lovely Judea?"

"I'll not place a legion under the command of an equite," Tiberius replied.

"Well, that's odd, given that you made one consul!" Caligula retorted.

The emperor gritted his teeth but refrained from lashing out at the young man. It was clear that Caligula was attempting to get a reaction from Tiberius, and he was not about to take the bait. As much as it grated on him, he knew the vile young man was correct. That he would make Sejanus consul and yet deny Pontius Pilate authority over a single legion was, indeed, hypocritical.

"I do not have a spare legion just lying around, doing nothing," Tiberius remarked, keeping his composure despite Caligula's impudence. "Still, I think we can reach a compromise that will preserve the balance between the senate and equites, while giving Sejanus and Pilate the support they requested."

Chapter IV: Seasons End

***

Spring was always a time of reflection for Artorius, especially with the news he'd just received from Dominus. This winter marked sixteen years since he ascended into the ranks. On days when he thought back on the time spent in the legions, his mind sometimes turned to friends from his youth; those who had not gone off to war on the frontier. Many days he pitied their dull and sedentary lives. He had seen more in his first year in the Twentieth Legion than all of them would ever see in their combined existence. His profession gave him stability, a guaranteed source of income, as well as security. Many who he grew up with were barely surviving. Others fared better, but were in vocations that left them stale and devoid of life. Yet for all that the legions had given him, it came at a terrible price.

The first time he had drawn his sword in anger, Artorius had learned the painful lesson that war was nothing like the historians and philosophers described. Every time he took the life of another human being, it felt as if a part of him died with them. His very soul would break whenever a friend and fellow legionary fell. It was no small wonder that men who spent too much time on the battle lines often became shells of what they once were, expressions dull and lifeless. Such was the toll for those who kept the empire's borders safe. The coming summer would mark three years since the Battle of Braduhenna; by far the most savage clash he ever engaged in. Though the battle had been won, nearly half his men had either perished or were so badly injured that they would never fight again. Those two days still haunted him, and on nights where he woke up trembling in a cold sweat, his wife, Diana, would do her best to console him. He had spent the last three years trying to rebuild his century into some semblance of the fighting force they had once been.

The skirmish in the outlying village had given his newest recruits a taste of battle and they had performed admirably enough. His plan had been rather brazen and it left him temporarily exposed. However, it did allow Praxus to envelope the raiders with the rest of the century.

As he brooded over the events from the previous evening, he had hoped to take part in the pending expedition that the commanding legates of both legions were planning. It would by no means be a full-scale invasion; that

would require approval of both the emperor and Senate. Along the empire's ever-hostile borders, it was not uncommon for preemptive raids and punitive expeditions to cross beyond the frontier and teach a brutal lesson to Rome's many enemies.

The letter he had just received looked to change everything. He looked down at the scroll clutched in his hand before turning his gaze towards the setting sun. For Centurion Artorius, he would be heading east, just not across the Rhine into Germania.

"Thought I'd find you here," Magnus mused as he walked up behind him.

Artorius turned to face his Nordic friend and fellow centurion. The two men had come up through the ranks and been close friends ever since their days of recruit training. Artorius' promotions had been extraordinarily rapid, and he'd received command of the century while his friend was still a decanus.

"Pity we almost never see each other anymore," Artorius replied.

Magnus had been awarded the Civic Crown for extreme valor at Braduhenna and had subsequently been promoted to the centurionate. This had required him leaving the Third Cohort and transferring to the Fourth, which was still being rebuilt after its members had panicked and committed mass suicide in a strange turn of events that none of them would ever fully understand.

"I heard the master centurion say the other day that you've taken a century's worth of raw recruits and made them into one of the best units within the entire legion."

"Then Macro exaggerates," Magnus replied with a chuckle. He then tossed his friend a clay wine jug. "Here, I thought you could use some refreshment. I stopped by your house and the Lady Diana told me you had gone off for some *thinking*. I know that anytime you go off into deep thoughts, it usually means you need a drink."

Artorius took a long pull off the wine jug and then handed it back to Magnus, who started to drink as well.

"I'm leaving Germania," Artorius replied, causing Magnus to spew wine everywhere.

"Come again?" the Norseman asked, his eyes wide.

Artorius handed him the scroll that had arrived along with the orders from Rome. It bore the seal of Pontius Pilate, Procurator of Judea.

Magnus began to read, vocally stating the last line; *it is time to redeem*

your promise. “What is Pilate talking about?” he asked after he finished reading.

“A long time ago, I made a promise to him,” Artorius explained. “I swore that I would serve under him anytime he needed me. He needs me now, Magnus.”

“But I thought Judea was only authorized an auxilia garrison.”

“Not anymore,” Artorius replied, shaking his head and handing him the scroll from Rome. “Though the emperor will not authorize Pilate an entire legion, he is allowing him to raise a single cohort of volunteers from throughout the empire.”

“Well, if he’s looking at you to lead this mob…” Magnus began as Artorius’ face broke into a broad grin.

“That means I may finally see Centurion Pilus Prior, regardless of my enemies’ best intentions.” Though not one for political intrigue, Artorius had a number of adversaries in Rome, even a few in the senate. Such had made any promotions beyond centurion seem unlikely at best. That he was now selected for cohort commander would be intolerable to those who had done their best to hinder his career.

“Then we should be drinking in celebration!” the Norseman said with a boisterous laugh. He gave his friend a smack on the shoulder before taking a long pull off the jug.

“I’ll miss you, old friend,” Artorius replied.

“Miss me nothing,” Magnus retorted. “Wherever you go I shall follow!”

“If only it were that simple,” Artorius observed. “Were we both still legionaries, it would not be an issue. Even if Macro does exaggerate, and I for one do not think he does, then we will be hard-pressed to convince him to let go of one of his best centurions, especially with an expedition across the Rhine pending.”

Magnus let out a loud belch and handed the jug back to his friend. “Piss on that,” he retorted. “This posting comes from Pilate via Sejanus, and therefore the emperor himself. I’m certain you can get whomever you wish. Besides, they’re not going to send all of both legions to slap around the Marsi. I’m sure I can be spared. After all, none of us are indispensable.”

“That may be,” Artorius concurred. “However, I will not go around Macro’s back; I have too much personal loyalty to him.” Platorius Macro had

taken command of the Second Century before Artorius and Magnus and first enlisted. His tenure had been an exceptionally long ten years with Artorius serving as his optio for the final two.

"Apologies," Magnus replied. "I did not mean any disrespect towards our master centurion. And I would never insinuate going behind him, I simply thought perhaps he would be willing to allow me to accompany you, given who the orders are coming from."

"Well, the answer is 'no' if we don't ask."



A rather burly praetorian greeted Gaius Caligula as he left the bathhouse near Villa Jovis. He'd had a most invigorating rubdown from a North African slave and was debating how to further amuse himself this day. He knew this particular guardsman who now approached him or at least knew enough about him to recognize his unbridled ambition. Such could prove useful to the young man who had great ambitions of his own.

"Naevius Suetorius Macro, is it?" Caligula asked as he casually tossed the fold of his toga over his shoulder.

"Acting deputy prefect of the praetorian guard," the big man asserted.

"Ah, still only *acting* deputy prefect," Caligula chided as he walked down the stone steps and onto the path that led towards the town.

"As long as Pontius Pilate still holds the actual billet, yes," Naevius conceded.

"What a shame that is," Caligula persisted, "you do all the work, and he gets to keep the title for himself."

"Quite," Naevius grunted. "Still, I did not come to talk to you about my posting or lack thereof."

"Ah, but I think you did," Caligula stated as he quickly turned and faced the man. "You did not come to exchange pleasantries nor did you come to bathe, though you could most certainly use it!"

Naevius snorted at the insult, but gave a curt nod of acknowledgment. As Sejanus' deputy, he found himself constantly on the move between Capri and Rome. The praetorian prefect rarely came to Capri anymore, perhaps afraid that if he left the city his enemies might use the opportunity to move against him. What he did not know was that Naevius was no mere lackey who was content in his current posting.

“I think you and I could find each other useful,” the praetorian replied.

“Hmm,” Caligula thought for a moment, “Not sure what use I could possibly have for an *acting* deputy prefect.” He waved a hand dismissively and started to walk away when the praetorian grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him around.

“Damn it, man!” Naevius growled. “Your position here is not as secure as you think. Don’t be a fool. You need all the friends you can get!”

“Unhand me, sir!” Caligula snapped indignantly, pulling his arm away, eyes growing wide. “I should have you arrested and flogged for this insult!”

“You mean like how I arrested and flogged your brothers?” Naevius replied, his demeanor suddenly cool.

Gaius looked off to the side briefly and cocked his head slightly. “You say we could find each other useful,” he noted. Though a young man of highly questionable morals and tastes, one could never accuse Gaius Caligula of being naïve. “How?”

“We both want what is rightfully ours,” Naevius answered. “We should talk more in private.”

“Yes,” Caligula said, lost in thought. His tone immediately changed, almost as if it was he who had approached Naevius in the first place. “If you are half as ambitious as I am clever, then we may find each other useful after all.” He then started to walk away once more. “By the way, I saw your wife accompanying you from the main docks. Lovely creature.”

“She is at your disposal.” The praetorian’s remark caught Caligula off guard, and he stopped in his tracks. His eyes were wide once more as he turned and faced Naevius, who was grinning crassly.

“My, but you *are* ambitious!” Caligula noted. “I think we shall get on famously. Send her to me tonight, and tomorrow we’ll talk.”

Naevius bowed in reply before turning and walking away.



“You know this should have happened three years ago,” Magnus said. “After Braduhenna they needed a number of cohort commanders replaced, and you ought to have been on the short list…especially after holding the line on the right flank!”

Though Artorius and Magnus had debated at length on many nights over his actions during the battle, Artorius did not feel like arguing with his friend

at the moment. Many had spoken highly of his century's actions in standing their ground against overwhelming odds, and yet not once had he ever felt like his actions were in any way heroic.

"Braduhenna was a giant blemish to the entire Rhine Army," Artorius remarked. "Not to mention there was still residual bad blood from Senator Gallus and his friends, who would have caught word of my being promoted to centurion pilus prior."

Artorius had risen through the ranks very quickly, achieving the rank of centurion in only ten years. This had required a special dispensation, as he had at the time been three years shy of the minimum age requirement of thirty. His reputation among both his peers and subordinates was one of admiration and mutual respect. Though Artorius was immensely strong and a great close-combat fighter, he never tried to win battles alone. He gave respect to his subordinates and understood that in battle he was but one among many.

His years under the eagle had not been without blemish. Just prior to his promotion he had been court-martialed on the charge of murdering his centurion, a vile and abusive man named Fulvius. Though he was acquitted when it was revealed that the centurion in question had been drunk and assaulted Artorius, along with another soldier, the stigma still carried with him. Some of the men, when talking about usurpers overthrowing kings, would refer to it as *'the Artorian method of promotion'*. Such talk was never spoken in his presence or in front of any officers who could be counted among Artorius' friends. But like any other foul rumor or insidious talk it spread quickly, and it seemed every soldier within both legions stationed in Cologne had heard or used the term.

That soldiers would jest about such grave matters was accepted as a matter of course. Fighting men have always shared a rather dark sense of humor that more sane people would find perverse and socially unacceptable. For legionaries, it was simply what one did. Still, there had been an even higher price to Artorius than just a few cruel jests; the centurion he had killed had powerful friends, including a few in the senate. Since he had not been convicted of a crime, their influence had determined that at the very least he would stay where he was. In effect, his career was over just as he was on the rise. In the minds of his peers, Artorius should have been one of the strongest candidates for command of the reconstituted Fourth Cohort following the Battle of Braduhenna. As it was, he was not given any consideration and a

ranking centurion from Hispania had been given the promotion.

"Well, it looks like your own friends have come through for you," Magnus observed. "You are fortunate to have a lifelong friendship with Pontius Pilate given his close rapport with the emperor's right hand."

"Sejanus," Artorius muttered. "I despise that man."

"What do you care?" Magnus retorted.

"You've never met him," Artorius explained. "I have. At Pontius Pilate's wedding back in Rome, while you were getting piss drunk with the lads, I had to step in and prevent a brawl between Sejanus and Justus Longinus. Were Pilate not Justus' friend, it could have ended very badly. Pilate not only saved Justus' career, but possibly his life. The praetorian prefect is not one to let a grudge go easily, and most of his enemies meet an ignominious end."

"I heard about that," Magnus remarked. "Still, whatever his personal issues are with Justus, that doesn't mean you cannot use Pilate's sway with Sejanus to your advantage. I know you loathe politics, which I have always felt has come as a detriment to your career."

"I've never used patronage to further my career, you know that," Artorius scoffed. "I have always stood on my own merits, nothing more."

His friend shrugged. "That's all well and good," Magnus agreed. "However, you know as well as I that ability only gets one so far in the legions. Whether we like it or not, politics and patronage will always trump leadership ability. You cannot change that, so you'd best embrace it."



It was not the answer Pilate was looking for, but it had to suffice. Lamia, the absentee-governor of Syria, had the only legionary forces in the region, yet none of his deputies had so much as paid a visit to Judea since Pilate took office. The pressure was enormous, as Judea was one of the most volatile provinces in the entire Empire. The letter from Sejanus alleviated his constant strain, if only slightly. It would have been simplest for the Emperor to have ordered the Twelfth Legion to detach one of its cohorts as a vexilation in Judea. As it was, they had all clamored so strongly against allowing Pilate any authority over their soldiers that a compromise was reached in that the legionary cohort would be a separate entity from the legions, holding an independent command in Judea.

It would still be at least a couple of months, if not longer, before the

soldiers from the western part of the Empire arrived. Lamia and the other legates in the Far East and North Africa had only allowed a minimal number of volunteers from their ranks to join the Judean cohort, and even then it had been very reluctantly. A dispatch from Lamia's chief tribune bordered on outright hostility as he made it clear that the only reason he was giving Pilate any legionaries at all was because the order had come from Sejanus, and therefore from the emperor.

The one letter he'd received that he got any pleasure in reading came from his old friend and brother-in-law, Artorius. It was very short and to the point as Pilate read the words aloud:

Hail Pontius Pilate!

You will be pleased to know that I am rallying volunteers from the Rhine Legions. Once assembled, we will head to Rome posthaste and then set sail for Judea.

T. Artorius Justus
Centurion Pilus Prior

"Never one to mince words, was he?" Claudia asked as she stepped into her husband's study.

Pilate looked up from the stack of papers on his desk and gave a tired smile. Though his hairline had started to recede at a young age, in the five years since they came to Judea he'd gone almost completely bald. He swore it was hereditary, but Claudia blamed it on the strain of work. Though now only in his late thirties, there was no mistaking that what hair Pilate did have was almost completely gray.

As Claudia walked behind his desk and kissed him gently on the forehead, he noted the sad air about her.

"You've been to the doctor?" he asked.

His wife nodded and took a deep breath before letting out a slow sigh. "*Procula's Curse*," she lamented quietly. "It seems Diana is not the only one of my father's daughters to be barren."

Pilate immediately forgot his own concerns, taking Claudia in his arms as he stood and held her close. Claudia laid her head on his chest, a single tear rolling down her cheek.

“I am sorry, my love,” she said, her voice shaking. “To think we were betrothed for so long, only to find I cannot fulfill my duty as a Roman woman.” Claudia Procula was only nine years old when she was betrothed to Pontius Pilate, who at the time was a young cavalry officer on the Rhine. That she was so much younger than him had allowed Pilate many years of enjoying a bachelor’s life before he was finally compelled to live up to his obligations. As she had been in her early twenties by this time, Claudia’s father had protested to him vehemently that he’d waited so long. “I suppose you’ll have to divorce me now,” she lamented.

“No,” Pilate replied, “I don’t *have* to do anything. You’ve been so much more than simply she who would bear my children. Whenever I have needed a voice of sanity and reason in this mad place, you have always been there with it. I would rather spend the rest of my life with you than find a woman who is no better than a breeder slave.” It was not perhaps the best choice of words; however, they sufficed.

Claudia wiped her tears away and kissed her husband affectionately. “I am still sorry that I cannot give you any children,” she said after a short silence. “I was looking forward to becoming a mother.”

“Perhaps having your sister with us will help ease your troubles,” Pilate replied.

“Rebekkah suggested I pray about it,” Claudia said as she slowly paced across the room.

This caused her husband to roll his eyes. “Seriously, prayer is that woman’s answer to everything.”

“Not at all,” Claudia said. “She is surprisingly well-educated and only turns to her understanding of the divine when all other methods fail her.”

Rebekkah was a Jewish woman who Claudia befriended not long after their arrival in the province. An only child who lived with her widowed mother, she’d never married despite being exceedingly attractive. That she could read, write, and had a knack for both mathematics and architecture intimidated many of the local men who would prefer a spinster or one who was only interested in bearing them sons. Rebekkah had further told Claudia that Judean men preferred submissive, docile types who would never question them.

“Well, though I did not agree with you hiring her as a personal attendant when we could have purchased another slave for less long-term cost, I confess she has been as faithful a companion as you could hope for.”

“That she has,” Claudia observed with a smile. “I think Diana will adore her.”

“Tell me,” Pilate stated as he sat behind his desk once more, “When she asks you to pray, which deities does she suggest you should pray to?” It was clearly a baited question.

“Whichever ones suit me,” Claudia shrugged. “You need not fear, my love. Rebekkah does not seek to convert me to her faith.”

“That is good,” Pilate asserted. “The last thing I need to explain to Sejanus or the emperor is my own wife accepting Judaism. They may allow the Jews to be monotheistic, but no Roman.”

“Again, you need not worry,” Claudia reassured. “Rebekkah is my friend, and she understands the harm any attempts at conversion could cause. Though true to her own faith, she is actually quite fascinated by our vast pantheon.”

Pilate decided not to press his wife any further. It was enough that she had received the devastating news that she could never have children, combined with the equally elating news that her sister would be joining them soon in Judea. Whatever deities her Jewish friend prayed to were the least of Pontius Pilate’s worries at the moment.

Chapter V: New Horizons

***

“Sergeant Felix reporting, sir,” the decanus said with a salute.

“Stand easy,” Artorius replied, returning the courtesy. In the weeks between sending his reply to Pontius Pilate and when it actually reached him, he was assembling the volunteers from the western legions. The logistics alone of moving these men and all their personal baggage was arduous, hence his need for reliable subordinate leaders. The orders from Rome simply directed him to assemble his men and head for Judea, it did not say how or what resources were available to him.

The centurion took a seat behind his desk and apprised the young man who stood before him. Artorius admired him greatly. Felix had been a severely overweight recruit that he had been particularly harsh to during his initial training a number of years before. He’d come close to breaking many times, yet he persevered and had served honorably ever since. The soldier had been through much during his time in the ranks; at one point suffering such a grievous abdominal wound during a raid that few thought he would live. He not only survived, but continued to excel as a legionary. Artorius had spontaneously promoted him to decanus during a lull in the Battle of Braduhenna, after two of his squad leaders had been killed. Felix was not only an able soldier, but a steadfast leader.

“I see you added your name to the list of potential volunteers for our expedition to Judea,” the centurion noted, reviewing the list of names. In truth, almost all of his men had put their names on the list, and he regretted that he’d only be able to take a handful with him.

“Yes, sir,” Felix replied confidently.

“You’ve been in the ranks for almost ten years now,” Artorius continued. “You’ve served in two major campaigns, both times singled out for valor. I would be honored to have you with me in Judea, but not as a decanus.” He waited a few seconds as Felix looked crestfallen before sliding a scroll across the table.

The young soldier’s eyes grew wide as he opened and read it. “Sir, I don’t know what to say.”

“We’ll take care of the particulars once I get the other officer billets

sorted out," Artorius replied with a grin. He then stood and clasped Felix's hand. "Congratulations, *tesserarius*."

"Thank you, sir," Felix said, saluting once more. "I must let Tierney know at once!" His face was beaming as he left. His common-law wife was a former Gallic noblewoman. Tierney's father had disowned her after blaming her for the death of her sister during a raid in which Felix had attempted to save her. It was during this skirmish that he'd received his fearful wound, and it was Tierney who helped nurse him back to health. Though Roman law would not recognize the marriage until Felix was either promoted to centurion or retired from the ranks, they still lived very happily together and had three children.

It was late when Artorius left the office and started the mile walk to his manor house in the city. Diana usually had his horse, and he preferred to walk. It was a cool spring evening, and the smell on the wind told him that a storm was coming. He wrapped his cloak around him as he walked out the gate where he was joined by his friend, Optio Gaius Praxus.

"Artorius!" Praxus shouted as he hurried to catch up with him. "I heard you're taking Felix to Judea as your tesserarius."

"You heard correct," the centurion replied, continuing to walk with his cloak wrapped tightly around him. "I'm starting to think the dry heat would be a nice change of pace from here."

Praxus did not notice the scroll clutched in his friend's hand. "So…any thought on who is going to be your optio?"

"Valens," Artorius replied without hesitation.

Praxus immediately grabbed him by the shoulder, and the two turned to face each other.

"What the hell, man? I'm not good enough to take to Judea?"

"I never said you weren't coming. I said you're not coming as my optio. I was going to surprise you with this, but since you're so damn persistent." Artorius sighed and shook his head. He then shoved the scroll into Praxus' chest. He paused while allowing his friend to read the order. "You've been my subordinate for too long, when you were once a peer and a mentor. It is time you took that position once more. Macro is rather sentimental towards his old comrades from the Second Century, so convincing him to endorse your promotion came with little effort. The legate signed it this morning."

Praxus grinned from ear to ear as he read the scroll. "I'll still be your

subordinate, since no doubt they will have to promote you to centurion pilus prior," he observed.

"The difference in our rank is only a formality at this point," Artorius responded as they started to walk once more. "You've been overdue for the centurionate for some time. I was surprised that Magnus got the position in the Fourth Cohort over you. His awarding of the Civic Crown won that for him."

"Speaking of Magnus, is he coming with us?" Praxus asked.

"I'm still fighting that issue with Macro," Artorius replied, "but I'm sure he'll relent if I keep on him. Remember, I was his optio at one time. I know how to compel his better judgment."

"That will leave three other centurion vacancies," Praxus remarked. "I wonder who they will choose to fill those. I don't think they will allow any more to come from the Twentieth."

Artorius replied, "Most likely I will expend what good will I have left with Macro once I convince him to let me take Magnus. We'll know more once we get to Ostia. Pilate's taken the liberty to screen officers from the eastern legions. I hope he can convince Justus Longinus to join us. He's spent almost his entire career in the east and he's far more knowledgeable than any of us as to the customs and quirks of all the peoples in the region. The centurions will, of course, be allowed to choose their own options, who will likely come from the same legions as them. Speaking of which, you need to start looking at who yours is going to be."

"I never thought about that," Praxus thought aloud. "This is all coming pretty quick. One minute I hear you're leaving for Judea, the next I find out I'm not only going with you, I'm also going as a centurion! Well, at least Lucilla and I can make our marriage legal now!"

"Ah yes," Artorius said with a smile.

Praxus had started seeing a woman a number of years before that he had met when assisting her father in subduing a pair of thieves that tried to steal his horses. The men were subsequently crucified, and Lucilla's father had been so grateful that he tried to offer his daughter up to Praxus right there. They now had a five-year-old son and three-year-old daughter. It seemed most of Artorius' friends had families. Though he and Diana could not have children, there was their adopted son, Metellus, who was also Artorius' biological nephew. Only Magnus remained a bachelor, though with the amount of time he was spending with a childhood friend of his sister's named

Ana, it was speculated to only be a matter of time.

"Now my children can also be legitimized," Praxus said with his brow furrowed in contemplation. "I'm off to tell Lucilla to start packing. Need to look at selling our house, too."

"We've got a month before we need to set off, so you've got time," Artorius replied. "Diana's already looking at buyers for our manor."

"Yes, give my best to Lady Diana when you see her," Praxus said over his shoulder as he walked away.

It was dark when Artorius returned to his manor house. The howling wind had increased, and rain was starting to beat against the roof. His Jewish manservant, Nathaniel, greeted him wordlessly, taking his cloak. He had not yet told the slave that they were returning to the land of his birth.

"Master," another voice said. It was Proximo, who had been Diana's family slave for a number of years. Though given his freedom two years prior, like many, he continued to stay in the employ of his former masters.

"Good evening, Proximo," Artorius said formally. "I trust you have my supper ready."

"Yes, sir. The Lady Diana is out. She said you would wish for some private time with your guest."

"What guest?" Artorius asked, puzzled. "I was not expecting anyone."

"Only me." It was his son, who Artorius greeted with a laugh and strong embrace. Before his adoption, Metellus had served as an auxiliary soldier, but since became a legionary once confirming his status as a Roman citizen. Though since joining the legions, he had been assigned to a different cohort and so the two rarely saw each other.

"Let me guess, you wish to come to Judea, too."

"Where you go, I will follow," Metellus replied with a nod.

"Son, you know you are not required to follow me across the empire," Artorius explained. "You've established a solid reputation and have made a fine start to your career without my help. I've heard rumor that you may be on the cusp of making decanus. You realize that if you come with me to Judea, you may lose this opportunity for promotion."

"I understand," the legionary replied. "I also know that Judea is an opportunity that may not come again. I want to go where I can do the most good for the empire, not just what is good for my career. And if I don't come, who is going to protect you when you get into trouble?"

Artorius chuckled at the remark. Metellus had saved his life at Braduhenna before the two had even officially met; it was later discovered that the reason the young soldier had fought so fanatically to save him was that he had discovered Artorius was his biological uncle. Once it had been proven beyond a doubt that Metellus was the son of his late brother of the same name, Artorius had immediately adopted him. “Very well,” he replied. “Just know that you will get no special favors from me. There will be volunteers coming from all over the empire, and all will have to reassert themselves to see who is most fit for promotion.”

“I understand,” Metellus replied. “I would not have it any other way.”

The two men dined together, with Nathaniel, Proximo, and a host of women servants bringing them the courses of their meal; the freedman and Artorius’ manservant being the only men on the household staff. This was a common occurrence, as house slaves were most often women. Male slaves usually ended up in the fields, the mines, or the arena.

For father and son, theirs was an unusual relationship, as Artorius was only eleven years older. Despite Metellus serving in a different cohort, and that they rarely saw one another, there was still much familial affection between the two. Metellus had also formed a bond with his adoptive mother, Diana.

The hour was growing late and Metellus was making ready to take his leave when Proximo opened the front doors and Diana strolled in. The storms had finally ceased, though her stola and cloak were both soaked.

“Ah, Metellus!” she said with a smile, not seeming to notice her own discomfort.

“Mother,” he replied, standing and walking over to her, kissing her on both cheeks. “Good to see you.”

“Yes,” Diana replied, handing her cloak to a waiting servant before addressing her husband. “I apologize for being late, my dear. As you could hear, the rains were insufferable, and I’d hoped to wait out the storm. I finally decided to leave and take my chances in the rain lest I wear out my welcome with Lucilla.”

“Ah, so she told you the news about Praxus?”

“Yes! And I think it is an absolute delight that they will be coming with us. And what of you, Metellus, our son? Will you be joining us in Judea?”

Metellus seemed uncertain what to say and glanced at his father. Though they had talked in depth most of the evening, they had not discussed for

certain whether or not he would be joining the Judean cohort.

"Yes," Artorius said at last. "Yes, he will be journeying with us into the east."



The next day Artorius sat behind a long table as Magnus and Praxus walked in carrying a pair of large satchels.

"We've got all the applications for volunteers from the western legions," Magnus remarked. "We also managed to get each man's official service records."

"How many volunteers are we looking at?" the Pilus Prior asked. "You know we are only allowed to take enough to fill three centuries."

"Over seven hundred," Praxus answered. "A number of these 'volunteers' are merely troublemakers within their units that their officers would sooner dump on us rather than deal with themselves."

Artorius shook his head in disgust, though he was hardly surprised. He could understand how a commander would be reluctant to give up his best soldiers, and when tasked with providing volunteers for a new unit, it was logical that they would try and offload some of their less disciplined men.

"I just hope we can find enough decent soldiers to fill all the vacancies in the cohort," Artorius quipped as he and his centurions started to go through the list of applicants. "Justus Longinus is screening applicants from the eastern legions."

It would take several days of pouring through each man's record and application. Unsurprisingly, there were a number that he would have been completely mad to accept. Some were downright comical, causing them to burst into laughter at the absurdity of the candidates in question.

"Look at this one," Magnus mused as he showed his friends one man's record. "Seven flogging offenses, twice sentenced to forfeiture of pay for serious infractions, and once sent to the stockade for thirty days; all within his first three years in the ranks. A model soldier, this one!"

"Yes, totally ideal for helping to restore order in a volatile province," Artorius grunted.

Thankfully for them, there were a number of men with good service records who were actual volunteers, rather than troublemakers that their officers were trying to rid themselves of. What they paid less attention to was

a soldier’s rank. No principle officers had volunteered, and there were only a small handful of decanii. Artorius and Magnus had already vetted the handful of men who came from their own centuries. As they continued to read through the lists there was a knock on the door.

“Come!” Artorius shouted.

In walked a man he had never seen before. He was in a red tunic, though he wore a centurion’s belt and carried a vine stick.

“Can I help you?”

“My name is Lucius Tyranus,” the man replied, extending his hand. “I’m your replacement.”

Artorius stood and clasped his hand.

“Of course you are.” Though he was smiling it was one mixed with sadness. “Let’s go for a walk. Centurion Magnus, carry on.”

Chapter VI: Changing of the Guard

***

“I know what you and your men did at Braduhenna,” Tyranus said as they walked past the barracks.

“Do you now?” Artorius replied with a trace of ice in his voice. It did not seem an appropriate topic of conversation for this new centurion to address with him, and he started to take offense at the remark.

“I was an optio with the Fifth Legion at that time,” Tyranus continued, causing an immediate change in Artorius’ demeanor.

He had not asked where his successor had come from. All he knew was he did not recognize him from any of the other cohorts within the Twentieth.

“Then you experienced the same horrors we did,” Artorius surmised.

Tyranus snorted in reply. “Not hardly. While we labored with repairing the burned out bridges, you were in a fight for your lives. And at night, while your men lay in the cold damp starving and freezing, we were able to fill our bellies and warm ourselves with cloaks and fire. And when we did finally join the fray the next morning, we were only able to do so because Tribune Cursor and his ten thousand had flanked the Frisians and driven them away from the bridge.”

“Still, you should not discredit yourselves,” Artorius replied. “We were already broken, and Cursor’s ten thousand completely spent from their forty-mile trek, then going straight into battle. Had the Fifth Legion not crossed when it did, there would have been fifteen thousand Romans to bury instead of fifteen hundred.”

“I would never diminish what we did that day,” Tyranus agreed. “However, when it was over, Master Centurion Alessio admonished the men against having any delusions of thinking themselves the true saviors of the Valeria Legion. That honor rightly went to Tribune Cursor. When we joined the fight we were all fresh. Cursor’s men had conducted their arduous journey in a single day and still executed their charge. The entire Rhine Army also knows about how your century held the flank. You’re a legend.”

“Something I get really tired of hearing,” Artorius grumbled. “No one ever mentions that we had been overrun, our formation collapsed, and we were simply fighting to the death. I had been wounded multiple times and wasn’t even able to stand by the time Cursor’s cavalry relieved us. Did you

know that after Braduhenna I tried to sell my hamata chainmail back to the armorers? I know it's customary for centurions to wear either chain or scale armor; they say because of its comfort and lighter weight. However, it does not stop the repeated blows of an enemy sword that's trying to rip out your guts."

"You wear a ranker's segmentata?" Tyranus asked, surprised.

"Not while in garrison," Artorius admitted. "During training and anytime we are on parade I don the hamata. As I said, I *tried* to sell it back but the master centurion adamantly refused to allow it, once he got word. When I showed him the scar on my side to remind him of my wounds at Braduhenna and how my armor failed me, he relented as far as allowing me to purchase back the segmentata plate armor I had worn as a legionary; for use on campaigns only."

They walked in silence for a few moments as Tyranus took in what his predecessor was saying. At last they stopped and faced each other. Artorius could sense that the newly-promoted centurion was uneasy about something. He decided to let the man speak as soon as he was ready.

"Listen," Tyranus said, "I know I'm new to the centurionate. I received word a week ago that I was being transferred. My baggage won't even be here for another two weeks. I had to take an advance on my pay in order to purchase slaves to handle moving my affairs, as well as acquiring suitable armor and accoutrements for when I take command."

"Take command," Artorius said quietly and shook his head. It was then he realized that while he had been so focused on his promotion and where he was going, and he was now reminded of what he was leaving behind.

"I know how much these men mean to you," Tyranus continued. "I also know that by coming from a different legion they have no idea who I am; only that I will be replacing you who has led them for so long. I hope they will follow me like they did you."

"Earn their trust, *be* their commander, and they will follow you," Artorius assured him. "Lead by example, be fair when administering both punishment and reward, and never use your rank or position for personal gain. I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. The most significant change from being an optio is that now you are absolutely responsible for the welfare of these men, both in garrison and in battle. You can delegate authority, but never responsibility."

Tyranus thought for a moment and then nodded. They walked back to the

century's offices, where the signum was posted just outside. At the top of the standard was the customary bronze hand that signaled a unit's eternal salute to the emperor as well as the senate and people of Rome. Encircling the palm on the Second Century's standard was a gold wreath, signifying extreme valor, which had been awarded by Tiberius himself.

"I'll need to choose an optio," Tyranus observed. "Since I do not know any of these men, can you help me with selection?"

"I can give you a list of officers who have acquitted themselves most favorably," Artorius replied. "However, I advise you take your time and get to know them yourself. As you are well aware from your own time as an optio, your second-in-command must be one whose leadership style is most compatible with your own. The simplest measure is, who would you entrust command of the century, should you fall in battle?"



"How do you think the new centurion will work out?" Valens asked after Tyranus left. "Think he'll do right by the lads?"

"He's a good leader," Artorius assured him. His discussion with Tyranus had lasted a couple hours, and it was close to the end of the duty day when he returned.

"Some of the men are just a bit nervous, that's all," his optio-select replied. "We seem to alternate between good and bad centurions here. Though, thankfully, the bad ones don't last long. Remember, I was here before you. My first two years we had a real prick who was almost as vile as Fulvius."

Artorius shuddered at the mentioning of his predecessor. Six years later, and he could still smell the man's retched breath and the stink of rotten alcohol as he stabbed him in that very office. There was even still a splotch of discoloration in the corner from where the bastard had bled to death.

"After he was discharged in disgrace," Valens continued, "We had Macro for ten years. Then the mercifully short reign of that abhorrent shit-heap, Fulvius. And now we've had you for the past six years."

"Tyranus will be fine," Artorius asserted. "At least he's no coward like Fulvius was; he was with the Fifth at Braduhenna."

"Hmm," Valens said with an approving nod. "That alone will give him a measure of immediate respect from the ranks. You understand my concern, of

course. I spent my entire career so far with this century, as have you. Many old friends have long since departed, but those who replaced them are no less my brothers."

"And the men who join us in the east will now become our brethren."



Artorius had planned this deliberately. He had already said goodbye to everyone he needed to. The few personal possessions he had kept in the centurion's quarters had been removed by his servant, Nathaniel, the week before. Once he relinquished command to Centurion Tyranus, he would simply walk away and hope that he would not look back.

The entire Third Cohort was assembled. All six centuries were in parade formation ten ranks deep, the decanii standing on the extreme right of their respective squads. The signifier stood centered in front of each century, with the centurion and optio flanking him. Dominus, Centurion Pilus Prior and Commander of the Third Cohort, stood in front of the formation, Praxus next to him. Though he had received his promotion orders and wore the transverse crest of a centurion on his helmet, he was performing his last official act as optio of the Second Century. He would read the order relieving Artorius of command and assigning it to Tyranus.

Artorius, Tyranus, and the century's signifier stood with Dominus. Artorius had told him that he did not wish to address the century, as he had already said what he needed to them. In reality, it was emotionally overwhelming for him. He had served with some of these men for his entire sixteen years in the ranks.

"Men of the Second Century!" Dominus shouted to the assembly. "Your reputation as one of the most valiant companies of fighting men ever seen in the imperial army is well deserved. For the past six years Centurion Artorius has led you through hell to immortality. Though we lament his departure, we know that he leaves with the honor of the Second Century, the Third Cohort, and the entire Twentieth Legion within his soul. We hail his ascension to the rank of centurion pilus prior and further welcome Centurion Tyranus into our ranks." He then turned to Praxus and nodded.

As he unfurled the scroll, Artorius took the signum of the Second Century for the last time. He clutched it to his chest and closed his eyes for a moment.

"Centurion Titus Artorius Justus!" Praxus shouted. "You are relieved of

command; receive now the gratitude of the Twentieth Legion for your honorable and valiant service as you pass the imperial signum to your cohort commander!"

Artorius opened his eyes and took a deep breath as he handed the standard to Dominus. *"With the passing of the Signum, I relinquish command!"* His booming voice echoed across the parade field.

Dominus then passed the standard to Tyranus.

"Centurion Lucius Tyranus Damian," Praxus continued. "You are now commander of the Third Cohort's Second Century. Accept the imperial signum!"

"With the receiving of the Signum, I assume command!" Tyranus then passed the signum back to the signifier, who turned about and marched back to his place in front of the Second Century.

Both centurions then turned to face Dominus. Though with his promotion he was now the same rank, Artorius still rendered the customary salute to his now former cohort commander before briskly walking away. He then heard Dominus give the order, *"Centurion Tyranus, take command of your century!"*

"Sir!" Tyranus then marched to his place at the head of the company of men Artorius had led for so long. He marched at a brisk pace and was out of sight even before Dominus dismissed the formation. He did not look back.

When Praxus caught up with him, Artorius had removed his helmet and was walking as quickly as he could towards the main gate of the fortress. Even though he was several inches taller than his friend and had a naturally longer stride, Praxus struggled to keep up with Artorius' pace.

"Easy there, old friend," Praxus said as they reached the gate.

Once outside the fortress, Artorius finally slowed his pace to an easy walk. "Damn it, but I'll miss them," he said, quickly rubbing his hand over his face.

"It's not the end," Praxus replied. "It's just a new beginning."

Artorius smiled and let out a sigh as he saw what his friend inferred.

A caravan of wagons awaited them. All of their personal possessions were stacked in chests and crates. Praxus' wife, Lucilla, and their children waited at the front of one, along with their servants. Lady Diana was with their servants, including Proximo and Nathaniel, at the back of a wagon. Nathaniel opened a large trunk and started to help his master out of his armor.

Artorius handed him his helmet and then removed his belt and the harness bearing all of his campaign medals and decorations before pulling off his armor. Once Nathaniel had taken his hamata chainmail, Artorius strapped his belt and gladius back on.

"You're not ready to go yet?" Magnus laughed as he walked up, leading his horse.

"I admit I had a bit of a hard time saying goodbye to the Second Century after all these years," Artorius said.

"I understand. Remember, I had more years with them than you did," Praxus retorted before giving him a friendly slap on the back.

"And you know you didn't leave all of us, sir," a voice behind him said.

Artorius turned and laughed as Felix walked towards them with the thirty legionaries Macro had allowed him to take from the legion. Eight had come from his former century. Among them his adopted son, Metellus, who smiled and nodded at him. It was a relief for Artorius to have so many of his friends with him in this next chapter of his life. As he pondered for a moment, he almost pitied Centurion Tyranus. He had come from the Fifth Legion by himself and assumed command of a century in which he did not know any of the men. He then looked to his right and saw twenty more legionaries approaching him. These were the volunteers from the First Legion who had been accepted into the cohort. Their packs were bulging with all of the meager possessions a legionary could carry.

"Where do you want us, sir?" the Decanus leading them asked.

Artorius pointed them toward an empty wagon that had its tarp pulled back.

"All legionaries can store their packs and personal belongings in that wagon," the centurion replied.

"Yes, sir," the decanus replied. There was a murmur of relief from the soldiers. Since only centurions and options were authorized horses, they would be walking all the way to Ostia and Rome. This was nothing new for men accustomed to marching twenty-five miles per day in full kit while on campaign. However, if they could avoid carrying their packs, which were far heavier than normal with all of their possessions, so much the better. Felix and the decanii quickly formed up a work detail to stow the men's personal baggage.

"Felix, post six men to the head of the column," Artorius ordered, "the rest will fall in on either flank."

“Yes, sir,” the tesserarius replied. “I also received word that the volunteers from the Fifth Legion are already posted at the second relief outpost, fifty miles from here.”

“Good,” the centurion said. “How many men are we picking up from them?”

“Twenty-four,” Magnus answered. “Between them and the lads we have with us there’s almost enough for a full century.”

“There will be a lot more by the time we get to Ostia,” Artorius replied. “I sent word for the volunteers from Hispania and North Africa to link up with us there. Given the time it is going to take for us to even get to Rome, I daresay they will spend quite a bit of time waiting for us. I received word last week that an optio from the praetorian guard named Cornelius has been selected to command one of our centuries. I sent a message that all volunteers are to report to him. He will keep accountability of our lads until we arrive.”

“A bloody praetorian,” Valens spat as he joined his friends. “I hate those pompous twats!”

“I checked his service record, and he does have some line experience,” Artorius replied. “He was among the praetorian cohorts that stormed the Angrivari stronghold alongside us.”

“Well, I have to give him some respect for that,” Valens conceded. “I just hope fifteen years of policing the streets of Rome and serving as one of Sejanus’ pets hasn’t ruined him.” As they continued their banter, the decanus from the First Legion walked over with a map in his hands.

“Sir, I’ve been checking our route of march,” he said. “If we skirt south and west to avoid the snow of the Alpes, it will take us at least a month to get to Rome.”

“You’ve never been to Rome, sergeant?” Artorius asked.

“No, sir,” the man replied. “I was born and raised in Belgica.”

Artorius raised an eyebrow and then remembered that with the empire being as vast as it was, the majority of legionaries who had sworn to defend Rome with their lives had probably never seen the Eternal City. The soldiers who expanded the empire during its years of conquest often settled in the areas near their last posting. Cities sprung up in their wake, bringing Roman culture to the far corners of the known world. Over generations many of their descendants would carry on the tradition of serving in the legions. When the young decanus first enlisted as a legionary, it only made sense to post him to the nearest legion where there were always vacancies, rather than sending

him clear across the empire. The only reason Artorius and Magnus had been sent so far from home when they first joined was because there were no legions posted near their homes in Ostia. That, and all reinforcements were sent to the Rhine to fight in the Germanic wars.

"Well, you are correct," Artorius stated. "If we can arrange transport from the port city of Massilia, that will save us at least an additional week on the march. Once assembled in Rome, we will take ship to Caesarea; about ten days of sailing under ideal conditions."

"So anticipate an additional week retching over the side of a ship," Valens added, drawing a chuckle from Artorius.

"By the time we get to Judea, all of us will have a better understanding of just how large the empire really is."

Chapter VII: Across the Empire

***

Thirteen days into their journey and the volunteers of the First Italic Cohort arrived in Augusta Raurica, at the northern base of the Alpes; the vast mountain range that separated Italia from its northern provinces. It was midafternoon and the city was swarmed with legionaries who were there on holiday. The Emperor Augustus had commissioned numerous recreation buildings for the city, and it served as a place that soldiers were sent on leave.

"The men could use some leisure time," Praxus said as he eyed the anxious faces of their legionaries.

"They do look a bit worn," Magnus concurred.

They had been marching for almost two weeks and were starting to show all the signs of wear. Even without having to carry their heavy packs, two weeks of straight marching, at twenty-five miles per day, took its toll. Thankfully, the trek had been largely uneventful, with the conglomerate of men from various legions following the main road that ran north to south along the Rhine.

"Alright," Artorius remarked. "We will stay here for three nights." He then called over Felix and the decanus from the First Legion, whose name he had learned was Cicero. Artorius was baffled at how his detachment had somehow ended up so critically short on officers.

In a normal century the ratio of legionaries to decanii was at most seven-to-one. Yet of the seventy-four men from the three legions along the Rhine they had picked up, Cicero was the only decanus. In order to assist, Metellus and two other legionaries had been temporarily appointed as acting squad leaders.

Even though Artorius made a point of never using his influence to further his son's career, he secretly hoped the position would be made permanent once the entire cohort was assembled. He thought perhaps there may be opportunities for his promotion. He fought against such notions. Even though patronage was often more important than ability and nepotism ran rampant throughout the legions, Artorius was determined Metellus would make his own way in the ranks. Even though Artorius was Metellus' cohort commander, he would not allow them to serve in the same century together. In a way it hurt him, for he loved his son and was proud of the man and

soldier he had become. Nothing would please him more than to fight on a battle line with Metellus at his side. Yet as a leader Artorius knew that perception, along with good order and discipline of his men, was far more important than his personal feelings. There would be no misconceptions of favoritism with him, no matter who it involved.

"Acquire billeting for the men," Artorius ordered his tesserarius. "They are to first conduct repairs of their sandals and kit with a full inspection by both of you before they are permitted to take leave."

"Yes, sir," Felix and Cicero both replied.

"Acting-Sergeant Metellus!" Cicero shouted, forcing Artorius to smile.

"I say we find ourselves a comfortable place to bed down for the night," Diana said as she guided her horse over to her husband, leaned over, and kissed him gently on the cheek.

"I will encamp with my soldiers," Artorius replied. "If you wish to find rooms for you and the other wives, please do so."

"The others can do as they please," Diana replied, "But where you are, so am I."

When all was settled, they laid his cloak out on the ground, took some blankets from their baggage cart, and lay on the ground, using Artorius' saddle pack as a pillow. The night air was cold, and the ground damp beneath his thick cloak but wrapped in a few blankets and with Diana's head on his chest, Artorius was reminded once more why he loved this woman so much. In that moment, as he gazed up at the infinite stars that lit up the cloudless night, there was no other place he would rather have been.



The next morning the three centurions went for a ride while their men completed repairs on their kit whilst indulging in the excesses offered by the city. As Lady Diana was the only spouse with a horse, she alone was able to accompany them. In fact, Artorius insisted she join them. They rode at a fast cantor on the dirt road that took them through the mountains towards Augustodunum, a hundred miles to the west. Diana was uncertain why they chose this particular road, but all three men seemed to be searching for the same thing.

"Think we'll even know it when we find it?" Magnus asked as they watered their horses in a creek that ran parallel to the road.

Artorius looked around and took a deep breath of the mountain air. “It’ll be an open meadow on top of a flat rise with the road sloping down in either direction.”

“Oh, that should be easy,” Praxus replied sarcastically, “There’s only, maybe, a hundred places matching that description between here and Augustodunum!”

“Ass,” Artorius retorted. “You were there, too! One of us should be able to recognize the place.”

“Possibly,” Praxus said. “It has been eleven years, though.”

“Eleven years,” Diana interjected. “You were here during the Sacrovir Revolt?”

Artorius grinned knowingly as he pulled an apple out of his saddlebag for his horse. “Somewhere around here.”

“My lady, you heard about the nine who were awarded the Florian Crest?” Praxus asked.

Artorius just smiled as Diana looked at his friend dumbstruck. He had never told her about how his squad prevented the rebel leader, Julius Florus, from escaping to start a new insurrection elsewhere within the Empire. It had been but one part of a much larger saga that had unfolded so quickly the entire rebellion was over before most of Rome knew it had begun.

“Of course I’ve heard about them,” Diana replied. “The death of Florus crippled the rebellion before it could spread and allowed the legions to smash the main rebel army at Augustodunum.”

“Well, you’re looking at two of them,” Magnus stated as he remounted his horse.

Diana looked over at her husband. He simply smiled and shrugged, allowing his friends to tell the story for him.

“Yes,” the Norseman continued. “We were in the same squad back then; with Artorius as our decanus. Our cohort, along with the cavalry regiment that would later be named *Indus’ Horse*, had routed the rebel army under Florus that was moving to reinforce Sacrovir.”

“I was also a decanus then,” Praxus said. “Though we all fought on the same battle line, it was Artorius’ squad that Macro sent after that corpulent Gaul once he was spotted.”

“Silly bastard was wearing an ornate breastplate and helmet that gleamed in the sun,” Magnus added. “It made him easy to spot when he was trying to escape through the trees! We pursued him, and I don’t doubt we would have

caught his fat ass, although the arrival of Commander Indus and two of his men expedited things. Bloody coward killed himself or at least tried to."

"He threw himself on his sword," Artorius explained. "Only he didn't do it right and ran the weapon through his bowels instead of his heart. It was Magnus who finished him." He nodded towards his friend as he finished explaining to Diana. "It wasn't until after the fighting was over and Sacrovir hunted down that we were formally recognized. To be honest, I had almost forgotten about the entire ordeal, what with the cohort having to double-time back to Augustodunum to take part in the final battle. In fact, it was months later that the nine of us who took down Florus were awarded the Florian Crest."

"And what happened to the others?" Diana asked.

"Commander Indus achieved much glory and renown," Artorius began. "His regiment was named in his honor by Tiberius. He continued to serve as a regimental commander under Tribune Cursor through the Frisian Rebellion. I never knew the names of his two troopers, though."

"Legionary Gavius is still with the Twentieth Legion in our former century," Magnus added. "Though he joined the army at the same time as me and Artorius, we kind of just grew apart over the years. It happens. And, of course, you know about Valens." The mention of their ever-deviant friend who was now serving as Artorius' optio brought a chuckle from everyone as they continued their ride. They were somber for a minute.

"The other two…" Artorius started to say and found he could not continue.

"Are no longer with us," Praxus finished for him.

"Carbo and Decimus were both killed at Braduhenna," Magnus quickly added.

"I remember them," Diana added sadly. "I used to sometimes see Carbo on gate guard when I would visit the fortress. He always made me turn my weapon in before he'd let me through."

Artorius taught Diana how to fight like a legionary and had a gladius made for her soon after they were together. Wherever she went, Diana almost always carried her weapon beneath the folds of her stola. With her current attire of a Gallic tunic and riding breaches, her gladius was clearly visible, strapped to her hip.

"It was Decimus who claimed Florus' polished helmet with its magnificent plume," Magnus reminisced. "I'll never forget the entire march

back to Augustodunum everyone could see it sticking out of his pack."

"He always said if anything happened to him he wanted it to go to Carbo," Artorius added. "Fate, however, decided that they should die together."

"What do you do with a legionary's personal effects when he passes?" Diana asked.

The turn of the conversation contrasted sharply with the sunny day and the pleasant sounds of the flowing creek, as well as the birds chirping in the woods.

"Every legionary has part of his wages deposited into a burial fund," Artorius explained. "If he is killed, this is used to cover the cost of any memorials built and is sometimes given to either his known family or someone he designated. The same is done with any personal effects. One of the more hateful tasks of a centurion is going through a dead soldier's possessions with his decanus. It was particularly difficult when Decimus and Carbo died, as both had been my friends since I joined the ranks. Valens had been battlefield promoted and was their squad leader for barely a day. He took it especially hard, as the three of them had always been close. Carbo had no children, so all of his belongings went to his sister in Lutetia. And though neither could legally marry because of their rank, Decimus did have a daughter named Decima, who I think was around eleven at the time. His only other surviving relative was a distant nephew whom he had never met, so we made certain Decima received everything he owned."

"Except for Florus' helmet," Magnus added.

"The legate was pretty adamant that it go to the Legion Museum with all the other war trophies from previous campaigns," Praxes said. "It, along with Florus' armor are still on display there."

They rode in silence for some time and Artorius sensed that Diana regretted broaching such an emotional topic. He brought his horse alongside hers, reached over, and took her hand in his. He gave it a reassuring squeeze and caressed it gently with his thumb as she looked over and smiled at him. They came up a steep rise to an open meadow. To their right they could hear the sounds of the river, on the left was a more sparsely wooded slope. About five hundred meters ahead, the dirt road and the ground sloped down once more. In the distance they could just make out the bend in the road that curved right around a grove of trees.

"This is it," Artorius said quietly. "Wait here." He rode at a fast gallop

across the meadow and down the far slope. The others watched as he reached the bend in the road, about a mile away.

"What's he doing?" Diana asked.

"I think I know," Magnus replied.

They all dismounted their horses and started to walk through the glade.

"This does look familiar," Praxus added, glancing around, "Though the grass was mostly flattened, as five-thousand men had camped here. Not many meadows in these parts are large enough for so many to bivouac."

After a few minutes they saw Artorius riding back, a look of triumph on his face. "I found it!" he said, which garnered knowing nods from his friends

"What did you find, love?" Diana asked.

"Something of the greatest insignificance," he replied. "A rag tied to a tree just around the bend. The day prior to the assault, Macro and a group of squad leaders did a leader's recon of the enemy camp. Once it was determined that the only viable avenue of approach was straight up the road, we left a rag tied to a tree near the bend, and another a couple miles further back. This signaled where we were to stage the cohort."

"I'm amazed the rag is still there," Praxus said.

Artorius shrugged. "It's a rag," he replied. "This road is not well traveled, and those that do come through here are not going to pay mind to a rotted piece of cloth tied to a tree."

"You said there were five thousand rebels in this camp," Diana noted. "Yet you attacked them with just the Third Cohort? That was madness!"

"You're telling us!" Magnus grunted. "A legionary cohort is never at full strength, and I think there were maybe four hundred and fifty of us, at most. However, we did have a cavalry regiment with us."

"Indus' Horse," Artorius added. "They were with us, though they had yet to receive their honor from the emperor. They would earn it here. Many shared similar tribal ancestry as the rebels. In fact, Indus and Florus were both of the Treveri and possibly related. We were a touch worried about their loyalties, but they proved themselves both here and at Augustodunum."

"We were still badly outnumbered," Praxus remarked. "It all came down to shock and surprise. Most of the rebel army was skirmishing with Indus' cavalry back down the slope we just rode up. When we stormed the camp there were only a handful of them loitering about. We then reformed and attacked the main rebel army, with the woods masking our numbers. For all they knew, we could have been an entire legion."

“When it was over we counted roughly five hundred enemy dead,” Magnus remarked. “Most of Florus’ army was still intact and could have easily overwhelmed us. However, they panicked and ran. Most were never seen again. Bastards never even showed up for the final battle at Augustodunum!”

“And somewhere up there,” Artorius said to Diana while pointing up the slope on their left, “is where we caught Florus. After Magnus finished him with a nice slash to the jugular, Indus insisted on carrying him back for proper burial.”

“A rebel and a traitor he may have been,” Magnus observed, “but they were still kinsmen. The rest of the enemy dead we left to rot. If we look hard enough, we might find a trace here or there, but after eleven years I suspect even their bones have been consumed.”

At the end of their three-day furlough, Artorius and his men once more began their trek south to the sea. With the early spring upon them, the Alpes were still covered in snow and many of the roads would be impassable. As such, he led his men to the coastal city of Massilia, where he’d sent Optio Valens ahead to secure them passage to Ostia and to Rome.

Chapter VIII: Family Matters

***

The final leg of their journey from Massilia to Rome was uneventful enough. Valens had been true to his word about getting them passage on a ship, and aside from a few of the men getting seasick, including Artorius, they made it to Ostia without incident. As the ship rose and fell in the rolling surf, oarsmen suddenly reversed their rowing, slowing the ship as it jarred against the side of the long dock.

"Well, that's that then," Artorius said as he pulled himself up from the railing. His complexion was still terribly pale, and he swore he had not eaten the entire trip. "Two days at sea…I loathe to think what two weeks will be like!"

The piers were extremely long, running several hundred feet, in order to accommodate large vessels needing to dock in deeper waters. Artorius waited until his men had all disembarked and their baggage was carried onto the dock. It was a hatefully long process lasting more than an hour, and the ship continued to rise and fall. The centurion could not fathom how sailors appeared completely unaffected as they used large hoists with slings to unload large crates of various cargo.

Once the last legionary had disembarked, Diana took him by the arm and helped guide him down the long gangplank. He almost stumbled over the side, his equilibrium still unbalanced, and it was not the most dignified exit he could make, but there was nothing for it. It was late in the afternoon, and Artorius knew there was little left for them to accomplish other than finding quarters for the night.

"Praxus," he said to his fellow centurion. "Have a messenger sent to the praetorian barracks. Find out where Centurion Cornelius has the other volunteers for the cohort billeted."

"Right away," Praxus replied. He seemed little worse for wear, having more of a stomach for the seas than most of their men.

"And where will you spend this evening?" Magnus asked, already knowing the answer.

"Home," Artorius replied. "I sent a message to Father, letting him know I would be in Rome, though of course there was no way of telling him exactly when. It's about ten miles from here, but I think a long walk will set me

right."

"I've sent Proximo on with instructions for storing our baggage and finding a place for the servants to lodge while we are here," Diana added.

"At minimum, we will be here a week," Artorius noted as they walked along the long pier, attempting to avoid the bustling crowds of sailors and dock workers unloading their wares. "It all depends on whether or not the other legionaries have arrived and if transportation arrangements made."

Once on dry land, Artorius felt his former strength returning to him. He and Diana guided their horses as far as the outskirts of Ostia before mounting. Metellus joined them, at Artorius' insistence. He had quite forgotten how much he loved springtime along the Mediterranean. The feel of the warm sun, and the pleasant breezes coming off the sea were a far cry from the wet, biting chill that permeated along the Rhine frontier.

They were glad to be out of the city before dusk, as that was when the true congestion struck. Within Rome, and to an extent Ostia, wheeled traffic was only permitted at night, given the dense pedestrian population. In essence, the cities never slept. All food and commercial wares consumed by the massive population of the empire's capitol could only be transported in sufficient quantities at night.

Though it had been six years since he'd been home, Artorius still instinctively remembered the way. The once-dirt path that turned off towards the low hills where his family home lay was now widened with paving stones. There were other houses along the road, where once there had been nothing but open fields. About a mile from the end of their journey he noted, privately, the cottage that belonged to his stepmother, Juliana. It now appeared to be occupied. Years before, he had received word that his former love, Camilla, had died in that very house. Though he and Diana were very open about their respective pasts, Artorius decided there was no need to mention this detail to her.

At length they came to the modest country house where Artorius grew up. It seemed much smaller now than when he was a child. He could see lamplight glowing in the dining room that overlooked the front of the house. The door was opened, and a stooped old man stepped out, leaning on a long staff. For a moment, Artorius almost did not recognize his father, Primus Artorius Maximus. His hair was now completely gray, and he'd developed a noticeable stomach.

“Father!” Artorius said, trying to conceal his concern.

“By Juno!” Primus replied, his face beaming as he embraced his son. He then took Diana by the hand. “And my Lady Diana. You have grown more beautiful, daughter.” He kissed her hand at this remark. In the failing light, as the sun sank behind the hills, Primus did not yet notice the young man with them.

“Father,” Artorius said. “There is someone else I want you to meet.”

Primus’ smile vanished as Metellus stepped into the light coming from the house. His eyes grew wide, and he shook his head slowly. “It cannot be.”

“Your grandson,” Artorius stated. “Metellus Artorius Posthumous.”

“An honor to finally meet you, sir,” Metellus said awkwardly. His appearance was so similar to his biological father that, for Primus, it felt as if his late son was with them once more. With tears rolling down his cheeks, he dropped his walking stick, limped over to his grandson, and embraced him hard.

After a few moments, they were led into the house where they were greeted by Artorius’ stepmother, Juliana. Her hair had started to gray as well, though she still held much of the dignified beauty that had enraptured Artorius’ father all those years ago.

“At last our family is all together,” she said with a smile as she kissed Artorius, Diana, and Metellus each on the cheek.

Artorius noted her tired expression but said nothing. He suspected that his father’s failing health was placing a great strain on Juliana. Because he did not know when he would be returning home again, he resolved that he must do what he could to provide for both of them. For a brief moment, he surmised this journey might be the last time he ever saw his father.



“Centurion Justus Longinus reporting, sir!” The burly, copper-haired man snapped a sharp salute, which Pontius Pilate returned before clasping his friend’s hand.

“You are most welcome!” the procurator said with much fervor. “Please come inside, you look parched.”

“Thank you,” Justus replied. He barked some orders to his optio, who marched at the head of a column of legionaries. The brightly painted shields and gleaming plate armor contrasted sharply with the shabby auxiliaries seen

in the province, drawing the curious and somewhat fearful gaze of many onlookers. Doubtless it would have caused more alarm were their numbers not so few.

Justus removed his helmet and followed Pilate into the atrium of the governor's palace. A servant walked over with a tray bearing two goblets of watery wine, from which Justus drank deeply. "I've brought three centuries from the eastern legions."

"And Artorius should be arriving within the next month, I hope," Pilate observed. "His letter came to me two weeks ago. Three weeks after it was dated. Of course, we know the imperial post moves far quicker than legionaries on the march."

"Well, unless they've met with some unforeseen disaster, they have undoubtedly arrived in Rome by now," Justus added. "Give them a couple weeks to assemble and arrange transport, plus the travel time by sea, and yes, I think they should be here within another month. And just so you know, though I have three centuries with me, there is only one other centurion besides me."

"Artorius is bringing the others," Pilate replied. "Only one has command experience as a centurion, the rest are newly promoted." He handed Justus a scroll that had come from Rome with the names of the senior officers coming from the western legions.

"I know Magnus and Praxus," Justus said. "Or, at least, I've met them. Cornelius I am not familiar with."

"He came from the praetorians," Pilate explained. "Sejanus felt that at least one of the guard should be in a leadership position within the cohort, to give it the emperor's personal touch."

He noted the scowl on his friend's face at the mention of Sejanus, though Justus held his tongue. There was an intense hatred between the two men, which had caused Pilate many uncomfortable moments, even at his own wedding feast! Justus was a lifelong friend, despite the difference in their social status and birth. And while Pilate did not feel the same sense bonding with Sejanus, the praetorian prefect was his benefactor, and so there was a large amount of personal loyalty, if not brotherly affection.

"Cornelius may be a praetorian, but he has line experience," the procurator continued. "Do not forget I was, and technically still am, a member of the emperor's bodyguard."

"I did not say anything," Justus asserted, even though his expression of

contempt showed his loathing for Sejanus had not dissipated at all over the years. He quickly sought to change the subject. “What are your orders while we await the rest of the cohort?”

“Keep your men in Caesarea,” Pilate directed. “Have them form a presence within the city to let the people get used to seeing legionaries. Keep the patrols small, no more than two squads. They are here to bring order, not cause alarm. Also, feel free to check on the barracks, which I ordered construction of as soon as I received authorization to stand up the cohort. I confess I had hoped to house an entire legion within Caesarea.”

“I will personally oversee the quality of the barracks construction,” Justus asserted.

There was another issue which Pilate wished to address. He struggled with how to articulate it properly. In the end, he decided the direct approach was his only option. “I have to ask, what are your feelings about falling under Artorius’ command?”

“The same as any other pilus prior,” the centurion shrugged.

“Justus, do not play dumb with me…” Pilate started to say.

“Alright!” Justus snapped. “Apologies, sir, but you want to know something I have never wished to discuss with anyone. You want to know if I blame Artorius for the death of my son, is that it?”

“Well, do you?”

“I don’t know,” Justus shook his head, his face red and suddenly dripping nervous sweat.

“I do not mean to cause you unnecessary anguish, old friend,” Pilate said reassuringly. “However, with your seniority to the other centurions, you will be Artorius’ second-in-command. I need to know if the past will come back to haunt either of you.”

“Artorius is my friend,” Justus asserted. “Though I have to keep reminding myself of that. The logical side of me says that Gaius knew the risks when he joined the legions. And I was not at Braduhenna, so I can never know exactly what happened there. All I do know is they were cut off with their backs against the river, with over half the men in their century either dead or wounded by the time it was over. Even Artorius was amongst the fallen injured. And for all that, I keep asking how they ended up there in the first place? The other side of me, the father who still grieves for his lost son, wants to know whose fault was it they ended up stranded and horribly outnumbered? I loved my son more than anything else in this world! I would

have gladly died in his place…”

“I am sorry, Justus.”

“Flavia says that Gaius’ death must have been the will of the gods,” the centurion continued. His hand was resting against the wall and his head bowed slightly. “Ha! I say there are no gods, and if there are I have already blasphemed against them to the point that for me there is no salvation. My wife is a deeply religious woman, and I cannot imagine the fear that set in her when I destroyed every last statue and image of a Roman deity within our house. You wonder if there will be trouble between Artorius and I? No, there will not be. I know deep down that Gaius’ death was not his fault. And I have my duty to perform. That is about all I have left in this world.” He then stood erect and composed himself. “And now, with your permission, I will take my leave and begin my duties.”

Pilate nodded and Justus quickly saluted before donning his helmet and leaving once more.



Diana elected to remain with Primus and Juliana during their stay. Though her own family was wealthy with a large palatial house in Rome, she preferred the honest company of her husband’s parents. She would pay respects to her father before their departure, though this would be more out of obligation than love. There had been a strain between Proculeius and his oldest daughter ever since the passing of his first wife. The woman he was now married to was little more than a girl when he wed her. She was, in fact, younger than Diana and possibly younger than Claudia. Who her father spent his life with was his own business, but what upset her was his demeanor towards Artorius. Because he was a soldier who came up from the ranks, Proculeius viewed him as an unworthy addition to the family, despite the fact that Artorius, as a ranking centurion would be elevated into the equites upon his retirement from the legions. A centurion pilus prior was still authorized to wear the narrow purple stripe of an equite on his toga, with most of the less nobility viewing them as peers. This was not the case with Proculeius.

It wasn’t even contempt with which he treated Artorius, but rather indifference, as if his daughter were not married at all. She knew that what would complicate matters further was when she finally broached the subject of Metellus, as legally he was Proculeius’ only grandchild. It was such family

matters that the young legionary wished to discuss with his father during the ride towards Rome.

"Proculeius is a jackal," Artorius said bluntly. "His father was a great man, but I think he cast a shadow too great for his son, which made him bitter. He's accomplished nothing on his own merit in this life, and he knows it. He barely acknowledges me, and he does not even know you exist."

"But should this be kept from him?" Metellus asked. "I mean, I am kind of his grandson."

"There is no *kind of* about it," Artorius said sharply. "I know you were not raised with our customs, but understand that under Roman law, a son is a son; whether by birth or adoption, there is no differentiating. You *are* Proculeius' grandson, just as much as you are my father's. That being said, given his obsession with birth, were he to know that you came from my brother, a lowly legionary, and a Germanic woman, it would drive him insane."

"Then I am surprised you have not rushed to make an introduction," Metellus added with a laugh. He was then sober once more. "I have something I've been meaning to ask. Do I resemble my father that much? It's just that…well…Grandfather's attitude towards me was rather peculiar, far more deeply emotional than I would have anticipated. And when he addressed me by name, it's like he wasn't talking to me, but rather to his dead son. I can't say it made me uncomfortable, just not what I expected."

"The answer is yes," Artorius replied. "People may notice that we are blood-related if they look closely enough. However, your resemblance to my brother is uncanny, to say the least. Neither he nor I ever shared such a distinct resemblance to our father. The only difference is your complexion is fairer, which I am guessing came from your mother."

"It did," Metellus confirmed. "She had brown hair, but light skin, like most of her people. I almost said *our* people, but then I never fit in with my mother's tribe. There was emptiness in my life the entire time I was growing. I knew I belonged with my father's people and that Roman citizenship was rightfully mine."

"When you first told me who you were, it confirmed that which I had suspected yet could not articulate even to myself," Artorius replied. "Though your father would have now been in his forties, he was but a legionary recruit of seventeen the last time we saw him two years before his death. You're but a few years older now than he was, so when your grandfather sees you, it is

as if his son were reborn. I confess it was the same with me when I realized who you were. When I first saw you with the auxiliary detachment that reinforced our line at Braduhenna, I swore I was looking at my brother. I did not take it as anything literal, but rather a symbolic premonition that my brother was with me that day."

"And, in a way, I suppose he was," Metellus surmised.

The two men rode in silence for some time while Metellus contemplated all he had learned over the past few days. His personal history was a far more complex one than the young man had ever envisioned. He was born of a Germanic mother and Roman father who was killed in battle before he was born. Raised by his mother's people, he had joined the Roman auxilia after her death, serving with the Army of the Rhine. His later adoption by his uncle, Artorius, and subsequent transfer into the legions had thrust him into Roman society and culture, which before he had only been vaguely aware of. That by adoption he was now not only a Roman, but related to one of the wealthier equite households, was surreal. If Proculeius was even half as pompous as Artorius said he was, then only the gods knew how he would react once he found that his sole grandchild came from what he would consider an ignoble background.

At the main crossroads that split between Ostia and Rome, they took their leave of each other. Metellus was to report back to Centurion Praxus, while Artorius had business within the Imperial City.

"Something else you should know that makes me proud," Artorius said. "I was twenty-two when promoted to decanus, which was considered extremely young. In fact, I was younger than all of the men I was required to lead. You're twenty-one, correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then if by chance your promotion is made permanent, you will have achieved the rank a full year before I did. And whatever any of our pompous relations may think, there is one thing that can never be taken from you. You are a soldier of Rome!"

Chapter IX: Ghosts of the Past

***

Artorius was grateful for the office space lent to him by the praetorians. He marveled at how comfortable their quarters were, with far more amenities than those of regular legionaries. Of course, no expense was spared when it came to the emperor's personal bodyguard!

Though he had not yet seen Centurion Cornelius, a guardsman informed him that arrangements had been made with an unoccupied room at his disposal. As Artorius organized a few things within the office, the Tribune Cassius Chaerea entered the room. He was someone the centurion had wished to speak to for many years. Though both had served in the Germanic Wars, Artorius had been but a lowly legionary in the ranks, while Cassius commanded a cohort of praetorians who had served as Germanicus Caesar's personal guard. But that was not the only reason he wished to speak to this man.

"Tribune, sir," he said, rising to his feet.

"Centurion Artorius," Cassius replied, clasping his hand. "I hope the accommodations are suitable for your work. I scarcely use this office, so it's no burden to me."

"They are more than suitable," Artorius replied. He then apprised the tribune for a second.

Cassius was in his late forties, his thick hair almost completely gray, with several scars marring his otherwise handsome face. One in particular ran across the right side of his forehead, where his helmet had been torn from his head more than twenty years before. A serious wound to the groin led to his voice cracking on occasion, something that along with his facial scars caused him some embarrassment. Roman society was notoriously vain, viewing any physical blemish with contempt. That he was regarded as a hero within the Roman Army garnered sympathy rather than scorn that others with similar afflictions were often subjected to.

"Tribune, if I may ask a question," Artorius said after a brief pause.

Cassius nodded.

"I do not wish to bring up any painful memories of the past, but there is something I have to know. You were in Teutoburger Wald. Did you know my brother?"

“No,” Cassius replied, shaking his head sadly. “I never met him and only saw him once at the very end. We were in separate legions, and even if we had served in the same legion, a tribune does not often interact with soldiers from the ranks.”

“I understand,” Artorius acknowledged.

“I did watch from a distance as he saved the lives of Centurion Calvinus and two of his legionaries,” Cassius added. “I made sure he was mentioned by name in my dispatches to Rome. Had he survived, the civic crown would have been his. I understand you later served with Calvinus.”

“In a matter of speaking,” Artorius replied. “We were in separate cohorts during the Germanic Wars but the same legion. He later became our master centurion, though my closest interaction with him came at my court-martial, which I’m certain you got word of.”

“Centurion Artorius,” Cassius sighed, “*Everyone* within the Roman Army got word of it, as did half the senate and most of the equites. That you were both acquitted and promoted at the same time raised a few eyebrows, to say the least. While making his case to be elected as a plebian tribune, following his retirement from the legions, Calvinus was repeatedly pressed about that particular ordeal. I was one of the few who knew about his connection to you via your brother, though I made certain it was never mentioned.”

“Something for which we are both grateful,” Artorius noted. “My dealings with Calvinus have been few, and I think it has been deliberately so. When we first met, I made it clear that I wanted no special favors or patronage because of who my brother was. A bit foolish, perhaps, but I was still a new legionary, idealistic, perhaps naïve, but I was determined to make my own way in the legions.”

“One does not usually shun patronage,” Cassius observed. “However, I think Calvinus respected you for it. I rarely see him, just during public assemblies of the plebian tribunes when matters are discussed that pertain to the praetorian guard, but I have no doubt he knows about your arrival in Rome. You might consider paying your respects to him and to another old friend, Aulus Cursor.”

“I would like to see Cursor again,” Artorius said. “We fought in many of the same battles, and yet we never even met until after I became a centurion. Where can I find him?”

“Well, he was recently appointed as an Aedile, so probably inspecting one of the bathhouses or brothels. Of course, there are hundreds of each

within the city."

This brought a brief chuckle from both men. The Aediles were official magistrates of the Roman government. They were primarily tasked with the licensing of brothels and bathhouses while overseeing the hygienic inspections of both. It was hardly what one would expect a man who'd once saved a legion to be appointed to do.

Cassius was serious once more. "I sent word to Centurion Cornelius. He knows where to meet you. I believe he has also made some of the arrangements for your transportation to Caesarea."

"Thank you, sir. I am much obliged to you."

"Good day, centurion," Cassius said as the two exchanged salutes.

As Cassius left, Artorius saw in his face the same eternal anguish that haunted all survivors of Teutoburger Wald. Master Centurion Macro was also a survivor. One of the few to escape from captivity and pending execution following the battle. Though Cassius was a national hero for having organized a successful stand and extraction that saved the lives of over a hundred soldiers, nothing could ever relieve the sense of loss he had suffered. Several of the tribunes in his legion had been lifelong friends; they had grown up together, were on similar career paths, and had been doing their compulsory service in the legions. All were killed. Cassius was the only officer of the equite class to survive the disaster, and none of the senatorial legates or laticlavian tribunes lived. Artorius had felt similar loss at Braduhenna. The difference being, despite their terrible losses that battle had been won.

The campaigns of retribution that came six years after Teutoburger Wald had been Artorius' first, and for him it had been a personal vendetta. He sometimes wondered how differently his life would have been had his brother not been killed in that terrible place.

As he sat by himself, the centurion contemplated something that had lingered inside him for some time. Just how many people had he killed in his career? He honestly did not know for certain. It was not unusual for a legionary to go his entire term of service without bloodying his gladius. Patrolling the frontiers, building roads, and conducting the mundane tasks of garrison life made up the vast majority of a Roman soldier's career. Contrary to what many thought, the life of a legionary was far less glorious than the depictions on columns and friezes that adorned popular artwork and monuments. When a legionary stood on a watchtower at the edge of the

frontier, weighted down by his heavy armor, wrapped in his cloak while the rain poured down on him, his feelings were those of misery and boredom rather than glory.

When battles did occur, the total amount of time a legionary spent on the fighting line often amounted to no more than a few minutes. With multiple ranks constantly rotating, for every five minutes a soldier spent fighting he spent roughly twenty-five resting. And if the battle was over quickly, he may not get a chance to engage at all. Yet whether it was fate or just dumb luck, Artorius had most often found himself in either the first or second rank during major battles. At Braduhenna, his first battle as a centurion, Artorius' century had fought by itself, rather than as part of a larger cohort formation. Therefore, Artorius had been out front the entire duration.

He had been personally trained by the late legendary Marcus Vitruvius, the most perfect killing machine the Roman Army had ever unleashed. And though there were many occasions where he would score only superficial injuries to his enemies or be unable to close the distance effectively, when Artorius was on the fighting line, enemies of Rome often died. After his final skirmish on the Rhine, he'd heard some of his younger soldiers complaining they had not been able to kill anyone. He thought they should consider themselves lucky.

As he sat brooding for a moment, the door opened once more and a younger praetorian officer stepped in.

"Centurion Pilus Prior Artorius?" the man asked. Artorius replied with a nod, to which the praetorian extended his hand. "Centurion Lucius Cornelius."

"I trust you've made arrangements for legionaries arriving from North Africa and the other western provinces?"

"Yes, sir." Cornelius then produced a series of scrolls. "Here is the roster of every volunteer and which legion they arrived from. I have made marks next to all who've arrived. The only ones unaccounted for are from the First, Fifth, and Twentieth Legions. Am I correct to guess they all came with you?"

"They did," Artorius answered. "What about transportation? By my estimate, we will need at least three *Quinquereme* class ships to transport all of our men, their equipment and baggage, plus all the household goods and slaves brought by the officers."

"I've got you two," Cornelius replied. "Apologies, sir, but there simply are not enough merchant ships with sufficient empty space. They tend to

leave as full as when they arrived, only with other types of cargo. Any wasted empty space costs them money. Getting a detachment of military vessels has proven extremely difficult, though I did manage to get the two Quinqueremes. They were confiscated ships taken by imperial customs from a band that was caught smuggling cargo from the Far East and attempting to avoid paying tax on goods brought from beyond the empire. They are slated to be refitted as warships. However, I was able to acquire their use for this mission."

"Fair enough," Artorius acknowledged. "The household baggage and slaves of the officers can travel by land, though their arrival in Judea will take months rather than weeks."

"I'm afraid it's unavoidable, sir," Cornelius apologized. He then handed Artorius another parchment. "Every officer, optio and above, will have personal quarters aboard ship and be able to take one personal servant, as will any spouses."

"You're quite the logistician," Artorius noted with approval as he read through the scrolls, which detailed the storage of rations, drinking water, as well as any equipment they would need as soon as they landed in Judea.

"It was one of my duties with the praetorians, sir. In addition to being an optio, I was responsible for the handling of all supply transactions within my cohort. Any time we needed new blankets for the barracks, bunks constructed, exotic foods for the officers' mess, or any other assortment of things a praetorian cohort needs, I was the one who was told to make it happen."

"Good to know," Artorius stated. "I'm certain we'll have a further use for your skills once we arrive in Caesarea."

Cornelius nodded in reply and then continued going through his notes about the travel by sea. "Legionaries will have to sleep on deck, of course. It will be cramped, and I hope not too many get seasick." Artorius took a deep breath through his nose, which made Cornelius grin for a moment. "Not a fan of the sea are you, sir?"

"Let's just say I may be spending more time leaning over the side of the ship than in my quarters," Artorius replied dryly. "Two days from Massilia to Ostia was bad enough. I admit that I loathe the thought of two weeks at sea."

"Of course, it depends on the weather," Cornelius added. "Commander Stoppello tells me he once made it to Alexandria in nine days, though that was under ideal conditions. Plus he and a fellow captain had placed a rather

sizeable wager to see who could get there first."

"Stoppello?"

"Commander Tiberius Stoppello," Cornelius read from other scroll that had the names of the ships' officers and crew. "Twenty years with the Imperial Navy, eight as a ship's captain. He knows his way around the Mediterranean better than any man alive."

Artorius looked at the parchment and grinned when he recognized one of the names, which he pointed to. "I think I know this man."

"Hansi Flavianus," Cornelius observed. "That's unusual, he has a Roman family name, yet his given name is either Germanic or Nordic. It says here he's Stoppello's sailing master."

"And if he is who I'm thinking of, he's the brother of one of my centurions."



Their time in the Imperial City had passed far too quickly. It was their last evening in Rome, and while his men enjoyed a final night in the port city of Ostia, Artorius took a walk in the vineyards with his stepmother. He was growing concerned about his father's health, given the drastic change in his appearance since the last time he was home. He expressed this to Juliana.

"Your father has aged quite a bit over the past few years," she confessed. Though now in her sixties, Juliana had aged rather gracefully, far more so than her husband who was three years younger than she. "He spends less time in the fields now, and recently had to hire an overseer to do all the tasks in the vineyards he used to enjoy."

"How can he afford an overseer?" Artorius asked, concerned. "The upkeep of his slaves is costly enough. I cannot imagine that some wealthy patrician hasn't tried to buy the vineyard out from under him."

"Oh they have," Juliana said. "One of the city tribunes named Cursor made him quite a reasonable offer just two weeks ago. I wish your father had taken him up on it."

"So do I," Artorius replied. "I know Tribune Cursor well. He is a good man, and one of the best cavalry officers I ever served with."

"Your father likes living away from the chaos of the city," Juliana observed. "I cannot say I blame him. I sold my cottage about two years ago. We used part of the money to hire the overseer and purchase a couple more

slaves to work the fields. No, I think that regardless of how hard things may become, he will spend the rest of his days here."

"What if I bought the house and the vineyards from him?" Artorius asked. "I would be accepting all financial obligations; you and father can continue to live here as my tenants."

"I do not think he would wish to place such a burden on you…" Juliana started to say.

Artorius cut her short. "Mother, I *have* money. I am a centurion pilus prior, which pays a substantial sum. My annual wage is thirty times that of a legionary in the ranks. And remember, Diana comes from the Proculeius family. Her fortune and financial worth exceed mine considerably. A greater burden to me would be knowing that one bad harvest and you and Father could lose everything, to say nothing of his declining health."

"I will talk with him," Juliana said, a sense of relief showing in her face and demeanor.

Chapter X: Casting Off

Port of Ostia, Italia
May, 31 A.D.
***

Though grateful for the time he and Diana were able to spend with his family, Artorius was now anxious to get his men on the ships and headed for Judea. As his father-in-law had shown little interest in seeing him or Metellus, Diana had offered to go alone to pay her respects. The visit was, unsurprisingly, brief. She had yet to tell her husband what transpired between them.

Disciplinary problems had been minimal while his soldiers were in Rome. This came as a relief, seeing as many of the men under his command came from other units, and he was not familiar with their habits yet. Still, the lack of issues meant the screening process he and his fellow officers had done of the men's service records had been effective.

He made his way down to the docks, where a pair of Quinquereme ships were waiting for them. These were the heavier class of Roman warships, so named because of the five rows of oars that protruded from each side.

"Centurion Artorius?" a voice said behind him.

He turned to see an older sailor who was mostly bald. What hair he did have was mostly gray. He was also very tall; a good half head taller than Artorius.

"Yes?" the centurion replied to the man, who immediately extended his hand.

"Commander Tiberius Stoppello," the sailor said, clasping his hand.

"Of course you are," Artorius replied with a grin.

"Come aboard, and I'll show you where you and your men will be staying," Stoppello explained as they walked up the plank and onto the ship, which was a bustle of activity. Magnus accompanied them and appeared to be looking around anxiously. Quartermasters were uploading supplies of rations and fresh water, sailors tended to the sails and masts, while oarsmen were constantly moving between decks.

"A miniature fortress on water," Artorius observed. "How many men on your crew?"

"We have about four hundred sailors and oarsmen," Stoppello explained,

“With another one hundred and twenty marines once we’re refitted as a proper warship. For now, your legionaries will be acting as marines.”

“I have two nearly centuries of men riding on each ship, so it will be a tight fit.”

“No matter,” Magnus replied. “We’ve slept in cramped spaces before.”

“I’ll cramp your space with a fist in your arse!” The shouted voice startled the three men., Before they could react, a large figure swooped down from the top deck, tackling Magnus to the ground. The Nordic centurion was caught by surprise and fell to his back. The large man, with an equally blonde mop of hair, spewing obscenities as they grappled on the deck, throwing wild blows. Yet, for the violence of the spectacle, it appeared both men were laughing maniacally through it all.

“What is the meaning of this?” Stoppello snapped.

Artorius placed a hand on his chest as he made to move towards the men. The centurion was laughing to himself.

“I think I know,” he replied. He shouted, “And a good day to you, Hansi!”

The large man staggered to his feet, his eyes wild with traces of hair hanging in his face. “Oy! You must be Artorius…” Before he could finish, Magnus smashed his fist into his face, sending him sprawling. His insane laughter never ceased. “By Odin’s raven, you still hit like a girl, little brother!”

Commander Stoppello let out a sigh and shook his head. “I should have guessed,” he said. “For a moment, I thought my sailing master had gone insane. *Hansi!*”

“Sir!” the Nordic sailor barked, suddenly on his feet.

“You can express your sibling affections later. Right now I need you to ensure that all rations and water casks are secured, and then have the oarsmen make ready.”

“Right away!”

“I’ll be buggered,” Valens said as he stepped onto the deck from the gangplank. “That’s your brother?”

“And your brother-in-law,” Magnus added, his hands on his knees with his face sweaty and flushed. “Why don’t you go introduce yourself? I’m sure he’d just love to hear about your torrid adventures with our baby sister.”

“Thanks, but if his *affections* are anything like your grandfather’s, I think I’ll wait until he’s finished making you feel welcome.” He then turned to

Artorius. “We’re ready when you are.”

The centurion nodded. “Have the lads come aboard and start stowing their gear. Commander Stoppello, when will we be ready to depart?”

“Within the hour.”



“Alaric, are you ready?” The question startled the young man. He looked up from where he was stowing his few personal belongings into a canvas sack and saw the sailing master, Hansi, standing over him. He had been dozing next to an empty crate on the pier while dock workers loaded cargo onto the waiting ship, before rousing himself to pack up his few possessions.

“Just packing up my things,” he said quietly.

“Ever sailed on a military vessel?” Hansi asked.

“No,” the young man replied, eyes cast downward as he tied the sack close.

“After you get your personal effects stowed, report to the master of arms to draw your gladius and buckler.”

The order felt strange to Alaric but he simply nodded and walked ahead of the sailing master up the ramp and onto the crowded deck of the ship. He ran his fingers through his blonde hair and swallowed hard as he saw dozens of Roman soldiers in full armor crowded onto the deck.

“Who are they?” he asked nervously.

“First Italic Cohort,” Hansi answered, “headed to Judea. Nothing to worry yourself over. My brother is one of their centurions.” He then hailed a Roman officer that Alaric could only guess was the sailing master’s brother. Once the man turned to face them, Alaric could see the striking resemblance. The two men were blonde haired and fair skinned like he was, but they were not of his people.

Alaric was originally of the Marsi tribe in Germania. He and his mother had been two of the only survivors from his village when it was destroyed by the Romans nearly sixteen years before. Alaric’s father, whose face he sadly could not remember, had been chief of their people and, as far as he knew, had died in battle. After fleeing the onslaught of the legions, his mother gained them passage to Britannia, where Alaric grew up in the court of Brigante King Breogan and his daughter, Cartimandua. Though she was a few years older than he, Alaric was infatuated with the Brigante princess. She

viewed him like a younger sibling, and he knew that any feelings he had for her were in vain. After all, as her father's only child, she was heir to the kingdom, and he was but a refugee from a defeated race. When he was thirteen, Alaric decided to leave the safe confines of Breogan's house and make his way out into the world.

The ship's captain, Commander Tiberius Stoppello, was arguing with the dockhands, who were insisting they take on additional cargo that needed to get to Alexandria. Stoppello was explaining that with one hundred and sixty legionaries on board, there simply was not room for any extraneous cargo. He also emphasized that the imperial Quaestor was paying him far more for transporting legionaries to Judea than he would receive if he took the cargo instead. Alaric watched the two men argue and did not see the legionary until he bumped into him.

"Here, watch where the hell you're going!" the man barked.

Alaric was startled and took a step back. Packs, shields, and javelins were stacked all about, and the soldier was struggling to keep his footing as he attempted to take off his armor.

Not wishing to see any more of the armored men, Alaric quickly made his way below deck and found his place behind an oar. A sad irony that after his people were massacred by the Romans, he was now serving aboard one of their warships. He had spent the past several years working aboard merchant ships, mostly smaller triremes, as he grew from boy to man. It was after a spell in Rome he took this position aboard the large Quinquereme. He had met the man named Hansi, who was on leave while their new ship was going through its initial refitting. Given his fair skin and blonde hair, he looked to be of similar ancestry as Alaric.

He soon learned that his new friend was, in fact, from a realm even further north, outside the borders of the empire. Hansi's grandfather had served as a Roman auxiliary and earned the family's citizenship. His brother, Magnus, who Alaric had seen on the deck of the ship, served in the legions. The Norseman had offered him a position as an oarsman, once he heard about Alaric's previous experience. He assured him this posting would not be a contracted position, so he would not be compelled to continue to serve as a member of the Roman Navy. Of course, Hansi did make certain he knew that should he wish to formally enlist, he would have a career instead of a temporary job. As work prospects for the young Alaric were scarce in Rome, the promise of a steady wage was too much to pass up. The Norseman had

been a good friend, like an older brother, during their remaining time in Rome; never asking questions about his past.

"Ready to cast off!" Hansi shouted.

It was Alaric's first sea voyage in over a year. He was seated on the inside bench, much to his dismay. The inside of the ship was hot, dark, and stank of sweaty bodies. At least whenever he had a portal seat he could feel the cool sea breeze and catch a glimpse of the sun. The rocking of the ship also made him seasick during the initial part of a voyage when he could not see where the ship was heading. There was a pair of leather straps fastened beneath the bench where Alaric and his oar mate would secure their gladii and small round shields.

Hansi shouted some orders to the men up top and then signaled to the drummer who sat at the front of the galley by the steps. He started to beat a slow cadence, which the men on the oars used to keep themselves synchronized as they backed away from the dock.

"Hansi!" Alaric said as the sailing master walked past them, ensuring all oarsmen were in sync with the drum cadence.

"What is it?"

"Where was your brother posted before coming here? Was he there long?" the young man asked in between grunts of pulling on his oar.

"Come on lad, keep your chest up and back tight," Hansi said, correcting him on his oar technique before answering his question. "He was in Cologne, with the Army of the Rhine for the past sixteen years."

"Sixteen years," Alaric replied as he leaned back into his oar once more. "Was he in the wars in Germania?"

"I'm certain he was," Hansi confirmed with a nod.

"And I assume a lot of his men on the upper deck were as well."

"Probably," the sailing master shrugged. He then looked at the young oarsman inquisitively. "Why all the questions about my brother?"

"No reason." Alaric quickly shook his head. His face was red with building emotion, though Hansi surmised it was due to fatigue.

"Control your breathing," he directed. "I know being an oarsman is tedious work, but that's what you draw the emperor's coin for." He then shouted to the rest of the crewmen, "That goes for all of you! I know we've been at port for some time, but get a few leagues under our belts, and you'll be right in no time."

"Says he who doesn't have to man an oar," the man next to Alaric

grumbled, thinking the Norseman could not hear.

Much to his dismay, Hansi's hearing was very sharp, and he stopped in his tracks, turned casually, and walked over to their bench. His expression unchanged, he reached past Alaric and cuffed the man hard behind the ear.

"One more insubordinate remark like that and you'll be manning this oar by yourself, with a bloody back!" Without another word he turned and headed past the drummer and up the stairs.

"Dumbass," an oarsman behind them said. "Hansi manned an oar for eight years before he began working his way up the ranks of the crew. He took the time to learn from the sailors and officers, and you would do well to learn from him."

The insubordinate oarsman only grumbled in reply. Alaric said nothing, as he did not even hear the men. His breath was trembling and a single tear rolled down the side of his face. What bitter irony that a number of legionaries aboard this ship had taken part in the annihilation of his people, including his closest friend's brother!

He thought of nothing else as the hours passed and the port of Ostia grew smaller, eventually disappearing in the distance. He was oblivious to the other oarsmen who were crowded in the confined space with him. Their grunts and muttered curses, whenever they hit a rough patch of sea, muffled in his ears. His body moved by instinct, and he was not even cognizant of the rhythmic drum beats.

Memories long suppressed suddenly flooded into his consciousness. He could feel the cold waters of the raging river as he clung to his mother's back. She was the best swimmer in their village, aside from his father. Wrought with exhaustion, she collapsed on the far bank, shielding him as she watched the Roman soldiers storm their village, burning huts and killing all who were unable to escape their wrath. Alaric's father was most likely already dead by this time. With his mother shielding his view he could not see what was happening, but he could still hear the screams of the villagers, even over the roar of the river. He had vague memories of both his grandfather, as well as his mother's sister, who had given birth just days before the Romans attacked. Years later, his mother would not give him the brutal details, but she did finally tell him that his grandfather, aunt, and newborn cousin were all killed by the rampaging legionaries.

"Oars in!" the drummer shouted as he ceased his cadence.

There was a collective sigh of relief from the oarsmen as they quickly

pulled their oars into the galley until just the large paddles protruded from the sides of the ship. Alaric could not recall how long they'd been rowing, but he was suddenly exhausted. His mates stood and stretched while bantering amongst each other. The young man felt claustrophobic. He scrambled over the long oars that now ran across the deck, stumbling past the other oarsmen as he made his way to the steps leading to the surface.

"Permission to go up top," he said, panting.

"What do you need to go up top for?" the drummer, who was in charge of the deck, asked. "You can wait until off shift like everyone else. Besides, if I let you go up top now, then I have to let everyone go! And with all those damned legionaries crowding the deck, there's not enough room for the sailors as it is."

"I feel sick," Alaric confessed, his face pale. It was not a lie, though his nausea had little to do with the incessant rowing over the rolling seas.

"Let him go," an oarsman at the front of the deck said. "If he spews down here, the whole bloody deck will stink all the way to Caesarea."

"Go on," the drummer nodded towards the stairs.

"Thank you, sir." He stumbled up the steps as the ship lurched through an oversized wave.

Up top, crewmen manned the sails, keeping the ship on course. Orders were shouted by Hansi, as well as the other officers who supervised the maneuvering under sail. No one even seemed to notice the young man as he leaned against the short rail that lined the top of the stairs.

The sea air was a reprieve, though it was short-lived. Crowding the deck were dozens of legionaries. Their armor and weapons were all stacked at the center of the deck. All wore red tunics, belted in the middle. Some lounged against their packs. Others played dice or other games, while a number had their sandals off with their feet hanging over the side of the ship. And then there were those who hung over the rail for a different reason, the seas already wreaking havoc on their stomachs. Alaric looked from one to the next. It was hard to guess most of their ages. He did surmise that a large number were his age or younger. And then there were some, plain by the weathering of their faces and the visible scars, who had seen numerous campaigns.

Whenever he saw a legionary who looked to be older than thirty, Alaric suddenly envisioned the man, eyes filled with rage, screaming in fury as he plunged his sword into his father, grandfather, aunt, or even his baby cousin.

And yet, even if some of these men had slaughtered his family, the soldiers themselves would never know it. After all, they had wiped out entire villages during the Germanic Wars. And besides, that was sixteen years ago. It was a difficult paradox to grasp, that these men who laughed and joked amongst themselves were monstrous killers.

Suddenly the sea air no longer comforted Alaric, and he felt violently ill. Gasping for breath, he sprinted past the elevated cabins to the back of the ship. He practically fell over the rail as he doubled over, the contents of his stomach spewing forth as he retched over and over. His vision clouded with tears, and all he could see was fire and death. Though the only actual sounds were the loud creaking of the ship and the rolling waves of the sea, in his mind he could hear the crackle of raging fire and the piteous screams of his people as they were brutally murdered by the very men who were now aboard this ship.

"Alaric!" It was Hansi, who was doing a walk around of the ship.

The young oarsman bolted upright and quickly ran his forearm across his bloodshot eyes.

"What the bloody hell, man? One would think you've never been out to sea before!"

"Sorry, sir, I don't know what came over me," Alaric lied.

"Well, you have been land-bound for the past year," the sailing master reasoned. "Another day and you'll be fine. At least you had the good sense to vomit off the back of the ship! I pity any oarsman sitting next to a port opening who gets splattered in the face whenever some poor sod spews his breakfast over the side. Just so you know, with this good wind we've picked up, we're running under sails for the time being; so that will give you all a bit of reprieve." He then patted the young man on the shoulder. "Now, I have to go pay respects to another one of my relatives who happens to be aboard ship."

Alaric could only nod, collapsing to the deck and hugging the support post of the rail as the sailing master bounded back towards the front of the ship. The raised decks with the officers' cabins shielded Alaric from the rest of the ship, though in that moment he did not care. As he clutched the post and contemplated throwing himself off the back of the ship, he let loose the tears that had been building for sixteen years.



At the prow of the ship, Optio Valens leaned over the rail, watching the endless seas before them, relishing the spray of saltwater in his face. He was able to tolerate sea travel readily enough. His main concern was keeping the men out of trouble. The sun was red as it slowly sank into the west. They had not even been at sea a full day yet and with nothing productive to do, the men were already becoming restless.

"Oy! You must be Valens!" a loud voice shouted.

The optio cringed for a moment, knowing that sooner or later he'd have to meet the other member of his wife's eccentric family. He had, of course, known her brother Magnus for years before he even met her. Her father and eldest brother lived in Rome, though they were more 'Roman' in their dress and demeanor than Nordic. Her grandfather, affectionately known as *Mad Olaf*, gave many people the impression that he was completely insane. Despite being in his nineties, decades past the age that he should have passed on to the halls of his ancestors, the long-retired auxilia centurion still enjoyed physically brawling with his grandsons. Given the type of greeting Hansi had given Magnus, Valens surmised he took after his grandfather far more than his civilized relatives.

He turned and apprised the Nordic sailor. He did have a bit of resemblance to his younger brother, though he was taller, leaner, yet still very large. His thick mop of blonde hair was kept short in the back, and like Magnus, he was clean shaven.

"And you must be Hansi," Valens said with a trace of apprehension.

The Norseman gave a boisterous cry and embraced him hard, slapping him hard on the back. "Welcome, brother!"

"Well," Valens said as they stood apart. "I wasn't sure if I was going to get the same greeting you gave to Magnus."

"Bah!" Hansi retorted with a wave. "We save that for him. Oleg and our father think we're all completely mad."

"And are you?"

"Probably," Hansi nodded. "Yet I look at our grandfather, who is likely to reach a hundred before the Valkyries come for him. While Father is only in his late sixties, soft living in Rome has done bad things to his health. Would not surprise me if Grandfather outlives him."

"I did notice that your father and eldest brother are quite a bit different than the rest of you."

Hansi shrugged again and then leaned back against the rail next to his brother-in-law. Valens noticed that he was keeping an eye on his sailors while they talked. Even while exchanging pleasantries with family, the sailing master was always on duty.

"Oleg's quite a bit older than the rest of us. Olaf began spending more time with the family after Grandmother passed on, but by this time our eldest brother was already a grown man and finished with his apprenticeship under our father. He never got that added influence of our ancestors; always considering himself a Roman and nothing more, despite his Nordic given name. In fact, no one outside the family ever calls him *Oleg*. Me, Magnus, and Svetlana were born Romans, but thanks to Grandfather, we kept that link to our heritage. Father never talks about it, though given that he broke Roman tradition by naming us how he did, he must be at least a little sentimental about where we came from."

"Svetlana and I have talked about that quite a bit," Valens said. "I do not have that kind of link with my ancestry. My father was a legionary, my mother a Gaul. I honestly do not know if we were even Latin or if a few generations back one of our predecessors won our family citizenship. All he would ever say is that I was a Roman and that was enough."

Chapter XI: Sea of Evil

***

By the second day, the small flotilla had rounded the southwest tip of Italia, after which there was no land in sight at all. As the sun rose on the fourth day, Artorius joined Commander Stoppello on the top deck. The ship's captain bore a look of concern.

"There's been a change in the air pressure," he said. He pointed off to the east. "And there, black clouds are forming in the distance. A bad storm is coming, sure!"

"Can we avoid it?" Artorius asked. "Perhaps there is a port somewhere we can dock in. Honestly, having a view of nothing but sea for the last two days, I have no idea where we are."

"We are in the middle of the Ionium Sea," Stoppello replied. "Sparta is a full day's sailing to the northeast, and we are still at least a day and a half west of Crete."

"So we sail right through it, then. Well, the lads have been rather restless with boredom, so this'll liven things up a bit." Artorius' attempt at humor was not felt by Stoppello.

"As we get closer, I want your men to cluster at the center of the deck, near the main mast," the ship's captain directed. "Have them bind themselves to the mast and whatever else is permanently fixed to the ship. They may be eager to assist, but they will only get in the way of my sailors."

"Understood," Artorius replied, his manner suddenly serious as he grasped the gravity of their situation. As the centurion descended the steps, sailors under Hansi's orders were reefing sails and readying the ship. A few miles away, just within sight off to the southeast, the other ship was preparing for the coming storm as well.

"Well, brother," the Nordic sailing master said as he approached Magnus, who was directing his legionaries to cluster at the center of the deck, "it looks like you might get a bit damp before this journey is over."

Magnus noted the deep concern in Hansi's face, despite his outward boisterousness. "No need to soften the blow. Just how 'damp' are we talking?"

"If you look far enough, you can see that the sky is as black as Odin's raven. A less-skilled crew would likely be torn to pieces in what is to come."

Hansi's face was hard for a moment before he grinned once more, smacking Magnus on the shoulder. "Not to worry, little brother. I'll carry you through this, like I did when you thought you could swim across the Lammefjord."

"I was four years old then," Magnus noted with a chuckle at the long forgotten memory, "And I had not yet learned to swim."

"You did after that. I saw to it, knowing Father would give me a severe beating if I let you drown." Hansi then looked over his shoulder, a blast of cold wind whipping his hair back. "Best secure yourself with your men. There is nothing more you can do, just let your big brother carry you one more time."

The black clouds and howling winds had come upon them unnervingly fast. Legionaries sat huddled shoulder to shoulder, arms linked together. The more superstitious cringed in terror at the first crack of lightening.

"Steady lads!" Artorius said as he joined his men.

"Sir, shouldn't you be in the cabin with your wife?" Sergeant Cicero asked, looking up at his centurion, who was doing his best to mask his own fear.

"Absolutely not!" The voice of Lady Diana startled the men. She wore a set of short riding breaches and a loose-fitting tunic. A fierce determination was in her eyes as she linked her arm with Artorius'. "My husband will not leave his men to face the wrath of Neptune alone, and if he goes over the side, I go with him."

As if to emphasize her remark, the ship dipped sharply and cut into a deep wave. A torrent of sea water surged across the deck, knocking over scrambling sailors, as well as both Artorius and Diana. They each grabbed onto a loose rope and dragged themselves back to where the mass of legionaries huddled together. Despite the helpless terror they both felt, Diana broke into a fit of laughter.

"How absurd would it be if we died now, after all we've been through?" she said over the howling wind and near-continuous rolling thunder.

As if the gods were answering her directly, a bolt of lightning speared the lower cross brace that held the now reefed main sail. A fierce blast of wind caused the ship to heave backwards as it surged through another massive wave, snapping the brace, which flew over the back of the ship, taking the sail with it.

"Well, that's not good," Artorius said as calmly as he could manage.



As quickly as the storm had fallen on them, it had passed. It was now late afternoon, the sun shone brightly, and there was scarcely a cloud in the deep blue sky. Both sailors and legionaries were in a state of mild shock at still being alive. The deck was completely soaked, and as crewmen sought to make what repairs they could, soldiers were attempting to dry out their armor, weapons, and kit.

Centurion Artorius and Commander Stoppello looked up at the mast and main sail. What remained of the sail was in tatters, the mast cracked in places and a central crossbeam missing. The other ship was nowhere to be seen.

"Think they bought it?" Felix asked as he joined the men.

"Can't say for certain," Stoppello replied. "That we have not seen any wreckage is a hopeful sign..."

The tesserarius nodded and turned to his centurion. "Sir, we've got the lads drying their gear. Cicero is trying to find his chest of oil and polish so that our armor doesn't rust. However, with the entire deck being an absolute shambles, he's not even sure if we still have it or if it was swept over the side."

"Do what you can," Artorius said with a nod.

Felix saluted and returned to the lower deck.

"I lost three sailors in that gods' awful storm," Stoppello observed aloud. "Two were taken away while trying to secure the main sail, the other was swept off the back deck."

"I am sorry," the centurion replied.

"They died doing their duty. And it looks like we'll be rowing our way to Caesarea."

"We have over a dozen broken oars," Hansi replied as he joined them. "I've got half the crews rowing, the rest bailing all the water we took on. The bottom deck is almost completely filled, makes me wonder how we're even still afloat!"

"This will slow things down considerably," Artorius noted. He turned to the commander. "How long till we get to Caesarea now?"

Stoppello exhaled audibly and paused a few seconds while he did some quick calculations.

"Well, I've only got so many crewmen who can man the oars," he replied. "It's not like I can have them rowing day and night."

“Put my legionaries to work then,” Artorius responded. “Hell, I’ll take an oar myself if I have to.”

“Let’s just say that *if* we can have the oars going constantly, I still predict at least an additional week, maybe two. We will need to stop off for provisions and to conduct what repairs we can. Thankfully, Cnossus, on the northern side of the Isle of Crete is only about a day from here.” Stoppello turned to Hansi. “Alter course to the northwest.”

“Yes, sir,” the sailing master replied before heading down below deck.

The stairs were crammed with oarsmen, who were in a long line, passing buckets full of water up from the bottom deck.

“Then that’s what we’ll do,” Artorius asserted to the ship’s captain. “I will task my men to fill in as replacements on the oars to provide relief to your crews as much as possible. And as soon as they finish drying their kit, I will task them with helping your sailors as much as they are able, without being in the way.”

As Alaric manned his oar once more, he was astonished to still be alive. In his superstitious young mind, the gods were punishing him for having taken up with a Roman vessel. He had faced plenty of storms during his time on merchant ships, but nothing like the fury unleashed on them that day. He was now rowing alone, as his oar mate was among those tasked with bilging out the lower deck. This added great strain, though being of strong Germanic stock, he managed far better than some of his companions. He watched as Hansi came below deck and spoke a few words to the drummer.

“Port side, hold fast!” the drummer ordered.

Alaric and those on the opposite side continued to row, turning the ship.

Hansi was calculating their rate of rotation and after a few moments gave subsequent orders to the drummer. “All oars, cruising speed!”

The beating cadence picked up once more and the battered ship lurched to the northeast.



The call to Cnossus had been a reprieve for sailor and legionary alike, though most grumbled that their stay was far too short. Valens, in particular, lamented that he had only been able to sample a small portion of the exotic experiences to be found within the port city.

“We were at least able to purchase new oars and inspect the structural integrity of the ship,” Commander Stoppello said as Artorius joined him and Hansi on the pier.

“Unfortunately, the main mast is completely unsound,” Hansi added. “She’s cracked in so many places that even if we could acquire another sail, it wouldn’t hold.”

“So what happens now?” Artorius asked.

“Well,” Stoppello began. “We can either wait a week for local craftsmen to fashion us a new mast and sail; which will cost us a fortune, mind you, or we can row the rest of the way to Caesarea and have the Roman Navy conduct the repairs.”

“How long will it take us to reach Judea under oars?”

“Close to a week,” Stoppello answered, “maybe less if your legionaries prove adept at rowing and can gain us a couple extra hours per day.”

“At this rate, all the officers’ household baggage will arrive before we do,” Artorius remarked sarcastically.

It was not true, of course. The convoy of oxcarts had broken off from the group at Massilia and was making its way by land across northern Italia, through Dalmatia, Macedon, and Thrace, before taking a series of ferries across the short channel into Asia Minor. From there they would make their way across the mountains before finally skirting the coast down into Judea. With oxcarts only averaging, at best, fifteen miles per day, it would be several months before they arrived, barring any unforeseen incidents. Twenty legionaries had been tasked as armed escorts for the convoy, while carrying a scroll from the senate, ordering urban cohorts to provide additional armed guards in between major cities. Artorius and Diana’s servants, including Proximo and Nathaniel, travelled this way with only a single maidservant accompanying Diana. Artorius’ callous remark was simply made in exasperation.

“I certainly won’t be besting my former time for crossing the Mediterranean,” Stoppello said with disappointment. “We once made the journey in less than nine days, though I suppose the gods do have a say in what conditions we set sail under.”

“What about our other ship?” Artorius asked.

“No one in Cnossus has seen her,” Hansi answered.

“So provided she wasn’t torn to pieces in the storm,” Stoppello added, “she should be arriving in Caesarea any time now.”

Chapter XII: Black Devil Ship

***

Days passed, and boredom was once again becoming the most arduous enemy for the legionaries aboard the ship. At one point the sailing master had pointed off to the north, noting they were passing south of the Isle of Rhodes, where many years before Tiberius had been sent after a bitter quarrel with the Emperor Augustus. But as the island was far in the distance, all anyone could actually see were the endless waters. It baffled the legionaries that the sailors could even know exactly where they were. The tedious task of manning the oars, even if for just a couple hours per day, proved more monotonous than when they were lounging on the upper deck. The dull tedium soon turned to heightened awareness early in the afternoon of the third day as a sailor high up on the mast called down a dire warning.

"Ship approaching, sir!" he shouted. "They're heading straight for us!"

"A relief, perhaps?" Stoppello asked. "Someone from Caesarea may be searching for us."

"I don't think so, sir," the sailor replied, his face full of alarm. "She looks to be armed, but that's no Roman Navy vessel."

"Damn it all," Stoppello swore under his breath. "Fucking pirates!"

"Pirates?" Artorius asked, having rushed over upon hearing the warning. "I thought Pompey Magnus wiped them out over a hundred years ago."

"A menace like this can never be truly exterminated," the commander replied through gritted teeth. "He may have destroyed their strongholds, but there are still renegades that prey on ships. We have no heavy armament, and there is no way we can outrun them, not without a main sail."

"Who says we have to?" Artorius mused. "You forget there are a hundred and sixty legionaries on board. Our main sails are gone, so they have no idea that this is a military vessel. What say we lay a little surprise for them?" His cocked grin reassured Stoppello.

"Alright," he replied. "We'll allow them to dock. Once your legionaries clear the majority off the deck, my sailors will board their ship and take it."

"Right away!" Artorius acknowledged before turning to his task at hand. "Centurion Magnus, Optio Valens! Prepare both centuries for battle!"

As legionaries donned their armor and strapped on their weapons, Artorius walked to the entrance of his cabin where Lady Diana and her maid

servant stood. Though his wife looked steady enough, the slave woman was petrified and cowering in the corner.

"Stay in there and barricade the door," Artorius directed.

Diana nodded and took a deep breath.

He asked, "Are you armed?"

Diana threw back her stola, revealing the legionary gladius she kept on her. "They won't take me without a lot of pain."

Artorius then kissed her quickly and returned to his men.

Once inside the cabin, Diana threw off her stola, preferring her short sleeve tunic and riding breaches. As they stacked chairs and a table against the door, her servant began to tremble uncontrollably.

"Snap out of it, woman!" Diana scolded, giving her a short slap across the face.

"I'm s…sorry, my lady," the slave replied through her tears. "I'm just so frightened what they will do to us. These pirates are soulless beasts."

"You just stay behind me," Diana said, drawing her weapon and taking a moment to marvel at the razor sharp blade. This was not the first time her life had been in grave danger. Unlike the incident when her estate had been overrun by remnants of the Sacrovir Revolt, this time she was prepared. Sweat formed on her brow, and she grabbed her wadded up stola, which she used to wipe off her face. The sound of the enemy ship approaching was growing louder; they were perhaps twenty minutes from boarding. She could her faint shouts of glee as the pirates reckoned they had found easy prey. Though her breath was trembling, she allowed herself a grin as she knew what nasty surprises awaited them.

"Looks like we'll finally get a chance to fight together," Hansi said as he helped his brother strap the belt around his armor.

"Don't get careless, brother," Magnus warned as he slung the baldric to his gladius over his shoulder. He started to don his helmet, then realizing how cumbersome it would be with its large crest, he elected against it. "You can fight with your fists, but your men are not soldiers."

"No," Hansi replied shaking his head, "We're better suited for this kind of a fight than you. We may only carry bucklers along with our gladii, and we don't enjoy the protection offered by your armor. By the same token, should you go over the side with all that heavy gear on, you're fucked!"

The two brothers gave a short laugh and Hansi smacked Magnus on the

shoulder.

"Just be careful," Magnus emphasized. "You did your duty to me when we were children, and you carried me again during the storm. Now it is my turn to protect you."

"We protect each other, little brother," Hansi said over his shoulder as he headed below deck.

In the stairwell leading to the oar decks, the sailing master stood ready with his gladius and buckler. He carried Commander Stoppello's weapons as well, knowing that his captain had to maintain the appearance of them being an unarmed merchant vessel for as long as possible while waiting for the pirates to board. He looked over his shoulder and saw young Alaric behind him. The lad was sweating profusely.

"You alright?" he asked casually.

"Y…yes," the German said before swallowing hard. "Just a little nervous."

"So am I," Hansi replied. "Don't worry, we're in good hands. I may mock my brother, but he is one of the best close combat fighters there is. And whatever rivalry may exist between the services, all sailors will freely admit that legionaries are the most effective killing machines in the world."

The Norseman, unaware of his young friend's past, did not realize the affect his words would have. He was now looking through the half open doorway leading to the main deck and did not see the young man's reaction.

Alaric closed his eyes and breathed deeply through his nose. It assailed his very soul that he was about to fight alongside the same soldiers who had annihilated his people. Many of these legionaries came from the Rhine frontier, and for all he knew some of the older ones could very well have taken part in the slaughter. Most of the journey, aside from their interlude in Cnossus, had been spent below deck, lest he have to set eyes on the hated legionaries. The times when soldiers had manned the oars had been particularly maddening for him, as there seemed like there was nowhere for him to run. And now, as if the gods were mocking his pain, he was forced to draw a blade in service to Rome.

Though the thoughts of fighting beside legionaries were repugnant, he was without choice. The pirates would not care about his past and would kill him as he was worthless as a hostage. And if he refused to fight, the Romans would execute him for cowardice. There was only one path to survival, and it was through the door with a sword in hand.

On the main deck, a series of large tarps covered the cargo. Hidden beneath them were a hundred and sixty legionaries. None of the men had donned their helmets, for fear they would hang up on the heavy canvas. Each man lay on his shield, with his javelins at his side. It was not the most comfortable position to be in, and they hated not being able to see what was happening. Artorius was at the corner of the left end tarp and was just able to see Commander Stoppello, who would signal when the enemy had boarded the ship. He glanced to his right at Felix, who was deep in thought.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Strange as this may sound," the tesserarius replied, "I'm actually thankful that Tierney is not on this ship with us." His common-law wife was prone to horrifying seasickness and had instead volunteered to go with the baggage train. Felix's request to lead the convoy had been denied with a decanus given the responsibility.

"Yeah," was all Artorius could say in reply. He then let out a nervous sigh.

He knew he'd taught Diana to fight well, but he still loathed the thought of what might happen to his wife should she not be able to fend off potential attackers. Given the location of the cabin, which was forward of where Artorius and his legionaries lay hidden, his instincts told him that Diana would have to fight before the day was over. He then cursed himself for having boarded her up in the first place. "If she dies, it will be because I failed her."

"Sir?" Felix asked. Artorius quickly shook his head and composed himself.

He could see the mass of the enemy ship and was knocked back as the side slammed into their vessel. A pair of massive gangplanks was dropped, with large spikes slamming into the deck, securing the two ships together. He then heard the sound of numerous foot falls as the pirates stormed aboard.

"What have we got here, then?" one asked aloud. "Looks like a poor merchant vessel has got itself lost; without your main mast, I see. To have survived the storms of the sea, just so that Neptune would hand you over to me." He then laughed maniacally and shouted orders to two of his men, "You two, check the cabin."

Artorius almost panicked as he could barely see two burly pirates trying to kick the door open.

“Here, it’s all blocked off!” one of the men grunted.

“Then kick harder!” the pirate captain snapped. “Must be something of value hidden in there. And what cargo have you got for us?” The pirate was now standing close to Stoppello.

“Passengers, mostly,” the commander replied. “Here, I’ll show you.” He started to walk away and quickly signaled to Artorius.

“Centuries up!” the centurion shouted. His men threw off the tarps and stood ready with their javelins. It was his first time seeing the pirates and he was shocked at just how many there were. He then grimaced, reveling in the look of surprise and fear in their faces. Against a heavily armored force of Rome’s finest, their numbers would mean nothing. *“Javelins…throw!”*

With a shout the legionaries unleashed a storm of javelins on their hapless foes, which were but a few feet in front of them. At such close range, the velocity of the pilum inflicted a fearsome toll. Brigands let out cries of anguish as they were ran through, their guts splayed by the tearing of the heavy javelins. A subsequent wave followed, and in a matter of moments, a substantial portion of the entire pirate force lay dead or dying on the deck. One was pinned to the front mast, the javelin running clear through his bowels, which erupted in a torrent of blood and human waste.

“Gladius…draw!”

Though they still had the legionaries outnumbered at least two-to-one, the pirates started to flee following the onslaught of javelins and the flash of Roman steel. Artorius’ face had contorted into a demonic scowl of bloodlust and rage. *“Advance!”*

It was a scramble for him and his men to get over the rows of tarp-covered crates, However, he was not going to give the enemy any chance of seizing the initiative or escaping. In his peripheral vision he saw Stoppello scramble for the stairway leading below deck. The pirate leader made ready to follow him, when Artorius leapt off a crate and slammed the bottom edge of his shield into the man’s face. The pirate fell to the deck, knocking himself senseless as blood sprayed from his shattered nose and mouth. Artorius quickly sliced the man’s throat open, leaving the body thrashing in shock as death took its grim hold. As he glanced up, his eyes grew wide when he saw the door to the cabin had been forced open. He started towards it when he was assailed by a group of pirates. Felix and a squad of legionaries were immediately at his side, and the battle commenced in earnest.

The pirates who battled them were a frightful sight. Coming from the

dregs of every corner of the empire, their appearance showed the brutally hard, and often short, lives they led. Their clothing was mostly tattered rags; even that which they stole from their victims did not stay in a state of reasonable wear for long. Few had any sort of armor, and those who did wore sleeveless mail shirts with so many broken links as to render them completely useless. They were armed with a few swords, but mostly spiked clubs and various tools refashioned as weapons. Most pervasive of all was their stench. Months at sea, combined with poor nutrition and nonexistent hygiene rendered them diseased-ridden beasts rather than men.

The brigand who bashed his clawed hammer against Artorius' shield was covered in hideous sores; his teeth were mostly absent and what he had were yellow and blackened with decay. His hair was frazzled and unkempt, with a scraggly beard offset by numerous facial scars. His eyes were wild, and he howled in desperate rage, which turned to a cry of pain as the centurion smashed the bottom of his shield against his lower leg, snapping the shin bone. Artorius quickly plunged his gladius into the fallen man's stomach, leaving him thrashing on the deck, screaming in pain, as the line of legionaries pushed back against their foe.



The cabin door smashed open, a pair of pirates shoved aside the table and chairs braced against it. Diana stood in the center of the room, her maidservant in the corner, cowering in fear. She had her left hand up defensively, her gladius in her right hand hidden behind her back.

"Well, well, what have we here then?" the larger of the two pirates said with a toothless grin, spitting off to the side in emphasis. He was mostly bald, filthy, and stunk of sweat. The stench of the men was so overpowering that Diana mused they had never bathed in the course of their pathetic lives.

"Been a while since we've had a soft piece of flesh such as this," his companion said with a wicked smile of his own.

Diana then revealed her weapon and settled into her fighting stance. The training Artorius had given her those years ago coming back to her.

"Ah, our little princess has got herself a toy," the second pirate said, walking towards her, nonchalantly. The bald one carried a large spiked awl, the shaft of which he slapped across the palm of his hand repeatedly.

"Come near me and I will end you!" Diana growled, her anger rising. Her

mind flashed back to the last time she had been held hostage by scum such as these. The humiliation she had been subjected to still haunted her, and she was determined that either these bastards would die, or she would.

"Now, we promise not to be too rough," the second pirate said with mock consolation. "Why don't you give us that before you hurt yourself?"

As he reached for Diana's weapon, she lunged forward, punching him hard across the face. She was incredibly strong, and the blow staggered the pirate. Before he could react, Diana stabbed him through the stomach. She gave a growl of rage, twisting the weapon back and forth as the brigand screamed. She wrenched her weapon free and showed shoved him aside. The pirate fell to the ground, clutching his ruptured guts and howling in pain. His bald companion was in shock with what he saw.

"Come on and die!" Diana shouted, goading the pirate on as she settled into her fighting stance once more. Her eyes clouded, and she was consumed with blinding hatred. This foul creature—for one could not call him a man—would have violated and tortured her, as Diana was sure he had countless women before. She would make him suffer greatly before sending him to hell.

"You filthy bitch!" he cried, swinging the awl in a high arc.

Diana sidestepped the blow, deflecting it with her gladius. The awl slammed into a short end table and became stuck. As the wretch tried to pull his weapon free, Diana calmly stepped towards him and swung her gladius down, severing his hand with a sickening chop. The filthy man fell to the ground on top of his companion, who still thrashed about, sobbing uncontrollably. In a gruesome spectacle, the severed hand still clutched the awl and was twitching as life left it, with blood pooling on the table.

"Tourniquet his arm," Diana ordered her servant, pointing to the stump of the pirate's forearm from which blood gushed freely. He was screeching loudly and kicking his feet. The servant was still terrified of him even in his stricken state.

Finally Diana had to grab her by the stola and throw her towards the man. "Do as I say!"

As her servant took a long strip of cloth and tied off the stump of the pirate's arm, Diana walked over to the man she'd stabbed in the stomach and glared down at him. His face was flushed and covered in sweat. He was gasping for breath but had quit thrashing and was looking up at Diana both piteously and with abject terror. After a moment's pause, she stomped him

hard in his ruptured guts with contemptuous rage, eliciting even louder screams of pain. She then looked down at the blood-soaked blade of her weapon and gave a grin of satisfaction which only enhanced the malice in her eyes. She then knelt down and let loose a guttural cry, proceeding to smash the pommel of the gladius against the man's skull. The first two blows knocked him senseless, yet she continued in her assault unabated. Harder and faster she hammered her weapon into his head, smashing out what remained of his rotted teeth, shattering his nose in a spray of blood, and finally caving in the skull with a series of sickening crunches as the bones snapped. Blood sprayed her face, adding to her macabre appearance as she stood and turned to see the other pirate lying against the wall, trembling in shock from having his hand severed, eyes filled with terror. Diana growled and ran her tongue over her teeth, grinning sinisterly.

"I am not your soft piece of flesh," she snarled.



Though the pirates had been caught unawares at the discovery of this being a Roman warship transporting legionaries, they had since recovered and were attempting to fight back long enough to get to their own ship. Artorius drove the boss of his shield into the stomach of one of the men as Felix stabbed over the top of his own into the throat of a pirate whose eyes rolled into the back of his head, blood gushing from his severed windpipe. Pirates were used to bullying unarmed merchants and were completely unprepared to face heavily armed professional killers. As their weapons were crude at best, they were completely devoid of armor, and their training nonexistent. It was a terrible mismatch. One dirty brigand swung his axe at Artorius, which caught on the top of his shield. With a jerk of overwhelming strength, he tore the man's weapon from his hand, quickly stabbing him beneath the heart.

Towards the right of the line, Centurion Magnus and his legionaries were making short work of the pirates who dared fight them. There was simply no way for their assailants to breach the shield wall with their pitiful weapons. As they pushed the mob back towards the edge of the ship, the Norseman slammed his shield hard into one man, sending him screaming over the side where he was soon crushed as the swell of the sea sent the two warring ships crashing into each other. The bottom half of his torso was completely severed

and floating in the surf, with the upper half of his body plastered to the side of the enemy ship.

As the remnants tried to scramble back across the gangplanks, Stoppello saw it was time for his counterattack. The commander ran to the foredeck, where a loaded ballista sat beneath a tarp. He threw the tarp aside and fired at the horde trying to flee the oncoming legionaries. The stone missile flew in a short arc, decapitating a pirate as he stumbled onto the gangplank, his smashed head bouncing onto the deck with a series of sickening thuds.

"With me!" he shouted as he waved his gladius towards the enemy ship.

Fleet footed sailors stormed across, jumping the short distance to the upper deck. Magnus watched, at first, in apprehension and then with pride, as his older brother slashed his way through the panicked pirate mass. In a display of Nordic strength, he effortlessly tossed one man over the side, threw another to the deck and proceeded to smash him in the face savagely with the bottom edge of his buckler until the skull shattered. Magnus could see blood spurting as the pirate's arm stuck straight up, jolting violently. Hansi was not only incredibly strong. He was quick and nimble, almost like a cat attacking its prey. He swung his buckler in a hard slash that carried so much force that it smashed the windpipe of yet another pirate who fell to the ground, clutching his throat in agony as he desperately tried to breathe. The Nordic sailor pitilessly smashed his face with the hobnails of his sandaled feet and left him to suffocate. Within minutes it was over. Dozens of pirates stood with their hands behind their heads, weapons at their feet.

A cheer erupted from the legionaries and sailors. As Artorius shouted in celebration with his men, he suddenly remembered his wife, dropped his shield, and rushed to her cabin. As he got to the door, he saw a pool of blood and fluids forming under the doorway and onto the deck.

"Dear gods, no," he whispered.

Before he could utter another word, the door was wrenched the rest of the way open and a screaming pirate was shoved through, where he fell face first onto the deck. His right hand was severed and a tourniquet was bound to his forearm. Diana stepped out behind him, her hair disheveled, the front of her tunic, as well as the gladius she still wielded, covered in blood.

"Get up!" she shouted to the whimpering pirate, who struggled to his feet, clutching the stump of his forearm.

"Please, show mercy!" he pleaded, eyes wet with tears, his grimy face flushed and covered in sweat.

All eyes were now on Diana as she grabbed the wretch by the scruff of his neck and dragged him to the edge of the ship.

"I shall show you mercy," she growled. Her face twisted into a wicked smile, eyes filled with rage. *"The same mercy you were going to show me and my servant!"*

Artorius had never seen her so full of venom and yet, in a twisted sense, he found it arousing. Diana shoved the whimpering renegade to the railing. The sailors, legionaries, and pirate prisoners were all silent as they watched her with feelings ranging from rapt fascination to horror.

There was a splashing in the surf. Artorius looked over the side and saw blood pooling where a pair of sharks ripped into the corpse of a slain pirate. He then looked up at Diana, and as she met his gaze, his own wicked smile matched hers.

"I think the sharks are still hungry," Diana hissed into the man's ear.

He immediately started to wail and tried to break away from her surprisingly strong grasp. She smashed the flat of her gladius against the stump where his hand used to be, causing the pirate to howl in further pain and fall to his knees. She then cut the tourniquet, blood flowed from the wound. She grabbed his forearm and held it over the side as a stream of blood fell into the sea. With a cry of wrath, Diana grabbed the man by the throat and shoved him over the side. He fell screaming all the way down until he splashed into the sea.

Diana did not bother to see if the sharks had taken him. She stood, breathing deeply, her eyes closed as she fought to regain her composure. As she slowly turned her gladius over in her hand, Artorius walked over and placed his hand gently on the side of her face. She let out a quiet sigh and then opened her eyes wide. Tears of relief ran down her cheeks. She grabbed him by the hair on the back of his head with her free hand and roughly pulled him to her, kissing him long and passionately. After several long moments, she released her grip. Her expression had calmed, and a gentle smile crossed her face. The hatred in her eyes was gone, though the prisoners looked as if they were even more terrified of Diana than of the soldiers who had slaughtered their companions.

"*Ave my lady!*" shouted the legionaries, as Artorius took Diana by the hand and walked towards his assembled men.

Chapter XIII: Lost and Damned

***

“They are long overdue,” Pilate said as he stared over the balcony that looked out over the city and towards the sea. He was vexed at the thought of having lost not only a third of his legionary force to the seas, but also one of his closest friends. The First Italic Cohort had arrived in Judea, minus its commander and two centuries. Pilate was worried about his friend, as well as his men. Cornelius and Praxus had informed him about the terrible storm they had encountered and that the flotilla had been scattered. The ship carrying two of the centuries had arrived, and Justus Longinus had been in Caesarea with the legionaries from the east for almost a month, but if the vessel bearing the centurion pilus prior, along with one hundred and sixty of his men, was lost, it was an ill omen for Pilate.

“We never saw them again after the storm hit us,” Praxus bemoaned, his eyes cast downward. He had been friends with Artorius and Magnus for sixteen years and with Valens for even longer. “Our bearings were so far off that we ended up north in Tyrus instead of Caesarea. Though I must give credit to the ship’s crew, as I was surprised we were not even further off course.”

“You’ve been here three days,” Justus Longinus spoke up. “If their ship sustained any kind of substantial damage, it could take significantly longer for them to arrive. We should not count them as lost just yet.”

“Agreed,” Pilate said, turning to face the men. “Justus, as the senior-ranking centurion, you will assume command of the cohort for the time being.”

“Sir.”

Pilate then dismissed the men. As a servant opened the large double doors to allow the men out, his wife, Claudia, walked in through them. She was clearly vexed and looked as if she had not slept since the first ship had arrived.

“Still no word?” she asked, knowing the answer.

“It is too early to lose hope, my love,” Pilate replied. “Still, if we have not seen them in a week’s time, we should probably expect the worst has happened.”

Claudia joined her husband on the balcony, the clear, sunny day unable to

mask the gloom within her spirit. She tried to remain stoic as she took his hand, a single tear ran down her cheek.



“These were not very profitable pirates,” Valens observed as he came up from the lower deck of the captured ship, holding a cloth over his nose and mouth. “The hold is full of rotten food, and we found maybe a chest or two’s worth of plundered valuables. Not much of a catch.”

“The real prize is the ship herself,” Hansi said. “She needs some repairs…”

“And a complete fumigating of the lower decks!” Valens interrupted.

“But she will fetch a handsome price,” the sailing master continued, ignoring his brother-in-law who looked a little pale.

“So how do we salvage her?” Magnus asked. “We’re already without sail and do not have enough oarsmen for both ships.”

“It’s too valuable to scuttle,” Hansi replied. “We’re still about three days from Caesarea, more if we elect to tow this ship in.” He then turned to address Commander Stoppello. “Sir, it will take some time, but we can get this ship to port.”

“I agree,” the captain replied.

“We found manacles and leg irons in their storage hold,” Valens added. “How many of these bastards can still row?”

“About sixty,” Magnus answered. “Not nearly enough to man even a single vessel. Those that were too badly wounded we are throwing over the side.”

“Did you at least finish them first?” Stoppello asked.

“Absolutely not,” Magnus said with a grin, which the captain matched. “It’s more sporting to let the sharks play with them a little.”

As if to emphasize his point, a helpless cry came from one of the badly stricken pirates as a pair of legionaries picked him up by the arms and legs, one of which was missing a foot. Sailors were already busily making the ship ready to sail, leaving the task of handling the prisoners to Artorius’ soldiers. The wounded pirate’s pleas were met by savage laughter from the legionaries as they unceremoniously threw him over the side, where he fell screaming into the surging seas.

“Good man,” Stoppello replied. “We’ll shackle the survivors to the

benches on their ship. My crews will work their sails, since they still function. We'll use it to tow our damaged ship in."

On the prow of the enemy ship, Alaric stood over the body of a brigand he had slain. It had been instinctive and came more effortlessly than he'd envisioned. The man's tongue protruded grotesquely, nearly severed in half by his rotting teeth as his body twitched in the final throes of death.

"You fought well," Hansi said approvingly as he looked down at the slain pirate.

"I did what I had to," Alaric said quietly.

"We still have plenty of work to do," the sailing master added. "Stow your gladius and buckler, then report back here. I think it is time you started to learn the technical aspects of a ship that involve more than just manning an oar."

"Yes, sir." Alaric was still staring at the dead man as Hansi went back to overseeing the preparations between the two ships. He should have been ecstatic that he was being moved to the sails, as it meant a better wage, as well as learning skills that would make him more marketable if he chose to remain a sailor. And yet, the young man from Germania felt numb inside, unaware of his surroundings as he instinctively crossed the large boarding ramp and returned his weapons to their place under his oar bench.

As Alaric returned to the captured pirate vessel, he was joined by more fellow sailors, along with a century of legionaries. Magnus and his men would remain aboard, Artorius and the First Century staying with their own ship.

"Hey, look what I found!" a decanus said with glee as he strolled over to his centurion, carrying a corded whip, which he snapped against the ship's deck. "I could have some fun with this."

"Do what you have to, to keep those bastards rowing," Magnus directed.

At the stairs leading into the rowing decks, a squad of legionaries was shackling the prisoners together. The decanus with the whip bounded across the deck, swinging the whip in a long arc which slapped hard across the back of one of the pirates, leaving a deep, bleeding gash. The man fell to his knees, screeching in pain as the soldier laughed boisterously.

"Yes, this'll do nicely," the decanus said. He then addressed the prisoners. "There will be a lot more of those for any of you bastards who slack off on the oars!"

The prisoners were quickly hustled down the stairs as the decanus let the whip crack once more across the back of a hapless pirate.

"Your man instills abject terror into the prisoners," Hansi observed as Magnus joined him near the back of the ship.

A number of sailors stood by with thick ropes tied to grappling hooks, which they would use to secure the two ships together. Their own vessel was being turned by what oarsmen remained aboard, and was now facing the rear of the captured ship.

"Pirates are bloody cowards," Magnus noted as he watched his brother's men throw their grappling hooks in high arcs across the narrowing chasm between the two ships. Sailors on the other side were taking the long ropes and tying them off. "We instill terror in them now, and it makes them think only of the moment; forgetting that they are all dead men anyway."

"I'd rather we didn't hand them over for trial and execution when we get to Caesarea," Hansi said, his arms folded across his chest.

"Oh?"

"I know a few slave traders in Caesarea," Hansi explained. "A couple of whom deal specifically in gladiators, as well as other fodder for the arenas. We won't get too much for this lot, but it will still be better than nothing. Besides, I think it is far more sporting to watch scum such as these torn apart by wild beasts, rather than the far more boring strangulation or crucifixion."

At the back of the towed ship, Artorius and Diana leaned against the outer wall of the raised cabin, watching as the sun slowly set in the west. Artorius placed his hand around his wife's shoulder, and she in turn wrapped both arms around his waist. As they were the same height, she had to lean into him slightly in order to do so.

"I was very proud of you today," Artorius said as he gently caressed her shoulder.

"I did what needed to be done," Diana replied. "After what happened in Gaul all those years ago, I swore that I would never be left helpless again. Those creatures were vile beasts from hell, they deserved their fate."

"This is true," Artorius concurred. "And I am glad you remembered what you learned when using a gladius. You know the lads practically worship you. After you cared for so many of our wounded after Braduhenna, they called you the *Goddess of the Twentieth*. And after today, I wouldn't be surprised if some of them start calling you the *Goddess of Vengeance*."

“Let us hope it will be for the last time,” Diana said as she kissed her husband on the cheek. The sun glowed red and seemed to sink in the sea as the two ships lurched slowly towards their new home in Caesarea.



It was early evening and Pilate was glad to finally be sitting down to a hot meal. He had dealt with yet another deputation from the Sanhedrin, complaining about abuses by the Jerusalem garrison. There was also the matter of soldiers carrying the images of the emperor through the city. This was viewed as a direct insult against the Jewish laws regarding idolatry, and what further surprised the procurator was that Tiberius had, in fact, sided with the Sanhedrin. This had caused some embarrassment for Pilate, though he had to admit that given the extreme religious sensibilities of the populace, the removal of the emperor’s image from public settings had saved him from further riots or worse.

Claudia was entertaining the wives of numerous Roman delegates and wealthy merchants in the region and, as such, Pilate had elected to dine alone this evening. A servant had just set down a plate of roast peacock when there was a loud banging on the door. Pilate let out a sigh.

“Come!” he shouted.

The door was opened and a young legionary briskly walked in and saluted. Pilate surmised the lad was on duty, as he was in full armor, though he carried his helmet tucked under his arm.

“A message from the commander of the watch,” the soldier said.

“Well, what is it?” Pilate asked impatiently.

“He says to inform you that a ship is approaching the harbor, sir,” the legionary said.

“Dozens of ships come into this port every day,” Pilate replied with a bored sigh. “What is so special about this one that the commander of the watch feels I must be disturbed during my dinner?”

“Well, sir, it appears to be towing a Roman warship.”



The commander of the watch had ordered the ballistae manned. Fires were stoked nearby in preparation for the order to fire flaming shot. Archers

lined the walls, and as the ranking centurion, Justus Longinus had rallied the cohort's legionaries, staging them back from the docks. Auxiliaries cleared the crowds away from the docks, and people scattered in all directions.

"Damned pirates," Pilate swore under his breath as he stood on the wall that was lined with archers awaiting his orders.

"A single ship towing one of our vessels," Justus observed.

"What does it mean?" a soldier asked.

"As there are no other military vessels operating in these waters that I'm aware of, I would say our friends' ship has been taken," Pilate scowled. "And if not a raid, then they are most likely looking for ransom. They will get none from me!"

"But if Artorius and his men are on that ship…" Justus began.

"I said they will get none from me!" Pilate snapped. He turned and glared at the centurion. "If I allow one pirate ship to garner ransom it will only encourage more brigands to unleash terror on the sea."

He was glad Claudia was entertaining guests this evening and was, therefore, oblivious to the situation. Pilate cringed at what it would do to his poor wife to think that her dear sister was held captive by the scourge of the seas.

"They're almost in range," a crewman behind an onager observed.

"Hold your fire until we know their intentions," Pilate ordered.

They watched nervously as the ships slowly coasted into a vacant dock. At length they stopped with a loud groan of the hull grinding on the dock and the splash of oars withdrawn from the water. The gangplank was lowered and Pilate let out a boisterous laugh when he saw the first man debark.



"Where the hell is everyone?" Magnus asked as he followed Artorius, who'd come down the other gangplank. "I thought you said this was one of the busiest ports in the world."

"It's supposed to be," Artorius replied, "Even at night." He looked around and was shocked to see the docks completely deserted. Boxes of cargo were scattered everywhere, as if the whole population of Caesarea that worked in the harbor had suddenly disappeared.

"Son of a bitch!" a voice shouted from across the way.

The two centurions looked over to see Justus Longinus leading the rest of the cohort towards them.

“Hey Justus!” Artorius shouted back. “Nice to see you, too, you dirty whore!”

“Warm reception,” Commander Stoppello observed as he walked up behind the men. He looked back at the ship and calmly said, “I can see why we caused them such vexation.”

“What?” Artorius asked, looking over his shoulder. He then realized what the captain was looking at.

“We used the damn pirate ship to tow ours in,” Stoppello explained.

“Well, I’ll be buggered!” Magnus replied as he burst into laughter. “That was probably the dumbest thing we’ve done in a while.”

“You’ve got that right!” Justus barked as he walked briskly over to them. He shook his head, though he was still grinning. “You realize you almost got baked by a dozen onagers and ballistae loaded with flaming shot!”

“Hey, it’s been a long trip,” Artorius remarked as he gruffly embraced his old friend. He noticed Pontius Pilate walking towards them and quickly stepped back and saluted the procurator. “First Italic Cohort reporting for duty!”

“You’re late,” Pilate replied, clasping his hand. “Still, it’s good to see you made it safe. What of this ship?”

“It’s a long story,” Artorius replied.

“You can tell me over dinner,” Pilate replied as he left the men to oversee the offloading of the ships. “Come to the palace once you’re settled. I’ll see if my cooks have any more of that roast peacock left.”

“Sounds delightful,” Artorius replied. He then turned to his wife. “Why don’t you go with Pilate? Your sister will be elated to see you. I’ll be along as soon as my men are settled.”

Diana smiled, kissed him on the cheek, and walked quickly to catch up with her brother-in-law and his escorts.

“I’ll go over to the merchant’s guild in the morning and see about fetching a price for the ship,” Stoppello said. “I know some fellows here who will pay a good price for her.”

“My brother knows of some good slave dealers in this city who will pay a few sesterces for the prisoners,” Magnus added.

By the time the legionaries and crewmen had disembarked from the ships, the pier was alive with activity once more. Hanging lamps were lit and merchant cargo continued to move on and off the ships. Few paid any mind to the two centuries of legionaries who marched through the dockyard.

“The barracks are this way,” Justus said, pointing towards a walled compound a half mile from the docks and about three blocks from the governor’s palace. A pair of sentries stood guard outside the open gate, saluting the centurions as they led their men into the complex.

“Welcome home, lads,” one of the men said to the passing legionaries who marched by them, carrying their bulging packs.

The layout was similar to most standard Roman forts, although on a much smaller scale, as this was only meant to house a single cohort. There were six long buildings with stucco walls and tiled roofs that served as the billets for the legionaries. Like all other Roman barracks, there were ten bays, one for each squad of legionaries and partitioned off into two rooms. One room was for storage of arms and equipment, the other was their living space. The tesserarius and signifier shared a small room, with the optio and centurion each having their own private quarters.

“The barracks were completed just four weeks ago,” Justus noted. “You cannot see it in the dark, but on the far side they are still working on the small principia, complete with administrative offices. We’re still waiting for the roof to go on the service building, but at least it has the sewage lines already run.”

Service building was a euphemistic term that described the communal latrines. Privacy was unknown to most, and legionaries were no exception. The service building primarily consisted of long stone benches with holes cut out for them to sit on. A constant flow of running water kept waste from lingering. Numerous buckets carrying sponges on sticks were dispersed throughout, which soldiers would use to clean themselves once they were finished. A narrow sluice of water ran in front of where they sat to relieve themselves, and this would be used to wash off their sponges. While not the most pleasant feature of the barracks, it was still far more preferable, not to mention sanitary, than how most dealt with human waste.

While soldiers noisily settled themselves into their barracks rooms, Artorius opened the door leading to the centurion’s quarters. Aside from a small desk and a bed, it was devoid of furnishings. The bed had no blankets and did not look the least bit inviting despite Artorius’ fatigue. He sighed and set his helmet on the desk and began the tedious task of removing his armor and all that came with it. Normally, Nathaniel was there to help him out of his kit. However, the Judean slave was with the rest of the baggage train and had probably not even made it through Macedonia and Thrace yet.

With no rack to hang is armor and decorations on, he unceremoniously tossed the lot onto his bunk before strapping back on his centurion's belt, as well as his gladius. Though he was completely drained from the long journey, he was also very hungry, and was suddenly glad of Pilate's offer to share a late supper with him at the palace. He stepped into the dark hallway, which glowed faintly with torchlight coming from the squad bays down the narrow corridor. Across from his own room, an open door led into the optio's quarters, where Valens' common-law wife, Svetlana, was helping him out of his armor and accoutrements.

"There's no damned blankets on the bed," Valens grunted as he spotted his centurion. "To hell with it, I think we're going to find ourselves a bit of refreshment and a more 'comfortable' place to lay our heads tonight."

"Care to join us?" Svetlana asked.

"Normally, I would love to," Artorius replied. "However, Pilate has asked me to dine with him, and it would be rude of me to refuse, especially on our first night in the province."

"Suit yourself," Valens remarked. "What are your orders for tomorrow?"

"Get the men acquainted with the city or at least the area surrounding the barracks. I'll task Justus with providing a few escorts. They've been here a couple months, so they should know their way around. We need to make sure all the bunks have mattresses and blankets, and we need to speak with the local quartermaster about where to procure rations."

"Works for me," Valens acknowledged. "Cicero is in our century, but as he will most likely be our chief armorer, we need to make sure he's got a suitable shop to work in, along with all the tools he'll need."

"I'll take care of that," Artorius said, feeling the full weight of every small, yet crucial detail required for an independent cohort to operate. All of which were his direct responsibility. Though he would most certainly be delegating the authority over many of the tasks to his subordinate officers, the one thing he could never delegate was responsibility. Whatever happened within the cohort, for good or ill, accountability fell upon him alone.

Chapter XIV: Friends Old and New

***

That their journey had at last come to an end seemed surreal to Artorius. Pilate had interrupted Claudia's dinner party to introduce Diana to the assembled guests. The two sisters had embraced affectionately and even shed a few tears. Pilate left the women and returned to his study, where a servant had had the good sense to heat up his dinner.

"There will be one more joining me," the procurator said. "Find him something suitable."

The slave bowed and left through a side door. As Pilate sat and started into his meal once more, the double doors were opened and Artorius was ushered in.

"I apologize for not having time to bathe," the centurion said as he strode across the large room and took a seat across from his brother-in-law. "I also won't have any more suitable attire until our baggage arrives."

"You are always welcome in my house," Pilate asserted. "And my private baths are at your disposal. In fact, why don't you and Diana stay here? There are plenty of guest rooms, and as you saw, we are but a few blocks from the barracks. I cannot imagine that you would prefer to live there."

"You are correct," Artorius replied as a slave walked in with a tray bearing a pitcher of wine and an extra goblet. The centurion took the cup and drank thirstily.

"I have the cooks preparing you some dinner," Pilate added as he consumed another chunk of roasted peacock. "It probably won't be anything exotic, but I assure you all the food in my household is more than palatable."

"Right now I'd be happy with some of Magnus' spitted boar," Artorius said with a laugh. "And I am grateful for your hospitality. It has been a long journey, coming all the way from Germania. This will certainly be a completely different experience for most of my men."

"That it will," Pilate concurred. Two servants entered, one bearing a plate of steaming strips of meat, the other with a large bowl filled with fresh vegetables. Pilate continued as his friend ate hungrily. "I'll give you a week to get assimilated and to get the cohort fully operational. Justus has done some of the work already, as you saw with his oversight of the barracks. But I also know there are many tasks which will require your direct input. After

you're established, I'm going to send you to Jerusalem for a few weeks to see if you can instill some order and discipline into the ranks of the auxiliary garrison."

"That's why you sent for me," Artorius said between mouthfuls of food.

"Justus is, thankfully, familiar with most of the people and customs that frequent this part of the world. I am thankful that you two are friends, even though…" His voice trailed off and an awkward pause followed as both men continued to eat.

"Has he said anything about what happened to his son?" Artorius asked at last, unable to take the silence any longer.

"We've talked," Pilate replied. "He doesn't wish to blame you for Gaius' death. However, I know you both subscribe to the notion that a centurion is ultimately responsible for the lives of his soldiers, regardless of circumstance."

"A responsibility I readily accepted when I rose to the centurionate," Artorius said. "And that is why, even if I live to be a hundred, I will always be haunted by what happened in Braduhenna."

"Still, like I said, Justus does not want to place the blame squarely on you. He knows your caliber as a soldier and leader of fighting men. What he wants is the truth. He wants to know exactly how his son died."

"I will speak with him," Artorius replied. "I owe him that much. Valens, my optio, was Gaius' squad leader at Braduhenna. He was with him when he fell and can tell Justus the total truth far better than I can. I will take care of this before we head to Jerusalem."

Noting the weariness in his cohort commander's face, Pilate dismissed Artorius as soon as he finished with his meal. The centurion then took his leave, a servant escorting him to where Claudia held her dinner party. Most of the guests had departed by this time, and the two sisters lounged on couches across from each other, talking nonstop.

"Ah, my love," Diana said as she reached a hand up, which Artorius readily took. Her expression was as tired as he felt.

"My apologies, dear sister," Claudia said as she reached over and took Diana's other hand. "I have kept you up late, and you've both had a long journey. Please, off to bed with you both. There will be plenty of time for us to catch up."

After Artorius helped her to her feet, Diana leaned down and kissed Claudia on both cheeks before they allowed the servant to escort them to their

room. The palace was quite large, far more spacious than any other residence Artorius had ever visited. He wasn't even sure if he could find his way out again! He noted the occasional guard that strolled through the corridors, though these men were neither legionary nor auxilia, but rather private bodyguards that Pilate had personally hired. This particular hall was not completely enclosed, but had a series of open balconies that seemed to almost run together. The moonlight shone brightly, negating the need for additional light, although the servant did carry an oil lamp before him.

The doors were all painted with a variety of bright colors, though in the moonlight, combined with his extreme fatigue, it was hard for Artorius to differentiate between them. The slave seemed to instinctively know which room was theirs, and at length opened the door to a rather spacious suite. Artorius could not help but notice that the room was larger than a squad bay that housed eight legionaries, with plenty of ornate furnishings and a huge bed that looked all-too-inviting. He instructed the servant on when to have him woken, and the man bowed deeply before leaving, closing the door behind him.

"An overdue night of comfortable sleep," Diana said as she threw back her stola and unstrapped her gladius.

Artorius chuckled as he unbuckled his own weapon and wondered if her sister knew that she almost always walked around armed. In a place like the governor's palace there was no need. However, the streets of the city, and especially the surrounding countryside, were inhospitable at best.

The faint glow of moonlight fell upon the room through an open window. As Diana laid her head on his shoulder, Artorius contemplated this next chapter that was about to begin in their lives. The east was completely foreign to him, and he recalled a conversation he'd had with Sergeant Cicero before they left Cologne. The empire was, indeed, vast and despite his years in the legions, his only exposure outside of Italia had been eastern Gaul, Belgica, and Germania. A new world opened before him, but that would come in the morning. For now, he rolled over and kissed his wife deeply, his desire for her never waning as she moaned passionately and took him into her arms.



As the sun broke over the horizon, the city of Caesarea slowly came to life. Hansi Flavianus had arisen a couple hours before and, after a few

interactions with slave merchants and old acquaintances, he made his way to the inn where his brother had elected to sleep the night before. Like many buildings in this region, it looked to be almost entirely made of stone. The Nordic sailor stepped through the entranceway, which was simply a large curtain over where there should have been a door. The bottom floor was a mostly-deserted tavern, and on the extreme right were the uneven stone steps leading up to the rooms. Grinning, Hansi bounded up the stairs and down the short hall on the second floor, to where he knew Magnus was staying. Without so much as knocking, he burst in.

"Brother, I've found a possible buyer for the prisoners," he said loudly.

Magnus was fast asleep, a local prostitute draped over his arm. He had accompanied Valens the night before, and after finding some suitable reprieve, had acquired a room at the nearest inn for the night. Though it was now early morning, long after he normally roused himself, the centurion felt he could sleep for another ten hours.

"Don't you ever knock?" Magnus chastised as he threw a sandal at his brother before crawling out of the creaking bed and pulling on his tunic.

The woman had the blankets pulled up to her chin and was giggling in a high-pitched voice.

"Oh, sorry, I didn't realize you were *busy*," Hansi chided with a laugh. He held up Magnus' sandal, which his brother quickly snatched from him.

"Yeah, well maybe you sailors are fine with spending weeks or months at sea, jerking off over the side of the ship. As for me, I need more quality satisfaction than what can be wrought with the palm of my hand."

"Well, actually I use two hands," Hansi laughed, gesturing crudely. "Now hurry up. Our potential client will be seeing us about the prisoners within the hour."

"Who is he?" Magnus asked, pulling on his sandals and then giving his lady companion a smack on the butt as she shuffled out the door, half naked, and still laughing.

"No idea," Hansi replied. "He didn't tell me his name. A few friends I have in port recommended him to me. None of them were even remotely interested in the disease-ridden lot we captured. So this fellow claims he's from Syria, but he doesn't look like any Syrian I've ever met. From the look of him, I'd say his origins are even further east than Parthia."

"So what's his interest in our prisoners?" Magnus asked as they stumbled down the stone steps out of the inn. He barely took notice of the sailor who

accompanied his brother, a very young man with light hair and fair skin such as his. He had the hood of his light cloak pulled up over his head to shield it from the sun as the three men stepped out into the sun.

"I'm going to hate this place," Magnus sighed as he squinted in the bright light.

"As long as you get to stay here in Caesarea, it won't be too bad," Hansi replied. "The sea breeze is nice and makes this place rather pleasant. It's Jerusalem and the inland cities that prove insufferable." He then turned to the young man who accompanied him. "Alaric, run off and see about the sail makers. Report to Commander Stoppello once you have negotiated a price."

"Yes, sir," the lad said, still shielding his face as he turned away.

"What's with him?" Magnus asked.

"You know, I'm not entirely sure," his brother answered. "He joined us in Ostia, said he'd served six years on various merchant ships. He must have been very young, as I don't think he's even twenty. Doesn't talk much, but he's a good worker. Said he'd never wielded a weapon in his life, though he fought well enough against the pirates, even got one of the bastards right in the stomach. For some reason he's awfully skittish around legionaries, probably something to do with his past. But, whatever that may be, it's his own business. Now, let's go see our new friend."

As one of the major port cities in the eastern empire, Caesarea was full of merchants, tourists, and various persons from every corner of Rome's domains and beyond. Oriental silks, eastern rugs, exotic clothing and décor seemed to overflow from every vendor stall; all punctuated by the smell of various spices and burning incense.

"It'll be another week till our ship is repaired," Hansi continued, "So I'll get to enjoy baking with you for a little bit longer."

"A week," Magnus scoffed. "I'll be here for gods know how many years."

"You and Artorius seem to follow each other all over the empire," Hansi observed as they walked along the cobblestone street, past the stockade on the docks where freshly-imported slaves were temporarily held.

"He's been my best friend since we joined the legions," Magnus replied. "I couldn't let him run off without me. Besides, how much of the empire have I really seen? Grandfather may be a true Norseman, but we were all raised in Ostia. I've never even been to the ancestral homeland. My entire tenure in the legions has been spent on the Rhine frontier, plus our three-year

stint in Gaul. At least you've been around the whole of the empire."

"Only the wet bits," Hansi noted with a laugh. "To tell you the truth, I have no idea why I joined the Roman Navy. For years it was rather tedious and backbreaking, sitting behind an oar for most of the day. Our pay is far inferior to that of legionaries, and the little time we did get to spend on dry land was usually nothing more than a day or two in a port city. The people may dress and talk differently, and the whores vary in skin color and how badly they are disease-ridden, but they are basically the same. Once you've seen one port, you've seen them all."

"Still, you've done well for yourself," Magnus observed, "Being a sailing master now and all."

"I had to work my way up to that," Hansi replied, "Just like you did in the legions. Spending all my days behind an oar with some oaf breaking wind at every fifth pull became too much after a while. I was also the only oarsman below deck who could read, and once the sailing master of my first ship found out, he immediately pulled me from the oars and had me acting as the captain's scribe. From there I was able to learn new tasks and eventually found myself where I'm at today."

"Commander Stoppello seems to rely on you quite a bit," Magnus observed.

"It's the way of things. He was the sailing master who got me away from the oars in the first place. I didn't realize it at the time, but all the while he was grooming me to replace him. When he received command of his own ship, I was transferred with him and promoted. I'd like to get my own ship, but we'll just have to see. I've already got twenty years with Roman Navy, and I'd like to settle down at some point."

"I can understand that," Magnus noted. "Still, it hasn't been all toil for you over the years. And surely you've made some lucrative hauls."

"We are able to supplement our income with various charter missions that the crew always gets a cut of," Hansi said. "And now that I'm sailing master, my take on a haul like we just did is substantially higher. Commander Stoppello is off negotiating with shipwrights to see who will pay the highest for our captured enemy vessel. Of course, the emperor will get his share right off the top, but there will still be plenty for us and the lads. Fortunately, the government doesn't bother with enforcing taxation on the sale of prisoners. Ah, here we are then."

They had reached a narrow, yet very tall and colorful tent that was

crammed between a pair of food stalls. Hansi pulled back the heavy tent flap and, despite the bright colors on the outside, as well as the glaring sun that continued to rise through the morning, it was completely dark, almost foreboding within.

"Ah, my northern friend!" a thickly accented voice said from within.

The walls of the tent were thick and covered in various animal skins, so as to make it almost as dark as night. Only a pair of oil lamps hanging from the supports gave any light at all. The two Norsemen gave their eyes a moment to adjust before entering in further. A number of small tables, animal cages, and various rugs were strewn about. They heard what sounded like a loud grumbling, though they could not discern from where or what it came.

The man who greeted them sat on what looked like a raised chair made of nothing but large pillows. He was reclined; a narrow cylinder in his hand which was attached to a length of tubing that ran to a large bowl. He appeared to be inhaling through the pipe, and when he exhaled through his nose, clouds of smoke wafted out.

He wore a large ornamental headdress with leather flaps that ran just past his cheeks and covered his ears. His robes appeared to be a deep red with gold embroidery. His eyes were narrow and slanted, with a face that was accented by a thin moustache that ran well past both corners of his mouth, and a thin beard that hung a few inches past his chin.

"You are right," Magnus said. "He does not look like any Syrian I have ever seen."

"And who is your friend?" the man asked Hansi, a cheerful smile never leaving his face.

"My brother. He is here to assist me in our business."

"I see by your garb that you are a Roman soldier," the man said. Then nodding towards Magnus, "And from your belt and how you wear your weapon, I would guess you are a centurion or better."

"I am a centurion," Magnus replied. "But you, sir, still have us at a distinct disadvantage. It is plain that you are from lands beyond the empire. So, who are you?"

"I spoke facetiously when I told your brother I was from Syria," the man replied. "As to where I am from…well, that is not important. Suffice it to say I come from a land many leagues east of Parthia. As for who I am, my name is Sukhbataar, it means 'hero of the axe' in my culture. And so, from one warrior to another, I bid you welcome."

“As do I,” a woman’s voice spoke up, startling the two Norsemen. In the darkness they did not see the cloaked woman, who threw back her hood, revealing a beautiful and exotic face.

“Now she is clearly Syrian,” Magnus said, regaining his composure.

Though her skin was on the fair side for her people, she had deep set brown eyes and hair.

“May I introduce Achillia, one of the finest gladiators in the world,” Sukhbataar said.

The woman’s eyes were hard, but she allowed a single corner of her mouth to turn up slightly in a smile as she folded her arms across her chest. She simply nodded to the men.

“We do not see many women gladiators,” Hansi observed. “Most Romans view them as more novelty than serious combatant. A shame, really.”

“As you know,” Sukhbataar continued, “Syrians are renowned for their skill with the bow.”

“Yes, we know,” Magnus replied. “We have plenty of them within the army. Most of our bowmen come from Syria.”

“I assure you,” Achillia said, “I am faster and more lethal with a bow than any man within the Roman Army. It is only because I am a woman that I am not allowed to serve.”

“I do not detect any trace of a foreign accent,” Magnus said. “You also speak to us as an equal. I take it then that you are not Sukhbataar’s slave?”

The woman’s head tilted back as she burst into a fit of laughter. Magnus found her slightly unnerving, yet at the same time exotically beautiful.

“Not all who fight in the arena are slaves,” Sukhbataar stated. “Achillia and I are…business partners, if you will.”

“You are also correct in that I am not what you would call ‘foreign’,” Achillia continued. “I am a Roman citizen, like you. Yet a life of docile maternity does not suit my talents. I cannot join the army, so I must find other ways to hunt.” Her gaze was now sinister, though her smile remained.

“Well, that’s why we’re here,” Hansi said while Achillia and Magnus continued to stare at each other. He then addressed Sukhbataar. “We have sixty prisoners we captured when we took a pirate ship. They are in pretty sad shape and of no use as gladiators. However, I think they’d be better used for Achillia’s *sport*, rather than the boring process of tying them to stakes to be strangled or nailed to crosses.”

“Hmm.” Sukhbataar had his eyes closed in thought.

Magnus and Hansi thought they heard the loud grumbling again.

“What is that noise?” Magnus asked.

With a mischievous grin, Achillia pulled back a large blanket that revealed a gigantic sleeping tiger.

“What the fuck is that?” Hansi snapped, jumping to his feet.

Magnus was at his side, gladius drawn as the great beast opened its eyes and yawned lazily. Sukhbataar was chuckling softly as Achillia laughed aloud once more and then began caressing the huge animal behind its ears.

“This is Sargon,” she said. “He means you no harm. I have raised him from the time he was born, and together we hunt.”

Magnus sheathed his weapon as he and Hansi sat once more. The great cat closed its eyes, and they realized what had sounded like loud grumblings was, in fact, Sargon’s purring.

“So shall we say ten denarii apiece?” Magnus offered.

“Three,” Sukhbataar immediately countered.

“Oh, come off it!” Hansi snapped. “You came highly recommended, and you would take us for fools.”

“As you say, they are a pitiful lot,” the entertainer said calmly. “But how about this; I’ll make it five while having you and your friends as my personal guests at our show in the Jerusalem arena in two weeks’ time.”

“Seven,” Magnus retorted.

“Six,” Sukhbataar said slowly.

The two brothers looked at each other for a moment and both nodded.

“Done,” Hansi replied, extending his hand.

“We will be by later this afternoon to collect the prisoners,” Sukhbataar said.

As Magnus and Hansi left the tent they were almost blinded by the bright sun which contrasted sharply with the deep dark from inside.

“What an odd fellow,” Magnus said, as they regained their bearings and started the long walk back towards the barracks.

“You meet all sorts on this end of the empire,” Hansi replied. “There are many lands and peoples that extend far beyond even the borders of Parthia. Though few will venture any further west than Syria or Asia Minor, many flock to places like Caesarea. I have to go inform Commander Stoppello about the deal we’ve struck, so I will take my leave, brother.”



Artorius had woken to his first morning in Judea as the predawn cast its faint glow on the city. He had left his wife sleeping as he rose, shaved, and taken Pilate's offer of using his personal baths for an invigorating plunge.

Though Pilate had business to attend to that morning and could not join him for breakfast, he made certain that his brother-in-law was taken care of. The centurion sat at the long table alone as servants brought him cooked eggs, fresh fruit, sharp cheese, and strips of meat from a mysterious animal he could not quite place, though he found it rather palatable. As he washed down the first few bites with a cupful of watered down wine, the large doors were opened and a servant announced, *"Commander Tiberius Stoppello of the Imperial Navy!"*

"Ah! Good of you to join me," Artorius said as the ship's captain entered. He too had bathed, shaved, and was now sporting a civilian toga. "If you haven't eaten yet, I will have the servants make some more. I have no idea what half this stuff is that I'm eating, but it is far better than what we've had over the past few weeks."

"I have the receipt of sale for the ship and the prisoners," Stoppello said, holding up a scroll that bore the seal of the imperial department of commerce and trade. He laid it out to Artorius, who continued to eat while standing next to him and reading. "Pirates make horrible slaves, and as most are disease-ridden, we took the first offer that came from an entertainer who claims to be from Syria. Our friends, Hansi and Magnus, struck the deal with him, and I'm sure you will find it satisfactory. The ship fetched a handsome price. As you can see, the emperor gets thirty percent right off the top. As for the rest, I've divvied up the largest shares equally between you and I, with the next highest going to my sailing master, Hansi, and your centurion, Magnus."

"That's fair enough," Artorius replied, looking at the figures. "I see you've got equal shares of the remainder going to your sailors and my legionaries."

"At two hundred and fifty denarii apiece, I scarcely think any of them will complain," Stoppello replied. "That's more than a year's wages for your men, and even more so for mine."

Artorius thought back to when he had made a legionary's pay. It seemed like a lifetime ago. His own share of the sale of the pirate vessel amounted to nearly five thousand denarii; a sum that amounted to more than twenty-two years worth of wages for a soldier in the ranks.

“Most of my men will blow through their share on drink, entertainment, and prostitutes,” he thought aloud.

“As will mine,” Stoppello added.

Artorius then decided that during the first meeting he would have with the centurions and officers of the cohort, one thing to be covered was the mandatory savings program within the army. Each pay cycle, every soldier had a percentage of his wages taken out and set aside for his retirement. Roman legionaries were notoriously frivolous with money, and this ensured they would at least have something when their term of service came to an end. This program was overseen by the individual legions, and since the cohort acted as an independent entity, Artorius decided to take it upon himself to instigate the program with his men. He made some notes for the signifiers, ordering them to take the mandatory savings out of each soldier’s share of the ship’s sale.

“How goes the repairs to your ship?” Artorius asked while servants brought breakfast and drink to the captain.

“Slower than I expected,” Stoppello replied as he sat down to eat. “I spoke with the admiral who oversees the eastern seas. He happened to be in port before he heads to Cyprus, where he is headquartered. I’ve been ordered to remain in Caesarea until my ship is not only repaired, but fully refitted as a proper warship. As my vessel is one of the larger ships in the region, I think he wants to keep me in the east as long as possible. So, whereas I figured we would spend a week in port, we’ll now be here at least a month. The ballistae and catapults have to be built, armor plating added, as well as barricades for archers, who we will need to enlist.”



It was past late afternoon and rolling into evening when Sukhbataar arrived at the ship to collect his new slaves. There were a dozen wheeled cages, each drawn by an ox. The cage at the end of the line was covered with a black tarp. Guiding them was a number of men who looked very similar in appearance to Sukhbataar, narrow-eyed and dressed in red with gold embroidery. There were others who carried fearsome pikes that Magnus surmised were the entertainer’s personal bodyguard. Achillia was with them as well. She wore a hooded cloak with a veil covering her face, with the exception of her eyes.

“About bloody time,” Hansi grumbled as he leaned over the rail of the ship. He then turned and nodded to his brother, who had brought with him a squad of legionaries.

“Get them up!” Magnus directed.

The prisoners were all chained together, seated near the main mast. The sadistic decanus was there with his whip, which he cracked hard against the deck.

“You heard the man!” he barked. *“On your feet, scum!”*

He slapped the whip once more as legionaries kicked and prodded the hapless former pirates to their feet. They clambered down the gangplank, with Sukhbataar counting them as they stumbled past him morosely.

“You’re missing two,” he noted.

“They bought it,” Hansi explained as he and Magnus walked down the plank and joined him. “So that’s twelve denarii lost.”

“Selfish bastards had to die on us,” Magnus chuckled with dark humor.

As Achillia watched the prisoners being shoved into cages, one of them sidled up as close to her as he could. Though he was a big man, who reeked of filth and excrement, the Syrian woman did not move.

“And what have we here, then?” the pirate said with a mad, black-toothed grin. “Care to spare the damned with a taste of your supple flesh, then?” When she said nothing, he cackled and spat in her face. She closed her eyes but did not move. There was a sickening slap of whip tearing into flesh, accompanied by the howl of pain as the offender fell to his knees.

“Vile bastard, I’ll teach you!” the decanus with the whip growled. He quickly walked up behind the man, who was still on his knees, and wrapped the whip around his neck. He twisted the end in knots, causing it to cinch down on the man’s throat. His tongue protruded grotesquely, and his face turned purple.

“Easy, sergeant,” Magnus said, placing a hand on his shoulder. “We don’t get paid if he’s dead.”

“I have better plans for him,” Achillia added as she wiped her cloak across her face. She turned and nodded to one of their escorts, who pulled back the tarp on the rear cart. With surprising strength, she grabbed the prisoner, who was coughing and trying to catch his breath, by the hair and manacles, and dragged him along the length of carts. Another escort opened the door, and though no one could see inside the cart, Hansi and Magnus knew what it contained.

“I think Sargon is hungry,” Achillia said with a sinister gleam in her eye.

“Who is Sargon?” a legionary asked as they watched the spectacle unfold.

“A pet,” Magnus replied with a grin, folding his arms across his chest.

At the final cart, the prisoner was still reeling from the shock of being lashed and lightheaded from being nearly strangled. Achillia effortlessly shoved him into the cart, and the cage door was closed behind him with the tarp secured back in place.

“Kŕmenie!” Achillia spoke towards the cage.

Upon the word, from an unknown language to the others, a loud growling came from within. This was followed by an animalistic roar, accompanied by screams of terror. The assembled legionaries were wide-eyed, yet Sukhbataar, Achillia, and their escorts seemed unconcerned, even as the cries turned to pain while the cage rocked as the hapless victim was devoured.

“Jerusalem, two weeks’ time,” Sukhbataar stated.

“Don’t be late,” Achillia said with a wink as they left with the long line of cages in tow. Screams still came from the covered cart, which left several trails of blood in its wake.

Chapter XV: Strange Traditions

Caesarea
May, 31 A.D.
***

"You missed all the excitement from Passover," Justus said as he, Artorius, and the other centurions met over breakfast.

"Always a potentially volatile time in this region," another centurion named Julius added. He had been with the Twelfth Legion and had been assigned to the cohort on Pilate's personal recommendation. "Pilgrims come from all over the region, and the population of Jerusalem swells to well over a million persons during this time."

"What exactly is *Passover*?" Magnus asked as he bit into a chunk of bread, which he washed down with watery wine.

"Jewish holiday," Julius explained. "According to their traditions, when a prophet named Moses was attempting to free his people from bondage in Egypt, God inflicted ten plagues upon their masters. The last of these was the death of the firstborn in every household. The Jews were ordered to paint the doors of their houses with the blood of a ram, I think. This way the angel of death knew to pass over their house."

"It was after this that the pharaoh relented and let the Israelites go," Justus added. "Oh, and the night of the passing over they were also told to eat unleavened bread."

There was a lengthy pause as the Roman officers attempted to make sense of the story.

"So," Cornelius began, pausing before continuing. "Which god of theirs did this?"

"The only one they have," Julius replied.

"Such a bother, being monotheistic," Praxus observed. "I don't know why they don't just borrow some of our gods. You know, a lot of people do."

"Well, that story's just dumb!" Magnus retorted. "Eat crappy bread and paint your door with blood and you'll be set free. I mean, what sense does any of that make?"

"Oh, come now," Artorius replied. "It's no more twisted than any of our sacrifices or customs. After all, how much sense does it make gleaning omens from a swallow's entrails? And Magnus, don't even get me started on

the twisted traditions of your people!"

"So with the Passover now finished, I suppose this is a better time for us to beat some discipline into the Jerusalem garrison," Praxus thought aloud as the men continued to eat.

"As good a time as any," Justus said. "Though to be honest, it is never a good time for us in Jerusalem. At least most of the damned pilgrims should be gone by the time we arrive."

"When do we leave?" Cornelius asked.

"In two days," Artorius answered. "Pilate is coming with us. There are a number of unfinished issues left over that arose during Passover."

"What sort of issues?" Magnus asked.

"Not our concern," Artorius answered. "Politicians take care of political matters. We are simply an extension of that. The main road taking us to Jerusalem takes us south along the coast for most of the way, then turns east for the last stretch. All told, it's about a three-day march."

The following day, Cornelius' century held its own formation on the drill field between the barracks and the cohort's headquarters building. The men were all in full armor, ready for inspection. Artorius was present, though he remained in the shadows of the nearest barracks, not wishing to intrude upon Centurion Cornelius. However, the reason for the formation had special meaning for him. The century's optio, who would normally stand behind the formation, instead stood by his centurion in the front, carrying a small scroll.

"Legionary Metellus Artorius Posthumous…post!" Cornelius shouted. The soldier stepped from his place in the formation and quickly jogged over to his centurion. Cornelius then nodded to his optio, who read from the scroll.

"As a testament of your tenacity, valor, and superior leadership, you are hereby promoted to the rank of Decanus / Sergeant of Legionaries!"

Metellus accepted the scroll, clasped his centurion's and optio's hands, saluted, and the returned to his place in the formation.

Artorius turned and left as Cornelius continued to brief his men on their upcoming trek to Jerusalem. He then realized that his son had just turned twenty-two and was, therefore, the same age he was when he received his promotion to decanus. Artorius knew that Metellus would go through many of the same trials that he did, compounded by holding his position at such a young age. While it was not unheard of for a squad leader to be in his early twenties, it certainly was not the norm. An issue that Artorius had had to

quickly overcome was having an entire squad of legionaries who were older. Although, in his case, they had all been friends who'd served together over the previous five years. Metellus was now leading men he'd never even met before they arrived in Judea.

"Well, he's made it this far already," Artorius said quietly to himself. Something he referred to was Metellus being awarded the *civic crown* for extreme valor, and for saving his life, during the Battle of Braduhenna. While Artorius had many decorations, the civic crown had eluded him. It actually did not bother him and, in fact, he was very proud of his son for what he'd already accomplished in the legions.

"Artorius!" The call of Pontius Pilate notified him.

He turned to face the procurator, snapping off a sharp salute.

"I take it your men are ready for their journey?"

"They will be," Artorius asserted. "The men are used to marching, and they've only been in Caesarea for about three weeks, so their legs have not gone soft on them yet."

"Not that you would ever allow that," Pilate chuckled. "I will be glad to have legionaries with me when I return to Jerusalem. I intend to keep you there a month, two at the most. After that, provided you've beaten some discipline into the garrison, the only times you should need to travel there will be whenever I visit the city during Passover, as well as the occasional inspection. Infernal mess that it makes the city, it still gives me a chance to make Roman presence known to as many Judeans as possible in one fell swoop. There are many days when the masses forget they are our subjects."

The two men started to walk together. Pilate was hosting a dinner party that evening, with Artorius and Diana among the honored guests. Secretly, the centurion hoped in vain that it would not run late, nor that he would be suffering too badly from a pending hangover.

Chapter XVI: To Jerusalem

***

It was an hour before dawn as the First Italic Cohort assembled outside the gate of its barracks. A single squad from each century would stay behind to watch the garrison. They were also still short the twenty legionaries who were escorting the baggage train on its extended journey. Still, it was an impressive sight as the armored soldiers formed four columns on the cobblestone road. As Romans were known for their displays of power, Pilate had directed Artorius to have his men leave the leather covers off their shields and their helmets on until they were out of the city.

As the soldiers all came from different legions, their shields were painted with different colors and patterns. Though various shades of red were most common, there were some whose legion colors were blue, black, or even green. The designs also varied considerably, between eagles' wings, lightning bolts, with scorpions for the African legionaries, and winged horses on the shields of those that came from the east. With all the more pressing matters of making the cohort ready, Artorius had yet to authorize a new shield pattern for his men.

"Quite the colorful plethora we have there," he said dryly as Pilate rode up on his horse. Artorius, along with all centurions and options, was also mounted. The Judean procurator had donned his military tribune's armor, consisting of a muscled cuirass with leather trappings, a deep red cloak, and an ornate brass helmet with black accents, topped by a black crest that ran front to back.

"The old armor still fits," Pilate said with a chuckle as he tapped his fist against the chest plate. "As for your men's shields…eh, the civilians don't know any better. Reminds me of the early days of the Roman Kingdom, when our soldiers resembled Greek hoplites and every soldier had his own personally designed shield. And if you look at their faces, the skin color of our legionaries is as varied as their shields."

Artorius looked back at his assembled cohort and nodded. Theirs was truly an amalgamation of the various racial aspects of the empire. The skin of his men varied from pale white of those who came from Belgica and Gaul, to the deepest black of some of the Africans. And yet, because of the Roman policy of assimilation, all were of one culture and one mind. Artorius felt that

all should pay homage to their ancestry, while acknowledging that they were Romans first.

"Cohort!" he shouted over his shoulder.

"Century!" his centurions sounded over their own.

"Forward…march!"

As one, the men of the First Italic Cohort stepped off and began the long march to Jerusalem. If it were just Artorius, Pilate, and a mounted escort, they could readily make the trip in little over a day, less if they rode their horses hard. As it was seventy-five miles to Jerusalem, it would take the marching legionaries three days to make the trek. There was a sizeable gap between each century, as the centurion and optio of each rode in front of their men. They marched four abreast, taking up a sizeable portion of the road, although pedestrians and civilian carts were quick to avoid them. At a mile past the southernmost outskirts of Caesarea, Artorius halted the formation, had his men place the leather covers on their shields, and gave them the option of removing their helmets.

"Any particular threats we should know about between here and Jerusalem?" Artorius asked, as he rode up beside Pilate.

"Not for us," the procurator replied. "Bandits and raiders tend to avoid this road simply because of the high volume of traffic. And those that are brazen enough won't dare try anything with us. They go after easy prey, not four hundred men armed to the teeth."

"And what of the zealots I've heard about?"

"They're out there," Pilate conceded. "We, sadly, do not have the resources necessary to hunt them down and exterminate them, even if we did have a full legion at our disposal. Thankfully, they are scattered and leaderless. They spend most of their time fighting each other, though given enough time, I suspect they will attempt to make a show of force against your legionaries."

The late spring days were quite pleasant with a gentle breeze blowing in off the sea. Though thick tree groves were rare, there was still a variety of evergreen, palm, and various leafed trees dotting the landscape and lining the roads. In the distance, off to the west, they could see numerous fishing boats; the sea providing much of the staple for the region. The further away from Caesarea they traveled, the more decidedly 'Jewish' the people appeared. The men were mostly bearded with shoulder length hair, though they did not appear unkempt like so many of the barbaric peoples Artorius had

encountered over the years. Their dress was mostly robes of plain, earthly colors, though the wealthier would don resplendent red, green, and gold. Indeed, some of the more well-off merchants they passed, who were riding in litters borne by slaves, were clean shaven with a manner of attire that was a mixture of both Jewish and Roman. Women tended to wear a greater variety of colors than men, and most wore colored head scarves with their hair pulled back.

Late in the morning of the second day of their journey, the cohort halted at a crossroads near a rather large fish market. Metellus, sensing an opportunity to supplement their rations, addressed his optio, “Sir, is there time to peruse the fish market?”

The optio surveyed the scene before answering. “Go ahead. Decanii only! We don’t need several hundred legionaries descending upon their market.”

Metellus grinned and spoke with the men in his squad, gathering a few coins from those who wanted some fresh fish with their supper. He then left the formation, walking down a short section of the sandy beach to the nearest stall. It was more of a shabby tent with all the walls rolled up, and a rickety table with numerous baskets of freshly caught fish behind a small group of men, who regarded the approaching Romans with great apprehension. One of the decanii accompanying Metellus was originally from Damascus and was, therefore, fluent in most of the local languages. He spoke to the men, who started talking rapidly and pointing to them, their fish baskets, as well as waving about at nothing.

“What are they saying?” Metellus asked.

“They say if we take all their fish, there won’t be enough for the people,” the decanus replied.

“Piss on that!” Metellus snapped. “It’s not as if we’re stealing from them. We’re paying for what we take!”

“In Roman coin,” one of the men sneered with a heavy accent.

Metellus glared at him. “Roman coin is the only currency of value here. You should count yourselves fortunate that we don’t just take what we wish.”

“Take it easy,” his fellow squad leader said quietly. “That is how they are. They will try and provoke us and find any reason to say we abuse them. It’s just how they are.” He then proceeded to further haggle with the men in their own tongue.

The argument went on for several minutes. Metellus was becoming

exasperated when he saw another man approaching them from down by the water. Dressed in similarly shabby garb, Metellus gathered he was not a fisherman. He was well built, and the decanus could tell from the size of his forearm muscles and calloused hands that he'd done much physical labor in his life. The fishermen ceased in their arguing and immediately looked down, as if embarrassed. Though the man did not stand out from the others in dress or appearance, Metellus surmised he was somebody of importance to them. When he spoke to the men, his voice was calm and almost serene.

"What's he saying?" Metellus asked.

"He's telling them to sell us what we wish and to be thankful for the coins we give them."

The decanus was grinning in triumph.

"A Jew with a touch of sense," Metellus muttered as he produced a handful of silver denarii. "I wonder what his motives are."

"One needs no other motives than to do the right thing," the man answered back in Latin.

It surprised Metellus that he'd been heard at all, given how quietly he'd spoken. He was further perplexed that, although this man was undoubtedly Judean, there was no trace of a foreign accent when he spoke. Metellus hefted his basket of fish while the Jewish men greedily took his coins, even though they scowled the entire time.

"You look more like a carpenter or stone mason than a fisherman," he said to the man who'd intervened for them.

The man simply smiled. "Think of me as a fisher *of* men."

"What?" Metellus asked, but he was grabbed by the shoulder by his fellow decanus.

"Come on," the sergeant said. "We need to wrap these up and get the lads to stow them. No doubt everyone's packs will stink by the time we halt for the night, but it will still make quite the feast! A fish pie is sounding awfully good right about now."

"Strange fellow," Metellus persisted as they walked back to the cohort, which was making ready to start marching again.

"Eh, you see their type all over the place," the other decanus said with a shrug, as they started handing bundles of fish to their men.

"Perhaps, but did you notice when he spoke in our tongue, there was no accent?"

"Well, there are plenty of Jews who are Roman educated. Although, I

admit he appeared to be a bit too shabbily dressed to have been tutored in Rome. Most of the Jews who come to us to be educated are from wealthy families, and like you said, that fellow looks like he's done mostly hard labor during his life. But who knows? You meet all sorts of eccentric people in this corner of the world."

The final leg of their journey proved uneventful enough, though many of the men were now complaining that their packs now stunk of fish. They turned east early on the morning of the third day, and by late afternoon the city of Jerusalem came into sight.

"Impressive," Magnus said as he rode up alongside Artorius and Pilate. "Looks like a gigantic wall surrounds the entire city."

"More like three giant walls," Pilate corrected. "The place we are going is the Antonia Fortress. It lies in the northeastern portion of the city, along the eastern edge of the second wall. Nearby are the Temple Mount and the Pool of Bethesda, which many superstitious people think has healing properties."

The dusty road leading to the east gate was full of people and carts, though like everywhere else the legionaries marched, they quickly stepped out of their path, either averting their eyes or glaring at them contemptuously. The walls were gigantic, far larger than anything Artorius had ever seen. He quietly thought to himself that should the Jews unite and cast the Roman garrison out, it would be a fearful task of retaking it. As they entered the city, the streets became congested beyond their ability to simply walk through, and sensing their march was about to grind to a halt, Artorius turned to Valens.

"Send twenty men forward and have them clear a path for us!"

"Right away!" The soldiers selected handed their packs to their mates, and with the prodding of javelins, thumping of shield bosses, and more than a few profane shouts, they started to clear a path for the procession to continue its march.

Artorius noticed the massive temple complex well before he saw the Antonia Fortress. It was surrounded by a large wall and looked more like a military stronghold than a place of worship. The temple itself jutted skyward. Off of the northeast corner stood the fortress. Although from a distance it looked to be part of temple complex, there was a definite separation of about six hundred feet between them. The fortress itself was very tall, with a large square tower on each of the corners.

"There it is, lads," Pilate said. "Built fifty years ago by Herod the Great,

and named after his patron, Marc Antony. I've ordered the auxiliaries to clear out and utilize other barracks space within the city, so there is plenty of room for your legionaries. We also use a portion of the bottom floor as storage space for the high priests' vestments."

"We store the priests' vestments?" Artorius asked.

"It is a rather strange rapport we have with them, but yes," Pilate explained. "The high priest, although Jewish and the overall spiritual leader of the people, is directly appointed by Rome. He is also an insufferable pain in my backside. I'll explain more later."

There was a long slope that led up to the gate of the fortress, where a pair of auxiliaries stood guard. They passed through the portcullis and into the large drill field. Permanently fixed training stakes lined either side of the field with deep balconies overlooking from the numerous floors of the main complex and corner towers. Groomsmen took their horses and while legionaries dispersed to find their quarters, a Roman bureaucrat and well-dressed Jewish man approached Pilate. Artorius surmised that he was likely the high priest or one of his top aides. The three men immediately began to argue something about construction on an aqueduct, costs, and who was paying for them. Artorius decided that such topics were not his concern, and so he joined his fellow centurions in finding where they were housed.

"Well, it could be worse," Valens said as he looked over Artorius' shoulder into the small living space. "I don't even have a desk in my room."

"It'll do," the centurion replied. He set his helmet onto the desk and then turned to his optio. "Here, help me out of this."

"All these years, I'll bet you've been wanting to ask me to undress you," Valens replied, breaking into a fit of laughter.

"Quit being a smartass," Artorius retorted. "You know I can't reach the buckle on this damn harness."

Valens complied and unhooked the harness that Artorius wore his phalerae and other decorations, though he would not stop giggling.

"Normally, Nathaniel would help me out of my kit, but he's gods only know where between here and Massilia. And since Diana stayed in Caesarea, she's not available at the moment."

"All the lads pair up and help each other," Valens observed. "Doesn't make it any less amusing for me."

"Valens, everything is amusing to you," Artorius grumbled as he tossed the harness onto his bunk. He pulled off his hamata chain mail and laid it out

on the bed before putting his centurion's belt back on. "My battle armor is with the baggage train, so I hope we don't have anything serious happen before then."

"You're one of the only centurions I know of in the entire army that still wears a legionary's segmentata," Valens observed.

"It provides better protection." Artorius pointed to his side in emphasis, where Valens remembered he had a fearful scar from where his hamata had failed to withstand the repeated blows of an enemy swordsman. He then gave the optio his orders for the remainder of the day. "Have the men bathe, clean and inspect their weapons and kit, and let them know there will be a full inspection in the morning. Centurions and options will be doing most of the actual scrutiny of the auxiliaries, so we need the other principal officers and decanii to step up and oversee the daily drill and training of our men."



Artorius spent most of the following morning sifting through the records for the Jerusalem garrison. Despite his humble quarters, there was a sizeable administrative area for him to work in at the end of the floor. The large desk he sat at was piled with documents with many more strewn about the tiled floor. When he summoned his centurions and options he was not in the fairest of tempers. Whatever their personal feelings, the truth was they needed the auxiliaries and, therefore, the task now fell upon them to restore discipline into their ranks.

"The condition of the garrison is deplorable," Artorius stated. "Numerous disciplinary problems and I suspect that what is documented is only a fraction of what actually goes on. There are frequent complaints, as well, from the civilian populace regarding excessive use of force, to include the last incident where several dozen unarmed protestors were killed when the auxiliaries disobeyed Pilate's expressed orders and fell upon them with their swords instead of clubs."

"The issue here is not just that the auxiliaries lack discipline," Cornelius explained. "Since Jews view it damned near sacrilegious to work for the Roman government, we have been unable to find sufficient volunteers to fill the ranks. Therefore, most of the auxiliaries we get are Samaritans."

"What provokes the issue is Samaritans and Jews hate each other," Julius added. "There is bad blood between them that goes back centuries. Honestly,

no one knows where it all started, but that hatred is ingrained into both races as soon as they are born. The Jews resent that Rome enlists Samaritans to lord over them, yet they will not volunteer to fill the ranks themselves. And let's be honest, the Samaritans love us about as much as they love the Jews."

"This is true," Cornelius concurred. "The Samaritans who enlist into the auxilia are not the brightest prospects from their people. In fact, I would hazard that they are the scum of society who often join the ranks in order to avoid going to prison for various petty crimes."

"You're more right than you know," Artorius said, tossing a scroll across the table. "Petty theft is one of the most common offenses in the disciplinary reports. These bastards are constantly stealing from each other when not extorting from the locals."

"What bothers me," Magnus remarked as he looked over the report, "Is that a legionary can be strangled or bludgeoned to death if he steals from his comrades. Auxiliaries fall under the same laws as our men, yet their crimes go mostly unpunished."

"Then it is time the laws were enforced once more," Artorius emphasized as he stood from the table. "We have a daunting task ahead of us. We must immediately restore good order and discipline in a place where it has probably never existed. We must be harsh but fair in our dealings with these Samaritans. And above all, we must set the proper example. Make certain our legionaries know that their conduct will be under the sharpest scrutiny. In fact, as long as we're in Jerusalem I want them to confine most of their leisure activities to the area around the fortress. They can cavort again after we return to Caesarea, but for the time being I need their highest discipline on display. Understand that there will be those amongst the auxiliaries that will not conform, no matter how much we try and instill order into them. These we will have to break and dispose of. I would rather have a dozen well-trained soldiers than a thousand mindless brigands."

"What are you proposing we do?" Valens asked, showing his rare serious demeanor. Though the optio spent most of his time living a life that was debauched even by Roman standards, he was still a solid officer and one of the most reliable soldiers Artorius had ever served with.

"For the rest of this week we will inspect two cohorts each day," Artorius answered. "Each centurion and optio will inspect a century of auxiliaries. Tesserarii will accompany centurions and serve as their scribes; signifiers will go with the options. Split your centuries with half the men going with

each group. They will assist as a visual example of what professional soldiers are expected to look like. Plus they can serve as enforcers should these Samaritans get a bit indignant with our establishing of standards. Make certain decanii do a full kit inspection on their men. They don't have to have to be polished to parade standard, however, I want there to be no doubt that they and their equipment are battle ready."

"Yes, sir," his officers all replied in unison.

After dismissing them, Artorius took some of the scrolls he'd been making notes on and left the room. As he walked along the open air corridor that ran along the drill field, he heard Abenader calling out to him.

"Centurion Artorius!"

He slowed his pace, although he did not stop or look back. He allowed Abenader to catch up to him before responding.

"You're late," Artorius retorted.

"If this is about the inspections my officers will be performing, I don't want to hear about it." Abenader grabbed him by the shoulder and Artorius turned to face him, forcibly smacking the auxilia centurion's hand away.

"Keep your hands off me!"

"Pilate may have brought you here," Abenader barked, "but I don't need your 'help'!" It was clear that the man who commanded the Jerusalem garrison severely resented being undermined by an officer from the legions.

Artorius surmised that Abenader was at least a dozen years older than him and viewed him as a young upstart. It was clear he'd been harboring his bitter feelings since long before Artorius and the Italic Cohort arrived in Judea, and he wasn't about to relinquish control of his realm without a fight. It was a fight Artorius had hoped to put off until after he'd gotten a thorough inspection of the auxilia cohorts, but he knew he had no choice but to put his rival in his place. It was not turning into what he'd hoped for in a first meeting.

"You think I want to be here?" he growled, his face inches from Abenader's. "You may have more years under arms than me, but do not take me for some rookie upstart. I'd bet a year's wages that I have far more time on a battle line than you!"

"I don't give a vat of piss if you've fought in a hundred battles and been awarded the grass crown by the emperor himself!" Abenader snapped back. "Jerusalem is my garrison!"

"You forget yourself," he said, suddenly calm. "Legionary officers are

rated above auxiliaries, which makes me senior to you. Both of us answer to the procurator, so I cannot order you directly. That being said, your auxiliaries are little more than a reckless mob, and I am here to restore order and discipline. If you have any issues with that, take them up with Pilate."

As he turned to walk away, Abenader grabbed him by the shoulder. Before the auxilia centurion could react further, Artorius spun around and grabbed him by the neck, slamming him into the wall. Though Abenader was a few inches taller, Artorius was infinitely stronger, his gigantic forearm pulsing as he clutched the man's throat.

"You lay a hand on me again, I'll snap your fucking neck!" he growled into Abenader's ear. He then promptly released his grip and Abenader gasped as his breath was restored.

He then took a more conciliatory tone.

"Look," he said, "We may not like each other, but know that I am not here to take command of the Jerusalem garrison. The sooner your auxiliaries start acting like professional soldiers, the sooner I will be gone."

As Abenader stormed out, Artorius was left in an awkward position. His first meeting with the man who was his peer within the auxiliaries, and therefore his best hope for making the garrison into a reliable fighting force, had instead ended in a physical confrontation. He knew he had to take some of the blame for escalating the conflict. However, he was already so exasperated by what he saw he could not understand how any officer worthy of his position could allow such deplorable conditions to exist. And since there was no one they could replace Abenader with, he realized that whether he liked it or not, they would have to learn to work together. Pilate was buried under the arduous responsibilities of managing the province and had left the restoration of order within the Jerusalem garrison to him.

Chapter XVII: Unworthy Allies

***

Artorius paced back and forth in front of the auxilia century, hands clasped behind his back, clutching his vine stick. They were mostly Samaritans and the stench alone told the centurion that most had probably never properly bathed in their lives. None were properly shaved, their hamata armor in varying states of rust and disrepair. By contrast, the twenty or so legionaries behind Artorius looked immaculate; their armor polished, equipment fully serviceable, and all were bathed and shaved.

"These men look like shit," the centurion grunted to Abenader who swallowed hard in embarrassment.

"Yes, but they do their job," he replied.

Artorius snorted in disgust and walked over to an auxilia decurion at the far left of the line.

"Weapon," Artorius said, holding out his hand. The decurion reluctantly drew his gladius and handed it to him. The blade was nicked and spotted with rust. Artorius sliced the blade hard over his hand, causing the men behind him to wince. He then held up his hand, which was uncut.

"You couldn't cut butter with this, let alone kill a man!" he spat. He then looked over his shoulder and pointed to one of the legionaries that were observing the spectacle. *"Legionary, post!"*

The soldier quickly stepped over to his centurion, who held out his hand. The legionary drew his gladius and handed it to him, pommel first.

Artorius held the weapon up. "As you can see," he noted, brushing his thumb along the cutting edge, "this weapon has a razor sharp blade. Though meant for stabbing, it will easily hack through limbs if need be." He swung the gladius in a short slash for emphasis.

"The blade has been kept oiled and is free of rust," he continued, the gladius gleaming in the sunlight. "Any nicks or burrs are worked out with a sharpening stone. This is what a serviceable weapon looks like." He then handed it back to the legionary who snapped a quick salute and took his place back on the line.

"This, on the other hand," he said, holding up the auxiliary's rusted sword. "You could not cut through pig fat with this!" He threw the gladius

into the dirt.

He then eyed the fittings of the decurion's shoulder armor and saw that many were broken. He grabbed the shoulder pad and easily tore it away from the rest of his armor, nearly pulling the man over as he did so. "Your armor is useless!" he shouted into the man's face. "You're supposed to be their leader, yet what kind of example are you to the rest of these men?"

A stifled snicker alerted him and he quickly stepped over to where an auxiliary was doing little to conceal his amusement.

"You find this amusing?" he growled into the man's face, almost gagging on the stench of his breath.

"Little," the man muttered with a sarcastic sneer.

Artorius started to turn away, only to spin around and smash the Samaritan across the helm with his vine stick, sending him sprawling into the dirt, and his helmet tumbling off his head. The other men in the formation gasped while the on looking legionaries grinned as Artorius proceeded to beat the man savagely. The rusted chain mail would absorb much of the repeated blows, though the strikes to the exposed legs and shoulders left the semi-conscious man grimacing in pain. After more than a dozen blows he stopped, though his face was red, and he was snarling in anger.

"Get up!" Artorius barked, kicking the man hard on the backside.

The dazed auxiliary was helped up by a couple of his companions. He stood with his eyes glazed over and a trickle of blood running out of his mouth. The centurion paced back and forth for a minute, his face red and twisted into a scowl of rage. His clenched fists caused his enormous forearms to pulse.

"Anyone else?" he said after allowing himself a moment to calm down.

The assembled auxiliaries all bore looks of utter disbelief, and Artorius correctly assumed that none had ever been given even rudimentary training or discipline in their collective tenures.

When there were no further responses he continued. "I didn't think so. Throughout the empire, auxiliaries serve alongside legionaries in hopes of earning the right to become citizens themselves. It is a hard and dangerous life, but one of honor with great reward for those who complete their service to the emperor. Judea is one of the only provinces where auxiliaries have served autonomously from the legions. Your slovenly appearance and the complete disregard you have shown for the arms and armor given to you by the emperor's good will demonstrates that not one of you holds a shred of

discipline or self-respect. Centurion Abenader is your commanding officer; however, as long as I am in Jerusalem, all of you answer to me."

He slapped his vine stick across his palm for emphasis. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Abenader, though he remained silent. Artorius had to make certain that whatever their personal differences, he did not publicly undermine the auxiliary centurion or do anything to directly embarrass him in front of his men. For all they knew, the two were close colleagues who had full confidence in each other. Artorius quietly hoped for such a resolution once he broke these men down some and started to show Abenader and his officers how to rebuild them.

He walked back and forth in front of the men for another minute, letting his words sink in. At length he spoke again, pointing his vine stick at the decurion.

"You are responsible for these men," he stated. "Therefore it is your duty to see to it that they are inspection ready by tomorrow morning. If they are not, you will be stripped of your rank, and I will find a new decurion to lead them. All will be in fresh tunics, clean shaven, and washed. I will not have any of you smelling like you slept in a fucking pig sty! And if any man shows up with a dull, rusted weapon or his armor and kit are not fully serviceable, he will be fined a week's pay!"

This was met with a loud grumbling from the ranks, and Artorius was surprised to hear Abenader quiet them.

"At fucking ease!" the auxilia centurion barked.

Artorius nodded towards him approvingly, and then looked over at the Samaritan who he had beaten for insubordination. The man's face was red, and he was breathing quickly through his nose. All the men from this century looked in various states of shock and utterly appalled. As Artorius turned to walk away, the Samaritan drew his sword and rushed up behind him with it held high to strike.

"Sir!" one of the legionaries shouted, but Artorius already sensed what was coming. He spun around, dropped his vine stick and grabbed the man by the wrist and throat, tossing him through the air with superhuman strength. The Samaritan landed on his back with a loud crash, the air taken from his lung, and his weapon flying from his hand. Artorius' hand held his throat in a vice grip.

"Idiot!" he shouted into the man's face, his booming voice echoing across the courtyard. "If you're going to condemn yourself to death for

assaulting an officer, at least do it properly! You *stab* with the gladius!"

He looked up and saw some of the auxiliaries stirring and starting to move towards him. They were protesting rapidly in their own tongue, completely forgetting themselves as they watched their friend struggle in vain against the centurion's grip. Felix snapped his fingers and all the legionaries took a single step forward with hands on the pommels of their gladii. The tesserarius drew his weapon and stood between the auxiliaries and his commander.

"Anyone who makes another move will share this man's fate!" he snapped.

The auxiliaries were immediately silent.

"Assault on an officer is punishable by death! The procurator will decide his fate." He then nodded to Artorius, who pulled the Samaritan to his feet, still grasping his throat.

"Take this piece of shit away," he ordered as he shoved the man towards a pair of waiting legionaries. He then turned to Felix. "Draw up the charge sheets and have him brought before Pilate by this afternoon."

"Yes, sir," the tesserarius replied. He then signaled to the legionaries who drug the man away, thrashing and shouting at them in a language they did not know.

Artorius stepped forward and addressed the flabbergasted auxiliaries. "You men have two choices," he said, surprisingly calm. "You can either start acting like soldiers, for which you will be rewarded."

He then nodded to where a group of legionaries had stripped the Samaritan out of his armor and were beating him with their fists until he ceased thrashing. They then drug him away.

"Or you can end up like him; a simple choice. Dismissed!" When the auxiliaries did not move he shouted at them once more, *"That means get the fuck out of my sight!"*

The decurion shouted some orders quickly and, attempting to make some sort of formation, they turned to their right and briskly left the field. Felix let out a sigh and a soft chuckle.

"That went a little rough," he observed.

"Are you surprised?" Artorius asked, watching through the entranceway where the auxiliaries left. He could hear the occasional shout from their decurion.

"Not even a little bit," Felix said with a snort. "Though I have to admit I

did not foresee one of them pulling a weapon on you."

"Really? Because I did."

Felix nodded in acknowledgment, then turned and dismissed the legionaries, many of whom were laughing amongst themselves and lamenting the pitiful state of the Samaritan auxiliaries.

"Worthless bastards," one grunted as their decanii marched them back to their barracks.

"All officers are to dine with me this evening," Artorius said to Felix. "I want to know how the rest of the inspections went."

"Yes, sir."

As Artorius made ready to leave he noticed Abenader, who had been watching the entire ordeal in appalled silence.

"Centurion Artorius, I must protest!" he said. "That man…"

"What's there to protest?" Artorius interrupted. "He attacked me with a weapon and meant to kill me. You know what Roman law says regarding assault on an imperial officer. It would be no different if you were assailed by one of my men. I am sorry."

Abenader simply nodded in understanding. It was still very awkward between the two centurions, and there was little doubt that there would be numerous spats between them. Still, Artorius was glad to see that there was at least the beginning of some sense of understanding between them.



Twenty-four men gathered around two long tables in the hall Artorius procured well away from the fortress. Tesserarii, signifiers, options, and centurions of the cohort all gathered around. The hall belonged to a Jewish merchant, who loathed the idea of it being used by Roman officers, though he relented at the sight of a handful of silver coins.

"I sent out for your dinner, as requested," the owner said as he and his wife approached the table with a tray bearing pitchers of wine. "I've spoken with the local bakers and butchers. They have made the best efforts to prepare proper Roman food for you and your men."

"Very good," Artorius replied as the man poured him a cup of wine. He then addressed his assembled officers. "While we are in Jerusalem, we will mess together weekly. This will allow us to share any information gathered throughout the city with all senior leaders of the cohort."

“The real issue we have is bettering the effectiveness of the auxiliaries,” Praxus spoke up. “The city is huge, and they are few in number. Even if they were crack troops, which they most certainly are not, they would be hard-pressed to confront a major crisis.”

“Agreed,” Justus added. “That is why force alone will not be enough. We also have to accept that we will never have the good will of the people, no matter what we do. I’ve been in the east most of my career, and yet Judeans are by far the most laborious to contend with. I think we would be better off expelling them from the empire.”

The owner of the hall had stepped out, and Artorius hoped he was out of earshot of Justus’ callous remark. The men muttered a few words amongst themselves as servants entered the hall, carrying trays with various courses. As legionaries’ tastes were simpler than those of noble Romans, the fare was far more practical, consisting of soups, freshly baked bread, roasted vegetables, as well as lamb and beef. Artorius had relented to the requests of some of his officers and procured a course of dormice, even though he found the supposed delicacy repugnant.

“And what of the Samaritan who attacked you today?” Felix asked. “What sentence did Pilate hand down?”

“The only one he could,” Artorius replied, holding up a stuffed mouse and then tossing it back onto the tray in disgust. “I want everyone there tomorrow when the sentence is carried out. It will serve as a reminder to our men, as well as the auxiliaries. We also need to make certain that while our methods need to be firm and sometimes harsh, we do not make a habit of being abusive for its own sake. All discipline needs to be meted out fairly with our men setting the example for them of what right looks like.”



The next day the entire garrison, at least those not on duty or leave, was assembled on the drill field. Facing them was the First Italic Cohort. In the center was a large wooden pole. Artorius gazed at the auxilia formation and noted that it should have been much larger. Abenader stepped over to where Artorius and the other centurions were gathered.

“As I feared, there have been a mass of desertions,” he lamented. He then glared at Artorius. “These heavy-handed tactics may cost me half my garrison.”

“If you’d been a bit heavy-handed yourself instead of coddling these filthy rats we could have avoided this entire problem,” Artorius replied calmly. He then nodded towards the edge of the field, where Pontius Pilate, his personal bodyguard, and a handful of staffers were approaching.

“Go stand by your men,” he said. Abenader gave a grunt and turned back to his formation.

As soon as Pilate arrived Artorius shouted a subsequent order, *“Bring forth the prisoner!”*

A squad of legionaries led the condemned Samaritan forward. His hands were bound in front of him and he was naked to the waist. Unlike the previous day, he made no protest and seemed resigned to his fate. He was tied with his back to the pole, facing his former companions in the Jerusalem garrison. Doubtless he had many friends who were saddened by his fate. Worst of all were the two auxiliaries who had been tasked with carrying out the sentence. As was customary in the legions, it was a condemned man’s peers who had to administer his punishment, not the officers. They stood with their heads bowed, a corded rope in their hands. Artorius was suddenly having doubts about the sentence they were passing. He swallowed hard. He looked over to Pilate, who simply nodded. It was too late to turn back.

“This man has been found guilty of assault upon a superior officer!” he shouted to the assembly. *“The penalty for this is death by strangulation!”*

He then nodded to the auxiliaries, who were at first reluctant to move. Valens stepped forward and gave one a hard kick in the backside, and they quickly went about their hateful task. They whispered a few things to the Samaritan. Artorius imagined they were asking for his forgiveness. They then wrapped the cord around his neck and tied it into a slip knot behind the pole, which they then proceeded to twist in order to constrict the rope around the man’s neck. At first the Samaritan made little sound, but as the rope grew tighter and gouged into his neck, his eyes grew wide, he started to gurgle and gasp in vain for breath. The two auxiliaries turned the knot faster, hoping to expedite their companion’s passing and save him from further torture. The man’s eyes bulged out of his skull as he thrashed violently, his tongue protruding sickeningly. At last he gave one last jolt and was still. The auxiliaries held the rope in place for a few more seconds before releasing it. Artorius then pointed to one of the men, who looked down for a moment and sighed. He then drew his gladius and stood in front of the now lifeless Samaritan. He looked over at Artorius, who nodded. The auxiliary plunged

his gladius into the man's heart, his eyes welling up with tears as he did so. The Samaritan did not move or make a sound. Pilate had ordered the stabbing as a means of preventing the men from faking the man's death.

Artorius was suddenly sweating, and his face betrayed his sense of regret. Surely he could have had the man lashed, thrown in the stockade for a week or docked a month's wages. He did not have to push for the death sentence, but then it was not his decision to make. There was nothing for it. The man's body would be left on display for a day and then disposed of. He now had a much larger issue to deal with, and he feared he would have to implement similar measures if he were to correct it.

"All centurions and options are to meet in the principia!" he shouted to the assembly. *"Signifiers and tesserarii, take control of your centuries! Formation…dismissed!"*

"Proud of yourself?" Abenader asked as he walked up behind him.

"No, I'm completely disgusted," Artorius replied. Deep down he wanted to beat Abenader for insubordination, though he knew that was petty at best. Besides, their difference was one of appointment rather than rank. Abenader was more of a peer than subordinate, and the only reason Artorius held seniority was due to his command of legionaries instead of auxiliaries. "I hope it does not come to this again."

Abenader simply nodded and returned to dismiss his formation. The auxiliaries were in a state of shock and disgust. The iron discipline so common within the legions was completely foreign to them.

"Centurion Artorius!" Pilate's voice caused him to stop in his tracks. He had completely forgotten the procurator was there and had neglected to so much as greet him after the execution was complete.

"Have all senior officers in the meeting hall," Artorius said over his shoulder to Justus, who had been walking behind him. "I'll be there shortly."

"Yes, sir."

Artorius then walked over to Pilate, whose face bore a look of consternation.

"Apologies, procurator," Artorius said as he walked over and snapped off a sharp salute.

"The auxilia garrison is missing a substantial portion of its strength," Pilate noted.

"Yes, sir," Artorius acknowledged. "I am meeting with my senior officers now to address it."

“I’m depending on you, Artorius,” Pilate replied, his expression unchanged. “Desertion is an ugly thing which could destroy the entire garrison. I trust you will deal with this appropriately.”

“I will have a draft resolution to you this afternoon,” the centurion said. “What I plan to do is going to require your approval if we are to enforce it.”

“I will trust your judgment,” Pilate said after a brief pause. “I don’t know if we will be able to keep from the people that a number of the Jerusalem garrison has deserted. It could give the zealots something to rally around; saying that our own men have lost its faith in our ability to rule.”

“We won’t keep it from the people,” Artorius explained. “We will proclaim it to them.”



Two days later, Artorius was observing the morning drill exercises one of the centuries was performing on the drill field. Working in close proximity with the cohort had given him a better understanding as to the true makeup of the Roman world, as its legionaries had come from every corner of the empire. He noticed his chief armorer, Cicero, who was mending a helmet under a shade tree.

“Not working in the armory today, sergeant?” Artorius asked, walking up to him.

“It’s rather stuffy in there, sir,” Cicero replied as he worked a crease out of a bent cheek piece. He then set the helmet and tools down. “Besides, days like this are rather pleasant.”

Artorius knelt down next to him and picked up the helmet. It looked like it had been smashed with a hammer.

“What happened here?” he asked.

“You may recall some of the lads from Julius’ century got into a brawl with a handful of drunken ruffians the other night,” Cicero explained.

“Oh, yes,” Artorius chuckled. “So this is the helmet of the legionary who got bashed in the head.”

“Knocked him silly, that did,” Cicero agreed. “Had blood dripping out of his ear for about a day, too. The drunken sod who did it is still sitting in the dungeons awaiting trial. The others were given a good thrashing by Julius’ men and left in a pool of their own blood and vomit. One pissed himself, and I don’t think anyone wanted to drag his sorry ass away.”

“And the fate of the man who assaulted our legionary will depend on how magnanimous Pilate is feeling,” Artorius surmised. “He may get off with a hundred lashes and a month imprisonment. Although if Caiaphas has put Pilate in a foul mood again, he may order the man’s crucifixion.”

The sounds of wooden gladii and practice shields striking the six-foot tall training stakes echoed throughout the courtyard. Artorius glanced up and watched as a decanus shouted orders to his squad.

“Shield boss strikes…go!” On the order, all seven legionaries began to punch their targets with the practice wicker shields. Grunts of exertion accompanied each blow as the soldiers slammed their shields home again and again.

“Gladii strikes, throat to groin…go!”

Artorius cocked his head slightly as he surmised each of the men on the stakes. Two were fair-skinned and had come from the Rhine legions. Three were of Latin origins, another was Greek. The last man was most likely Syrian or Mesopotamian. The decanus, who had removed his helmet and had his hands on his knees as he checked the technique of his men, was a black African.

“Cicero, you said you were from Belgica,” Artorius noted to the armorer.

“Yes, sir,” Cicero replied as he took a pair of pliers and started working on the helmet again.

“That man who is drilling his squad in front of us,” the centurion continued, nodding towards the decanus, who continued to shout orders to his men.

“Sergeant Galerius,” Cicero replied. “What of him?”

“What do you notice about him?” Artorius asked.

Cicero set the helmet down again and apprised the decanus.

“He should have me check the hinges on his left shoulder plates,” the armorer replied. “The rivets look a little loose.”

Artorius started to chuckle.

“That’s not what I meant, although good observation. I was referring to his being a black African.”

“Oh, that,” Cicero remarked with a shrug. “Sure, I noticed. Beg your pardon, but it is kind of obvious, sir.”

“You both came from opposite ends of the empire,” Artorius observed. “And yet you both have Roman names, you share the same language, culture, and upbringing. Galerius isn’t exactly an African name and, I daresay, Cicero

is not a name held by your ancestors."

"In that you are correct," the armorer replied. "We've held our citizenship for generations, and I was never told what our ancestral name was. All I know is that my great-grandfather changed our name to Cicero sometime around the death of the great orator himself. Mind you, it was his agnomen, rather than a cognomen. However, mere plebeians like us taking the name as our own caused little notice. As long as you don't try and take the name *Caesar*, no one really cares what a man calls himself or his family. You, sir, are among the few in this cohort who truly are Roman by birth."

"The Artorians are of Messapic origin, in southeast Italia," the centurion noted. He continued, "But then one has to ask, what does it mean to be a Roman? Rome is not about a location or one's ethnicity. It is an idea, an assimilation of many peoples into one culture that brings light into what is otherwise a very dark and unforgiving world. Rome brings law, order, as well as education and a far better quality of life to those who fall under our rule. Men like Sergeant Galerius may be different in appearance to those born in Italia, but he is every bit as 'Roman' as the Gracchi or any of the other old families. The Jews, on the other hand, by their refusal to integrate have remained little more than conquered serfs who deny themselves the light that is Rome."

Chapter XVIII: A Whisper of Death

***

It was a crowded day in the market. Atop a long stage were auctioneers selling various wares. Travelling merchants could rent the space, as stalls and shops were almost all taken by local vendors. This day it was spice merchants from Parthia and beyond. It was a chaotic display and a wonder that any business transactions could take place in the flurry of noise and the crowding of potential buyers at the foot of the stage. The merchants were suddenly silent as the squad of legionaries approached from the left end of the stage. Two forced their way through the crowd and began to nail a scroll to the large center support post. Optio Valens led the rest onto the stage where they flanked him on either side, facing the crowd. He removed his helmet and started to read off a scroll that was identical to the one his men were nailing to the post.

"Let it be known that a number of Samaritan auxiliaries from the Jerusalem garrison have committed the heinous crime of desertion from the ranks! The punishment for this act is death by strangulation. In his mercy, the Procurator Pontius Pilate is giving every auxiliary a week to return to his unit. As being absent without permission of one's commanding officer is still a punishable offense, those who return will be given twenty lashes and a week's confinement but will then be allowed to return to the ranks. Those who do not willingly return and are captured will be given one hundred lashes and then executed by the comrades who they deserted!

"Attached to this edict is a list of names of every auxilia who has abandoned the standard. Anyone who captures and returns a deserter to the garrison will receive a monetary reward. Know that anyone falsely accusing another of being a deserter in order to achieve satisfaction of a personal grievance will be dealt with appropriately. Signed, Gaius Pontius Pilate, Procurator of Judea."

Valens scanned the crowd to judge their reaction. Most appeared indifferent and were anxious for the Romans to leave the stage so they could go about their business. If they were smart, most of the deserters would have fled the city, knowing they would be sought out.

“Well, that roused them,” a legionary muttered sarcastically.

“Let’s go,” Valens grunted.

As soon as he and his men were off the platform it immediately erupted into a frenzy of activity once more. They made their way through the crowded market. Most of the people avoided contact with the legionaries, though occasionally they would have to shove their way past those oblivious to their presence. As they reached the corner of the market square, a legionary tapped Valens on the shoulder.

“Sir, isn’t that your wife over there?” he asked.

Valens glanced to his right. There was no mistaking Svetlana. Though his centurion’s wife, Diana, had decided to remain in Caesarea, Svetlana was anxious to see what all the fuss was about regarding the Jewish capitol. A tall Norsewoman with blonde hair and fair skin stood out in stark contrast to the mix of Judean and other eastern races that populated the market. The optio grinned and walked up behind her. She was talking excitedly to a young Parthian woman, whose stall was full of small clay pots and pungent dried incense plants. Valens gave her a quick pinch on the backside, which caused Svetlana to yelp. She turned and made ready to slap him, then laughed when she saw who it was.

“Husband!” she giggled. “You’re the third person to try and get fresh with me today!”

“And the other two?” Valens asked as Svetlana kissed him gently on the lips.

“One has an eye closed shut, the other a broken nose,” his wife replied.

“Nice,” a legionary said from over Valens’ shoulder. “Sir, your wife is a rough one.”

“Tell me about it,” the optio replied. He then waved his men off before addressing Svetlana once more. “So what are you getting here?”

“Well,” she replied, “This lovely lady here has an assortment of various incense burners, not to mention scented massage oils that we cannot find in Caesarea.”

“Your wife has the most lovely skin,” the Parthian woman said, running her hand over Svetlana’s cheek and causing her to blush.

“I see,” Valens said with a grin. He then winked at his wife. “That’s not all you’re shopping for is it?”

Svetlana grabbed him by the shoulder armor and pulled him aside.

“If you’re a good boy, maybe I’ll bring her home with me,” she

whispered seductively. She then gave him a quick kiss and went back to bantering with the Parthian woman.

"I envy you some days," a legionary said to Valens as they left the market.

Back at the fortress, Artorius was reading over the inspection reports his officers had given him. There was a noted improvement within the garrison that remained, though they were still far beneath acceptable standards. Still, it was a start. He hoped to have his men on their way back to Caesarea by the end of the month, with him and his officers conducting periodic inspections to ensure that the Abenader and his men were making progress, and above all not upsetting the delicate balance with the people. The last thing any of them needed was for their enemies to put aside their differences and mass against the Roman occupiers.

A loud banging on the open door drew his attention, and he grinned when he saw it was Magnus.

"A message just came for us," the Norseman said excitedly, holding up a single piece of parchment.

"Well, it cannot be anything too terrible, given that you're smiling." Artorius sat back in his chair and folded his hands behind his head.

"Our dear friends, who we sold the pirate prisoners to, have cordially invited us to be their honored guests at the arena the day after tomorrow." Magnus smacked the parchment with the back of his hand in emphasis. "And joining us will be Commander Tiberius Stoppello, along with my brother."

"You know I loathe gladiatorial games," Artorius said, leaning forward onto his desk. "However, if this *entertainer*…what did you say his name was?"

"Sukhbataar," Magnus replied. "And it's not him I care about seeing or any of his gladiators. No, I want to see that nubile Syrian woman, Achillia, who is supposed to be fast and deadly with the bow!"

"After the last couple weeks we've had, I could do with watching a Syrian nymph shoot a bunch of pirates that tried to hijack our ship." This thought brought about some much-needed laughter from Artorius. He was still disturbed by the execution of the auxiliary who assaulted him, and this would give him some reprieve. "A pity Diana isn't here to see it."

"Well, now that you mention it…"

"I came with Stoppello and Hansi," Diana interrupted as she bounded into

the room. Artorius leapt to his feet, taking her in his arms and kissing her passionately.

"I…I didn't expect to see you," Artorius said, unable to conceal his joy at seeing his wife.

Diana simply shrugged. "I've had plenty of time keeping my dear sister company," she replied. "When Hansi came to tell us about the little exhibition their new friends were putting on in Jerusalem, I decided I had to join them."

"I will leave you two to catch up," Magnus said with a wink.

Though they'd only been gone a couple weeks, it felt much longer. Diana sat on her husband's lap, her arm draped over his shoulders. While such open displays of affection were frowned upon in Roman society, there was little about their relationship that fit within what was considered 'normal'. The fact that they had married at all, even though it was known that Diana could not have children, defied one of the prime reasons for marrying in the first place.

"I have to warn you," Artorius said. "My quarters here are pretty austere. There's barely enough room for me on my bunk."

"Since when have I ever cared about that?" Diana asked while playfully running her fingers through his hair. "I'll sleep on the street if I need to."

"Well, thankfully, there's no need for that," Artorius chuckled.



"Ah, my dearest friends!" Sukhbataar said excitedly as the contingent of Roman guests arrived at the arena. He embraced Magnus and Hansi hard. He then noted the other members with them.

"This is our good friend, Titus Artorius Justus, Centurion Pilus Prior and Commander of the First Italic Cohort," Magnus said in introduction.

"A pleasure," Sukhbataar said, taking his hand. He then noticed Pontius Pilate, who was flanked by several legionaries that were keeping the gawking crowds at bay.

"And this," Magnus continued, "Is Gaius Pontius Pilate, Procurator and Roman Governor of Judea."

"Your honored servant," the entertainer said, bowing deeply. Pilate nodded in reply.

"I have never visited this arena," Pilate stated. "All entertainments I have hosted have been in Caesarea."

“Ah, then you have seen some of my work before,” Sukhbataar said, as he guided the entourage up the enclosed stairs to the covered box seats. The arena, which was made almost entirely of wood, was far smaller than those seen in Rome and other imperial cities. Despite the vast population of Jerusalem, there was less of a taste for gladiators than in other regions of the empire.

Artorius glanced over his shoulder and saw that, near the steps, his legionaries were attempting to communicate with Sukhbataar’s men. He had to chuckle when he saw the men exchanging and comparing each other’s weapons to their own.

“So where is the lovely Achillia?” Magnus asked excitedly, as servants brought them fresh fruit and wine.

“She is preparing to make her appearance,” Sukhbataar said with a devious grin. “She will be pleased to see our friends from the northlands have joined us.”

There was a small dais in the sand and a cloaked figure discretely made its way over and stood on top with its head bowed and hidden from view. Artorius and his friends knew who it was, though most of the crowd was oblivious in their own affairs as they called for food and argued amongst each other over wagers being placed on the day’s events. At length, Sukhbataar, who as the host of the games was also acting as the announcer, stood and addressed the crowd. His booming voice carried far and all was immediately silent.

“People of Jerusalem and honored visitors!” he said. *“Today, we bring a special treat. A spectacle of skill and prowess unseen within these walls! Bring forth the condemned.”* With all eyes on him, few had even noticed the cloaked figure, whose arms hung loosely, though if one looked closely they could see the fists clenching repeatedly.

On the other side of the arena, a gate opened and fifteen of the pirates walked in defiantly, flanked by the oriental guards, who quickly left once the last man stood in the sand. Two of the guards carried in a long crate, which they dropped on the pit floor with a loud crash. They threw back the lid, revealing an assortment of crude weapons.

“I promised them all freedom and an imperial pardon, should they prove victorious,” Sukhbataar said over his shoulder.

“A promise you do not have the authority to keep,” Pilate noted with

great agitation.

"My dear governor, I would not be too concerned. However, if by chance they should succeed, please feel free to condemn me in their place."

"I intend to," Pilate remarked, though the entertainer did not look in the least concerned. Instead, he chuckled softly and addressed the crowd once more as the pirates feverishly grabbed for weapons from the crate.

"These men have been condemned to death for acts of piracy and terror! Yet, they have this one chance at life and freedom if they together can defeat a single opponent. Facing them, and promising to send each to hell's door, I give you Achillia!"

The crowd gasped in shock as the Syrian threw her cloak aside. Magnus' jaw dropped, as it was the first time he had seen her uncloaked and in broad daylight. She wore loose-fitting trousers common amongst the Far East, though all she wore above the waist was a tight-fitting top that held her breasts in place. Her arms, shoulders, and torso were all completely exposed, revealing a supple, yet extremely well-muscled physique. Her stomach muscles looked like they could break rocks. Her hair was pulled tight, and across her back were a Syrian longbow and a quiver of arrows.

She stood calmly with her arms folded across her chest, not even reaching for her bow. The pirates stalked slowly towards her, uncertain if they were walking into a trap. As they advanced, they fanned out into a semicircle. Achillia gave her telltale smile as her eyes gleamed with anticipation. When they were within twenty meters, in one fluid motion she un-shouldered her bow with her left hand while retrieving an arrow with the right.

Her next movements were so rapid that it seemed unreal; she quickly drew back and loosed her arrow into one of the men in the center, then with alarming speed drew back and shot down his two companions on either side of him. The men shouted in rage and charged towards her, snarling and swinging their crude weapons wildly. Achillia nocked another arrow and felled one of the pirates off to her left through the stomach, then quickly bounding from the short dais and leaping over the bent over figure and in between his friends.

The pirates, stumbling forward due to their clumsy momentum, were slow to turn about. Achillia hunkered down and shot one through the small of the back, and as he fell forward, thrashing in agony and trying to grab hold of the shaft, she drew back and loosed another arrow through the heart of the man nearest her. Less than a minute had transpired, and already six of her

assailants lay dead or mortally wounded.

"Filthy bitch!" one of the men screamed, causing her to smile sinisterly as she quickly nocked another arrow. Two of them stepped towards her, while the rest seemed uncertain what to do next. They had to know that she could not shoot them all before they got to her, though none seemed too anxious to sacrifice himself in order to save the others. The two who were brave enough halted abruptly as Achillia snapped her bow up once more. They were but a few feet away and she was slowly arcing the drawn arrow back and forth between them.

"You can't get both of us," one of the men snarled. Achillia blinked and nodded in acknowledgment. She then loosed the arrow into the man's companion with such close range velocity that it burst through his throat, leaving a spray of blood and torn flesh. In less than a second, she lunged forward, slamming her forehead into the first pirate's nose, crushing it into his face with an audible smash. As he yelped in surprise, eyes closed momentarily from the pain, she wrenched the spent arrow from the throat of his companion within the brief moment before he collapsed to the arena floor and slammed the bolt into the first man's eye socket. He fell to his knees, eliciting a high-pitched scream of unimaginable pain.

The remaining pirates gave a renewed shout of fury and rushed her once more. Achillia sprinted back towards the dais, spinning about and loosing three more arrows in rapid succession. All were deliberately aimed low, striking the men in the legs. She then leapt onto the platform and dropped to her knee, eyeing the men sinisterly. The four who still remained un-stricken noticed that her quiver was empty.

"Well, well," one of them said with a triumphant sneer. "The little whore forgot to bring enough arrows. What say we defile her before skinning her alive in front of this adoring crowd?" His companions gave toothless grins of wicked glee as they started towards Achillia once more.

"Let me rape that bitch in the ass with a rusted cleaver!" shouted one of the wounded men, who was writhing on the ground, clutching his grotesquely maimed thigh, his bone splintered by one of her arrows.

What they did not notice was that Achillia's right hand, which hung just below the edge of the dais, clutched a long chain. She gave a broad smile to the men and then stepped back to her feet, leaping backwards and pulling hard on the chain, the length of which led to a cage that was buried in the sand. The trap door was barely covered with a thin layer of sand and dirt; just

enough that no one, least of all the condemned pirates, even noticed it. In a spray of sand, the door flew back and a deep, terrifying roar erupted from within as Sargon sprang forth.

"Mordovat!" Achillia screamed, waving her hand towards the now terrified pirates.

In his initial leap, Sargon smashed into one of the men. His companions scattering in horror as gigantic claws slashed the hapless victim before the raging tiger plunged his fangs into his throat, bursting the artery and leaving him a twitching mass of bloodied death.

The three condemned men who could still stand were petrified with fear. Even if Cerberus had sprang forth from the bowels of Hades, it could not have filled them with more abject fear than the great cat, with its six hundred pounds of rippling muscle and fangs each the size of a dagger. One of the men unknowingly defecated as Sargon opened his great mouth and snarled at them.

In the covered box, Sukhbataar was grinning broadly and chuckling to himself. "We save a fortune on fodder for Achillia's pet this way," he said with dark humor.

Pontius Pilate, who had rarely so much as cracked a smile during the last five years of extreme strain from trying to govern the Judean province, suddenly burst into a fit of laughter. It was no doubt aided by the potent wine Sukhbataar had served his guests. The procurator leaned forward and grabbed the entertainer by the shoulder.

"My dear friend," he said enthusiastically. "I have not seen such a fitting display of skill, to say nothing of the creative means of disposing of this criminal scum."

On the arena floor, Sargon had torn the guts open on the last of his victims and was now casually stalking towards the wounded pirate who had made the vile threat towards his mistress. Achillia walked beside him, scratching him behind his large ears as he sniffed at the terrified man, whose eyes were wide with horror.

"Please!" he pleaded. "Show mercy! Surely I have suffered enough!" He tried to crawl away, and was stricken by great pain in his shattered leg once more.

"Suffered enough?" Achillia asked sinisterly. "One who would have me

impaled with a rusted weapon dares to ask for mercy…but yes, you shall have it."

The man first looked relieved, anticipating that the Syrian killer would spare his life.

Sargon growled and sniffed at him some more, causing him to panic again. "I thought you were showing mercy!"

"Oh, but I am," Achillia replied, laughing maniacally. "I shall speed your passage to hell." She then glared at him before speaking into the tiger's ear. "Sviatok, môj maznáčik; feast my pet."

She turned away and strolled to the dais as the man screamed in agony and terror as Sargon snarled and buried his fangs into his neck. Achillia had been oblivious to the hundreds of spectators, who had been greeting her with shouts and accolades as she slew the condemned criminals. As she mounted the small platform, she un-shouldered her bow once more and held it high in both hands, as she closed her eyes and raised her face towards the sun. The spectators erupted into a frenzy of cheering at the macabre, and rather bizarre, sight in the arena sand; a single Syrian woman with a bow, standing amongst the corpses of fifteen pirates with an enormous tiger feeding on the bodies. Achillia then faced the imperial box and gave a sweeping bow before leaping from the dais and making her way out of the arena. Sukhbataar's men quickly entered and began to drag away the corpses, while Sargon the tiger feasted contentedly.

The Roman entourage in the box seats had applauded loudest when Achillia had slain the last of her victims. Though Artorius loathed gladiators, viewing them as flamboyant amateurs, he was nevertheless awestruck by the Syrian woman's prowess with a bow, to say nothing of the spectacle of animalistic power from Sargon the tiger.

"I think I'm in love," Magnus said as he took another deep pull of wine.

"What of the other pirates?" Artorius asked.

"We could not dispose of them all at once, now could we?" Sukhbataar said with a chuckle. "We've kept the rest alive for the time being, occasionally giving one to Sargon as a treat. Perhaps there will be a chance for an even greater spectacle." He glanced over at the Pilate out of the corner of his eye.

"Sukhbataar, my friend," the procurator said. "You have indeed pleased me. We have larger venues in Caesarea, which attract a much greater variety

of spectators from around the empire. We have a massive carnival to celebrate Saturnalia in December. You will be my honored guests, as well as one of the highlights of the festival games. I take it you have other gladiators?"

"Mainly exotic beasts," Sukhbataar confessed. "However, with seven months of preparation, I can prepare a spectacle that will dazzle all within the eastern empire."

"I will pledge a thousand denarii to fund your endeavor," Pilate stated, raising a few eyebrows amongst the gathering. "I want our Saturnalia celebrations to rival those of Rome herself!"

Chapter XIX: The Fall of Sejanus

October, 31 A.D.
***

It was, at last, the time for farewells between the sailors and legionaries who had endured the harrowing journey to Judea together. As they gathered at the docks, the ship that had borne them to the east floated majestically on the waters. The freshly constructed main mast contrasted with the well-worn rest of the ship. Ballistae and catapults were mounted to the upper deck, as well as the front of the ship. Armored barricades to protect archers lined each flank. The Quinquereme truly exuded Roman power over the seas.

It was the eve before the vessel would cast off, and aside from a few patrolling members of the city watch, only two men stood on the dock near the gangplank. One was a man who would not be returning with the ship's crew.

"Are you sure about this?" Hansi asked Alaric.

The young man had approached him two days prior to let him know that he intended to remain in Judea for the time being. As he had only been with them for that particular voyage and had not contracted with the Roman Navy, he was not under any obligations to them.

"I am," the young man said. He was wearing a new, dark blue cloak, had acquired a fresh tunic and sandals, while also getting his hair cut shorter. These were a few things he had done for himself with a small portion of his share from the prize ship.

"You are a fine sailor, and even with no formal training you acquitted yourself well in battle."

"There is something I must find," Alaric emphasized. "Six years on merchant vessels, a year in Rome, and now this last voyage, I still have not found it."

Hansi looked at the ground for a brief moment and then looked up again, folding his arms across his chest. "You know, I've always said that a man's business is his own," he said, "but I am going to ask, what is it you are seeking?"

"The ability to forgive," Alaric replied quickly. When he did not see any

change in the Norseman's demeanor, he decided to continue. "You've been as good a friend as I've been able to find in the whole of the world, and as we likely will not see each other again, then perhaps I should tell you. You probably guessed that I was not born in Britannia, although my people knew of them. I came from a land just east of the Rhine. Our tribe was called the Marsi."

"I've heard of your people," Hansi said with a nod. "Remember, though I was raised just outside of Rome, my ancestry comes from lands far to the north of your own. Am I right to guess that you came to Britannia as a refugee about fifteen or sixteen years ago?"

"I could use a drink," Alaric said in reply, wiping a rag over his now sweating brow.

"There's a tavern close by," Hansi stated.

The two men walked in silence. A block away, the light came from within an inn possibly as old as the city itself. They stepped through the opening and down into the sunken portion of the tavern, which was mostly empty aside from a few merchants who had just come into port, as well as a few off-duty legionaries. Hansi wisely chose a table far away from these particular patrons. An Alexandrian Greek woman brought them a small jug of mead and a pair of clay goblets. Hansi filled their cups and waited for his friend to continue.

"I was very young then," Alaric finally said, after finishing his first cup and refilling it. "I don't know how the war came about, and I don't care. The tribes of Germania have been in a constant state of conflict with Rome ever since anyone can remember. What I do know is that my mother saved my life the day the legions destroyed our village. As far as I know, my father was killed that day, as was my grandfather, my mother's sister, and my newborn cousin. The Romans were not out for conquest, but murder. Knowing they would kill any they found, my mother fled with me to Britannia. The rest you know. And now it is time for me to ask you a question. Was your brother one of the legionaries who destroyed my people?"

Hansi did not answer right away; not because he did not wish to answer the young man's question, but because he had to think back to the tales Magnus had told him of his early years in the legions.

"Yes," he said at last. "At least, I am assuming so. My brother was assigned to the Rhine legions around the time of the Germanic Wars. There is a very strong probability that he fought against the Marsi."

“I don’t seek vengeance,” Alaric emphasized quickly. “Please don’t think that I am remaining in Judea to try and exact retribution. But understand that what happened all those years ago has been gnawing at my very soul ever since the day the legions came.”

“It must have been hard, then, having to fight alongside those very soldiers who killed your people,” Hansi observed.

Alaric took another long drink of mead and then hung his head, nodded slightly.

The Norseman placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “It is a credit to your character that you did the right thing and stood by us when we faced those awful pirates. Please know that I wish you well, and I do hope you find what it is you seek.”

The next morning proved particularly difficult for Hansi. As sailors, along with a procured compliment of marines and archers, boarded the ship, he made his way over to his brother and sister. Commander Stoppello was exchanging goodbyes with Artorius and Diana, while thanking Pontius Pilate for his hospitality. Hansi first placed both hands on Svetlana’s shoulders.

“You’ve grown so much, little sister,” he said, his voice full of emotion.

“And you’ve grown uglier,” Svetlana said with a laugh as she embraced her brother. “Safe travels, dear brother.”

Hansi then looked over to his brother-in-law, Valens.

“Look after her,” he said. “I may not have seen her since she was a little girl, but she is still my blood and means everything to me.” The Norseman then stepped over to Magnus and said, “Sixteen years and only now, when we get to know each other once more, we must be parted.” He placed a hand on Magnus’ shoulder.

“Caesarea is one of the largest ports in the whole of the eastern empire,” Magnus noted. “I am certain our parting will not last.”

“Well, just in case, here is something to remember me by.” Without warning, Hansi swung his fist, catching his brother on the side of the head, sending him sprawling to the deck.

“Damn it all, you still hit like a little girl!” Magnus staggered to his feet and lunged at his brother, tackling him onto the rocking pier.

“Strange way their people shows affection,” Commander Stoppello observed as he and Artorius watched the two brothers brawl, while spewing

profane curses at each other.

“I don’t think it’s their people, so much as their family,” Artorius told him with a grin. While the lighthearted display of violent brotherly love caused many bystanders to stare in disbelief, none could comprehend the events unfolding in Rome that would shake the very fabric of the empire.



Pilate was in a near state of panic when Artorius and Diana arrived the next day. It was a pleasant late morning, and they were hoping to join the procurator and his wife for a stroll down to the seaside and a much-deserved relaxing lunch. Instead, when they arrived, Pilate was sweating profusely, despite it being relatively cool on the open air balcony leading from his office.

“Messages from Rome,” Claudia said quickly in explanation. Though she was not fretting as much as her husband, her face still bore an expression of extreme concern.

“Sejanus has fallen,” Pilate said, handing a pair of scrolls to Artorius. The centurion took a few minutes to read the contents while Diana held his hand. Pilate’s brow was soaked in sweat, which a servant quickly wiped away with a dry cloth.

The first scroll came from Regulus, the current consul, and one of Pilate’s friends within the senate. It was a detailed account of Sejanus’ fall and the purging that had since followed. Though details were sketchy, Regulus stated that irrefutable proof had been given to the emperor, proving that Sejanus intended to depose him and take the imperial mantle for himself. Given that correspondence from Rome could take months to reach Judea and this had arrived just two weeks after the events transpired told of the gravity of Sejanus’ fall.

“His eldest son, Strabo, was arrested and killed just days later,” Pilate said as Artorius continued to read. “I fear greatly for his younger son and daughter. They are just children, yet I fear that Tiberius will not spare them from his vengeance.”

“Their mother, Apicata, killed herself after Strabo was executed,” Claudia added. “And if Tiberius does unleash the ultimate retribution upon Sejanus’ children, what will happen to those who called him friend?”

One could only speculate on just how many senators and noble friends of

the praetorian prefect had already perished in the wake of Tiberius' wrath. And yet, the second scroll was simply an official order, stating that Pilate had been relieved of his posting as deputy prefect of the praetorian guard, and that he had the emperor's thanks for his years of service.

"At least they found you a worthy successor," Artorius noted when he read that Cassius Chaerea had been assigned as deputy prefect.

"Enough of the levity," Pilate scoffed as Claudia gently rubbed his shoulders, trying to calm him. "My appointment was at the behest of Sejanus. Tiberius knew he was my patron, and now he has been executed as a traitor. It would seem Justus gets the last laugh in their feud after all." He laughed darkly at the irony.

Though Sejanus had many enemies, the fact that one of the few who ever had the nerve to stand up to him was a mere centurion from the ranks had been a constant irritant. He had made it clear on multiple occasions that the only reason Justus was not exiled or dead was because of their mutual friendship with Pontius Pilate.

"These letters came to us very quickly from Rome," Artorius observed. "If Tiberius wanted to dispose of you, he most likely would have dispatched a group of praetorians to come for you at the same time he ordered the arrest of Sejanus. So, in simplest terms, you should do nothing. And I would say nothing to the Syrian legate, either in correspondence or in person."

"We don't have to worry about seeing him in person," Pilate grunted. "I wouldn't know him if I saw him, as he still governs in absentia from Rome. In my five years as procurator none of his bureaucrats have ever called upon us nor so much as invited me to come to Syria."

"Well, if the emperor wanted you eliminated, he would have done so already," Artorius speculated. "All the same, the loss of Sejanus does lead to potential vulnerability. He was able to shield Tiberius from much of what went on here. As it is, you can bet the emperor will now have an eye on Judea. If we are able to maintain order then I believe in time he will forget or, in the least, forgive your being a patron of Sejanus."

That evening Artorius went to the tavern that was enclosed within the legionary barracks. Justus Longinus had had it constructed, giving them a place of recreation that was just for legionaries, as well as a few select 'companions'. It was run by a rather affable Greek whose full beard and theoretical nature caused the soldiers call him 'Socrates'. No one knew his

real name, and he seemed content enough being known by the name of one of his people's most famous philosophers. Soon after assuming his position, he had told Justus that he preferred legionaries as clients rather than local auxiliaries because he knew they would always pay their bill. Artorius and the other centurions had made it clear that anyone refusing to pay for goods or services rendered in Caesarea would be subject to ten lashes, plus a forfeiture of a day's wages in addition to what was owed. Socrates had once told Artorius that while he appreciated such discipline making legionaries ideal customers, he wondered if it was a bit excessive. To which the centurion had replied, 'I have no idea if it is excessive; we've never had to instigate this punishment. And if we ever do, I promise it will only happen once or twice.'

This particular evening Socrates was serving wine and food to Justus Longinus, his optio, as well as some of the decanii from his century. Justus was visibly drunk and practically throwing coins at Socrates every time he ordered another round; with the Greek only too happy to oblige. His daughter assisted him this evening, and though relatively attractive, it was made clear to the soldiers that she was not for the taking.

Artorius sighed and shook his head as he walked over to the table. Part of his reason for going there was he knew that Justus would be in a celebratory mood.

"Centurion Artorius!" one of the decanii said as several of the men quickly rose from their seats. Artorius quickly waved them to take their seats.

"Sit down, I'm not the emperor!" he remarked with a laugh.

"There you are!" Justus shouted, despite Artorius standing next to him. He slammed his fist on the table, causing one of the cups to tip over. "The lads and I have just been knocking back a few."

"A few?" Artorius asked, looking over at Socrates.

"I've sent my boy out back to fetch a fresh cask," the Greek replied with a boisterous laugh. He then quickly walked over with a cup for Artorius, which the centurion eyed suspiciously.

"Trust me this is not the normal piss water I serve to the rankers. Your friend here has been buying me out of my best vintage."

Artorius chuckled and smelled the contents of the cup before taking a drink.

"Come!" Justus said sharply. "Another toast, now that our cohort commander is here."

All the men rose and held their cups high. *"To the fall of Sejanus!"*

"May his corpse not poison the Tiber!" the men all replied in unison.

Artorius remained silent through this, though Justus did not appear to notice. If the message from Rome was true, then Sejanus was certainly a traitor, and Artorius could not fault his friend for celebrating the demise of such a hated enemy.

"Good riddance, you bastard," Justus said with slightly slurring speech. "May he and all his closest friends rot."

At this Artorius elbowed him sharply.

"What?"

"You forget who some of his friends were!" the centurion snapped.

"Not you, surely," Justus replied, causing Artorius to elbow him again.

"Ass," he grumbled. "I'm talking about Pilate. Our friend, and not to mention governor of this province, was a close confidant of Sejanus. Understand that with his fall, Pilate is now vulnerable and by association so are we. Revel in the demise of your enemy, but do not forget that with him gone, we will now be under direct scrutiny of the emperor."

"I'll take Tiberius on the imperial throne over Sejanus," Justus grunted.

"Agreed," Artorius conceded. He then said quietly, almost to himself, "I fear that this last betrayal will have far reaching affects, darkening whatever remains of Tiberius' reign."



Artorius had returned to Jerusalem to conduct a cursory inspection of the garrison a few weeks later. He hoped it would not take more than a week or so, as he and his men who accompanied him wished to be back in Caesarea in time for the Saturnalia celebrations. In addition to Valens and a handful of legionaries, he had also brought Sergeant Cicero, his chief armorer. He was conducting a thorough inspection of the arms rooms while Artorius and Valens watched a batch of new volunteers being led to the drill field.

The sight of auxiliary recruits attempting to march was a pathetic tragedy in Artorius' mind. There were approximately a hundred of them, most wore little more than rags, and some were devoid of even rudimentary sandals on their feet. The decurion leading them gave the order to halt before quickly walking over the centurion and optio, rendering the customary salute.

"An inspiring sight," Valens said with thick sarcasm. "I'll bet the people

of the city feel safer already."

"With respect, sir," the decurion spoke, "you asked for volunteers, and these are who came forward."

"Take them over to the quartermaster," Artorius ordered. "Have them draw a single tunic and pair of sandals, then take them to the river and have them washed, shaved, and given some semblance of a haircut before billeting them."

"Yes, sir," the decurion said with another quick salute. He then shouted a few orders to the mob, who lethargically followed him over to the supply rooms.

As Artorius and Valens watched them depart, Sergeant Cicero joined them, his face full of vexation.

"I've completed my inspection of the arms room," the armorer said.

"And?" Artorius asked.

"It's pretty sad," Cicero replied. "Many of the gladii are rusted and pitted; hamata armor is mostly rusted, with broken links, and otherwise unserviceable. There are also numerous weapons that are simply missing."

"What of the previous armorer?" Valens asked, folding his arms across his chest.

"I told him to piss off unless he wanted what's left of his teeth broken," Cicero remarked. "Sorry sirs, but my father was a smith, and he taught me to respect one's weaponry; steel was the one thing a man could trust."

"You're not taking over their armory," Artorius emphasized. "The man responsible for this mess will be flogged and reduced back to the ranks. However, we must find someone amongst the auxiliaries who is knowledgeable with weaponry and metal smithing. I cannot believe that all of these men are worthless scum."

"They aren't," Valens agreed. "Mind you, even the legions have their share of cowards and shirkers, but I do feel that a large enough number of those who did not desert are at least willing to become soldiers. I spoke with Abenader, and he feels that all current auxiliaries should go through recruit training along with the new men. I have to say, I agree. We may as well start them all over. Let them write a new chapter, as it were."

"That is if any of them can read," Cicero scoffed. "I'll start vetting volunteers who wish to work in the armory. At minimum, there should be three or four armorers per cohort, though it would be ideal if each century had its own."

“Do what you can,” Artorius replied. “Anything else?”

“Yes, sir. I need steel, and lots of it. I think most of the weapons and armor can be repaired, and any that are unsalvageable we’ll melt down for scrap. I also know that we’ll eventually need to forge replacement weapons and equipment for ourselves. I do not trust weapon merchants in this region. Their work is shoddy at best. And since we are not officially assigned to any legion, we are not authorized to draw replacement arms from the imperial depots.”

“A bureaucratic technicality,” Valens grunted.

“I’ll speak with the procurement office,” the centurion replied. “I cannot promise anything, but if we have to, we’ll send out scrounging parties to acquire what you need.”



While Artorius and his men continued to try and rebuild the Jerusalem garrison, even more disturbing news came to Pilate from Rome; strangely enough, none of it from the emperor. Even though Tiberius corresponded with the procurator directly, his dispatches were all official business regarding the running of the Judean province. The news Pilate received came from either the consul Regulus or the new Deputy Praetorian Prefect, Cassius Chaerea. It seemed that the plot of Sejanus went deeper than anyone suspected. And when Artorius returned to Caesarea, just a week prior to Saturnalia, he discovered more than he ever wanted to know, and it all came from an unlikely source.

Hail, Artorius, old friend and brother-in-arms!

I write you with much vexation in the aftermath of the fall of Sejanus. Know that I have no regrets in the role I played exposing the traitor for what he was; a soulless tyrant who would sought to make himself master of Rome. I was there when he was strangled, his body cast down the Gemonian Stairs and torn to pieces by the mob. He betrayed the empire and his punishment was just.

It is what happened after that weighs on my heart. Tiberius tasked me and an old friend of yours, Gaius Calvinus, with discovering the truth behind other rumors he’d heard whispered. What we found was that Sejanus had

already murdered in his quest for power. The emperor's son, Drusus Julius Caesar, did not die from too much drink as had long been assumed. No, he was murdered, not only by Sejanus, but also by his own wife, Livilla! Tiberius' wrath has been renewed, and I now fear for Sejanus' two younger children, who are no longer safe. I have used my Tribunician veto to stop the executions of those falsely accused of being privy to the plot; however, should the emperor himself unleash his wrath, I will be powerless to stop him.

In the end, I view this letter as my confession. I dare not let Pontius Pilate know of my involvement in Sejanus' fall, as doubtless that will cost me his friendship. You, however, Calvinus and I know we can trust. You still have friends in Rome, as does Pontius Pilate. The emperor is wary of his Judean Procurator, but he still views him as an honorable servant of the empire. But do not allow any reason to arise that would make him think otherwise. As I said, as long as I hold office of plebian tribune I can veto the senate, but I can do nothing should Tiberius unleash his rage. And I fear he is set to do so against the blameless children of Sejanus. Should they die, I will have myself to blame.

I did my duty, and it has cost me deeply. Take care, old friend.

Always,

Aulus Nautius Cursor

Artorius had not spoken to Cursor in several years. In fact, he regretted deeply not making time to see him or his former Master Centurion, Calvinus, when he was in Rome.

What Artorius did not know was that between the time Cursor had penned his letter to when it reached his friend in Judea, Tiberius had exacted the ultimate penalty against Sejanus' remaining son and daughter. The son, though only thirteen, was dressed in his formal toga to signify he was a grown man, before he was strangled. The daughter, a year younger, was first raped by the praetorians, as there was no legal precedent for executing a virgin. In a horrifying display, the girl had been defiled while the rope was around her neck. Cursor had witnessed the sickening display, powerless to save them. He'd left a broken man, seeing the price of doing his duty. In the end, he was left wondering if Rome was even worth fighting for.

Chapter XX: Horsemen under the Bull

Caesarea, Judea
July, 32 A.D.
***

Spring came once more to the empire, with many feeling a sense of rebirth after the hated affair that came in the wake of Sejanus' fall. The dark cloud had hung over Caesarea, and especially Pontius Pilate. Even the joyous celebrations of Saturnalia could not remove the pervading gloom.

The baggage train, carrying all the household goods for the officers of the First Italic Cohort had at last arrived, along with all of their servants and the twenty legionaries who had acted as their escorts. Though they had seen a substantial portion of the empire during the months it took for them to cross from Gaul into Judea by land, they had been oblivious to the fearful news from Rome, hearing only the odd rumor here and there. As the daily business of most inhabitants within the empire was unaffected by what happened in Rome, Artorius wondered if the average citizen even knew who Sejanus was and why he had been struck down.

Pontius Pilate had, at last, quit panicking whenever he received official imperial correspondence. The only real change was that instead of communicating with Sejanus, he now received his instructions directly from the emperor. Most of the provinces were considered *senatorial*, with their governors appointed from the senate and allowed to rule with near autonomy. Judea was one of the few *imperial* provinces, with an equite procurator, answering to the emperor instead of through the senate. And while rumors abounded as to Tiberius' state of mind, what dispatches he did send to Pilate were mostly routine and almost mundane in nature.

The spring Passover had been mostly uneventful, with Pilate making his annual speeches to the assembled masses, reminding them that despite their religious autonomy, they still fell under the rule of Tiberius Caesar. I was now summer and Artorius had just returned to Caesarea, following another garrison inspection in Jerusalem.

"The training of the new recruits goes well, I take it?" Pilate asked as Artorius handed him a pair of scrolls.

"Well enough," the centurion replied. Though molding the new auxiliaries was moving at an agonizingly slow pace, coupled with his at times

strained rapport with Abenader, Artorius knew he had to instill confidence in the procurator. “These scrolls are the updated rosters for the garrison, along with the payroll that will require your authorization. It is slow going, but at least there was no violent quelling of riots this last Passover.”

“Hmm,” Pilate muttered, setting the scrolls aside. “You know that the garrison of Jerusalem is but a fraction of my responsibilities in this province. Whatever issues arise, I depend upon you to resolve, until such time as they are able to manage themselves effectively.”

“Understood,” Artorius replied.

“Was there anything else?” Pilate’s face was worn, and Artorius wondered if he slept at all anymore.

“There is,” the centurion confirmed. “I have a handle on the auxiliary infantry, but have yet to so much as see a single cavalryman since I’ve been in the province. I know they exist, I saw the manning rosters.”

“*Ala I Gemina Sebastenorum*, a regiment of Samaritan cavalry,” Pilate acknowledged. “They spend most of their time patrolling the major roads between Judea and the bordering provinces. Given the unbridled hatred that you are well aware of between the Jew and Samaritan, I tend to keep them out of the cities as much as possible. You should pay them a courtesy visit. Their commander is a centurion named Taurus. He’s a Roman, at least, and a sound cavalry officer.”

“I’ve likely seen him in passing,” Artorius noted. “When is he due to be in Caesarea again?”

“The day after tomorrow,” Pilate answered. “As I personally don’t care to see any of his Samaritan cavalry, I have directed him to give his monthly reports to me personally. Return around midday tomorrow, we should be finished with our meeting then.”



For Centurions Cornelius and Julius, there was more to serving the empire than simply commanding their centuries in battle. Julius was originally from Tarsus in Asian Minor and, as such, was familiar with the numerous peoples within the eastern empire, to include the eccentric Jews. As a boy he had visited Caesarea, as well as Jerusalem with his father. Therefore, he was able to view the populace not as conquered subjects but as people.

Though from Rome, Cornelius made the acquaintance of Claudia Procula's Judean friend, Rebekkah, and the two were spending a significant amount of time together. It was midmorning when they walked past an old building, the sounds of many very young voices caught Cornelius' attention.

"What is that?" he asked. "It sounds like it is full of children."

"It is," Rebekkah replied, "But that is no place of happiness." She attempted to guide him away. He took her by the hand and quickly walked around the stone wall to the open gate. The stench was overpowering. Numerous children, many with various diseases, and all malnourished, were congregated within.

"What is this?" Cornelius asked.

"A place for orphaned or unwanted children," Rebekkah replied sadly. "A local rabbi does what he can for them, but sadly these poor souls are mostly lost."

"This isn't right," Cornelius said, shaking his head. "Surely there is something that can be done. I have seen the temple in Jerusalem and loathe the idea that a place with such wealth would allow children to starve."

"The priests do ask us to pray for them," Rebekkah said hopefully, though Cornelius only shook his head in disgust.

"Prayer is worthless without action." He released her hand and walked through the courtyard, which was overgrown with weeds. He shook his head as he walked past the children who varied in age between two and fourteen years in age. There were a few older women looking after them, though they mostly hid behind their head scarves and kept their eyes averted from the centurion. Rebekkah waited for him just outside the gate as he made his way into the stucco building. He came back out after just a few minutes, his hand over his mouth as if he were gagging.

"Please, let's leave this place," Rebekkah pleaded. "There is nothing you can do here."

"That is where you are wrong," Cornelius replied as he took a small rag and wiped his brow. "They have no sewage or waste disposal. It is disgusting in there! I am going to get in touch with some contacts I have who may be able to help."

Rebekkah stopped abruptly and was gazing at the centurion with admiration. "You really do care about our people."

"They are my people, too," he reasoned. "This province is part of the Roman Empire, and therefore the people within are, to a certain degree,

Rome's responsibility. But know that I curse those fat bastards at the temple who allow this to continue! The scraps they throw away from their table would be more than enough to feed these children. And if they are not given an education or any skills, what happens to those who survive? Many of the bandits and zealots in this region probably came from places such as this!"



The next day Artorius arrived back at the governor's palace just as Taurus was finishing his report to Pilate. The cavalry centurion was aptly named, as he was rather bullish in appearance. He was broad in the shoulders and thighs, with a dark complexion and a gruff face that looked as if it required a shave twice per day.

"Centurion Artorius," the man said, extending his hand. "A pleasure to finally meet you. Your reputation precedes you."

"Does it now?" Artorius asked, accepting Taurus' hand.

"I trained under an old friend of yours, Aulus Nautius Cursor," the centurion explained, causing Artorius to grin.

"I remember Tribune Cursor well," he remarked, suddenly remembering the troubling letter he'd received from his friend the previous December. The two men continued their way down the long corridor, "Though I have not seen him for several years."

"He is doing well enough," Taurus remarked. "He was elected as a plebian tribune a little over a year ago, though he has tried to keep himself out of the public eye ever since the fall of Sejanus."

"Why would he do that?" Artorius wondered aloud, even though he knew the answer. "He wasn't one of his followers, as far as I can tell."

"No, that is correct," Taurus explained. "He kept whatever level of decorum was necessary while Sejanus still held the emperor's favor. I have not been to Rome for some time, so I cannot say for certain. However, rumors do have a nasty way of traveling, even this far east. Word has it that Cursor was one of those who brought down Sejanus. My sources even say that it was he who exposed the betrayal of the emperor's niece, Livilla."

"Cursor has a fierce devotion to duty, no matter how painful," Artorius observed. Even without the tribune's letter, he would not be surprised at the notion that his old friend would have done what was necessary if he knew Sejanus to be a traitor.

“That he does,” Taurus concurred. “He’s also one of the most candid officers I ever served with.”

“I have to ask you something,” Artorius said, stopping to face the centurion as they reached the atrium. “Were you one of the ten-thousand?”

“At Braduhenna?” Taurus’ face was dark and serious. He gave a short nod of confirmation. “Yes, I was. As painful as the memories are, I was not going to address this out of respect for what you and your men in the Twentieth endured.”

“It’s been four years ago as of next month,” Artorius noted as servants opened the great doors, and the two men stepped out into the afternoon sun. The elevation of the palace on the high steps allowed it to catch the cool sea breeze that was denied the congested streets below. The heat of summer was great in mid-July, and Artorius was ever grateful that their posting was on the coast and not inland at some stifling garrison like Jerusalem or Jotapata. “I have to ask… how? How exactly did you all march forty miles in a single day and still have the strength to fight at the end?”

“I’ve been asking myself the same question every day,” Taurus answered, taking a deep breath as they descended the steps and walked the few blocks to the small stables by the barracks where the senior officers boarded their horses. “To be honest, it is mostly muddled in my mind. It was late afternoon when we started, and once night fell it seemed as if our trek would never end. Cursor insisted we walk our horses for the majority, allowing them to save their strength. Time stood still, and as we marched along the river, trying not to snap our ankles on the slippery rocks, I felt like Sisyphus, pushing his boulder for all eternity. I cannot imagine what that night was like for you.”

“Cold, wet, and unforgiving,” Artorius replied. “I felt as if the Rhine at our back was really the River Styx, and the Frisians were there to send us to Charon. My men were already battered and exhausted, plus we’d already suffered a number of casualties.”

“Even after we crossed the river, mercifully unopposed,” Taurus continued, “I lamented privately that we had to make the same trek back again. Thank the gods that the Fifth Legion had repaired the bridges during the night and were able to reinforce us. Had they not, both your legion and our entire force would have been annihilated.”

It always darkened Artorius’ mood to talk about Braduhenna. Though he’d fought in numerous campaigns, even the triumphs of Germanicus were lost in the shadow of that dark place where so many Roman soldiers

needlessly died. Still, there were times he needed to talk about it, as if the pressure was ever building and his soul would rupture if he did not release it. Taurus was the first man, besides Tribune Cursor, that Artorius had spoken to since then who had been a part of *The Ten-Thousand*, as they were known.

Unsure what else to say, they walked in silence until they reached the stables. Artorius was accompanying Taurus to where his cavalry regiment was cantoned just outside the city. A groomsman brought Taurus' horse to him, as Artorius' servant, Nathaniel, fetched his own mount.

"How would you rate the overall quality of your men?" he asked openly as soon as they were mounted and riding at a slow trot through the streets.

Though densely crowed, the people cleared a path for the two men, not wishing to run afoul of a pair of armored Roman soldiers.

"They're not the men I had on the Rhine," Taurus replied candidly. "I won't lie to you, there are many days I would cast the whole lot of them in the abyss. For us it is not simply a matter of finding volunteers, but also men who can effectively ride a horse. Despite our proximity to Syria and Arabia, this is always hard to come by."

"I would think Arabians would flock to the standard."

"So did I," Taurus replied. "And of course politics plays a substantial part, just like in all of our other affairs. The best Arabian horsemen who enlist end up attached to the legions in Syria, Egypt, and Asia Minor. It seems every time I do get a handful of troopers worth a damn, the legates snatch them away from me. That leaves me with Samaritans and those who no one else wants. Both Pilate and his predecessor, Gratus, have tried to get me some better quality men. However, as they are but equites themselves, the legates are not exactly inclined to listen to them."



The camp of the Judean cavalry contingent consisted of numerous tents and a hastily erected crude fence for stabling their horses. The entire regiment was assembled in ten ranks with a large enough gap for the two centurions to walk between them. They dismounted and, with Taurus' permission, Artorius inspected random troopers' weapons for serviceability and wear. On the surface, he could find little fault with Centurion Taurus' cavalry contingent. The men were washed and shaved, their arms and equipment reasonably serviceable.

It was only as a courtesy amongst peers that Artorius was even allowed to inspect the men. As Taurus also came from the legions and held the billet of cohort commander, the two men were technically the same rank. In fact, given that Artorius had only held his position for a little over a year, he reasoned there was a good chance that Taurus was senior to him based on date of rank.

"Your men look a little rough, but nothing serious," Artorius noted to Taurus, as he returned a cavalryman's lance back to him. The three-hundred men stood in formation, each man to the left of his horse.

"In daily duties they perform adequately," Taurus noted. He then said a few words to one of the other centurions, who in the Samaritans' native tongue shouted a series of orders and dismissed the formation. "Just know that there is a reason they are mostly kept from the major cities."

"I figured as much," Artorius noted, raising an eyebrow.

"To be honest," Taurus continued, seeming glad to have a fellow Roman officer he could vent to outside of his regiment, "These lot are a nightmare to keep control of under ideal circumstances. It's not that they won't fight, but rather it's getting them to cease once the engagement is decided. I sent some men out to pursue a small group of bandits we'd tracked down. I specifically told them to bring at least a couple of them to me alive for interrogation. All but one were left impaled on spikes, and the one they did bring to me, all they brought was his head."

Artorius broke into a laugh, which Taurus could not help but do the same. The cavalry centurion then guided him over to his personal tent, which was substantially larger than the ones that housed his troopers. It was a large Bedouin style, with a semi-permanent presence to it. A Numidian servant held the flap open as the two men entered. Inside, the large camp bed was about twice the size of a soldier's cot and covered with thick blankets. A stand in the corner held a large clay water jug, and in the center stood a table with six chairs.

"I occasionally hold meetings with my centurions in here," Taurus explained. He then snapped his fingers and the same servant entered with clay goblets of wine.

"Your mission is to patrol the main roads of the province," Artorius said, "Yet, you are too few in number to effectively hinder bandits from harrying the populace."

"Hence, those who can afford it bring an armed escort with them," the

cavalry centurion replied. “The rest are left to take their chances in the wild. We cannot prevent outlaws from plying their trade, although I would like to hinder their access to weapons.”

“That is where, perhaps, I can help you,” Artorius conjectured. “My men have been doing little except trying to train the local garrisons. They need a real mission. What do you know about the zealots and other rebels within the region?”

“Only that they are disorganized and lack central leadership,” Taurus answered.

“They are also better armed than simple bandits,” Artorius added. “Capturing some of them may lead us to where they are getting their weapons.”

“Possibly,” Taurus conceded. “However, it is not like there is only one arms supplier in the region.”

“No, but if we can eliminate one of them it may dissuade others. There have been several weapons shipments from the imperial depots that were bound for the legions and have disappeared. I know we cannot stop the flow of unlawful arms completely, but to do nothing is simply unacceptable. Especially if we are dealing with stolen legionary weapons. I have an entire cohort at my disposal. What say we conduct a joint mission, utilizing all of our assets to bait some of the better armed and more organized rebels into a brawl?”

Chapter XXI: Punish and Enslave

***

It had taken a bit of convincing in order to get Pilate's authorization, though in the end he reckoned hunting renegades and arms smugglers was a better use of his legionaries than simply training the local auxilia. For this particular venture, Artorius would take a single century of legionaries on a road march to the port city of Tiberias, on the Sea of Galilee. It was the seat of the Jewish king, Herod Antipas. The publicly stated purpose was for the soldiers to bring a number of state gifts from Pontius Pilate, as well as give Herod a personal display of Roman power.

Tiberias was only a couple days' march from Caesarea. It would take them through rolling hills near Nazareth that were thick with woods and vegetation. Such terrain would offer much cover for any bands of renegades or zealots. It also allowed a contingent of Taurus' cavalry to parallel the main road mostly unseen. The intent was for the legionaries to draw their foe into the open and have the cavalry cut off their escape. Artorius only took one century with him, as he felt that any larger of a force would be viewed as too formidable for a zealot band to risk attacking.

They left one morning in early August, just as the predawn cast its glow and before the heat of day. Artorius rode at the head of the contingent, his signifier marching alongside his horse with the century's signum held high. The cohort had a lone cornicen, who walked behind the signifier, his curved horn draped over his shoulder. Felix, the tesserarius, was at the head of the column, just in front of the first pack mule. All the logistics animals bearing the soldiers' rations and tents, as well as some exotic spices for them to present to Herod, were in a long line. Legionaries marched in a file on either side of their supply animals. Behind the column marched two squads, led by Optio Valens, who also had a horse. His slave, Erin, walked beside him and was the only woman within the group. Taurus led a detachment of fifty cavalrymen, who in the open regions kept at least a single terrain feature behind Artorius' men.

The first day passed uneventfully enough. Occasionally, Artorius would have his men search the passing wagons, though there was little to be found that would arouse suspicion. As night fell, they arrived at the town of Nazareth. It was mostly a farming community, the actual urban center

consisting of mostly single story buildings. Only the single inn that they could see from the outskirts had a second floor.

“We’ll bivouac outside the town,” Artorius directed his officers. “Have the men set their tents on the west side of the road. We’ll make our presence know, though we are not here to cause any undue disruptions.”

Shepherds led their flocks along the road as legionaries went about setting up their camp for the night. The men hurriedly guiding their sheep past the camp gave the armored soldiers an occasional nervous glance. Within a half hour, ten squad tents stood erected in a perfect hollow square, with separate tents for the principle officers, as well as Artorius’ private tent in the center.

“Not much in the way of entertainment in these parts,” Valens grumbled as Erin helped him out of his armor.

“There will be plenty to keep us amused in Tiberias, I’m certain,” Felix replied with a chuckle. He then looked lost in thought for a moment. “You know, I heard there’s a rather famous Jewish teacher from this area.”

“From here?” Valens asked, bemused. “I find that difficult to believe. There is little here that makes me think of it as the home of any sort of learned person. These people are mostly shepherds and farmers.”

“I can only go by what I’ve heard,” Felix remarked. “I’ve never met the man personally. Apparently though, he often speaks out against the Sanhedrin, calling them hypocrites who should act to help the people instead of acting all pious and praying loudly. Publicly they denounce him as a heretic, although given his popularity with many of the people, I think they are afraid of him.”

“Well, then, I’m amazed Pilate has not invited him over for supper. It seems those two would get along famously!”

The large door flap of their tent was rolled open, and they leaned back on their cots, watching the sun slowly set behind the low hills as the occasional legionary walked past.

“There is a certain peacefulness about this place,” Felix said after a few minutes. “I can’t quite place it, but somehow I understand why the Jews love it here.”

“They call it their promised land.”



The soldiers were gone before the people of Nazareth had roused

themselves for the day. It was still another full day's march to Tiberias, barring any unforeseen crises. As much as Artorius wanted to get his men some actual experience, he knew it was far better if their march proved uneventful.

"Contact right!" a soldier shouted, dashing any chance of a monotonous trek to the Sea of Galilee. Instinctively, all legionaries on the right side of the column turned in the direction of the threat, forming two battle lines, shields together. The sun was just starting to crest over the hills to the east, its orange light glaring in their faces. Two squads on the left side faced out the other way, lest they be attacked from both sides.

Artorius, at first, thought the legionary may have simply panicked at the sight of a shepherd, but then his eyes grew wide as dozens of men rose up from behind the line of sagebrush plants, slings whirling over their heads.

"Down!" Felix shouted as a barrage of sling stones bounced off the wall of shields.

"Rear guard, hold in place!" Artorius ordered, instinct and training taking over. After all of his years in the legions, it came reflexively to him. *"Right wing, advance! Left wing, on me!"*

Without waiting for further orders, the cornicen sounded several loud notes from his horn that echoed through the valley. As the men on the right of the column started to slowly advance, sling stones hammering their shields, Artorius led several squads of legionaries off to the left of where the enemy was engaging them. With no sign yet of their cavalry support, he feared they would simply let off a few volleys of harassment before disengaging. They were too few in number to effectively threaten his column, however, as they were unencumbered by armor and heavy weapons, he had no doubt that the zealots could outrun his men whenever they chose to break.

Rocks and grits of sand crunched under his feet as they scrambled up the short slope. As Artorius suspected, the zealots were unleashing a final volley and starting to make a run for it. It was then the centurion noticed the glint of metal coming from behind the zealot's hiding position. Rushing towards them were Optio Valens and his men. The zealot leader saw them and quickly shouted orders to his men, who started to flee. Though they were too fleet-footed for the pursuing legionaries, a storm of javelins from Valens' men fell upon them. One man screamed in pain as the heavy pilum smashed into his thigh, sending him tumbling to the ground. Another was run through the back, the heavy javelin bursting out of his chest in a spray of blood and

bone.

As the rebel leader gave a loud cry and they began to flee, columns of dust kicked up from behind the small grove of trees they ran towards. Their eyes grew wide in panic as several dozen Roman cavalrymen emerged from the woods. At their head was Centurion Taurus, wielding a long spatha sword. He shouted a series of orders, his men lowering their lances and emitting a loud battle cry as they charged. Armed only with their slings and the occasional short sword, the rebels were quickly overwhelmed, skewered by lances, with one hapless fellow having his skull split by a vicious smash of Taurus' sword.

"Here!" Artorius shouted, as he and his men rushed towards the fray. "I need some of them alive!"

A trooper plunged his lance into the throat of one last assailant as Taurus repeated the orders in the Samaritans' native tongue. There were at least a dozen zealots that had been unable to escape. Their companions were being pursued by Taurus' cavalry, and they cringed each time they heard one of their fellows scream in pain as he was cut down.

"Bind their hands," Artorius directed his men. He then looked up at Taurus, his face sweaty, he was breathing heavy from exertion. "Well done. Can your men escort the prisoners back to Caesarea? I'd rather not have to take them all to Tiberias and then back again."

"We can," Taurus replied. "We'll make sure at least some of them live long enough to be crucified. I can have about twenty men remain as your screen force as well. Shouldn't be any further issues between here and Tiberias, and I doubt another band will be so brazen to try this again so quickly."



It was dusk by the time the contingent reached Tiberias. Many were still on edge after the events of the day, though some of the legionaries lamented that aside from the first javelin storm, none of them had been able to actually engage their enemy at all.

"All we did was hide behind our shields while those bastards beat on us with rocks," one soldier grumbled.

"And had we not done so, you'd have your face smashed in," his decanus chastised.

“What we did was hold them in place to allow the rest of our men to flank them,” Sergeant Cicero added. “You forget.; We do not fight any battle alone. All of us have a part to play in every engagement. The reason why the Roman army is the most feared fighting force in the world is because of our ability to work together. Always remember that!”

The palace of the Judean client king, Herod Antipas, stood out in stark contrast against the skyline. Most buildings clustered along the coastline of the Sea of Galilee; which at thirteen miles from end to end, and a width of eight miles at its widest point, it was, in actuality, more of a large lake than a sea.

“There it is, lads,” Artorius said from atop his horse, “The city named in honor of our emperor, and home to the King of the Jews.”

“Not much of a city, is it?” Valens asked as he rode up beside his centurion.

“It’s only eleven years old,” Artorius noted. “I asked Nathaniel about it before we left. He said it was built on the site of an old village called Rakkat, that’s mentioned in their holy books.”

Large palms and evergreens lined the roads, as well as many of the houses. The streets were far cleaner than Jerusalem with flowering gardens accenting most of the buildings. The people were also better dressed, mostly in bright colors, and appeared to bathe far more regularly. Valens made note of this.

“One thing this area is most known for is its hot springs,” Artorius explained. “The legends are that the waters have healing effects.”

“Regular bathing does keep one healthy,” the optio noted with a trace of sarcasm in his voice. “So many of our nasty provincials might live to be older than thirty if they’d simply bother to have a wash from time to time.”

As they continued up the high street towards the palace, they noticed a different air about the people. Even though the populace was overwhelmingly Jewish, they did not appear to have the inborn hatred for Rome like their countrymen in Jerusalem. Some even smiled and greeted the column as it marched past.

As they reached the open gates leading into the palace grounds, a well-dressed man stepped through to greet them. Though clearly Jewish, he wore a resplendent Roman style toga, kept his naturally curly hair cut short, and was clean shaven. When he spoke, his Latin was perfect, and like the man with

the fishermen Metellus had seen, there was no trace of a foreign accent in his voice.

"Welcome, most noble warriors!" he said with much enthusiasm.

"You must be Herod Agrippa," Artorius replied as he dismounted his horse.

"That is what most know me by," the man said with a short bow, "Although my actual name is Marcus Julius Agrippa. It was my grandfather who named me after the great Roman admiral who defeated Marc Antony and later sent me to be raised and educated in the imperial household in Rome."

"Your name precedes you," Artorius replied, placing his fist over his chest and giving a nod of respect.

"And I was sent by my uncle to greet our noble visitors."

"I don't know if you could call any of us 'noble'," Valens remarked as he dismounted and joined them.

"This is Optio Tiberius Valens," Artorius said in way of introduction. "And I am Centurion Titus Artorius Justus. I bring gifts for your uncle, the king, as well as a message of friendship from our noble Procurator Pontius Pilate."

"And for that, my uncle bids you welcome," Agrippa emphasized. "Come, we have a quarters arranged for your men. You and your officers will be my personal guests at the palace. Will you and your optio dine with me this evening?"

"We would be delighted," Artorius replied. He was puzzled that a nobleman with the status of Herod Agrippa, one who was more Roman than Jew and who'd been best friends with the emperor's son, would wish to share his dinner with a mere centurion from the ranks. Still, he knew better than to refuse his hospitality, tired though he was.

It was well into the night by the time the legionaries were settled in and Artorius and Valens joined Herod Agrippa in his personal dining room in one of the wings. The room was fairly small and the design was grand, though less so than in Roman palaces. The columns were stone, painted a dark red on the lower half, and a dirty white on the upper. The flooring was mostly earth-tone tile. What Artorius noticed immediately was that in the living suites for Agrippa, the décor was mostly Roman. Despite Jewish laws against idolatry, there were a number of statues depicting Roman noblemen and women, as

well as a larger-than-life, full bodied statue of the emperor standing in full armor, a laurel crown upon his head and right arm extended in a salute.

The oaken table was polished to a high sheen and was lined with a number of Roman couches. As the three men lounged at the long table, Artorius recognized that most of the pottery was ancient Etruscan. The large wine jug and goblets were painted black, with gold motifs of animals and humans.

“Gifts from my dear friend, Claudius,” Agrippa explained as servants began to bring them their first courses, while filling their wine cups. “He has such a fascination with Etruscan history and art.”

“I confess, I am a bit surprised that you would even invite us to share your supper with you,” Artorius admitted.

“Bah,” Agrippa said, waving his hand while filling his wine once more. “You men are the first decent Romans I have seen in a long while. Besides, you come as emissaries of Pontius Pilate, and I know that as a centurion pilus prior you will be elevated into the equites when you decide to leave the legions. Who knows, perhaps a governorship or tribune’s posting awaits you.”

“Perhaps,” Artorius agreed with a shrug. In reality, he’d never even considered a political career after his time in the army was done. He was a soldier of Rome, and that was enough for him. He noted with a trace of concern that Agrippa was now on his third cup of wine. It was a potent brew, not watered down like what one usually drank with their dinner.

He had to admit that the food was excellent. Agrippa’s servants brought them an assortment of various meats, cheeses, and fresh vegetables, along with local fruit. Artorius and Valens mostly ate in silence, unsure what to think of their host. As he quaffed his fourth cup of wine, Agrippa seemed inclined to talk more about his friends in Rome.

“Ah, dear Claudius,” he said with a reminiscing laugh. It was clear that although a nobleman and possible heir to Herod Antipas’ throne, Agrippa was a lonely man who appeared content to speak with anyone who happened to be Roman. “The trouble he, Drusus, and I used to get into when we were young! And there was Posthumous Agrippa; the last surviving son of my namesake, and only remaining grandson of Augustus, who later banished him. We were all close in age and became like brothers. And Claudius’ brother, Germanicus, looked after all of us. But sadly, Claudius and I are all who remain. Our other friends all murdered well before they turned forty.”

There was an awkward silence that followed, and the two soldiers continued to eat, while Agrippa mostly drank. Artorius was not surprised by this, given the reputation he'd had when he would cavort with Drusus Caesar. There were also rumors regarding Agrippa's indebtedness, and that he was not in the best of standings with his uncle. Still, the centurion kept these thoughts to himself. Instead, it was Valens who changed the subject to confirm a rumor they had heard during Passover in the spring.

"What is this about a prophet whom your uncle put to death?" the optio asked.

"Oh, that," Agrippa said, rubbing his temple as if his thoughts were elsewhere. "Yes, beastly affair that was."

"We heard he was put to death because your uncle feared he could lead a rebellion against both his rule and ours," Artorius stated.

"Hardly!" Agrippa said with a halting laugh before taking another long pull of wine and letting out a loud belch.

"So who was he?" Valens persisted.

"His name was Yohanan ha-mmatbil," Agrippa explained. "He was otherwise known as John the Baptist. He claimed to be a messenger from God…well, that's hardly surprising in this part of the world. I meet people on the street every day who claim to speak with the Almighty! He was a fool, but a harmless one. His only 'crime', if you will, was insulting my uncle for divorcing his wife and marrying the wife of his brother. Personally, I found his criticism to be quite appropriate and would have commended him for it. It was *she* who brought about his death."

"Who?" Valens asked.

"Salome, my cousin, or niece depending on how you look at it. She is the stepdaughter of my uncle. A vile creature she is, takes after her mother, my sister. When asked to dance for Herod, she put on such a display for the lecherous old bastard that he offered her anything she wanted, to include half his kingdom! Instead, she asks for the head of Yohanan on a silver platter."

"That *is* vile," Artorius remarked.

"I know," Valens added. "I mean, I've had women ask me for some pretty twisted things, but that tops them all."

"Personally, I think her mother had a hand in it," Agrippa continued. "I was there, though I could not overhear all that was said; it was loud with all the music. Still, that she would ask for a man's execution…"

"Are you still going on about that, dear cousin?" The woman's voice

startled the two Romans, although Agrippa seemed unconcerned. Salome strode into the room, her demeanor one of deviant defiance. She was strikingly beautiful with smooth olive skin, long hair that was carefully placed over her shoulders, with a thin, yet properly curved figure barely hidden beneath a dancer's dress. She was also very young, certainly under twenty.

"Do you call me *cousin* or *uncle* today?" Agrippa asked venomously.

"Will you not introduce me to our guests?" Salome asked, ignoring his biting words.

"I did not know they were your guests to be introduced to," Agrippa retorted, his speech now slightly slurred from drink.

"You forget whose palace this is," Salome replied, her countenance unchanged. Valens found he could not take his eyes from her, and she smiled knowingly at his staring.

"Very well," Agrippa sighed. "This is Centurion Artorius and Optio Valens. They come as emissaries from Pontius Pilate."

"Mmm, so Pilate sends his mighty conquerors," Salome said seductively as she laid herself on the couch next to Valens. She took an olive from the nearest plate and flicked it into her mouth with her tongue.

Artorius cringed as Valens nearly choked on his wine, knowing what his optio was contemplating. That this woman had so casually demanded a man's death with the same demeanor one would ask for an extra cup of wine, would not stop Valens from wishing to do unspeakable things to her.

"When will I have my audience with the king?" Artorius asked Agrippa, who was starting to look glassy-eyed from all the wine he'd consumed.

"Tomorrow or the next day," Agrippa said absently. "I hear you ran into a spot of trouble on your journey."

"You heard about that. How?"

"I have eyes everywhere," Agrippa chuckled. Though his face drooped and he slurred when he talked, Artorius suspected he was not as incoherent as he appeared. "I knew the same day that you had left Caesarea, and when you arrived in Nazareth. I know more about what goes on in this kingdom than my idiot uncle ever will."

Artorius was not at all surprised that Agrippa had spies all over the region. After all, Judea was not that large, and he reasoned anyone within the royal house had their own network of informers. What did catch him off guard was his insult towards Herod Antipas. And yet, either Salome was

paying him no mind, did not hear him, or quite probably Agrippa did not care what she heard or told her stepfather. Salome continued her hushed talk with Valens, who seemed enraptured by her, though after a few minutes she excused herself and bid them all goodnight.

"Twisted viper," Agrippa said as soon as she left the room.

The optio continued to stare at the entrance she'd left through.

"Valens…" Artorius said chastising.

"What? Don't worry, I've broken far more dangerous creatures than that one."



The next morning, Artorius decided to take a stroll through the palace grounds as well as take in the legendary hot springs of the area. It would be another day before Herod Antipas bade the Roman emissaries to come see him. His delay was a subtle way of showing that even though he was but a client king under the Roman Empire that these lands were still his. In fact, his kingdom was but a portion of the province; split into two regions, he ruled the lands of Galilee and Perea. The lands to the east were ruled by his half-brother, Philip the Tetrarch. Though granted a substantial measure of autonomy, there were ever the gentle reminders that they both fell under Roman rule, and were therefore subservient to Pontius Pilate. They did have a substantial amount of influence, though, such as when they compelled Pilate to remove the votive shields displayed at the Antonia Fortress, as it greatly offended the people's views of idolatry.

Just off the palace grounds was one of many Roman-influenced bathhouses. This one was especially large, with the steaming water piped in from the subterranean hot springs, therefore requiring no manmade heating. A small number of legionaries were gathered on the steps gambling and playing dice games. They all quickly stood as Artorius walked up the steps.

"Centurion, sir," one of the soldiers said.

"At ease, men," Artorius replied. "How are the waters?"

"Fantastic!" another legionary spoke up. "I don't know what it is that permeates from the springs here, but it gets out the perpetual grime of this place." These soldiers were from the grassy plains and forested regions of Gaul and Belgica, so it was no surprise that they viewed the more arid east as 'dirty'.

Inside, a slave took his clothes and the centurion stepped into a steam room for a few minutes before deciding to take in the famous hot baths. No sooner had Artorius plunged into the heated waters than a man he recognized as Herod's chamberlain entered abruptly. As he was the only person within that was clothed, the centurion guessed that he was not there to enjoy the steaming mineral waters.

"Ah, Centurion Artorius!" he said excitedly. "Forgive my interruption."

"Let me guess," Artorius sighed as he ran his hands through is soaked hair, "Herod is requesting my presence at once."

"That he is," the chamberlain replied, bowing slightly and extending his hands in a show of resignation.

"Very well," the centurion said. "Tell him I will see him in half an hour."

"But…" the chamberlain started to protest, though he cut himself short at Artorius' glare. "But, of course."

Artorius felt a trace of pity for the man, knowing that he would be severely chastised for not bringing him before Herod immediately. However, it was also a subtle ploy on Artorius' part. The Jewish king may have been able to make him wait a day,, but by coming on his own terms, Artorius made it clear that he was not answerable to Herod. He would, of course, give him all manner of respect due to his person, though he would not cower, grovel, or in any way show subservience.

It was closer to a full hour before Artorius made his way into Herod's audience chamber. He had been unable to find Valens, and so he rounded up two squads of legionaries, had them get into full kit, with each man carrying a pot or jar of spices and incense that Pilate had sent.

"Centurion Pilus Prior Titus Artorius Justus, Emissary of his Excellency, Gaius Pontius Pilate!" The chamberlain's voice sounded both frayed and relieved that Artorius had finally arrived.

Herod's hall was dark, lit only by a series of oil lamps that made the room smell of smoke. Brightly colored rugs adorned both the walls, as well as the floor. The hall was full of people, various Judean officials, priests, members of the Sanhedrin, as well as a number of young women and slaves. Seated at the far end on a raised step was Herod himself, along with his queen, Herodias. Agrippa lounged on a couch and appeared to be trying to remain inconspicuous. Artorius was surprised that he did not see Herod's stepdaughter, Salome. Remembering that he had been unable to find Valens

earlier, he cringed at the thought of his optio creating a diplomatic disaster.

"I bid you welcome, noble centurion," the Judean king said. He was perhaps in his early fifties, though his hair was surprisingly still dark and thick. It was naturally curly, and hung in great locks from the sides and back and was parted down the middle. His moustache and beard were very thin and trimmed short. His robes were a variety of patterns of mostly black and blue, the edges laced with gold. "What is it you bring us from your master?"

The word 'master' was meant to demean Artorius, though he kept his expression one of cordial respect. It was clear the two would be playing a game of veiled insults with each attempting to mentally dominate the other.

"Various spices, as well as some fresh incense," the centurion replied. "The procurator even sends a jar of rare scented soap that I am sure Your Excellency will appreciate." He then waved his legionaries forward, each man setting his jar or pot at the foot of the raised step.

"Does Pilate suggest that either I or my people smell vile?" Herod asked, leaning back in his chair and resting his chin in his hand.

"I think you will be able to judge for yourself after you make use of his generous gifts," the centurion replied.

This created a stir amongst the throng within the hall, though Herod actually gave an appreciative chuckle as Artorius produced a scroll.

"I also bring a formal message from the procurator."

Herod signaled to Agrippa, who reluctantly rose from his couch and walked over to Artorius, his eyes fixed on him the entire time. As he got closer, Artorius could see they were bloodshot, and he stank of wine, though he appeared to, at least, be mostly sober at the moment. He gave a knowing grin as he read the contents of the scroll.

"To his Excellency, Herod Antipas," Agrippa read. "It is with the spirit of friendship and cooperation that my centurion and his men bring these gifts to you. I trust you will put them to good use. I also thank you for your continued assistance in maintaining good order within the province and that this will give you continued patronage of the divine Emperor Tiberius Julius Caesar, by whose grace we both owe our positions." Agrippa deliberately paused for a moment, and Herod looked as if he regretted having Pilate's message read publicly. His nephew continued, "I expect I will see you in Jerusalem when I make my annual stay during your people's Passover celebrations. Yours faithfully, Gaius Pontius Pilate, Procurator."

The letter was respectful enough, though with emphasis on certain words,

Pilate made plain that Herod was his subordinate, as well as the emperor's. And though he was respectful enough in his invite to join him in Jerusalem at the next Passover, it was clearly an order and not a request. The simple offering of gifts and a single letter made it very clear to Herod Antipas that he was not the supreme ruler of his lands that he pretended to be.

"You can thank the procurator for his gifts and words of *friendship*," Herod said to Artorius curtly, dismissing him.

The centurion gave a quick nod and signaled for his men to follow him out of the hall.

"After reading Pilate's letter, the tension became thicker than that wretched smoke," Sergeant Cicero said as soon as they were in the outer atrium.

"Did you know what the message said before it was read, sir?" a legionary asked.

"That's being rather presumptuous as to how much you think I am in the procurator's confidence," Artorius replied, though his grin told the soldiers all they needed to know. "And now to rally our lads and make ready to leave this place. I suspect by the time we find Valens we will have worn out our welcome here."

"Centurion Artorius!" It was Agrippa, coming from the hall, where many voices could now be heard talking.

Artorius nodded for his men to leave them. "I thank you for your hospitality last night," he replied as the Jewish prince walked next to him. "I do think, though, that it is time for us to leave soon."

"And I will likely be joining you," Agrippa replied, causing Artorius to raise an eyebrow. "Trust me, my own welcome has become well-worn. I think it is only a matter of time before my uncle tires of me or gets word of one of my loose-tongued rants before throwing me in the dungeon. My company is no longer wanted here."

"Where will you go then?"

"Rome," Agrippa said without hesitation. "My true friends are there, what remains of them. Even the emperor will most likely welcome my return. Knowing now that Drusus was murdered, Tiberius no longer blames me for his death."

Their conversation was cut short as they neared a flight of steps just off the large open air entrance to the palace. Sounds of maniacal laughter echoed down the stairs, along with the rapid sound of running feet. They were almost

knocked over by Valens, who was rushing down the stairs while trying to cinch up his belt.

"Damn it, Valens!" Artorius snapped. "Where the hell have you been?"

The optio's eyes were glassy, though he did not smell of alcohol. He grabbed his centurion by the shoulder guards of his armor. "Artorius, you would not believe what I've been doing! That Salome is a *freak!* She does this thing with her finger…" He paused as he noticed Agrippa. "No offense intended towards your cousin-niece." He broke into a fit of laughter at his own last remark.

"Please, feel free to insult her all you want. I know what she is."

"And save it for later," Artorius added, grabbing Valens and guiding him towards the exit. "For right now, we are leaving."

"Leaving?" Valens asked. "But why? I thought we were off-loading all that pungent crap that Pilate had us deliver to make that ass, Herod, smell a little better." His voice was loud and carried further than made his centurion feel comfortable.

"Already been done," Artorius explained. "Seems he wanted it a little early. And what is with you?" He was exacerbated by his optio's constant giggling and complete indifference to everything inappropriate that he was saying loudly.

"Must have been whatever that crap was she was burning upstairs," he reasoned. "I don't know what it was, but it stunk terribly! I told her she needed some new incense, that whatever she had was rotten. That sultry bitch laughed and told me to just inhale deeply. So I did, and that's when things got weird."

Artorius could not help but break into a fit of laughter at the absurdity of his friend's remark. "Valens, when you of all people say that something has gotten weird, I probably don't even want to know what that entails."

"Probably not," the optio replied with his brow furrowed. "In fact, I'm not sure I even want to know."

Chapter XXII: Disciples of Love and Hate

***

Two of the prisoners died on the way to Caesarea, and due to their slow rate of march, even with cavalry lances in their backs, they still only arrived a day before Artorius and his contingent returned. Centurion Taurus sent a rider ahead, and so when they reached the outskirts of Caesarea that evening, Magnus and two dozen legionaries were there to greet them.

"We'll take charge of your prisoners, sir," the Norseman said as he saluted.

"Much obliged," Taurus replied. "I will make my report to Pilate in the morning. I sent some of my men back to see about Artorius, and he's on his way back. They're camped about ten miles from here, so they should return by late morning."

Magnus nodded and then waved his men forward. Legionaries fell upon the hapless prisoners, berating them and prodding them towards several caged wagons that were waiting for them. As they were being manhandled into each cage, Cornelius and Rebekkah came walking from the other direction, unaware of what was transpiring. As they got closer, one of the prisoners stopped just before the edge of the cart, his eyes growing wide. Rebekkah gave a short cry and placed her hand over her mouth. She then rushed over to the man, startling both Magnus and his legionaries.

"Jotham!" she cried morosely as she placed both hands on his face, which was devoid of emotion. "Dear God, what have they done to you?" She was now sobbing openly, though her pleas were cut short by a legionary who forced his way between them.

"Here, you can't be doing that! Off with you now!"

As Cornelius ran over and grabbed Rebekkah by the shoulders, Magnus snapped at him, "Damn it, Cornelius, keep control of your 'friend'!"

"I've got this handled, Magnus," the centurion replied curtly before leading Rebekkah away, who was, for a minute, unable to speak through her sobbing.

"Into the cage, filthy bastard!" the legionary snapped at Jotham, cuffing him hard across the back of the head.

"What was that all about?" Cornelius said with exacerbation as soon as

they were away from the scene where the last of the prisoners were now being loaded into the carts and led away. “You created a scene and made me look like an ass in front of one of my peers and his men!”

“I’m sorry,” Rebekkah said with shuddering breath as she tried to regain control of herself. “It’s just that…that was my brother.”

“Your brother,” Cornelius acknowledged coldly, releasing her.

“Please,” Rebekkah pleaded. “You must help him. They’ll surely crucify him!”

“And rightfully so,” he replied with contempt. “Damn it all, Rebekkah! We keep the peace in this province, for if we did not the insane factions of your tribes would rip each other apart. I have even given much of my own coin in assisting your people’s orphaned children, while fat priests in their vast temples ignore their plight. And for all that, your *brother* has taken up arms against Rome!”

“I swear I didn’t know,” Rebekkah replied, wiping her hand over her tear-stained eyes. “He disappeared over a year ago. We heard no word from him, and for all we knew he was killed by robbers. I am sorry, my love, please forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive,” Cornelius replied gently, taking her in his arms once more.

“I’m frightened for him.”

“The brother you knew is already dead,” Cornelius emphasized. He regretted his biting words to this woman he’d grown to love deeply over the past year, yet all he could do at that moment was just hold her as she let her built up tears of sorrow fall.



Artorius rode straight to the palace after arriving in Caesarea the next morning. A servant took his horse, and he removed his helmet while heading into the palace and up the stairs to Pilate’s study. When he arrived, the procurator was in a heated argument with the Jewish High Priest, Joseph Caiaphas. A pair of freedmen scribes were furiously trying to scribble down all that was said between the two.

“I have no issue with your people policing after themselves,” Pilate emphasized as Artorius quietly let himself in. “However, this time the mobs have gone too far!”

“The woman was a prostitute and an abomination before God,” the priest retorted. “Her crime is punishable by death under our laws.”

“Your laws,” Pilate replied, “not Rome’s. Roman law supersedes that of the Jews, and whether you like it or not, prostitution is not a crime under Roman law, let alone punishable by death. Therefore, your complaint against the rabbi who stopped the mob from stoning the poor woman to death is invalid. What was his name again?”

“Yehosua,” Caiaphas replied, trying to keep his temper under control. “In Latin his name would be pronounced *Jesus*. And I must correct you, procurator, for he is no rabbi.”

“Well, teacher, then,” Pilate remarked. “Whatever he is, he saved that woman’s life. And it would seem he has quite the influence over your people.”

“He is the son of a carpenter from Nazareth, though his manner of speaking does not sound like anyone from our region. And you are correct, he does have a profound influence on our people who listen to his teachings. And that is why I tell you he is dangerous. He speaks of love and forgiveness, but he’s already started to undermine our authority over the Jews. How long, then, do you think before he starts trying to undermine yours?”

“Thank you, Caiaphas,” Pilate said, ending their discussion. “I appreciate your concern about the strength of Roman rule over your people and will look into the matter.”

Knowing there was nothing more to be gained, Caiaphas bowed and turned to leave, almost bumping into Artorius.

“Eavesdropping on private conversations, I see,” he grunted.

“And good to see you, too,” Artorius replied with a grin as the disgruntled high priest left. The centurion then turned to Pilate, who was accepting a cup of wine from a servant. “What was that all about?”

“The short version of the story is that a mob flew into a rage over a local prostitute and tried to stone her to death. The teacher from Nazareth you heard us discussing intervened, quelled the mob, and saved the woman’s life. I have told the Jews repeatedly that it is Roman law they fall under, not the laws of Moses or whatever prophets they choose to reference. This latest incident was too much, and I’ve had to take more drastic steps.”

“Such as?”

“I’ve revoked the Jews’ authorization to carry out capital punishment,” Pilate replied. “From now on, only Rome will administer the harshest of

sentences, and even then only those for crimes committed under Roman law."

"Are you sure that's wise?" Artorius asked. "That is going to create a massive load of work for our courts, plus it leaves the potential for us being placed in a very precarious position."

"Artorius, you are both my friend and brother-in-law, which is one reason why I allow you to be far more candid than perhaps I should. That said, I do not tell you how to train legionary or auxiliary infantrymen. Do not tell me how to pass laws and edicts on these insufferable people."

"Apologies," Artorius replied, feeling somewhat embarrassed.

Pilate raised a hand, silencing him. "No," he said, "I should apologize. You always mean well, but you do not see what I have to deal with every day from these people. And remember, I was governing this province five years before you arrived."

"There are many days I don't envy you." Artorius decided it was time to change their topic of conversation to the very reason why he'd come straight to see the procurator. "Speaking of capital punishment, I take it you received word about the ambush and the prisoners we took?"

"Centurion Taurus gave me a full report. Your men did well. I sent both Justus and Julius to Jericho. As it is about twice the distance from here as Tiberias, I do not expect them back for a few more days. Praxus went by ship to Gaza. I gave him a mission similar to yours, extending our friendship to the local ruler, another one of Herod's relatives, while gently reminding them that they still fall under Rome."

"Fortunately for us, the zealots are unorganized and lack central leadership," Artorius observed. "I hate to think what would happen, should they ever quit fighting each other and actually unite their people against us."

"And that is why this Jesus from Nazareth may need watching," Pilate remarked. "I'll grant you, prophets and so-called messiahs can be found behind every bush in this province. However, most are blustering fools who the people pay little attention to. As much as I loathe the thought of Caiaphas being right about something, he makes a valid point in that the people actually follow this man. But I don't think you need to concern yourself over it. I'll speak with Justus when he returns and get his input."

"What about Cornelius?" Artorius asked. "He seems to have a rather strong affinity with the Jews."

"Yes," Pilate concurred. He then remarked, "Perhaps too much of one. No, Justus is the best set of eyes and ears we have. He's spent almost his

entire career in the east, he speaks most of the languages, and I hate to admit it, but his network of informers is far superior to mine. That's why I sent him to Jericho. It is deep within the province, and if anyone can gauge the true disposition of the people, it will be Justus."



Another week passed before Justus returned from Jericho. Much to Pilate's relief, the city was mostly docile when compared to the simmering cauldron of hatred that was Jerusalem. There had also been more sightings of the man known as Jesus of Nazareth, and Pilate decided it was time to put the matter to rest. Late one morning after breakfast, he called a meeting with both Artorius and Justus, as well as an auxiliary cavalryman from Taurus' regiment who had heard the Nazarene teaching the week before.

"Prophets in this region spring up all over the place," Justus observed. "Why should this one be any different?"

"The prophets of the Jews speak mostly of freedom, usually wrought through violence against Rome," the auxiliary trooper said. "This one seems to be different. He has a very calming air about him. Apparently he talks of compassion towards all mankind; even the Romans."

"Well, that's very nice of him," Pilate replied with a bored sigh, his head resting in his hand. "Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin keep insisting he's a threat, so we need to find out for certain. Justus, have a squad of legionaries follow him and deliver a full report within a week. If he is truly harmless, leave him be."

"I'll go myself," the copper-haired centurion said. "But no legionaries. I'll have my sources find out where he is supposed to be speaking next and will see for myself if he is truly a threat or just a harmless vagrant. If this Jesus of Nazareth so much as raises a finger in defiance towards Rome, I'll personally stab him through the heart." Justus then saluted and immediately left.

"I hope this Nazarene turns out to be nothing worth noting," Pilate said after a moment. "I would rather put Justus' sources onto finding arms smugglers. I understand the group you captured had some military-grade weapons on them?"

"Only a few," Artorius replied. "But yes, we did find some gladii very similar to ours."

“There have also been some more thefts from a couple of the central armories,” Pilate added. “These are normally heavily guarded, so I suspect there is someone working on the inside to allow smugglers access. Should we capture one of the ringleaders alive, we can provide vital intelligence to those conducting the investigation, which would be a huge political benefit to us.”

“Do we have any possible leads?” Artorius asked.

“There is one. His name is Jesus bar Abbas, though most just refer to him as *Barabbas*. He’s a petty thief who somehow managed to escape after being caught stealing horses from an Arabian merchant over a year ago. He’s certainly a risk taker, and it would not surprise me if he’s moved on to stealing arms and selling them to the zealots. He may even be a zealot himself. I want him found, tortured, and after he’s given us the names of his suppliers, crucified.”



As summer slowly changed into fall, the rest of the year passed uneventfully enough. Justus’ week-long mission of following Jesus of Nazareth, as well as any other prophets who Pilate felt needed watching, had become his full-time occupation. Two so-called ‘messiahs’ had been arrested for inciting sedition and were summarily crucified, although nothing could be found of fault with the teacher from Nazareth, despite the constant protestations of the Sanhedrin. Pilate had further restricted what the Jewish authorities could and could not do regarding the dealing with crime and punishment, therefore preventing them from dealing with the Nazarene directly.

As the one-year anniversary approached of the fall of Sejanus, Pilate would immediately break into a cold sweat every time correspondence came from Rome. He would then be relieved once he saw that it was mostly administrative details and not once was the ordeal with Sejanus ever mentioned. Pilate had wisely heeded the advice given by Artorius and his staff and remained silent about his former benefactor. It was almost as if Sejanus had never existed. Indeed, a decree of *Damnatio Memoriae*, meaning “condemnation of memory”, had been passed on both Sejanus and Livilla.

Correspondence from the emperor was becoming harder to gauge. Just before Saturnalia, Pilate received a pair of messages from Tiberius. The first berated him severely for his iron-handed tactics when dealing with the

people, and if rebellion did ever come to Judea, the emperor would hold him fully responsible for it. The very next day, Pilate, now fearing the worst, received a second message from the emperor, asking about his health and that of his wife, and further wishing him a joyous Saturnalia.

"It was very kind of him to wish us so," Claudia observed over dinner.

They had invited Artorius and Diana to dine with them, and all lay on couches around a series of small, ornate tables.

"I never know what he's going to say anymore," Pilate said with exasperation. "As much as it pains me to say this, our dear emperor has become a neurotic shell of what he once was."

"It started when his son died," Claudia conjectured. "He was never the same after that."

"You served under his command in Germania," Artorius observed. "Surely he was not the paranoid, delusional wreck he's become."

"In all honesty," Pilate replied, "I find it difficult to believe that those two entities are the same person. The Tiberius who led us on the Rhine I would have followed into hell itself. You know Augustus once said that despite his differences with his stepson and heir, he felt Tiberius was one of the greatest generals Rome ever had, even better than the divine Julius Caesar, if you can believe that."

"Well, let us not worry ourselves to death over the emperor's state of mind," Diana spoke up. "Saturnalia will be upon us soon, and this is supposed to be the greatest time of celebration. Whatever his gloomy demeanor, perhaps the spirit of Saturnalia has even had an effect on Tiberius, if his last letter is any indication."

"Tell me," Claudia said, looking over at Artorius, "Will your friends be joining us again? Their performance last year was a delight!"

"I hope so," Artorius replied, "Especially for Magnus' sake. I swear he's in love with that Syrian archer, Achillia!" This brought a laugh from the assembled friends. As the evening wore on, Diana raised her cup in toast.

"Io, Saturnalia!" she said.

"Io, Saturnalia!"

"Master!" Nathaniel's voice started them as he quickly rushed into the room and bowed before Artorius' couch. "Forgive my intrusion, but I have discovered vital news regarding an arms smuggler in Caesarea. He may be the one who provided arms for the men who attacked you."

"Who is it?" Pilate said, sitting upright quickly.

“His name is Barabbas.”

Chapter XXIII: Before the Pain

***

“Are you sure about this?” Felix asked, peering out from beneath the hood of his cloak. Though it was the middle of the night, the street was alive with activity with numerous torches and oil lamps casting their glow about. The merchant quarter of the city never slept, with supply wagons bearing goods for sale from across the Empire and beyond clattering over the cobblestones. During the daytime the streets were crowded with citizens and patrons, therefore the only time to move massed amounts of cargo was at night. And with Saturnalia but a few days away, preparations for the celebrations went on during both day and night.

“Not even a little bit,” Artorius replied with a dark chuckle. “Still, Nathaniel was certain this would be the time and place of the transfer.”

“And what happens if we’re wrong?” the tesserarius persisted.

“Nothing will happen to you or to any of our men,” Artorius replied. “I, however, will count myself lucky to escape with only a formal reprimand from the procurator, as no doubt this will cause yet another incident between us and our Judean subjects. However, that is a risk I am willing to take. If we are correct, then that wagon is full of stolen Roman arms, meant for the Twelfth Legion in Syria.”

They watched for a couple minutes as a pair of men dismounted from the wagon and spoke quickly with another man who started to swing open the large wooden door of the warehouse. Artorius deduced one of the men from the wagon had to be Barabbas. A third man jumped down from the wagon and guided the pair of mules into the dimly-lit building, the wheels of the cart creaking loudly as they turned on the paving stones.

“Sir, if I may ask,” Felix began. “What would happen to your servant, should this prove to be a ruse? He is a Jew, after all.”

“You cannot throw all Jews into the same lot,” the centurion said. “With all their varying sects, many of them hate each other even more than us. Which is why those damned zealots have not been able to do more than the occasional raid or ambush. But to answer your question, if this is a ruse, then he will be fortunate if he escapes with a mere flogging. And, trust me, he is aware of this.” Artorius may have been rather fond of Nathaniel, but he was a slave nonetheless, and as such, Artorius would not hesitate to use the most

severe of punishments at the slightest show of disloyalty.

In less than a minute, the cart was rolled into the warehouse and the door started to swing shut.

"Let's hope the auxiliaries don't botch this one for us," Felix grunted as Artorius rose to his feet and signaled to the squad of legionaries that accompanied him. All had kept themselves hidden in the shadows, their cloaks covering their faces as well as their armor. Helmets and shields would have been too conspicuous, so all each man carried was his gladius.

Artorius bounded across the street, knocking aside several passersby and jumping past a slow-moving wagon. The man closing the warehouse door did not notice him until the centurion's fist smashed into his face, sending him sprawling back into the warehouse. Artorius and Felix heaved the door open as eight legionaries sprinted past them, throwing off their cloaks and drawing their swords. There were half a dozen men inside the warehouse, all in a state of shock at having their place of business stormed by legionaries. Two of the men rushed for the small door at the back of the warehouse. As the cross brace was pulled aside, the door was kicked in, knocking the man down as several auxiliaries, along with their decurion, spilled into the large room.

"What is the meaning of this?" one of the men yelled, face red with anger. "How dare you barge in and assail us like this!"

Artorius ignored the man as he pulled back his cloak. As he wore his legionary plate armor, minus his decorations harness, the only thing distinguishing him from his men was his brass centurion's belt, which was devoid of the hanging leather straps seen on legionaries. His demeanor alone told the men that he was in charge, and he shoved the man who shouted at them aside as he strode with purpose over to the cart.

"And what have we here?" he asked, throwing back the large tarp. Underneath was a pile of logs.

"Lumber," the man replied with a smirk. "We ship lumber in from Galilee. Is this what you assault merchants for in the middle of the night?"

"Which of you is Jesus Barabbas?" Artorius asked, ignoring the man's tirade.

"Piss on you, Roman!" one of the men who rode in on the cart spat.

Artorius then noted the scar above his left eye that Nathaniel had spoken of. He calmly walked over to the man, who was seething in rage. The centurion noticed, that despite it being a cool evening, the man was sweating profusely. Clearly he was nervous, and not just at the sight of Roman

soldiers.

His expression unchanged, Artorius swung his fist and caught the man he knew to be Barabbas behind the ear, dropping him to his knees. He then walked to the wagon and climbed into the back. He glanced over at the first man who had verbally assaulted them and saw him swallow hard. Artorius grabbed the first log and threw it from the cart. The Judeans were startled by his brutal strength as he threw the first few logs which echoed loudly as they crashed into the warehouse floor. He saw the long crates underneath, still bearing the imperial seal. Artorius glared at the men, who were now in a state of abject terror. All except Barabbas, who simply stared at the ground. One of the men panicked and sprinted for the back door, trying to force his way past the auxiliaries. The decurion had his gladius drawn, which he plunged into the man's stomach. The smuggler's eyes grew wide in pain and horror, though the only sound he made was a pathetic whimper as he slumped to the ground. The auxilia officer, remembering his training, had angled his sword up and plunged the weapon through his victim's intestines and into his heart. Deep crimson covered the blade as he withdrew it, allowing the dying man to collapse to the ground, blood spilling from the wound and forming a pool beneath his twitching body.

"Murderer!" the first man shouted.

Felix grabbed him by the hair and yanked his head down, slamming his knee into the man's face. A crowd of onlookers was starting to form outside the still-open warehouse door, all talking quickly in whispered voiced. Artorius snapped and pointed his fingers towards the gathering crowd. The decurion nodded and shouted some orders out the back door. More than twenty auxiliaries, who had been waiting behind the building to catch any smugglers attempting to escape, quickly converged on the front the building, forcing the curious onlookers back. The first man was now on his knees, spewing curses in Hebrew at the Romans. Felix stomped him hard on the back of the head, his hobnailed sandals tearing open a nasty gash.

"Open the crates," Artorius ordered the auxiliaries, who immediately scrambled onto the wagon.

It took two to three of them to throw off each log, whereas the maddeningly strong centurion had been able to handle them alone. Felix and the legionaries started to bind the hands of the smugglers and the warehouse owner behind their backs. The man whose building it was now wept openly as Felix pulled him to his feet. There was a loud crashing as auxiliaries

smashed open one of the crates.

"Sir," one of the men said, holding aloft a Roman gladius and scabbard, which he tossed to the centurion.

"Roman weapons," Artorius observed as he flipped the gladius over in his hand, "Made for Roman soldiers."

"Please," the warehouse owner pleaded, "I did not know. I swear, they said they were transporting lumber! I did not know…"

"Shut up!" Felix snapped, cuffing the man across the gash on his head, where blood was starting to coagulate in his hair.

One of the smugglers began to scream uncontrollably, thrashing about in the grip of his legionary handlers. A soldier then proceeded to smash the pommel of his gladius repeatedly into the screaming man's face and head, tearing numerous gashes and breaking the man's nose until he was finally knocked senseless.

All the while, the man Artorius knew to be Barabbas stood quietly, his hands bound behind his back. His gaze was fixed on the floor, unwilling to look at the Roman centurion who now stood before him, holding the scabbarded weapon accusingly.

"Someone must be offering you a hefty price, if you are willing to risk death to steal military weapons," Artorius accused. "Or are they for your own usage?"

Barabbas finally looked up at him, his face twisted in defiance. His head tilted back slightly, as he made ready to spit in the centurion's face. Before he could do so, Artorius drove his knee into Barabbas' groin, dropping him to the floor. His eyes were wide, and he broke into a coughing fit as he lay on his side. Artorius drew the gladius from its scabbard and placed the point on his neck.

"Who are you selling to, Barabbas?"

"Kill me and be done!" he spat in between gasps. This elicited a hard kick to the stomach from the centurion.

"No," Artorius replied calmly. "I have something better in mind for you."



"Despite the rather vehement protestations of Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, I have elected to have the men tried in Roman court," Pilate explained when Artorius made his report the next morning. "As you recall,

after the incident with the prostitute, I had to revoke the authority of the Judean local governments from trying capital cases."

"The theft and selling of Roman military arms most certainly falls within this category," Artorius noted. As he answered directly to the procurator, he almost forgot at times the number of bureaucrats and various administrators that populated Pilate's staff. Several of the men served as judiciaries, along with the procurator, whenever a case came before Roman jurisdiction.

"Had they gotten all the way to Jerusalem, I don't think we ever would have found them," Pilate observed. "Your men are to be commended."

"It certainly would have created a far more harrowing scene in Jerusalem," Artorius added. "As Caesarea is the commercial hub of this region, I doubt that even half the crowd that witnessed the raid were Jews."

"And those that were could have cared less what happened to one of their competition," Pilate added. "Right now all they care about is making certain nothing goes wrong with the upcoming Saturnalia celebrations."

"So what will you do with them?" Artorius asked. "Clearly they are guilty; the trial is little more than a formality."

"Barabbas will be put to death," Pilate answered. "We've tried to ascertain who the arms were meant for, but that bastard is stubborn. Either the torturers I have are rank amateurs, or perhaps he's telling the truth when he said they were not meant for any particular buyer."

"That is plausible," Artorius added. "There are many factions of zealots and various militant groups in the region. Lucky for us, they are usually too busy fighting each other. Barabbas would have made a fortune off the sale of those arms. And, perhaps, they were meant for himself and whoever his followers are."

"But instead he's bought himself the crucifix," Pilate replied with a sinister grin. "How many weapons did you say you confiscated?"

"One hundred and fifty gladii," the centurion answered. "And the same number of pilum. Given what zealots would pay for Roman-quality arms, Barabbas could have lived like a king for the rest of his life. What of the others?"

"If I execute Barabbas, I can show at least some clemency towards the others," the Procurator replied. "The other smugglers will each get ten years. A decade in one of our prisons will break them of any desire to steal arms from Rome ever again. The only real trial will be that of the warehouse owner."

“How so?”

“I have had several reputable persons within the community come forward to vouch for him,” Pilate replied. “While his proclaimed ignorance may have been the natural reaction in the face of being mauled by Roman soldiers, I have to ascertain if there is in fact some truth to his statement. If he is clearly guilty, then he will be given the same sentence as the others, as well as having his warehouse and all its goods confiscated. If, on the other hand, there is some truth to his words, or at least enough to give a general perception thereof, then I will have something to ponder.”



Artorius elected to take his entire First Century with him on the mission to deliver the stolen arms to the Twelfth Legion. Pilate had already sent word back to Flaccus, the new Syrian governor, as well as the legion’s chief tribune, so Artorius was not about to risk losing these weapons again. It was early morning, and his men were gathering around the wagon, where they would escort it to the docks and then onto the ship bound for Syria.

“Taking the entire First Century, eh?” Justus Longinus observed as he joined Artorius, who was emerging from his house.

“Pilate has told pretty much everyone of importance in the entire empire of our little raid,” Artorius replied. “I’ll be damned if I’m going to lose these weapons now, especially since it was detailed in the procurator’s quarterly report to the emperor.”

“Our friend, Pilate, has been on edge ever since the fall of Sejanus,” Justus noted. “He grasps at any opportunity to draw praise from either Tiberius or the senate.”

“His reports used to go through Sejanus,” Artorius remarked. “Now he has had to correspond with the emperor directly. You know, Sejanus’ downfall came over a year and a half ago, and yet despite Pilate being his deputy within the praetorians, as well as his protégé, nothing was ever said. Tiberius never even mentioned Sejanus in any of his subsequent correspondence; which aside from the usual berating for the constant complaints from the Jewish hierarchy, any communications from the emperor have been mostly routine.”

“Tiberius is fickle,” Justus observed, “but he is no fool. There was enough upheaval in Rome after the usurper-in-waiting was deposed. He could

hardly make Pilate a victim of his vengeance without risking further disruption in the east."

"Still harboring hate towards Sejanus," Artorius stated. "Don't try and hide it, old friend. I could sense it in your voice. Whatever his crimes, he has paid for."

"We will never know how many fell victim to his lust for power," Justus grumbled. "How many so-called traitors were simply political opponents that needed to be disposed of? Sejanus may be dead, but I hope that if there is an afterlife, then maybe those who he unjustly destroyed can exact their revenge as well."

Artorius immediately regretted broaching the subject. Justus' hatred for the man had scarcely diminished since hearing of his enemy's fall from power and execution. Upon hearing the news, he had delved into an excessive drunken display of celebration. Artorius had been forced to formally admonish him for his conduct. Though he apologized for conducting his festivities so publicly, he never showed any remorse for having celebrated the destruction of Sejanus and the death of most of his immediate family.

As Justus seemed content to accompany him on the ten-minute walk to the barracks, Artorius was restless to change the conversation. Though the cohort commander was in full military garb, he remarked that Justus was wearing a plain civilian tunic and cloak.

"Oh, this," his fellow centurion shrugged. "I, too, have a mission this day. My sources tell me that the Nazarene teacher Pilate wants watched is spending the next day or so in a small fishing village not far from here. I have an assortment of civilian clothing that makes me not so conspicuous. I may not be able to completely hide my being a Roman from the careful observer, though by avoiding wearing legionary red I can make my presence less obvious."

"I know Pilate gave you this assignment because of your experience in this part of the world," Artorius added. "Still, you be careful, especially if you're going out alone."

"This is not my first time checking on the locals," Justus reassured him with a wink. He then lightly pounded his fist against the side of his cloak, and Artorius could hear the rattling of his gladius scabbard. "Remember, I also speak fluent Aramaic and passable Hebrew. Besides, the more hostile zealot types avoid this Jesus of Nazareth. His talk of peace and reconciliation is not

to their liking, and there are a host of other teachers and prophets for them to latch on to."

Presently they arrived at the barracks. In front of the line of stucco buildings, Valens had formed the century into two columns on either side of the wagon. Artorius' servant, Nathaniel, sat on the wagon bench, holding the reins. Artorius turned and clasped his friend's hand.

"Safe travels," Justus said.

"We should only be gone a week," Artorius observed. "A day, maybe two by sea to Tripolis, then a couple more by road to Raphaneae. And, as you already know, in my absence you are in command."

"Of course," Justus replied. "And I've already spoken with Centurion Magnus. Depending on how long it takes me to find this Nazarene, which should not prove difficult, and however long he gives me useful information, I may not get any time as cohort commander."

Both men chuckled at this observation. Justus then gave a nod before heading towards the stables, where a groomsman was waiting with his horse.

"The century is formed and ready to march, sir," Valens said with a salute as Artorius walked over to his men.

Artorius returned the salute and took his place next to his signifier at the head of the column. Though both he and Valens were authorized to travel by horseback, they knew that space on the small ship would be cramped between the cargo wagon and eighty legionaries taking up almost all available space on the top deck. He thought back to the last time they had traveled by ship during their arduous voyage to Judea and was grateful that this journey would be much shorter.

Chapter XXIV: Render Unto Caesar

***

Like most of his missions of this nature, Justus had elected to go without armor or helmet. The heat was stifling as it was, plus he did not want to draw any more attention to himself than he had to. If this Nazarene prophet knew that he was being watched by a centurion of the legionary cohort, he might hold his tongue and not give away his true intentions. Justus' gladius could still give him away, though he kept it well hidden beneath his cloak, which was a light summer variant with the hood up to keep the sun out of his face. Justus understood the dangers that were far more prevalent than in the western part of the empire.

His informers had been busy. Having a paid network of spies was a habit he had picked up during his early years with the Sixth Legion. A man from a political party known as the Herodians had informed him as to where he could find the Nazarene on this day. Near an open crossroads towards the outskirts of town was a well that merchants used to bring up water for their draught animals. It was here that Justus saw a crowd gathered. As he approached, he noticed that they were mostly well-dressed men, likely members of either the Sanhedrin or other ruling parties, such as the Pharisees. He noticed his contact from the Herodians, though they did not so much as make eye contact.

Seated on the edge of the well was a man that Justus guessed was Jesus of Nazareth. He did not look any more conspicuous than the other Jewish men. His hair was kept long, but well groomed, as was his trimmed beard. Though his robes were worn and threadbare, they were clean and unsoiled. His hands and his muscular forearms told of a man who had done much work in his lifetime. The word Justus had gotten was he had been either a carpenter or stone mason.

As Justus walked towards the front of the crowd, it appeared that Jesus was in an argument with a handful of Herodians and Pharisees. Though there was agitation in the voices of the Herodians, their tone was civil enough.

"Teacher," one of the men said, "you will not take a stand one way or the other regarding the Roman occupation of our lands. But what say you about the taxes demanded by them? Is it lawful as Jews for us to pay tribute to Caesar?"

“Why must you tempt me, you hypocrites?” the Nazarene answered calmly. He then stepped off from the well and walked over to the men, holding out his hand. “Give me a coin. One like that which we pay in tribute.”

The Herodian glanced at his friends, one of whom elbowed him in the ribs.

“Give it to him,” he friend chastised quietly.

The Herodian pulled out a denarius, which he handed to Jesus. All the while Justus furrowed his brow in contemplation. The Nazarene turned the coin over in his hand.

“Tell me,” he said, “On a Judean coin, whose image would we bestow upon it?”

“None!” the Herodian snapped. “Putting a person’s likeness on a coin would be idolatry!”

“But we do not have Judean coin,” his friend said quickly, noting the face on the coin that Jesus was gazing upon. “All our coin are Roman…” He cut himself off as Jesus looked at him and smiled knowingly. Justus found himself matching the Nazarene’s grin. There was an inaudible murmur from those in the crowd.

“Exactly,” Jesus replied after a brief pause. “So tell me then, whose image is on this coin that we are expected to pay in tribute.”

The Herodian who gave him the coin swallowed hard.

“The Emperor Tiberius Caesar,” he relented.

“Well, then,” Jesus said, handing him back the coin. “Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s; and render unto God the things that are God’s.”

Justus had to stifle a chuckle at the flabbergasted looks upon the faces of the Herodians and Sanhedrin. Most of the people, though, nodded and muttered approvingly amongst themselves. There were other lessons given, with the crowd growing even as the disgruntled Sanhedrin dispersed. One of the men who remained asked the teacher about a passage in one of their holy books that spoke of loving one’s neighbor.

“It is true,” the Nazarene replied. “One must love their neighbor. But I tell you this; love not just your neighbors, but also your enemies.”

While these words certainly caught many people by surprise, they were all Justus needed to hear, and he quietly left the scene.



Tripolis was a much smaller port than Caesarea, and Artorius was glad that he'd forgone bringing his horse or allowing the men anything but the barest essentials. Just getting off the ship proved to be a nightmare, as it seemed there were crew, passengers, and cargo from a dozen vessels all trying to use one narrow pier. His men had been compelled to forcibly make their way through the crowds, violently shoving people aside with their large shields as they made room for the cart bearing the weapons for the Twelfth Legion. It was late afternoon by the time they made their way out of the dockyards.

"We'll camp just outside the town," Artorius told Valens and his principle officers. "Raphaneae is perhaps another full day's march from here."

"Understood," Valens replied before barking out a series of orders for the Decanii.

As Tripolis fell within the Roman province of Syria, and given its proximity to Raphaneae and the fortress of the Twelfth Legion, they were more used to seeing legionaries than the citizens of Judea. The capitol of Antioch was several days' march further north though, thankfully, there was no need for them to go that far. As Artorius led his men through the streets of the city, there was less cause for alarm or the terrified stare. They also noticed the statues of Roman deities that lined the main town forum, as well as great statues of both Tiberius and Augustus that adorned the center.

"At least the Syrians know who their masters are," Valens muttered as he walked next to his centurion.

Artorius' servant, Nathaniel, could clearly hear him, though he remained silent. Having been a slave his entire life, he was used to the veiled and not-so-veiled insults against his people.

Nathaniel had proven useful to Artorius since they arrived in Judea. His knowledge of local languages and customs had made the daily interactions of his master with the populace far less painful. As a reward for discovering the arms smugglers, Artorius had offered to buy his slave a wife, though he had respectfully declined, stating that if he were to ever marry it needed to be out of love rather than obligation. Instead, Artorius purchased for him one of the Jewish holy books that Nathanial had long wished for.

On the outskirts of the city, the century made ready to camp for the night. Given the brevity of their journey, they had kept their baggage to a minimum,

electing to sleep under the stars and only bringing a handful of pack mules with cooking supplies and rations. The nights were cool during the late winter and early spring, and those legionaries not on sentry duty huddled beneath their cloaks around a series of campfires.

The next day they arrived at the fortress of Legio XII Fulminata, also called *The Thundering Legion*. The absentee legate, Lamia, had at last been replaced after having governed for ten years without so much as leaving Rome. The new legion commander, as well as governor of Syria, was a man named Lucius Pomponius Flaccus. Despite the similar name, he was unrelated to the retired optio that served with Artorius during the early years of his career in Legio XX. However, as he governed from Antioch, it was not he, but rather his very young chief tribune, who greeted the detachment from Judea. Instead of armor or uniform, he wore a civilian toga, with emphasis on the broad purple stripe that denoted his status as a member of the senatorial class.

"Detachment from the First Italic Cohort, reporting" Artorius said, saluting.

The tribune returned it rather lazily. "Hmm, I see you have our weapons that were stolen by those beastly renegades."

"Yes, sir. One hundred and fifty gladii, with the same number of pilum. Almost enough to equip two centuries."

"And yet no word on the men who perpetuated this crime," the tribune noted. "It would seem Pilate is still lacking as always when it comes to garnering information from prisoners. No doubt he's already crucified this Jesus Barabbas before he could be persuaded to spill his guts to us."

The tribune's insulting behavior grated on the centurion, and as such he elected to keep quiet about Barabbas, who was still very much alive. He was sentenced to die, certainly. However, Pilate's best interrogators were still working to get any useful information about who at the depot was stealing arms to sell on the underground markets.

"At any rate, we'll take those weapons off your hands," the tribune said, snapping his fingers.

A dozen legionaries who'd accompanied him surrounded the wagon and started to guide it into the fortress. He appeared surprised that Artorius still stood before him. "You are relieved, centurion."

"I had hoped my men could rest here for the night," Artorius remarked.

“It is late in the day, and we traveled light, with only minimal provisions and no tents.”

“That’s not my problem, is it?” the tribune scoffed. “You’ve finished your mission and are no longer needed. And you can tell that incompetent fool, Pilate, that though he may have survived the aftermath of his precious patron, Sejanus’, fall, we still remember him as nothing more than that praetorian’s lackey. Now off with you!”



“What is it, Justus?” Pilate asked a few days later as he read through the weekly pile of decrees, tax notices, public works projects, and the never-ending complaints from the Sanhedrin.

“It’s about the Nazarene,” the centurion replied.

“Which Nazarene?” Pilate asked, still reading the latest note from Caiaphas that had him irritated at the moment.

“The so-called prophet, Jesus of Nazareth. You tasked us with following him for a week and then reporting back.”

“Oh, *that* Nazarene,” Pilate said, letting out a loud yawn. “Well, what did he say; anything seditious that you had to cut his heart out for?”

“Actually, no,” Justus replied with a chuckle. “He…he told the people to pay their taxes!”

Pilate was signing a document when Justus’ words made him scrawl the quill across the parchment.

“Come again?” he asked, looking up at him for the first time. “These bloody Jews never talk about paying taxes unless they are complaining! Hell, I couldn’t even get them to pay for their own damned aqueduct from the fat coffers of their precious temple without causing a riot!”

“I know,” Justus continued. “It was truly the strangest thing.” Justus then went on to explain to Pilate about the conversation that ended with Jesus telling the people to ‘Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s’.

“And the people didn’t lynch him on the spot?”

“No sir, they love him,” Justus answered. “I don’t doubt that his comment will garner him few friends within the Pharisees or the Sanhedrin, but the common people adore him. He said something else, too. He told the people that they should love not just their neighbors, but also their enemies.”

“A Jewish prophet who tells the people to pay their taxes, and that they

should love their enemies, meaning us." Pilate sat in thought for a minute before addressing the centurion once more. "Well done, Justus. Continue to observe this man. If he is, indeed, loved by the people, he may prove useful to us."

It was as they were finishing their conversation that the doors were opened once more. Artorius strode in, looking rather filthy and disheveled, still in full armor with his helmet tucked under his arm.

"By Juno," Justus said, "Could you not have bathed and shaved first?"

"I would have bathed in Raphaneae, had we not been told to piss off as soon as we delivered the weapons," Artorius protested. He then spoke to Pilate, "We were forced to march straight back to Tripolis, without so much as being allowed inside the fortress. It would seem you have some enemies in the Fulminata Legion."

"So I have," Pilate acknowledged. "They did not appreciate my coming down hard on their rankers for lapses of discipline. But after all, that was why I was sent there in the first place. They are a good legion, mind you, though I think my patronage with Sejanus caused some ill feelings."

"Yes, that was made very clear to me," Artorius added. "Still, the weapons have been returned. Any word yet from that creature, Barabbas?"

"Not yet," Pilate replied. "We've avoided outright torture for the moment, as the information is usually unreliable if applied too soon. We did get him to confess to a number of other crimes, though."

"Such as?"

"Horse thievery, as well as the rape of a rabbi's daughter," Pilate said with disgust. "He claimed they were lovers, though at the time the girl was only thirteen. She has vouched for his identity. It was two years ago and she has made plain that, her age aside, their relationship was not consensual."

"Then the sooner we put him on a cross, the better," Justus said. Having a daughter around the same age and hearing this new revelation about Barabbas only sickened him further.

"Don't worry, you'll get your chance to crucify him soon enough," Pilate replied. "He will be coming with us to Jerusalem, along with whatever's left of those zealots you captured. We'll execute them as soon as we arrive, and perhaps save Barabbas as a special gift to the populace during Passover. No doubt seeing him hung from a cross will please the girl's father."

Chapter XXV: Curse of the Damned

Jerusalem
March, 33 A.D.
***

Pilate loathed Jerusalem. During the Jewish Passover celebrations, the city's population swelled to nearly a million souls, and as such, there were bound to be brawls and public incidents to quell. He left most of this to the Sanhedrin and their special police, augmented by his auxiliaries. Artorius and his legionaries were kept near the palace as his personal bodyguards, while also serving as a reaction force should things get out of hand in the city. As Rome's representative, Pilate had the duty of addressing the populace and reminding them that, though given a certain amount of autonomy by grace of the emperor, they were still subjects of Rome. Passover afforded him the best opportunity to speak to the people.

There was also an obscure tradition of sorts where the Roman governor would release one condemned prisoner on the people's recognizance. Personally, he felt the idea to be revolting. During his first year he had allowed one prisoner to be freed, in hopes of showing a bit of magnanimity to the people. The result had been that the man subsequently raped a merchant's wife and stolen his horse. After his recapture, Pilate had had the man crucified in the marketplace, as opposed to the rock of Golgotha. This caused an outrage amongst the people rather than prevailing to their sense of justice. Even the merchant, whose wife had been raped, cried out against the man's punishment!

To add to his grief, the emperor received word of the execution and strongly admonished Pilate for it, as under Roman law once a man had been given pardon for a capital crime, he could not subsequently receive the death penalty. Because of this, Pilate had immediately ceased the practice of releasing prisoners on Passover and all future executions were carried out at Golgotha. He was relaying this story to his staff when a pair of legionaries entered. Artorius raised his eyebrow when he saw they had his servant, Nathaniel, with them. The legionaries halted and saluted.

"Sir, this man claims to have knowledge of a possible Jewish rebellion within the city," one of the men stated.

“Nathaniel, what the hell?” Artorius said. “I wondered where you’ve been!”

“Apologies, master,” Nathaniel replied, his head bowed.

“So he is your servant?” the other legionary asked.

“Yes, he’s my servant!” Artorius snapped.

“Sorry, sir, it’s just that one Jew looks the same as any other to us. We get a dozen of these ‘informants’ coming to us every week, Always trying to either fill their coffers with reward money or looking to eliminate some personal rival who was fucking their wives.”

“If this man has information, you would do well to listen to him,” Pilate asserted. “He’s the one who discovered the arms smuggler, Barabbas, in the first place.” He waved the legionaries off, who saluted and started to leave.

“Fetch the other centurions,” Artorius called out to the men.

“Yes, sir.”

Artorius and Pilate then turned their eyes on Nathaniel, who raised his head and met their gaze.

“Forgive me, masters, I tried to come sooner, but I had to stay hidden for a time,” Nathaniel began. “I went to see one of the Nazarene’s disciples speak over near the slave market.”

“Dear gods don’t tell me your man is taken by this Nazarene as well!” Pilate interrupted with a glare towards Artorius.

“You said so yourself. We should respect the personal beliefs of all, even the Jews,” Artorius replied calmly. He nodded to Nathaniel, who continued.

“I was standing with my back next to an alleyway. Well, I recognized one of his disciples, though I cannot remember the man’s name. He was met by a pair of rather surly looking characters in the alleyway. I noticed one of them was armed, and curiosity got the best of me. I followed them and hid next to a refuse pile when I heard the men speak.”

“Did you get a look at any of them?” Pilate asked.

Nathaniel shook his head. “No, master. But I did hear one of the men speak about ‘bar Abbas’ or maybe it was Barabbas. I’m not sure which.”

“Ah, yes, our friend Jesus Barabbas,” Justus stated as he and the other centurions walked into the hall. “The weapons smuggler and rapist who Artorius captured.”

“Jesus,” Artorius noted. “That’s the Nazarene’s name as well.”

“It’s common enough in these parts,” Pilate observed dismissively. “Asking how many Jews are named Jesus or Joseph is like going to Rome

and asking how many are named Gaius or Titus."

"Barabbas is an enigma to us," Justus remarked. "Even his name is cryptic. 'Bar' means 'son of,' so his name could be 'Jesus son of Abbas.' By the same token, 'Abbas' means 'the father,' sometimes in reference to their god."

"I don't give a vat of piss what his name means!" Pilate snapped with a scowl. "I know who Barabbas is, I do sign the warrants, you know. He's grown ambitious if he's moved on from smuggling the occasional sword to plotting sedition and murder. I take it, then, that these men are his followers?"

"They are, master," Nathaniel asserted. "I heard one of them say, 'it is time'. Many within the city are anxiously awaiting the Nazarene's return to the city, and this is when they are planning to take the Antonia Fortress and freeing Barabbas."

"This Nazarene," Pilate interrupted. "He's the supposed prophet who told the people to pay their taxes."

"Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's," Justus quoted aloud.

"He's becoming more useful to us," Pilate observed.

"Maybe so," Artorius replied. "But he's also proving useful to Barabbas' followers. With the masses thronging to greet his arrival, his followers think we will be too distracted to stop them from taking the fortress, freeing him, and the others."

"Then we should bar all the gates and make sure he cannot get in," Cornelius said.

Artorius shook his head. "We'll do no such thing," he responded. "If we bar up the fortress every time there is rumor of unrest, the city would cease to function altogether."

"I hate this fucking place," Pilate grumbled as he rested his head on his clenched fist. "It's only during this bloody Passover time that I have to be in Jerusalem."

Artorius nodded in understanding and then turned to Abenader. "The auxilia will oversee the Nazarene's arrival and keep the crowds in order."

"Understood," the auxilia commander replied, notably refraining from calling Artorius 'sir'. Though he had a far greater number of men under his command, Abenader still resented that Artorius was nominally his superior. The issue of seniority still continued to rear its ugly head, especially in light of the latest reprimand Abenader had received from Artorius regarding the

persistent lackluster discipline of his auxiliaries.

Artorius then turned his attention to his legionary centurions. “We’ll let Barabbas’ followers *in* to the Antonia fortress. Getting out will prove far more difficult.” He grinned wickedly at his last remark, eliciting some knowing chuckles from his men.

As Artorius left the meeting he was intercepted by Sergeant Cicero. Many of the lads still jested that he must be related to the famous orator of the same name. This was preposterous, as the Cicero whose death even his rival Julius Caesar lamented had come from a very wealthy and noble line. The man who mended breaks in their armor and kept their swords from cracking was a metal smith, as had been his father, and his father’s entire family for as long as could be remembered.

“Centurion Artorius!” Cicero called, waving his cohort commander down.

“I’m a little busy, sergeant,” Artorius replied, walking briskly down the hall. He hoped Abenader’s mounted scouts would get eyes on the Nazarene within the next day or so and give them enough warning as to his pending arrival.

“If it’s about the possible attack on the Antonia Fortress, you may want to see what I have to show you.” The armorer’s words stopped Artorius in his tracks.

“How long until the word spreads to the entire damned city,” Artorius muttered. He shook his head and then addressed Cicero again. “Alright, sergeant, you have my attention.”

“This way, sir.”



The centurions and options gathered in a semicircle around a pair of scorpions at the practice range. Cicero was proudly displaying what looked like a half moon blade on the end of an elongated scorpion bolt.

“The lads and I were trying to find a use for some of the scrap iron that’s been piling up in the smithy,” the decanus explained. “Someone mentioned that the scorpions on the walls of the Antonia Fortress have terrible fields of fire and do us little good. So that’s when we came up with this.” He handed the bolt to Artorius, who turned it over in his hand.

“This is rather heavy for a scorpion round,” Centurion Magnus observed as Artorius handed it to him. “I see you’ve added a counterweight to the back end.”

“Yes, sir,” Cicero conceded. “However, the idea we came up with is for a shock weapon that can be used at close range. We had to lengthen the bolt so that the blade will fit. That, combined with the weight slows down the speed and accuracy at any kind of range. However…”

He nodded to four of his men, who cranked the torsion ropes back on the scorpions. Artorius noticed they had set up straw figures in the shapes of men on the range. They loaded modified bolts into the weapons and fired. The heavy blades sliced through several of the targets before slamming into the far wall. Artorius and the other officers grinned in appreciation.

“Not bad,” Praxus remarked under his breath.

“That’ll ruin somebody’s day,” Valens added with a laugh.

“As you can see,” Cicero continued, his face beaming, “At close range, the bolts still have plenty of velocity and can cut through a mob of bandits with ease. Any attack on our stronghold will doubtless have us at a severe disadvantage in numbers. I say we even the odds a bit.”



“My master will be arriving at the gates of Jerusalem tomorrow morning,” Judas said. Their meeting place was a basement in an abandoned warehouse that was in serious disrepair. Few even acknowledged its existence, and the underground room was well hidden. A rebel called Yaakov grinned and turned to his assembled leaders.

“Tomorrow will be time for us to free our leader and take Judea back for the Judeans!” he shouted, bringing a cheer from his men. He looked back at Judas. “A pity your master will not join us. His influence with the people could be quite useful.”

“He is a man of peace,” Judas protested.

“And a Roman sympathizer!” a man spat.

Yaakov then grabbed Judas gently by the shoulder.

“Can he not see?” he asked. “His people are *here*, not in Rome! One word would be all he’d have to say. *Freedom!* He could rally all the tribes of Israel against the hated occupiers. Right now we are divided, leaderless. Barabbas’ hope was that once Jerusalem was in our hands, perhaps the tribes

would unite, but we need a real leader. There are many who will not follow Barabbas, but they will follow the Nazarene."

Judas shook his head. "No, I've tried to explain it to him, but he will not listen. He goes on about how we should love not just our neighbor, but also our enemies."

"Bah!" another man shouted. "He would have us befriend those who enslave us!"

"Enough," Yaakov said with a raise of his hand. He assessed the disciple and could see the vexation on his face. "I'm sorry, Judas, but after tomorrow Jesus of Nazareth will have to make a decision. His influence with the people is too powerful for him to sit as an idle observer. Once the Antonia Fortress falls and we drive the Romans out of Jerusalem, he will have no choice but to join us. And if not, then he can go skulking back to the imperial dogs in Caesarea!"

The disciple was clearly vexed as he stood and paced for a moment. At last he said, "He will join us. If not, I will see to it that he at least cannot hinder us." Judas slumped into a chair in the far corner.

Yaakov gathered his men around a crudely drawn map of the Antonia Fortress. "Once inside," he explained, "I will take a small group of our best climbers and scale the tall tower. The rest of you will seal off the exits and make sure no one escapes. We will then do a floor by floor search until we locate the procurator. Aside from freeing Barabbas, he is our chief objective and must be taken alive."

"More satisfying to slit his throat," one man grumbled.

Yaakov slammed his hand down onto the table. "No!" he barked. "Pilate is of no use to us if he's dead. He is the only potential hostage worth taking. We will then locate the dungeons, free Barabbas, and any others the Romans have imprisoned."

"And what if the emperor will not negotiate for Pilate's release?" another man asked. "They are hardly on the friendliest of terms, so I cannot imagine Tiberius would give a damn what we do with Pilate."

"If the emperor will not negotiate, then, yes, we will execute him," Yaakov conceded. "But by then we will have rallied the entire city, as well as much of the nation to our cause. With so many people here for Passover, we'll simply fortify Jerusalem and dare the Romans to attack us!"

"What about the women?" one man asked. "Pilate's wife and the others?"

"She'd fetch a fair price, I'm sure," another added.

“That she would,” Yaakov agreed. “But she is not who we seek. If Claudia Procula can be taken alive, so be it. She will make for good negotiating should Pilate escape. However, if she dies tomorrow, then she dies. I care not.

“Mark well, brothers, the only reason the Romans can pacify Judea with such a paltry force is that our people are too divided to unite against them. We spend our days squabbling and fighting amongst each other when we should be fighting them! That ends tomorrow. Tomorrow we will rally the entire nation to our cause and cast off the shackles of Rome forever!”

Chapter XXVI: Die by the Blade

***

Artorius paced the rampart in anticipation. Praxus and two squads from his century were manning the wall in order to give the appearance of normalcy. This put the men in a precarious position as, doubtless, the rebels would try and overrun the gate to prevent it from being shut. There was also the risk of being trapped between the rebels outside the wall and those in the main courtyard. It was because of these hazards Praxus elected to lead the men himself. The centurion removed the crest from his helmet and phalerae harnesses from his armor. Artorius, who had removed his helmet before climbing the rampart, pointed this out to him.

"A centurion patrolling the rampart will look suspicious," his friend explained. "Don't want to spook them into not showing up. With nothing but my hamata chain mail, at a distance they might mistake me for an auxiliary."

"A sound plan, old friend," Artorius concurred.

"Think they'll come?" Praxus asked.

"I have no reason to doubt Nathaniel," Artorius replied. "Especially after his discovery of the legionary weapons. The question now is whether or not the word got out that we know they are coming. Abenader's scouts reported seeing the Nazarene a few miles outside the city, riding a donkey no less!"

Praxus grinned and shook his head.

"Not exactly the dignified approach of a divine prophet," the centurion remarked.

"Well, if he is divine, at least he's harmless," Artorius conjectured. "He tells the people to respect authority and show kindness to each other. And now he just might unwittingly lead an entire horde of zealots into our hands. He preaches peace yet helps us make war. Ironic."

"Did the scouts say how many people thronged the roads?" Praxus asked.

"They couldn't say for certain, but it was, without a doubt, in the thousands."

"And of those left here, I wonder how many wish to spill our blood," Praxus said as he watched the chaos of city below them.

Though many had gone to see the Nazarene's arrival, still many more went about their business.

“This has always been an uneasy peace,” Artorius answered.

“I’ll be disappointed if those zealot bastards stand us up,” a nearby legionary remarked.

“So will I,” Artorius replied, giving the soldier a friendly smack on the shoulder before descending the wall. He then walked across the vast courtyard and ascended the short flight of steps to where a large barricade had been hastily erected.

Hidden behind them were Sergeant Cicero and six scorpion crews.

“How are your men doing, sergeant?” Artorius asked as he knelt down beside his armorer.

“Cooking in this damned heat, sir,” the decanus replied. “I wish those brigands would make up their minds already.”

Artorius checked with each of the crews, who expressed similar displeasure about the rebels needing to hurry up and attack already, before returning to his own position.

“Alright,” Artorius said, “check your weapons, make sure they are loaded and ready to fire. Then pull your men into the foyer and out of the heat.”

“Right away!” The scorpion crews were not going to argue about getting into the shade.

Praxus and his men on the front wall would simply have to make do.

There was a long landing at the top of the steps, with openings leading into the fortress on either side. In the right hand entryway was his First Century and half of Magnus’ century. The rest of the Nordic centurion’s men, along with Cornelius’ century were staged in the far entranceway. Justus had his men, along with the rest of Praxus’, on the upper level, ready to defend the walls and the gate. Julius and his men were all armed with bows, as the Jerusalem garrison was lacking in archers. All that was left was the maddening wait.



“I hate daytime guard duty,” a decanus complained with a loud yawn.

Praxus snorted in reply, with the heat bearing down on them he agreed with the squad leader’s assessment. Before the centurion could answer, a man with a curved short sword jumped onto an ox cart below.

“Long live Judea!” he screamed at the top of his lungs.

The call was echoed by numerous men in the crowd. Most of them threw off their cloaks, revealing short swords, meat cleavers, and hand axes. Others were wielding scythes and farm tools. Had it not been for the raid on the arms smugglers that led to Barabbas' capture, many would have been armed with Roman gladii and pilum. Praxus could hear a loud cry of lamentation from some of the women in the crowd; perhaps the wives and mothers of these men. They were terrified at what their loved ones were about to do. They also knew the terrible retributions the Romans would exact should the rebels fail.

"I think we have our answer," he said with a deadpan smile.

Artorius heard the shouts as well, and he looked over to Cicero and his men who all looked like they were asleep while lounging in the shade of the foyer. The cries of the Judeans outside the gate immediately roused them from their heat-induced slumber.

"About time," one of the gunners grunted as he rushed to the steps and sat behind his weapon.

"Alright lads, do not fire until the word is given," Cicero reiterated.

Two of his men knelt behind either end of the barricade. Their sole purpose was to shove the wall over and allow the crews to engage the rebels. For now they all sat hidden and waited anxiously.

In the archway, Artorius donned his helmet and drew his gladius. The men of the Julius' century, armed with bows, immediately ran onto the upper step and knelt behind the line of scorpions, the barricade tall enough that it masked their presence as well. Scavenging enough bows had been a challenge. Legionaries were only modest shots with the bow. Most of the Roman Army's archers came from Syrian auxiliaries, whose marksmanship was legendary.

"If only Achillia were here with us," Magnus chuckled. "Certainly this would be excellent sport for her."

Artorius was unconcerned. The total distance from the steps to the outer wall was only about a hundred and fifty feet. The archers would be engaging rebels at close range in order to provide room for the infantry to form up for their assault.

"Stand ready, lads," Artorius called over his shoulder. His voice was calm, despite the clamor that echoed beyond the main gate.

"I want to slaughter these bastards just for making us kit up in the middle of the blasted day," a legionary behind him grunted.

“Looks like you’re about to get your chance,” the man’s decanus said as they watched dozens of maddened zealots pour into the courtyard.

Up on the wall Praxus tried to gauge just how many rebels were attacking the fortress. He reckoned their numbers to be in the hundreds. All were lightly armed with melee weapons. Perhaps they figured they would take the fortress quickly and would not need slings or other missiles.

“Brave amateurs,” he said quietly as he drew his gladius.

A pair of ox carts was rolled by a number of men towards the gate as makeshift battering rams. Since they left the gate opened, the first cart rolled right through, the second losing control and catching one of its wheels on the outside of the gatehouse. A man stood on top and was shouting orders. A legionary on the wall threw his javelin, which slammed hard into the man’s chest, sending him flying from the cart, pinning his twitching corpse to the ground. This was followed by a woman’s scream as more javelins flew from the walls, impaling many who had yet to breach the gate.

“They’re trying to take the walls, sir!” a legionary shouted from the far end as a series of grappling hooks came over the side.

A group of four men climbed over the left side, but instead of engaging the legionaries, they made for the nearest tower, which they threw a second grappling hook up. As they started their ascent, Justus and his legionaries ran along the rampart towards the gate, weapons drawn.

Yaakov looked over his shoulder as he climbed the tower, his eyes growing wide at the sight of dozens of legionaries gathering on the rampart over the main gate.

“Where did they come from?” one of his men asked, fear rising in his voice.

Yaakov started to climb quickly. He and his small group had intended to infiltrate the fortress and capture Pilate while the rest overwhelmed the garrison. With soldiers observing the crowds greeting the Nazarene’s approach, the fortress should have only had minimal protection! A sense of dread came over him as he heard the scream of one of his men being knocked off the rampart below, falling to his death.



The ox cart that made it through the gate was shoved aside as zealots

flooded the courtyard, oblivious to the large numbers of legionaries that were repelling their companions from the walls of the front rampart. Massed shoulder to shoulder in the wake of their numbers, they pressed towards the steps that led into the main atrium. Towards the top, a makeshift wooden barrier was knocked down, revealing a number of scorpions, as well as a full century of archers.

"Fire!" Cicero shouted.

The heavy blades shot from his scorpions ripped through the oncoming crowd like a scythe through a shock of wheat. Each bladed bolt sliced through torsos and severed limbs, leaving a trail of death in their wake.

"That is beautiful," the decanus remarked with dark humor.

"Archers up!" Centurion Julius and his men quickly rose.

Without waiting for subsequent commands, the archers drew back and unleashed a volley into the stunned ranks of the zealot horde. Each man quickly nocked another arrow and started shooting at rebels closest to the steps, driving the survivors back in disorder. Cicero's scorpions unleashed another wave of death, tearing through the masses as the courtyard became saturated in the spurting blood from the fearful wounds wrought.

"Infantry advance!" Artorius called to his assembled legionaries.

A cornicen sounded the notes into his horn, both as an audio signal to those across the way, as well as a dire warning to the zealots of their impending doom.

The space in front of the steps was already littered with corpses and gravely wounded men as Julius' archers continued to pick off those who got too close, creating a gap for the infantry to form up in. Artorius then signaled to Julius, who immediately led his men to the stairs along the right-hand wall, where they would replace Praxus and Justus on the front gate.

"The archers are advancing!" Praxus called over his shoulder to Justus. He then ordered his men, "Close that bloody gate!"

The portcullis came crashing down, impaling one hapless rebel as it sealed the fate of those still inside. Praxus' and Justus' legionaries severed the ropes on the grappling hooks, leaving dozens of rebels clustered outside the gate.

"Fall back!" Justus ordered his men, who filed along the left-hand wall, followed by Praxus' men as the archers took their place.

Praxus lingered on the corner, watching as Julius ordered his legionaries to fire a volley into the massed rebels outside the gate. Those within would be finished by Artorius and the infantry.

Legionaries from both ends of the steps swarmed the field below. Artorius and the other centurions took their place on the extreme right, their options on the left. The mass of zealots had grown silent. They kept their distance, unsure of what to do in the face of this wall of men and metal. The soldiers stood ready, shields close together, javelins at the ready to throw.



A young man in the crowd was filled with abject terror. He had heard those in the back yelling that the Romans had closed the gate behind them. They were completely unprepared for what they now faced. The zealots had been told the Roman forces would be preoccupied outside the city with only a small force of Pilate's personal bodyguards manning the fortress. Where had these legionaries come from? There were hundreds of them, and he knew that he and his companions were at their mercy. Their paltry weapons could do nothing against the Romans' shield wall or their protective armor. If only they had gotten those weapons Barabbas had promised them!

He looked into the faces of individual soldiers. A number of them were young, some perhaps no older than he was. Yet when he met their gaze, he saw that their age was the only thing they shared. While he viewed himself and his fellow zealots as men who only fought to free their people, those who faced him were not even human; their entire existence centered on killing.

"What are they waiting for?" he asked quietly.

"Barabbas will come for us, won't he?" a nearby lad asked.

"Barabbas," the young man scoffed. "He's probably already dead. The Romans likely cut his throat as soon as they saw us coming for him. And what could he possibly do against that?" He pointed his weapon at the Roman line. He saw in the background behind the wall of legionaries the hated procurator, himself, standing atop the steps. Like a coward, he, too, was wearing armor. The young man tried to take a step backwards when his foot slipped out from under him. He looked down briefly and was horrified to see that he had stepped right into the splayed guts of one of his friends. As he looked up, Pilate addressed the mass.

"Rebellious scum!" he called down to them. "You have violated the

peace of this city, during one of your people's most holy of celebrations! Have we not coexisted in relative peace and goodwill? Has Rome not brought order and prosperity to your cities? And this is how you repay our charity!"

"Charity?" one zealot screamed. *"You would have us be your slaves!"*

Pilate grinned at the outburst and continued. "By standing before me, armed as you are, you have sentenced yourselves to oblivion! May your kinsmen learn well what happens to those who violate the peace of Rome!" He then turned to the centurion in the front rank, who was looking up at him, waiting for the order. Pilate simply nodded and walked away. The young man closed his eyes and accepted his fate.



"Front rank…throw!" Artorius shouted.

The rebels' indecision only hastened their destruction. Centurions in each rank echoed the order and storms of javelins ripped into their enemy. The silent pause was broken by fresh screams of anguish as blood and gore sprayed forth from the terrible wounds wrought by the heavy javelins. The rest of the mob gave a unified scream of rage and charged.

"Second rank…throw!"

"Third rank…throw!"

The young rebel winced as the man next to him was skewered through the heart by a javelin. He cried out in pain as another tore through his shoulder and stuck in the rebel behind him. He fell to the ground, clutching his shoulder and crying in pain along with the other wounded that had been denied a mercifully quick death. Men trampled him as they rushed forward in a desperate bid to go down fighting against the Romans.

"Gladius…draw!" Artorius shouted.

"Rah!"

"Advance!"

The zealots made an attempt to fight back as Artorius and his legionaries slowly marched forward. Men threw themselves against the shield wall, but it was in vain. One came at him with a garden tool in a hard slash, which he easily blocked. He then smashed the rebel in the shin with the bottom of his shield, snapping the bone in two. The line was advancing quickly, and he

stepped over the crippled man, allowing Magnus to finish him with a stab to the vitals.

His men fell upon their foe and killed them with contemptuous ease. This rabble was not even a worthy enemy who could readily defend themselves, and Artorius' disdain for them fueled his anger. One man threw his curved short sword at him, which was deflected by Artorius' shield. His face was contorted in rage; the rebel's eyes were wide with mad scorn. The centurion walked up to him and plunged his gladius into the man's bowels. It would have been just as easy to stab him in the heart or the throat, yet he was so filled with scorn that he did not view this scum as deserving of a quick death.



From high above, Diana held Claudia's hand as they watched from the balcony that overlooked the main courtyard. Her younger sister winced as individual screams of pain permeated the din of the ongoing brawl. The rebels were slowly being backed towards the gate; the bodies of the slain littering the ground as the legionaries stepped on and over them. The killing continued unabated. Diana heard Pilate tell Artorius that no quarter was to be given.

"Those bastards haven't a chance," Diana growled with a sinister grin. Her free hand gripped the pommel of her gladius.

Were any of the rebels able to escape the wrath of Artorius and his legionaries, they would not take her without a fight!

"As strange as this may sound, I pity them," Claudia replied as the shriek of another zealot caused her face to twitch. Down below she could make out the screaming man, who was pinned against the wall, a legionary grinding the blade of his gladius into his groin.

Her older sister gazed at her sternly. "You know that every last one of those brutes would not hesitate to rape you and cut your throat!" Diana admonished. "They are getting what they deserve! Do not show them pity, dear sister, for they would show you none."

Claudia looked down. "I know," she replied. "In many ways I guess I'm still a naïve little girl who still sees the best in people. I'm sorry, Diana, but I have not had to deal with men at their worst like you have."

"And for that I'm thankful," Diana replied, clutching her sister's hand. "I would rather you stayed the way you are." Out of the corner of her eye she

then saw the four men scaling the tallest tower. “Wait here,” she said.



The advancing legionaries stumbled as the ground filled with dying rebels. The men in the subsequent ranks could scarcely take a step without tripping over a bloodied corpse. The formation was tightly compressed and Artorius knew that executing a passage-of-lines would be impractical. His sword arm was starting to fatigue and he could not count how many men he had slain, if indeed they could be called men. Sheep or cattle would have made a better show of themselves! At last they reached the front gate, where up above Julius and his men were sending arrows raining down upon the rebels still clambering outside the portcullis. One last rebel stood with his back against the wall, hands held up in surrender. Pilate had ordered all to be killed, and Artorius was not feeling merciful. He smashed the boss of his shield into the zealot’s face, sending him sprawling to the dirt. As he tried to stand, Artorius brought his shield down, repeatedly smashing the man’s skull until it shattered under his relentless onslaught. In a final insult, he spat on the twitching corpse.

Outside, civilians now swarmed the gate. Wives, mothers, and daughters trying desperately to drag away their men, who wailed in despair at leaving their companions to their fate. Despite the mass of women and other civilians amongst the rebels, the archers on the wall continued to fire without pity. Praxus winced as one young woman, who was trying to forcibly coax her husband away from the wall, took an arrow clean through her upper arm. She fell to the ground, her high pitched screams of pain reverberating throughout. Her husband screamed oaths of rage and started to throw rocks up at the men on the wall. One bounced off the helm of a legionary, who turned his bow on the man and with malicious glee shot him through the guts.

Though the Romans were not deliberately shooting civilians, the chaotic swarm below made it impossible not to, and several other women were badly injured or killed by stray arrows. Julius sensed the inherent danger of continuing to engage civilians.

“Cease fire!” he shouted.

“What gives?” his optio asked. “There are still gods know how many of those bastards down there!”

“If we keep this up, we’ll kill an equal number of civilians,” the centurion explained. “We do that and we’ll have the entire city clamoring for our heads.” Though Rome ruled Judea, he understood that several hundred legionaries, no matter how well fortified, could not withstand the uprising of an entire city.

Artorius had heard the order to cease fire given on top the rampart, and he knew the battle was now over. He looked to his left and saw his men were doing anything but celebrating. Even the pirates they had butchered two years before had at least attempted to fight back. These men were nothing but cowards who thought they could walk into a Roman fortress and kill or abduct the procurator. He then turned to his fellow centurions.

“Cornelius, have your men check the bodies and see if any of these worthless scum are still alive,” he ordered. “Round up a few of the less badly injured, and we’ll crucify them after sundown.”

“Yes, sir,” Cornelius replied as his men went about their task.

“Magnus,” Artorius said to his friend. “Have your men gather up as much of the crowd from outside as you can. Make them drag these piles of shit out of our courtyard!”

“Right away,” the Norseman responded.

“What do you want us to do?” Optio Valens asked as he walked over from the far end of the line.

The men of the First Century were drenched in sweat and completely exhausted from their ordeal, having done the vast majority of the fighting.

“Get the men inside,” Artorius directed. “Take some time and make sure they get plenty of water and cool off. We’ll have some work to do tonight, provided Cornelius finds any of these sorry bastards worth crucifying.”

“Yes, sir.” Valens replied. He then shouted down the line, “First Century, with me!”

Artorius walked over to the left-hand wall and ascended the steps. Though Praxus had released his men, he remained, leaning with his back against the rampart. Artorius removed his helmet and joined his friend.

“They never learn,” Praxus said as the gate was opened and Magnus’ men started forcibly grabbing protesting civilians and dragging them into the courtyard to clear away the dead. Praxus’ eyes were closed, his face tilted up into the sun.

“We taught them a harsh lesson today,” Artorius replied. “Hopefully

making the people clean up this mess, not to mention crucifying the few survivors, will drive the point home."

"I doubt it," his fellow centurion replied. "If anything, I think we've only stoked the fires of hate even more so."

"Well, what else could we have done?" Artorius retorted, exacerbated at the situation. The heat bearing down on them did little to soften his temper.

"Nothing," Praxus replied, opening his eyes and looking over at his friend. "These weren't even true insurrectionists. They were merely a band of thugs who saw an opportunity to murder or capture Pilate, and for that we should be thankful. An actual rebellion would have seen this place assaulted by thousands who were well-organized and equipped, not a reckless mob of a few hundred."

"Perhaps they were hoping that by taking the Antonia, they could incite such a mass rebellion," Artorius mused.

"Perhaps," Praxus agreed. "I think there will come a time when this gods' forsaken place explodes. I just hope it does not happen on our watch."



Yaakov's arms felt like they were going to fall off as he made his way slowly up the tower, unable to ascertain from the cries and sounds of battle below how it fared. Sweat dripped from every pour and his hands felt slippery on the rope. He could hear his three companions breathing heavily, the terror of falling the only thing allowing them to keep a grip on the rope, despite the pain in their hands and forearms.

Just as he felt he might lose his grasp completely, he reached the top and grabbed a hold of the rampart. He wasn't sure if he still had the strength to pull himself over, but then a strong hand reached down and grabbed him by the forearm, hauling him over the edge. In his exhaustion, Yaakov did not question who his savior was, until he looked up and saw that it was a Roman woman.

"I…I am obliged to you, my lady," he said through gasping breath. She stared at him coldly, and with the sun glaring behind her, he did not see the weapon in her hand. Blinding pain shot through his stomach as the gladius plunged in to the hilt, bursting out his back. Her expression unchanged, the woman shoved him back over the rampart, his agonizing death expedited as his brains splattered on the cobblestones below. With a single hack of her

weapon, the woman severed the rope, sending the other three men screaming to their deaths.

Chapter XXVII: Execution of the Mind

Rock of Golgotha, outside Jerusalem
***

This was the second Passover Artorius would witness in Jerusalem, and the prisoners he and Taurus had taken the previous summer were finally being given their sentence. Several had died from disease or suicide during the months between their capture and transfer to their place of execution. It was because thousands of pilgrims were already flocking towards the Jewish holy city that Pilate had wanted to make as public a spectacle as he could of the fate of those who would bring violence against Rome. The day after the attack on the Antonia Fortress, he ordered Artorius to take a detachment up to the large rock known as 'the skull-pan of a head'. Far too large to be just a rock, but too small to be known as a mountaintop, it was the place where criminals handed down the most severe of sentences were taken for crucifixion.

"Don't bother taking the prisoners to the dungeons," the centurion told his men. "We'll make directly for Golgotha and get this over with."

"Sir, what about Barabbas?" a soldier asked. "Do we crucify him as well?"

"No. Leave him in the prison under heavy guard. We'll see if Abenader's interrogators can get any more useful information from him. Besides, Pilate wants his execution saved for the Passover celebrations."

It was a pleasant evening as the sun set and a gentle breeze blew across the skull-shaped rock. Artorius marveled at how it contrasted to the ghastly task they were about to perform. Under normal circumstances the condemned would be required to walk to their place of execution, often times carrying the cross beam to their crucifix. Pilate had wished to expedite the fate of these condemned rebels. Those Pilate decided to make the ultimate example of, were blindfolded and thrown into the back of a single ox cart. Artorius had arrived with some of his men an hour earlier, and he could hear the creaking of the wheels from the cart coming up the path.

"At least the evenings are pleasant enough," Metellus said as he walked up behind Artorius.

“I hate this place,” he replied quietly.

“Judea?” his son asked.

“That,” Artorius acknowledged. Two years had passed since the day he’d received his orders sending him and his friends east. And yet, despite the promotion, plus the far more pleasant climate of Caesarea, something about the province never sat well with him. He felt he was better suited keeping barbarians at bay on the Rhine frontier, rather than trying to placate a province where one never knew who was a friend or enemy. “But this place is truly malevolent. Many a wicked soul has been purged here, and I swear that evil permeates from this cursed rock.”

“Forgive me for asking, sir, but was this not your idea?” The decanus’ face bore a look of puzzlement as Artorius turned and faced him.

“Metellus, what are you doing here?” Artorius asked, ignoring the question. “I told Cornelius to have your century stand down.”

His adopted son gave a shrug.

“Morbid curiosity I suppose,” he replied. “I know this is a hateful task, and it’s one I have yet to take part in.”

“No one should relish crucifying other men,” Artorius remarked. “The humiliation and pain we subject the condemned to has left me with many a sleepless night.”

“I don’t relish the idea,” Metellus said gravely.

Even in the closing dark Artorius could sense the apprehension in the young soldier.

“I would much rather be getting drunk and shoving my cock into a young whore, believe me. I can’t explain why I felt I had to come here, I just did.”

“Alright,” the centurion responded. “If you wish to educate yourself on inflicting our greatest punishment, I won’t deny you. Drop your armor and go see Felix. Have him put you on one of the teams.”

“Yes, sir.” As Metellus wandered off to find the tesserarius, the cart slowly came into view.

Artorius saw Valens sitting next to the driver, holding a lantern. Two dozen legionaries walked on either side, with a few more riding in the cart with their javelins pointed at the hearts of the condemned.

“There you are,” the optio said, jumping down and walking over to his centurion.

“Any trouble from this lot?” Artorius asked.

Valens shook his head. “No, they are pretty docile. My guess is they

accepted their fate a long time ago." Valens then noticed Metellus talking with Felix, who was instructing one of the other legionaries to stand down. The young soldier looked relieved and quickly started to don his armor and equipment, anxious to leave the hated place. "What's Metellus doing here? You put him on a crucifixion team?"

"He feels he needs to learn what it is like," Artorius answered. "Besides, I was even younger than him when I did my first crucifixion. Do you remember that?"

"I do," Valens nodded. "It was our first action after you were appointed squad leader. That one fellow you went insane on, slashing him up with your gladius and then having us plant his cross right on top of an enormous mound of carnivorous ants."

"I had a lot of hate in my heart then," Artorius said, closing his eyes for a moment at the memory. "There are many times it almost destroyed me. I hated the Germans, and pretty much any non-Romans after what happened to my brother. I hated women because I felt abandoned by Camilla. That day we crucified those barbarians, if you had told me that ten years later I would be happily married to a woman I dearly loved, with my brother's son adopted as my own, I would have laughed and probably punched you in the face."

"You're definitely not the same person you were then," Valens observed.

"Are any of us?" Artorius replied. He then looked over at his son. Despite the fact that Metellus had been a soldier for nearly six years, Artorius still felt an instinctive need to protect the young man.

"Well, this will be a good lesson for him," Valens said with a shrug. "Cornelius brought his name up the other day. He never says much to you because you'll think he's just telling you what you want to hear. But he said the truth is, Metellus has been a model soldier and is seen as a mentor by a number of the men in the ranks. No ego, either. The lads in his squad were stunned when Cornelius told them about Metellus earning the *civic crown* at Braduhenna."

"He makes me more proud than I have ever been able to tell him," Artorius replied.

A legionary then walked over and interrupted their thoughts.

"Sir, we're ready to conduct the crucifixion," he said, bringing Artorius and Valens back to their dreaded task.

The centurion shouted over to his tesserarius, "Felix, bring your teams up!"

“Sir!” Felix responded. “Alright, lads, let’s get it over with.”

Six men would take each rebel, because when one was filled with extreme terror, they become capable of ungodly feats of strength, and it would take a number of them to subdue each condemned man. Valens walked back to the cart and came back with a hammer and canvas sack full of large spikes. Another legionary carried a corded whip.

“Oh, come off it, Valens!” Felix said with exacerbation. “We’ve got plenty of rope, there’s no need to get ghastly and nail these poor bastards up.”

“True,” the optio conceded, “But supposing someone wants to cut them loose? I don’t know about you, but I don’t plan on staying up here for several days, waiting for them all to die. No one will live for very long after having rusted spikes driven through their wrists and ankles. We nail them up. It will make any attempt at rescue futile.”

“You do it then,” Felix retorted as he walked over to supervise the removal of the prisoners, who so far were still strangely quiet.

“What’s gotten into him?” Valens asked, perplexed.

“You made it sound like you enjoy this,” Artorius replied.

“The hell I do!” Valens said. “I’m serious when I said this is more practical if we don’t want to stay up here for however many days it’s going to take these sods to expire. You want to help?”

Artorius glared at him but knew it would be wrong to decline. If he was going to task his men to perform such a loathsome deed, it would set a better example if he took the worst of it on himself. No matter what a condemned criminal’s offense, no legionary in his cohort enjoyed crucifixion. Roman soldiers were taught since the time before they even picked up a gladius to kill their foes quickly and cleanly.

It was a different kind of person who enjoyed inflicting suffering on others. Legionaries of this persuasion were usually identified early in their careers and often reassigned to the legion’s torture detachment. Artorius was thankful that he had only dealt with them on the rare occasion where he needed a prisoner interrogated. In his mind, the men of the torture detachments were sadistic sociopaths.

As he watched the prisoners being carried to their fate, he almost felt sorry for them. Whatever burning loathing he had felt during the skirmish the previous summer, it had since cooled with the passing of time, symbolized by the setting sun. For his own sense of well-being, he was glad that he no longer resembled the hate-filled berserker from his youth. Conversely, the

soldier that stood next to him with the corded whip showed no sign of his rage lessoning. Artorius then recognized him as the same decanus who had whipped the pirates they captured on their journey across the sea.

"Do not lash them to the point that you hasten death," Artorius directed.

"Yes, sir," the sergeant said through a wicked sneer.

The centurion noted the man's face. If anyone could have been assigned as a torturer, it was him. Though he was mostly a model soldier and squad leader, Artorius sometimes wondered about his mental state.

"This place will drive us all mad," he uttered quietly.

He followed Valens and another legionary, who carried the lantern, over to the first cross. Soldiers removed the man's blindfold and cut the bonds holding his hands behind his back. The zealot's face was vacant, and he, just for an instant, met Artorius' gaze. There was no emotion, just resigned acceptance. Months in prison had emaciated him and left him already a hollow shell of what had once been a man. Artorius knew that most of these men were dead already, at least in spirit. The finishing off of their mortal bodies was but a formality.

"Wait until they're all tied down before we start," Artorius whispered to Valens. "They seem pretty calm right now, but that will change once we drive the first nail home."

"Understood," the optio replied.

It only took a few minutes and each rebel was tied to his cross, and still they made not a sound. The legionaries stepped back and waited for the order to lift their heavy burdens and place them into the post holes at the base of each crucifix. Valens knelt down next to the first man, Artorius beside him.

"Do you want to hold or hammer?" Valens asked, doing his best to sport a grin.

The centurion snatched a spike. He grabbed the zealot's wrist with one hand and held the spike over it with the other. As the sharpened length of metal rested on the man's wrist, he could hear his victim's breathing increasing rapidly, knowing what was about to happen.

"Don't hit my fingers," Artorius said while trying to control his own nervous breathing. As much as he did not want to watch, he found he could not draw his gaze away from where the spike met flesh.

"Carpentry's my hobby," Valens replied. "I think I can swing a hammer well enough." The optio then looked down at the rebel with a sinister glare. "Don't worry, this will only hurt for a minute."

At the first blow of the hammer the rebel screamed in pain, unable to stay silent any longer. Valens tried to expedite the task as a spurt of blood splashed Artorius' face. It dripped into his right eye as he kept his stare fixated on the spasms of the rebel's stricken forearm. With macabre efficiency, Valens jumped to the other side. Artorius held a second spike ready, which the optio drove home as quickly as he could.

"Now the feet," Valens said, pointing towards them with his hammer.

Artorius' stomach was twisting as the zealot's body convulsed in a fit of screaming agony. He felt that he could watch no more, but he forced himself to. He felt that if Valens had to watch, then so did he. The optio wiped his forearm across his brow as soon as they finished. He then called over his shoulder.

"Alright, lads, turn him over."

"Sir?" one of the men asked.

"I've got to bend the spikes so they can't be pulled out! Now get over here and turn him over, damn it!"

The rebel continued to scream in unholy anguish as the six legionaries hefted his cross over and dropped the man unceremoniously onto his stomach. Valens quickly hammered each spike, bending it over until each was flush against the crossbeam.

"Okay, hoist him up," Valens directed as he grabbed his bag of spikes and walked over to the next victim.

To their credit, each of the condemned men did his best to remain silent and not give what they thought was satisfaction to the Romans, yet none of them could withstand the pain of having spikes driven through their wrists and feet. As Artorius knelt down to help Valens nail the next victim, the slap of the corded whip biting into the crucified man's flesh echoed along with his screams.

"This is going to lead to a few sleepless nights," he said while staring Valens in the eye.

The optio nodded. "They brought this about, not us!" he replied with a grit of renewed determination as he swung the hammer home once more.

The cries had mercifully subsided by the time Artorius dismissed his men. He had ordered two squads of legionaries to guard the execution site until morning. Men from Cornelius' century would be relieving them at that time. He watched as the soldier with the corded whip walked past him, his face still twisted in anger. The centurion grabbed the decanus that was behind

him and pulled him aside.

"You two know each other well?" Artorius asked.

"Yes, sir," the squad leader replied. "Not done anything wrong, has he?"

"No," Artorius replied, shaking his head. "But I think this place is getting to him or at least something is. I understood when he flogged the pirates, and I can even understand this to a degree, but he seems a bit unstable. Keep an eye on him, make sure he doesn't start lashing people on the streets or his own soldiers with that thing."

"I understand, sir," the decanus replied. He paused for a second and decided to tell his commander what he knew. "Look, he had himself a Jewish girlfriend. Not too hard to comprehend, happens all the time in the provinces. Well, sir, these people are funny. Her father threatened her and their whole community rebelled at the idea of one of their own defiling herself with an infidel such as us."

Artorius snorted at the idea, but it was true. Though a conquered people, the Jews still viewed themselves as superior to the Romans.

"So anyways," the decanus continued, "She was given the choice between the one she loved and her family. Well, sir, you can guess what choice she made."

"Alright," Artorius said, giving a short sigh of relief. "If that's all it is, his broken heart will mend. Take him to the brothels this week."

"Not sure if he's feeling up to it…" the squad leader began.

"That wasn't a request, sergeant," Artorius scowled. "I'll do worse than lash him with a corded whip if he isn't balls deep in the most debauched whore in the province."

The decanus laughed and nodded. "Don't worry, sir. He's a good soldier; it won't take that much to convince him to clear his mind and his groin."

Though he could have left any time he wished, Artorius elected to stay at least through the first guard shift. The sixteen legionaries and their decanii spread out in a semicircle in front of the crosses. They placed a handful of torches to give them at least enough light to spot anyone who might come and try and rescue the condemned. Behind the crosses, the legionaries for the other shifts laid down to try and catch some sleep.

An hour had passed and Artorius sat on a rock, his head bowed. He did not realize he had started to doze off when he heard a commotion coming from the guards.

“Here!” a legionary shouted. “Stop right there!”

Artorius bolted upright and saw two of his men dragging a young woman into the torchlight. The slumbering legionaries were also alerted.

“It’s alright, go back to sleep,” he told his men, who lay back down. He walked over to the soldiers who threw the woman down at his feet. Her body was trembling in fear, and she sobbed uncontrollably.

“Come to rescue the damned,” one of the legionaries said.

“Don’t be fucking daft!” his decanus snapped. “One little girl is going to cut these men down? I think not. Keep your eyes front and make sure she doesn’t have friends hiding in the dark.”

“I’m alone, I promise,” the woman managed to say through her tears.

Artorius walked over and gazed down at her in realization.

“I know you…” he started to say.

“Rebekkah!” one of the prisoners cried from above. It was the first sound any of them had made since they had been strung up. “Don’t hurt her! Let her go!”

“Shut up, you!” the decanus with the whip shouted, lashing him hard across the torso with a loud slap, leaving a fearful bleeding gash.

Artorius knelt down and lifted the woman’s chin up. Her face was flushed, her eyes swollen and filled with tears, which stained her cheeks. He could tell she wished to pull away from him, yet her abject fear paralyzed her.

“Your brother,” he said, motioning with his head towards the man who had cried out.

She nodded nervously.

He then looked over at his legionaries. “Leave her be. We have punished the guilty; the least we can do is show a little mercy.”

The soldiers nodded and walked away from the sobbing woman. Artorius had heard that one of the prisoners was the brother of Cornelius’ lover, though with all he’d dealt with over the past few months, he’d forgotten.

“Dearest brother, what have they done to you?” Rebekkah sobbed as she ran her fingers over Jotham’s leg.

His feet and legs were stained with dried blood from the grisly wounds the spikes had left.

“You still call me brother,” he said quietly. His mouth was parched and it hurt to speak.

“We heard rumors, but we never paid them any mind,” Rebekkah said. “I

could not bear to think that my only brother had become a…no, it was better to think that you were dead."

"You're right," Jotham replied with a raspy voice. He then broke into a coughing fit, spewing bile and blood that told of unseen internal injuries from the beatings he'd suffered at the hands of his Roman captors. "Leave me, Rebekkah. Your brother died long ago."

Her despair was total, and she could not fathom the abject horror of his fate. Artorius and his legionaries stood out of the way as the young woman walked away. Her hand was over her mouth in a vain attempt to stifle her sobbing. She did not even notice the soldiers as she stumbled out into the darkness. One of the legionaries walked over to Artorius and shook his head as he watched her disappear.

"Sir, was that Centurion Cornelius' woman?"

"It was," Artorius replied. "Not a word to him."

"I hope we've done our last crucifixion in this gods' forsaken country," the soldier said quietly.

"So do I," Artorius replied. "If these insane bastards would just quit giving us reason to!"

"I swear the heat must fry their brains," Valens mused as he joined them. He was wiping a rag over his mouth, having gone off and vomited once they finished hammering the last spike home. He and Artorius walked away from the circle of torches and could just make out Rebekkah meeting another cloaked figure who carried an oil lamp. "So are you going to tell Cornelius about our little visitor?"

"No," Artorius said. "What is between them is not our concern. We've done our duty here, and now we have to make certain order is maintained through the Jewish Passover."

"Hmm," Valens mumbled. "You know, I heard that Nazarene teacher arrived in Jerusalem while we were thrashing those buggers who attacked the fortress."

Artorius cocked a smile. "We should invite him to the palace. Pilate's been wanting to meet him for some time."

Chapter XXVIII: Unholy Hatred

***

There was a warm night breeze wafting through the mostly quiet streets. For Sergeant Cicero, it came as a reprieve. Whenever the cohort came to Jerusalem, he spent most of his days in the sweltering heat of the forge and the armory, training and supervising the auxiliary armorers. They were still amateurish when compared to those of the legions, but at least they no longer needlessly broke weapons they were trying to repair, and they understood how to keep the arms and kit of their men serviceable. Cicero was also a decanus, and as such he felt that all his time in the armories caused him to neglect his duties as a squad leader. So he was grateful when Felix, his tesserarius, granted his request to place him and his squad on two weeks of night patrol. Cicero figured that would save them from the insanity that was the Passover celebrations.

With the plethora of pilgrims who made their way to Jerusalem every spring, the population of the city nearly doubled and with only so many inns and residents willing to take in guests, there were many who simply slept on the streets. The legionaries marched down the center of the road, so as to avoid stepping on the countless pilgrims who slumbered in heaps along the edges and in every doorway.

“Such a relief they put us on night patrol,” a legionary said as they rounded a corner that took them towards the temple and the Antonia Fortress.

“I know,” one of his companions replied. “Imagine what these streets are like during the daytime!”

The sounds of shouting alerted Cicero and his men.

“What the bloody hell is that?” the first legionary asked.

“Sounds like a damn riot,” another responded. As they started to move towards the commotion, a group of men on horseback rode past them.

“Samaritan auxiliaries,” the first legionary observed.

“Then this is more than just a minor disturbance,” Cicero responded. “Let’s go!”

The decanus rightly feared that a minor situation could become volatile quickly, given the abject hatred that existed between the Judeans and the Samaritans.

The squad of legionaries jogged up the block and arrived just as the

horsemen dismounted and started shouting in Aramaic to the crowd that had gathered just outside the meeting hall. Cicero halted his men and formed them into a column, which marched calmly but deliberately towards the commotion. The crowd of Jews, which appeared to be all men of the Sanhedrin given their more elaborate dress, immediately ceased in their shouting as the legionaries advanced. As they forced their way into the hall, Cicero saw a Judean standing before what looked like a judiciary tribunal. His hands were bound in front of him, his face swollen and bruised. Off to the side he recognized Caiaphas, who was arguing with an auxilia decurion.

"Is there a problem?" Cicero asked calmly.

"We've got this under control," the decurion replied indignantly.

Cicero then walked over to the prisoner, who was motionless and silent. "What happened here?" he asked, noting the man's purple cheek and eye that was swelling shut.

"This man is our prisoner," one of the Sanhedrin guards responded quickly. "He is accused of treason and blasphemy!"

"Accused but not convicted," Cicero replied. "Explain the marks on his face." He knew it was hypocritical for him to broach this subject, given that Roman legionaries never shied from physically abusing prisoners, even before conviction.

And yet, the Sanhedrin guard was suddenly silent.

"I told you, we have this under control!" the decurion suddenly interrupted.

Cicero grabbed the man by the shoulder and led him aside. "Let me be very clear," he said in a low voice, "You do not *ever* try and undermine me in front of these people! I need not remind you that as a legionary decanus I am the senior ranking here." "And now comes our officer who is senior to you," the auxiliary said with a sneer.

Cicero looked over his should as Centurion Abenader walked into the hall.

"What's going on here?" Abenader asked.

"Just a minor disturbance over a local religious matter," the decurion replied.

"More like a fucking riot about to start!" Cicero retorted. "I want to know why these people are holding a tribunal in the middle of the night."

"Whatever it is I'm sure my men can handle it, *sergeant*," the auxilia centurion said with a slight trace of disdain in his voice. The ever-present

strain that existed between Abenader and Centurion Artorius often carried over when each had to interact with the other's soldiers.

"Then why are you here, sir?" Cicero's question caught Abenader off guard.

But instead of answering, he walked over to Caiaphas. The glares from the rest of the Sanhedrin filled the room with a noticeable tension. Whatever pleasure they may have gotten from watching the Romans argue amongst themselves was overshadowed by their intense hatred of them.

"A bit late for a religious trial," the centurion observed.

"There is more to this than you need to worry yourself over," Caiaphas replied. "This man has broken our laws, and we will deal with him accordingly."

"But has he broken Roman laws?" Cicero spoke up. He expected another rebuke from Abenader, but the auxiliary centurion simply nodded.

"The sergeant is correct," he said to Caiaphas.

"This man is claiming to be the Son of God," the priest answered. "This is not only a gross defamation of our laws, but any man professing to be a deity and a king is in direct defiance of Roman rule."

"Alright," Abenader conceded. "But let him be tried before Pontius Pilate. If, indeed, he is seeking to make himself king, then he has committed high treason. However, it is not within the authority of this tribunal to pass guilt or innocence."

"Very well," Caiaphas said with a nod. "Let the procurator be his judge."



Abenader sent word to Pilate that night, warning him of the Sanhedrin trial and that the situation required his jurisdiction. The next morning the procurator had the prisoner brought before him at the Praetorium, a set of stairs which Pilate had his seat of judgment placed, at the Antonia Fortress. Artorius and Justus accompanied him, along with a number of freedmen, clerks, and legionaries.

"So who is this faux 'king' that Caiaphas is bringing before me?" Pilate asked as they crossed through the atrium towards the Praetorium.

"It is the teacher we've been hearing about, sir," Abenader replied, "Jesus of Nazareth."

These words caused all the men to stop abruptly.

“It can’t be,” Justus said quietly.

“I thought you said he was a harmless preacher who told the masses to pay their taxes?” Pilate said in rebuke to his centurion.

“I did,” Justus replied. “And yes, he did say those words. I cannot believe the man who told the people to love their enemies would be guilty of subversion against Rome!”

“That will be for me to find out,” Pilate said, as the men finished the short walk.

Waiting for them were Caiaphas, various members of the Sanhedrin, and the man whom the procurator had wanted to meet for some time, yet now was placed in a position to decide whether he lived or died.

“So this is the man you say wishes to make himself king,” Pilate stated.

“Yes, procurator,” Caiaphas replied.

Pilate then noted the bruising on the Nazarene’s face. “And you bring this man before me, already physically chastised before guilt has been proven?”

“Apologies, procurator,” the high priest said with a bow. He was clearly being patronizing, which angered Pilate considerably.

“Have you nothing to say for yourself?” Pilate asked the Nazarene. When the man remained silent, he then looked back to Caiaphas. “What crimes has he been charged with?”

“Three crimes,” Caiaphas explained. “The first is perverting our sacred nation; the second is compelling the people to refuse to pay tribute; the third, and most severe for your Excellency, is sedition against the Roman Empire.”

“Indeed,” Pilate said, still keeping his eyes focused on the Nazarene. “You say this man is from Nazareth, which is in Galilee. That makes him a subject of Herod’s. Let Herod deal with him. I’ll have no part in this.” As he turned around, Pilate was shocked to see his wife standing in the atrium, watching the entire spectacle.

“The trip to Tiberias will take at least a week!” Caiaphas protested.

“Well, fortunately, Herod just happens to be in Jerusalem for the Passover, on my personal invitation,” Pilate retorted, turning back around. “I would think you’d be aware of the arrival of your actual king, were you not too busy trying to root out false ones.”

Caiaphas looked crestfallen, clearly wishing to have the issue with Jesus of Nazareth decided already.

Pilate then looked to Artorius. “Have him taken to Herod. Let him pass guilt or innocence and decide what is to be done.”

“I will take him personally,” Justus said quickly.

Pilate gave him a puzzled look, but thought no more about it when Artorius simply nodded his consent.

As a squad of legionaries led the Nazarene away, Valens whispered to Artorius, “I’ll go, too.”

His centurion gazed at him with a raised eyebrow.

“I don’t need you causing another diplomatic incident,” he replied.

The moment of levity was short-lived. More of Caiaphas’ supporters from the Sanhedrin and Pharisees had arrived and were crowding the area known as *the Pavement* just outside the Praetorium.

Pilate left through the atrium, where he was met by his wife, who bore a look of deep consternation.

“My love, I beg you,” she said, “Do not have anything to do with this man! I had a horrid dream last night on account of him. He is innocent of what the Sanhedrin accused him of, and I suffered much in my dreams because of this.”

“It’s alright, my dear,” Pilate said, placing both hands on Claudia’s shoulders. “I’ve sent him to Herod Antipas. Even if he does find this Jesus of Nazareth guilty, he cannot pass capital sentence on him, only I can. So not to worry, the Nazarene’s life is quite safe.”



The palace used by Herod was located in an upscale community not far from the Antonia Fortress. Herod had acquired the entire building for his stay during Passover. A messenger had been dispatched and reported back that the Judean king was anxious to finally meet Jesus of Nazareth. Given the gravity of the situation, plus Valens’ promise to be on his best behavior, Artorius had relented and let him accompany Justus.

Word of the Nazarene’s arrest had spread throughout Jerusalem, and the column of legionaries that escorted him to Herod had to force their way through the curious throngs of people, many of whom had greeted Jesus’ arrival the week before with cries of adulation and the laying of great palms in his path.

Justus marched at the head of the formation, with Valens in the center of the column, just behind the Nazarene, who still had not uttered a word since first being brought before Pilate. As they approached the palace, one of the

guards on the entrance quickly rushed inside, escorting out Herod's chamberlain a few moments later.

"I see you've brought the great teacher to us," he said to Justus. "Please, bring him this way."

The centurion gave orders to the ranking decanus, and the legionaries formed a cordon just outside the main entrance. Valens elected to follow Justus inside. As Justus waited in another room to escort the Nazarene in to see Herod, Valens saw none other than the evil seductress, Salome, walking down the stairs. She immediately noticed him and smiling wickedly, walked slowly towards him.

"Tiberius Valens," she said with a trace of mockery in her voice, "The mighty optio of the First Century, First Italic Cohort."

"Salome, the Herodian whore," Valens replied with equal disdain. "You put your mouth to better use when you're not speaking. A pity I did not have my way with your mother, too, as I assume you had to learn the tricks of your trade from somewhere."

In the other room, Justus waited for their audience with Herod. He whispered to the Nazarene, "I promise, it is going to be alright."

Jesus finally spoke, albeit cryptically. "It is fortunate that such power is not yours, Justus."

"You call me by name," the centurion said, somewhat confused.

"I have known your name since before you did." This last remark baffled Justus, as he surmised that this man was at least a couple years younger than him. There was no time for him to inquire further, as the chamberlain led them into Herod's chamber, which was filled with members of the court.

"Ah, Jesus bar Joseph!" Herod said excitedly as the men entered. "The most famous man to ever come out of my lands, we meet at last!"

The Nazarene remained silent as Herod approached him, as did several of his assembled priests.

"Is this the man who wishes to make himself king of our people?" one of the men asked.

"I hear he can perform miracles," another said with a voice dripping of sarcasm.

"Yes, a miracle!" Herod said excitedly, then calling for a cup of water. "I hear you raised a man from the dead, but I will not ask such extreme things from you. Only, can you turn this cup of water into wine like we were told

you did at a wedding this last summer?”

A servant nervously held the cup up to Jesus, who simply glanced at it but said nothing.

“No?” Herod asked with a trace of disappointment in his voice. He slapped the bottom of the cup, sending it flying out of the servant’s hands, the contents spilling all over the Nazarene. Herod then walked slowly around him, eyeing him closely before breaking into a fit of nervous laughter. “Bah! This man is no messiah, nor is he a king. Caiaphas’ men seem to have rattled his brain and his ability to speak. This man is a fool, but completely harmless. Get him out of my sight!”



“Herod has refused to deal with the Nazarene,” Valens said as he entered Pilate’s study, where the procurator was conversing with both his wife and Centurion Artorius. Justus had sent the optio ahead while he escorted Jesus back to the Praetorium.

“What?” Pilate snapped.

“He said that the man is a fool but a harmless one.”

“So he did not acquit him, exactly,” Pilate muttered. “Meaning that he has deferred to me once more. Bastard…”

“My love, please!” Claudia protested.

“Look, I cannot just do nothing,” Pilate retorted, his voice full of irritation. “I have to settle this matter once and for all. I’m going to put an end to this, and after today I hope I never hear about Jesus of Nazareth ever again!”

As Pilate left the office, his temper rising, Artorius turned to Valens. “Summon the rest of the century, and notify Magnus. I want him and his men here as well.”

“Yes, sir.”



The throng of people outside the Praetorium had grown substantially and now numbered in the hundreds. The sight of so many people, all calling for the Nazarene’s blood, unnerved Pilate. He was relieved when he saw Centurion Magnus and Optio Valens leading their centuries, who posted in

columns on either side of the steps leading up to Pilate's chair.

"Excellency," Caiaphas said, "King Herod has declined to pass judgment on this man, knowing that it is only for you to determine guilt or innocence here. And if guilty, then it takes a Roman magistrate to pass capital sentence."

"I am well aware of my responsibilities," Pilate glowered. He glanced over at the Nazarene and then back to the high priest. "You charge this man with three crimes. The first is perverting of your nation. I could give a vat of piss about your religious laws, and so whatever blasphemies you say he has committed mean nothing to me or to Rome. The second charge you say is he has forbidden the payment of tribute. I have several witnesses, including one of my own centurions, who will attest otherwise. *Render unto Caesar* were these man's words. Therefore, of the first two crimes, I can immediately declare Jesus of Nazareth *not guilty*. The third charge; that of sedition against the Roman Empire is the one I must weigh carefully."

"The man professes to be a king!" Caiaphas spat. "Your own soldiers heard it!"

"Crucify him!" a voice shouted from the crowd, which was quickly echoed by several others.

"Enough!" Pilate boomed as he rose to his feet. "I will speak to this man alone and ascertain the truth." He then turned and went back into the atrium.

A pair of legionaries led the Nazarene to the secluded area, where Pilate dismissed them.

"Have you nothing to say?" the procurator asked. "I want to help you, but you must help me if I am to save you."

"It is not I who needs to be saved," Jesus said calmly.

"Do you not hear that?" Pilate asked, waving towards the Praetorium, where the voices of the angry crowd continued to shout for the Nazarene's death. "They say you claim to be a king, and as such you seek to subvert the authority of Rome."

"My kingdom," Jesus replied slowly, "Is not of this world."

"So you are a king, then!" Pilate said.

"You say that I am a king. The reason I came into the world is to testify to the truth. If one is on the side of truth, they listen to me."

"But what *is* truth?" Pilate asked in frustration. He paused for a moment, and when the Nazarene did not speak he said to him, "Your lack of defense is putting me in a bind. If you would but say a few words of reason on your

own behalf, I could pass the final verdict of *not guilty* and be done with this! Yet you leave me with few options."

"As I said, it is not I who needs to be saved."

"Damn it, man!" Pilate snapped. Then shaking his head he said, "You leave me no choice. You will be chastised under the lash, and hopefully that will appease this mob."

As the procurator returned, Caiaphas turned to the throng and signaled for them to cease in their shouting. He then nodded to Pilate. "What words have you for us, Excellency?"

"I find no fault in his man," Pilate answered, eliciting a furious backlash from the masses, all screaming for the Nazarene's torture and execution.

Artorius signaled to Magnus and Valens, who led their men into a semicircle of two ranks on the bottom two steps. Yet even the sight of Roman soldiers behind their shield wall did little to quell the mob's growing rage.

"Did he not confess to being a king?" Caiaphas persisted.

"The man you call Jesus of Nazareth is of no threat to the Roman Empire," Pilate replied, trying to keep his voice strong, yet calm and in control. "However, for causing such a disturbance, and for refusing to mount any serious defense of himself…"

"That's because he has none!" a man in the crowd shouted, leading to him taking a blow to the stomach from the bottom edge of a legionary's shield.

"And for that," Pilate continued, "I will have him chastised with the lash. At which time I hope reason and sanity return to your senses!" He then nodded to Abenader, who subsequently led the Nazarene away to where his interrogators would exact the punishment.

"That crowd is getting ugly," Artorius emphasized once they were back in the atrium.

"I can bring my men up," Justus added.

"No," Pilate said, shaking his head. "No more soldiers. We have two centuries already. Any more and I suspect we will have a bloodbath on our hands."

Ten minutes later, while legionaries kept an uneasy watch on the restless crowd, Artorius ventured down into the pit where prisoners suffered flagellation while tied to a great pillar. The horrifying sight almost caused him to vomit. The Nazarene was barely standing upright, his arms wrapped

around the pillar and his hands tied together. His back, shoulders, arms, and legs were all soaked in blood. Countless deep gouges scoured his back, and it was no small wonder that his body had not gone into shock as a result. The torturer was continuing to lash him, only using a large whip covered in barbs that would hook into the flesh and rip it away in grotesque chunks.

"What the hell is this?" Artorius shouted.

There were several other auxiliaries present, all spitting and taunting the Jewish teacher, whose breath was now coming in short rasps.

"Pilate said to lash him, so we are," the decurion remarked with a shrug.

Artorius found himself unable to control his fury; inner rage that had long lain dormant manifested itself as he walked over to the auxiliary officer and with every ounce of his strength smashed his fist into the side of his face. The decurion collapsed onto his side, eyes open in shock.

"Idiot!" the centurion howled, his wrath fully unleashed. "You were told to chastise, not lash him to death!" He then proceeded to kick the decurion repeatedly. The auxiliaries stood in shock as they watched their officer being beaten by the enraged centurion. But then something happened that no one expected. Artorius suddenly stopped and cried out, as if paralyzed. He looked over his shoulder and saw that it was the Nazarene himself who was restraining him.

No one seemed to question how he'd gotten free of his bonds or that he was even able to stand. The fact that simply placing a hand on the centurion's shoulder seemed to physically restrain him was unnerving. Artorius caught his gaze, and the man quietly shook his head.

"Why?" Artorius asked.

Instead of answering, the Nazarene fell to a knee, suddenly weakened by his horrifying ordeal. Blood was pooling in the sand, and it was no small wonder that he had not succumbed already.

Artorius looked to the auxiliaries. "Help him up. Put his robes back on him and bring him to Pilate. Surely he's suffered enough."

As he made his way up the steps that led back to the atrium and the Praetorium, Artorius worried that the Nazarene's injuries were already so fearful that he may not survive them. It was another ten minutes before he was returned, this time wearing not his own robes, but shabby ones of purple. That he was able to walk on his own made Artorius speculate that perhaps his injuries were not as fearful as they'd appeared. What appalled him was a crown of thorns stuck into the top of his head. They dug into his scalp in

numerous places, leaving trickles of blood that already added to the macabre spectacle.

"A king needs a crown," one of the auxiliaries said, before spitting on the Nazarene once more.

"I think he's agonized sufficiently," Artorius said to Pilate, whose expression was also one of horror.

"Agreed," he said. Then guiding Jesus by the arm, he took him out to the Praetorium, where the crowd immediately erupted into chants for his execution.

"Behold the man!" Pilate shouted to the crowd. "He has been scourged and chastised sufficiently. Therefore, I am of mind to release him."

"No!" screamed the crowd. "He must be crucified!"

"There's nothing for it," Artorius said in exasperation.

"They've all gone mad," Justus concurred. He then looked to Pilate. "What are we to do? Surely we do not execute a man simply to placate the mob. But we cannot release him now. It'll start a damn riot!"

"I have one last card to play," Pilate answered. His eyes were fixed on a priest standing next to Caiaphas, who had remained mostly silent. "You," Pilate said to him. "You're the man whose daughter was defiled by a notorious criminal and seditionist called Barabbas."

"Yes, Excellency," the man said, averting his eyes in shame.

"What has this to do with the matter at hand?" Caiaphas protested.

Pilate grinned and then looked to the crowd. "It has periodically been a custom for the Roman procurator of this province to pay homage to your people's Passover celebrations by releasing a condemned person back into society. This has not been done for some years, and perhaps now we should revive this show of mercy. I will therefore give you two choices. Either I release Jesus bar Abbas, a known thief, murder, rapist of young girls, and a man who actually sought open rebellion against Rome, or I can release Jesus of Nazareth, a man who I find no fault in, and who your own King Herod refused to condemn."

There was suddenly a deepening silence as the crowd was shocked by what the procurator was proposing. The priest, whose daughter had been violated by Barabbas, closed his eyes as if in prayer. When he opened them again, they were black with rage.

"Give us Barabbas!" he screamed.

The mob immediately echoed his cries, demanding the release of the

hated criminal.

"What then would you have me do with Jesus of Nazareth?" he asked, his face showing signs of wear and defeat.

"Crucify him!" The crowd's shouts were becoming louder and more passionate.

Artorius looked back at Pilate, who was, for the moment, transfixed in disbelief. He looked down and saw people beating on the shields of his men. They seemed like wild animals to him, and he was suddenly enraged once more.

"We cannot allow this," he said to Pilate. When the procurator did not answer, his temper got the best of him once more. "Fuck it," he growled as he rushed down the steps, unsheathing his sword. He then shouted to his legionaries, *"Gladius…draw!"*

"Rah!"

The shouting crowd suddenly stepped back quickly as they faced a wall of both legionary shields and swords. Every soldier was down in his fighting stance, ready to strike.

"Wait for the command!" Magnus shouted quickly from his place on the line. "Do not advance or strike until ordered to do so!"

"Just give the word and we'll clear this place out," Valens said over his shoulder.

With Artorius occupied on the steps, the optio had taken his spot on the right of the line. Though the hostile crowd had stepped away from the legionaries, their shouts became even more impassioned. Artorius glared at Caiaphas and the other Sanhedrin who goaded them on.

"Crucify him! Crucify him!"

Artorius looked up first at Justus, whose face was pale, eyes shut. He then looked over at Pilate, who knew he had been bested.

Artorius quickly raced up the steps. "Pilate, we cannot let this happen," he said quietly.

The procurator shook his head. "I gambled everything on offering them Jesus bar Abbas or Jesus of Nazareth," he replied, his eyes fixed on the mob that was growing in frenzy. "And I have lost. Not only will we have to crucify a man I find no fault in, the terrorist scourge must now be set free."

"Artorius!" Magnus shouted from the line.

He looked down and saw the crowd was becoming more brazen and advancing once more on the wall of legionaries.

“Give the word!”

“Do it!” Justus echoed. There was a look of fierce determination in Justus’ eyes that unnerved Artorius.

Pilate sensed it and immediately acted. “Stand your men down,” the procurator ordered.

Justus closed his eyes and grimaced.

“I’m sorry,” Artorius said as he placed a hand on his fellow centurion’s shoulder. He then turned towards his men below. *“Centuries…stand down!”*

Though there were numerous muttered curses from the ranks, the men sheathed their weapons.

Presently, the wretched creature Barabbas was brought up from the dungeons by a couple of auxiliaries. He was unkempt and looked as if he’d been beaten every day since the date of his capture. He walked with a limp, but was still grinning broadly in defiance.

“You have been granted the mercy of Rome,” Pilate said. “Do not squander our generosity.”

Barabbas did not say a word, only continued to grin inanely. Artorius wondered if the beatings given to him by the torturers over the past couple months had caused permanent damage to his mind. His stomach turned when he watched Barabbas saunter over to the priest whose daughter he’d molested. The man looked at him with contemptuous horror, seeming to regret the words that brought Barabbas’ release. The wretched thief laughed out loud, grabbed the priest by the shoulder, kissed him on the cheek, and with a shout of triumph stumbled into the now-welcoming crowd.

All eyes returned to the Nazarene and the Roman procurator. Pilate then signaled for a servant, who brought him a bowl of water, in which he symbolically washed his hands.

“I am guiltless of this man’s blood!” he shouted to the crowd.

“Then let it be on our heads!” Caiaphas retorted.

Pilate ignored him but then turned to Artorius. “Have him taken to Golgotha and crucified,” he ordered. He could not bring himself to look again at the Nazarene as he quickly walked away.

“I know this man means much to you,” Artorius said to Justus, “So I won’t have you take part in this.”

His friend stared at him, eyes wet with tears for the first time since losing his son. He then slowly shook his head. “No,” Justus replied, “I will go.”

“Alright,” Artorius nodded, “But I will not have you take part in the

actual crucifixion. The auxiliaries will handle that. Take two centuries and fall in behind them. Just make sure the crowds don't create a disturbance. This Nazarene has many enemies here, but also many more amongst the people who love him. They must not be allowed to interfere."

"Understood." Justus' face was now hard as stone, and he walked back up the stairs signaling for his men to follow him.

"There's a pair of condemned criminals set to be executed as well," Abenader said as he walked over to Artorius.

The centurion could only nod in reply as he walked over to the Nazarene. He waved off the pair of auxiliary infantrymen who were readying to drag him away. The man was a fearful sight. The crown of thorns cut deep into his scalp, the streams of blood coagulating all over his face. One eye was closed shut from the beating he had taken, but his face was the least of it. The purple robes that he was covered in were soaked with blood and sticking to his skin. Artorius reckoned that even if they had been able to save him from the cross, he most likely would have died of infection from his terrible injuries. The marks scoured deep, in places his ribs were exposed from where the flesh was torn away. Perhaps crucifixion was a mercy at this point. Still, it did not relieve the sense of guilt that engulfed him.

"Why?" he asked. It was all he could find to say. "Why did you not let us save you?"

The Nazarene looked at him, his one open eye rather serene, despite the torment of pain that showed upon his face. The man's response would echo in his mind for the remainder of his days, in a mystery that he would never fully understand. They were the same words he had uttered to both Pilate and Justus.

"It was not I who needed to be saved."

Chapter XXIX: Paid in Blood

***

The afternoon was unseasonably hot and dry. Artorius and a handful of men decided to take the long way around and avoid the crowds that clamored to watch the fate of the man who was either loved as the Messiah, or despised as a horrid blasphemer. Neither meant anything to the centurion; it was all the same to him. He abhorred the religion of the Jews. Even more so he despised their hypocrisy and sense of superiority, even in the face of their conquerors. Many deaths had he ordered over the years; men, women, even children had perished either by his directive or under his very hand. So why did the pending execution of this one man affect him so? He could not say for certain. Certainly the Nazarene had had an effect on a number of his men, Justus Longinus in particular. And Pilate was right. He could find no fault in him.

The rest of the cohort had turned out, in case of a major disturbance, and those not following the Nazarene and the other condemned criminals went ahead with Artorius. People were already flocking all along the route, the column of Roman soldiers signaling the pending procession of sorrow.

As the group reached the rock of Golgotha, no one said a word. Artorius looked over his shoulder and saw that Magnus and Praxus were there with him; Cornelius and Julius had turned out with their men and elected to accompany Justus. To his right, his signifier planted the standard and leaned against it. To his left, several dozen legionaries formed up, removed their helmets, and grounded their shields and javelins. It had been a short walk of just a few miles, but the men were already soaked in sweat, and they greedily drank from their water bladders. With a few quiet orders from Centurions Magnus and Praxus, the men gratefully started to remove their body armor.

“We’re going to be here a while,” Magnus observed. “No sense in the lads suffering in the heat more than they have to.”

Artorius nodded, though his gaze was fixed on the execution plateau below.



The sound of the crowd was deafening. Whereas the mob that the

Sanhedrin had brought into the forum had called for the Nazarene's death, now people were wailing and crying at his fate. It was a paradox that was not lost on Justus, though lost as he was in his own thoughts. His eyes remained fixed on the man he was set to execute, and it broke his heart. Though he had never admitted it openly, something had awakened inside of him at this man's teachings. It was the most brutal of ironies that he, a Roman soldier who had spent a life killing in the name of the empire, would come to understand the Nazarene's message of love and compassion more so than the seemingly most devout of Judea's religious sects.

The centurion's spirit had hardened like granite over the past five years since the death of his son. No one, not even his wife and daughter, had been able to break through the barriers that had engulfed his very soul. This man called Jesus, with his simple message of love in a world that was otherwise consumed by hate, had done what no one else could. It was the bitterest irony that Justus would now have to enact Rome's most severe sentence on him.

Justus cringed as he saw the Nazarene succumb to the weight of the crossbeam and collapse into the dirt. In truth, he was amazed that the man could walk at all, much less carry the crossbar to which he would soon be nailed. An auxilia started lashing him with a whip, but the man could only crawl at this point. A Judean in the crowd forced his way past the auxiliaries and picked up the large brace. Whether he did so because he was ordered to or of his own volition, Justus did not know. He watched as Abenader roughly dragged the Nazarene to his feet and the macabre procession started once more. The two condemned criminals that carried their crossbars behind the Nazarene were a pathetic sight. They had been spared the lash and were relatively unscathed by comparison, yet their lowly demeanor and open sense of self pity paled to the quiet dignity with which the Nazarene carried himself.

The crowds had mostly dispersed by the time they finished the long trek to Golgotha. Only a small group, including the Nazarene's mother, was permitted to watch the execution. Watching from above were Artorius along with a group of officers and legionaries.

Justus paced around the field as the two criminals screamed piteously for mercy and then in pain as they were nailed to their crosses. He ignored the men, his eyes fixed on the Nazarene. He continued to step, never watching where he was treading; men moving out of his way as he walked past them. He cringed as a pair of auxiliaries tore the robes from the man. The scabs

which stuck the robe to his skin were torn open, and his wounds bled afresh. Though he winced in pain he made not a sound. All was silent with the exception of the moans of the two criminals and the stifled sobs from the Nazarene's mother.

Justus' gaze was transfixed as the auxiliaries threw the Nazarene back onto the cross. They stretched his arms out so roughly that he could hear an audible pop as one shoulder was dislocated. His wrists and ankles were then tied down. Though silent up to this point, he cried out as the heavy spikes were driven into his wrists and feet. Once the cross was erected and slammed into its posthole Justus finally looked away.

"Eli Eli lama sabachthani!" the Nazarene cried out.

Justus understood his words, which said, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

Time passed and yet hardly a sound was made. There had been a brief commotion when the two criminals argued amongst themselves. Justus, who spoke Aramaic, thought that one was scoffing at the Nazarene while the other chastised him and said that at least their fate was deserved, that the Nazarene was blameless of any crime. The second man then implored Jesus for his pardon. Though he could not say for certain, for the response was in a low and raspy voice, Justus thought he heard the man known as Christ reply, "I promise…today you will be with me in Paradise."

"Paradise," a legionary, who also spoke Aramaic, scoffed. "Their corpses will be rotting in the ground or else a feast for the carrion birds."

"Yes," Justus concurred, though his expression betrayed his doubts. He could not fathom why he was suddenly uneasy. After all, he had crucified more than his share of condemned men during his tenure in the legions. The Nazarene, who had so recently been thought of as a possible ally, was now a wretched sight. His naked body was covered in blood from numerous lacerations wrought by the terrible scourging. The crown of thorns gouged into his scalp, blood coagulating in his matted hair. His head hung low, his left eye beaten shut, and his voice barely audible above a harsh whisper. And yet for all that, there was something more that Justus simply could not place.

A small handful of his legionaries stood clustered at the edge of the clearing. The rest of the soldiers that paced quietly were auxiliaries. The legionary who spoke Aramaic leaned against a long spear that he carried, his face wrought with boredom. The crowds that had followed the long trek to

Golgotha had mostly dispersed. Huddled together near the crucifixes were a middle-aged woman, who Justus thought was the Nazarene's mother, along with a younger woman, and a couple of men.

"I would just as soon finish the poor bastard and be done with it," the legionary said as he spat into the dust.

"So would I," the centurion agreed quietly.

The difference was the legionary wished to dispatch the Nazarene so he would not have to stand guard anymore. For Justus it was a rare feeling of mercy. Even if by an impossible stroke they were told to cut him down and release him, Justus knew the poor victim would never survive the fearful wounds he had already sustained. The spikes driven through his wrists and feet had smashed through bone and created gaping holes that oozing blood coagulated around; already drawing the feasting of horse flies. It was a terrible sight! Justus Longinus, the hardened centurion who had been devoid of emotion since his son was killed five years before, felt a single tear roll down his cheek.



Artorius sat with his back against a rock. He wasn't sure how long they would have to stay there, especially since it could often take a couple days for one to die by crucifixion. He suspected that given the fearsome injuries Jesus of Nazareth had sustained already, he would last a day at the most. The sky clouded in the late afternoon, and he was thankful for the overcast reprieve from the heat.

"The lads have come back from patrol," Magnus said as he sat next to his cohort commander. "It's pretty quiet. I don't think our friend from Nazareth will have any rescuers coming for him."

"His followers are docile," Artorius remarked. "They are not zealots. And even if they did wish to come cut him down, his wounds will let them know that he's not long for this world anyway."

As they sat quietly, the cloudy sky suddenly grew black. Artorius opened his eyes and was suddenly alert, as were the men around him. All were immediately on their feet as a slight tremor shook the earth beneath them.

"Earthquake," his signifier said.

The sky grew even darker, and the trembling was now accompanied by sounds like thunder though there was no flash in the darkened sky.

“Get everyone out of there!” Artorius ordered Magnus as he stood, pointing to where Justus and his men still lingered along the three crosses.

“But the condemned…” Magnus started to say.

“Finish them!” Artorius snapped.

The Norseman nodded and signaled down to Justus as Artorius ordered his men to don their armor and make ready to move. Once the legionaries were on their feet, Artorius walked back to the ledge and gazed at the scene of chaos below. A few onlookers were fleeing in terror, and the auxiliaries had also broken and ran. Only Justus and his legionaries stood their ground, as did the Nazarene’s mother and her few companions. It was then that Artorius took a deep breath and uttered the immortal words, “Here was the Son of God.”



The signal was unmistakable, and it brought Justus a sense of relief. He was anxious to leave that cursed place and found he could no longer bear the sight of the stricken Nazarene, whose bloodied body had since grown still.

“Break their legs and then get ready to move out!” he shouted to the nearest soldier as the sounds of thunderclap grew louder.

A legionary grabbed the hammer that had been used to drive home the crucifixion stakes and quickly smashed the legs of the two criminals. The men gave renewed cries of anguish as their shin bones snapped, though their passage into oblivion would now be hastened. The soldier then rushed to the base of the Nazarene’s cross and made ready to swing when suddenly he stopped.

“What the hell are you waiting for?” Justus shouted. “Finish him already!”

“I think he’s dead, sir!” the legionary responded.

The earth heaved beneath them and the man suddenly panicked.

With a growl of rage, Justus grabbed the other legionary’s heavy spear, which he had since left at the base of the cross. He looked up at Jesus, and he did, indeed, look as if he were already dead. Still, he had to make certain. He swallowed hard and gritted his teeth.

“Please forgive me,” he said quietly. He then thrust the spear just beneath the Nazarene’s ribcage. The weapon plunged into the man’s flesh, penetrating all the way to the heart. As he wrenched free the crimson-soaked blade, a jet

of blood and fluids splashed him in the face. He gave a great cry and fell to his knees as if he had been struck down, his helmet knocked from his head.

After a moment the rumble of the earth subsided, though the sky remained black. Justus glanced around and realized he was alone. Shivering despite the warmth in the air, he donned his helmet and gazed down at the bloodied spear. He clutched the weapon close and looked up at the cross once more. Without another word he solemnly walked away.



It was a long walk back to the barracks and the principia. Artorius had ordered Cornelius and Julius to keep him posted on the disposition of the crowds. There had been a brief panic following the tremors, and with the sky still dark it seemed that most of the people were cowering in fear.

It was late afternoon, and yet, the blackened sky made it feel like it was already night. The wind blowing was warm, but Artorius felt a chill run up his spine. His stomach was twisting in knots, and he found he was sweating. This was not unusual for him, for he loathed crucifixions and each time he had the hateful task of taking part in one he would pray to whatever deities were listening that it would be his last.

What was it he said? *'Here was the Son of God'*? Had he unconsciously acknowledged the divinity of one whose bloodied carcass hung from a cross in the most indignant form of execution the Romans had devised? The very thought frightened him, as it went against all reason and logic; threatening his very sanity. Though not an atheist and hater of religion like Justus, he was more than assailed by doubts regarding mankind's understanding of the divine.

As he attempted to sort out the wave of a thousand conflicting thoughts, he was distracted by a stooped over person, huddled beneath a hooded cloak. He could not tell if it was a man or woman, as they were deliberately hiding their face and hands. Artorius walked over and pulled the hood back, revealing the face of a very young man with fair skin and blonde hair. The lad's smooth face was streaked in tears, his eyes red.

"You're no Jew," Artorius noted. "Nor are you a Roman."

"N…no, sir," the man said quickly in a heavily accented voice.

"So who the bloody hell are you?"

"M…my name is Alaric," the man replied. He then stood upright and

regained his composure as he seemed to recognize the centurion. “I know you, sir. I came with you on ship from Ostia.”

“Did you now?” Artorius asked.

Alaric nodded his head quickly.

“Yes, sir. I was an oarsman under Stoppello. We fought the pirates together. My friend is Hansi Flavianus.” The lad’s response took Artorius aback.

“If you were a crewman of Stoppello’s, what are you doing here?”

“Looking to find myself,” Alaric responded as he started to walk down the dirt road.

Artorius walked beside him, surprised that they were the only two souls on the road. It was as if the darkened sky and brief tremor had scared away the entire province. He had deliberately taken a different path back to the city than the one he had sent Magnus and his legionaries on.

“You’re from the Nordic realms,” Artorius surmised, though Alaric shook his head.

“No,” he replied, his voice no longer showing fear of the centurion. “Germania was my place of birth. I was of the Marsi.”

The mention of this tribe caused Artorius to halt in his tracks.

Alaric looked at him and sighed. “You know of my people and how we were practically exterminated by Rome.”

“I do,” Artorius replied coolly. “Though your tribe still remains.”

“Ha!” Alaric scoffed. “There are but a few scattered remnants even after all these years. I daresay, sir, you are probably old enough that you could have taken part in my people’s destruction.”

“So what if I did?” Artorius retorted defensively, though secretly grateful to have something else to occupy his time besides the crucifixion of the Nazarene. “The Marsi were part of the Germanic Alliance under Arminius, who ambushed and murdered nearly twenty-thousand of my people, including my brother.”

“I mean no offense,” the young German replied, catching the growing hostility in Artorius’ voice and growing fearful of the armed centurion. “Hostilities between our peoples have existed for centuries. One side commits atrocities upon the other, all in the name of vengeance for a previous wrong. It never ends.”

“Interesting then, that you fought beside us against the pirates,” Artorius noted.

“The irony of which has never been lost upon me,” Alaric remarked. “But I did not fight for Rome. I fought for my own survival. When I left home…”

“And where do you claim as home?” Artorius interrupted. “Seeing as how you say you were of the Marsi, speaking in a past tense.”

“Britannia,” Alaric answered. “And I pray that Rome leaves that isle well enough alone. I was just a boy when my mother saved me from our village as it was destroyed. I remember very little from the time she carried me across the raging river, lashed to her back, to when we landed on Britannia’s shores. We were saved from starvation in the wilderness by King Breogan of the Brigantes. He was kind enough to take us into his household and practically raised me as a foster son.”

“And now you wander through Judea and the east,” Artorius noted.

“I saved enough during my time at sea that I’ve been able to live to some degree of comfort since landing here,” Alaric explained. “I figured once I started to run out of coin, I would find work aboard another ship. But then I met him…”

“Who?” Artorius started to ask. He then raised an eyebrow in realization. “You mean the Nazarene?”

“I’ve been following him for the last three years,” the young man continued. “Many called him ‘rabbi’, though I don’t think he was ever recognized by any synagogue. I think that is why so many, especially us who are not of the Jewish faith, simply called him ‘teacher’.”

“And what did he teach you?” the centurion asked.

“Mostly how we should be to each other,” Alaric answered. “It is difficult to explain. He was of deep personal faith, yet he loathed the hypocrisy of organized religions. Sad that he met such a violent end when all he wished was for people to love one another.”

“Do you think he was the Son of God?” Artorius’ question caused Alaric to stop abruptly.

The young German turned to face him, a single tear running down his cheek. “I followed Jesus of Nazareth,” he said, “because I thought he could teach me to forgive. Rome destroyed my family and my people. When I see your armored soldiers, all I see is death. I asked him…no, I *begged* him to teach me forgiveness, lest I never find peace within my soul. I do not know whether or not he was the Son of God, as his followers claim, but I do know he was more than just a man.” With that, he abruptly turned and walked away as quickly as he could, leaving Artorius completely alone once more.



Artorius was taken aback when he saw Justus enter the principia. He had walked the entire way from Golgotha with the bloody spear clutched to his chest. His forearm, hand, and face were also covered in sticky crimson. His fellow centurion simply walked over to a table, dropped his helmet onto it, and collapsed into a chair, holding the spear close. His face was filthy from the flaking blood that had splattered him, his hair matted with sweat, eyes completely vacant.

“Justus!” Artorius said, walking over and placing a hand on his shoulder.

“How was I to know?” was all his friend would say.

Chapter XXX: Live for the King

***

The Passover season had mercifully ended, and Pontius Pilate returned to Caesarea, along with the First Italic Cohort. That a number of the Nazarene's followers had rolled away the boulder in front of his tomb and spirited away his body did not matter; or at least it would not have, were there not numerous supposed sightings of him.

Several months had passed since the crucifixion, and it was well into summer. The numerous detections of him walking the earth, alive and well, were having an effect on many within the populace. Pilate was determined to put the issue to rest once and for all.

"If the Nazarene lives," he stated, "Then let him come before me. Let me see the scars on his flesh, the holes in his hands and feet, and the wound to his side. If, indeed, he walks amongst us, I daresay the whole of the empire will bow before him and acknowledge him as a god among men!"

Many took the procurator's remarks as condescending; a dare to this newest Jewish sect to produce their Messiah in the flesh before him. Those closest to him, particularly his family, knew that deep down he was afraid. What if Jesus, whose followers called the Christ, was indeed divine; a god who could not be killed by the weapons of men? Justus Longinus seemed to think he was, though he had mostly kept quiet about his feelings.

Still, he and his family were associating less with their Roman peers, and he spent more time with locals who had known Jesus of Nazareth intimately. As Justus had spent most of his career in the east, many of his friends and fellow soldiers dismissed his actions as simply those of one who was more familiar with eastern culture than with his own. And as his informant network was still very active in rooting out insurrectionists and those guilty of sedition, he kept himself immersed in these matters.

Centurion Cornelius was doing the same, although some dismissed this out of hand, due to his ongoing intimate relationship with the Judean woman, Rebekkah. That Roman soldiers had executed her brother did not appear to sway her feelings for the centurion.

Artorius rightly had his own suspicions, though he kept his thoughts to himself. In fact, he had yet to tell anyone of his own assessment of the Christ following the crucifixion. Instead of answers or assertion, all he could feel

was confusion. He surmised that there were some things in this world that he simply would never understand, and he had to accept them as such. It was because of this that he avoided the subject altogether, even with Diana. And yet, it was because of the surreal nature of the Nazarene's death and the aftermath that Artorius decided it was finally time to confide in his wife something he had never shared with anyone, and that evening he would take her on a walk along the sea.

That day Cornelius and Justus were dispatched to patrolling the area around Jamnia to the south. This was at the request of the local allied king, who was permitted control over the tiny sliver of land along the sea, much the same as Herod Antipas. Magnus and Praxus were conducting a joint maneuver exercise with Centurion Taurus' cavalry, Julius' men were on city patrol in Caesarea, and Artorius' own century had the task of palace guard for the next month.

"We have enough men that we can run three shifts," Valens noted as he went through the century's roster. "Three squads on each shift can cover the entire palace easily enough, and that means we stand one squad down each day."

"Make it happen," Artorius said as he went through some other documents. "Insurrectionists keep mostly to the hills with the occasional raid on the smaller settlements, though Pilate is concerned they might become brazen enough to try and hit us here."

"I would have thought smashing those bastards who tried to take down the Antonia Fortress would have taught them a lesson," Valens mused.

"That will never happen," Artorius grumbled. "These people learn what it means to defy Roman rule about as well as the Germanic barbarians we fought all those years ago."

Once evening came, Artorius walked hand-in-hand with his wife, watching the waves glide over the sand. Diana knew what was troubling her husband, and that he had difficulty in expressing it.

"These last few months have been surreal," she said, trying to coax him to finally open up to her.

"According to the newest sect of Judaism," Artorius replied, "we crucified the Son of God, yet he still lives. I cannot say for certain that I believe this, but I have witnessed some things that can never be explained."

"Such as?" Diana only persisted because she knew Artorius longed to tell

her what had lain dormant within him for many years, since before they'd even met.

"It was after the Triumph of Germanicus," Artorius explained, already feeling a great weight coming off his chest, though he could not fathom how his wife would react to his story. "Eight years had passed since the death of my brother, and yet I saw him."

He went on to tell her about how after the Triumphal parade, while walking along a hill path alone, he'd met another legionary and spoken to him at length. The man was not just a Roman soldier, but the soul of his long-departed brother. He spoke very quickly, and as soon as he finished he felt like he was out of breath. Diana remained silent for some time, trying to comprehend her husband's tale.

"I have never spoken of this to anyone," Artorius emphasized, "Lest they think I'm mad. I daresay, you probably think I've lost my mind."

"No," Diana replied, slowly shaking her head and giving his hand a squeeze of reassurance. "Given the fantastic turn of events we've witnessed, my mind does not know what to think. My heart, however, believes you. And that is enough for me, my love."



It was a routine patrol, stopping all who passed along the stretch of road leading from Jamnia to Joppa, and searching them for weapons and other contraband. After the release of Barabbas, Pilate was anxious to keep what remained of the rebels from reorganizing.

Both centuries encamped on the side of a hill that overlooked the main road. Despite its relatively flat appearance, the terrain was so rough that the only feasible way for carts to travel was on the dirt road that had been used for a thousand years already. A squad of legionaries waited at either end of the road with merchants and travelers reluctantly having their cargo and persons searched.

"Not exactly endearing ourselves to the populace," Cornelius noted as he and Justus watched some of their soldiers searching the caravan wagon of a well-dressed merchant.

"Sedition and rebellion are rife in this province," Justus replied. "And with every new sect that arises, more crazy zealots find yet another reason to take up arms against Rome."

“At least the Nazarene’s sect taught peace and understanding,” Cornelius noted.

“That he did,” Justus replied. “Some of his followers I am not so sure about, though. The same arrogance that permeates much of the Jewish religious hierarchy infests them as well. I can’t help but wonder if the message will eventually be lost altogether.”

It was easier for Justus to speak with Cornelius about these matters. Whatever Artorius may have said at the crucifixion itself, he was not willing to discuss the matter further. For Justus Longinus, the centurion who had blasphemed against all gods after the death of his son, it was a type of awakening for him. Cornelius understood this, as he had heard the Nazarene speak on numerous occasions and was moved by his words.

“Rebekkah calls herself one of his followers,” he said at length.

“And do you?” Justus asked.

Before Cornelius could answer, they were interrupted by one of the legionaries from the checkpoint.

“Beg your pardon, sirs. A man has just ridden up who says he’s one of Centurion Justus’ informants.”

“Bring him up,” Justus ordered as he and Cornelius retired into his oversized tent.

The two centurions sat around a small table as legionaries escorted the Judean in. He was a middle-aged man with a scar running down the left side of his face, past a sightless eye. He was clean shaven, though his hair was long and pulled back. He wore a traditional head scarf, which he unwrapped from around his face.

“My Lord Centurion,” he said with a bow.

“Amir,” Justus acknowledged. He knew it was not the man’s real name, but then he did not care what his informants were called, only that they did the job he paid them to do, discreetly and effectively.

“I have the information regarding a secret anti-Roman society lurking in Joppa.”

“And?”

“They are few in number, but they have a man who is promising them Roman weapons,” Amir stated. “I think he is someone you are familiar with.”



“Barabbas,” Justus growled as he crept along the low ditch next to the small wheat field.

It was almost midnight, and even from a distance he could clearly see the renegade’s face as the door was opened to the small, one-room stucco farmhouse.

“I followed him after his release,” Amir explained quietly. “It would seem time in your prisons only made him even more brazen. He’s found a few local contacts in this area, including the owner of this paltry farm.”

“Alright.” Justus signaled to his nearest decanus, who passed it down the line. As silently as they were able, his entire century encircled the house, creeping along, with the occasional bleating of a goat startling them for a moment.

“Weapons!” a voice said from within, as Justus leaned against the wall near an open window. “We need weapons! Your men attacked the Antonia Fortress without proper arms, and they were slaughtered because of it.”

“I can get your arms,” Barabbas replied. “We’ll make our own if necessary.”

Hearing all he needed to, Justus waved to one of his men, who smashed in the door with his foot. Legionaries on the far side of the house kicked in the other entrance as well.

“What is the meaning of this?” the old man, whose house it was, demanded.

“Weapons?” Justus asked, his eyes cold with rage. He eyed the table, which held a number of Jewish holy books. “You claim to be devout people of peace, yet you speak of sedition and murder.” He then looked over at Barabbas and grinned sinisterly. “Hello, Barabbas. We meet again.”



The trial of the seditionists had been brief and expedient. The old man’s farmhouse and plot of land were confiscated, while he and the others were sentenced to death by crucifixion. Pilate considered commuting their sentences to prison time, but reasoned that as soon as they were released they would simply find another zealot group to join and would be plotting to take up arms against Rome once more. By handing down the most severe punishment available, the intent was to deter others. There was one man, however, that would not be going to the cross.

“Jesus bar Abbas,” Pilate said as he paced in front of the wretched man. He’d been beaten severely by Justus and his soldiers, though per Pilate’s directive, they made certain there was no lasting damage. “You have been found guilty once again of plotting to sell weapons to insurrectionists, a capital crime. However, because you have previously received the emperor’s pardon, you cannot be given the death penalty.”

“Piss on you, Roman,” Barabbas slurred through his swollen and bloodied lips.

Artorius stepped over quickly and slammed his fist into the renegade’s stomach, doubling him over and dropping him to his knees. He began coughing violently and spewing up bile.

“As I was saying,” Pilate continued. “I cannot nail you to the cross. However, I can give you a sentence that will make you wish I had. Centurion Artorius, where did you say we should send this vile excuse of a man?”

“Mauretania,” the centurion replied. “Let him live out his days in the sulfur mines.”

“Yes,” Pilate said, grinning as Barabbas looked up at him, eyes wide. “Once you go down into the dark, you will gaze upon the sun no more. The sulfur will burn your skin, your mouth, your tongue; it will blind you within months. Within a year, provided you still live, you will have been driven completely mad. You are the vilest of scum, Barabbas! The teacher, Jesus of Nazareth, was a righteous man who had done no wrong. He died in your place, and this was how you repaid him!”

For the first time, a look of understanding crossed Barabbas face, and his eyes became wet with sorrow; not for his sentence, but for what he had done. In perhaps the only instance in his life, as the soldiers drug him away, he shed tears of remorse.

Chapter XXXI: Days of Rage

Caesarea, Judea
November, 36 A.D.
***

An unusual period of relative peace came to pass over the province, following the summer of strange sightings of the deceased Nazarene and the dispatching of Barabbas to the mines of Mauretania. Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, while still a constant irritant, had quieted their openly hostile rhetoric towards Pontius Pilate and the Roman government. Indeed, almost three years passed before another crisis emerged.

"Another bloody prophet," the procurator swore under his breath.

"Only this one's armed," Taurus replied.

Pilate shook his head and walked over to the table, slamming his fist down hard. "He calls himself *Taheb*, which means 'restorer'. Many Samaritans are calling him their Messiah."

"Your entire cavalry regiment is made up of Samaritans," Artorius observed.

"That is true," Taurus admitted. "However, my men are loyal to their oaths. Almost all have heard this Taheb's words, yet they remain firm in their allegiance."

"Jove damn them!" Pilate snapped. "That's all we need is thousands of armed Samaritans causing a fucking riot!"

"Or worse, starting an insurrection," Justus added.

"How many men do we have available?" Pilate asked his assembled military leaders.

"I have two cohorts of infantry available," Abenader replied.

Knowing he would need reinforcements, Pilate had sent for the commander of the Jerusalem garrison to bring what forces he could spare.

"My regiment has been reinforced and is totaling about four hundred and fifty cavalry," Taurus added.

"The First Legionary Cohort is battle ready," Artorius asserted.

"Give or take the strength of the Auxilia cohorts, that gives us a total fighting strength of about eighteen hundred men," Pilate said after a short pause. "There is just one problem that I see." He then turned to Abenader,

whose face bore a look of puzzlement.

"Sir, if you are questioning the loyalty of my men…"

"They have shown great improvement in discipline and training," Artorius interrupted in a rare defense of Abenader. "That being said, this whole region is so bloody tribal that can we be assured they will turn their weapons on their own people?"

"My men know where their loyalties lie," Abenader asserted. "You do not question Centurion Taurus' cavalry, so I'd expect you not to question those under my command." He was indignant that after all this time the quality of his soldiers was still being called into question.

"Let us hope it does not come to that," Pilate added. "I do not want another bloodbath on our hands like we had at the Antonia Fortress. Still, we cannot allow an armed mob to run rampant. These people know the law, and it is up to us to remind them of it."

"And these people carry not just butchers cleavers and farming tools," Taurus added. "They are armed with proper weapons to be sure."

"A pity then, that the arms dealers we struck down three years ago did not sway others from doing the same," Pilate lamented.

"We may have an armed insurrection brewing," Artorius said. "The Governor of Egypt warned us last year that there was growing anti-Roman sentiment in the region. Should we then inform the Legate of Syria, in case we need reinforcements?"

"I do not wish to have my first meeting with Vitellius involve me crawling on my knees, begging for help," Pilate retorted.

Flaccus had returned to Rome after his initial three-year tour was complete and had elected not to extend his time in the east. His replacement was Lucius Vitellius, who had served as consul just two years before. His power and influence was vast, and the last thing Pilate needed was appearing weak before the man who could most positively or adversely affect his career since Sejanus.

"Well, if this goes bad, you won't need to go begging to Vitellius on your knees," Artorius mused, "You're head will probably be on a Samaritan spear."



"Somebody explain to me why this bloody hill is so important," Valens

vented as the cohort marched towards Mount Gerizim.

Taurus and his cavalry were screening their front and sending out reconnaissance patrols. It was the largest combined force assembled together since Pilate's arrival in Judea more than ten years before.

The procurator was in full armor and in command of the taskforce. It had been many years since Pilate had taken to the field, and though most of his time was spent as an artillery officer, he had lost none of his ability to lead and coordinate large numbers of soldiers. In reality, there were only three men he had to give orders to directly; Artorius, Abenader, and Taurus.

"According to Samaritan tradition, it is the one place not swallowed up in the Great Flood," Cornelius explained.

All centurions and options rode together, along with Pilate, at the head of the long column of legionaries. Abenader also rode with them; his first cohort marching ahead of the legionaries, the other behind.

"It's not even that big of a hill," Magnus observed. "And what great flood exactly are they talking about?"

"Many cultures in the region speak of it in their mythology," Cornelius continued. "The Jews, Samaritans, Babylonians; all have stories of when God flooded the earth in a rage and wiped out most of mankind."

"Well, that's certainly cheerful," Pilate remarked dryly. "And no disrespect to Centurion Taurus, but all of his cavalry are Samaritans!"

"About half of the auxiliary infantry are as well," Artorius added.

There was a noticeable tension in the air.

"In other words," Magnus replied, "if the auxiliaries elect not to turn on their brethren, we're pretty much fucked."

"That sums it up," Pilate said with a macabre grin. He then looked over at his auxilia centurion. "No disrespect to you, Abenader. But even if they don't openly turn on us, should the auxiliaries refuse to fight, one cohort of legionaries cannot possibly withstand the onslaught of four thousand men when caught out in the open."

"You realize we've gone this entire time without a single fatality within the cohort," Magnus observed. "It would be a shame if all of us die today or tomorrow."

Mount Gerizim lay just thirty miles from Caesarea, along the main road between Judea and Galilee. Pilate's forces had left in the afternoon two days before the expected ascent of Gerizim by the armed force of pilgrims. As they approached the mountain the night before the climb, they were met by

Centurion Taurus and members of his cavalry.

“Taheb and his men are all encamped in the village of Tirathana, not far from here,” he said as he rode up to Pilate and saluted. “I sent scouts under cover into the village, and they are all there, celebrating the liberation of their sacred mountain.”

“And are they armed?” Pilate asked.

“They are,” Taurus confirmed. “They have mostly spears, smaller curved swords, with bucklers for shields. A few of the leaders even have hamata chain armor.”

“It’s as we suspected,” Artorius said.

Pilate gave a nod.

“To our advantage,” Taurus continued, “they do not know of our approach. They may have seen some of my cavalrymen, but as they are fellow Samaritans who frequently patrol this road, they likely paid them no mind. From what we gathered, they have no knowledge of your force’s approach.”

“We best not try to blockade the village,” Artorius spoke up. “It is too large to encircle with the small force we have, plus then we would not be able to mass our numbers.”

“Agreed,” Pilate replied. “We’ll bivouac on the far side of the mountain under the cover of darkness. That means no cooking fires tonight. All of us will have to eat our rations cold. In the morning we will be waiting for them.”



The next morning Artorius had his legionaries formed up in the center behind Pilate. Each century was operating independently with their soldiers four ranks deep. He had placed his First Century in the very center of the formation. Abenader’s Auxilia infantry were on the flanks, with Taurus’ cavalry covering the wings approximately one hundred meters off to each side. The slope was steep enough that it would give legionary javelins greater reach, as well as allowing for momentum should they need to attack. The ever-present sun shone down on them, the reflection off their armor glared into the faces of the advancing Samaritans.

The horde of ‘pilgrims’ radiated pure hostility and contempt for the Romans. Those closest to their leader brandished their weapons. Most carried short, Arabian curved swords, with small wicker shields. There could be no

doubt that this was a mob ready for battle. There were many chants and prayers emanating from the throng, in a language that Artorius could not understand. Yet even if they were calls for peace, their tone was sinister and threatening.

Pontius Pilate stood well in front of his assembled soldiers, Artorius and Abenader on each side, a step behind him. He wore his tribune's armor of gleaming muscled cuirass breastplate with white leather straps hanging off the shoulders. His gleaming helmet bore its tall feathered crest that ran front-to-back. It was the same armor he'd worn all those years ago, when he and Artorius first served together on the Rhine. Though polished and well maintained, the scouring told of countless battles the procurator had seen long before he stepped into politics.

"Halt!" he shouted, raising his hand.

"You defile our mountain with the presence of your soldiers," a man they guessed to be Taheb said as he stepped forward, a handful of bodyguards at his sides.

"It is you who defiles this place," Pilate retorted calmly.

On either end, the cavalry slowly started to advance, making their way towards the flanks of the Samaritan force. "This is supposed to be a holy pilgrimage, which are more than welcome in these lands. But no other force of wayfarers comes armed such as yourselves. This is an army, and an illegal one at that. If you wish to continue on your excursion, then lay down your arms immediately!"

"Ha!" Taheb retorted. "And why should we? If we lay down our weapons, your men will attack us!"

There were mutterings of consent from the assembled mass, coupled with jeers and insults shouted towards Pilate.

"I promise no harm will come to you," the procurator emphasized. "But I cannot allow any armed force to pass!"

"You would have us enslaved like our brethren who wear your cursed uniforms!" one of the men next to Taheb shouted.

The so-called Samaritan Messiah decided in an instant to end the discussion. *"I'll save our people, even if I have to martyr myself!"* he screamed as he drew his sword and lunged towards Pilate.

The procurator quickly drew his gladius and stepped back. His foe's sword slashed against the cheek guard of his helmet.

"Shit!" Artorius swore as he and Abenader drew their gladii.

Each stepped forward to protect Pilate, driving their weapons into the vitals of the men on either side of Taheb, who had stumbled forward from the momentum of his attack. Pilate sprang forward and stabbed him through the throat. The prophet's eyes grew wide in disbelief as he fell to his knees. He choked up gouts of blood, which also gushed from his ruptured neck. Pilate spat on him as he and his centurions quickly backed away. The mob of Samaritans was momentarily stunned at the sudden slaying of their savior.

"Javelins…volley by ranks!" Artorius shouted. He did not know if the enemy's shock would turn to rage and was not going to give them any chance of seizing the initiative. He also knew he had to smash them quickly, in case the auxiliaries wavered. And even if they held their ground, the horde still had them substantially outnumbered.

"*Front rank…throw!"* Valens shouted.

A storm of javelins sailed over the top of Pilate and the centurions, who sprinted up the hill. Artorius immediately took his place on the extreme right of his century; Abenader and Pilate to his left. The auxilia centurion stayed close to the procurator, acting as a personal bodyguard. Decanii within the century gave subsequent orders and several more volleys of javelins rained down upon the Samaritans. On either side, the rest of the cohort was raining down its own storm of death on their hapless foe. Artorius turned around just in time to see a mob gathering around their dead prophet, wailing in sorrow and rage, cut down by the wave of death that descended upon them. Javelins tore into their flesh, their wicker shields proving all but useless against the storm of death. In his peripherals, Artorius saw the other centuries unleashing their remaining salvos of javelins.

"Gladius…draw!"

"Rah!"

It had been three years since his men had drawn their blades in anger. The arrogance of these so-called 'people of God' enraged them. For a sect that claimed to be one of peace, they were quick to turn to violence.

"Charge!"

The order was followed by a continuous shout as the legionaries stormed down the hill. They smashed into the Samaritan horde, shields bowling those closest to them over. To his right, Artorius could sense the men from Praxus' Century crashing into their enemy. By this time the Samaritans had recovered from the assault and began to fight back against the hated Romans.

Still up on the hill, Pilate and Abenader watched the battle unfold. Pilate's head was bowed slightly. He had come to attempt a peaceful resolution and had failed.

"Sir, look!" As Abenader pointed to his right, Pilate saw the auxiliary cavalry riding parallel to the enemy flank.

At first he wasn't sure if they were simply abandoning the field, but then they immediately conducted a hard left turn and charged into the Samaritan flank. He looked to his left and saw the cavalry on that wing executing a similar maneuver. The infantry had also attacked and were fighting alongside the legionaries. He then breathed a sigh of relief.

"I told you my men would remain loyal," the centurion asserted.

"You have my gratitude, Abenader," Pilate replied.

Below, the enemy horde was breaking. In a matter of minutes it was over. The Samaritans broke and ran. The legionary and auxiliary infantry pursued as far as the bottom of the hill. The cavalry continued and slaughtered many as they tried to flee. Abenader's face twitched. The horsemen were so anxious to prove themselves to the Romans that they needlessly continued the killing long after the issue was decided. It was the one confounding issue Taurus had always said about his men; they would always fight, but often not know when to stop.



"We've taken over five hundred prisoners," Magnus said as he joined the senior leaders at their camp.

Several oxcarts had been brought on the journey and were now laden with arms taken from the Samaritan dead. The wailing of grieving wives and mothers echoed throughout the landscape. The Romans were camped several miles from the battlefield, and yet the cries of the grief-stricken still permeated their senses.

"Well done," Pilate replied.

A servant handed the centurion a goblet of wine, and the procurator proposed a toast. "Gentlemen, to the suppression of insurrection before it had a chance to begin."

The men all drank thirstily and Pilate then addressed Centurion Taurus. "Your men proved their loyalty today, and for that I am grateful."

"Thank you, sir," Taurus replied.

“They probably killed a couple hundred more than necessary,” Pilate continued, “But I am not going to lose any sleep over the bodies of rebellious scum.”

“Nor should you!” a voice said boisterously.

The assembled officers were surprised to see it was Caiaphas, along with members of the Sanhedrin. He was grinning broadly, which was something Artorius had never recalled seeing.

“Caiaphas,” Pilate grumbled. “What are you doing here?”

“We received word of the troubles,” the high priest explained. “And once I heard that the rebels were routed, I wished to come congratulate you on your great victory.”

“Given how much your people and the Samaritans hate each other,” Artorius observed, “it is hardly surprising that you would celebrate their slaughter.”

“Please,” Caiaphas replied, raising his hands in resignation. “I know we’ve had our differences and doubtless will continue to. However, I am willing to admit that you have kept the peace over the past three years, and with the destruction of this rebellious army, you have maintained that harmony.”

The continuing cries of mourning loved ones of the slain added a macabre accent to the high priest’s words.

“Then perhaps you will join us for a drink,” Pilate said, signaling a servant to offer the priest a cup of wine.

“So what will you have us do with the prisoners?” Magnus asked.

“We’ll execute the leaders and any who cause further trouble,” Pilate said without hesitation.

“Ah, now that I will drink to,” Caiaphas said with a chuckle as he held his wine cup high.

Chapter XXXII: Bitter Departures

***

Reports of the Battle of Mount Gerizim would take several weeks at minimum to reach Rome, and as Pilate did not foresee any ill consequences to come of it, he elected to take Claudia on a long awaited holiday. If anything, he felt that a commendation from Vitellius, the senate, or perhaps even the emperor would be waiting for him. It was with great shock that he received different news altogether when he returned to Caesarea more than two months later.

The man's name was Marcellus, and it was known that he was a close friend of Vitellius. He had not traveled alone, but rather brought an entire entourage of bureaucrats, freedmen, and staff. And as Marcellus had expressly forbidden Artorius or any of Pilate's friends from breaking the news to him, his words completely took the procurator off guard.

"Pontius Pilate," the man said. "I am here as your replacement, by order of Lucius Vitellius, on the authority of the Emperor Tiberius Caesar."

"Replacement?" Pilate said aghast. "What is the meaning of this?"

"A number of issues," Marcellus explained, with a certain trace of arrogance in his voice.

Claudia clutched her husband's hand as they listened to their entire world come crashing down. "It culminated with the slaughter of the Samaritan pilgrims…"

"Now see here!" Pilate snapped. "Those 'pilgrims' were armed for battle. We acted in self-defense and, by doing so, suppressed a potential revolt!"

"Perhaps," Marcellus said patronizingly. "However, it was not I who ordered your removal. I am simply your successor. And as I was saying, Legate Vitellius was specifically informed by the emperor a number of months ago that after eleven years you were perhaps wearing out your usefulness in the province. There have been numerous complaints by the Sanhedrin over the years, as well as Herod Antipas. Granted, Vitellius took little heed of our client king's rebukes, knowing his ulterior motives for trying to make himself legitimate king of all Judea. However, this latest slaughter of the Samaritans proved your undoing. The Council of Samaria petitioned Vitellius personally, and it is by his order that you are hereby relieved."

“But surely…” Pilate protested. “How could he depose me without allowing me to plead my case?”

“*As I said*,” Marcellus answered with a bored sigh, “The emperor felt your usefulness was played out in the east anyway. It is likely Vitellius would have relieved you even if he had thought your actions appropriate. And since any appeal of his decision would go through the emperor, his directive is if you take umbrage with his decision, then you need to take it up with Tiberius.”

“I understand,” Pilate said quietly, still in shock, the gravity of what had just transpired beginning to sink in. He guided Claudia by the hand and they started to leave the office.

“Oh, and one last thing,” Marcellus said. “Vitellius may not wish to see you, but he has demanded that the commander of the First Italic Cohort report to him at once.”



Artorius had never even met the Legate of Syria, and now he stood before him, awaiting his judgment on his disciplinary case. With Pilate deposed, Vitellius was the only man of sufficient rank to pass judgment on the conduct of Artorius and his legionaries. He had left Caesarea with all possible speed once Pilate had informed him of the legate’s directive. Artorius had traveled alone, knowing that Antioch, where Vitellius governed from, was a week’s ride by horse. As such, he had said his farewells to Pilate and Claudia. Their presence was no longer welcome, and they were hastening their own departure.

The centurion was both angered and nervous. He had not been arrested, so he presumed he was not being criminally charged. By the same token, he was indignant at having to answer before a disciplinary hearing because he made a quick decision that ultimately saved the Governor of Judea’s life. As he had arrived in Antioch in the evening, he took the opportunity to try and catch a night’s rest, while thoroughly bathing and polishing up his armor for his meeting with the legate in the morning.

“Centurion Artorius reporting, sir,” he said with a sharp salute as he stepped into the hall, his helmet tucked under his arm.

There was a long table on a short dais, yet the only person occupying it was Legate Vitellius. There were no tribunes, senior centurions, not even a

clerk. While the reason may have been simply a matter of Artorius not falling under their chain-of-command, he would have felt at least partially reassured if the tribunal contained at least one of his fellow centurions. As it was, the legate alone would decide his fate.

"Stand at ease, centurion," Vitellius replied.

It frustrated Artorius because he could not judge the governor's demeanor one way or the other. On the one hand, he had dismissed Pilate by simply sending a message with his replacement, yet he had granted Artorius a hearing in person. He knew very little about Vitellius, other than he was a former consul. The legate had only held his posting for two years and had never as much as visited Judea. Therefore Artorius could not begin to surmise where he might stand with him. All he knew was that his fate now rested in the legate's hands.

"I've read the official reports," Vitellius began, "to include your own detailed description of the action that took place on 16 November. Much to the chagrin of the Samaritan delegation, I can find nothing criminal to prosecute you with. As Pilate was the emperor's personal appointee, I felt it right that he judge the procurator himself. As a legionary centurion pilus prior, your fate has been left to me." He paused to let the words sink in. His demeanor still betrayed nothing.

Artorius could not fathom what Vitellius would do. Reduction in rank or dismissal from the army would require a criminal court martial, and the legate already said he had done nothing criminally liable.

"Yes, sir," was all he elected to say.

He would let Vitellius lay it out before forming any sort of rebuttal.

"You must understand," Vitellius continued, "that while the equite procurator governs independently, both Syria and Judea are ultimately my responsibility. Pilate was governor, and during Lamia's tenure he was granted a large amount of autonomy. However, with Syria now under my governorship, it fell upon me as the emperor's representative to act upon any crises that proved unmanageable for Pilate. Same can be said of his replacement, Marcellus. He, too, will have to answer to me, should he fail to maintain order within Judea. As for the current situation, over a thousand Samaritans lay dead, slaughtered by your men."

Artorius' face twitched as he fought to suppress his anger at the perceived rebuke. He remained silent, waiting to hear what Vitellius' disposition towards him would be.

“I understand that the mob was armed,” the legate said, realizing Artorius would not respond just yet. “I argued this with the Samaritan delegation, and they did not bother to deny this. They flagrantly broke the law, and Pilate was right to bring his soldiers to disperse them. And since pretty much all of the Samaritans who were close enough to their leader were killed when the fighting broke out, they are unable to say for certain who struck the first blow. I have no reason to disbelieve that Taheb attacked Pontius Pilate. The procurator was right to kill the man in self defense, and I can concur with yours and Centurion Abenader’s judgment when you killed the men that were close enough to threaten Pilate. As his soldiers, your duty was to protect him.” Vitellius paused for a moment. Up to this point, everything he said would seem to vindicate the centurion. However, were this the case, he never would have summoned Artorius to Syria.

“The issue now at hand is what happened once Taheb was dead,” Vitellius began again. For the first time his demeanor showed that all did not bode well for the centurion. “The three of you immediately started to withdraw. By your own admission the Samaritans were paralyzed with shock at the loss of their leader. You immediately escalated what had been a single man’s attack on the procurator to an all-out battle. You ordered your cohort to unleash their javelins and attack.”

“We were outnumbered,” Artorius replied, finding he could remain silent no longer. “In any tactical situation, one must never allow the enemy a chance to seize the initiative. I had but a moment to make a decision…”

“And make it you did,” Vitellius interrupted. “And now you must take responsibility for it.” The words struck Artorius hard, but he knew the legate was correct. “I must say, it is a credit to the discipline and valor of your legionaries that they did not suffer a single fatality that day. However, nearly a hundred auxiliary infantry and cavalrymen were killed, with nearly three times as many wounded. I cannot fault you for the lack of discipline amongst the cavalrymen who continued to slaughter the Samaritans as they fled the field. They were not your men and therefore not your responsibility.” Vitellius then looked over some documents on his desk before continuing.

“Know that I am also taking into account your service record, which I see is rather impressive. You’ve served the empire for twenty-two years now. You fought at Ahenobarbi, Idistaviso, and Angrivari during the Germanic Wars. I see that during the Rebellion of Sacrovir and Florus you were at Augusta Raurica Pass, where you were one of only nine to be awarded the

Florian Crest, and you went on to fight at the Battle of Augustodunum. There is a special note in your record, too, stating that during the Frisian Rebellion you held the flank at the Battle of Braduhenna. Your century was singled out for valor by the emperor himself."

Artorius' face twitched at the memory and he realized, thanks to the ever-efficient Roman bureaucracy, even those in the Far East knew about Braduhenna.

Vitellius continued to read. "You have been awarded the *Silver Torque for Valor* four times; an impressive statement in and of itself. And you've been mentioned in dispatches for distinguished conduct on no less than eight occasions. The only other blight on your record besides what happened at Mount Gerizim is when you were court-martialed twelve years ago in the death of the centurion who you would later replace. As you were acquitted this holds no bearing on my decision." The legate stopped reading and looked up at Artorius once more, who stood stone-faced.

"What is your judgment then, sir?" Artorius asked. It was strange for the centurion, as he had never heard anyone else spell out the cumulative results of his career in the legions; almost like an epitaph. Like all soldiers of Rome, his service record was a matter of public record that any officer in the army could review if he wished.

"You've had a distinguished career, Centurion Pilus Prior Artorius," Vitellius said after a moment. "Your service to the empire has been exemplary. That is why I take no pleasure in what I must do." Vitellius clearly had his interpretation of how events transpired, and as much as he hated to admit it, he knew he had acted rashly in having his men attack when they did.

"Though no criminal charges will be filed, I still have the good order of the province to consider," the legate continued. "The ongoing presence of legionaries in Judea will only serve as a stark reminder of the slaughter that happened at Mount Gerizim, regardless of who is to blame. Therefore, I am disbanding the cohort."

Artorius felt like he had been stabbed through the heart.

"Sir, whatever decisions were made that day, right or wrong, the responsibility is mine alone!" he protested. "My men should not suffer for following my orders, especially if, as you say, there was nothing criminal done!"

"Your men will not suffer," Vitellius asserted. "They will be reassigned

back to their former legions. Any promotions the men were given will still be honored. No one will lose any rank over this."

Artorius breathed a sigh of relief and nodded. "Well…the Twentieth was always home for me anyway."

Vitellius was stoic in demeanor, which made him suddenly nervous again.

"I said your *men* will be reassigned back to their former legions," the legate replied coldly. "Your new assignment will take you west, but not to Cologne. There will be enough upheaval as it is with your centurions and options returning to the ranks, as it now means that a handful of officers who were anticipating promotion will have to wait as those vacancies will be taken. As they were not so much charged with any wrongdoing, their transfers are simply administrative. Yours, on the other hand, is a different case. As you said, the responsibility for Mount Gerizim is yours alone."

"Am I then to be forced out of the legions, sir?" Artorius could feel his pulse racing as he feared the worst.

Vitellius grimaced slightly. "If you want to look at it this way. Even without being criminally charged, you could have been forced into retirement simply because the cohort has been disbanded, and there are no vacancies for one of your rank. And despite your record of service, there are those within the senate who have called for your immediate dismissal from the ranks. Fortunately for you, even though Pontius Pilate has fallen out of favor you still have friends. You know the name Platorius Macro?"

Artorius' face lit up at the sound of a name he had not heard in years. "I do indeed, sir! He and I go back many years, to the beginning of my career."

"Well, it seems he came through for you, at least as much as he was able," Vitellius explained. "He serves as an administrative tribune with the plebian assembly and was also appointed as mayor of Ostia. Being a retired centurion primus pilus, his influence is substantial. Though he could not convince the senate to allow you to remain in the ranks, he did the best he could in finding you a way to still render service to Rome. You have other friends as well, albeit both equites; Gaius Calvinus and Aulus Cursor. Both spoke vehemently on your behalf."

He then passed a scroll to the centurion. As Artorius read it, he realized why it had taken so long for any disposition to be made. Between the time the Samaritan delegation arrived in Rome, tedious deliberations and correspondence between the emperor and senate, Macro's own intervention,

the final decisions made, and official notification making its way clear across the empire, it was no surprise that the ordeal had drug out for several months. Though he should have been grateful for the intervention of his friends, Artorius' heart sank as he read the assignment order.



"What the hell?" Magnus grunted as he read the document Artorius gave him.

Praxus snatched the scroll from him and began to read. "I didn't know Ostia had a police commissioner," he remarked after a minute.

"It doesn't," Artorius replied bitterly. "At least it didn't before Macro convinced the Quaestor to fund the position."

"How did this happen?" Praxus said. "We get to return home to the Twentieth and you get sent off to some made up magistracy that completely takes you away from the legions! Oh, well, at least it holds the same rank as a centurion primus ordo."

"Read it again," Artorius replied. "It *pays* the same. And while I've been given an honorary appointment as a centurion primus ordo, the position does not carry the actual rank. I've essentially been cast out of the legions. The only reason I have not been cashiered completely is because there was no court martial. Looks like my enemies get at least a touch of revenge on me after all."

"Wait a minute," Magnus remarked. "You're not talking about the friends of Fulvius?"

Fulvius had had friends within the senate who had sworn to bring Artorius to ruin.

"That would be them," Artorius concurred. "Seems he had more friends than just the fallen Senator Gallus. And while plebian tribunes may hold the power of veto, there was only so much they could do."

"But that happened twelve years ago!" Praxus protested.

"They were rather patient," Artorius remarked. "I never gave them an opportunity to strike at me. I still haven't; at least not to a degree that they would have hoped I would. Still, they saw the opportunity when Pilate fell from favor. Those in the senate not after my head have no idea who I am, except maybe Apronius and Silius. I don't know if those two are even voting members of the assembly, and even if they are, their input would have

counted for little. Macro, Calvinus, and Cursor did what he could, and for that I am grateful."

"And to think he swore he would never get involved in politics!" Praxus said with a mirthless laugh.

"Well, at least you do get to return home," Magnus observed. "Still, though, twenty-two years served honorably in the ranks and this is how it ends!"



Diana's feelings were mixed at best. She was glad to be leaving Judea and anxious to get back to Roman culture and society. By the same token, this was not how she envisioned things coming to an end for her husband. It upset her greatly that Artorius had given so much of himself for so long, and now he was being relegated to an administrative position in disgrace. *Disgrace*. The word struck Diana hard, for she knew that Artorius had had to make a split-second decision and had done what he felt was right. Her thoughts were interrupted as Metellus opened the door to the room where servants were packing Diana's personal belongings.

"I'm not disturbing you, am I, Mother?" he asked as he cautiously stepped in.

Diana smiled and kissed him gently on the cheek. "You know you're not required to address me that way."

"Yes, you tell me that all the time," the young decanus said with a smile of his own. "And I always remind you that I find it appropriate to do so." He paused and noted the sad demeanor in his adoptive mother's face.

"He did the right thing," Metellus asserted. "I don't give a damn what Vitellius or anyone else says. The fact that in six years, gods know how many skirmishes, and a final pitched battle, the cohort never suffered a single fatality. That has to count for something!"

"I know," Diana replied, shaking her head and stepping towards the doorway that led to the small balcony. She gazed out towards the sea, where ships came and went from the Caesarea harbor. "I wasn't there, but I cannot believe he would order his men to attack if he did not sense an immediate danger."

"Had he not done so, the Samaritans might have seized the initiative,"

Metellus concurred. “The loyalties of the auxiliaries have always been sketchy, and had the enemy been given a chance to attack on their terms, I do not know that they would have held. I think they attacked because we took advantage of the Samaritans’ shock at the loss of their ‘prophet’. What enrages me is that Artorius and Pilate shoulder the blame for the incident, yet no one has placed blame upon those Samaritan bastards who massed on their supposed holy mountain armed for battle!”

“Any word on what will happen to all of you?” Diana asked, changing the subject. She continued to stare into the sea.

Metellus shrugged. “We’re all being sent back to our former legions,” he replied. “As a decanus it shouldn’t be too terribly difficult for me to find a vacancy. For the centurions it is going to be tricky. The First Italic Cohort was its own entity, and with its disbandment there will be an excess number of centurions. I’m guessing that final dispositions won’t be made until we at least return to Rome. Vitellius has already decreed that none of us will lose any rank, so they’ll have to work something out.”

“The seas are treacherous this time of year,” Diana observed. “I suspect we will be traveling by land. Perhaps we can take a holiday in Greece, like Pilate and Claudia had intended.”

“Not a bad idea,” Metellus concurred. “From what I heard, we’re not expected back until spring at the earliest, so travelling at a methodical pace will give the powers in Rome a chance to sort out the rosters of the legions and find us all assignments.”

The door opened again and Artorius entered without paying any mind to the servants who were still working at a feverish pace. He carried a pair of scrolls, one of which bore the imperial seal.

“Ah, good, you’re both here,” he stated. “Word hasn’t gotten out yet, but it will soon enough.”

“Word about what?” Metellus asked, his arms folded across his chest.

“It’s not about Pilate and Claudia, is it?” Diana asked, her face creased in concern for her sister and brother-in-law.

“This first letter comes from them,” Artorius answered, presenting the scroll without the imperial seal. “His meeting with the emperor went as well as could be expected, given the circumstances.”

“So Tiberius pardoned him?” Metellus asked.

“It wasn’t Tiberius.”

Chapter XXXIII: Death is Just the Beginning

Villa Jovis, Isle of Capri
16 March, 37 A.D.
***

"The emperor has risen!" the slave said with eyes wide in disbelief. "He's asking for his supper, and he wants his ring back."

Caligula's face twisted in anger and embarrassment. A number of senators had gathered at the Imperial Villa on Capri when they heard that Tiberius was close to breathing his last. Many were anxious for the man they had so long hated to finally pass into the afterlife. In Gaius Caligula, the last surviving son of the great Germanicus Caesar, they saw hope for a new golden age. Indeed, they were about to hail the young man, who carried Tiberius' ring, as their new emperor. Now that word had come that the old emperor was, in fact, still alive, they were instantly filled with fear. What would Tiberius do to them should he hear they were celebrating his demise? Caligula signaled with his head for the Praetorian Prefect, Naevius Suetorius Macro, to follow him.

"I need you to take care of this, now!" Caligula growled under his breath.

"It will be done…*Caesar*," Naevius replied with a wicked grin.

Caligula returned the look and nodded. The burly praetorian popped the knuckles of his hands and briskly walked towards the wing where Tiberius lay, apparently not dead.



Tiberius was, indeed, still very much alive, even if he had fallen into a temporary stupor that had fooled his great-nephew and his minions into thinking he had expired. He laughed at how absurd they must now feel! He had sent a servant to fetch his ring back, as he did not want that disgusting little man to defile it. It mattered not to Tiberius that Gaius Caligula was the son of Germanicus. He lamented that he had been slow in realizing just how wicked Caligula was, but he would make things right. He wasn't sure who would be his successor, but if he had his way, he'd remove that debauched little man from his will.

The door opened, and Naevius bolted into the room. The look in his eyes immediately betrayed his intentions. It was then that Tiberius realized there would be no making things right. He could only hope that Caligula would not last long on the imperial throne, and perhaps posterity could forgive him for placing him in such a dangerous position. It would prove a vain hope.

"Come to do your master's bidding," the emperor observed. His face was twisted in a defiant sneer.

Naevius was big and strong, but Tiberius would not go quietly into the next life. The praetorian strode forward and started to draw his gladius. With surprising speed, Tiberius lunged forward and slapped him hard across the face.

"Don't be stupid, man!" he snapped as Naevius took a step back, surprised. "If you cut me, it will be clear I was murdered! At least try and be subtle about it! Here, use this…" He quickly moved to the bed and grabbed a large pillow, which he threw at the prefect. This caught Naevius off guard, and as he reached up to catch it, Tiberius stepped in and kicked him hard in the groin. Naevius fell to his knees, and the emperor punched him hard twice across the temple. Though he felt a surge of his old strength returning, Tiberius knew it could not last. The praetorian was much larger than him, wearing armor, and if need be, he would use his weapon.

"Come on," Tiberius goaded, taking a step back. "Damn yourself for eternity and betray your emperor!"

Naevius gave a growl of anger at the humiliation this old man was putting him through. He gave a shout and tackled Tiberius, slamming him onto the bed with a crash. The emperor grabbed his neck in both hands as Naevius tried to strangle him in turn. Tiberius was still surprisingly resilient, but Naevius knew he would outlast him, even as his face turned purple from exertion and the emperor's attempts to choke him. Tiberius then released the grip of his right hand and punched Naevius repeatedly in the face. The praetorian kept squeezing even as his left eye closed shut from the repeated blows. As Tiberius ceased in his strikes, Naevius released his grip.

"Alright," the emperor said with a resigned nod. "Finish this." His body went limp as Naevius grabbed a pillow and smashed it over Tiberius' face. In a final insult, Tiberius' soul left his body before Naevius could get any satisfaction out of killing him.



The sky was grey, and Tiberius found himself kneeling on a patch of earth. He gasped in shock and stumbled to his feet. The room, the villa, the entire island of Capri was gone. He was instead on a dirt path. Behind him was a range of hills with the road going between them. Where the road met the hills was black.

He felt very much awake, not at all like he was dreaming or in a trance. He then looked down at his hands and forearms and saw that the wrinkles of old age were gone. His arms were thick and strong once more. He reached up and felt his face. Not only were the marks of age gone, but even the scars of acne that had tormented his younger years were absent.

He then took further note of his surroundings. There were trees and tall grasses on either side of the path he was on. The grey skies made it feel like just before dawn on a cloudy day. He gazed down the path and in the distance, where the skies broke and light shone down, he saw the silhouette of a woman. Behind her was a tall stone wall, with a large gate that was cracked partway. From inside a bright light illuminated forth. He walked towards it, trying to make out who the woman was that stood just outside the light. At last he was able to see her face, and his heart soared.

She waited for me, he thought to himself. Vipsania's smile was as radiant and beautiful as he had remembered when they were young. As she took his hand and led him through the gates of Elysium, Tiberius Claudius Nero at last found peace.

Chapter XXXIV: End of Days

Rome
March, 38 A.D.
***

As the Eternal City came into sight over the horizon, Artorius sighed, a series of mixed emotions washing over him. To be certain, he was glad to be home after months of travel, yet the circumstances surrounding his return still sat hard with him. Unlike his fellow centurions, he had elected to travel in civilian garb. Anymore he felt that wearing his armor made him a fraud. His was in an unusual position since he was technically no longer serving in the legions, yet he maintained his rank, at least an honorary equivalent. Diana had taken the liberty of sending some of her servants forward to secure their accommodations for them. Pilate and Claudia had offered to let them stay at their manor house in Rome, which they had, thankfully, maintained even while they were in Judea for more than a decade.

"I suppose this is where I leave you," Cornelius observed. "I should go report to the praetorian prefect." He had been most fortunate, his connections in the praetorian guard securing for him a centurion's posting within their ranks. The Judean woman, Rebekkah, had come with him and was now his wife.

"I heard rumors that he murdered the emperor," Magnus remarked.

Cornelius snorted. "Well, I'll be sure not to ask him that over dinner," he replied dryly.

He shook hands with the other centurions and spurred his horse towards the city. It was late morning, and the sun of spring felt good against their backs.

"I don't suppose you'll have to have an audience with the emperor like Pilate did?" Praxus asked, looking over to Artorius, who shook his head.

"No, thankfully I am of little importance to Caligula. I'd hazard he doesn't even know my name. At least I hope he doesn't!"

"Hard to believe that 'Little Brat' is now master of the Roman world," Praxus lamented. "He is the third Caesar I have served under, and I do not feel him worthy of either of his predecessors."

"You know, I always forget about our difference in age," Artorius

replied, looking over at his friend, who was the only one of the group to have served under Augustus.

Artorius was hardly a youthful legionary anymore, having just turned forty a couple of months prior. Praxus was at least six years older than he, yet one would scarcely know it to look at either of them. It always fascinated him that despite the hardships they had suffered together, neither he nor any of his closest friends resembled their age. Diana was four years older than he, and yet she too had remained youthfully defiant in the face of the advancing years.

“Growing old is something best left to other people,” Praxus said with a laugh.

“That’s what my grandfather still says!” Magnus added.

“I cannot believe Olaf is still alive,” Praxus replied. “What is he, a hundred now?”

“Pretty close,” Magnus replied. “He started carrying a walking stick, saying his bad back makes it hard for him to walk. I think he just uses it to beat people with!”

The three friends shared a brief chuckle, after which Artorius let out an audible sigh. He then took Diana by the hand and without another word, made their way towards the city below.



Cursor let out a sigh as he walked out of the imperial palace, thankful that his term as plebian tribune was set to end soon. He had used his veto to block the usage of public works funds in order to build an elaborate addition to the palace, including a full-sized lake. This angered the new emperor, Gaius Caligula, who summoned him to the palace to berate him for this.

With his usual candor, Cursor explained that he did not oppose the emperor building additions to the imperial palace, but they were not to come from the public works funds. He explained that Caligula’s two options were to either use his own funding for the work or he would have to make the addition and lake open to the public. Perceiving this as a joke, Caligula had broken down into a fit of laughter and proceeded to get falling down drunk. He then seemed to forget the reason for summoning Cursor, playfully slapping him on the back repeatedly and telling him he needed to visit more often, that they never saw him enough. Cursor found this last part especially

odd, as he had never met Caligula in his life. And as the two men had been alone during their meeting, servants aside, he had no idea who ‘they’ were.

“Yes, he’s a bit unbalanced,” Cassius Chaerea said as he escorted the plebian tribune from the palace grounds. “One minute I thought he was going to have you strangled, the next he’s acting like you’re his long-lost best friend.”

“And this is the man who now rules the civilized world,” Cursor grunted. “To be honest, Cassius, I do not like the path he is going down. Something tells me that future dealings with him may not end so favorably. I hear he nullified Tiberius’ will on grounds of insanity.”

“Only that part which named Tiberius’ grandson, Gemellus, as joint heir,” Cassius conjectured. “He borrowed a quote from Augustus and said there could only be one Caesar. In the rest of the will, he actually respected his predecessor’s wishes.”

“You know my term as plebian tribune is almost up,” Cursor explained with a change of subject. “I don’t think I shall seek reelection. Let someone else deal with *Little Brat*.”

“You could always try for a posting with the praetorians,” Cassius suggested. “If you vacate your position, I don’t doubt some of our tribunes will try to attain it.”

“No, thank you,” Cursor grunted.

“Macro did it,” Cassius added. Despite his years of loathing the praetorians while serving in the ranks, Platorius Macro had accepted an appointment as a tribune of the guard, which included command of a cohort of praetorians.

“I may eventually ask for command of cavalry again,” Cursor said. “That is if Rome has any campaigns in the foreseeable future while I am still young and fit enough to be of some use.”

“Suit yourself,” Cassius shrugged. “I’m hardly a young man either. I think I’ll stay around long enough to see just how well or ill Gaius Caligula reigns.”



As they reached the top of the rise overlooking the port city, Magnus and Praxus turned their mounts around. Below they could just make out Artorius and Diana walking their horses, holding hands.

“It still doesn’t feel right,” Praxus remarked, “Us going back to the legions and not him.”

“I know,” Magnus replied, somberly. “And yet, I cannot help but think we will see him again; that the fates will bring us together one last time. Believe me, Praxus, we have not seen the last of Titus Artorius Justus.”

Epilog: Six Years Later

Roman Assault Force
Off the Coast of Britannia
43 A.D.
***

The invasion fleet was enormous. From the prow of his vessel and to his left and right, Artorius could see nothing but other ships in either direction. The sea was rough, though the waters were only about chest deep where they were to launch the assault. It would be a rough landing, but as the initial wave would be carrying only their weapons and armor it would be passable enough. The sky was dark, and the wind gusted in his face. Along the short beachhead and up on the cliff he could see numerous fires burning.

"The First Cohort will spearhead the attack," his commanding legate had ordered him during the preparations.

When the scout ships had conducted their reconnaissance of the landing site it was empty, and they did not know whether or not there would be any resistance. The ground at the top of the cliff was reported to be relatively flat and devoid of dense growths of trees. As the First Cohort had the most men, they would move up the beach and secure a large enough area on top of the cliff for the rest of the Twentieth Legion, Valeria. The Second Augusta, Ninth Hispania, and Fourteenth Gemina Legions were all making similar landings at various points along the coastline.

"Depth, two fathoms!" a nearby sailor shouted over his shoulder as he pulled in the knotted measuring rope that told them how deep the water was.

"Standby to reverse oars!" Admiral Stoppello shouted to the sailing master who was overseeing the rowers. Camillus, the aquilifer, stood next to his master centurion on the prow of the ship, the legion's eagle standard clutched to his chest.

Once they hit the shallows the legionaries would have to slog about a hundred meters through the surf before they hit the beach. It was then that Artorius first heard the ominous chants coming from the beach. Hundreds of figures in hooded cloaks stood around the fires, their faces hidden, and hands held in front of their chests in prayer. Dozens more lined the beach, their chants carrying over the wind and seeming to permeate the very air the

legionaries on the ship breathed. They grew even louder as the vessel lurched to a halt in the shallow waters.

"Fucking druids," Camillus cursed as Artorius turned to face his men.

"First and Second Centuries, up!" he shouted. *"Form up to advance!"*

The soldiers reluctantly got to their feet, clutching their shields and javelins close to them as the sinister chants grew ever louder.

"What the hell's gotten into them?" Artorius growled as he turned his gaze front once more.

"You have to admit it is a rather riveting performance," Camillus stated with his usual good nature. "The lads are superstitious. Even the most battle-hardened veteran still fears the gods of darkness and those who can harness their unholy power."

"And you don't?" Artorius asked.

Camillus simply shrugged. "I've had a good life. What's the worst they can do to me?"

Behind them they could hear mutterings from the men laced with words of druids, magic, and curses. Artorius knew they had to move immediately, lest irrational fear upset the entire operation. If his own men were being so adversely affected by the druids' spectacle, he knew it had to be playing havoc on the men aboard the other assault ships.

"They'd better follow us when we go over," he grunted.

Camillus simply grinned. "They'll follow *this*," he emphasized, holding up the legion's eagle. The aquilifer then turned and addressed the legionaries.

"Soldiers of the Twentieth Legion!" he shouted, holding the eagle high. "You cower like old women before a handful of barbarians in ratted cloaks! Their gods do not hold power over the eagle! Will you let this sacred standard fall into their hands?"

"No!" a legionary shouted, eliciting similar affirmations from the other soldiers.

Camillus gave a sinister grin. *"The eagle advances!"* he shouted. *"Will you follow it to glory or allow it to fall into their vile clutches and damn yourselves for eternity?"*

He then turned about, and holding the eagle aloft, threw it over the front of the ship into the surf. He looked back briefly and saw the looks of horror on the faces of the legionaries before jumping over the side. The standard tumbled end over end before slamming into the sand in the shallow surf.

"The eagle stands, and it faces the enemy!" Artorius shouted.

He watched as the aquilifer surged through the crashing waves, retrieved the standard, and started to advance towards the beach alone. He grinned briefly and then turned towards his men with a look of fierce determination.

"To the eagle!" he shouted as he jumped over the side of the ship and to his fate.

If you enjoyed this book and wish to stay up-to-date on upcoming books, as well as interesting historical events and people, please subscribe to my monthly Mailing List.

The adventures of Centurion Artorius and his legionaries concludes in Part Six of The Artorian Chronicles,

Soldier of Rome: The Last Campaign

