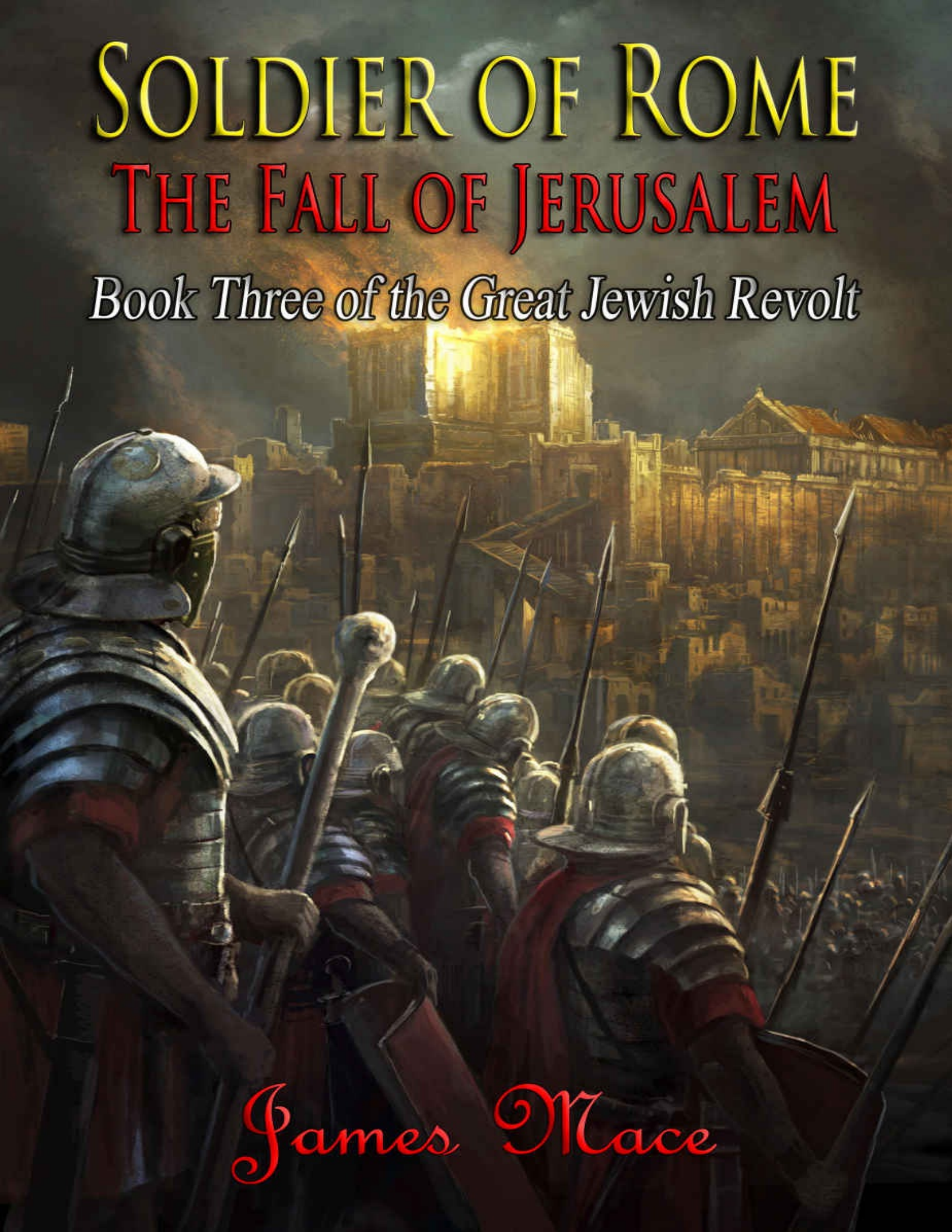
Soldier of Rome

The Fall of Jerusalem

Book Three of the Great Jewish Revolt



James Mace

Soldier of Rome
The Fall of Jerusalem

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Live as brave men; and if fortune is adverse, front its blows with brave hearts.

- Marcus Tullius Cicero

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
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I Stood With Wellington
Courage, Marshal Ney

The Anglo-Zulu War

Brutal Valour: The Tragedy of Isandlwana

* Stand-alone novel or novella

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Preface

The Flavians have arisen. Following the death of Emperor Nero, four men battled to become ‘Caesar’ in what was now called *The Year of the Four Emperors*. Flavius Vespasian, the fearsome general previously in command of the furious onslaught against the rebellion in Judea, emerged victorious. As emperor, he must return to Rome, leaving his son, Titus, to destroy the rebels and capture Jerusalem.

The Judean capital finds itself under siege, not just from the imperial army but from its supposed protectors. Since the overthrow of the post-Roman government, a bitter and extremely violent struggle raged for over a year, as various zealot factions battle for control of the Jewish state. John of Giscala, who murdered the moderate, Hanan ben Hanan, rules the city through brutality and terror. His chief rival, a former Sicarii ally named Simon bar Giora, is a man of even greater ferocity who recognises neither John’s government nor that of Rome. The factions descend into madness, bringing untold misery to the people of Jerusalem.

As Titus advances towards the Jewish Holy City with his massive army of seventy-thousand imperial soldiers, the warring Judean factions must decide whether to stand together against the coming onslaught or die in a bloodbath of mutual hatred.

Cast of Characters

Romans:

Flavius Vespasian – Emperor of Rome, who emerged victorious following the defeat of the pretender, Vitellius
Titus – Son of Vespasian and newly-appointed commander-in-chief of Rome's eastern armies
Lucilius Bassus – Commanding Legate the Tenth Legion, who replaced General Trajan, following Vespasian's rise to power
Marcus Thrasea – Commanding Legate of the Twelfth Legion
Lucius Domitius Quarto – Commanding Legate of the Fifteenth Legion who replaced Titus after his rise to commander-in-chief
Lucius Vetutius Placidus – Commander of the Roman auxiliary corps
Gaius Artorius Armiger – A former optio with the Tenth Legion, now serving as the siege tribune for the imperial army
Titus Valerius Cinna – Centurion Primus Pilus of Legio XII and a survivor of the disaster at Beth Horon, four years prior
Aulus Ralla – Centurion Primus Pilus of Legio XV
Claudius Nicanor – A centurion within the Tenth Legion's Fifth Cohort and close friend of Gaius Artorius
Marcus Liberius – A centurion commanding the Siliana Regiment of Horse
Josephus ben Matthias – A former Jewish rebel leader who changed his allegiance to Rome following his capture at Jotapata

Jews:

Simon bar Giora – Zealot leader, he has established a fiefdom south of the fortress at Masada. He recognises neither the previous moderate government nor the Romans.
John of Giscala – Zealot leader and hated rival of Simon bar Giora. He has aspirations beyond that of merely a Judean general within the resistance.
Jacob bar Sosias – An Idumean general and ally of Simon
Mathias the Elder – Father of Josephus
Levi – A former deputy of Josephus, now one of John's most loyal allies.
Marcus Julius Agrippa II – Client King, commonly called Herod Agrippa

II, he is the son of the original Herod Agrippa and great-grandson of Herod the Great
Julia Berenice – Client Queen and sister of Agrippa



Jerusalem, 1st century A.D.

Part V

Vespasian becomes Emperor, and Titus remains in Judea to finish the rebels

Chapter I: Rise of an Emperor

Alexandria, Egypt
January, 70 A.D.



Tiberius Julius Alexander

The waves crashed against the Alexandrian docks as a large imperial warship lurched towards the harbour. As he watched from his position just above the seaside market the Roman procurator, Tiberius Julius Alexander, feared the vessel might smash against the docks or impale itself on one of the large formations of jagged rocks that lined the harbour. He was joined by several scribes and local magistrates, as well as one of the commanding legates from the Egyptian legions.

"I know those flags," General Thrasea of Legio XII observed with a nod towards the red and gold trimmed standard that looked as if it might be ripped from the rear mast. "That's the standard of the Ravenna fleet."

"Must be carrying something pretty damned important to risk crossing the treacherous seas this time of year," Alexander concluded. He winced as the ship was carried by a wave, smashing sideways into the vast stone pier used by larger vessels.

Dock workers and sailors struggled to secure the warship with a series of long ropes, as the violent sea sprays continued to wash over the pier.

A long plank was lowered with a crash and a soldier wearing the armour of a praetorian guardsman disembarked. His deep crimson cloak threatened to pull him into the surf as the wind caught hold. Only after his feet gained purchase on the stone pier was he able to don his helmet and make his way over to Alexander and his entourage.

"Governor Alexander?" the man asked. When the procurator nodded in reply, he introduced himself. "Arrius Varus, Prefect of his Imperial Majesty's Praetorian Guard."

As the two were peers, there were no salutes exchanged. Instead, Varus extended his hand.

"I thought Alfenius Varus commanded the Guard?" the procurator asked inquisitively.

"My cousin," Varus confirmed. "He was sacked at the end of the war. The emperor needs a new pair of prefects, and Regent Antonius Primus appointed me to one of the positions."

"Ah, so Primus is now regent," Alexander remarked. "That means Vespasian has won."

"Indeed, though Primus' appointment is but temporary. Licinius Mucianus, the Governor of Syria, will assume the duties of regent once he arrives in Rome. I suspect he probably has by now." He grinned and added, "Had the Vitellians triumphed, I suspect they would have sent my cousin with an entire cohort to arrest you." The wind picked up again, causing the crest on Varus' helmet to lie sideways. "Can we get out of this damned weather already?"

It was a short walk from the harbour to the governor's palace, which once belonged to the Ptolemaic Pharaohs. As soon as they stepped inside its massive double-doors, the men removed their sodden cloaks, while servants helped Varus out of his armour. Wine was brought for the men and they gathered in the same room Vespasian had once used to plan his campaign against the now-overthrown pretender, Aulus Vitellius.

"May I also introduce General Thrasea of the Twelfth Legion," Alexander said, by way of introduction.

"Honoured to meet you, sir," Varus said respectfully.

"Likewise," the legate replied. "I have to say, I am surprised they sent the Praetorian Prefect to carry the despatch regarding the war's end."

"I volunteered. Although, after the nightmare of the past two weeks at sea, I've had plenty of time to second-guess myself." He quaffed his entire

cup of wine in a single quaff and demanded more before continuing. “My ‘official’ reason for personally coming was to assume my duties by the emperor’s side. Though to be honest, I simply wanted to get away from Rome. Because I commanded Primus’ cavalry corps during the war, Mucianus was none too pleased with my appointment as Praetorian Prefect. Doubtless he wanted to award the post to one of his own lackeys.”

Alexander snorted and shook his head. Even the horrors of civil war did little to quell the incessant rivalries that existed in imperial politics. Though they fought on the same side, there was little love and only begrudging respect between the two generals who had commanded Vespasian’s armies. That Antonius Primus had launched the invasion of Italia without waiting for support from Mucianus’ division amounted to little more than a political ploy to rob his rival of glory. And like all such dangerous games, the price was paid with the lives of Roman soldiers. As Varus went on to explain, Primus’ dangerous gamble worked, and they had inflicted a string of crushing defeats on the Vitellians.

He discussed in detail all that transpired since the Flavian army’s decisive, albeit extremely costly, victory at Bedriacum in northern Italia. He spoke of the march towards Rome, while his cousin and the other prefect, Junius Priscus, abandoned their posts at the central Italian stronghold of Narnia. With much regret he described how Vitellius attempted to abdicate, only to be overruled by the fanatics within his own army. The fighting on the streets of Rome had been fierce, coupled with the added chaos of the Saturnalia celebrations. It was perplexing that these took place in spite of the siege, for many revellers were slain in the horrific chaos. The three men found a trace of morbid humour in this, though their demeanour changed with Varus’ next revelation.

“And with much regret, I am obliged to inform the emperor that his beloved brother, the noble Sabinus, was murdered the day before we took the city.”

Alexander gave a sober nod.

Thrasea lowered his head in sorrow. “I knew Sabinus well. I had the honour of serving as his laticlavian tribune with the Ninth Legion during the invasion of Britannia. He was the embodiment of what it means to be a noble Roman. His loss is a tragic blow to the emperor and to Rome.”

“To Rome, perhaps,” Alexander conjectured.

The legate gave him a quizzical look but did not press the matter further.

While the procurator had little doubt that Vespasian loved his brother, from a pragmatic standpoint Sabinus' death removed what could have been an unintended obstacle to Vespasian's hold upon the imperial throne.

The procurator addressed Varus. "You will remain here as my guest. With the campaign season in Judea at an end for the winter, I anticipate the emperor's arrival within the coming weeks."

"I am indebted to you. After two weeks at sea, I could certainly use a bath, a shave, and a fresh set of dry clothes."



During his war against Vitellius, Vespasian detached six of the ten cohorts from each of his three legions in Judea for the invasion of Italia. Under the command of the Syrian governor-general, Licinius Mucianus, the division was spearheaded by the entire Legio VI, Ferrata. Having marched more than 2,000 miles from Lebanon to Ravenna, over the course of three months, it was with no small measure of bitterness when Mucianus learned his men had not been needed at all. A division consisting of the Danube legions and auxiliary regiments under the legate of the Seventh Gemina Legion, Marcus Antonius Primus, had invaded Italia without waiting for reinforcements. Against overwhelming odds, and after a series of extremely bloody battles, they succeeded in taking Rome and executing Vitellius. Mucianus had halted his army at the northern Italian port city of Ravenna, while he himself rode with all haste to Rome to assume his position as Regent of the Empire. To add an extra measure of legal significance to his position, the senate unanimously voted to name Mucianus as consul the following year, with a prominent senator named Caesius Rufus as his colleague.

"The emperor needs his legionaries back in Judea," the imperial regent said, during his first meeting with the current consuls and leading members of the senate.

"We've received no confirmation from my father, the emperor," the imperial prince, Domitian, remarked.

"Nor will we," Mucianus countered. "Vespasian informed me that he will need to tour the eastern provinces before returning to Rome. Which is why he left me as regent."

Domitian scowled. Though just eighteen years of age, he was son of the

emperor, and felt he should have been named regent in his father's stead. He made ready to state this rather forcefully when he caught the gaze of his friend and mentor, Senator Marcus Cocceius Nerva. Nerva, sensing the young man's intentions, quickly shook his head, silencing him and preventing any potential embarrassments.

"The soldiers from my division are still in Ravenna," Mucianus continued. "And as disappointed as they are to have not taken part in the fighting or spoils, they do us no good continuing to sit on their backsides in northern Italia. We still have a war to finish in Judea, and I have no doubt that the emperor will want to claim Jerusalem as a prize for Rome."

"It's over two thousand miles from Ravenna to Judea," Consul Rufus surmised. "It will take them months to return."

"Then they'd best make a start," the regent emphasised. He produced a scroll. As a courtesy, he handed it to Domitian. "We received this despatch from Titus, the Prince Imperial, requesting the soldiers currently posted in Rome return to Judea via ship."

"The seas are extremely rough this time of year," Nerva remarked. "I know Primus dispatched Arrius Varus to Alexandria with the news of the victory to Emperor Vespasian. We can only hope it did not founder. I worry about sending vessels loaded with legionaries across such treacherous waters."

Mucianus pondered this for a few moments. "If we place them aboard triremes with shallow drafts they can follow the African coast in relative safety. Should the seas take a turn for the worst, they can run their vessels aground and the men can walk the rest of the way to Judea."

Despite the nonchalance of his assertion, the imperial regent knew such a plan was still fraught with risk. It would require much coordination between the Ostia and Ravenna fleets to procure enough triremes to transport several thousand imperial soldiers, their weapons, armour, and other equipment. At minimum, Mucianus reckoned it would take a month or more for these detachments to reach Judea, and as much as three or four for the rest of the army to make the drudging return to the east.

"In addition to the cohorts, this message specifically asks for a centurion named Nicanor," the prince spoke up, quickly reading through the message. "Who in Hades is Centurion Nicanor? And why is he so damned important to my brother?"



Three days after Arrius Varus arrived in Alexandria an entourage of warships descended upon the Egyptian port city. Titus commissioned a tailor in Ptolemais to fashion a purple flag emblazed with a gold laurel crown, to serve as the standard for the emperor's flagship. This same tailor had fashioned the purple and gold toga Rome's new emperor wore, as he descended the long gangplank onto the pier. Alexander looked on as Vespasian and his entourage disembark. He was grateful the seas were calm this day.

"Hail, Caesar!" the procurator said, saluting the emperor. He then turned to Varus. "May I present Arrius Varus, formerly commander of the imperial horse under Antonius Primus and now Prefect of your Praetorian Guard."

"Honoured, sire," Varus said, with a short bow.

"You come from Rome," Vespasian observed, letting out a sigh of relief. "I take it our armies have emerged triumphant?"

"Indeed they have, Caesar," the prefect replied. "The pretender, Aulus Vitellius, is dead. Marcus Antonius Primus assumed the regency until he is relieved by your appointee, Licinius Mucianus. I regret to say that, though your armies emerged triumphant, the cost in lives was extremely high." He then paused for a moment, uneasy about his next proclamation. "With deepest regret, sire, I must inform you that among the dead is your own brother, the noble Flavius Sabinus." Varus gritted his teeth, uncertain how the emperor would react to this news.

Whether still unsteady from his journey by sea or simply overwhelmed at knowing he was now undisputed ruler of the Roman world, Vespasian showed no emotion.

Noting the awkward pause, Titus spoke up. "We thank you, prefect, for both your courage and loyalty to the empire." He extended his hand, taking the scrolls containing the formal felicitations from the senate, as well as Antonius Primus' detailed reports of the campaign and the immediate aftermath following Vitellius' overthrow. Alexander then escorted the emperor and prince imperial to their quarters within the palace. Strangely enough, not a word was said about the death of Vespasian's brother. Instead, he asked a series of questions regarding the stability of Egypt and the nearby provinces to the west. Mucianus' reports during his long journey across Asia Minor and the Balkan provinces made the emperor realise there would be no

immediate return to Rome. After a year of unrest and two civil wars, the citizens of the empire were fearful and despondent. They needed reassurance that their latest emperor was here to stay.

Once shown to their apartments, Vespasian dismissed Alexander and his entourage, stating he was exhausted from his journey, and they would talk more over dinner.

"Who would have thought it?" he asked his son, as servants helped him out of his newly-won imperial robes of state. He then donned a simple, more comfortable tunic.

Titus sat at a nearby table enjoying a cup of wine.

His father added, "Three years after you came to retrieve me out of exile, I now return to Rome as emperor."

"From Galba, to Otho, to Vitellius, and now Vespasian," Titus replied, shaking his head. "All in the course of a single year. The gods must have a sense of humour; that they would send us from disgrace and obscurity to the imperial throne. At least now there are no more pretenders. Galba was despised, and no one mourned his slaying. Otho's reign lasted just ninety days; not long enough for the far corners of the empire to hear of his ascension, let alone establish a reputation for good or ill."

"Declaring our allegiance and legitimising his claim to the throne after Galba's overthrow served us well," said his father. "I have never been all that astute when it comes to that nasty business of imperial politics, yet for once I made the right decision. We were able to declare Vitellius an unlawful usurper while our armies avenged poor Otho."

"Something none of your three predecessors had was a strong military reputation," Titus noted. "Whatever ill feelings Nero may have harboured towards you, the public always remembered 'Vespasian the Conqueror'."

"The people are fickle, and they love a winner," the emperor said with a smile.

Twenty-seven years had passed since his great conquests in Britannia, and many were still enamoured with him. Emperor Claudius had seen both he and his now-late brother, Sabinus, awarded Triumphal Regalia and a formal *Ovation* in recognition for their harrowing feats and decisive victories. And though his later governorship of North Africa had been an unmitigated disaster, it was his military exploits that were now remembered.

Contrastingly, Nero's successor, Galba, was hated during his tenure as a legate. He'd won no victories of note during his time in Germania and was

still loathed by the army when he usurped Nero several decades later. The subsequent emperors, Otho and Vitellius, possessed no military experience at all.

Vespasian waved his servants off and held the laurel crown in his hands. “This damn thing makes my head itch. I swear, I will only wear it during formal ceremonies.”

“A pity Uncle Sabinus won’t be there to place it on your head, when you return to Rome,” Titus said.

According to Primus’ detailed despatch, the emperor’s brother had led his urban cohorts in defence of the temple complex atop Capitoline Hill from the Vitellians before they were overwhelmed by superior numbers. He had been captured and murdered just prior to the Flavian army’s final assault on the capital, while the Temple of Jupiter burned.

Titus then noted a look of consternation on his father’s face and questioned him about this.

“Primus sent a private letter along with his formal despatch,” Vespasian explained. “He said that while Sabinus’ death was a tragedy, in the end it may have been necessary to ensure stability within both the family and the empire.”

Titus pondered this for a moment. “To be honest, I had often wondered how he would handle becoming subservient to his younger brother. Thrasea whispered to me earlier that Alexander hinted at something similar when they received the news from Varus.”

“Regrettably, Sabinus and I grew apart after the Britannia campaigns,” Vespasian said candidly, allowing himself a few moments to reminisce. “Those three years we spent together, conquering what is now the northernmost reaches of the empire, were our proudest days. I won’t lie to you, son, they were the best years of my life. Your mother was still with us, you were just starting to walk and get into mischief, and the Flavians were a family dedicated to serving the empire, devoid of scandal or the ugliness of politics.” He paused as his mind wandered into the distant past. “Damn it all, but I was so naïve then!”

A servant then placed a crown of leaves on the emperor’s head while another held up a mirror of polished bronze.

He turned down one corner of his mouth. “Bloody thing looks absurd,” he muttered, as he tossed the crown onto a table and dismissed his servants. His thoughts were still on his late brother as he sat and poured himself a cup of

wine.

“Though we were not close, your Uncle Sabinus was devoted to the family. You recall that he helped us during some of our more difficult times. When I took up mule trading in order to save us from financial ruin, he came forward with assistance, stating it was unbecoming of a Flavian to deal in such a degrading trade. He never said it, but I know he often viewed me as an embarrassment and liability, especially after that rather awkward debacle in North Africa. I tried to be benevolent and not overly tax the people in order to fill my own coffers, and they thanked me by throwing stones and mule shit at me. Between that, calling Empress Agrippina an insufferable twat, and later being exiled by Emperor Nero, I am surprised he did not disown me altogether.”

“It’s not just Uncle Sabinus who was left in an awkward position after some of your little mishaps,” Titus added with a nervous laugh at the uncomfortable memories. “Of course my choice of a wife did not help matters, especially after her family was implicated in the Pisonean conspiracy against Nero. Thankfully, after I divorced her, he never mentioned it again. As for Uncle Sabinus, since the eldest brother is always head of the family, I cannot help but wonder if there was some measure of jealousy when the people declared you emperor and not him?”

“Think how you would feel if I named Domitian my heir instead of you,” Vespasian countered. He gave a short, mirthless laugh and shook his head. “I often wonder what I shall do with your brother.”

“You know,” Titus said, leaning over the table and changing the subject, “the civil wars may be at an end, but we can scarcely call the empire at peace.”

“Romans are their own worst enemies,” his father concurred. “Because we were so busy fighting each other, the ungrateful provincials in Batavia thought they could simply declare independence and take half of Germania with them.”

“Well, Cerealis will sort them out,” Titus said, referring to his brother-in-law who, until a year ago, commanded the Fifth Legion during the ongoing Jewish Revolt. During the war between Vespasian and Vitellius, he led a wing of Flavian cavalry in the final attack on the gates of Rome. After which, he was dispatched to Batavia with fresh troops to deal with the uprising. Yet it was not the troubles in the west that bother the two men. “And, we still need to finish these damned zealots in Judea.”

“That is where you come in, my boy,” the emperor said. “Primus has cowed the senate, and I have the utmost faith in Mucianus’ abilities as regent; however, if the empire was stable, we would not need a regent in the first place. According to Primus, the senate tried to name him emperor before offering him the consulship instead.”

“He declined both,” Titus remarked. “Though I think in the case of the consulship, Mucianus may have denied it to him. No love lost between those two.”

“Yes, well, I leave soon for my tour of the eastern capitals, then off to spend the rest of my life trying to keep the more nauseating flatterers in the senate from shoving their noses up my backside.”

Titus laughed and pondered for a moment. “Our detachments sent to Rome should be returning within a month or so, depending on the seas and if the Ravenna fleet has enough ships. If they have to walk, it will be summer by the time they return. Same can be said of the cohorts from Mucianus’ division, who have little choice but to make the long trek by land.”

“I’ve ordered the Twelfth Legion back to active service,” Vespasian said reassuringly. “They’ve had over three years to reconstitute their strength following the debacle at Beth Horon. General Thrasea swears they are ready and eager for a fight. Now it is time for them to have their revenge. But we need a final prize for Rome before I can order the doors to the Temple of Janus closed and declare peace within the empire. I have promised the people stability. Any trace of failure now will undo all we have fought for.”

“Jerusalem,” Titus said, taking a long drink of wine. “You want me to take Jerusalem.” The thought of assailing what was arguably the most formidable fortress-city in the known world was unnerving.

“Yes, but you must try to avoid a direct assault.”

“A siege will take months, perhaps years,” Titus protested. “A quick victory will not be possible without a fight.”

“And what if you fail?” Vespasian retorted. “You remember how hard they fought at Jotapata and Gamala. Jotapata took us forty-seven days and only had one wall to breach. Three walls protect Jerusalem, each triple the height of those at Jotapata. The various fanatics may be at war with each other now, but once they see our siege towers advancing, even the most nihilistic among them will put their differences aside.”

“I agree, the only thing preventing them from continuing the war in earnest is their own petty squabbles,” Titus observed. “But even if I am to try

diplomacy first, I will need every fighting man we can muster, and right now nearly half our legionaries are somewhere between Moesia and Rome."

"Do what you have to," the emperor said, "but know that I need Jerusalem." It was Vespasian's turn to take a long drink of wine. He then turned to one of his aids. "Have Josephus brought before me."

"Yes, Caesar."

Chapter II: Return to the East

Ravenna, Northern Italia
January, 70 A.D.



Roman Centurion

For Centurion Claudius Nicanor, an end to the civil war between Vitellius and Vespasian was a much-needed reprieve. For two years, he and his fellow soldiers from the Tenth Legion fought a series of brutal battles and sieges during the re-conquest of Galilee. His cohort was then detached to the vast division under the Governor of Syria, Licinius Mucianus, as they began the arduous three-month trek from Syria and Judea to Rome. Subsequently, the commanding general of the Balkan legions, Antonius Primus, had begged Vespasian for reinforcements to supplement his own division. Enough ships were scratched together to transport three cohorts from the Judean legions to Dacia. Rather than waiting for Mucianus, Primus launched an invasion of Italia, utterly crushing the forces of Vitellius in one of the most improbable victories in recent memory near Cremona. The city itself was sacked and completely destroyed, in a rather shameful affair when Primus lost control over his army. Anxious to finish the war and put this embarrassing episode behind him, he gathered his forces and within weeks engaged the Vitellian remnants at the gates of Rome herself. The fighting, which took place during

the heart of the Saturnalia celebrations, had been horrific. There were those who now referred to Rome's most celebrated holiday as the *'Saturnalia Bloodbath'*.

A month had now passed since the end of the fighting and the execution of Vitellius. Romans, resilient people that they were, returned to a sense of normalcy within the Eternal City. Mucianus arrived soon after and assumed control as Regent of the Empire, immediately withdrawing all imperial soldiers from the city itself. A vast network of camps was erected north of Rome along the Via Cassia and Via Flaminia. And while the legionaries and auxilia troopers were given leave to enjoy all that the city had to offer, strict curfews were enforced and breaches in discipline punished harshly. All soldiers were expected to maintain their drill and fitness, unlike the Vitellians, who'd been allowed to indulge for several months.

"At least Mucianus had the sense not to allow us to grow soft and complacent," Nicanor remarked to his cohort commander, Centurion Pilus Prior Galeo.

"Yet we still have far more disciplinary issues to deal with than we do on the frontiers," Galeo grumbled. "I saw the reports from your own century; five floggings, seven reductions in pay, and twelve given extra duty."

"To be fair, several of those were repeat offenders," Nicanor replied. "I've also revoked leave for anyone who commits an offense serious enough to warrant either flogging or reduced pay."

"The rest of the cohort has fared little better," the pilus prior noted. "And I confess, my own First Century has been the worst. I have a decanus who I had to flog, take a month's pay, *and* reduce in rank back to legionary."

"I heard about that," Nicanor said. "Getting drunk, refusing to pay for services rendered at a brothel, and then beating the madam within a breath of the afterlife is scarcely what one could call good behaviour. Were he a private citizen he'd likely be scourged or even put to death."

"The sad thing is, he had just been awarded the *Silver Torque for Valour* at Cremona." Galeo sighed in frustration. "We often hear that soldiers eventually become unfit to return to civilisation. While I usually scoff at this notion, it is examples like this that reinforce such views. Regardless, the faster we are away from Rome, the better."

"Any idea when we will be departing?"

"Sooner than the rest of the army." The pilus prior produced a scroll bearing the broken seal of Regent Mucianus. "Most of the eastern legions and

auxilia regiments will have to walk all the way back to their respective garrisons. We, on the other hand, are being given the privilege of sailing back to Judea."

"In the middle of winter?" Nicanor scowled. "That's just fucking lovely."

"Well, it's your fault we're being hurried back to the east and risk being smashed to pieces during a winter storm."

"What do you mean?" Nicanor frowned.

"General Titus, the Prince Imperial, has asked for you personally," Galeo explained. "I suspect it has something to do with your mate, Josephus."

"Well, if it's me they want, I would rather take my horse and ride the long road back to Judea."

"Even if you were given access to the mounts of the imperial couriers, it would take you six to eight weeks to ride all the way back to Caesarea," Galeo observed. "Whereas by sea, we can make the journey in a third of that time. Besides, we don't have a choice in the matter. And if it makes you feel any better, you and I will get to ride aboard Admiral Flavianus' former flagship, the *Minerva Sulis*."



In the nearby city of Ariminum, newly-appointed tribune Gaius Artorius Armiger was ending an extended period of convalescent leave. Formerly Centurion Nicanor's optio, he had been badly wounded when the glancing stone shot from a ballista nearly took his right arm off at Bedriacum. Subsequently, he remained behind at a field hospital while the rest of the Flavian army marched on Rome. While concerned his injuries might make him unable to continue to serve in the legions, there were some wounds that ran much deeper.

As he sat at a small desk, an oil lamp flickering next to a writing quill and parchment, he flexed his right hand. Even after several months, he did not have full usage and feared me might never regain his previous strength. Due to this injury, he had delayed in writing to his father; for he wanted his words to be in his own hand and not a scribe's. Following the taking of Rome, Antonius Primus secured Gaius' elevation into the lesser-nobility, along with an appointment as tribune in command of siege works and artillery for the eastern army. While ever grateful to the former regent, it was a bitter tragedy that had befallen the Artorian family which allowed this to happen.

Gaius closed his eyes briefly, took a deep breath, and began to write:

My dearest father,

It is with much regret that I have not written to you sooner, for my injuries have precluded me from doing so. I must now tell you what I know regarding the death of my dear brother, Lucius. I curse the fates that we served on opposing sides in the civil war between Vespasian and Vitellius. I can only offer that hollow comfort to be found in knowing that he fought with valour and died as a soldier of Rome. Though it was not my hand that slew him, it was with both shame and guilt that I delivered the news to his beloved Laura.

The only solace I found is that I was with him during his final moments, before the gods took him to Elysium. He spoke of love for the family, and he asked for yours and mother's forgiveness. Thankfully, we were able to forgive each other for having drawn blades against one another. I mourn for the brothers, fathers, and sons who died on opposing sides in this hateful conflict who were unable to reconcile with their kinsmen. After all I have witness, I confess I have lingering doubts as to the mercy of the gods. Yet, if any is to be found, I hope the slain are able to make amends in the afterlife.

Emperor Vespasian's regent, Marcus Antonius Primus, has decreed that I be allowed to assume Lucius' honours and responsibilities as a member of the equites. While I will forever mourn the loss of my brother, it is my duty to carry on this legacy for the good of the family. I will be returning to Judea soon, with the appointment of tribune in command of the army's siege train. I will answer directly to General Titus, the Prince Imperial.

The injury to my right arm has mostly healed, and while I have regained use of it, there is a sporadic numbing that will likely endure for the rest of my days. Whatever physical pains I have to bear, know that it will not preclude me from performing my duty, for I am still a soldier of Rome.

If I may conclude this letter with happier news, Lady Aula Vale has accepted my proposal to become my wife. The lines of Artorius and

Cursor will at last be made one. The joy from which I hope will help all of us heal during our times of sorrow. I remain always your loving son,

Gaius Artorius Armiger

"A great tragedy," a woman's voice said behind him.

He shuddered as Aula placed her hands consolingly on his shoulders. "Even more so, because your brother fought for the wrong side."

"Were any of us on the right side?" Gaius asked, assailed by doubts, even after the triumph of Vespasian's armies.

"The right side belongs to those who won," Aula stated rather candidly. "And your brother—the gods rest him—fought on the side that lost."

The words were harsh, but Gaius knew them to be true. "This is certainly not the first time one has risen above their station due to immense personal tragedy, yet one simply does not rise up from the plebeian ranks of the legions into the equites. Perhaps the gods have some sort of plan for me after all."

Aula, who had doubts as to even the very existence of the gods, or any sort of 'divine plan', kept these thoughts to herself.

"You told me that when he was dying, he spoke of his regrets at having drawn his sword against his own brother," she said instead. "But at least you made amends, and he died at peace. I know he would want you to take his place with pride, and assume his place at the head of the next generation in the Artorian dynasty."

She continued to gently caress his back, as Gaius stood and placed his arms around her waist. Aula Cursia Vale was the daughter of a long-time friend of Gaius' father and grandfather, Aulus Cursor. At twenty-seven, she was just a year younger than Gaius, and the two had been raised together in the Romanised town of Aqua Sulis in south-western Britannia. Like both of her parents, Aula was tall and could look Gaius in the eye. Life on the farthest fringes of the empire had made for a unique childhood for both, and while many Roman girls learned more 'feminine' arts, Aula Vale had been taught by her father to read, ride a horse, and fight with a sword.

Long before the war between Vitellius and Vespasian, Aula was appointed as an imperial courier under the tutelage of Vespasian's brother, Flavius Sabinus. It was an unusual position for her, both as a woman and as a member of the nobility. Yet, it was not entirely unprecedented, and Sabinus

had noted several instances where women had served a vital role as couriers during Rome's long history. When Gaius first saw her in Syria, ten years after his departure from Britannia to join the legions, she was wearing a crimson tunic with her father's old cavalry spatha strapped to her hip. Now she wore a more elegant woman's stola, with her wavy brunette hair draping over her shoulders. She defined Roman elegance, and one would never guess that it was she who slew Vitellius' brother at the end of the war.

"We are both sworn to duty," Gaius surmised as he embraced Aula and kissed her gently.

"Sadly, mine is in Rome at the imperial court, while yours is in Judea," Aula replied. "Do one thing for me; do not make me wear mourning garb before my wedding day."

There was a knock on the door and the city's governor, Titus Porcius, entered. Previously, he had served as the deputy administrator to the city under Gaius' elder brother. With Lucius' death, he now governed Ariminum in his own right, and graciously allowed Gaius to remain in the palace while he convalesced from his injuries.

"Tribune," he said, and with a nod to Aula, "My lady."

"Governor," Gaius acknowledged. "I cannot thank you enough for your kindness and hospitality these past few months."

"Please, the honour is mine. I just came to let you know that the armourer and his assistants have arrived to get you fitted into your new military garb."

"Ah, yes, please show them in."

The armourer was a man from Gaius' former legion, the Tenth Fretensis. With him were two assistants and a pair of slaves who carried in the heavy garb.

"It took a month to craft, but here we are, sir. Sized to your exact measurements. Now to see how it fits."

"Let us hope I haven't gotten fat while convalescing," Gaius noted with a short laugh.

The armour consisted of a polished iron muscled cuirass, very similar to that worn by the Greek hoplites in past eras. The leather subarmalis, worn beneath the armour, was dyed white with red border around the trappings that came off the shoulders and from the skirt. The two assistants helped the tribune into the cuirass. Aula watched with a bemused grin on her face. Gaius was surprised at how well it fit. Much of the weight was supported by his hips rather than hanging off his shoulders. It felt a few pounds lighter than the

lorica segmentata he'd worn over the past decade.

"How's that?" the armourer asked as he tugged on the straps underneath the armpits.

"Good," Gaius said, with an appreciative nod. "A bit ostentatious, perhaps, but it fits well."

"Wait until you see the helmet."

When he saw his new helmet, the tribune thought it looked fancier than even those worn by senatorial legates. The front rose up into a rounded peak giving the appearance of a visor. It was decorated with scrollwork on the sides and an embossed lion's head in the centre. This detail was insisted upon by Aula, as her father had had an almost identical design on his helmet. The black feathered crest was very thick, and ran front-to-back along the crown.

"General Titus will think I'm trying to show him up," Gaius chuckled, as he donned the helm. Once again, the fit was far better than anything he had been previously issued.

"Nonsense. The prince imperial simply prefers more modest garb. I know, because I designed his armour myself. Yours took a month, whereas I pounded out his in a week."

Gaius looked to Aula and gave a hopeful grin.

She was practically beaming as she folded her arms across her chest. "A true hero of Rome."

"Now I'm afraid to scratch it!"

Aula laughed at this. "Father always kept his armour immaculate, yet you could clearly see the scouring from the strikes of countless adversaries. He used to say that they were reminders of his mortality, and that a man whose armour was devoid of blemish had never been in a real battle."

"And now, sir, there is the matter of payment," the armourer spoke up. "We'll be taking back your old segmentata and issued helmet, so that's been factored in." An assistant handed him a scroll, which he glanced over. "Let's see, taking into account materials and labour costs, minus the return of your old issue, we're looking at…eight hundred denarii."

Gaius gasped slightly, and Aula's eyes grew wide. It should have come as no surprise, though, as the craftsmanship was superior, as was the fit. While legionaries, principle officers, and centurions had a stipend taken out of their pay to supplement the costs of their armour and weapons, they were still issued and mostly paid for by the Roman state. Tribunes and legates, on the other hand, were expected to purchase their own armament.

“Eight hundred denarii would pay the wages of four legionaries for the better part of a year.” Gaius fetched his coin pouch from a nearby table.

“Yes, well, four legionaries could never have crafted such a fine piece of military garb.”

Having anticipated the exorbitant costs of his new armour and kit, Gaius had exchanged several hundred and fifty silver denarii for thirty-two gold aurei coins. He handed the pouch to the armourer. “Here’s thirty-two aurei.”

“This still shorts me fifty denarii,” the armourer protested. He then turned one of the coins over between his fingers. It was newly minted, bearing the image of Emperor Vespasian on one side, on the other the goddess Fortuna. “These are very nice; I don’t get to see gold coins very often. I see there are a few with the images of Otho and Vitellius. Those might be worth a small fortune in a few years. Tell you what, I’ll take the thirty-two aurei and leave it at that.”

With his armour and kit ready, Tribune Gaius Artorius looked ahead to his imminent return to Judea. He knew many of the Flavian soldiers from the eastern legions were set to sail from Ravenna, just a day’s journey by horse from Ariminum. He spent one last night with his beloved Aula before steeling himself to return to the war in the east.



Gold aureus of Vespasian

Chapter III: The Pardon of Josephus

Alexandria, Egypt
February, 70 A.D.



Josephus ben Mathias

Soldiers lined the great hall of the governor's palace in Alexandria. Once belonging to Cleopatra and the pharaohs, it had lost none of its magnificent splendour since the Roman conquest. Legates from the Egyptian legions were present, as were the local prefects and magistrates. The emissaries from the Greek provinces and those of the allied Judean king, Agrippa II, were also on hand for the ceremony. Arrius Varus commanded the detail of soldiers within the audience chamber. Though these were legionaries, rather than praetorian guardsmen, many hoped to win elevation into the emperor's bodyguard.

Vespasian sat on an ornate throne, also previously belonging to the defeated pharaohs, atop a tall dais. And though he had complained about how it made his head itch, he chose to wear the laurel crown this day. Titus, the prince imperial, stood at his right with Tiberius Alexander on his left.

This was Vespasian's first formal ceremony since being officially recognised by the senate as lawful ruler of the Roman Empire. In an unprecedented move, the senate acquiesced to his demand that Vitellius be named an unlawful usurper and that the official beginning of his own reign be

backdated to 1 July of the previous year; the very day Tiberius Alexander and the eastern legions proclaimed Vespasian ‘Caesar’. For the senate, it was a small price to pay for peace in Rome.

When all was in place, the emperor nodded to the porter, who beat his staff on the paving stones three times. *“Bring forth Josephus, son of Mathias!”* the man’s voice boomed.

A series of trumpet blasts echoed in the spacious hall, and Josephus was escorted in by four legionaries along with Vespasian’s personal bodyguard, Octavianus. Ever since agreeing to collaborate with the Romans, Josephus had been unchained and allowed to essentially come and go as he pleased; however, he had never been formally set free. On this day he was clean shaven and freshly bathed. He wore a red tunic, much like those worn by legionaries. There were numerous hushed conversations being muttered by the dozens of witnesses, most of whom had never even laid eyes on the man who almost defeated their emperor in battle and later foretold of his eventual rise to power. What stood out the most was just how average this Jew was in size and appearance. It seemed surreal that such a man, a scholar no less, had nearly bested the ‘Siege Master’. All was immediately silent as a porter banged his staff on the floor once more. Vespasian rose to his feet. He and Josephus appeared to be smiling at each other, as if sharing a private joke.

“It is a shameful thing,” the emperor began, his demeanour now serious, “that this man, who once foretold of my eventual rise to become Caesar and has proven himself to be the messenger of the divines, should remain our prisoner.”

Titus took the cue from his father and stepped forward. “If it pleases Caesar, the bonds that held our former adversary, who has since become a friend of Rome, should not simply be loosed. But rather, they should be smashed; broken to pieces to symbolise that he should have never been bound.”

Vespasian nodded his consent, and Titus clapped his hands. A pair of servants came forward; one carrying a set of shackles and chains, the other a large wooden block. The chains were set upon the block, while the first man then hefted a large axe. Sparks flew and the loud crash of rusted links breaking apart echoed throughout the vast chamber. Once they were sufficiently smashed, the men held aloft the shattered shackles and a handful of links before carrying them from the hall.

“Let it be known,” Vespasian announced, “that Josephus ben Mathias is

not simply a man being granted his freedom. He is one who should never have been placed in chains. Furthermore, he is now friend of Caesar and of Rome."

This last statement was telling; for it granted Josephus the patronage as well as the protection of the emperor. Anyone who attempted to mistreat him would face the wrath of Vespasian. Josephus himself said nothing. He felt any words would sound like either false flattery or undignified grovelling. He therefore simply bowed and took his leave.



Titus found Josephus in his quarters later that afternoon. The former governor-general of Galilee was lying on his bed, reading a tattered scroll.

"Not intruding, I hope," Titus said.

Josephus stood. "Not at all."

"So your prophecy has come to pass," the prince imperial remarked with a bemused smile. "Either you were extremely lucky or perhaps your god really does speak to you."

"Did," Josephus corrected. "He *did* speak to me, though He does not anymore."

"A pity, that. It would be best for all if he would talk some sense into your people. But that's not his way, is it?"

"The ways of God are unknowable to man," Josephus reasoned. "I spent years studying our holy books in the temple, devoting my life to His service. And yet, I have utterly failed to understand the will of the divine. I was certain God intended to free our people. And perhaps He did. The Roman governors were all corrupt and exceptionally cruel. Our victory at Beth Horon freed our people; yet they proved to be blasphemous and ungrateful. And because the fanatics have overthrown and butchered those who God chose to lead us, Rome is being used as His instrument to punish my people."

It was a harsh assessment; one the Jewish scholar did not make lightly. Hanan ben Hanan, who had led the Jewish Free State, was both mentor and a dear friend to him. The zealots who overthrew him were enemies of Josephus, who attempted to have him killed on more than one occasion. That so many sects insisted on slaughtering each other, rather than uniting against Rome, was an affront to God in his mind. Over the past two years, since his capture following the defeat at Jotapata, Josephus deduced it was God

Himself who decreed the Jews be punished and Vespasian rule the known world.

"And what will you do now that Josephus is a free man and friend of the emperor?" Titus asked.

"I have never understood how you Romans can so easily embrace those who were once your mortal enemies," Josephus remarked, evading the question for the moment.

"Well," Titus said, with a grin, "perhaps the ways of Rome are unknowable to men."

"Clearly." Josephus took a deep breath while contemplating his choice of words. "I have reckoned for some time that this day would come; the end of a long journey that began when I was pulled from the well at Jotapata. Each day I was allowed to live filled me with questions. Many have never been answered. Still, I fulfilled my purpose once I relayed God's message to your father. I accepted my fate, thinking perhaps you would nail me to a cross when Rome had no more use for me. Now, I don't know what my purpose is."

"The journey only ends if you want it to," the general reasoned.

"Perhaps. But what will Titus do? Now he is commander-in-chief of all Roman forces in the east, as well as heir-apparent to the imperial throne?"

"My duty," Titus answered firmly. "This coming spring, once my army is assembled, we will at last turn our attention towards conquering Jerusalem."

Josephus swallowed hard at the mention of the Holy City. He knew it would come sooner or later, and the Romans would never allow Jerusalem to remain in the hands of zealots. He was filled with conflicting feelings. While he despised John of Giscala and his followers, wishing them cast into oblivion, he feared what would happen to the city and its people in the event of a Roman siege.

"You'll never do it," he said, shaking his head. "Our Holy City…they'll fight to the death."

"So be it," Titus remarked, with a nonchalant shrug. He then nodded towards the scroll on Josephus' bed. "May I ask what you were reading?"

"The last letter I ever received from Hanan." Josephus shook his head mournfully. It was still difficult for him to think of the horrific fate that had befallen his dear friend and mentor. "All he ever wanted was what was right for our people; to protect them like his own children."

"He was a wise man," Titus remarked. "And incredibly brave."

“He never intended for me to best you,” Josephus confessed. “Our victory at Beth Horon was as much about the terrible leadership of General Gallus, as it was about the bravery of our warriors. In his heart, Hanan knew that I could never defeat Vespasian.”

“Not that you didn’t try,” Titus remarked with an appreciative smile. “You made a far more stalwart defence against Rome than any other faction we’ve been up against.”

“He wanted some concessions,” Josephus continued, ignoring Titus’ remark, flattering though it was.

“I am certain we could have come to some terms.”

“No more corrupt governors,” Josephus emphasised. “Surely you know of the atrocities that vile bastard, Gessius Florus, committed against our people. And he was but the latest in a string of incompetent villains sent by Rome to lord over the Jews.”

“Hmm,” Titus replied, noncommitting. He knew about the scourge of violence, oftentimes unjustified, coupled with the various desecrations committed by the former procurator. He gave a short nod of acknowledgment.

“The reassurance of sanctity of the temple and our holy places,” Josephus added. “And perhaps a measure of independence while remaining a client state under Rome.”

“Reasonable concessions,” Titus acknowledged. “After all, we allow King Agrippa a measure of independence.”

“Those were Hanan’s feelings as well,” Josephus stated. “Had he lived to see your father become emperor, I know an agreement could have been reached, putting an end to this pointless war. With his death, the people are left leaderless and divided. Our brave young warriors are drawn to either that odious creature, John of Giscala, or any number of the various violent sects. And now there is another monster vying for power, Simon bar Giora, who is in many ways even worse than John. I fear there is no future for my people, for there is no one to lead them.”

“No one?” Titus asked, rising to his feet. He patted Josephus reassuringly on his shoulder and left him to his thoughts.



The late winter rains drenched Tribune Gaius Artorius as he rode into the

city of Ravenna. His heavy cloak was soaked, leaving him shivering as the wind whipped the rain into his face. Because he had no manservant, he would have to spend hours polishing his armour and helmet lest it get rusted, once he got settled for the night. He followed the cobblestone road near the shoreline, to where he could see the rough seas tossing the imperial naval vessels anchored in the harbour. These were mostly smaller trireme and quinquereme warships. The massive octeres-class flagship and half a dozen transports had departed the week before with the first wave of returning soldiers. Finding a gathering of naval officers at the nearby harbourmaster's building, Gaius was disappointed to learn that his friends from Legio X were among those already departed.

"We can try to squeeze you on board," the commander of the lead quinquereme stated. "Though I can't promise your horse and baggage. All these ships have been designated for the Fifth Legion's detachment."

"You do realise who I am," Gaius stressed. "I am Tribune Gaius Artorius, chief siege engineer for General Titus."

"I understand, but this manifest comes from Mucianus, the Imperial Regent. And unless General Titus is able to send countermanding orders all the way from Judea, this lot is sailing with the Fifth Legion's cohorts tomorrow morning."

It was extremely frustrating for Gaius, but he knew there was little he could do. Orders were orders. Even if it did not take weeks for messages to reach from one corner of the empire to the other, he doubted his importance was such that the prince imperial would give him and his horse passage on a ship at the expense of legionaries. He then realised that General Titus may not even know he was coming. After all, his appointment had been signed by Antonius Primus during his brief tenure as imperial regent. And that came only as a favour to Lady Aula Vale. Did Primus even bother to send a message to Titus, letting him know he had a new siege officer joining his army? This seemed highly unlikely.

"The army has lasted this long without me commanding their siege works," he muttered glumly. He stepped back out into the rain and started to lead his horse away from the docks.

"Tribune," the commander called after him. "I just remembered; there is a regiment of cavalry that passed through here yesterday. They're headed for Thessalonica, where they are catching transport to Judea. If you ride hard, you just might catch them."

“Thank you,” Gaius replied with appreciation. The Greek port city was about nine hundred miles from Ravenna. He reckoned it would take him about a month to reach without risk of blowing out his horse. First thing he had to do, of course, was catch up to this regiment of cavalry, lest he get left behind again. He decided to rest both himself and his horse before beginning the long journey.

Three days later, the rains finally ceased as he approached the north Italian port of Triste. Gaius was beginning to wonder if he’d been played the fool. Then, he crested a hill overlooking the city and saw a large camp of tents and horses. A chill ran up his spine when he spotted their banner; a rearing black horse on a field of azure.

“The Siliana Regiment of Horse.” He was suddenly filled him with a sense of foreboding. Why he knew their standard was lost to him at the moment.

“Tribune, sir.” A decurion saluted, as Gaius rode into the camp. “I did not realise we were getting a new commanding officer.”

“I’m not your commander. I’m just here to accompany you to Thessalonica and then to Judea…please tell me that is where you are headed.”

“Yes, sir,” the cavalry officer replied. He added, with a touch of scorn, “Regent Mucianus feels that the quickest way for us to prove our loyalty to the emperor is to bloody ourselves fighting rebellious Jews.”

“Ah, I take it you fought for Vitellius.”

“As did most of the western armies,” the decurion said unapologetically.

Gaius shuddered and thought to himself, *‘It cannot be’*.

“I’ll take you to Centurion Liberius, sir. He can answer any questions you may have.”

The centurion commanding the regiment was a big man of Gallic origins. He reminded Gaius of a much taller version of his grandfather, who though of average height, had been built like a mortal Hercules. The tribune forgot his position for a brief moment and almost saluted the man.

“Sir,” the centurion said, offering a salute and saving Gaius from potentially embarrassing himself. “What can I do for you?”

“I am Tribune Gaius Artorius, the new siege engineer for the eastern army under General Titus.” Gaius extended his hand.

The centurion seemed startled at hearing his name. Regaining his

composure he accepted the tribune's hand. "Beg your pardon, sir, but did you say your name is Artorius?"

Gaius nodded.

Liberius took a deep breath and let it out slowly. While there were likely other families within the Roman world of the gens *Artoria*, it was most certainly not a common name. "Forgive me for asking, but are you in any way related to Tribune Lucius Artorius?"

Gaius felt as if he'd been punched in the gut. He immediately recalled why he recognised the standard of the Siliana Regiment of Horse. "He was my brother." His smile was awkward and nervous. "I now know why your regiment seemed familiar to me. I was almost trampled by your troopers at Bedriacum."

"You were with the Seventh Gemina Legion?" Liberius asked.

Gaius shook his head. "No, I was part of the detached cohort from the Tenth. I was an optio then. It is because of my brother's death that I was elevated into the equites…damn it all, but this is awkward."

"That it is, sir," Liberius concurred. "But, we are all friends now, whatever our past differences. Please, can I offer you some refreshments?"

Gaius accepted, thinking at that moment he could drink an entire vat of wine. The two men sat on a pair of old camp chairs the centurion kept in his quarters. Both recalled that terrible night from the previous summer, when the battered and exhausted Flavian army under Antonius Primus brazenly attacked the larger and well-rested Vitellian force. During the night-time battle, Tribune Lucius Artorius and Centurion Liberius had led their regiment over a hill in what was intended to be a flanking manoeuvre against Primus' own legion, the Seventh Gemina. Instead, they crested the hill at the same time that a force of Flavian legionaries emerged from the other side. A storm of javelins violently halted their advance and mortally wounded Lucius. The troopers of Siliana Horse never knew who it was they had faced. Yet, every survivor lamented that, had they reached the hill just a few minutes sooner, they would have smashed into the Gemina Legion's flank before reinforcements could stop them.

"The gods have a perverse sense of humour," the centurion remarked. They had spoken for the better part of an hour, having quaffed copious amounts of wine, as the reminisced over that terrible night.

"Perhaps this is how we heal our past differences, by standing beside those we once attempted to slay in battle."

“If you’re anything like your brother, I will be honoured to have you ride with us, sir.”

Liberius graciously allowed the tribune to use his camp bed for the evening, and the next morning they rose early to continue the trek to Thessalonica. It was 750 miles from Trieste to the Greek port city, and the regiment followed many of the same coastal roads that Gaius and his legionaries from the Tenth did during the invasion of Italia under Antonius Primus. Every three days they would halt for a day to rest their horses. It was nearly four weeks before they reached the port and boarded the waiting ships bound for Judea.

Chapter IV: Fires of Famine

Jerusalem
Late February, 70 A.D.
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John of Giscala's lordship over Jerusalem had become dangerously perilous, since the arrival of Simon bar Giora. Traitors had allowed the Sicarii ally into the city, in hopes of diminishing John's power and bringing stability to the Holy City. Instead, and all-out civil war had erupted between the factions. The fighting had been relentless, with hundreds already slain. Thousands more were either crippled or succumbed to infection from their fearful injuries. Yet despite the violence, the people continued their daily lives, in hopes that the rivals would sort things out soon, so that they might carry on in peace. There was also the lingering threat of the Romans, whose armies now occupied most of the cities within twenty-five miles of the Holy City.

On a late winter's morning, the people roused themselves to begin the work of the day. Merchants opened their stalls. The devout made their way to the Temple to offer up the daily sacrifices. At first glance, one would scarcely guess that the city was embroiled in a fearful civil war.

Simon's faction, being significantly larger, occupied most of the wealthy districts in what was known as Upper City. The Temple District itself was held by a treacherous man named Eleazar, whose faction was by far the smallest of the three. Knowing he was surrounded on both sides, John tasked his trusted henchman, Levi, with commanding their skirmishers, as well as the crews manning the scorpion bolt throwers they had taken from the Romans at Beth Horon. Every tall structure near the large steps leading into the Temple District was manned by their missile troops.

No one knew exactly how this latest round of fighting started, only that shouts and screams of terror echoed from the Upper City. A brief clash erupted between Simon's warriors and John's. The rooftops were now swarming with skirmishers raining missiles down on both sides. As men fell dead or injured, both sides were compelled to withdraw.

“The enemy holds the high ground, so a direct assault would be folly,” John explained to his captains as he rallied his forces. “Let them come to us, that they may fall to our darts and arrows.”

As a band of Simon’s warriors led by allied Idumean soldiers rushed down the long thoroughfare, they met with a barrage of arrows, throwing darts, and sling stones. The Idumeans hunkered low behind their shields, though the zealots were mostly exposed. Six fell in the first salvo, their bodies riddled with arrows and darts. Another screamed as his face was caved in by a sling bullet. As the broken fighters scattered and fled up the street, the Idumean soldiers backed away using their shields for cover. Numerous arrows and darts protruded from each of their shields. Scowling with hatred, a pair of John’s fighters turned their scorpion bolt thrower towards these men. Despite the state of disrepair since their capture four years before, many of these engines had lost little of their destructive power. With a jerk on the firing mechanism the heavy bolt flew from the weapon, punching threw an Idumean shield like it was paper, ripping through the man’s armour, and doubling him over as his guts were impaled.

John’s fighters cheered. Their foes fled in various directions. One of the men manning the scorpion suddenly jolted. He felt as if he’d just been punched in the back. His eyes starting to glass over, he looked down to see a bolt protruding through broken ribs.

“The defilers behind us have bolt throwers, too!” a captain shouted, ordering his men to find cover. He looked along the high walls of the Temple district. Several Roman engines lined the defences.

“Bastards,” Levi swore. He and John watched from a nearby rooftop. “Our enemies surround us on both sides and rain death down upon us.”

“Have our bolt throwers and best archers concentrate on clearing the Temple wall,” John ordered. “The rest will focus on keeping Simon’s forces from enveloping us.”

“A pity we are not using any of the Romans’ catapults,” one man muttered.

“They’re useless at close range,” John retorted irritably. “And in this environment, they are best used for throwing fire. I do not wish to burn Jerusalem to the ground.”

The fighting continued for most of the day, quickly devolving into a bloody stalemate. Though Simon’s faction held the high ground of Upper

City, John's skirmishers were positioned to rain down murderous missile barrages at every avenue of approach. His scorpions and skilled archers suppressed much of the bombardment coming from the Temple district…at a fearful cost. As the sun set, at least fifty of his men were dead and three to four times as many badly injured. Many of the poor wretches lay stricken in the streets, blood pooling between the living and the dead.

"We cannot keep going like this," the Giscalan grumbled.

Two hours after sunset, he assembled his senior captains and advisors. Several were injured during the exchange, and one was dead. Their demeanours varied between defiance and despair.

"We held our own today," one of them said, "Yet we still lost many good men."

"And more will bleed in purging the heretics from God's holy city," another retorted.

"Of that there is little doubt," John concurred. "But our numbers are not infinite. Simon's forces greatly outnumber ours, and he holds the high ground of Upper City. Our strength may be greater than the traitor, Eleazar's, but we cannot hope to overwhelm him while Simon still threatens us."

"Then we enlist the people!" another man spoke up. "A half million souls inhabit this city; at least one in every five is a man or boy of fighting age. We must conscript them to fill our ranks."

"And what's to say Simon won't attempt the same?" Levi countered. "We are at an extreme disadvantage, trapped between both our enemies' bands of renegades. Unless we break this stalemate soon, we'll be finished."

This was met with protests and insults from the younger officers.

John stood with his arms folded, listening to his captains bickering for a few minutes before slamming his hand on the table. "Enough! We are in a precarious position, yet our enemies underestimate us, just like the Romans did. Brawn has failed, so we have to outthink them. Yes, Simon has us outnumbered, and he holds the Upper City. Eleazar holds the Temple and commands the city's grain stores. If we can seize control of these, we hold power over the city. We will then fill our ranks with volunteers…and conscripts if necessary. Starvation is the ultimate weapon. If that fool, Eleazar, understood this he could have taken control of the entire Jewish State by now."



After the day-long battle, every faction fighting for control of Jerusalem was collectively exhausted. The men guarding the grain warehouses for Eleazar naturally assumed that the warring divisions would spend the next few days resting and recovering. Because of this complacency, John elected to launch his raid to seize control of the city's food stores that very night.

At the start of the war, the Jewish State's previous leader, Hanan ben Hanan, ordered massive reserves of grain brought to the Holy City upon each harvest. He knew the threat of the Romans re-conquering much of Judea existed, depriving the resistance of access to the vast swaths of farmland which fed the population. He therefore directed several huge warehouses built near the Temple district, with the intent of holding enough wheat and other grains to last the city for at least a couple of years. There were five such structures on either side of the street running parallel to the western wall of the Temple district. Each stood thirty feet high and sixty feet long. They were filled from floor to ceiling with sacks of wheat and piles of raw stalks. Even after Hanan's overthrow and death, John of Giscala continued to have any surplus from the harvest brought to the city. Rats and other vermin infested the warehouses; the more macabre of his men stated that these could serve as a ready source of meat in the event of a crisis.

"We'll be able to feast like kings, while the Romans starve in the wasteland they create beyond our walls," John had said to his captains, before leading them in the assault.

He handpicked a thousand of his best fighters for the attack. Another thousand were ready to join the fray if needed. A light rain, common during the Judean winter nights, began to fall as the various bands of warriors crept along the streets and alleys towards the warehouses. The cloudy skies and drizzle provided much protection from the prying eyes of Simon's sentries manning the towers along the First Wall, which ran perpendicular with the western wall of the Temple district. Though it made the raiders cold and miserable, the rains kept the usual denizens of the night indoors.

They were now in the district known as Tyropoeon, a middle-class section of neighbourhoods surrounded by the Second Wall to the northwest, the First Wall to the south, and the Temple District to the east. The warehouses were close to the Antonia Fortress where several hundred of Eleazar's fighters were housed. John's intent was to overrun the patrols around the grain stores, establishing his men in defensive positions in and

around them before the defiler's warriors could react. The zealot grinned sinisterly when he saw a small group huddled around a stone fire pit. To the left, barely visible in the bleak light, he saw others sleeping up against the high wooden wall. He waited nearly half an hour before advancing on this small band, allowing the rest of his men time to encircle the large complex of buildings.

Feeling it was time, John turned to his nearby captains and nodded. They drew their blades and signalled for their men to follow. One accidentally kicked a rock which clattered across the cobblestones, alerting the guards. At first, they thought it was perhaps a stray dog.

One man's eyes suddenly grew wide as he saw the horde of approaching death. *"Sound the alarm!"* Knowing any chance of a sneak attack was ruined, John and his men gave a loud shout and rushed the guards, who were hurriedly retrieving their weapons. One managed to raise his spear in time to impale one of John's fighters through the chest. The spear point became stuck in the dying man's ribs. His killer was quickly slaughtered by half a dozen blades.

A full-scale battle soon erupted along the street and narrow alleys between the warehouses. Because none wore any sort of uniforms, it was difficult to tell friend from foe in the encompassing dark. There were many unfortunate cases where fighters on both sides were slain by their mates. A score of John's warriors formed a human barricade near the western gate to the Antonia Fortress, ready to face any potential reinforcements. Emerging fighters were quickly assailed and cut down before they could join the defence.

Something John had not anticipated was the nihilistic fatalism of many of Eleazar's men. Convinced their faction held the Temple, and were therefore God's chosen defenders of the true faith, they would rule over Jerusalem or no one would. Sensing they were being overrun and understanding their assailants' intents, one of their leaders shouted, "Burn the warehouses! Let God kill our enemies with starvation!"

This reckless man would be spared such a slow and agonising fate, as a zealot blade plunged into the side of his neck. He fell to his knees, blood spurting onto his killer's weapon and hand. Through spittle and blood that sputtered between his teeth, his mouth twisted into a sneer. His last sight, before his vision faded to black, was of numerous torches being flung into the open windows and doors of the warehouses.

“They’re burning the grain stores!” A Giscalan warrior pointed his bloodied spear towards one of the central warehouses.

Though the roof and outer walls were damp from the rains, the dried grains inside had already caught fire. Flames were licking out from behind the shuttered upper windows.

“Damned fools.” John gritted his teeth. He called out to a group of nearby fighters. “Get as many men together as you can and put these fires out before they kill us all!”

As if the fates were seeking to humiliate them further, the rains suddenly ceased. The damp wood from the walls and roofs of the buildings hissed as the intense heat of the flames caused wafts of steam to escape. Any efforts to put out the fires were hampered by the continuous fighting. Eleazar’s fighters knew they could not hope to win this battle. Yet, as their dead and dying fell in bloody heaps, the sight of the burning warehouses made them fight harder. The *‘fires of famine’*, as it would later be known, was God’s punishment for John and Simon’s insolence.

By the time the survivors fled for the perceived safety of the fortress and Temple, every building containing the city’s emergency grain supply was engulfed in flames. The fires burned extremely hot, not allowing anyone within fifty feet of the collapsing structures. Screams from the scores of badly wounded who lay on the road and alleyways caused the mortified onlookers to shudder in horror. Many of the bodies of both dead and wounded alike were now in flames. The pitiful shrieks of those whose fate was to slowly burn to death would haunt all who witnessed the dismaying spectacle.



The following morning, every last citizen of Jerusalem was consumed by an overwhelming sense of dread as the thick columns of black smoke continued to billow skyward.

“It’s as if hell itself swallowed up our bread of life,” Rebekkah said bitterly, as she and her family watched from atop their small roof garden. The mother of Josephus, her and her family had struggled bitterly ever since the capture of her son, who John and his followers decried as a traitor.

“This is my fault,” her husband, Mathias, said. His face was pale. “John of Giscala is a cruel despot, yet by allowing Simon bar Giora into the city, we

have unleashed a terror far greater than any we could possibly imagine."

"You could not have known, father," his son, also named Mathias, replied consolingly. The younger Mathias then placed an arm around his sister-in-law, Judith, who was shivering in fear. After a moment's pondering, he added hopefully, "Perhaps this is God's way of compelling the warring factions to end this madness. Once the Romans come, surely John and Simon will know they cannot survive a long siege. As perverse as this may sound, I wonder if it is God's will that Caesar lords over the Jews."

"Josephus understood this," Judith spoke quietly. At first she had refused to believe that her husband was collaborating with the Romans. Now, she wished the rumours were true. "They call him 'traitor', yet I fear he may be the one hope for our people."

Chapter V: Seventy-Thousand Strong

Mediterranean Coast of Judea
Late February, 70 A.D.



Titus, the Prince Imperial

As the bulk of his army marched up the Judean coastline, General Titus felt the full weight of his responsibilities bearing down on him. When he had first taken command of Legio XV four years prior, at the age of just twenty-six, there was some concern that he was far too young to command a legion. Indeed, few had had greater doubts than Titus himself, regarding his readiness to lead five thousand men into battle. That was perhaps why, in his own mind at least, he tended to overcompensate during the first two years of the war. Like his father, he preferred to lead his men from the front, often accepting extreme personal risks. The young legate knew the quickest way to ensure his soldiers' loyalty was for them see he viewed his own life as no more valuable than theirs. Time and again he demonstrated his willingness to fight and, if need be, die alongside his men.

Titus performed his duties admirably, winning the respect of his peers as well as the men in the ranks. But now, the responsibilities heaped upon him were magnified more than ten-fold. As commander-in-chief of all imperial forces in the east, and with the Twelfth Fulminata Legion finally returning to

active service, the prince imperial had an even larger force than his father had commanded.

"Once the detached cohorts return from Italia and we link up with the Fifth and Tenth Legions, we're looking at seventy thousand men, give or take," Tiberius Alexander stated.

The two rode towards the head of the ever-growing column of imperial soldiers marching along the coastal road to the port city of Ascalon.

"The logistics alone are a nightmare," Titus remarked. "It's not just the soldiers who need ample rations and fresh water but every horse and beast of burden."

"And that is why you have me," Alexander replied. As chief-of-staff, the logistical needs of the army were his responsibility. Each legion had roughly six hundred mules for carrying tents and soldiers' baggage, plus two hundred more for hauling siege engines and ammunition wagons. As for horses: the legate, tribunes, centurions, and at least half the options had personal mounts. And, each legion had 150 indigenous cavalry. Four legions, an equal number of auxilia infantry, an entire corps of cavalry, and thousands of allied troops from King Agrippa's loyalist Jews equalled a staggering number of men and beasts.

Titus chuckled. "At least we are close to Egypt, that massive grain silo of the empire."

"Julius Caesar once wrote that wars were won and lost by logistics," Alexander observed. "It was never truer than during the Siege of Alesia. Had the Gauls succeeded in cutting his supply lines, his army would have starved within two weeks."

"If these bloody Jews had any sense, they'd line every road between Jerusalem and Alexandria with raiders. The army won't survive in this land if compelled to forage."

Josephus rode quietly behind and to the left of the two officers. His thoughts often turned to a time when the Romans were his enemies, when he was certain he would die with a legionary blade in his guts. It was strange that despite his having fought directly against Vespasian in battle, the emperor exonerated him of any wrongdoing. Allegiances, enmities, and friendships shifted quickly within the Roman world. Prior to the fall of Jotapata, Vespasian would have nailed Josephus to a cross. Now, he was being publicly hailed as a 'friend of Caesar' and given a place of honour within Titus' entourage.

“You do work in mysterious ways,” he muttered quietly, as he gazed up at the sky.

The day was overcast with just a few traces of sunlight breaking through the clouds. A light drizzle had fallen the night before. The sound of the gentle fall of rain was soothing to Josephus as he had slumbered. Yet when he awoke, he was filled with a sense of foreboding. He could not explain why, but he felt his family, and indeed all of Jerusalem, was now in grave danger. As the harbour of Ascalon came into view in the distance, Josephus hoped his premonitions were wrong and the rebels would not fight to the death; and perhaps the people of God could be spared from further calamity.



For Tribune Gaius Artorius, the return to Ascalon felt surreal. Four years had passed since he last stood on the city’s walls, facing down the vast army the Judean rebels sent to reclaim the port. Little had changed, though the city was now bustling with fervent activity that was absent during Gaius’ last stay. During that time the people, mostly Roman loyalists, hid in fear as the huge rebel army marched to seize the city. Now they went about their business with scarcely a thought to the war that still raged just a few days’ journey to the east.

The Siliana Regiment of Horse came ashore at Beirut. It took the better part of a day for the slings to lower the horses over the sides of the ships. As the flotilla was due to resupply in Ascalon, Gaius elected to accompany them. They arrived in the late afternoon, and it was only after much difficulty, involving fixing a broken pulley, that the tribune’s horse was hoisted over the side of the ship.

It was now early evening and Gaius made his way through the throngs of citizens going about their business. He remembered the stables belonging to the auxilia garrison’s officers were near the eastern gate. The eastern wall anchored itself to a series of large, rocky hills to the north and south. A few auxilia infantrymen manned the ramparts; boredom now their greatest enemy. Having placed his mount in the care of a groomsman for a few copper coins, the tribune ascended the stone steps. The men closest came to attention, their section leader rendering a salute.

“Carry on, sergeant,” Gaius said. He removed his helmet and gazed towards the east. “Four years,” he said quietly to himself, a wave of

memories washing over him.

Four years had passed since his cohort, supported by large numbers of auxilia infantry and cavalry, utterly annihilated the standing army of the free Jewish state. He was a decanus then, and like many of his mates was convinced he would die on the open plane beyond the gates of the city. The Judean rebels horribly outnumbered them, plus they were coming into battle having recently routed the retreating imperial forces at Beth Horon.

"One would never guess the carnage these walls have witnessed," a voice said from behind him.

Gaius turned and smiled broadly at the sight of his old friend, Centurion Claudius Nicanor.

"Tribune, sir," the centurion added with a salute.

Gaius laughed and returned the courtesy before embracing his friend and former mentor. "Well I'll be buggered. Damn it all, it's good to see you! But what are you doing here?"

"Like you, we're looking for the rest of the army," Nicanor remarked with a shrug. "We arrived by ship two days ago. The seas were so bloody rough we had to put in at Rhodes for the better part of two weeks. The garrison commander here told us General Titus is set to arrive within a week. Galeo took a section of local cavalry and set out to find them. We have to assume zealots and bandits roam the region, and he doesn't want our entire cohort walking into an ambush."

"That's true," said the tribune. "We've been so wrapped up with our own civil war, we've lost all strategic situational awareness in Judea."

"Well, *someone* has to know what's been going on here," Optio Julius said, joining them.

"By Vulcan, it's about time you got to keep the optio's staff," Gaius winked.

"Only until this conflict is decided," Julius noted. "I surpassed my twenty-year enlistment while we were marching towards Rome. However, I promised our good centurion that I would not abandon him until after we take Jerusalem."

"With the promotion to optio, I was able to authorise a three-year extension," Nicanor explained. "Of course, he is not obligated to stay the full term. I just made it for three years, in case these damned rebels prove even more resilient in defending Jerusalem than they did Jotapata."

Gaius furrowed his brow. "I would think, given the casualties and

attrition we've suffered, the legion would need every soldier it could muster."

"Normally, yes, but General Primus granted us a pretty sizeable favour," the centurion explained. "You remember when he accepted those two thousand sailors from the Ravenna fleet to serve as replacements in our legions? Since there is a crucial need for fresh troops is in Judea, he gave the eastern legions half of them; a thousand soldiers in all!"

Julius added, "And since they were all mariners with at least some experience, they've been much easier to train than fresh-faced recruits. The Fifth Cohort alone received fifty of the lot, which almost puts us back to full strength."

"And I think we'll need every last one of them before this is over." Nicanor shook his head and let out a sigh. "If we thought Jotapata was difficult, wait until we try to capture Jerusalem." He forced a smile. "But look at you, *sir*, chief of artillery for the entire damned army!"

Gaius gave a nervous half-grin. "Actually, Primus appointed me as chief siege engineer; meaning I will have not just the catapults and ballistae but also ramp and tower construction, and everything else that goes into besieging an enemy city. Of course, it's up to General Titus as to what actual use he has for me. Since my appointment letter from Primus is supposed to serve as my introduction to the prince imperial, I doubt he even knows I exist."

"Well, you're certain to earn your place within the equites, one way or another," Nicanor gave him a good-natured smack on the shoulder. "To think it all started eleven years ago when you lobbed the head of a Parthian general over the wall of Tigranocerta into the laps of his mates."

"You remember the name I gave you after that?" Julius asked.

Gaius laughed. "Yes, *Fortuna's Bastard*, as I recall. It didn't really stick, though I think it is even more suitable now."

"Well, if I ever do call you that, I'll be sure I include a 'sir' in the title," Julius said, with a grin.



Several days later, the prince imperial and his entourage arrived at Ascalon. The vast open plane in front of the eastern wall provided the ideal place for Titus to stage his army. Just laying out the series of camps each night was a daunting task, but one lesson he had learned during his earliest

days as a legate was delegation. While the commander-in-chief chose the site each day, each legion and auxilia regiment had its own surveyors and engineers to undertake the more detailed tasks. And because all marching camps followed a specific template, every soldier from the legates down to the legionaries knew where his tent and equipment went.

Titus was especially grateful he had Tiberius Alexander as his chief-of-staff. There had been some initial grumblings from some of the senior officers who referred to him as *'That Alexandrian Jew'*, usually accompanied by a few disdainful words of racist profanity. This form of xenophobia was lessened, though not entirely erased, when Alexander proved to be very adept at keeping the logistics trains of rations and other supplies constant. Legates and auxilia regimental commanders sent him daily requests for supplies. And because Alexander had stressed the need to have a dozen of the army's best horsemen on his staff, he was able to dispatch these requests to his contacts in Alexandria with remarkable speed. He had a hand in many of the underground markets in the east, helping the army acquire within weeks what could take months through normal supply channels.

Another lesson the commander-in-chief appreciated from his days as a legate was that each legion was its own conscious entity, capable of taking care of its own daily needs without interference from the commanding general. Centurions and their subordinate officers oversaw the establishment of the camp, daily training and discipline, as well as the digging of drainage and latrine trenches; the latter was of particular importance. If the army remained in place for more than a day, the sheer volume of human waste and the swarms of flies that it gathered could cause a health hazard in a very short time. No matter how fearsome their enemies were in battle, disease was always an army's greatest nemesis. Hence why sewage trenches had to be filled in and re-dug every few days.

Upon their arrival at Ascalon, Titus and his entourage were met by the city governor, garrison commander, centurions, and other officers from the legionary cohorts who arrived before them. With the majority of the Tenth Legion still encamped east of Jerusalem, their detached cohorts established camp with those from the Fifth Legion, whose headquarters was with the blockading force north of the Jewish capital. Centurion Liberius of the Siliana Regiment of Horse reported to General Placidus who appointed him to the permanent rank of commander of the regiment.

"An added incentive to ensure loyalty," Placidus explained to Titus,

noting his reservation at having a former Vitellian regiment attached to the army. As the commander-in-chief had a plethora of issues to deal with, not least of which coordinating the army's approach to Jerusalem and the consolidation of his scattered garrisons, he simply nodded his consent. With the daily management of the army left to his senior officers, the prince imperial could concentrate his energies on the overall strategic situation.

"Ever since the fighting worsened between the zealot factions, we have had no eyes within Jerusalem," he said, during a council of war that evening.

"We've received the occasional deserter," Legate Cerealis of the Fifth Legion stated. "Despite the terrible hardships they've endured, the people are just as terrified of us as they are the fanatics. And if given the choice, I think they would rather suffer the tyrants they know than a foreign occupier."

"I want you to increase your patrols of the region," Titus directed Placidus.

"We'll get some use out of that Vitellian regiment from the Danube, Siliana Horse," Placidus noted. "I'll send officers from my eastern troops to act as guides and liaisons while they familiarise themselves with the region."

The newly arrived legate of Legio X, Lucilius Bassus, stood with his arms folded, an incredulous look upon his face. "Beg your pardon, general, but are these damnable Jews really so daft as to think they can stand against us? We've already conquered most of this forsaken land. And by Jupiter, one only has to look at the size of our army to see they haven't a chance."

"You haven't seen the walls of Jerusalem yet, General Bassus," Titus replied. "From their perspective the city is an impenetrable fortress. But I do hope you are right, and that the Jews will sue for peace once they see the size of our army."

For the next hour, the legates and auxilia commanders discussed the practical logistics behind taking their massive force and advancing on the Judean capital. Observing patiently was Tribune Gaius Artorius, who had yet to find the opportunity to report to General Titus. Once the commander-in-chief was satisfied with their plan of approach to the city, he dismissed his officers.

Gaius saw his opportunity. "General, sir." He stepped up to where Titus stood with his hands resting on the table.

"Can I help you?"

"Tribune Gaius Artorius, sir. I've been assigned to take command of your siege works."

Titus' raised eyebrow was all he needed to let him know his arrival was not expected. He handed the orders signed by Antonius Primus and stood quietly with his hands clasped behind his back while the commander-in-chief read the despatch.

"Our friend, Primus, took quite the liberty assigning someone to my staff without my knowledge. But then, he's always been one who rarely asks permission to do anything. As regent, I suppose he was within his rights." He stood back and appraised the tribune. "So you're an engineer?"

"No, sir," Gaius replied, suddenly feeling awkward. "Until recently, I was an optio with the Tenth Legion."

"And now you're a tribune? How in bleeding Hades…actually, don't answer. I don't care how you attained your rank. Likely it was Primus bending the rules once again."

"If I may answer, sir, my brother was a member of the equites. After he was killed at Bedriacum, Regent Primus elevated me to his position." Gaius immediately regretted answering, as Titus scowled at him for a moment. He hoped the prince imperial would not ask him which side his brother fought on.

"I have a need for engineers, yet Primus sends me a former legionary," Titus scoffed. "How exactly does he think you are qualified to command the siege works of the entire damned army?"

Gaius swallowed and decided candour was his best approach. "To be honest, I'm not qualified. I even said as much to him. However, I am skilled in all classes of both ballista and catapult. I took control of the Flavian siege engines during the attack on the Vitellian camp outside Cremona. I was also an onager crewman at the Siege of Tigranocerta…"

Before he could continue, Titus cut him off. "Wait, that was you?"

Gaius nodded.

A bemused grin crossed the general's face. "It's been more than ten years, yet every soldier east of the Danube still talks about the single catapult shot that ended the siege."

"Yes, sir, the men in my century called me *Fortuna's Bastard* for a time," Gaius said, allowing himself to relax a little.

"A title one should wear with pride. Alright, so maybe you aren't an engineer, but I'll certainly find a use for *Fortuna's Bastard*. There's a centurion primus ordo named Vorenus, who is in charge of the Tenth Legion's artillery."

“I know him,” Gaius stated. “He’s a good man.”

“I have plenty of engineers. However, I don’t have anyone to lead them. It would be useful to have one officer to oversee, rather than twenty. I’ll appoint Vorenus as your second; you’ll report directly to me.”

“Very good, sir.”

“Dismissed, tribune.”

Gaius came to attention, saluted, and began to make his way out of the principia tent. Titus’ next words stopped him.

“Just one question. How exactly did you compel Antonius Primus to elevate you to your late brother’s position within the equites? I know Primus well. He may be a loyal soldier and capable general, yet he is not one to dole out favours to anyone who cannot repay him ten-fold.”

“I didn’t,” Gaius replied openly. “Apparently he owed a sizeable favour to my fiancé, Aula Vale.”

“I’ll be buggered. You’re the one betrothed to Lady Aula?” Titus broke into laughter. “Hades be damned. I know Aula, and the emperor speaks very highly of her father. I think we shall get along well; clearly there is more to you than just being a former legionary.”

Chapter VI: For the Freedom of Israel

Jerusalem
March, 70 A.D.
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Despite the catastrophic burning of the city's grain stores, or perhaps because of it, violence on the streets of Jerusalem continued on an almost daily basis. The dead were often left to lie for days and sometimes weeks before terrified families dared retrieve them; by which time, the corpses had been picked clean by robbers, covered in flies and the early signs of decay. Those left unclaimed were tossed unceremoniously outside the gates, in an affront to common decency as well as Jewish laws regarding burial of the dead. Each side in the horrific struggle blamed the other for the calamities inflicted upon the people, yet all privately knew they shared in the blame for the continued desecration of God's holy city. It was the approach of a common enemy that finally brought Simon bar Giora and John of Giscala to negotiate a truce.

Knowing his old enemies would eventually return, Simon sent scouts to the west to watch for the approach of the imperial army. The huge force assembling outside of Ascalon could be seen for miles, and Simon's scouts hurriedly returned to the city before they could be intercepted by mounted patrols.

Hoping to atone for what he felt was a grievous folly in bringing Simon into Jerusalem, Mathias offered to act as intermediary between the two leaders. "The Romans are scarcely ten miles from Jerusalem's gates. Whatever passions each of you may feel in this ongoing struggle, all will amount to nothing, once the imperial army threatens both the city and the temple. Do we allow our people to lose all because we cannot stand together?"

"Mathias' son may be the greatest traitor the Jews have ever known," John began, his arms folded across his chest as he stared hard at Simon, "and he did seek to betray me by allowing my enemies into the city. However, I am a man of mercy who will forgive transgressions against my person, if it be for the good of the people." He then addressed his hated rival. "Simon, my

enmity towards you has not waned in the slightest. I will never call you ‘friend’, nor will I cease in praying that God condemns you in the next life for your ceaseless sacrilege. That being said, I am willing to put aside my sword and propose an alliance between our factions.”

Simon nodded slowly, folding his own arms in response. “It is your blackened soul that God will punish in the afterlife. But as you say, we now face a common enemy, one who cares nothing for our struggles or for the sanctity of our holy places. I will never accept you as lord or commander. But I am willing to have peace between our forces, that we may save God’s temple and chosen people from the wicked foreign invaders. I drove the Romans from these lands once before, and I will do so again.”

Such pompous grandstanding made many of the assembled elders and priests cringe; however, there was a modicum of truth to Simon’s words. Of every zealot and warrior leader present, he was the only one who could rightfully claim a victory over the hated invaders. Regardless of motives, all were glad to see the two rivals putting aside their differences, for the greater good of the free Jewish state.

“Then let us consecrate this new bond of peace and unity between our peoples,” Mathias emphasized.

A sheep and a dove were brought to the temple to be sacrificed by the priests. The two former rivals simply extended their hands, cold gazes fixed upon one another. Each man gave a subtle nod of both understanding and, perhaps, even a trace of respect for the other’s tenacity.

“There will be no need for any faction to cede control over their districts of the city,” John emphasised. “Instead of fighting each other, we will turn our swords outward and stand defiant in the face of Emperor Vespasian and his false gods.”

“The unfortunate slain will be given proper burial and funerary rites,” Simon added. “Let prayers and sacrifices be made, that God may pardon their sins, and their souls be purified before him. For the sanctity and the freedom of the Kingdoms of Judah and Israel, I now pledge my sword.” He drew his weapon—a captured Roman cavalry spatha—and held it up to his face in a form of salute.

“The blades of my men shall sing a song of divine fury until they are soaked in the blood of God’s unholy enemies.” John then drew his own weapon.

As the ostentatious spectacle continued, priests leading the sacrificial

beasts towards the burning alter, Mathias said a silent prayer with earnest fervour.

For John of Giscala, this alliance with Simon bar Giora was fortuitous and well-timed. Having been assailed by the forces of both Simon and Eleazar, it was no small miracle he survived. Eleazar still occupied the temple; however, with Simon calling for a truce with John, he could more readily dispose of the upstart before turning his attention on the Romans.



A thousand miles to the northwest, the governors from the various provinces within Asia Minor assembled to greet Emperor Vespasian at the city of Nicaea. As with every other city they visited, the emperor and his entourage arrived to much fanfare. During the day Vespasian met with various magistrates, addressing the problems and concerns indigenous to each city or region. Numerous scribes sat at each meeting, furiously scribbling notes as fast as the men talked. Something that impressed the nobles was that Vespasian actually cared about their troubles. He gave advice and reassurances where he was able, while promising to look into any issues he could not directly address at that time. The emperor approached every matter with a soldier's pragmatism and a measure of intelligence beyond that expected of a man whose greatest achievements were confined to the battlefield. Each night the governors and nobles would host a magnificent banquet, all eager to gain added influence within the new imperial dynasty. After the eleventh such feast, the emperor excused himself just before midnight. He signalled for Trajan to follow him.

"By Apollo's cock that was tedious!" Vespasian grumbled. He set the laurel crown on an end table within his private suite and scratched his fingers along the sides of his head.

"Tedious but necessary," Trajan assured him, snapping his fingers and alerting servants to bring them wine.

"No more wine for me," the emperor said, waving the servants off. "As much as I've eaten and drank these last few weeks, I'll start to look like Vitellius if I'm not careful."

Trajan chuckled at the mention of Vespasian's late rival. Though six years younger, he'd been in terrible health brought on by his love of the feast. The men shared a laugh at the comparison, but the emperor was determined

not to become a fat, gout-ridden sore like his predecessor.

"Four factions vying for the throne damn near tore the empire apart," Trajan observed. "The people need a reassuring hand to let them know that peace and stability have returned. It is good that you meet with as many of the provincial governors as possible. Many are old colleagues you haven't seen in years."

"Being exiled, at first politically and then literally, made them forget who I was. Not that I was ever much of a force within the senate to begin with. If I was lucky, when senators remembered my name it was for my little role in the conquest of Britannia twenty-seven years ago, and not the unpopular disaster that was my term as Proconsul of North Africa."

"If it makes you feel any better," Trajan consoled him, "several times during our various ports-of-call I have heard praise given for your martial prowess. Our victories in Judea have helped keep memories fresh, though I think your reputation was aided because Nero practically begged you to assume command of the eastern armies, despite his enmity towards you. I've heard it said more than once that Vespasian must still be the *War Master* if even Nero saw his greatness. Some of that was forced flattery, yet I think there is much genuine admiration among your former peers."

Vespasian allowed himself an appreciative smile, though it quickly faded. "I need to be more than an emperor who can win battles, Trajan. Tact, diplomacy, and political savvy will be needed to maintain stability within the empire. Sadly, I lack all three of those qualities."

"I don't know, you did alright this evening," his friend replied.

The emperor gave him a puzzled look.

"You didn't drop one word of profanity all night or make a single crude joke. Not that this group of governors would have minded, but there is a certain amount of decorum expected from an emperor. At the same time, you did not come across as haughty or stuffy either…a bit uncomfortable, perhaps, but hopefully that will go away in due time."

"*Uncomfortable* is putting it mildly," Vespasian remarked. "I was so bloody nervous, I thought I was going to piss my sodding toga!"

"Get used to it," Trajan chided him. "And if I may be so bold as to advise you, Caesar…"

"Damn it all, that's why I have you with me," Vespasian interrupted. "I may be emperor, but I cannot do this alone. I need wise and strong advisors, not arse-lickers who say what they think I want to hear."

“Good,” Trajan replied. “Then I will tell you this; drop the ‘reluctant Caesar’ façade. Even the poorest peasants from Egypt to Britannia know you did not want to become emperor, but neither did Tiberius. He, however, took his reluctance too far, and it came across as both pandering and undignified. I know you hate the laurel crown as well as much of the pomp and ceremony that comes with the office, but make sure you continue to keep those thoughts private. Vent behind closed doors to your closest friends. Never let the public see you as anything less than the strong colossus who is going to lead Rome into a new age of prosperity. After what the people went through last year, they deserve it.”

“As I said, that is why you came with me.” Vespasian gave him a friendly slap on the shoulder.

Trajan took a long drink off his wine.

Vespasian settled for water.

He stared into his cup for a moment in contemplation before speaking again. “You know it wasn’t easy letting others do my fighting for me, just as it was difficult leaving Judea before we’d finished with that damned place.”

“Titus is young, but he is both brave and capable,” Trajan reasoned. “Appointing Alexander as his chief-of-staff was a wise, if politically risky, move. The Twelfth Legion has also returned to active service, giving Titus an even larger force than you commanded.”

“We need men of competence to keep the army supplied and fed, and I don’t give a damn about who, among the more xenophobic in the senate, Alexander’s appointment enrages. Whether they like it or not, he is the most capable man we have for the task. And if he performs well, I just might make that Alexandrian Jew a senator.”



The beating of drums and the sound of cornicens’ horns echoed across the land. The rhythmic pounding from thousands of marching soldiers shook the very ground. The defenders of Jerusalem could hear their approach long before they could see them. Titus’ army was vast. Even with soldiers marching eight to ten abreast, the approaching column extended for nearly ten miles.

Leading the advance guard were auxiliary cavalrymen, lancers as well as mounted archers, dispatched by King Agrippa II. Several thousand auxilia

infantrymen escorted the army's surveyors and engineers. They cleared any obstacles from the roads and laid out the massive camps each night. With them was the commander-in-chief's personal baggage train, along with that belonging to his legates and senior regimental commanders. Tiberius Alexander rode with the cavalry escort, as did Tribune Gaius Artorius.

Titus and his select escorts rode about a mile behind the advance guard and surveyors. He decided to ride in just his belted tunic this day, reckoning there would be time to don his armour long before any sort of fighting ensued. The elite First Cohort of the commanding general's own Legio XV marched beside them as the guard of honour. Riding next to him was the Fifteenth's Legate, Lucius Domitius, and a score of staff tribunes, scribes, and messengers. Much of the prince imperial's entourage was made up of foreign soldiers from the various auxilia and allied cohorts selected as liaisons due to their proficiency in Latin as well as their native tongues.

Next were the siege trains led by Centurion Primus Ordo Vorenus of the Tenth Legion. These were also under heavy escort from auxilia infantry. The eagles and standard bearers followed along with the Fifteenth and Twelfth Legions; their indigenous cavalry providing flank security. Legionaries marched in close order, eight men abreast, with each legion extending well over a mile up the road. Baggage trains for the legions with all of their servants and pack animals marched behind them; the sound of braying mules and grunting oxen the only sounds to accent the cadence of soldiers' footfalls. The remaining auxilia infantry and cavalry regiments came last with their own baggage and animals dispersed throughout. These men significantly outnumbered the legions, with many coming from the armies of King Agrippa and the allied king of Arabia. And yet, this was but a portion of the imperial forces bearing down on Jerusalem. Legio V was en route via Emmaus. Legio X was on the march from the east.

As for Josephus, he rode close to the commander-in-chief. His eyes constantly strained towards the direction of Jerusalem. Though he wore the mail armour of an auxilia trooper, he had declined to carry a gladius or other weapon. He insisted that, although a 'friend of Caesar', he would never draw a blade against his own people.

"Jerusalem is in sight, sir," a centurion from the advance guard said, as he rode up and saluted Titus. "The vanguard is established at a recently abandoned village less than four miles from the city."

Josephus spoke up. "That will be Gabaothsath, also known as 'The Hill of

Saul'."

"I think it's time I laid eyes on your holy city," Titus said. He turned to an auxilia officer. "Commander Liberius!"

"Sir?"

"I am going to conduct a personal reconnaissance of the city. Siliana Horse will accompany me."

"Yes, sir," the officer replied with a salute before riding off to bring up his regiment.



Along with elements of the advance guard, Gaius Artorius quietly rode through the abandoned streets of the village, a company of horsemen escorting him. It still filled the tribune with conflicting feelings whenever he saw those brave troopers who he'd once faced in battle. It was not just that they were his former enemies, but at the time they were commanded by his late brother.

He glanced behind him when he heard the sound of galloping hooves and recognised Commander Liberius.

The officer drew his spatha, his voice booming, *"Siliana Horse, rally to me!"*

Gaius listened to the barked commands of their officers, as troopers kicked their horses into a gallop riding towards the head of the column. He wondered what his brother would think, were he to know his former regiment now served the very men they had once fought against.

"What do you think's happening?" the tribune asked Alexander.

"I'm not certain. I suspect our commander-in-chief wants to have a look at Jerusalem for himself. You may as well stay here with the surveyors and infantry escorts."

The chief-of-staff kicked his horse into a gallop, following the companies of troopers back to where Titus was assembling escorts for his reconnaissance of the city. What surprised him most was seeing that the prince imperial only wore his tunic and sword belt. "Don't you think you should armour up?"

"My kit is all with the baggage," Titus replied. "It will take an hour to find. Meanwhile, we are wasting daylight. I'm not too concerned, Tiberius. I have six hundred horsemen with me. I don't think the vermin infesting

Jerusalem will wish to come out and throw their lives away needlessly."

"It is not the common people you need worry about," Josephus explained to Titus. "The zealots control them through fear. I assure you, the fanatics may wish to fight us to the last, but the people only desire peace."

Titus was removing his cloak and making one last check of his kit before leading his armed reconnaissance forward. "Then they would do well to demonstrate this desire for peace by offering up the heads of their supposed 'leaders'." His demeanour was cold and his gaze hard. He remounted his horse and signalled for the Siliana Regiment to follow him. With them he selected a company of King Agrippa's mounted archers, some of whom were familiar with the city and surrounding region.

The entourage departed, and within half an hour, the city came into full view as they followed the main road that led to its northern and western gates.

Titus had never seen Jerusalem. He swallowed hard in appreciation at the imposing size of the seemingly impenetrable fortress city. "You ever see anything like it, commander?"

Liberius' eyes were wide. "No, sir. Where I come from, one might see the occasional wooden stockade or Roman fort, but nothing like this. Even Rome herself is not surrounded by such mighty defences."

"She has no need of them," the prince imperial replied.

Recent history had made it clear this was a lie. Were the Eternal City surrounded by even a single wall as impressive as the three that enveloped Jerusalem, the armies of his father may not have been able to wrest the throne from Vitellius.

The height alone of the walls surrounding the Jewish holy city made the commander-in-chief realise just why their adversaries were so defiant. Ladders would be impossible to use, and siege towers would have to be enormous; seventy feet high at least. And yet, as high as the surrounding walls were, the tower on the northwest corner they rode directly towards stood close to twice its height.

"That's the Psephinus Tower, sir," a trooper from Agrippa's mounted archers stated. "They say that one can see both the Mediterranean and the mountains of Arabia from its pinnacle."

"It looks octagonal in shape." Titus observed through squinted eyes.

"Yes, sir. It was modelled after the Tower of the Winds in Athens. The nearby gate is called 'The Gate of the Women's Towers'."

“We’ll follow the path leading east just past the tower,” Titus directed.



“The Romans approach!” an excited sentry reported. He had just come down from the Psephinus Tower, his face flush with anticipation.

“How many men?” Simon asked.

“Several hundred horsemen,” the zealot replied, short of breath. “Mostly lancers, though I did spot at least two-score of our traitorous kinsmen carrying bows. They are following the path leading east, just out of range of our archers.”

In spite of his first chance to spill Roman blood in four years, Simon bar Giora found his feelings of resentment were directed more towards John of Giscala than their common foe. While he was relieved to put an end to their internal quarrel, he cursed himself for failing to defeat the Giscalan’s zealots despite his far superior numbers. Because of this numerical supremacy, Simon knew he would have to take the brunt of the early fighting against the imperial army.

“And your men are keeping their heads down?”

The fighter nodded. “As you directed. The Romans will think our defences are completely abandoned.”

“They’re taunting us!” another man spat in contempt. “Let us teach these vile defilers what it means to desecrate the Holy City!”

Simon turned to him, his mouth twisted in what could have been a malevolent grin or a scowl of anger. “Take three hundred of our men and block the path near the ravine, a mile to the east.”

The man ran to rally his compatriots.

The zealot leader turned to one of his Idumean commanders. “I want a thousand of your best spearmen ready to surround and annihilate these imperial shits.”

“It will be done.”

Simon wished for nothing more than to stain his sicae with Roman blood. However, he knew it was impractical to lead every action personally. His alliance with the Giscalans was fragile at best. Who knew what treachery John might attempt while Simon was chasing Roman horsemen outside the city walls?

He made the long climb up the Psephinus Tower steps. He heard

numerous protestations from some of his men, demanding they launch their full weight against the enemy cavalry. Simon said nothing. He reckoned he would have to deal rather firmly with the malcontents later. Did they not realise how foolish it would be to attack such a small group with the majority of their army? His warriors needed to be both aggressive and prudent when it came to battling these foreign monsters.

Red-faced and out of breath after the steep climb, Simon wiped his brow and gazed down upon the unfolding scene below. His men would tease the Romans and see what mistakes they were prone to. If they could slaughter an entire cavalry regiment, then God was surely favouring their endeavour.



The mounted detachment formed into a pair of columns, their eyes scanning the seemingly vacant ramparts, scrub brush, and groves of trees. Titus had elected to conduct a leaders' reconnaissance ahead of his escorts. With Commander Liberius, his subordinate centurions, and two companies of Siliana lancers, they sprinted ahead, well beyond a small valley enclosed by fruit trees. In doing so, they put distance between themselves and the rest of their troopers. Unbeknownst to them, zealots were emerging through a hidden side gate between them and the majority of their troopers.

The rest of the reconnaissance force halted in a large grove. Cavalrymen were shading themselves from the sun, while picking apples for themselves as well as their horses.

"Filthy Jewish pigs cowering behind their walls," a trooper scoffed.

This remark brought the glare of several Judean mounted archers. It was difficult for the allied troops sent by King Agrippa to fight beside the Romans; for although they were imperial loyalists, they were still subjected to the same racism and scorn as their wayward countrymen.

"I don't think we'll find them cowering," one of these men said, nodding towards the gradual rise that led out of the orchard.

All eyes turned to see numerous enemy skirmishers and heavily armed warriors forming into a large battle line.

"Gods damn it, I thought General Titus was supposed to warn us of any approaching threat!" a decurion swore, as the alert was shouted to the hundreds of horsemen who could not see their foes through the trees.

"They must have slipped behind him," a trooper reckoned. He took one

last bite of an apple and flung the core in the direction of the zealot mob.

"Little boys with their ponies look lost!" an enemy warrior sneered in heavily accented Latin.

His companions laughed, mocking the cavalrymen, who were suddenly aware of enemy fighters both in front and behind them.

A sling stone whipped high through the air, slapping hard against the branch of a tree. The large grove proved both fortuitous, as well as a hindrance for the Romans. With ample cover and concealment, the Judean slings and throwing spears were largely ineffective. By the same measure, the mounted archers could not get a clear shot at any of their adversaries. Rebel infantrymen were seen forming two ranks, long spears protruding forward.

"They're trying to goad us into attacking," a trooper said. An arrow skipped off the ground, causing his horse to rear up.

"Bastards lured us into a trap!" another lamented.

Indecision gripped the horsemen, a number of section leaders saying they should withdraw and fight their way past the rebels behind them. Others insisted they needed to press forward and link up with General Titus. All the while, the zealots continued to laugh at them, flinging the occasional missile weapon, along with torrents of profanity and verbal abuse. They did not attack, hoping to goad the mounted force out from the protection of the grove.

A half mile ahead, Titus and the senior officers from the cavalry regiment were surveying the ground near the northeast corner of the city. In the distance to the southeast, the Mount of Olives rose against the skyline.

"The new city known as Bezetha lies just beyond the north wall," an officer from the allied Judean mounted archers stated. "There's a second wall well within which links to the Antonia Fortress."

Titus contemplated the defences, which appeared mostly abandoned at the moment. An occasional sentry was spotted along the wall and guard towers. They appeared to be paying little attention to the contingent of imperial horsemen.

"It's almost as if they are ignoring us."

Commander Liberius then spoke up. "Or they wish to make us think that, sir. Perhaps they are hoping to draw us in closer to the city."

Titus' eyes grew wide in apprehension, and he bit the inside of his cheek in frustration. "Fuck!"

As soon as he turned his horse about, he could hear the sounds of the Jewish rebels mocking his detachment. He kicked his horse into a gallop, the officers and escorts following in confusion. Only Liberius seemed aware of his commanding general's trepidations.

At least a thousand enemy fighters were arrayed in a long line. Fortunately, all had their backs to them. The spearmen in the first two ranks wore bronze helmets and scale armour, wielding large bladed stabbing spears. The majority of the rest were lightly armed with slings, bows, and bundles of throwing spears.

Titus drew his spatha and gritted his teeth. "We'll charge through this lot, rally our men, and push back to the camp." He was suddenly regretting his decision to not wait for his personal baggage so he could don his armour. He knew the sensible thing would have been to entrust an armed reconnaissance to one of his subordinates. Yet, his impatience had placed him at terrible and unnecessary risk. It was a foolish risk to take, especially for a commanding general and son of the emperor!

"With me!" The commander-in-chief sprinted his horse right into the centre of their massed foes.

The officer from the mounted archers loosed an arrow which caught a zealot in the back of the leg. The man's screams alerted his mates, who turned about in bewilderment as the small detachment of horsemen crashed into their ranks.

Titus swung his spatha low. It deflected off the shield of a fleet-footed fighter. As the contingent rode down into the ravine, their troopers remounted, heeding the shouted orders of their officers.

"First and Second Companies, on line!" Commander Liberius bellowed over the din of confusion. He then turned to the allied Judean officer. "Have your men fall in behind them, the rest of my companies will follow."

"Understood."

Though deadly out in the open, mounted archers were simply not equipped for close combat. They knew they needed the protection offered by the Siliana lancers. And though they could scarcely see their enemies waiting behind them, they unleashed a pair of volleys in the hopes of dispersing the rebels before the first two companies advanced.

General Titus rode with the lead companies; however, he was far less brazen than usual given his lack of armour or helm. And while the trees hampered the accuracy of the mounted archers, they still succeeded in

scattering the large force of rebels that had hoped to trap them from behind. Several were shot down, and lay writhing with arrows protruding from various limbs. One had been shot through the stomach, and his cries of agony were loudest of all.

As the lead elements reached the Psephinus Tower, Titus halted and turned back to make certain his entire force managed to extricate itself. He winced when he saw scores of zealots attempt to swarm the rear guard. Two cavalrymen were pulled from their mounts and hacked to pieces; their screams echoing across the valley. Within minutes the rest of his forces emerged, the shouted insults of their zealot assailants unceasing.

The commander-in-chief brooded the entire way back to the column. All were silent, even among the officers, as they tried to make sense of what had just transpired. The Jewish rebels had attempted to lure the Romans into a trap and were almost successful. Titus knew it could have been far worse, the death of two troopers notwithstanding.

“It wasn’t a total loss, sir,” Commander Liberius reasoned. “We did get a look at their defences on the north and northeast sides. And we know they aren’t going to quietly hand the city over to us.”

“If only we had eyes within the walls,” Titus muttered. “What I wouldn’t give to know the disposition of our enemies. Are they finally united or are they still fighting each other? And what of their food and military supplies? Just how well-armed are they? How long can they hold out until they begin to starve?”

The commander made no reply as they approached the outskirts of the marching column, where two legions and thousands of auxilia troopers awaited their return.

Tiberius Alexander had been alerted as soon as the scouting contingent was spotted. He stood near the entrance to their marching camp, arms folded across his chest. “Judging from your appearance, I’d say you got into a bit of a scrap,” he observed.

“A minor altercation,” Titus replied, dismounting and handing the reins of his horse to a waiting groomsman.

The commander-in-chief summoned his senior commanders and staff officers. When all were gathered in a circle, he took a long stick and drew a rough outline of the city in the dirt.

“According to our friend, Josephus, the Hinnom Valley to the south makes any approach impractical,” Titus began. “Therefore, we will occupy it

with mounted auxiliaries and skirmishers. We lack the numbers to prevent them from using this terrain to move in and out of the city; we simply need to keep eyes on it, and harangue them as much as possible. The east and west approaches are the most heavily defended; the Fortress of Herod along the western wall, and the Temple itself on the east. So we should concentrate our assaults to the north. The Twelfth and Fifteenth Legions will encamp there. And once the Fifth Legion arrives, they will position themselves across from Herod's Palace, covering the approaches in and out of the west side of the city. The Tenth will take up an overwatch position along the Mount of Olives to the east. The Kidron Valley runs along the eastern ramparts of the city, which is also the heavily fortified temple's outer wall. It is forested and covered in gardens, so it is a likely area where the enemy will launch raids and counterattacks from."

"Even once the entire army assembles, it will be difficult to cordon off the entire city," Alexander observed.

"Then we must breach the walls quickly and break them," the ever-aggressive General Placidus asserted.

Titus agreed. "Once the Fifth and Tenth arrive, we'll test their defences. The emperor needs a quick victory; however, I will not lose thousands of troops in futile assaults with nothing to show for it. We may not be able to envelope the entire city, but neither can they defend every possible approach at once."

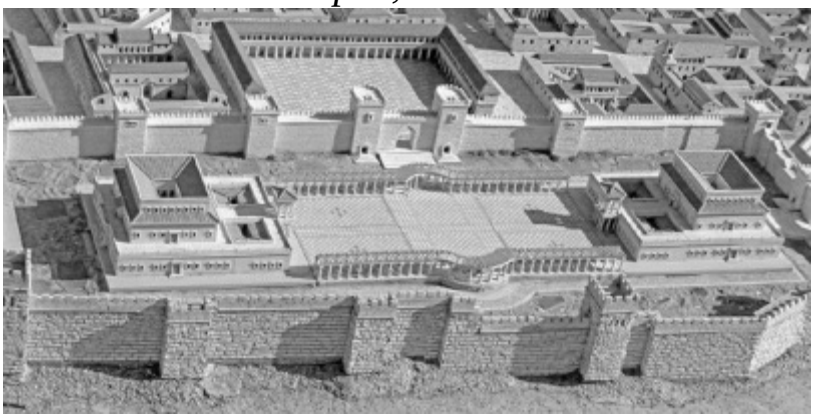
Despite the prince imperial's close call, there were no further sorties from the city. Within a day, the northern camp was established with roving cavalry patrols forming a presence to the south. The Fifth Legion arrived two days later, the Tenth the following afternoon. They had, perhaps, the best view of the city along the western slope of the Mount of Olives. They were also compelled to form their camp in a long line running parallel to the eastern wall of the city. As the Roman army consolidated and improved their various camps and defences, General Titus wondered if taking such an imposing fortress city was even possible. For the safety and stability of the imperial family, as well as the empire itself, failure was simply not an option. If the zealots were allowed to maintain control of the Jewish Holy City, other rebellious provincials would become emboldened, creating discord along the frontiers.

As Titus stood near the entrance to his centre camp, he made a bold

prediction, to both himself as well as the gods. “I will take Jerusalem or leave my rotting corpse buried beneath its walls.”

Chapter VII: Passover, Bloody Passover

Jerusalem
7 April, 70 A.D.



Herod's Fortress, western Jerusalem

Jerusalem was now under siege, yet that did not sway the people from all over Judea from performing their sacred duties to God and the Temple. In spite of the war, hundreds-of-thousands of pilgrims made the journey to the Holy City for the *Feast of Unleavened Bread,* also known as *The Passover*. The number of persons coming to witness the sacrifices and pay homage each year had only increased since the fighting erupted. It was doubtful that even the presence of the Roman army could keep wayfarers at bay. Within the city, there was much relief that the internal war between factions appeared to be over; however, John of Giscala knew there was still one sect left to deal with.

While Simon and John preferred to leave each other to their own devices, they knew they must settle the matter of the Temple for good. The two agreed to meet at the tribunal within Herod's Fortress; a place once used by the Roman prefects to dispense justice. As there was still a great deal of mistrust between the two, each man was accompanied by a hundred of his warriors and attendants. The eastern gate leading into the large forum of Upper City was left open. Curious citizens were kept at bay by dozens of fighters from each faction.

"I know why you asked me to come," John said plainly, as both men drew their swords and handed them to their nearest captains. "So let us come

right to the point."

"The Passover will soon be upon us," Simon replied, scarcely hiding his disgruntled demeanour. "And yet that filthy dog, Eleazar, continues to defile God's sacred temple."

"He won't for long," John reassured him. His eyes glinted with malicious glee. "God delivered our people from Egypt. So, too, will He give us back the holiest sanctum."

"Indeed." Simon was intrigued by his reluctant ally's assertion, though he was not entirely convinced. He folded his arms across his chest in emphasis. "How?"

"Leave that to me. Even now, thousands approach the Holy City, despite the pestilence of foreign invaders at our gates. It is the people themselves who God will use as His divine instrument to give us back what is ours." He paused for a moment. "But here are my terms; you may hold the Upper City as well as this fortress. However, it is my men who will reclaim the Temple, therefore our faction will control it. You will still have unfettered access to the sacred altars to perform your own sacrifices, but control of the Temple district will be mine."

"Fine." Simon gave a dismissive shrug. "The Temple will be yours, so long as you allow any who properly purify themselves access to the sacrificial altars. We've teased the Romans a bit, but it will not be enough to stop them. This is our people's gravest hour of need. It would not do to offend the Almighty when we need Him most."

John promised Simon that dignity would be restored to the Temple before the Passover week was finished. He took his leave, his guards clearing a path through the throngs of curious citizens who could not help but wonder what brought Simon's hated rival to Herod's Fortress.

Josephus' brother, Mathias, was among these onlookers. He glared as John walked past him, his hatred for the Giscalan undiminished. After all, it was his brigands who had beaten and robbed Mathias when he first came to Jerusalem with wagons full of wares to sell at market. He lost everything that day. Had it not been for his father's wealth, he would have been left impoverished. And the longer he remained, the more Jerusalem felt like a prison. He was thankful his wife and children had stayed with her family in Jericho. While that city had surrendered to the Romans, at least he knew they were safe. He still feared for his parents and his sister-in-law, who were kept in a state of house arrest by Simon bar Giora. None could leave their home to

so much as go to market without a dozen armed men escorting them. They were also forbidden to leave the house at night. Even now, several of Simon's warriors shadowed Mathias, watching his every move. He yearned more than ever to make a break for it, to flee the city, and perhaps even defect to the Romans. However, he knew this would condemn his family to a terrible fate. For Mathias ben Mathias, Jerusalem had become his prison.



Because of the rough terrain and series of impassable valleys to the south and east, and with the western gate leading into the city via Herod's Fortress restricted, most travellers to the Holy City arrived from the Damascus Road to the north. Most of the Romans knew nothing of the Jewish sacred *Feast of Unleavened Bread*, and so the arrival of pilgrims baffled them. With Jerusalem now under siege, it seemed bizarre to the imperial soldiers when people started to arrive from the north. They came at first in small groups, setting up their humble encampments about a mile from the vast marching camps of the Twelfth and Fifteenth Legions. Within days the numbers grew into the hundreds, then thousands.

By the 7th of April, the throngs extended for miles along each road leading into Jerusalem. It was now seven days before the Jewish holy week of Passover. The devout were not about to let a bitter war at the gates of the holy city prevent them from making their sacred pilgrimage. A Roman checkpoint had been established at the crossroads north of the city, where the northern and north-western roads converged. For the soldiers of the Twelfth Fulminata Legion, the western road held many bad memories, for it was the path that led through the bloody pass of Beth Horon.

"A valley of death in whose shadow we will forever remain," a decanus muttered, as he watched the seemingly endless line of Jewish men, women, and children making their way past the nearby village of Gabaon.

"Sergeant, what in Hades are we supposed to do with all these people?" a legionary asked.

"Don't these ignorant twats know there's a war on?" another asked incredulously. The soldier spoke loud enough to be heard by the nearest waiting pilgrims. As it was doubtful any of them spoke Latin, his insults went unheeded.

Their centurion approached, his scowl betraying his annoyance. At least

two cohorts of legionaries were turned out to blockade the road, while scores of cavalrymen rode along the open plain to make certain wayward pilgrims did not slip past them.

“Thank Mars you’re here,” the decanus said. He saluted his commanding officer. “This is the strangest damn thing I’ve seen; multitudes converging on Jerusalem, yet they have not come to fight. What do you think it means?”

“Some damned Jewish holiday from what I hear,” the centurion replied. He nodded to one particular man accompanied by his wife and six young children. “These people are but sheep. If they intended to liberate Jerusalem, they would not have brought their wives and children. At any rate, we’ve sent word to General Titus.”

“Glad to hear it, sir.” The decanus then spoke in a low voice, as if ashamed, “I’ll come right out and confess, these people are kind of freaking me out. They started arriving a few days ago. At first, we thought they were just curious nomads. They seemed content to camp well away from our lines. But now their numbers have become intolerable.”

“It’s the same everywhere,” the centurion remarked. “Even to the south, in the anarchy that is the Sicarii territory, patrols have spotted thousands of travellers approaching the city.”

As the men discussed the situation, General Titus and several of his staff officers rode up from his headquarters to the south.

“Look alive, lads!” the centurion barked, as he and his men came to attention. “General, sir.” The officer exchanged salutes with the commander-in-chief who took a moment to survey the scene.

It appeared Titus was smiling.

“Let these people through, centurion,” the prince imperial ordered.

The centurion and his legionaries were perplexed.

“What…all of them, sir?”

“Yes, all of them,” Titus replied curtly.

The centurion to his men with his vine stick. “Alright, you heard the commanding general! Let this lot through!”

As the excited pilgrims were waved through by the soldiers, they gave shouts of praise and thanks to their god. The centurion, meanwhile, could not fathom why his commander-in-chief was grinning to the point that he appeared to be stifling a fit of laughter.

“Respectfully, sir,” he said as he walked up to Titus. “Are we now trying to win the hearts of these people with our generosity?”

“Generosity has nothing to do with it,” Titus replied. He gazed down at the officer. “And if you cannot see how this plays into our hands, then you lack imagination. I said they could enter the city. I never said they could leave.”



As he watched the wall of Roman soldiers part, allowing the people to pass, Yaakov gave a sigh of relief. He kept the hood on his cloak close to his face, concerned the soldiers might recognise him. He knew this was an absurdity. He had been a no one within the Judean resistance in Galilee; set free by the man who, last he heard, was now Emperor of Rome. Still, the sight of these men in their segmented plate armour with brightly painted shields, filled him with dread and a flood of terrible memories.

Ever since the fall of Jotapata, when he and Josephus were plucked from their hiding place in a well after their friends had committed mutual suicide, the young man had become a wanderer, lost in both body and soul. At each town and village he scratched a living as best as he could manage before moving on once more. He sold fish for a time while living in an abandoned shack near the city of Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee. He eventually made his way to Jericho, where he hoped to find friends or distant relations. But once he heard the city had fallen to the Romans, he turned back and drifted from village to village for the next two years. All the while, the imperial onslaught continued unabated throughout the old Jewish kingdoms. The only region not swarming with soldiers was to the south, yet Yaakov feared the Sicarii even more than the Romans. Eleazar ben Yair would attempt to enlist him into his band of murderers, or else cut his throat.

Walking past the lines of imperial soldiers, Yaakov kept to the centre of the crowd. They hurriedly made their way down the Damascus Road that bisected the Roman camps. He could not help but wonder if his wayward friend, Josephus, was encamped amongst their enemies. He had heard rumours regarding the man who was once his mentor. It was generally accepted that Josephus was alive, yet Yaakov was disheartened every time he heard his friend had changed his allegiance and was assisting the Romans in their conquest of Judea.

The gates were opened, and they passed into the New City of Bezetha. Many of the pilgrims raised their hands to the sky in supplication, thanking

God for delivering them safely into the Holy City. Many sought out the nearest inns. Those with family in Jerusalem made their way to the homes of their loved ones.

For most, who had neither family nor the coin to pay the extortionist rates demanded by innkeepers every Passover, they carried rolled mats and blankets and would content themselves with sleeping on the ground. Yaakov was among them.

He carried a small sack of bread, hoping it would last him the week. And what few coins he did possess would be used to purchase an appropriate sacrifice, so that he may offer proper homage before the Almighty and ask for his divine guidance. He climbed up the high slopes of a large rock formation. It stood out like a hideous wart along the landscape. Known as Golgotha, it was where the Romans had conducted the majority of executions during the occupation. Originally, the site was chosen due to its location, in close proximity yet just outside of Jerusalem. However, as cities are known to do, Jerusalem's population expanded. In time, Golgotha was swallowed up by the vast sprawl of the district known as Bezetha, or *'New City'*.

The young man could be assured of some measure of privacy, for most Jews viewed Golgotha as a cursed and wicked place. As he sat along the edge which faced east, Yaakov recalled his previous apprehensions about encamping on a place where so many wicked souls had been sent into the afterlife. Would he hear their cries in his sleep, as their spirits were forever tormented by the Roman whips and the excruciating suffering that was death by crucifixion? After all he had suffered during the last four years, such thoughts were laughable. In truth, Yaakov felt nothing. Golgotha was a barren rock, nothing more. If any such spirits did haunt it, they could do no more harm to him than he'd already suffered in this life.

What concerned Yaakov more was the Temple, majestically towering in the distance over the walls of both its own district and that of the quarter known as Tyropoeon. Did God truly reside within, as he'd been led to believe since he was a young boy? Or was the Temple nothing more than stone and wood, adorned with tapestries? With much shame in his heart, Yaakov quietly confessed that he no longer knew what he believed in.



If there were any trepidations from the Jewish priests or elders regarding

the Romans allowing pilgrims into the city, few were willing to speak up. Only Matthias the Elder had expressed any sort of reservations about their enemy's supposed generosity. During Passover, the city's population more than doubled, causing great strain on food stores even during years of plenty. Now, with Jerusalem's emergency stores of grain destroyed, the city could find itself in severe crisis within days. He expressed his concerns to Simon bar Giora during one of their many meetings leading into the holy week.

"And would you rather they were kept from God's holy sanctum?" Simon asked accusingly. He then attempted to reassure the old priest. "If we were to deny the people, especially after the Romans have let them through the gates, what do you think would happen? They would turn on us and fling us from the walls of the city."

"I suppose you're right," Matthias replied, though still unconvinced. He was beginning to regret having aided Simon in his seizing control over a large portion of the city. Though John of Giscala had become an embittered tyrant, Simon was scarcely any better. The fighting between them had been so horrific it was only now, after making a tentative truce, that the rotted bodies of the slain were finally given any sort of proper burial. Many of the corpses thrown from the city walls had been left where they lay, the unfortunate souls who had neither family nor friend to give them their funerary rites. The zealots who slew them cared nothing for the deceased. In their cruelty, they viewed the bodies as fresh meat for wild dogs.

Matthias was deeply concerned about how many more would join the dead as the siege progressed. No one ever spoke of their burned grain stores, yet all knew such an event was catastrophic. It troubled him deeply that no one was even addressing the pending food shortages. With so many pilgrims flooding the streets of the city, how much more would their remaining grain and livestock supplies be strained? But, for the moment, there was an ever more pressing matter, one which threatened to stain the most sacred places in Jerusalem with blood.



For the second time, John of Giscala found himself faced with the task of saving God's holy temple from defilers. The first had been under the cover of night during a violent thunderstorm, when he and his men wrested control of the temple from the Roman sympathiser, Hanan. Now they would take it

back once more, this time from their erstwhile ally who had since betrayed them.

Despite it being a warm spring day, his men wore long cloaks where they could conceal their weapons. Most carried sicae daggers, while a handful, including John, wielded capture Roman gladii.

“It is time,” he said, addressing his men.

These were handpicked fighters, as fierce in courage as they were stalwart in loyalty.

“Remember, it is Eleazar we are after,” Levi emphasised. “Most of the people flocking to the temple are simple pilgrims. It is they we fight for this day.”

John scowled. “We must not shirk our duty before the Lord,” he stressed. “It is *God* for whom we fight. While our prey is that filthy traitor, we must not allow for any hesitation, even if it means striking down those who find themselves between us and his band of traitors. Any innocents who fall this day will find themselves welcomed into the gates of paradise as martyrs to the true faith.”

Allowing for no more discussion, the zealot leader signalled for his men to follow him. They dispersed into five groups of ten men each and made their way by different streets and alleyways to the temple district. It seemed every foot of space was crowded with pilgrims hoping to make their way into the temple complex. He knew the short trek would be extremely difficult and time-consuming. John emplaced his men during the early hours, just after sunrise. The streets were still crowded with pilgrims, yet he knew it would become even more claustrophobic as the day wore on.

The glow of the sun broke through a layer of high clouds, shining in the faces of zealots, as if God himself were smiling down upon those who would soon liberate his holiest sanctum. Armed men lined the ramparts of the massive temple walls. Others tried to control the flow of people into the outer complex. John kept his head beneath his hood, lest he bring unwanted attention to himself. Most of the pilgrims had no idea what he looked like, but Eleazar’s thugs would certainly know his face. They forced their way through the gates nearest the Antonia Fortress rather than the main entrance to the south. John took a moment to glance up at the ramparts once manned by Roman soldiers, now swarming with zealot skirmishers.

“Mindless fools,” he said quietly to himself. “God had best turn their hearts, or I shall send them to him.”

The outer complex of the temple, where the vast majority of public business was conducted, was larger than most of the surrounding neighbourhoods outside its huge walls. In the very centre, raised up on a series of steps all the way around, was a tall inner wall, which in turn surrounded the holy Temple. Numerous vendor stalls were scattered throughout, selling incense and sacrificial beasts to those who wished to garner God's favour. Given the state of turmoil and the terrifying sight of the imperial Roman army outside the city, there was no shortage of people willing to part with their last shekel in hopes of attaining divine blessings.

On the outer steps leading to a high sacrificial altar, John spotted his quarry. Despite not being a member of the college of priests, he was dressed in their sacred vestments, conducting himself as if it were he who was High Priest, rather than Phannias, who stood off to the side as little more than an observer.

"By Moses and Jacob!" Eleazar said with a laugh when he spied John. "I admit, I am a bit surprised to see you here, old friend."

"You take much liberty in addressing me as 'friend'." John's demeanour was calm, though his eyes bore into the temple governor.

Eleazar's smile waned, and he gave a nod of understanding. "It is true, our differences are as great as ever. That you have aligned yourself with that murdering despot, Simon, does not help matters."

"Simon is but an ally of necessity," John explained. "I have never called him friend. You, however, were once very dear to me. Perhaps with God's help, we can come to an understanding."

While he had little desire to discuss matters at all with the condemned, he noted that Eleazar's warriors were nowhere to be seen. Only a handful of priests were by his side. The disgracefully incompetent high priest, Phannias ben Samuel, remained atop the steps leading into the inner temple courtyard. Meanwhile, at least ten of John's own men were slowly working their way through the crowds, encircling their unsuspecting victim. The rest were forcing their way towards the high priest, who was surrounded by at least twenty heavily armed guards.

Eleazar contemplated his rival's words for a moment. "Then with the Lord's blessings, I welcome you. Are you here to offer a sacrifice upon the high altar?"

John nodded slowly, his eyes now fixed on the zealot nearest Eleazar. "I am," he replied. "I am here to make a sacrifice and to give back to God what

is rightfully his."

With the subtlest of signs from their leader, several of the zealots swarmed the unsuspecting Eleazar. He cried out as the first blade, a captured Roman gladius, was plunged into his back. Light danced off the numerous weapons that were quickly drawn and thrust into their now screaming prey. The temple chief's white and gold trimmed robes were quickly becoming saturated in blood. He fell to his knees. Time seemed to slow. A few surreal moments passed during which none of the surrounding throng appeared to notice the horrific violence that was now desecrating the temple grounds. Only when John drew his own blade and raised it high did people start to shout and scream in surprise and alarm.

"For Israel and Judea!"

His battle cry was the signal for the rest of his men. They drew their short swords and daggers and swarmed the steps towards the high priest. The score of guards were caught unawares. To their credit, they immediately closed ranks and brought their spears to bear. Three were not quick enough and were brutally slain on the steps. Their screams of pain echoed across the vast courtyard. Blood spurted from their twitching bodies, leaving streaks along the white stone steps.

"Protect the high priest!" one of the men shouted.

Though outnumbered, they were far better armed and equipped than their adversaries. Most wore captured Roman hamata chainmail, while carrying circular shields and wide-bladed stabbing spears. A brawl ensued, as John's men attempted to overwhelm Eleazar's fighters. The guards formed a wall of spears and shields, one of the men lunging forward and plunging his weapon into a zealot's stomach. The man doubled over in extreme agony, his guts ruptured. One of his companions took a spear point directly in the eye. The subsequent high-pitched shriek echoed louder than any of the cacophony of battle cries and weapons clashes.

"Grab him," John ordered, pointing at the badly stricken and bloodied Eleazar.

Despite numerous fearful wounds, he was still alive. The zealot leader raised his weapon high while he and his men brutally shoved their way towards the temple steps. Eleazar's men in the Antonia Fortress, as well as those in and around the temple, were now suddenly aware of the chaos. Due to the overwhelming number of pilgrims, it would take some time for them to force their way through to the inner temple.

John sought to put an end to the struggle before he and his warriors were overwhelmed. *"Enough!"* he shouted, as they approached the steps. "Stand down, Levi!"

His friend, who had been leading the attack, complied.

John looked at the remaining temple guards. "My brothers, our quarrel is not with you."

The whimpering Eleazar was then drug forward, causing the high priest and the assembled guards to gasp.

"What is this blasphemy?" a guard shouted in rage. "You dare to defile this sacred ground with violence!"

"Not defile," John explained calmly. "By this sacrifice, we purify the temple and restore it to God's people." He nodded to the men holding Eleazar upright for all to see.

The temple governor was a fearful sight; his robes were torn and splotched in dark crimson. Blood had splashed his face, and he was in terrible pain. "May God grant you endless suffering," he hissed. Blood and spittle ran down the corners of his mouth.

In malice, John raised his weapon once more. *"And so dies a traitor to God and his people!"* He slashed his blade hard and deep across Eleazar's throat.

His eyes wide, gouts of blood erupted from both his mouth and the hideous gash. Eleazar's eyes glazed over as death took hold. The zealots released him, his corpse landing face-first on the steps. Those pilgrims nearest the unholy site cried out in horror.

Worse than the endless violence that had plagued Jerusalem since the internal war erupted between factions, to have blood spilled within the temple itself was a dire sacrilege. Many wondered if their previous suffering was God's punishment for the violent overthrow of the Jewish government under Hanan. He and his leading councilmen were also murdered within the temple walls. What judgement would the Almighty unleash on the people now?

"Wicked defiler!" one of Eleazar's fighters shouted.

Dozens forced their way through the crowd and faced John. Their weapons were drawn, faces red with rage.

"Damn you, Giscala!" another spat. "To commit such blasphemy during the Passover!"

"Hold, my friends," John pleaded. He waved his hand towards the high priest, whom he addressed. "Phannias, you know me. It was I who, by the

grace of God, helped you attain the high priesthood. I implore you to use your anointed and exalted position to call for unity among our people. Outside those walls, the hell-spawn of Rome are converging to destroy the temple and our people. Though I despise him, Simon bar Giora has willingly joined his sword with mine, that we may save God's chosen people. This man, whose blood stains the temple steps, refused our entreaties of an alliance. He would have rather seen the temple desecrated by Rome than protected."

Phannias, though lacking in both intellectual savvy and leadership, had enough sense to know he would do well to support this murderer from Giscala. Were he to condemn John, the uneasy peace would be shattered, with renewed violence unleashed upon Jerusalem once more. Such chaos, coupled with the encroachment of the Roman army, would spell doom for all.

"Our friend speaks much wisdom," he said at last, addressing the people as well as the swarm of armed fighters. "We cannot hope for peace so long as Jews continue to spill each other's blood." He signalled for his men to stand down.

They shouldered their spears, still clearly distraught over the death of their leader and friends.

John mounted the steps and spoke to the armed men. "If it pleases the high priest, I would be honoured to assume the role as governor of the temple. I have already spoken with Simon, and he has agreed that the temple should fall under my jurisdiction. You men who fought for Eleazar have proven yourselves brave. I offer my right hand to you, asking that we stand as one. Together we will expel the Romans once and for all from the ancient kingdoms of Israel and Judah. I further pledge my life for a free Judea. The unholy armies of Caesar will never set foot within these sacred walls so long as my lungs draw breath!"

The armed warriors were still in a state of shock; their leader's bloody corpse leaving a sickening stream of blood running down the temple steps, and they were momentarily indecisive. All knew the high priest was a weak-minded fool, yet because he had spoken so passionately in front of a massive throng of the people, they were left with little choice.

"We pledge our weapons to you, John of Giscala," a guards' captain said, after a few moments of uncomfortable silence. "And our lives we give to God. If you are indeed his chosen champion, may his divine blessings cast down on you. And if you are not, then may his divine judgment strike you

down.”



Having spent his last twenty shekels on a sacrificial dove, Yaakov had hoped to offer up a sacrifice worthy of gaining God’s favour. Now, as he witnessed in horror the heretical slaughter of the temple governor, he was filled with a deep sense of revulsion. Holding the bird close against his chests, he backed his way through the throngs of people who were in a state of bewildered shock.

Word of the massacre was already spreading through the disbelieving crowds as Yaakov made his way back to one of the large southern gates leading out of the temple district. People from both Upper and Lower City were now converging on the high steps leading to the Temple Mount. Driven by inquisitiveness, they sought to know the truth regarding the murder of Eleazar ben Simon. Such morbid curiosity filled Yaakov with disgust.

He forced his way over to the northeast corner of the high steps, which overlooked the quarter known as the City of David. The steps stood high enough that he could see over Jerusalem’s easternmost wall. He held the dove close, gently stroking its head as he gazed towards the long line of earthen ramparts, topped with sharp stakes, which ran along the western slope of the Mount of Olives. It looked like a gaping, wound, as if the ground itself were crying out in agony. Imperial legionaries patrolled the length, like armoured demons burst forth from the bowels of hell. Sections of cavalry troopers roved the gardens and groves of trees at the base of the hill. And yet these men, his mortal enemies, suddenly seemed more human to Yaakov than those wicked murderers who bloodied the Temple while blasphemously proclaiming they were doing God’s will. He turned his gaze back to the towering pillars of the inner Temple itself. A hollow sensation washed over him. He stared at the Temple’s magnificence and felt nothing. He then looked down at the dove clutched in his arms. It was a beautiful bird. As he continued to caress its head, he felt that to kill such a wondrous creature would be an affront to the Almighty rather than a pleasing sacrifice.

“Go,” he said. He lifted his hands to the sky and released the dove.

It furiously flew away in the direction of the Roman camp.

“Fly to the heavens, for you will no longer find God in this defiled place.”



During the following days, sacrifices and celebrations of the Passover continued unabated. As soon as the bodies of Eleazar and those fallen during the skirmish on the steps of the altar were cleared away, Phannias was directed by John to continue in his duties to the temple. Along the north side of the enclosed district, John formed up the remnants of Eleazar's warriors. To a man, they all swore fealty to him, echoing their captains' pronouncements that they prayed he was God's true champion.

As the self-appointed governor of the temple, John took Eleazar's rooms for himself. The quarters of the high priests were far more lavish and comfortable than any to be found in Lower City, and the zealot leader was glad to finally have a comfortable bed to lie upon.

"Eleazar had nearly three thousand men," Levi noted, recalling the parade of warriors from the early afternoon. "All but a couple hundred have sworn their blades to us. Some will likely run to Simon. Others will simply disappear."

"And I daresay a few will slink away to the Romans," John surmised.

"A shame, though it cannot be helped," his friend shrugged. Despite their recent string of successes over the past few days, his face was etched with doubt.

The Giscalan grinned. "Why, Levi, surely you see how this favours our enterprise. These deserters will let the Romans know that our people are no longer divided, but ready to face them united under God's holy banner."

"Let us hope they stay united," one of his captains remarked. "Forgive me, John, but I simply do not trust Simon."

"Nor do I," the zealot leader confessed. "But he has agreed to an alliance so long as the Romans remain a threat. And he has more than twice as many warriors as us, even with those we enlisted from Eleazar's fighters. He controls the greatest swaths of the city and will have to bear the largest burden of the fighting."

Levi added, "It will suit him. After all, he still speaks of little except his victory over the Romans at Beth Horon. I suppose he has earned that right, seeing as how he holds the last real victory over the invaders. Mind you, that was four years ago. Josephus could have ended the war at Jotapata had he not betrayed our people to Vespasian."

John's expression remained passive, yet his words were like ice. "Levi, I

will ask you to never mention the traitor's name in my presence again. Josephus ben Matthias has condemned his soul to eternal damnation. That his family is safely protected within Simon's Upper City districts is a constant source of irritation." He sighed in resignation. "I should have had the lot of them put down like rabid dogs when I had the chance."

"Don't be so quick to order their executions," a captain remarked. "After all, they may at some point prove useful to us."

"Yes," John concurred, stroking his chin in contemplation. "We may need hostages before this is over, and Josephus' family are the only ones the Romans will give a damn about saving. Once they are no longer of any use, I want their throats cut in front of the great traitor. Let his sorrow at watching his beloveds' blood stain the earth serve as a warning to all who would betray me."

Levi showed concern at this last remark. It was not simply that John was promising to kill Josephus' family, though this troubled Levi. He knew Mathias and the others were likely damned. It was that his master was speaking about those who would betray *him* rather than stressing their defiance towards God. He shook his head and dismissed it as a simple tongue slippage on John's part.

Levi knew he had to steel his resolve, for the coming weeks would be filled with terrible trials and savage conflicts. He had already changed his allegiance once when he abandoned Josephus for John. And now that John controlled the Holy Temple, he had to remain firm in his faith that the Giscalan was anointed by the Lord to set his people free.



The man's name was Yeshua ben Malaki. At just eighteen years of age, and unable to grow a proper beard, he was more of an overgrown boy than a man. And yet, the past four years of violence had bludgeoned the innocence of youth from his soul. The son of a cobbler, he had been apprenticed to a tailor who specialised in priestly robes five years earlier. He had had little time to learn his trade before his entire world was plunged into violence. Like many, he revered Hanan ben Hanan and later sided with Eleazar during his revolt against John, because it was John who slew Hanan. With Eleazar gone, Yeshua found little left to fight for. He could have gone over to Simon's faction like many of his friends, but Yeshua simply did not trust him,

especially since he had now aligned himself with Giscala. And had it not been his men who set fire to the granaries? At least that is what Eleazar told them.

It was now the second night since John reclaimed the temple. The Passover celebrations continued despite being marred by violence within the holy sanctum. Yeshua, therefore, found it fairly easy to slip away into the dark, moonless night. The Roman camp atop the Mount of Olives was fairly close. During the day, one could clearly see the swarm of activity that reminded the young Jewish man of an anthill. The surrounding hills and valleys echoed with the sounds of trees being felled, and hammers pounded constantly as the imperial army built its fearsome siege towers. Their earthworks were encroaching towards the first wall to the north, and Yeshua knew it would not be long before the assaults began.

The young man took great care as he made his way down the Kidron Valley, where he stumbled onto one of the main roads running parallel to the temple's eastern wall. Virtually blinded by the incessant darkness, he crashed into a thicket, falling and cutting his hands, face, and legs. He bit his lip as he fought back the stream of profanities that threatened to bellow forth. The thicket formed part of a natural wall around a large grove of olive trees known as *The Gardens of Gethsemane*.

Just past the gardens the ground opened up, allowing Yeshua a clear view of the string of torches that lined the Roman camp. From a distance, the red and yellow flickering lights looked like swarms of sinister eyes gazing down on him accusingly. Distances were difficult to judge in the dark. The lights appeared to be far away, yet it was but a few minutes after he started his ascent that a voice shouted menacingly, *"Halt! Who comes upon the watch?"*

Yeshua practically leapt off his feet and was fearful that he may have soiled his tunic. He saw several soldiers lurking behind an earthen mound well in front of the barricades. Two carried spears and shields, the others had bows raised, ready to loose their arrows. The men were auxilia skirmishers the Romans deployed as picquets a short way from the camp. The young Jew reckoned that if he could see four or five of them, there were likely more lurking in the darkness.

He spoke very little Latin but had memorised one phrase for just such a moment. His hands raised in surrender and said, "A deserter from the Jerusalem garrison."

It was midmorning when Yeshua was taken to see the commanding legate of Legio X, Lucilius Bassus. Having sent word to General Titus that they caught a deserter, the commander-in-chief rode over from his own camp across from the north-western ramparts of the city. Yeshua's hands were bound in front of him, though he had been treated with surprising clemency. He reckoned this may have been in part because the Romans were anxious for information from within the city. That he had come to them willingly, well before the battering rams struck the first blow, had likely spared him from their whips. As he was grabbed by each arm and led into the tent where the Roman commanding general awaited him, Yeshua noticed a Jewish man standing just behind him. He had never met Josephus, but heard his name mentioned many times both before and during the war. Yeshua thought he must have seen him at some point during their shared time within the temple, but could not be certain if this was, in fact, the 'great traitor' who stood before him.

Titus tasked Josephus with accompanying him to meet the prisoner. He knew the city well and what questions to ask about Jerusalem's defences. And since the prisoner spoke no Latin or Greek, the prince imperial needed an interpreter.

"Some of our picquets found this man wandering aimlessly towards our fortifications," General Bassus said. "He's lucky the archers didn't shoot him dead."

"As we may be," Titus surmised. "Think he might be a spy?"

"If he is, he's a lousy excuse for one," Bassus remarked. "The lads heard him crashing through the gardens long before he came upon them."

Titus nodded to Josephus, whom he had briefed on a series of questions to ask.

"What is your name?" Josephus asked.

"Yeshua ben Malaki…may I ask what is yours?"

The former Judean general smirked. "I think you know who I am. Now, you say you were part of the Jerusalem garrison."

"Yes."

"Which faction did you fight under?"

"Until two days ago, I served Eleazar ben Simon."

"The governor of the temple," Josephus acknowledged. "I know him well."

“You *did* know him well,” Yeshua emphasized. “He’s dead, cut down by that vile beast, John of Giscala, within the temple’s sacred grounds.”

Though he held no love for Eleazar, Josephus shook his head in disgust. “And during the Passover, no less. Is nothing sacred to that man?”

“I would say not, which is why I am here. I want to see the temple restored as a symbol of peace and beauty for our people. Twice now John of Giscala has tainted it with bloodshed.”

“What of the fighting within the city?” Titus interrupted Josephus translation. “Are the factions still making war upon each other?”

Yeshua shook his head when Josephus asked him. “No. John and Simon bar Giora have made an uneasy truce. They agreed that each will maintain control over their own districts, and together they will expel the Romans from Judea.”

“How many fighting men do they have total?” The commander-in-chief asked, ignoring this last remark.

“John has between eight and nine thousand warriors including the majority of those who once followed Eleazar. Simon has roughly ten thousand of his own fighters with another five thousand allied Idumean soldiers.”

“Bloody hell, we outnumber them nearly three-to-one,” General Placidus noted.

“Yes,” Titus replied. “However, the city has a population of perhaps half a million, with an even greater number of pilgrims for the Jewish Passover. Even if only one-in-five are men of fighting age, the rebels could conceivably rally as many as two hundred thousand to face us.”

“Then we must try to negotiate a surrender,” Josephus pleaded.

Titus continued to brood before telling the soldiers guarding Yeshua, “Take him away.”

“Wait!” the young man said, his pleading eyes fixed on Titus. “Please, tell me I will not be crucified or sold into slavery. I beg of you, I came to you in good faith.”

The Roman general gave an almost imperceptible nod as Josephus translated his next words. “The first blows of the battering rams have yet to strike,” he replied slowly. “Therefore, the chance of clemency still exists. This man will remain a prisoner until the city is taken. After, he will be freed as a sign of Roman mercy.”

Chapter VIII: We'll Give Them War

East of the Antonia Fortress
15 April, 70 A.D.



Legionaries during morning parade

As the sun rose, Titus and a contingent of horsemen once again rode around the defences of the Jewish holy city. The purpose of this latest sortie was two-fold. Firstly, he consented to allow Josephus the chance to parlay with the defenders; and second, surmising that this would prove futile, he needed to find the weakest point along the outer wall. Each of his three divisions had already been given the order to begin building siege platforms and to set fire to the suburbs outside the city walls. This last order was staid just long enough for the commanding general to give the zealots a chance at peace.

"The northwest corner is the weak point," Titus stated, as he nodded towards the imposing walls overlooked by the Tower of Psephinus. "The valleys make most of the approaches impractical. And the walls of the temple, as well as Herod's Fortress, are likely too strong for our rams to be effective."

"The wall near the Antonia Fortress is also vulnerable," Centurion Nicanor noted, having been attached to Titus' escort this day.

"It is also John of Giscala's territory," Josephus added. "Despite the

enmity we share, I believe we have a better chance of negotiating with him than with Simon."

The wall surrounding Bezetha linking the New City to the temple district was referred to by Josephus as 'The Third Wall'. The area where he, Titus, Nicanor, and their escorts approached was near where the eastern portion of the wall joined with that of the outer temple complex. Lower than the other defences, it was also overshadowed by the Antonia Fortress. Titus scowled at the sight of the Roman fortress that for decades served as a source of imperial power within the Jewish holy city, now infested with zealots and rebellious thugs who'd murdered most of the garrison.

The three men dismounted near the road that ran parallel to the wall. Titus ordered their escorts to keep back in a ready skirmish line, should the rebels attempt a surprise sortie. Excited voices were heard shouting down into the city from the ramparts, now teeming with curious onlookers. A series of bellowed orders caused the men to give way. Soon Josephus found himself gazing upon the face of his most hated rival and false-friend, whom he had not seen in years.

"Well, well," John said, haughtily folding his arms across his chest. "The defiler *Yetzer HaRa* has returned."

Josephus' face remained impassive, despite being referred to by the Hebrew term for incarnate evil. It wasn't until he saw the man standing next to John that he showed any outward emotion. His face broke into a broad smile of both joy and relief at the sight of one who he loved, and long since thought departed for the afterlife. "Levi!" he shouted. "You live! Thanks be to God!"

"I live because I escaped from your treachery," Levi snarled.

Josephus' countenance began to cloud over.

"This is the man who was supposed to defend Galilee!" John interrupted, pointing at Josephus accusingly. "You couldn't wait to make a deal with the Romans, could you?"

"That is a lie!" Josephus snapped. He fought back his emotions, not wishing to get into a war of words with the Giscalan. He addressed his old friend once more. "Levi, you were there. We held Jotapata for forty-seven days, and fought with every last bit of our resolve. Do you not remember the suffering of the people as they slowly starved to death, while injury and disease wasted away our fighting men?"

“Don’t listen to him,” John countered. “Will you take the word of a murderer who now stands with the Romans? Look at him, he even wears their armour!”

Josephus continued to ignore John, instead pleading with Levi. The joy he’d felt at seeing his old friend still among the living was darkened by the gaze of hatred that came from the man he loved like a brother.

“What happened at Jotapata, we cannot allow to happen here. If the Romans are forced to use their engines of war to take the city, there will be no mercy. Please, Levi, remember the suffering of the women and children and magnify that twenty-fold.” He paused before turning to Nicanor. “I brought a friend, one who loves our people as much as we do.”

“A Roman?” John scoffed. “You come to parlay and dare to claim that a *Roman* is a friend of the Jews? And just how many did he kill during the taking of Jotapata? How many Jews has this pagan butcherer slain?”

“Far fewer than you are responsible for,” Nicanor countered in perfect Hebrew. “Tell me, Giscalan, how many of your fellow Jews have *you* murdered? Our people are at war because you rebelled against the lawful rule of Rome. But Jerusalem is just as much my home as it is yours. I was raised here, I grew up among your people, and I speak your languages. Levi, you know me! You knew my father, who loved both Jew and Roman alike.”

Instead of placating Levi, Nicanor’s words caused him to seethe with rage. His bow, until then concealed by the ramparts, was suddenly raised to his shoulder, an arrow half drawn. Titus, oblivious to the entire conversation due to his inability to speak Hebrew or Aramaic, grimaced at the threatening gesture. He tried to quickly calculate just how close to the wall they were, and if they were in range of a bowman.

“For God’s sake, Levi!” Josephus said. “Do not do this. I implore you, save the people now while you still can. Tell John what really happened at Jotapata…”

“Traitor!” Levi roared, pulling the bowstring back and letting his arrow fly.

His arrow flew wide of its mark, and Nicanor yelped as he was struck in the shoulder. His hamata chain armour absorbed most of the impact, but the arrow managed to break several links and bury itself a half inch into his shoulder.

“Nicanor!” Josephus said, grabbing his friend.

Dozens of bows were raised from the defences.

Though Titus had not been able to understand a word that was said, the message was clear as the three men quickly backed away under a torrent of insults from the defenders. His face was red with anger.

"By Venus' cunt!" Nicanor shouted. He jerked the arrow from his shoulder. A trickle of blood ran down his arm, and he clenched his fist repeatedly, gritting his teeth. He then looked over to Josephus, whose face was ashen.

"No," he whispered. "Please, God, not Levi…"

"He's fallen under Giscala's spell," Nicanor replied, breathing calmly despite the shooting pain. "There's nothing you can do for him."

Titus was glaring at Josephus reprovingly. "The time for talking is over." He looked back towards the city. "If these bastards want war, then that is what we shall give them."



That afternoon, thick columns of black smoke rose up from the residential suburbs to the north and west of Jerusalem. They were abandoned, for their residents had fled to the protection of the high walls once the Romans were seen approaching the city. Many wept silently that night, watching from a distance as their homes were destroyed. The streets of Jerusalem were now overflowing with Passover pilgrims trapped within the holy city, unable to leave. Those who had attempted to do so were sent back by the Romans, who brandished their weapons menacingly.

Mathias watched from the Tower of Hippicus on the northwest corner, where the Upper City joined with Herod's Fortress and the Third Wall. "It's as if hell itself were encroaching upon the city of God."

His eldest son sadly watched as the wall of flames engulfed hundreds of houses and shops beyond the north wall of Bezetha.

The sounds of thousands of pickaxes echoed in the night, as hordes of imperial soldiers levelled any structure of stone that the fires alone could not consume.

"It is past the curfew," one of their escorts said reprovingly.

With a nod of acceptance, the two men descended the spiralling stone steps and made the trek through Upper City to their home. The streets were relatively clear of travellers, for the wealthy quarter was cordoned off by its own inner wall, separating it from the poor districts of Lower City. Though

they lamented the destruction of the outer suburban neighbourhoods, a knot in Mathias' stomach told him that this was just the beginning of Jerusalem's miseries.



There had been simultaneous orders from General Titus; burn the outer suburbs, and begin the building of earthworks and siege platforms for their engines of war. Tall earthen platforms were thrown up with large wicker hurdles emplaced to protect work crews from enemy missiles. Because the temple and the ancient City of David to its south appeared to have the strongest defences, Titus deployed his largest catapults and ballistae there.

On the morning after the razing of the outer districts, Tribune Gaius Artorius walked along the line of engines that faced the city's eastern defences. For him, it was a chance to finally put his developing skills as a siege engineer to use. In addition to the Tenth Legion's assets, he had acquisitioned one-third of all scorpions and onagers from the other legions. He also commandeered all but three of the heavy siege ballistae, arraying these along the vast rampart that stretched from the southern base of the Mount of Olives to the northeast corner of Bezetha.

"Twenty heavy ballistae, fifty-four onagers, plus a hundred and twenty scorpions," Centurion Vorenus counted. "That'll be enough to wake these bastards up."

The two officers spotted General Bassus approaching on horseback.

Gaius came to attention and saluted. "Siege engines are ready to deploy, sir."

"Very good," the legate replied. "Order all crews to prepare to occupy their firing positions. I want the first line of ammunition wagons at the platforms with reserve supplies held at the main camp until needed."

"Yes, sir!" Gaius turned to his cornicen. "Sound the advance. Centurion Vorenus, order our escorts to form a screen line."

"Sir."

Trumpets sounded. With a cacophony of shouted orders, the braying of oxen, and the grinding of hundreds of sets of wheels, the entire siege force ground its way towards its earthen platforms a quarter mile away. Three companies of archers and two centuries of auxilia infantry advanced ahead of them. The archers would take up positions behind the forward hurdles,

reinforcing the picquets who were already in place. Infantry would maintain a ready reserve behind the siege line.

The heavy ballistae were by far the most difficult to get into position, as they required twenty men to heft them onto the earthworks. Each was twice as tall as a man and capable of lobbing a massive boulder over a quarter mile. At minimum it took four men, two on each side, to work the metal cranks that withdrew the thick throwing arms and torsion ropes. At least two more crewmen were required to heft the heavy stones into the long trough. So great was the commotion, the eastern city walls were covered with curious zealots. With amazing efficiency, and no shortage of back-breaking exertion, every siege engine from the ballistae down to the onagers and scorpions were emplaced and ready to commence bombardment within less than thirty minutes. All was silent as the soldiers stood by their machines, waiting for the next order.

"Load!" Centurion Vorenus' voice boomed.



"Man the catapults and bolt throwers!" John shouted, waving his arm frantically towards the ramparts. At last, the scorpions and onagers captured four years prior could now be put to use against their former masters!

Unfortunately, training for his men had been practically non-existent. They therefore had to improvise when learning how to operate the fearsome engines. The years of inclement weather and dry rot had left many of the weapons in a state of disrepair. Still, John was determined to make the imperial invaders pay for desecrating the Jewish lands by using their own machines against them. Stones and bolts began to fly haphazardly from the defences. Many sailed wide, with a number of catapult rocks kicking up gouts of dirt in and around the siege works. A few managed to smash into the hurdles, causing them to splinter in places. A pair of auxilia skirmishers were shot down by Judean scorpions. The defenders howled in triumph at drawing first blood from their assailants. But, while their defensive bombardment caused some havoc among the Romans, the pending counter-barrage would prove to be nothing short of hell unleashed.



“All engines are loaded, sir,” Centurion Vorenus reported.

Gaius drew his spatha and raised it high, taking a deep breath through his nose. He watched the barrage of catapult stones and scorpion bolts coming from the city wall. The heavy shots kicked up clods of dirt, most of the bolts falling short.

“Steady, lads!” the tribune shouted to his nervous crews.

A large stone slammed into the ramparts just short of one of the siege ballistae.

He dropped his arm and a near simultaneous order was shouted by every section leader on the line.

“Fire!”

Onagers unleashed a storm of both stone and flaming shot. The siege ballistae lurched. Their heavy throwing arms snapped forward, loosing a barrage of heavy stones as if flung by the titans themselves.

Centurion Vorenus did not even wait to see their effects before he shouted his next order. *“Reload!”*



Stone and mortar exploded in a loud crash from the incoming barrage. Heavy stones smashed into the wall. Many more sailed high over their heads, crashing into the city behind them. John’s men had practiced some with the catapults and were desperately attempting to reload and adjust their ranges. Being up on the high walls should have given them a decided advantage; however, their greatest liability was their lack of training and discipline.

Men on one catapult cried out as a ballista stone smashed the engine. A splintered board plunged into one man’s guts, doubling him over in agony. A ruptured torsion rope snapped into another’s neck, tearing it open in a spray of blood. The crew of another catapult turned to flee as they watched their friends writhing in agony.

John drew his blade and rushed towards the steps, barricading their escape. “Filthy cowards!” he screamed. “You slay your fellow Jews, yet flee like old women when faced with our true enemies?”

It was a brutal irony, for these men had killed Jews in the past on John’s orders. Yet, even as one man screamed with a scorpion bolt plunging into his back, the others suddenly feared their maddened leader far more than the onslaught of Roman siege missiles. John of Giscala prided himself on being

able to instil fear in both friend and enemy alike. Their adversaries may have been better trained and disciplined, but his rage kept his more easily frightened warriors in check.

What was becoming clear, was that despite the advantage afforded by their high walls and ramparts, the zealots were getting the worst of this exchange of artillery bombardment. Within minutes, two of his catapults were completely smashed as were several bolt throwers. Thirty men lay dead or horribly maimed. Many were unable to control their screams of abject pain. Several had their guts split open. Many more were stricken with smashed arms and legs, bone splinters bursting through torn flesh. John rushed to the wall, anxious to see what kind of effect their barrage was having on the Romans along the slope of the Mount of Olives. It was impossible to see for certain. A scorpion bolt whizzed past his head, and he knew there was little else they could do this day.

“Withdraw from the ramparts!” he shouted, waving his men back with his sword.

The incoming storm of stone and bolt had intensified as the imperial crews found their range. A corner section of the nearest tower shattered in a cloud of broken stone and mortar. So anxious were the zealots to find safety that most of their dead and wounded were abandoned upon the battlements.



Their enemies had been clearly outmatched in both skill and numbers, but the exchange of siege artillery had not been entirely one-sided. The support structure on one ballista was split down the side. The throwing arm on an onager was smashed. Seven crewmen suffered various injuries from the enemy’s counter-barrage. Two were dead.

“Either the enemy has withdrawn or we’ve smashed all their engines,” Vorenus observed, noting the ceasing of return shots coming from the walls.

As if for dramatic effect, a flaming shot from one of their own catapults smashed into a tower in a spray of liquid fire.

“Looks impressive, yet completely useless against stone defences,” the centurion chuckled. This did not halt the cheers from the crew that fired the shot.

“Order all scorpions to stand down,” Gaius ordered. “Ballistae and onagers are to increase elevation, firing into the city; ten shots each, then

stand down. Engines will then be manned at half-strength, firing only on targets of opportunity."

"Very good, sir."

The tribune passed the order for all crews to get a tally on how much ammunition remained in the carts on the line. While the column of wagons bearing catapult stones, clay pots filled with liquid fire, and scorpion bolts was an impressive sight, Gaius knew their resources were not unlimited. And while onagers could fling practically anything that could be hefted into their slings, the heavy ballistae required round stones that had been smoothed on all sides. Scorpion bolts had to be properly fashioned from perfectly straight shafts, with fins and square bolt heads hammered out by the army's numerous blacksmiths. And while this initial barrage had scarcely put a dent in their resources, Gaius knew it was best to be prudent, lest they risk facing a shortage during the later assaults.

That evening, the Tenth Legion's Fifth Cohort was on ready-reserve near the siege engines. Due to the size of the city and the impassable terrain to the south, the Romans had been unable to invest it fully, choosing instead to fortify their various camps while keeping up robust patrols of the open spaces between each. The concentrated engines on the western slope of the Mount of Olives were of crucial importance. These were a prime target for zealot raiders. In addition to normal sentries, Legate Bassus had therefore ordered a single cohort posted each night near the siege platforms.

In a bold yet dangerous move, Centurion Galeo had directed the Fifth Cohort to position itself in front of the protective entrenchment and palisade stakes. Despite the misconception that the region was barren, numerous groves of trees and thick brush lined the landscape. Most of the tall trees had been cleared from in front of the Roman camp, yet the sagebrush stands remained. Soon after dusk, Galeo led his men into position. It proved difficult, especially with only starlight and the sliver of a crescent moon to see by. The pilus prior placed his and Nicanor's centuries in the very centre. Due to the terrain and the large frontage they had to cover, each century was deployed into four ranks in loose formation, with four to six feet between each soldier. Legionaries then lay prone atop their shields with pila lying close by. It was not the most comfortable position, and the fidgeting of many a soldier could be heard as their armour, weapons, and shields constantly shifted in the rocky dirt.

“If they’re uncomfortable, it means they’re awake,” Signifier Aurelian whispered to Nicanor.

“Still, can’t see a bloody thing,” the centurion muttered. “Bastards will be right on top of us before we know it. Damn it all, I should have thought to lay out some tripping obstacles down the slope. Then we could hear them coming.”

“Well, at least they’re as blind as we are,” Aurelian replied with a good-natured grin. His glance fell upon the centurion’s bandaged shoulder, which he could just see in the faint moonlight. “How’s the arm?”

“Hurts like a bastard, but I’ll live.”

Though he would never admit it to any of his soldiers, Nicanor’s heart was injured far worse than his shoulder. Though not nearly as close to Levi as he was to Josephus, Nicanor had always thought of him as a dear friend. It wounded him deeply to have someone he had been close to since childhood attempt to kill him. But the hurt turned to rage over the subsequent two weeks, and the centurion now relished the thought of exacting retribution.

Hours passed and excitement at the thought of possible action had since turned to tedium. Nicanor knew if the zealots were going to make an assault on the siege engines they would have to do so before dawn, since the sun would be behind the Romans and in the faces of the rebels. As the night wore on, many of his soldiers nodded off only to be roughly woken by their mates and decani when they began snoring.

“Looks like this night’s going to be a bust,” Aurelian whispered, his head now resting on his buckler. The faint glow of the predawn made their vision much clearer. It was still another hour before the sun crested the hills to the east, and Galeo had stated that he wanted to withdraw the cohort before sunrise.

Nicanor was just about to relay down the line for his men to quietly depart when he spotted movement in the valley below. He reached over and grabbed his signifier by the arm, pointing towards the mass of shadows moving amongst the gardens and glades of trees along the plain leading to the city wall. Aurelian nodded and reached over to the decanus on his left, as well as the three behind them. As quietly as they could manage, the entire Fifth Cohort roused itself, blood surging through the veins of every legionary. They could readily discern the shapes of men moving in the shadows, and it filled every imperial soldier with bloodlust and rage.

A cornicen lay next to Centurion Galeo, his eyes wide as he, too, spotted

the approaching force of enemy raiders. It was difficult to tell how many there were. He guessed their numbers to be at least a hundred. They weren't moving with any sort of cohesion or organisation, but simply trying to make a dash for the siege works. The pilus prior realised a band of unseen fighters must have reached his centuries on the right when an echoing command was shouted.

"Century, up!"

Knowing they were compromised, Galeo nodded to the cornicen. He stood and sounded a long, loud blast from his horn. Legionaries scrambled to their feet, hefting their shields and javelins. There were no controlled volleys. Soldiers had been directed to unleash at the first targets which presented themselves. The raiders were not nearly as close on the left and in the centre as they were on the right, so these soldiers simply flung their pila towards the shadows where they thought the enemy might be. Distance was difficult to judge in the dark, though numerous cries of pain came from just below their position.

"Gladius…draw!"

With a shout, over four hundred blades flashed from their scabbards. The zealots were now fleeing down the slope in a panic, having given up completely on assailing the Roman siege engines.

"Advance!"

With the broken terrain and clinging remnants of darkness, the Fifth Cohort stumbled its way down the hill. Centuries maintained at least some semblance of formation. Individual legionaries tried not to trip and fall, nor accidentally stab each other when they did so. The hundreds of spent javelins sticking into the ground created an additional hazard. Several soldiers tripped over their own pila hidden in the shadows of trees and brush. One soldier cried out as an injured zealot sat upright and thrust his short sword into the man's leg. The legionary's companions quickly smashed the rebel with their shields before stabbing him repeatedly with their gladii. There were several other such incidents as the cohort continued down onto the plane. Two other legionaries were badly injured, while one poor soldier was mortally wounded by a spear thrust to the groin. This enraged the Romans, and they plunged their blades into every fallen Jewish fighter they came across. Though Centurion Galeo hoped to bring back some prisoners for General Titus to crucify from the ramparts, he could not fault his men for not risking being struck down by rebels who were only pretending to be dead.

The soldiers increased the speed of their pursuit as they stormed through the nearest gardens. However, the zealots knew the area far better and had mostly disappeared. Only a pair of men injured during the javelin barrage were taken alive.

It was Optio Julius who suddenly realised they had advanced too far and were now within range of enemy archers on the walls. *"Halt!"* he shouted, raising his gladius high.

The shouts of excited sentries along the city wall reverberated as did the footsteps of bleary-eyed defenders rushing to the wall.

"Fuck," Galeo cursed himself for allowing his cohort to overextend itself. He then shouted to the cornicen, "Sound recall!"

The order proved unnecessary. It seemed every soldier, from the centurion pilus prior down to the youngest legionary, knew they were in a precarious position. The first arrows flew from the ramparts. Soldiers hunkered behind their shields. Sling stones followed, the hollow echoes resounding as they bounced off legionary shields and armour.

"Easy lads!" Centurion Nicanor called out, even as a pair of arrows embedded into his shield. "Maintain formation, faces towards the enemy."

There was a loud shout when one soldier took an arrow to the calf. The man hobbled backwards, trying to keep his shield up. His mates on either side immediately closed ranks, one offering an arm to support him while the other protected them with his shield. Once out of range, centurions ordered the wounded carried to the legion's hospital tent along with the unfortunate soldier who had succumbed to his terrible groin injury. The man lay in a pool of blood and other bodily fluids, eyes still scrunched in pain, his jaw clinched.

"If it's any consolation, we counted twelve dead zealots plus the two we took prisoner," one of the centurions reported to the frustrated Galeo.

The pilus prior's expression was unchanged from that of anger and embarrassment. "I've served in the ranks for too damn long to make such an amateurish mistake." He then told the subordinate officer, "Take charge of the prisoners and have them brought to the commander-in-chief. I'm off to go get a chunk ripped from my backside by General Bassus and the master centurion."

While the legate and primus pilus were unhappy with the Fifth Cohort's recklessness, they still offered some measure of praise to Centurion Galeo for having kept the raiders from smashing their siege engines.

As for Nicanor, he was relieved his own century suffered just a few minor injuries; mostly from tripping hazards as they descended the hill. Whenever the cries of fallen echoed into his ears, he would privately whisper, *'Please don't be one of mine!'* It was a common phrase uttered by those who commanded soldiers of Rome. He therefore understood his cohort commander's self-chastisement.

"The lives of every last man in the Fifth Cohort are his responsibility," he stated to Julius, as they paced the siege line later that morning.

Onagers sent the occasional harassment shot towards the eastern wall, while scorpions loosed their bolts whenever a zealot foolishly exposed himself.

"One can only imagine the weight of obligation on Legate Bassus," the optio added. "Or for that matter, the commanding general. If Titus is anything like his father, the loss of every imperial soldier weighs heavily on his conscience."

"Very noble of him, though he should be careful," Nicanor remarked. "Otherwise, the weight of responsibility will kill him by the time he's forty."



The following morning, Josephus made another attempt to compel the city to surrender. The northern and western districts of Jerusalem, including most of the 'New City', were under the control of Simon bar Giora. Josephus explained to Titus that perhaps John of Giscala's stubbornness was due to his personal hatred towards him, whereas he was mostly an unknown to Simon. This time, instead of imperial soldiers, he took a section of King Agrippa's mounted archers with him. They approached along the Damascus Road, which lead into the city via what was sometimes referred to as 'The Women's Gates'. This outermost wall, which surrounded the vast and mostly open New City, was not nearly as high as the imposing structures surrounding the Temple district. Josephus elected to wear a simple tunic this day, rather than the armour Titus had given him.

"Once more, the great traitor approaches our holy city," a voice called down from the defences.

"I have tried to parlay with John, now I come to speak with Simon," Josephus replied. "Until recently, your factions were hated enemies, yet now you are at peace. Why, then, should you not attempt to make peace with the

Romans?”

This was met with derisive laughter and more than a few choice words of profanity.

“Whatever agreements Simon has made with the Giscalan are of little concern to us,” the man on the wall retorted. “We are here to keep all defilers out of Jerusalem. Do you really think that after driving the Romans away, whipped and cowering after Beth Horon, we will ever open our gates to them? Go away, traitor. Go suckle on your imperial master’s cock some more, but keep your vile filth away from God’s holy city.”

Chapter IX: Deception

Jerusalem, the North Wall
30 April, 70 A.D.
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A Roman siege, especially during the first few weeks, involved endless days of manual labour and extreme toil from the vast majority of its soldiers. Seventy-thousand imperial troops were massed at various camps, and not one sat idle. Daily improvements were made on each of the forts to prevent against enemy counterattacks. Trenches were dug deeper and filled with spikes and other obstacles. Earthen ramparts were erected higher and topped with rows of palisade stakes, while twenty-foot high wooden guard towers were built every few hundred meters. New latrine and refuse pits had to be dug every few days, once the stench and flies emanating from the previous ones became intolerable.

In addition to improving their camps, the soldiers from Legions V, XII, and XV had the rather daunting task of building up their siege platforms, as well as the ramps for both towers and battering rams. The toil could be harrowing for those building the wooden support structures and carrying endless baskets of earth. As they drew closer to the walls, enemy archers and slingers increased their bombardment. Auxilia archers and scorpion crews did their best to keep these suppressed. Yet for the vast majority of legionaries and auxilia troopers, their days were filled with chopping down every tree within five miles of the camp, while levelling entire hills to provide dirt for the embankments.

The Tenth Legion maintained its rather lengthy encampment and earthworks along the slope of the Mount of Olives. Due to the difficulty of approach via the Kidron Valley towards the southern districts of the city, as well as the extremely tall and imposing walls of the Temple itself, they maintained a steady harassment of onager and ballistae bombardment. With no towers or platforms of their own to construct, most of the Tenth’s legionaries provided labour details for the rest of the army.

To the south of Jerusalem, where the rugged Hinnom and Kidron Valleys

provided a natural barrier against invaders, General Placidus maintained a series of picquets and mounted patrols. Many of the cavalrymen came from King Agrippa's Judean loyalists; some of whom were familiar with the region. And though their purpose was primarily to hinder any supplies from entering the city, there was also concern regarding the possibility of Sicarii raids from the south. Most of the Roman leadership suspected that Eleazar ben Yair was an ally of Simon's, if for no other reason than the zealot had been able to amass his army and move freely through Sicarii territory unmolested.

Josephus knew the Sicarii recognised no rule over the Jews except their own, having publicly denounced the Romans, as well as every other Judean faction who had at one time or another seized control of the Jewish State. So while it was unlikely they would marshal an army to come to Simon's aid, they most certainly had spies watching the siege and would take advantage of any imperial forces roaming the south that they viewed as vulnerable. Fortunately for the soldiers patrolling the southern districts, their greatest nemesis thus far had been boredom.

Such was the case for both attacker and defender alike. Since the imperial army's initial approach to the city, what action there had been between Judean rebels and imperial soldiers had amounted to little more than indecisive skirmishes with no clear victor for either side. Soldiers continued to work on fortifications and siege platforms, while zealots harassed them with slings and arrows from the walls, along with the occasional raid. These often proved costly. The rebels lacked cohesion between factions, with neither willing to commit the overwhelming numbers necessary to overthrow the Roman siege works. What raids they did launch were often haphazard, with men dying or captured and later crucified, with little tangible results.



During the early morning hours at the end of the month of April, which the Jews called *Nisan*, Levi watched one scuffle between their own raiders and the Roman cohort guarding the northern siege works come to an end. A couple hundred fighters, having been driven back, fled in disorder towards the safety of the city's outer wall. Slingers and archers manned the ramparts, ready to bombard any Romans foolish enough to attempt a pursuit. Yet as the Judean warriors withdrew, Levi noted a large number of imperial soldiers

sought to chase them down, only to be halted by the loud and exceedingly angry orders shouted from their officers.

"They're eager," one of the captains in command of the ramparts remarked. "We should turn their aggression against them."

Levi concurred and left to find John. As he descended the stone steps and made his way through the open expanses of Bezetha, he devised a stratagem to draw the Romans into a trap and perhaps break the stalemate. He found John waiting for him at the Antonia Fortress. When Levi explained his ideas, the zealot leader agreed.

"Go to Simon with your plan," John directed. "The defence of Bezetha is his responsibility, after all."

Ever since attaining a truce with his rival, Simon had insisted on maintaining control over the vast majority of the city. Both the wealthy Upper City, as well as the old, poor districts of Lower City fell under his charge, as did Tyropoeon and the vast expanses of Bezetha, the 'New City'. John was content to allow this without complaint, for while Simon's forces were much greater in number, they were spread thin trying to defend the outer districts and maintain control over the city. John's domain was limited to the Antonia Fortress, the Temple district, and the southern reaches east of the Pool of Siloam, namely the fortified City of David. So, while his territory was but a fraction of Simon's, it was also the most heavily fortified, aside perhaps from Herod's Fortress. He was perfectly content to let Simon bleed for the time being.

"It will be done," Levi replied before taking his leave.

Communication between the factions came via emissaries rather than the leaders discoursing directly with each other. There was still a great deal of mistrust between John and Simon, and any meeting would require hundreds of guards for each man. As the survivor of Jotapata who had been personally betrayed by Josephus, Levi was a man well-respected by all factions. As such, he could freely wander the city without the need of a large escort. Three fighters accompanied him this morning, for there was still the threat of being set upon by robbers.

The men departed the fortress and made their way through Tyropoeon in the direction of where the impenetrably thick First Wall, which protected Upper City from the north, intersected with the Tower of Hippicus at Herod's Fortress. Walking along the overly crowded streets, it was easy to see why lawlessness was starting to take hold of Jerusalem. Though most of the

Passover pilgrims had camped within the open spaces of Bezetha, many were now crowding to the inner reaches of the city out of fear that the New City could not hold against the Romans. Some had been set upon by thieves and brigands, many of whom were members of Simon and John's militias, and were left destitute. Innkeepers had also thrown out those who could no longer afford the extortionist rates.

The charred wreckage of the city's grain warehouses served as a stark reminder that hunger would soon become the people's greatest nemesis. Where children once played in the streets, they now slinked in the gutters, begging for food or attempting to pick the pockets of passers-by. One such urchin attempted to take the money pouch from one of Levi's escorts, only to be met with a swift backhand blow across the face from his intended victim.

"Filthy rat!" the warrior snarled. He levelled his spear at the boy now trembling in terror, tears running down his face where an angry red welt was forming.

"Enough," Levi said, calmly yet firmly. He was genuinely concerned that the enraged zealot would kill the lad without second thought. Four years ago, such barbarism would have gotten the man arrested and charged with murder. Yet such was the state of near-anarchy within Jerusalem that any fighters who swore allegiance to either of the two power factions could prey upon the people at will, devoid of any fear of reprisal.

As they reached the Tower of Hippicus, they saw Mathias being escorted from the fortress by six of Simon's warriors. Levi kept his distance, avoiding any potentially embarrassing encounters with the father of 'The Great Traitor'.

Guards then escorted Levi to the tall towers where Simon was observing the Roman siege works to the west. He was joined by the Idumean general, Jacob bar Sosias, and several of his officers.

"What news from your master?" Simon asked, without bothering to look Levi's way.

"A stratagem for dealing with the Romans, though if I may humbly say it, this was of my own devising."

"Indeed. Well, you did lead the defence of Jotapata for forty-seven days. So what is this 'stratagem' of yours?" Simon was now looking at Levi, who leaned against the stone ramparts.

"The Romans are anxious for battle," Levi explained. "Yet they are tentative. And why wouldn't they be? Would you want to assail the walls of

God’s own fortress? Our raids have so far have been ineffective. We have failed to mass our numbers against the Roman’s siege works.”

“And why should I risk losing hundreds of my men while your master sits idle?” Simon countered.

“To be fair, you did demand control over the very sectors where the enemy now builds his platforms.”

Simon chuckled and gave an appreciative nod. Levi was one of the few from John’s faction who could speak to him so candidly without inciting an argument.

“So you want us to launch a direct assault on their ramps, is that it?”

“No,” Levi replied, shaking his head. “I want you to surrender to the Romans.”



Within the ranks of Legio XII, there was a growing sense of impatience as the walls of Jerusalem stared down at them. For the survivors of Beth Horon, there was an overwhelming lust for revenge that had been burning for four years. These feelings of hatred had spilled over to the numerous recruits that now made up a full third of the legion. For the younger soldiers, their desire to avenge their mates was compounded by an even greater aspiration to prove themselves worthy of fighting beside the more battle-hardened veterans. This savage bloodlust would prove fortuitous for Levi’s plan, as it was a cohort from the Twelfth that patrolled the open ground between the camp at Mount Scopus and the northern wall of Jerusalem.

General Titus and Legate Thrasea were riding along the outside of the camp on horseback, surveying the ongoing siege works. The rebels had launched a sortie against the northern works the day before, and the corpses of twenty raiders lay rotting in the sun. Three of their wounded hung from crosses, just beyond the defensive entrenchment of the legion’s camp.

As the two senior officers made their way to a nearby camp belonging to one of the cavalry regiments, a series of confused shouts echoed from within the city. They turned to see several hundred zealots forcing their way out of the Damascus Road gate. They seemed confused, many giving cries and lamentations at having been betrayed by their comrades. The soldiers from the Twelfth Legion, who were a quarter mile in front of the officers, saw the commotion as well.

“Stand ready, lads!” the pilus prior of the legionary cohort shouted, his centuries turning to face the horde while forming into battle ranks.

“What in Hades are they playing at?” Thrasea asked the commander-in-chief. “They seem confused, and it doesn’t look as if they’re forming up to attack.”

Titus turned his ear towards the mob, trying to ascertain what they were shouting at him. Most of it was garbled and in the local dialect, yet he could make out the occasional words *‘surrender’* and *‘save us’* spouted off in heavily accented Latin.

“I think they’re saying the city wishes to surrender,” Thrasea surmised.

“It’s a ruse,” Titus said, his eyes narrowing. “These bastards are many things; deceitful, dishonourable, and wicked, but they are not stupid.”

As the two generals debated the meaning of this rather bizarre display, the cornicen of the Twelfth Legion’s cohort sounded a loud blast on his horn.

“Advance!” the pilus prior shouted, his gladius raised high.

“What in bleeding Hades are they doing?” Titus was alarmed by what he was witnessing.

“The city gate is still wide open,” the legate replied. “He’s seizing the initiative before the confused Jews come to their senses.”

“Not with a single damned cohort he’s not!” Titus retorted, spurring his horse into a gallop.

His anger at the impetuousness of his wayward legionaries proved well-founded. The mass of rebels outside the wall suddenly scattered in either direction. Rather than fleeing, they reformed as a swarm of zealots surged through the gate. Archers and slingers appeared on the ramparts, and the centurion pilus prior realised the gravity of his error. A barrage of arrows and sling bullets rained down upon the soldiers, driving them back from the wall. The quick thinking of the centurions and options on the wing centuries was all that saved the cohort from being flanked.

“Left wheel!” the centurion on the left shouted, suddenly aware of the danger they faced. He raised his gladius and placed himself at a right angle from the century on his right. With great speed and precision, the seventy-five men of his century pivoted so they faced the charging onslaught that, moments ago, appeared to be a dishevelled mob. The century on the right executed a similar manoeuver on the other flank, just as the charging enemy fighters smashed into their shield wall.

Legionaries disgorged their javelins as fast as they could. Those in the

front ranks were compelled simply to drop theirs, as they had no time to throw before they were swarmed. Titus reined in his horse. He saw hundreds of rebels now surging behind the hapless cohort. Soldiers in the rear ranks of each century quickly rushed in to plug the gap, but not before several of their comrades were overwhelmed and cut down. Surrounded and terribly outnumbered, over four hundred legionaries were now in a desperate fight for their lives.



While some of the rebels under Simon bar Giora had taken part in the routing of the Romans at Beth Horon, there were many others who had never faced the imperial army in battle. That they tricked an entire cohort of supposedly the most disciplined soldiers in the known world filled them with a sense of triumph. After the weeks of indecisive engagements, they would send the Romans running from the walls of Jerusalem once more! The bravest and most fanatical threw their bodies into the legionary ranks, attempting to break up their formations. Though some paid for their wanton brazenness with a gladius to the face, throat, or guts, their sacrifice succeeded in smashing gaps within the imperial shield wall.

The Romans were well-armoured, but by no means invulnerable. The zealots' weapons were useless against the helmets and segmented plate worn by their adversaries, so Simon had drilled his men to attack the exposed faces, throats, groins, and legs. If the zealots could fracture the shield wall, these naked regions would be exposed.

It was a confused struggle, especially with a full third of the imperial legionaries having never fought an actual battle before. They found themselves completely surrounded, with numerous gaps in their battle lines swarming with enraged zealots. It was only by sheer force of discipline, and the reality that there was nowhere for them to run to, that they kept the formation from completely collapsing.

The most fervently courageous of the zealots paid a terrible price. They lacked any sort of armour and most only carried small bucklers or wooden shields for protection. Their tunics were splattered with crimson as they fell, their guts impaled by legionary blades.

"Sound recall," the pilus prior called over his shoulder to the cornicen.

Arrows and sling stones continued to rain down on them, despite the

inherent risk that the defenders might hit their own fighters.

It was a slow and ponderous undertaking for several hundred legionaries to withdraw in a square formation, all the while under the continuous onslaught of maddened zealots. Those in the rear ranks, closest to the centre of the formation, were tasked with carrying away the dead and wounded. It was no easy feat; a legionary's armour, helmet, and weapons added thirty pounds or more to his frame. Some were carried. Others were simply dragged by the shoulder plates on their segmentata. Sadly, not all were able to be extracted. Several badly wounded soldiers were wrenched away from the battle lines and hacked to pieces by the mob.



General Titus watched the debacle, his anger boiling over; not at the Jews, for he could not fault them for using deceit against their much stronger foes. Rather, his wrath was reserved for his own soldiers and their reckless leaders who risked so many lives in a foolish endeavour. Their loss would not only raise the morale of their enemies but crush that of his own army. No number of zealots slain could undo the ongoing disaster.

The sound of galloping hooves behind him alerted the commander-in-chief. He turned to see a single company from Siliana Horse riding towards him. The time from when the overzealous cohort charged to when they desperately tried to extract themselves was only a few minutes. There had simply been no time to organise a larger relief force, yet these brave horsemen had taken the initiative.

"Give the order, sir, and we'll get them out of there," the commanding centurion said, his spatha drawn. He had just under a hundred lancers and no mounted archers.

"Not yet," Titus replied. "There are several thousand Jews surrounding our lads. If we charge now, we'll be cut off as well."

He could no longer see his cohort, lost amongst the enemy throng. The entire mass of humanity was slowly moving towards the Roman lines, meaning the battle was still ongoing. Sentries within the camp had sounded the alarm, as had General Thrasea, who was attempting to form a relief effort with whatever soldiers were able to hurriedly don their kit and make ready for battle. By the time they began to parade in front of the camp, the battle would be over.

As the mob approached within a hundred meters of where he sat astride his horse, Titus drew his spatha. *"Siliana Horse, on me!"*

Thirty more troopers had joined the relief force, as Thrasea was giving the order for his assembled legionaries to advance. Titus spurred his mount into a gallop. The troopers gave a loud battle cry as they charged. The momentum of the rebels' assault was waning. With a wall of horsemen charging towards them, they broke off the attack and fled back to the safety of Jerusalem's walls. There was no need to taint their victory with unnecessary losses. Troopers swarmed either flank of the legionary cohort, driving their enemy from the field. Their officers raised their weapons, halting them from pursuing any further.

As the zealots rushed back to the city, they turned and brandished their weapons, giving loud shouts of triumph and hurling insults at the defeated Romans. The ovations carried over to the men on the wall, their shouts of victory echoing throughout the city. Even the imperial encampments along the Mount of Olives could hear the celebrations. For Titus and the Romans, the humiliation was harsher than the loss of lives they suffered.

Though the entire engagement only lasted a few minutes, the legionary cohort was in a fearful state. Twelve of their number were dead, including five who lay butchered near the city wall. Another forty bore various injuries. The centurion pilus prior's face was filled with frustration and shame.

His commanding general slowly rode over to him. "Centurion," Titus said, his voice calm yet filled with tension. "Get your wounded to hospital, and then parade your entire cohort in front of my tent within the hour."

"Sir."

Titus rode back to the principia, his face red. He leapt from his horse and tore off his helmet. He called both Legate Thrasea and Master Centurion Cinna into his tent to discuss what should be done. Titus' initial reaction was to exact the harshest measure of discipline upon the cohort.

"You mean 'decimation'?" Thrasea asked nervously.

Titus silently glared at him. He then looked to his primus pilus whose face was ashen.

Every man in the army was terrified of the punishment known as 'decimation', where one in every ten men was sentenced to death, regardless of guilt or innocence. Lots were drawn, and the condemned were then beaten to death with clubs by their own friends. Due to its severity, it had only been

used once in more than a hundred years.

"While I will not excuse their rash conduct," Cinna remarked slowly. "Punishments such as decimation are only appropriate when an army exhibits cowardice in the face of the enemy. These men were foolish but not cowardly. And if I may be so bold, sir, I feel that decimation is an outdated and counterproductive form of punishment."

"I would have to agree," Thrasea added. "Decimation had not been used in over a century, and with good reason, until Galba recklessly imposed it on his own newly-raised legion two years ago. We all know how well *that* ended for him."

While the legate's words were not meant to threaten the prince imperial, it was well-known that Emperor Galba's own Legio I, Adiutrix, who he had decimated in a spiteful rage, turned against him and helped the usurper, Otho, overthrow and murder him.

Titus knew there was a fine line between discipline and tyranny.

"And if I may add, general," Cinna continued. "I think the lesson has already been learned. I know the centurions from this cohort personally and can vouch for their competence. They got careless, like we all have. But on my honour, it will not happen again."

Thrasea was uncertain if the primus pilus was referring to the commander-in-chief's own reckless foray a few weeks before. Regardless, it made Titus self-conscious, and his glowering countenance softened as he shifted uncomfortably for a moment. He knew that to punish the leaders of this cohort for a mistake very similar to his own would sit poorly with the men in the ranks. All the same, discipline needed to be restored and accountability held. After all, a dozen legionaries had paid the ultimate price for their cohort commander's imprudence.

"Have the cohort parade before the principia," Titus ordered, his expression noncommittal.

The two officers saluted and left the tent, while the prince imperial ordered his manservants to help him out of his armour. After a few minutes, Thrasea stepped back into the tent and nodded.

For this address, Titus elected to don his best parade-ready armour with its polished iron and bronze helmet, topped by its long purple plume. His cloak was also a deep purple, signifying his status, not just as their commander-in-chief, but future emperor.

He stepped from his tent and paused for a moment to look upon the

beaten faces of his legionaries. He then began pacing slowly with his hands clasped behind his back. Extreme nervousness showed on the faces of many of the soldiers, knowing full well what possible punishments awaited them. Their centurion pilus prior stood stone-faced, accepting full responsibility as well as whatever sentence their commanding general handed down.

"These Jews are not merely ruled by madness," Titus began. His voice was hard yet calm and carried loud enough for the entire cohort to hear. "I have fought against them for four years. You men of the Twelfth should know better than any that this is no disorganised rabble, whatever their ragged appearance. They are clever, using cunning stratagems to gain their good fortune and success. Their obedience lies in unwavering faithfulness to each other."

He paused for a few moments, continuing to pace along the front rank of the assembled cohort before speaking again. "We Romans carry Fortuna's favour by our obedience to orders, proper discipline, and complete submission to our officers. This entire cohort went off without its commanding legate nor any support from the rest of the army. You allowed yourselves to be drawn into a trap that any amateur could have spotted. Truly, the discipline of Roman warfare groans heavily, as will my father when he hears of this reprehensible debacle. In all his days of warfare, never did he make a mistake as grievous as this. Had you emerged victorious this day, such disorder would still be a disgrace. Our rules of warfare demand that those who break our laws forfeit their lives. Look hard across the field at those you left behind. Even now, their bodies are being treated with contempt by our enemies, and they demand justice."

While the commanding general berated the errant cohort, soldiers from all over the camp began converging on the parade field in front of his tent. Word of the disgraceful ambush had spread. Now there was great fear that, in his rage, Titus would exact the harshest of punishments within his power. The men of the cohort cringed, many fighting back their sorrow, knowing that even if they were not among those sentenced to death, they would be the ones ordered to carry it out.

"I look upon your faces," Titus continued, his tone softening slightly. "And I see men whose punishment has already been exacted. The shame and bitterness of your needlessly fallen comrades will haunt you until the end of your days. You men in the ranks followed your officers' orders, and in them you placed your obedient trust. Your officers sought to rid your glorious

legion of the scourge of defeat from four years ago. While, like my father, I am one to praise initiative, we have all witnessed today the price paid in lives when initiative becomes recklessness."

He then addressed the cohort commander directly in a much lower voice that only a few could hear. "Centurion, the lives of those lost and the broken bodies of the maimed are on your head as well as mine. For I cannot shirk my own responsibilities to the order and discipline of this army. I leave it to you to personally oversee the retrieval of our dead, that they be given proper funerary rites. Should you not survive this mission, then the gods will have decided to be less merciful than I, and I will await their judgment against me."

The centurion said nothing but nodded in understanding. He exchanged salutes with the commander-in-chief who abruptly turned and went back into his tent. The pilus prior dismissed the cohort. Their collective feelings were of both relief and humiliation. The pilus prior then met with his subordinate centurions to devise a plan to retrieve their fallen brothers.



Titus' concerns about carelessness and lack of discipline extended far beyond a single cohort. That night, while the centurion pilus prior led his band of volunteers towards the city wall to extract the slain, the prince imperial was joined in his private tent by Tiberius Alexander. His chief-of-staff was one of the only people he felt comfortable confiding in, and he was glad for his company.

"We've gotten sloppy," Titus lamented. "Not only did the Twelfth damned near lose an entire cohort, there was that lot from the Tenth Legion who overextended themselves and got into a bad spot the other day."

"To be perfectly candid, it is not just legionaries who've allowed themselves to get a bit careless," Alexander remarked.

Titus grimaced.

His chief-of-staff continued. "Your scouting the outer walls with only a small escort, devoid of armour, was just as foolish as what those lads in the Twelfth did."

"My father would have never allowed any of this to happen. He would have prohibited my reckless actions, and I doubt our errant cohort would have acted so foolhardy, had he still been in command."

“That is complete and utter bollocks,” Alexander retorted. “Vespasian was one of the greatest generals Rome has ever known. However, he is not a god…well, at least not until he leaves this world and the senate decides to deify him.”

“As if the senate has the authority to tell the divines who to accept as one of their own,” Titus remarked with a short laugh.

“Trust me, he had plenty of flaws,” the Alexandrian Jew continued. “By his own admission, he still does. Even after thirty years of leading men into battle, not all of the sieges during this campaign were exactly flawless. I was not there, but surely you remember the numerous debacles from Jotapata and Gamala. This little cock-up by the Twelfth was not the first, nor will it be the last, we face before Jerusalem falls.”

Alexander’s words were foreboding. Titus also knew they were what he needed to hear. He had a huge army to control, quite possibly the largest since Julius Caesar’s conquest of Gaul 122 years before. He only hoped his own mistakes would not cost too many Roman lives.

His brooding was interrupted by the centurion pilus prior from the errant cohort. His face was pale, and he carried his helmet under his arm. He came to attention and saluted. “We’ve returned from retrieving our fallen, sir. They were stripped of their weapons and armour, but at least now we can send them with dignity to Elysium.” Titus dismissed the man, who saluted once more and made ready to leave.

The prince imperial stopped him. “Centurion.”

“Sir?”

“Tell your men to exercise patience. They have my word that before this is over, the Twelfth Legion *will* have revenge and its honour restored.”

Chapter X: The Outer Wall

Roman Siege Works, North-western Wall
10 May, 70 A.D.
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The following week was spent preparing the ground for the initial assaults. The north wall was the most logical place to attack. It covered a vast space with mostly flat, open ground leading up to it. At less than forty feet in height, it was shorter than the inner, much older walls. Originally built thirty years before by King Agrippa I to protect the outer districts of the ever-growing city, he had originally intended to build walls sixty feet high and fifteen feet thick. However, he feared offending Emperor Claudius, who might have accused Agrippa of fortifying his city for rebellious purposes. The emperor was the king's closest friend; both were raised in the imperial household of Augustus Caesar. Agrippa therefore agreed to make his wall much smaller. This gesture between friends was greeted with a measure of appreciation by the Romans and scorn by the zealots now defending Jerusalem.

Laying the final groundwork for an assault by siege towers and battering rams was a harrowing undertaking. Half a legion was mustered each morning, along with several thousand auxilia infantry and numerous cavalry regiments, to protect the workers. Archers and scorpions attempted to suppress the enemy skirmishers and missile troops on the ramparts. After weeks of preparation, the earthen ramps were in place, the large rams ready to break the walls. It was the destructive engine belonging to the Twelfth Legion which would be given the honour of striking the first blow.

Titus and Alexander sat astride their mounts as the assault troops in the foreground readied themselves. They were soon joined by Tribune Gaius Artorius. The siege officer had slept very little since the army began investing in the taking of Jerusalem. Though Centurion Vorenus had advised he trust in the technical skills of his engineers and artillery crews, he felt it crucial to learn as much about their capabilities as possible. During the day, he oversaw the construction of the ramps and towers or observed the harassing

bombardment from his catapults and ballistae. At night he ate his supper while engineers, ballistics experts, carpenters, and surveyors briefed him on their progress and what he could expect from them. He also kept in constant communication with Tiberius Alexander, relaying any needs for tools and supplies not readily available.

"*Nico* is ready to roll into position, general." Gaius referenced the name given to the largest of the army's battering rams.

As Titus gave an affirmative nod to his chief siege engineer, he and Alexander were joined by General Placidus and Legates Bassus and Thrasea. Cerealis and Domitius were overseeing their own legions' initial assaults. Though the honour of the first strike was given to Thrasea and the Twelfth.

"If the people had any sense, they would overthrow the zealots and open the gates to us," Thrasea mused. "After Nico lands its first blow there will be no mercy."

The first strike of the battering ram was steeped in symbolism. An unwritten rule, known throughout the world, was that up until the ram's head touched the wall of any stronghold, the defenders could surrender and expect at least some measure of clemency from the Romans. Even after the skirmishes between war engines, as well as the numerous brawls in front of the city walls, the citizens of Jerusalem still had a few precious moments left with which to come to terms with the imperial army.

"Good," Placidus said. He then spat on the ground in contempt. "This whole fucking place can burn to the ground for all I care. I hope we leave their precious temple a pile of ash and rubble."



Titus' intent was to create a series of breaks within the outer wall, allowing them to launch numerous assaults simultaneously. He sent three rams forward, including that massive beast of an engine the men had named 'Nico'. Weighing many tons, with an iron rams head on the end, Nico took twice as many men to heave into position as a normal battering ram. Even with the added manpower, it moved at a crawl compared to its mates.

"Many walls has Nico destroyed," the leading decanus said with sinister glee. He strained against the post he leaned into, his sandaled feet digging into the hard-packed ground.

His men were red-faced and dripping with sweat as they grunted and

heaved their mighty beast forward.

"Keep it going, lads. Within the hour we shall unleash upon Jerusalem with the fury of a god!"

The earthen ramps angled upward at a gentle angle, allowing the engines to advance to within fifteen feet of the top of the wall. The beam upon which Nico's iron ram's head protruded was over three feet thick. The iron head alone weighed several hundred pounds. The ram was suspended from an A-frame covered in large planks to offer protection for the crew from enemy missiles. Rocks and large blocks of stone crashed on top of the shed as they approached the wall. The thirty or so men underneath the shelter continued grunting in exertion, sweat dripping from their bodies. Onagers and scorpions shot over their heads, attempting to drive the defenders back.

"Halt!" the section leader at the head shouted, over the noise of enemy missiles clattering and smashing against the roof.

They had stopped several feet from the wall, in order to give the ram as much room to swing as possible.

"This is it, lads," an older legionary added. "Our first blow will signal death for these filthy Jewish pigs!"

"Take up your positions," the section leader ordered. "Alright then…*draw!*"

The initial pull was always the hardest, and the holding chains creaked loudly in protest under the colossal weight. The crew first allowed the ram to swing forward easily, before using the backswing to pull and gain greater tension.

After several swings the section leader's tone of voice changed. "Right lads…*pull!"*

His crewmen grunted loudly as each man pulled back with all his might until they sensed the beam was at the apex of its backswing.

"Ram!"

"Rah!" the crewmen shouted, driving the wall-breaking beast home.



The crack of Nico's first blow was louder than anything heard yet. Even the barrage of heavy ballistae stones paled in comparison to the fearsome smashing of the battering ram. From the edge of his camp, where Titus watched his engines hammer the Third Wall, he sensed another sound

reverberating from within the city. It was a mournful cry, carried on the wind from hundreds-of-thousands of terrified souls.

"The lamentations of the women," he said, with a malicious chuckle.

"They know every last one of them will die." Placidus' own sneer of contempt showed the utter disdain he held for their adversaries. He then saw Josephus out of the corner of his eye, hanging his head. "Don't worry, *friend of Caesar*, we'll spare a few to sell into slavery. And I'm certain the good general will make sure you get your share of the profits."

Josephus said nothing, refusing to even look at the auxilia corps commander who was now laughing maniacally as he turned his horse about and rode away.

Titus dismounted and walked over to Josephus, placing a hand on his shoulder. "He's right, you know. Like it or not, Josephus, you're as much a part of this now as any of my legionaries. You did all you could to prevent this from happening. The zealots are to blame for your people's destruction."

"My people's fate was sealed the moment Levi loosed his arrow at me," Josephus replied. His voice was stoic, yet he quickly wiped away a tear. His thoughts turned to his wife, his family, those friends who he hoped were still found among the living. Was there any hope left for them? The echoing smash of the battering rams seemed to mock his trepidation. He knew that only God himself could save Jerusalem, and that the Almighty had decided to stay his hand.



Simon stood atop the Tower of Phasel watching in disgust and frustration as the Roman battering rams pummelled the outer wall. There appeared to be little the defenders could do, for the stones they dropped failed to break the protective sheds. They were further harried by enemy catapults, bolt throwers, and archers who unleashed their missiles from behind protective hurdles.

"Damned wasps that need to be swatted away," he said, to one of the Idumean commanders, Yohanan ben Yohanan. "It is time for the Idumeans to earn their place at God's table."

"Give the word, and we will end the infernal noise from those battering rams."

Simon nodded and the Idumean left to rally his men. Simon then gave

subsequent orders to his assembled captains. Oil was scarce, yet he ordered as much as could be scavenged brought to the outer wall. Fires were stoked and the cauldrons brought to a boil.

The walls shuddered, and many of the zealots looked nervously at each other. They feared the rams might break the walls while they still stood atop them. Hurriedly, they dumped the bubbling oil over the sides, in many cases dropping the cauldrons in their haste. Having learned the rather painful lessons from Jotapata, Titus had ordered the protective sheds reinforced with overlapping planks of wood and steel. While this added considerably to their weight, it not only reinforced them against bombardment from heavy stones, but also rendered the limited supplies of oil completely useless. The scalding liquid hissed against the overhead protection of the sheds, yet did little else except bubble and scour the planks. The hammering of the rams continued unabated.



Though lacking in the impenetrable thickness of the inner walls, the outer Third Wall still stood even as night fell upon Jerusalem. It would likely take several days of relentless pounding for even the fearsome ‘Nico’ to break through. Simon had met with the Idumeans’ senior leader, Jacob bar Sosias, who concurred that it was time for his men to unleash against the Romans. General Yohanan was given the honour of leading the assault with the intent of destroying the imperial siege works along the western wall, nearest Herod’s Fortress.

The Idumean general assembled his assault force in the Praetorium. Three hundred of his own Idumean soldiers accompanied more than seven hundred of Simon’s zealots. One in every ten men carried an unlit torch.

“We must strike hard and fast,” he directed. “Remember, we are here to burn the enemy’s siege platforms and rams, not engage in a stand-up fight.”

His captains, as well as those of the zealots, nodded in concurrence. Signalling for them to follow him, Yohanan led them to an obscure gate near the Tower of Hippicus.

He was unconcerned about his own soldiers, for they were well-disciplined and would follow orders. It was the zealots who troubled him. Unlike their leader, Simon, who understood that this would be a long and arduous siege, his men were ever anxious to kill as many Romans as they

could or die as martyrs trying.

Once through the gate, Yohanan and his raiders kept close to the wall, using its enormous shadow to shield their movement from the eyes of Roman sentries pacing behind the hurdles and other barricades. Darkness engulfed them. The sporadic light of Roman torches did more to hinder their night vision than help.

As such, the Idumean general almost ran straight into the support posts of the nearest ramp. He strained his eyes to see the fearsome battering ram that sat atop. “Take half your men and continue on,” he whispered to one of the zealot leaders. “There is a second ram not two furlongs further along the wall.” He waited a minute or so before tapping one of his men on the shoulder. At least a dozen flints were struck as they frantically set about lighting their torches. The sparks caught the attention of bleary-eyed Roman sentries, scarcely fifty meters from where Yohanan and his raiders knelt, ready to strike.

“Sound the alarm!” was heard just as the first torches ignited.

Rather than assist Yohanan’s men in destroying the ram and its assault ramp, most of the zealots gave a loud shout and charged towards the sentries. The hurdles and other barricades halted them briefly. As they began to climb over, one of their number was felled by the javelin of a legionary sentry. He cried out in pain his ribs were shattered by the heavy weapon, his lungs quickly filling with blood. This only further incensed his comrades.

Yohanan, meanwhile, clambered his way up the side of the tall ramp, a blazing torch clutched in his right hand. Once at the top, he and several of his soldiers attempted to light the ram and its protective shed. This proved difficult, however, as the Romans had saturated the wood with water to prevent such a thing. The ram itself was also hung by chain instead of rope.

“It’s no good,” a soldier protested. “The wood is too damp to burn!”

“Sir, we’ve set fire to the ramp!” another voice called up from below.

Yohanan saw that the flames along the support structures were beginning to spread. Once they were engulfed, the earthworks would collapse under the weight of the ram, which would eventually be consumed by the fire. Further along the wall, he could see the flames licking up the wooden supports of the second ramp.

He beamed in satisfaction and waved to his men. “Come on!” His soldiers sprinted down the ramp to where their zealot allies were brawling with a

growing number of Roman troops. As he made ready to give the order to pull back into the city, Yohanan felt as if he'd been punched in the chest. His breath was taken from him, and he looked down to see the fins of a scorpion bolt protruding from his chest. He broke into an involuntary coughing fit as he fell to his knees. His leather and scale armour, offering some protection against slashing weapons, had proven useless against a scorpion bolt shot at close range. The Idumean general collapsed onto his stomach, blood spurting from his mouth. He continued to cough and was now throwing up blood. His body convulsed, and he was unable to move away from the heat of the growing flames. He silently prayed that death would take him before the fire did.



At the hurdles, the zealots were continuing to clash with the Romans, anxious to spill blood this night. Several sentries had been overwhelmed and slain, but now there were growing numbers of imperial troops converging on the barricades. The ramp was closest to Legio XV and most of these reinforcements were legionaries from the prince imperial's own legion. They were accompanied by several companies of spearmen dressed in Herodian armour and conical helms; Jews from King Agrippa's army, who fought against their own countrymen.

"Filthy traitors!" a zealot snarled at them.

The sight of Jews fighting beside Romans caused the zealots to fly into a blinding rage. The surviving Idumean commanders urged them to withdraw. Instead, they focused their hatred on their faithless kinsmen, all but ignoring the advancing waves of legionaries. The zealots had managed to scramble over the barricades, which in turn served to trap them as a storm of javelins rained down upon them. Gladii were drawn with a shout, and both Roman and allied Judean alike charged into the bloodied zealot mob. The fighting was fierce. As their friends were slain in rapid succession, the surviving rebels started back over the hurdles, their courage failing and intent on saving their own lives.

Near the second assault ramp, the raiders had been driven back by the charge of a single company from the Siliana Regiment of Horse. Accompanying them was none other than General Titus himself. The commander-in-chief had ordered his tent moved closer to the barricades a

few days before, so he could react quickly in the event of such a raid.

"Centurion!" the prince imperial shouted. "Get water and entrenching tools; put these damned fires out!"

The energy from their raid exhausted, the surviving zealots fled to the safety of their own defences. Archers appeared along the walls, raining down arrows upon any would-be Roman pursuers. As Titus struggled to maintain order, a loud crash was heard from well behind their siege lines.

"Damn it all, they must have gotten to the towers!" a legionary cried out in dismay.

Titus kicked his horse into a gallop. Scores of his troops scampered out of the way as he raced towards the sound of the commotion. Soldiers were now gathering from several directions upon one of the siege towers that lay shattered on its side.

A centurion waved his arms at the commanding general. "It's alright, sir! It's alright! The rebels did not breach our lines."

Titus dismounted and tried to survey the wreckage in the faint torchlight. "What happened?"

"My guess is one of the bearing walls was not strengthened properly and the bloody thing simply tipped over. Regardless, this isn't the work of raiders, sir. They would have set fire to it, not attempted to pull the damn thing down."

Titus let out a sigh of relief. A fallen tower could be repaired and raised again, although he would have Tribune Artorius discipline the men who'd worked on this particular structure. He then turned back towards the barricades, where scorpions were being manned and archers taking up positions to protect the soldiers attempting to put the fires out. Disorder had gotten the best of several men who were shot down by Judean archers as they scrambled towards the burning ramps. Several decani quickly got their soldiers under control, forming their men into testudo formations to protect those carrying water and entrenching tools. The arrows and scorpion bolts from the hurdles helped to suppress the defenders' attempts at hindering the firefighting efforts. Within the hour the flames were out, though it would be morning before they could assess the damage.

"Sir, we've taken a prisoner," a legionary reported, as the commander-in-chief wearily made his way back to his tent. "What shall we do with him?"

"Keep him safe…for now."



The next day, Titus and Legate Domitius of Legio XV went out to survey the wreckage. The charred support structures of the ramps still smoked. Ash and dust blew on the gusts of wind that came from the north. Overall, they appeared to be structurally sound. Only one of the rams had suffered some scorching. Its crewmen said it added ‘character’ to it. Over a hundred corpses littered the ground in and around the hurdles and siege ramps. Titus’ own forces had suffered twelve dead and nearly forty wounded.

The ground was covered in large blackened marks where the bodies of the slain had bled out. Hundreds of drag marks ran both towards the city and the Roman encampment. Soldier and zealot alike had tried to save their fallen friends. Under the protection of scorpions and archers, legionaries and auxilia troopers continued to drag and carry back their fallen comrades. Scores of rebels still lay where they had fallen.

“Of all the raiders, we only managed to capture one alive,” Domitius grumbled. “At least we can make a proper example of him.”

Titus’ mouth turned up in a malicious smirk. “Did we get any useful intelligence out of him?”

“Nothing we didn’t know already. My interrogators beat on him a bit but left him mostly unblemished, per your orders.”

The prisoner was brought forward. The first thing Titus noticed was how young he was, no more than a teenager. His face was smooth and boyish, with unkempt hair hanging in his eyes. Both were bruised, as was the side of his face. They were his only injuries, for the moment. His head was held high in defiance as a pair of auxilia troopers led him to the commanding general. Near the siege hurdles, on a raised earthen platform used for one of the heavy ballistae, lay a fifteen-foot cross. A hard-faced legionary stood nearby with a corded whip his hands.

“He says his name is Isaac, son of Yeshua,” one of the soldiers said. “Two weeks ago he was a pilgrim from Nazareth…”

“And now he’s foolishly attacking Roman siege works,” Titus interrupted. Wishing to spare his friend, Josephus, from witnessing the torture and execution of the young Jew, Titus ordered an officer from King Agrippa’s forces to address the city’s defenders.

“Desecrators of the holy city,” the man called out, *“your defiance of Caesar has brought nothing but misery and death to our people. And now*

you will witness the penalty for making war against Rome."

The walls were now swarming with zealots. Titus had ordered his archers and siege engines to hold their fire, so that the rebels might watch the hellish spectacle that was about to unfold. A few profane insults were hurled towards the Judean officer; however, all were soon silenced as they watched the young man dragged to the top of the earthworks.

"This man's name is Isaac ben Yeshua of Nazareth," the loyalist officer continued. "A holy trekker turned zealot. Witness now the penalty for such defiant heresy."

The young man's tunic was ripped from his body and with a blow to the stomach from a Roman fist, he fell to his knees. He was trembling, sweat streamed down his face and neck. His breathing came rapidly when he saw the shadow of the soldier with the whip hovering over him. The legionary looked to Titus, who gave a slow nod. With a loud crack, the whip slapped the zealot's exposed flesh, cutting into the skin. The soldier was slow and methodical, getting a wide backswing before each strike. To his credit, the young rebel managed to keep from uttering a sound until the fifth or sixth blow. He at first whimpered, his back covered in streams of blood. As the whip continued to crack against his body, he found he could no longer control his screams.

After the twentieth blow, the prince imperial ordered a halt to the punishment. "Enough! I don't want him dying of shock or bleeding to death before you've had a chance to hang him up."

The legionary stepped away and a squad of auxiliary infantrymen threw the lad onto the cross. He cried out once more as his bloodied back scraped across the pole. His arms were stretched out, almost to the point that they were pulled from his shoulders, then tied to the cross brace. His ankles were bound to the vertical support. A dozen men hefted him up awkwardly, then dropped the pole into a three-foot hole.

The sight of a lone man, naked and bleeding, hanging from a fifteen-foot cross so close to the wall, added a sad, pathetic accent to the display of carnage. Not a word was uttered from the defences and the zealots slowly dispersed.



"The enemy looks to have mostly withdrawn from the outer wall,"

General Domitius reported later that afternoon. “They took it far worse than us last night. Between the losses already sustained and sheer fatigue, I doubt they have the strength to man outer defences any longer.”

Similar reports had come from the other legates. The Third Wall appeared to be deserted. The prince imperial turned to Tribune Gaius Artorius and asked him for his assessment.

“The walls are starting to crumble,” Gaius remarked. “Give me an hour and we can breach the north wall.”

“Deploy Nico forward,” Titus ordered. “It is time the armies of Caesar entered Jerusalem once more.”

“I’ll see to it personally, sir.” Gaius saluted before departing to find his siege crews.

“Sir?” a voice said from behind Titus. It was the centurion pilus prior, from the Twelfth Legion’s cohort that had gotten itself ambushed a couple weeks prior.

“Centurion,” he acknowledged.

“Request permission to lead the attack,” the pilus prior stated. The Twelfth was tasked with breaching the wall, and the centurion knew this was the best chance they would get.

“Granted,” Titus answered. “Form your cohort behind Nico. Once through the breach, open the gates for the rest of the assault force and begin clearing the walls and towers.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The hour was growing late and the sun setting behind them as Titus walked across the barren field. He found Gaius rallying his tired siege crewmen.

“I know you are weary,” the tribune said to his men. “But know that your enemy is far more beaten than you. And if we do not push forward now, then we give them time to recover and make our lives difficult. This time I will be assailing the breach with you. Should I fall, you can use my corpse as a counterweight to the ram.” He gave a self-deprecating grin, which drew smiles and even a few laughs from his soldiers.

“Alright, you heard the siege officer,” the decanus leading the crew said. “Let’s get Nico back to the wall and shove this ram up some zealot ass!”

Gaius smiled and faced General Titus. “We’re ready to advance, sir.”

Titus folded his arms across his chest and nodded. “Send them the

emperor's regards."

Two companies of archers accompanied the massive ram. Their front ranks carried wicker hurdles to shield them from enemy missiles. The red glow of the setting sun fell upon the outer wall, casting a great shadow in the east. There seemed to be few, if any, defenders left on the battered ramparts.

Beneath Nico's protective shed, Gaius and forty crewmen drove the heavy structure up the earthen ramp. The iron-banded wheels sunk into the dirt, slowing their progress as they braced themselves against the interior posts. The setting sun off to their right cast a glow upon the wall. The tribune found it almost mesmerising. With each step, their hobnailed sandals gripped the earth, creating indelible imprints. Sweat dripped off Gaius' brow, stinging his eyes; his forearms were slick and his tunic soaked beneath his armour.

"Halt!" the decanus shouted. The ram lurched to a stop less than ten feet from the wall. The stones were already cracked from the previous onslaught.

The crew paused for a moment, each man taking a series of deep breaths before commencing their work of destruction. The occasional stone smashed off the protective shed, yet within moments the enemy resistance appeared to have dissipated altogether. Though neither Gaius nor the ram crewmen could see anything beyond the patch of wall they intended to smash, the tribune dared to hope that the Jewish rebels had expended themselves and were ripe for the picking. He took one more deep breath before taking his place at the front of the massive pole near the iron head. Though he was the senior officer present, he had briefed the decanus that once they reached the wall, he was just another crewman. The two-score of men manning the ram braced themselves as they took hold. They began to swing the beast, the support chains creaked loudly, gaining momentum until at last ready to strike.

"Pull!" the decanus shouted. *"Ram!"*

The sound of the iron head smashing into the wall was deafening for the men confined to the protective shed. Gaius' ears were ringing. He found himself popping his jaw, trying to relieve the pressure in his ears as they swung the ram again. The wall, already weakened by previous assaults, began to crumble after the second strike. Dust filled the air. Broken stone fell from the wall with each successive blow. After a full minute of continuous pounding, the ram smashed completely through the wall. With nothing to hold their massive weight, stones in excess of a thousand pounds each fell onto the shed and slammed into the ground below.

“That’s done it!” Gaius shouted, his ears still ringing.

The crew swung the ram several more times, clearing away fallen stone and rubble.

“Withdraw!” the decanus ordered.

Gaius scrambled past the crewmen, who were relieved to be wheeling the massive engine back down the ramp.

The tribune emerged and rushed over to the centurion pilus prior from the leading assault cohort. Archers stood ready, though the enemy had not returned to the wall. The pilus prior saluted as Gaius approached him.

“Once the ram is out of the way, the city is yours,” Gaius said.

“We’re ready, sir.”

The centurion’s feelings were traced with disappointment. There wasn’t more than a few diehard zealots manning the wall. The sun was now barely clinging to the western horizon, the coming of night threatening to swallow up his cohort.

“Come on, come on,” he whispered. He anxiously watched the ram wheeled down the ramp. As soon as it reached the bottom, it executed a sharp turn to the right. The centurion took this as his signal to attack. *“With me!”*

He raised his gladius high. His men gave a shout of rage and stormed up the ramp. Two of the files instinctively fell into step in the deep grooves left by the heavy siege engine. A salvo of sling stones, arrows, and throwing darts rained down from the ramparts. These, in turn, were met with volleys of arrows from the archers below. Legionaries kept their shields high, forming a protective shell. With a subsequent shout, they stormed into the breach. One hapless soldier cried out in pain. A stray arrow had managed to strike him in the calf. His leg spasmed, and he tumbled over the side of the ramp.

The breach created by the ram was full of broken blocks and piles of jagged stones. The centurion knew that, were the defenders still intent on holding the outer wall, there would be hundreds of fighters waiting for them. Instead, the ground inside of the wall was practically deserted. The only zealots left were the fanatics up on the ramparts who were determined to die for their god this day.

“Third and Fourth Centuries, action left!” the pilus prior ordered. “Fifth and Sixth on the right; First and Second, on me!”

Every soldier within the cohort knew their role before the assault began. Half of those tasked with clearing the walls sought out the nearest steps. The others cleared the base of the defences, as well as the towers. The cohort’s

Sixth Century ran with all haste towards the nearest gatehouse. Here a sizeable number of zealots were determined to hold until the last, and they flung stone and spear alike at the approaching legionaries.

The lead soldiers stormed up the ragged stone steps, shields held up protectively. So incensed were they, that the soldier leading the attack gave a howl of rage and plunged his gladius into the bowels of the nearest rebel fighter. He was subsequently swarmed by half a dozen zealots, who stabbed and slashed at him with their curved blades. Most of these deflected off his armour, though one slash caught him on his sword arm. The wound bled profusely, yet the maddened legionary scarcely noticed. He thrust his weapon into the guts of one man, then bashed his helmeted head into the face of another, sending him falling from the wall.

He was soon joined by a number of his mates, who killed with equal fury. Within moments, the gatehouse was taken.



"Assault cohorts ready, sir!"

Two additional cohorts from Twelfth Fulminata gathered in a long column behind the ramp to the west of the initial breach. The vengeful legion had been given the honour of drawing first blood in Jerusalem by General Titus. Expecting an intense bombardment, they hunkered low behind their shields, eyes frantically scanning the defences. Yet all was silent. No arrows, sling stones, not even a hurled insult rained down upon them. Their own siege towers made not a sound; only the rhythmic smashing of the battering ram against the crumbling breach echoed in the silence.

After more than two weeks of pounding, the thick wall finally gave. Huge stones broke apart, creating a thick cloud of dust as they crashed into the earth. Large blocks and chunks of mortar crashed down on the protective shed above the ram, jarring the exhausted crewmen.

"Withdraw the ram!"

There was no mad dash into the breach just yet. The Romans waited for the dust to settle, to see just how large of an opening the ram had made. Even with no defenders opposing them, assaulting the breach had its share of hazards. The crumbled foundations would create a series of jagged obstacles they would have to climb over, plus the added risk of falling stones from the broken wall.

The ram was heaved back down the ramp, chunks of rock and mortar falling off its sides. Once the heavy engine was clear, Master Centurion Cinna blew his whistle. His men gave a loud shout and charged up into the breach. They expected a swarm of zealots to be waiting for them on the other side. But as they clambered over the rocks and other obstacles, they quickly came to realise that the New City was likely deserted.

"Bastards have all hoofed it!" Cinna's optio spat in anger.

The master centurion ignored his complaint. "First Cohort, start clearing these buildings!" He pointed his gladius at a large rock outcropping north of the Tower of Hippicus and west of the Second Wall. "Do not advance any further south or east from that point."

Cinna soon found the pilus priors from the initial assault, who informed him that the eastern stretch of the north wall was secured. While his men began to ransack the nearest neighbourhood, soldiers from the legion's Fourth Cohort were dispatched to clear the remainder of the wall itself.

The pounding of the rams belonging to the Fifth and Fifteenth Legions still echoed. Titus wanted to create more breaches for his men to enter. His intent was to eventually raze the entire wall; but for now, he would have it manned by archers and auxilia skirmishers.

The master centurion and his First Century advanced cautiously through the abandoned city as far as the large rock known as Golgotha. Used for decades as a place of execution, it stood out from the city below like a deformed skull. Cinna climbed up to the large space where countless crucifixions had been performed over the years and surveyed Bezetha, the Second Wall, and the Temple in the distance.

"And so, Rome has returned," he said quietly. A flood of terrible memories washed over him from four years before, when the rebellion had just erupted. The troopers of the Jerusalem garrison were either expelled from the city or killed. The rebel factions were divided and unorganised then, with neither Simon bar Giora nor John of Giscala in control of the Jewish state. The moderate government under Hanan ben Hanan hoped for a negotiated end to the fighting. The holy city hadn't even been that well defended at the time. According to the turncoat, Josephus, it was close to capitulation when that damned idiot, Cestius Gallus, inexplicably withdrew his army. Now it was swarming with zealots, Idumean soldiers, and any man or boy of fighting age who was willing to pick up a weapon and stand against Rome.

Cinna took a deep breath and surveyed sprawling districts of Bezetha.

The New City was very open, unlike the cramped districts of the rest of Jerusalem. Thirty years before, Bezetha had not even existed, nor had the vast Third Wall. One of the reasons the Roman governors used Golgotha as a place of execution was its proximity to the city, while still being outside its gates. The ever-growing population had led the allied King Agrippa I to expand Jerusalem north of the Temple. Now, Bezetha would serve as the camp of the imperial army while the Romans looked towards the inner defences. The retaking of Jerusalem had begun.

Chapter XI: In the Shadow of Golgotha

Bezetha, the New City
25 May, 70 A.D.



Golgotha, ‘The Rock of the Skull’

Sensing the imminent collapse of the outer defences, Simon begrudgingly accepted that Bezetha could no longer be saved. During the night, while the Twelfth Legion swarmed the ramparts, he ordered his fighters to pull back to the Second Wall that surrounded the district of Tyropoeon. The Temple, Antonia Fortress, and Tower of Hippicus were all enclosed behind these defence works. Simon further ordered his wounded, who had thus far been cared for in a series of houses near the execution rock of Golgotha, to be evacuated to Herod’s Fortress. Their dead were abandoned where they fell.

“Let the Romans have it,” his senior captain, Boaz said with a contemptuous spat.

As they stood atop the Tower of Phasel, Simon scoffed in defiance as hundreds of Roman troops marched into Bezetha. “They will get no further,” he growled. “Send word to the Giscalan. He would do well to defend the Second Wall, as well as the temple and fortress. And it would be wise to continue to harass the imperial forces outside the city who still profane the Mount of Olives with their presence.”

“And what would you have us do?” one of his captains asked.

“We will take the fight to the Romans. They will drown in a sea of blood beneath the shadow of *The Skull*.”



Satisfied that the rebels had withdrawn from Bezetha, Titus ordered his headquarters moved into the city. The Twelfth and Fifteenth Legions would do the same. The Fifth remained opposite of Herod’s Fortress to the west, and the Tenth still encamped along the Mount of Olives.

The sight of a Roman army breaking down and moving its marching camp was best described as organised chaos. Every last man knew his tasks and responsibilities. Legionaries in each squad were assigned to either collapse and pack the tent, or retrieve the palisade stakes from their section of the earthworks and fill in the encircling trenches. As tents were rolled up and tied to their pack animals, decani inventoried all of their squads’ equipment, to include cooking pots, various tools, and individual weapons and kit. Once a squad was ready to march and its equipment accounted for, the decanus would report to the tesserarius who, in turn, would inform the centurion when the entire century was assembled.

Signifiers gathered at the pay wagons for their cohorts, securing the money chests before taking up the standards and returning to their centuries. Centurions and options coordinated the order-of-march within the individual cohorts. The centurions pilus prior did the same for the entire legion, coordinating with the chief tribune and master centurion. Auxilia infantry and cavalry regiments made similar preparations. Catapults and ballistae were loaded onto their wagons. The logistics train for the siege works was the largest within the entire army, with hundreds of wagons and thousands of beasts-of-burden required to transport the artillery, smithies, horse farriers, and other various equipment. Despite the appearance of near anarchy, two legions, an equal number of auxilia troopers, plus siege trains, were ready to advance into the city within two hours of General Titus giving the order.

Commanding legates accompanied the surveyors with a designated escort into Bezetha. Titus directed where each legion and auxilia regiment was to encamp. Alexander and his staff officers sorted the logistical details. And while they intended to eventually raze the New City to rubble, the commander-in-chief sought to make best use of the neighbourhoods nearest

the inner walls.

“Place archers on all the rooftops overlooking any possible avenues of approach for enemy raids,” he ordered General Placidus. He nodded towards the three tall towers to the south of Golgotha. Numerous buildings ran along the dirt path leading to the rock structure which had served as tomb for an old nobleman named Yosef of Arimathea. These were mostly multi-story homes belonging to wealthy merchants and Judean nobles, as well as the governor of New City.

“That is the strong point,” Titus stressed. “Any attacks are most likely to come from there.”

“We’ll sort them out,” Placidus said, with nonchalant confidence. Since the Third Wall had been taken, the auxilia corps commander was supremely assured that the city would fall within weeks, if not days. He gave orders to his regimental commanders to dispatch a third of their archers and infantrymen to secure the district between Golgotha and the Tower of Hippicus.

Near the outer siege line, Tribune Gaius Artorius oversaw the breaking down and loading of his engines onto their designated wagons. Because the earthworks and ramps had been built by legionaries who were now moving their camps into the city, he did not have the manpower to tear these down as well.

“Not to worry, sir,” Vorenus reassured him. “Once the rest of the army gets their arses sorted, we’ll have plenty of men to assist us.”

“We haven’t even received any orders as to when or where we’re supposed to go,” Gaius replied with a trace of irritation.

“We’ll be dead last to enter Jerusalem, sir,” the centurion observed. “If we tried to lug our siege trains into the city now, we’d jam up all the roads, creating a sodding nightmare.” He then remarked with a grin, “I would have thought your time in the ranks got you accustomed to hurrying to getting ready, only to sit on your backside for hours waiting to move.”

Gaius chuckled, recalling the numerous times in recent years where as a decanus, and later optio, that he chastised his legionaries to quit complaining about the incessant waiting; an ever-present, albeit less glamourous reality of life within the legions.



Near the Tower of Hippicus stood the great tomb of a long-deceased Jewish nobleman, Yosef of Arimathea. In a story that had taken on mythological proportions, a Jewish teacher named Yeshua ben Yosef had been buried there, following his execution for supposedly inciting insurrection, more than thirty years before. Yeshua's followers had proclaimed he was the son of God, who rose from the dead after three days. While the body had indeed gone missing, there were few who believed the stories that came from a handful of fanatics from what was but one of many sects and heretical cults within Judaism. And yet the sepulchre remained as a quiet reminder of that mysterious man from Nazareth.

A large pool sat across from the southern face of the tomb. From there, a host of Simon's fighters waited. It was when the Romans were establishing their vast series of camps within the walls of Bezetha that they were most vulnerable. From his position atop the tower, the zealot leader could see a handful of archers occupying some of the rooftops of the nearest buildings. Beyond that, legionaries were setting up their tents and establishing barricades.

"Free Judea!" a voice cried out.

Scores of zealots and a hundred Idumean soldiers sprang forth and rushed the camp. Trumpets blared in other parts of the city, as a series of sorties were launched from various quarters.

Arrows flew from the rooftops. Fighters cried out as they were shot down. Yet so quick was their attack, they were able to swarm the nearest sentries, who were slain even as they sounded the alarm. Legionaries and auxilia troopers dropped their entrenching tools and rushed towards the fray; their officers shouting commands and ordering them into battle lines before engaging.

Simon's intent was to fight a series of raids and sneak attacks, while never allowing the imperial soldiers to mass their superior numbers. However, the wrath of his most fanatical followers was great. They refused to heed the calls to withdraw as Roman battle formations advanced towards them. Volleys of javelins pummelled their ranks, men screaming as they were impaled by the heavy pila. Yet even as this band foundered, more fighters emerged from their hiding places, joining the fray.



General Thrasea established the Twelfth Legion's principia at an open-air marketplace just northwest of Golgotha. He found the buildings within this particular neighbourhood to be stifling and squalid, so he elected to erect his principia tent within the market, rather than using one of the buildings as his headquarters. His soldiers smashed vendor stalls and kicked in the doors of surrounding houses, hoping to find valuables to plunder.

"Bloody stinks in there," his chief tribune bickered. He emerged from a two-story stone structure. "Smells like a rotting goat carcass."

"It very well could be," Thrasea observed. "If the Jews knew we were going to destroy their homes, what would stop them from leaving bloated animal remains and shit as welcoming gift for us?"

Before the young chief tribune could reply, the sound of trumpets and cries of battle alerted them to the chaos unfolding near the old tomb.

"That didn't take long," the legate grumbled, donning his helmet. He ordered his second-in-command, "Ready three cohorts for battle and have the rest held in reserve."

Thrasea then called for his horse. With escorts from the legion's cavalry, he galloped down the dirt road that led to where Master Centurion Cinna and the First Cohort were advancing in battle formation. Though the area was fairly open, he could only march his men in a column sixteen soldiers wide along the main road. Two of his double-strength centuries advanced on the wings, negotiating their way through the abandoned streets and alleys, hoping to envelope their quarry.

The rebels had taken the early initiative; however, the initial shock had subsided, and they now faced organised resistance from their imperial foes. The converging legionary and auxilia cohorts formed into battle lines as they were assailed by hundreds of Judean fighters. Javelins were flung, albeit the effects were hindered by the numerous buildings and stalls.

With shouted orders and whistle blows from the centurions, the Roman battle lines advanced. Curved swords, hand axes, and stabbing spears hammered their shield walls. The Jewish warriors fought with zeal and valour, though their frustration quickly mounted at their inability to breach the line of shields or the soldiers' heavy armour. Every few minutes, centurions would blow their whistles or shout audible commands and fresh troops would surge forward in a passage-of-lines. Fatigue and recklessness got the best of the occasional rebel fighter, often with fatal consequences.

Shrieks from the wounded and dying echoed above the din of battle. Men had their guts splayed open by gladii and stabbing spears, leaving streaks of blood and slippery piles of entrails in their wake.

General Thrasea sought to find Cinna. Upon seeing the primus pilus advancing at the head of the First Cohort, with hundreds of his legionaries smashing into the zealot mob on both flanks, he was satisfied that his men had wrested the initiative from the enemy. He turned his horse around and rode northeast, seeking out his counterpart from Legio XV.

The zealots from John of Giscala's faction had also surged forth from the Tyropoeon gate and were engaged in a bloody brawl with the Apollinaris Legion. Syrian auxiliaries and allied Judean archers were scrambling to the tops of the nearest structures and unleashing salvos of arrows at their enemies. Thrasea soon spotted Titus leading a contingent of mounted archers towards the large open space between the two legions.

"They're trying to goad us into attacking the defences," the commander-in-chief said to his legate. "I've ordered the Fifteenth Legion to only press as far as Golgotha. Placidus and his regiments will secure the northern flank. I'm personally taking these men to capture the rock itself."

"Understood," Thrasea replied. "I've ordered my men to only drive the enemy back as far as the tomb and pool nearest Herod's Fortress. The rebels still have a number of our siege engines. No doubt they would like to use them against us now."



Within an hour, the zealots appeared to tire and began the disorganised withdrawal back behind the Second Wall. The Romans, having learned their lesson from previous sorties, kept their distance from the enemy ramparts where archers and slingers hurled insults and attempted to goad them into attacking. Despite Thrasea's concerns, none of the captured scorpions or catapults made their way to the ramparts. Satisfied that the battle was over, the prince imperial returned to his headquarters.

"I'm afraid such raids will be our constant companion for the time being," he remarked as he joined his staff officers at his principia. Legionaries were still erecting the tent. The prince imperial's baggage wagons were unloaded and the draught animals unhitched.

Half of the imperial forces remained in battle formations, while the

remainder continued establishing their camps within the city. Legionaries and auxilia troopers toiled into the encroaching darkness, the sound of pickaxes smashing into the rocky ground echoing. Overzealous Judean warriors, often without orders from their leaders, launched a series of raids throughout the night. The darkness rendered imperial archers all but useless, and legionaries were unable to employ their javelins before their assailants were on top of them. Had the sorties been better organised, they might have created greater havoc and destruction. And yet, John and Simon's barely suppressed antipathy towards each other prevented any such unified cooperation. Around four hours before dawn, the zealots gave up their attempts at further disrupting the Roman entrenchments, with the survivors retiring into the inner city.

The following day, satisfied their camps were fortified and barricaded, Titus ordered much of the Third Wall to be destroyed along with a substantial portion of Bezetha. He established his principia in a large forum the Jews called *The Camp of the Assyrians*. There was little activity coming from within the inner city, and he assumed the rebels were exhausted from the previous days' ordeals. That evening, he called for a meeting with his legion commanders, General Placidus, and Tribune Gaius Artorius.

"I have to hand it to them," Alexander stated. "They seemed tireless last night in their constant sorties against us."

"Let them keep coming," Placidus remarked. "Battling us in the open is the most asinine tactic they could employ. For every one of our men who falls, they lose between five and ten."

Titus' demeanour was calm, in sharp contrast to the ever-volatile auxilia corps commander. "They'll grow tired of their fruitless attacks soon enough. Once they see that their efforts to disrupt our occupation of the city have failed, they will have little choice but to try and hold us from the inner defences. I do not plan on giving them any breathing space. Our focus now must be on the Second Wall, as well as the Antonia Fortress."

"My siege trains are ready to move into the city, sir," Gaius spoke up. "I will need extra manpower to demolish and move the ramps and earthworks."

Alexander spoke for the commander-in-chief on this matter. "Each legion will re-establish its ramps and artillery platforms. Have your engineers scout the defences and see where we should best deploy our towers and battering rams."

“We’ll first give the men a day of rest,” Titus decided. “The last few days have been exhausting for them. And we know it will require much back-breaking labour to tear down and move the wooden support works holding each ramp in place.”

“Not to mention the literal ‘moving of mountains’ to build them up again,” Legate Domitius added.

“I also have a few matters to sort tomorrow,” the prince imperial remarked. He said to Thrasea, “Have the Twelfth Legion paraded two hours after sunrise.”



As Titus predicted, there was a pause in the fighting the next day. Both sides needed time to regroup and assess the strategic situation. Knowing that trying to contain their warriors’ pent up fury would be futile, both Simon and John had allowed the rather reckless sorties during the previous nights to continue until casualties and exhaustion brought their fighters to their senses.

The Roman commander-in-chief took this temporary cessation of hostilities as an opportunity to formally recognise one of the stalwart attackers who helped take the defences. Per Titus’ orders, the Twelfth Fulminata Legion was paraded in the open ground nearest the Damascus Road gate. They made a great spectacle, so that their enemies behind the second wall might see them. Armour and shields were polished, with every soldier standing with his shield and javelin planted in the ground. At Titus’ direction, cornicen horns sounded a series of loud notes, heard by all within several miles of Jerusalem.

A lone legionary stood in front of the legion. Beside him were General Thrasea and the senior officers of the legion. The soldier was in full armour, yet he had removed his helmet. His face bore numerous cuts and bruises; his right arm was heavily bandaged and in a sling. Titus, Alexander, and members of the army’s staff stood facing the formation. Alexander held a gold crown fashioned in the shape of a series of towers.

“When the imperial army lays siege to an enemy stronghold,” Titus spoke, “it is customary that the first man over the defences be rewarded for his valour. Today we honour the man who drew first blood on the walls of this city. Legionary Marcus Julius Corbo, come forward.”

The man did as he was told, coming to attention before the commander-in-chief. Alexander handed the crown to Titus, who placed it upon the soldier's head. A staff tribune then read from a scroll:

"In the name of Emperor Titus Flavius Caesar Vespasian Augustus, and that of the Senate and People of Rome, the Rampart Crown is hereby awarded to Legionary Marcus Julius Corbo. For valour and extreme courage, beyond that normally expected of an imperial soldier, Legionary Corbo was first to storm the ramparts of the rebel city of Jerusalem, and despite numerous injuries to his person, did slay three enemy warriors. His heroic actions led to the capture of the defences."

Titus clasped the soldier's hand. "Well done. By your valour, you have helped restore honour to the Twelfth Fulminata Legion."

The two men exchanged salutes. Legionary Corbo did a sharp about turn and was met with a loud ovation from his legion as he took his place with his century.

Titus raised both hands, silencing the men. "While we honour the valour of Legionary Corbo and the conduct of the entire Twelfth Legion during the taking of the city's outer defences, we must continue to be brave and cautious in equal measure. When in battle, our discipline must be sound; hot-headed rage can only lead to madness and unnecessary risk. Steel your hearts, and know that our enemy is far from beaten. These next phases of the siege will be arduous and extremely brutal. I implore all of you to temper your courage with proper conduct, for that is what defines true bravery."

Titus took a moment to look into the faces of the men closest to him. They varied greatly in age, from youthful recruits scarcely old enough to shave, to battle-hardened veterans reaching the end of their twenty years of service. As an eastern legion, their ethnicities were also varied. Many of the younger legionaries were of Syrian, Arabian, or even African origin. These were mingled with replacements sent after Beth Horon from Italia, Gaul, and the Balkans. A few had even come from the far reaches of Britannia.

The sight of these men was sobering for the commander-in-chief. He knew that, no matter how tactically sound and disciplined they may execute the remainder of this war, many of these faces would never see home again.

Chapter XII: Treachery and Mercy

Bezetha, the New City
28 May, 70 A.D.
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Three days after taking the outer wall, Tribune Gaius Artorius led his siege crews in bringing one of the large towers into the city. While it was his carpenters and engineers who toiled to build the massive towers, Gaius felt it only proper that he take part in their first action against the Second Wall. The tribune stood at the base of the tall structure, its front and sides were covered in iron plates.

"This will give us the best view of their defences and where to employ our catapults and ballistae," he explained to Centurion Vorenus.

Gaius was not afraid of heights, per se, yet after the fallen tower incident a few weeks prior, he was understandably nervous. Given its height and extreme weight, he worried about its stability. His chief engineers reassured him it was structurally sound.

"I'm not arguing that with you, sir," the centurion chuckled as he noted his tribune's nervous demeanour.

It had taken some time to clear the necessary breach, for the tower was far too tall to fit through any of the gates. The gap in the wall had to be widened, stone and debris cleared away, as well as the levelling of the disturbed earth. Scores of men were then needed to heave the massive structure into the city.

"Are you coming?" Gaius asked, looking over his shoulder as he started to climb the ladder within the tower.

"Sure, why not? After all, what's the worst that could happen?"

The tribune found he actually appreciated Vorenus' rather morbid sense of humour. He often suspected the centurion's manner was different towards him was different than with other tribunes. Gaius had come up from the ranks rather than being born into Rome's lesser nobility. Like the primus ordo, he had experienced the horrors of war many times over and was devoid of naïve delusions of invincibility.

Gaius kept his gaze fixed on the very top as they climbed the wooden

ladder. At about forty feet up, they reached the first platform. It was here that assault troops would surge into breaches created by the battering rams. Large rope pulleys held a ramp in place. A second ladder ran up the centre of the platform, leading the remaining twenty feet to the very top. The tower tapered here, and the space was much smaller than the lower floor. Wooden and iron palisades encircled the platform, providing protection for archers and scorpion crews.

"Marvellous view from up here," Vorenus said, taking a deep breath.

Gaius gave a nod and signalled to the men below.

A series of orders were shouted by one of the sergeants. With a hundred loud groans and the creaking of wheels upon their axles, the tower began its advance. Gaius peered nervously over the side as the large, iron-banded wooden wheels squeaked loudly and the ponderous monstrosity moved along the dirt road. Buildings in the tower's path had been demolished. Surveyors had also made certain the ground was stable enough to support its massive weight.

"Not nervous, are you, sir?" the centurion laughed, noting the excessive sweat on the tribune's brow. Accompanying the two officers atop the sixty-foot tower were two scorpion crews and six archers. "I can't believe a hardened bastard like you would be afraid of heights. Look at it this way; if the tower tips over and we end up crashing, it should only hurt for a few seconds."

Gaius laughed in spite of himself. It was slow going through the broken remains of Bezetha. The neighbourhoods and marketplaces were now covered in legionary and auxilia camps. Soldiers patrolled the streets, while sentries manned the earthen ramparts facing the Second Wall. The air was accented by the loud crack of battering rams as they worked to level the Third Wall. Houses and shops were looted and then set alight. With the rams committed to tearing down the long wall, pickaxes and pry bars were used to dismantle the stone structures within New City.

Every twenty minutes, the decani leading the tower moving detail halted their men for a brief rest. After an hour, Gaius pointed at a tall tower that rose from the northwest corner of the Second Wall.

"That could cause us some trouble. It must be over seventy feet tall."

"If they get scorpions or onagers up there, they could wreak havoc on any assault forces within a half mile," Vorenus concurred.

"Looks like there is a cluster of buildings just beyond it," the tribune

added. “That won’t make for a good breaching point. All the same, we should level that middle tower.”

“Agreed.” Vorenus leaned over the side and shouted down, “Bring up Nico!”

With loud grunts from below and squealing from the wheel axels, the tower was turned southwards, the pivoting wheels digging up great mounds of dirt and rock. The detachment then followed a road parallel to the western quarter of the Second Wall. At a few hundred meters from the rock of Golgotha, now manned by archers and auxilia skirmishers, the tower turned once more to the west. The main gatehouse of the Second Wall, topped by a pair of towers, stared menacingly towards the Roman besiegers.

When they were within fifty feet of the wall, the archers and scorpion crews began to engage the defenders along the ramparts. Here they predominantly held the advantage of height; however, the middle tower to the north still stood a good ten feet above their heads. From here, a small number of archers attempted to shoot back; however, the distance made their volleys ineffective. While the Roman archers suppressed the enemy skirmishers on the wall, the two scorpions turned their attention to the tall tower. Three zealots manning its ramparts were felled; one screaming as he tumbled over the gatehouse, falling to a gruesome death far below. Meanwhile, a loud groaning in the distance, accompanied by the cadenced shouts of numerous straining crewmen, told of Nico’s approach.

From atop the siege tower, Gaius was able to get his first real look at the City of Jerusalem. While the New City of Bezetha was mostly open ground, the city proper was a sprawling metropolis of stone buildings and market squares much like most large cities in the east. It was the Temple District in the distance that filled the tribune with awe and trepidation. Both its walls, as well as the one intersecting it, known as the First Wall, were much higher than the others and appeared to be unbreakably thick. The inner structure of the temple itself dwarfed even these impressive ramparts.

“It’s going to be bloody claustrophobic once we get in there,” Vorenus observed.



Watching from the tall middle tower was an Idumean captain named Castor. A professional soldier who served the Jewish nation for more than

twenty years, he was both clever and brave in equal measure. Ever since the fall of the Third Wall, he had been asking for catapults to place atop the tower. Most of these were controlled by the Giscalan's faction, who were reluctant to part with their cherished engines. After several days of haggling, John finally relented. Given the tower's very narrow circular stairwell, the catapults had to be completely dismantled and reassembled at the top.

Far below, Castor and his companions watched as the large battering ram ambled towards them, accompanied by scores of imperial auxiliaries.

"They mean to destroy the tower," the captain muttered in disgust.

"If they succeed, we won't be able to support the defence of the western gate," one of his men noted in dismay.

The zealots kept low behind the stone ramparts, as the occasional scorpion bolt was flung from the Roman siege tower to the south. And with no gates or hidden doors close to the middle tower, there was no way to launch a sortie against the approaching ram without being seen by imperial sentries. The presence of Roman infantrymen escorting the ram taunted the Jewish defenders, daring them to attack.

The ram known as Nico halted a few feet from the tower. After a few moments, the iron ram's head began to swing back and forth, the grind of the support chains heard even by the men on the tower. The first blow startled them, causing some to grab onto the ramparts.

"When brute force fails, we must use cunning instead."

As the middle tower began to shake, Captain Castor nodded to his companions, who immediately began to prostrate themselves before the advancing juggernaut of the imperial siege tower.

"Hold, friends!" the Idumean officer shouted, raising his hands high. *"Would you unleash your engines of war on those who desire peace?"*

The siege tower ceased its advance, and the ram halted its blows. There appeared to be some confused talk between the two officers he could see on the high platform. Castor ordered one of his men to seek out Simon bar Giora.



"What the hell are they playing at?" Gaius was irritated, suspecting the men in the tower were toying with him.

"That man appears to be an Idumean soldier," the centurion observed.

“His Latin is passable enough. Do you think they realise they are beaten?”

“Not for me to decide,” the tribune replied. He shouted to the soldiers below, “Send for General Titus!”

An uncomfortable silence fell upon the ramparts. The two men watched as the Idumean and his companions lurked along the tower’s defences, fearful of the ram and scorpion bolts.

“That man may say they want peace,” Gaius added. “But even if he is sincere, who is he? He is not John of Giscala, and I doubt he is Simon bar Giora.”

“There may be individuals within their factions who are finally seeing reason,” Vorenus concurred. “But I doubt they speak for the entire rebellion. Not to sound pessimistic, but I will believe there is peace once we fly the imperial eagles from atop their sacred temple and have hung their leaders to crosses.”



While Simon and his Idumean allies attempted to delay and deceive the Romans, John of Giscala was working on an even more devious stratagem. Unbeknownst to his friend-of-necessity, the zealot leader had summoned a large number of his men to the house of the temple priests. Located along the western wall south of the Antonia Fortress, it had a large basement used for storing wine and olive oil.

“Our ‘friends’ attempt to deceive the Romans with their poisoned tongues,” John said to his captains and advisors. “But our enemies will not fall prey to them. And Simon’s warriors continue to throw their lives away in futile attacks upon their siege works. The Romans are strong, as is Simon’s faction. But neither of them possess even a fraction of our strategic intellect.”

“What are you proposing?” one of the men asked.

“The Second Wall will not hold for long,” John explained. “We cannot use brawn alone to beat the Romans; they are far too many in number.”

“So what are you suggesting, then?” Levi persisted.

“The armies of Caesar may be stronger, but we, my friends, are smarter. Once they take Tyropoeon and the Antonia Fortress, we won’t be able to flank them anymore. However, if we cannot go around their defences, then we will go *under* them.”

Levi smiled wickedly. “Of course. If we sneak under their defences, we’ll

destroy their ramps and towers from below. They shall be swallowed up by hell itself!”

“Madness,” a warrior protested. “The ground is mostly rock. It will take months to burrow under the wall.”

“Not if we work in continuous shifts,” Levi countered. “We have plenty of men. And given the layout of the city, just beyond the Temple and First Wall, we can surmise where they will establish their assault ramps. Having their siege works destroyed from underneath will be devastating.”

“We’ve beaten the Romans before,” John added. “And after four years of war, they are still prone to mistakes.” He hefted an old, rusted pickaxe. “Come, brothers, let us begin the trek to freedom.”



An hour passed before the commander-in-chief arrived at the tower. He brought Josephus, as well as several Judean soldiers, including a man named Eneas. Eneas was a turncoat Jew who once served in the Judean army under Niger of Perea. He was one of the few survivors of the rebel army’s disastrous attempt to seize the port of Ascalon from the Romans. Little did he know that the siege tribune standing atop the tower was one of the imperial soldiers who had slain many of his friends. Following Niger’s murder at the hands of John of Giscala, Eneas defected to the loyalist forces of King Agrippa.

As the small band of men scaled the tall tower, a heated argument appeared to be taking place among the rebellious Jews.

“What are they saying?” Titus asked, as they watched the squabble unfold.

“It appears some of the men wish to surrender,” Josephus translated. “The others are shouting that they would rather die than become Roman slaves.”

Just then, five of the men drew their swords and appeared to stab themselves in the guts, falling from the Romans’ view as their companions cried out in sorrow. Castor, his eyes filled with tears, turned and caught sight of Eneas. His face broke into a broad smile.

“Eneas?” he asked. “Praise God, you live!”

“I am thankful he has saved you, as well,” the Judean soldier replied, for he knew Castor well. “The Lord has given us this chance for peace, and it gladdens my heart to see you speaking with his voice.”

“It is with his voice I ask the Roman commander to offer me his right hand of security. The fanatics are disorganised and breaking, while the people desire peace…”

“Look out, sir!” one of the auxilia archers shouted, thinking he saw movement along the ramparts. Before Titus could say anything, the man loosed an arrow towards the enemy tower.

“Cease fire, damn you!” Titus shouted.

The man’s section leader cuffed the archer across the head.

The arrow sailed in a high arc, striking Castor on the side of the nose. The Idumean cried out in surprise and pain. “Why do you wound me so, when I come to you as friend?” he wailed. “I offer you not only my submission, but a great store of coin taken from the traitor, Giscala!”

“Think he’s sincere?” Titus asked.

Josephus shook his head. “Hard to say. They’ve played us for fools before, but then there are many who have been genuine in their submission before Rome.”

“I’ll go, sir,” Eneas said, his ears perking up at the promise of gold and silver. “I know this man and will place my trust in him.”

“Take two men with you,” Titus ordered. “Bring Castor and whatever spoils he has to me.”

A ladder was placed against the wall, and the three men quickly climbed onto the rampart nearest the middle tower. As they approached, the men who’d supposedly committed self-slaughter rose up, laughing maliciously they brandished their weapons.

“Die, betrayers of God!” Castor screamed, hurling a large stone towards Eneas.

The Judean soldier ducked and the rock smashed the nose of the man behind him. The rebels then set fire to the wooden scaffolding and platform within the tower. Eneas and his companions hurried back down the ladder as the flames licked higher. Castor gave a shout of defiant rage before leaping into the falling structure. Little did the Romans know there was a vault beneath where their adversaries were able to safely jump. They were convinced the men had been consumed by the fire.

“Such audacity,” Gaius said, a trace of respect in his voice.

“Should have just let you shoot the bastard,” Titus said, giving the errant archer a pat on the shoulder.

The words brought great relief to the man convinced he would receive a

severe reprimand for his earlier actions.

The prince imperial turned to Gaius and Vorenus. “Destroy the tower.”

Not all zealots were as brazen or defiant as Castor and his men. During the night, several defectors escaped by abandoning their posts along the eastern wall of the Temple district, and cautiously making their way to the imperial camp along the Mount of Olives. These men were fortunate enough to be captured by patrols of legionaries rather than auxilia troopers. Most of the regiments who supplemented the Tenth Legion were Syrian, Arabian, and Samaritan. Their antipathy towards the Jews went back generations. Any deserters found by these men could expect to be butchered without mercy. When brought before Titus, the fortunate survivors confirmed what he suspected, the city was, in fact, held captive by her supposed protectors. This was a weakness the prince imperial hoped to exploit in the coming days.

Chapter XIII: Driven from the Breach

Tyropoeon district, Jerusalem
30 May, 70 A.D.
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Five days had passed since the Romans first entered the New City within Jerusalem. After pummelling its base for an entire day, the middle tower of the Second Wall was toppled by the fearsome battering ram known as Nico. Titus ordered the crew to smash a hole in the wall to the south of the wreckage. He intended to launch simultaneous assaults via the breach and siege towers. Because there were so many buildings clustered near the middle tower, the commanding general placed all three of his tallest siege platforms to the west. The Antonia Fortress, as well as the temple complex's outer wall towered over these, giving their enemies a clear view of their intentions.

"Surprise is a luxury we are deprived of," Titus explained to his legion commanders on the evening before the assault. "The enemy can see all of our movements, and they will know when we are coming. But if the deserters we've captured are telling the truth, the only thing keeping the people from rising up against the zealots is fear. Both Simon and John have terrorised these people for years; they are beaten and without hope."

"With respect, general," Placidus spoke up. "Why the fuck should we even care?"

Legate Domitius of Legio XV added, "Forgive me, sir, but I agree with Placidus. We've shown no mercy during this entire war, nor they to us. Why would we start now?"

"Because, with all of the Passover pilgrims still trapped within, there could be over a million souls crammed behind the city's walls. I don't think the combined forces of the zealots and Idumeans number more than thirty thousand. The rebels have beaten the people down, yet they fear we will slay the lot of them. If we show mercy—even though they have violated our rules of war by continuing to resist after the rams' first blows—there is a chance they will rise up against the zealots."

Placidus continued to scowl, yet he said nothing more. Though he

voraciously disagreed with Titus on the matter, he knew there was no further use in arguing. Even Domitius, who previously served as Titus' chief tribune with the Fifteenth Legion, had his doubts. Having made their concerns known, all they could do was follow their orders and hope the commander-in-chief's assessment proved correct.



The following dawn, the siege towers attacked the north face of the Second Wall. They met only sporadic resistance, as archers and scorpions atop the advancing towers rained death onto the defenders. The heavy ramps crashed onto the walls, as legionaries swarmed the defences. The tower first occupied by Gaius and Vorenus was used to attack the western ramparts south of the shattered middle tower. There were no defenders waiting for them. The crew manning Nico pummelled the wall without the need for a siege ramp. They occupied the defences, yet were ordered to wait until the wall was breached by the rams before advancing into Tyropoeon. The Second Wall proved less stable than the Third, and by morning, a hideous gash appeared with piles of shattered stones lying in the ram's wake. While the decanus commanding Nico insisted he needed another day to further smash open the gap in the wall, Titus insisted the existing breach would be sufficient.

The commander-in-chief arrived wearing his battle armour, covered in scouring and marks from numerous campaigns. With him was the elite First Cohort of his former legion, the Fifteenth, supported by two hundred hand-picked soldiers from the allied Judean forces. Two centuries of legionaries and a company of archers provided support from atop the Second Wall.

Domitius waved the commander-in-chief over for a few private words. "Are you sure you know what you're doing, sir?"

"I hope so," Titus replied with a nervous chuckle. "The men know the orders?"

"They do. And to be honest, they are completely baffled. We razed most of the New City, yet now they are told to neither burn nor plunder the houses beyond the wall. I understand your intent, but every time we have tried being merciful it has been met with treachery."

"Well, now that we are about to enter Jerusalem proper, I think the people will understand this is a rebellion they cannot hope to win. And if the zealots

are even half as cruel to the people as we've been told…" He paused for a moment, sensing the persistent doubt in his legate. "Look, they may hold no love for Rome. But, how much longer can they live under famine and slavery?"

"All the same, I am ordering six companies of archers to follow us in reserve."

"Us?" Titus asked.

"Of course," Domitius asserted. "You are the commanding general, but that is my First Cohort you are taking with you. What kind of legate would I be if they went into the breach, while I stayed safely behind the lines?"

Titus gave an appreciative grin. He recalled Domitius' service as his chief tribune, when he was legate of Legio XV. His bravery was without question, and he'd accompanied Titus during the early morning assault that finally broke the defences at Jotapata. Now, his courage was coupled with four years of brutal experience. Titus had always felt a bond with Domitius, perhaps because, of all the senior officers within the army, they were the closest in age. Alexander and Bassus were five or six years older; Placidus and the others even more.

"Alright. You'll take the nearest piece of high ground, probably a roof top, once we're through the breach. Position our reserves and keep your eyes open for any signs of treachery."

Domitius gave an affirmative nod, and the two clasped hands. Titus appeared very confident, almost nonchalant, in his deportment. Yet, he knew he was taking a substantial risk. It was because of this that he chose to lead the assault personally. Most of his soldiers were filled with trepidation, and if his assessment about the populace proved wrong, then he was determined to suffer the repercussions for his decision.

The breach was just wide enough for six soldiers to walk through abreast. A sense of doubt came over Titus, as the words of the battering ram's decanus echoed in his mind. He knew it would be extremely difficult to extract his forces should the situation turn against them. Anxious as he was to put an end to this siege, he decided he was willing to accept the hazard.

"First Cohort's ready, sir," the master centurion said, with a salute. Per the prince imperial's orders, they had left their javelins and carried their gladii drawn. The narrow streets would make it difficult to employ their pila, and he did not want overzealous legionaries killing curious onlookers indiscriminately.

Standing in the centre of the front rank, Titus drew his spatha, raised it high, and with a sweeping arc signalled the advance. The area nearest the breach was a large market square, predominantly used for selling wool, braziers, and bolts of cloth. A few of the stalls were manned by terrified merchants who lurked behind their wooden booths, eyes wide in fear, as they stood protectively over their wares. Legionaries filed down the street and behind the market stalls. Aside from the handful of merchants, the small forum felt deserted.

Legate Domitius ordered his reserve archers to kick down the doors of a row of townhouses that butted up against the Second Wall. The roofs of several had been smashed by falling stone during the assault by the battering ram. Though the flats nearest the wall were now deserted, most of the rest were crammed with terrified families, many whose numbers had swelled by the arrival of relatives from the Passover pilgrimage.

The legate accompanied a squad into the one such house crammed with people. Men, women, children, and elderly grandparents were huddled in terror as the door was smashed in.

“We’re not here to hurt you,” Domitius said reassuringly, even though he was almost certain the Jews could not understand him. Still, he spoke gently and kept his weapon sheathed.

Archers followed him into the house, negotiating their way up the rickety stairs that led to the second floor and then to the roof garden. Within minutes, the rooftops of every flat overlooking the market square were manned by imperial soldiers.

As his soldiers pressed through the forum, Titus glanced over his shoulder. Feeling a sense of relief, he was glad Domitius had taken the initiative, for the legionaries and archers along the ramparts of the Second Wall were in no position to effectively support his sortie. His eyes quickly scanned the surrounding buildings as they reached the end of the large market square. The streets were very narrow. Most of the buildings consisted of one-level stone structures with flat roofs. Shaded canopies topped most of these, and he could see a few nervous faces peering down at them.

The district behind the Second Wall, Tyropoeon, was less than a third of the size of Bezetha, yet held at least double the population and buildings. Many homeless and wayward pilgrims lined the gutters, having nowhere else to go. Straight ahead of Titus and the First Cohort was a series of trees and small gardens in the shadow of the Antonia Fortress and the Temple of

Jerusalem. The walls were massive, towering over those of the Second Wall. They were also rumoured to be impenetrable. Auxilia soldiers who had at one time been posted to the Antonia Fortress told the commander-in-chief that the walls were fifteen feet thick. Even the fearsome Nico would not be able to break through.

"Alright, you bastards," Titus said, under his breath. "Where are you hiding?"



John grinned menacingly as he watched from the high western wall of the Temple complex. Simon had promised to send his fighters from the Upper City of Zion, whose First Wall he still held, along with a large sortie from the Tower of Hippicus and Herod's Fortress. John and his warriors would send one wave from the Temple to attack the Romans head-on. Another group would swarm the Second Wall and drive the defilers from the city proper.

"I worry about our friend, Simon," Levi said, joining him on the wall. Levi continued to act as intermediary and negotiator for John and was often privy to Simon's councils of war with his own zealots. "He cares nothing for the plight of the people. He even said he hopes many of them starve or die of disease, that Jerusalem is only fit for those who fight against the Romans."

"He may be right," John said. His words were cold, yet Levi sensed a trace of regret.

"And once the invaders are expelled from God's holy city, there will likely come a reckoning between the factions who fought in his name. I pray nightly for our people, yet we can show no mercy towards those who would sell out the Jews to Rome."

Levi bowed his head and gave a slight nod of acceptance. He had spent many days walking the streets which were overflowing with pilgrims and the refugees who had fled from Bezetha. Food was already proving scarce. If the armies of Caesar were not expelled from Jerusalem soon, he feared a grave crisis awaited God's chosen people.



The Roman assault cohort reached the pristine parks and tree groves. Titus suddenly grew nervous as his soldiers spread out along the city streets.

They had little choice, for their numbers were great and the density of Tyropoeon constricting. He ordered the master centurion to keep his men from going beyond the trees. He did not know the disposition of those rebels who still held the fortress and temple district, and this concerned him greatly.

The blaring of a trumpet from the large tower to the southwest alerted the men. It was answered by a similar blast coming from the tallest tower of the Antonia Fortress.

“Damn it all,” Titus swore under his breath. He then turned to the primus pilus. “Get your men back!”

“Sir.” The master centurion’s voice was calm, yet he fully understood the gravity of their situation.

Before he had time to issue a single order, hundreds of enemy fighters spilled forth from western gates leading into the temple.

A lone century from the First Cohort had made its way along a narrow street to the north, only to now be under attack, with zealots spilling forth from every house in the district. Legionaries stood back-to-back, gladii at the ready, as a swarm of enemy fighters smashed into their ranks. While the imperial army excelled in battle on open terrain, the confines of urban combat limited their effectiveness. With their movement severely constricted, their large shields became as much of a hindrance as a protection. Soldiers were shoved into each other, making usage of their weapons exceedingly difficult. That they had been ordered to leave their heavy javelins behind proved to be a saving grace, for their seven-foot shafts would have created an even greater obstacle.

Those rebels wearing armour led the various attacks, throwing their bodies behind their round shields, attempting to break up the Roman formations. They swung their swords and axes wildly, flinging throwing darts and stabbing with their spears. The legionaries, in turn, punched with their shields, attempting to create distance between them and their assailants while thrusting with their gladii.

Near the gardens, a centurion primus ordo grabbed Titus from behind, pulling him behind his century’s shield wall. As the commander-in-chief had no shield, he would be completely exposed if he tried to fight on the battle line. What surprised Titus was the lack of enemy skirmishers on the rooftops. The Jewish rebels were known for utilising their archers, slingers, and dart throwers from above, yet they were conspicuous by their absence. As a horde of warriors rushed their centre line, Titus reckoned the ferocity of the enemy

attack negated the need for skirmishers.

With nowhere else to go, the prince imperial remained in the second rank of the cohort's First Century, keeping close to his old mentor, Master Centurion Ralla. As legionaries clashed with zealots, he thrust his long spatha between the two soldiers in front of him, hoping to catch a rebel in the face or chest. And with the cohort scattered, centuries were fighting their own standing battles. Each element threatened to be surrounded and cut off from their mates as more and more rebel fighters surged into the fray.

The Judean loyalists were in a harrowing struggle not far from the breach. Zealots had spilled forth from every house and shop near the square and nearly a dozen men were cut down before they had a chance to react. The survivors formed their own shield walls, though their long stabbing spears proved ineffective in such close quarters. And because they had been attacked from both flanks, they were unable to form more than a single rank in either direction.



General Domitius gritted his teeth as he watched the chaos unfolding. Unbeknownst to Titus and his men, a large force of rebels was now assailing the legionaries and archers manning the northern and western faces of the Second Wall. They had spilled forth from both the Antonia Fortress, as well as numerous gates and subterranean trap doors previously unknown to the Romans. The legionaries were making a valiant stand, with many rebels already slain or badly injured. Their numbers were too few, however, and they were being assaulted from numerous directions simultaneously.

"Sound the retreat," Domitius ordered his cornicen. "Archers ready!"

As the rapid series of horn blasts echoed throughout the city, companies of archers unleashed salvoes of arrows onto the attacking zealots. With no missile troops of their own, the Jewish rebels were subjected to relentless barrages with no chance for recourse. However, they fearlessly continued in their assaults upon the legionaries and Judean loyalists, even as their friends fell dead or badly maimed. The lone century, for a time cut off from the rest, battled its way back to the garden square. At least ten of their number were wounded, and Titus ordered the cohort to try to form a corridor leading back to the breach, through which the injured could be evacuated. There was a handful of dead, and each took four men to carry.

“Once that century is past us, we’ll retire to the breach,” Titus ordered the primus pilus.

Ralla nodded in reply, as he smashed a zealot in the face with the boss of his shield.

In his frustration, Titus knew there was little he could do besides act as another blade on the battle line. He had no horse, and even if he did, the streets were so constricted he would not be able to manoeuvre. He had lost all situational awareness of what was transpiring behind him, and he hoped that Domitius was holding the breach. Given the rebels’ overwhelming numbers and the legionaries’ inability to form proper battle lines, Titus feared his entire detachment would be cut off and overwhelmed. Though he had accepted the personal risks involved with leading the sortie, he knew it would devastate the morale of the army should it lose a thousand men, along with their commanding general, in this debacle. The prospect of defeat terrified him even more than the prospect of his own death.



Though never one to shy from battle, Simon bar Giora chose to remain atop the Tower of Hippicus, that he might gage the fighting prowess of both his men, as well as that of his rival, John of Giscala. The distance and buildings obscured much, yet he could see hundreds of John’s fighters driving the Romans from the ramparts of the Second Wall. He did not know whether to smile or sneer. Glad to see the Giscalan’s men were doing their part, his loathing for John made him partly wish that his warriors were the cowards he’d often called them. “I cannot see what is happening,” he grumbled to Boaz. “I’m going down to the First Wall to get a better look.” The fighting had pushed north, and his vision was obstructed by the Second Wall.

“I’ll come with you,” the old warrior asserted.

Boaz was braver than any of his men, oftentimes to a fault. But, Simon tended to keep him away from the actual fighting. He was too valuable as both advisor and motivator to be wasted as fodder for a Roman blade.

It took the men ten minutes to climb down from the wall before making their way past a series of towers, until they could clearly see a road which lined the inside of the western Second Wall.

“Damn them,” Simon muttered. He watched a storm of arrows fly from a

score of rooftops. Though trees and other structures kept him from seeing most of the actual soldiers, the volleys appeared to be constant and relentless.

“Their archers are all that stands between the invaders and oblivion,” Boaz remarked.

Had he known General Titus was leading the incursion, Simon would have sent his entire army into Tyropoeon in order to capture or kill the prince imperial. Instead, all he knew was the Roman archers were inflicting numerous casualties on his men, while their legionaries made a fighting withdrawal. And while there was no ordering his men to cease in their attack, he decided against sending any more warriors into the fray.



“That’s it lads, keep it up!” Domitius said, encouraging his archers.

They were loosing their volleys dangerously close to the withdrawing infantry soldiers, yet he knew it was the only way to keep the rebels from overwhelming the battered cohort.

The echo of hundreds of cheers to the north alerted him, yet it was not Roman soldiers crying out in exaltation, but Jewish rebels who had reclaimed the northern ramparts of the Second Wall. Scorpions and archers under the direction of Tribune Artorius and Centurion Vorenus were all that kept the zealots from attacking the platforms and overwhelming the siege towers. Two regiments of cavalry were now roaming behind the towers, while several cohorts of auxilia infantry rushed forward to support the siege works.

Near the rock of Golgotha, hundreds of volunteers staged to assist with the extracting of casualties. Most of these men had left their armour behind, only carrying their gladii for protection. Wagons were brought to the breach; and while some were pulled by oxen, there were many without their draught animals yoked. These were pulled and pushed by dozens of legionaries, anxious to help their injured brethren.

The allied Jewish soldiers were the first through the breach, carrying their own dead and wounded. Nearly a hundred of these men had remained behind to secure the breach itself, vowing to be the last through. It was a slow and arduous ordeal, with rebels continuing to assail the imperial soldiers as they withdrew. And while every effort was made to save the wounded, with each surge more soldiers fell, hampering their efforts. The zealots were taking it far worse, in no small part due to the relentless volleys coming from

Domitius' archers. While scores of Roman troops had fallen during the chaotic struggle, Judean losses now numbered in the hundreds. Yet few cared about anything except victory, no matter what the cost.

As the First Cohort reached the breach, decani took charge of their men, ensuring an orderly withdrawal. Those assisting the wounded or carrying the dead went first. Archers increased the speed of their volleys, and Domitius feared they may run out of arrows before they could withdraw themselves.

"Slow down your volleys," he ordered their section leaders. He glanced at the quivers of several men and saw they were down to their last five or six arrows.

Using measured and deliberate salvoes, rather than slinging arrows wildly, the zealots were kept at bay as the last of the legionaries reached the breach. Domitius gave a sigh of relief when he saw the purple plume of Titus' helmet among the last of those to arrive.

"Get your men out of here!" the commander-in-chief ordered.

Domitius relayed the order to his archers. To keep the breach clear, most of his men clambered over the Second Wall and onto the waiting siege tower, which was making ready to withdraw, lest it be swarmed by the enemy fighters now retaking the wall.

A loud cheer came from the soldiers assembled near Golgotha as Titus and the last of his men cleared the breach. These were not shouts of triumph, but of relief that their task force had not been destroyed. The commander-in-chief was filled with rage and humiliation at this latest setback. Siege towers and defensive hurdles were compelled to withdraw fifty meters from the wall, which had fallen once again to the zealots.

Chapter XIV: Hunger and Terror

Jerusalem
3 June, 70 A.D.
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"We have won a great victory!" Simon shouted. He held his cup in salute to his warriors. "The Romans will never enter holy Jerusalem, so long as God gives us the strength to drive them from our walls."

"We drove them out, but they still hold Bezetha," Boaz noted.

"Bezetha was never a true part of Jerusalem," Simon remarked. "It is but a den for whores and sinners unfit to live within God's holy city."

"The Romans may be beaten, but the people still starve," another man spoke up. "The grain stores burned by the heretic, Eleazar, would have lasted several years. And we still have all of the pilgrims from the Passover. Famine and disease are creeping within the city. A number of people have already perished."

"Let them all die," Simon said coldly. He was angry with his men for casting such a blight upon their hard-won triumph. "Let all who would supplicate themselves before Caesar die of hunger and shame. God will purge the unworthy, leaving only those who stand defiant against the unclean gentiles as his chosen people."

"If the people want to eat, then they can take up arms and help us expel the Romans from the city," Boaz added. "Those unwilling to defend Jerusalem from heretics do not deserve a shred of the divine's mercy."

The words of the two men struck the assembled zealots and Idumean leaders as cold and heartless. Jacob bar Sosias was particularly unnerved by what he was hearing. The Idumean general had first aided John of Giscala with seizing power from the moderates, before becoming so repulsed by his cruelty that he and most of his soldiers left the city. He was further filled with a sense of shame that he had not only aided Simon in annexing Idumea to his cause, but helped him gain dominion over most of Jerusalem.

"I truly thought he was the one to free the Jews from Roman slavery," he said later to Captain Castor, whose face and arms were bandaged from the

burns and other injuries he'd recently suffered.

"He was always a brutally harsh man," Castor concurred. "But I felt that was what the people needed; a strong leader who would force them to either fight or perish. Perhaps that is what he is doing, in his own mind at least."

The two soldiers strolled over to the breach the Romans had smashed into the Second Wall. There were several sentries bearing torches, yet their attention was focused inside the wall, rather than beyond. What puzzled the two Idumean men was seeing a band of zealots dragging the bloodied corpses of their slain towards the breach. To their horror, the bodies were being stacked in rows like lumber.

"What in God's holy name are you doing?" Jacob asked the warrior leading the detail.

"We don't have enough cut stone to fill the gap, and these lot were just lying around," the man replied with a macabre grin.

"Have you no decency?" Castor asked. "No respect for the dead? Per our laws, the dead *must* be given a proper burial!"

The zealot spat on the ground. "We can either dig a giant hole in this rocky ground, or our friends here can continue to serve us, even in death."

Jacob was horrified. He looked to Castor, who simply shrugged.

"I doubt the Romans will want to come through that way again," he said. The captain found the use of dead bodies as a wall equally repugnant, yet his sense of decency had been beaten from him during the weeks of brutal fighting.

The Idumean officers left the zealots to their macabre task. They continued in silence for some time as they made their way to Herod's Fortress. Their progress was slow. The streets were filled with refugees and homeless pilgrims in addition to the usual beggars.

"I'll not have our dead treated so unkindly," Jacob said, as they neared the Tower of Hippicus. "Simon's renegades can do what they want with their fallen, but all Idumean soldiers will be given proper burial and funerary rites."

"As you say, general." Castor's words sounded nonchalant, almost dismissive.

Jacob grabbed him by the shoulder.

The captain quickly added, "These are savage times we're living in, general, and I doubt many of us will leave Jerusalem alive. Say what you will about decency and respect for the fallen, but decency is dead here. Neither

Simon, John, nor the Romans have any sense of grace. God has turned away from his holy city. Perhaps the traitor, Josephus, was right. Maybe God has chosen to punish us, I don't know."



While the Idumean officers contemplated the sorry state of the people trapped within Jerusalem, the Romans were in an equally foul temper. Titus was angry at his own impetuousness, blaming himself for the losses they suffered. It made his previous rebuke of the Twelfth Legion's errant cohort seem hollow and hypocritical.

"We have tried clemency, and it has failed," he grumbled as he met with several of his senior officers. "I took a thousand men into that breach. Thirty are dead and nearly two hundred wounded. Not only did we accomplish nothing, but we lost the Second Wall."

"At least none of our fallen were left behind to be desecrated by those bastards," Domitius said.

"Even now, those filthy vermin are using their own dead to plug the breach," Placidus added with disdain. "Disgusting parasites, the lot of them!"

"Sir, if I may," Gaius Artorius spoke up. "From what we can see atop our siege towers, the enemy defenders are few. The Second Wall lacks the height of the First, plus the terrain is open here, allowing our siege works to operate with impunity. I think they will concentrate their efforts behind the First Wall and the temple, rather than try and keep us out of Tyropoeon."

"I concur," Tiberius Alexander added. "The zealots themselves may be fanatical, but their leaders are not stupid. They have to know that any attempts to keep us from taking the Second Wall will end in the needless slaughter of their men. The district it protects, Tyropoeon, holds no strategic or defensive value; not when they still hold the Antonia Fortress and massive First Wall."

Titus looked to Josephus.

"It's what I would do," the former rebel general stated candidly. "I wouldn't just give up Tyropoeon, but nor would I commit more than a few hundred to slow our advance. Make no mistake, they'll make us bleed for every inch of ground, but the real fighting will happen after we take the Second Wall."



Four days after losing the Second Wall, Titus ordered a broad assault using both siege towers and battering rams. Three breaches were smashed into the walls. As Castor predicted, they deliberately avoided the previous opening now piled with rebel corpses. Many of the bodies were bloated, their ruptured guts causing an unholy stench. Flies formed a cloud of pestilence.

The attacks on the breaches were supported by siege towers, allowing the Romans to attack the high and low ground simultaneously. Scorpions and archers unleashed volleys of death upon the wall's defenders, leaving nothing but scores of corpses and badly wounded zealots to face the imperial infantry as the assault ramps slammed onto the ramparts.

Countermanding his previous order to spare the houses and people within Tyropoeon, Titus now ordered the entire district razed to the ground. Citizens fled in terror as legionaries unleashed their pent up fury. Men, women, children, the elderly…none were spared. Doors to houses and shops were smashed in, the terrified cries within mingling with the soldiers' shouts of hatred. The women were treated with exceptional cruelty. The least fortunate were savagely raped numerous times before they were killed. The gates to Upper City and the Temple district were sealed by the fleeing zealots, leaving the people to their bitter fate.

"Not even bothering with taking prisoners," Gaius observed.

He and Vorenus watched from atop one of the siege towers.

"A mistake, if you ask me," the centurion remarked. "Those we capture now have the best chance of fetching a fair price from the slave drivers. The longer this siege drags on, the more the people starve and are wrecked by disease. In a few months, there won't be anyone left worth a bronze sestertius."

Gaius nodded and leaned against the protective rampart of the tower. The cries from the women echoed the loudest. Though he was filled with a momentary sense of revulsion, he found himself unable to turn away. A veteran of numerous wars in the east, as well as the last Roman civil war, the tribune was no stranger to the abject horrors of battle. And while he was guilty of many of the same atrocities now being committed by the unleashed legions, he privately found himself wrought with feelings of guilt. Was it simply that he found it unmanly to butcher unarmed women and children, or was it something more? He most likely would never know.



The following day, having routed the zealots and slaughtered any unfortunate enough to have remained in Tyropoeon, soldiers and siege engineers set about demolishing the Second Wall. Smaller rams, pickaxes, and pry bars were used to smash the stone buildings within, while legionaries and auxilia troopers plundered anything of value before setting the wooden structures alight. There was not much to be had, for the people had been robbed of most of their valuables by their zealot ‘protectors’ long before the first battering rams struck the outer wall.

“Look at these bodies,” Alexander noted.

He and Titus walked through the macabre streets. Corpses lay everywhere, blood and bodily fluids flowing in sickening streams down the gutters and soaking into the earth.

“How can I not?” the commander-in-chief asked. “One cannot take a few steps without tripping over a dead Jew. Our lads are certainly efficient killers.”

“I’m not talking about that. Look at the state of the dead.” Alexander knelt next to the corpse of a middle-aged woman and placed his hands on her chin. “Look at these sunken cheeks. Not only are the men not finding anything worth plundering, there’s little in the way of food to be found. Starvation will break these people long before our blades do.”

“One can only hope,” the prince imperial mused. “But many of these were impoverished pilgrims and beggars. And besides, the dead zealots did not appear to be starving.”

Their talks were interrupted by the return of Domitius, whose Fifteenth Legion had stormed the southern neighbourhoods of Tyropoeon.

“We’ve established a cordon facing the First Wall, general,” the legate reported. “Thrasea’s men have anchored off my left flank and are forming a blockade of the Antonia Fortress and Temple district.”

“Excellent work. And no counterattacks from our Judean friends?”

Domitius shook his head. “Not yet. However, we are taking every precaution. I’ve ordered half my men to begin razing buildings and establishing initial siege works. The rest are securing the area against any possible incursions.”

“This district is much smaller, perhaps one third the size of Bezetha,”

Alexander observed. “The enemy may be hiding behind their strongest defences, but their ability to catch us unawares has diminished.”

The Romans now occupied Bezetha and Tyropoeon with two legions, thousands of auxiliary soldiers, and numerous siege works. The Tenth Legion still occupied the eastern approach along the Mount of Olives, while the Fifth Legion remained encamped to the west of Herod’s Fortress. The southern approaches consisted of numerous impassable valleys and extremely broken terrain that made investing it with imperial soldiers largely impractical. Instead, Titus ordered the continuing of roving patrols, mostly of cavalry and auxilia infantry.

Though the intent was to hinder any supplies from reaching Jerusalem, the prince imperial knew there were many ways into the city unknown to them. Harassing attacks by zealot skirmishers and raiding parties against his southern forces was a near-daily occurrence. Enemy warriors would suddenly appear from behind rock formations and out of the seemingly impassable valleys, assailing imperial patrols with missile weapons and short skirmishes before disappearing. What added to the Romans’ frustration was the inability to know where these attacks were coming from. Did they originate with the city’s garrison, or were these rebel fighters from outlying regions, come to support the defenders?

Something else which troubled Titus was the good order and discipline of his army. Auxiliaries were difficult to keep under control under ideal conditions. Even his legionaries showed signs of fraying during the sacking of Tyropoeon.

“My father had his difficulties with the army when we faced you at Jotapata,” he explained to Josephus.

The two surveyed the impressive heights of the First Wall.

“Forty-seven days tested our mettle. It has now been sixty days since we first laid siege to your holy city.”

“You’re afraid of losing control of your army,” Josephus observed. “You don’t need to tell me; I’ve seen it. War can turn the noblest and most civilised of men into barbarians.” He looked towards a squad of legionaries building barricades with stone taken from demolished buildings. “Look at their faces, some are mere boys who’ve scarcely seen seventeen summers. Yet when I look into their eyes, I see old men filled with bitterness and hatred.”

“They face an enemy who knows he cannot win,” Titus observed. “Any

sane man would have surrendered and begged for Caesar's mercy the moment our army was in sight, but sanity has long since abandoned this place. Jerusalem is ruled by madness; a madness that threatens to infect even my most disciplined soldiers. I have no doubt they will continue to follow orders up until the city falls. You do know that I am making every effort to save your precious city and temple. But the more my lads suffer, the less charitable they will feel once the last zealot falls. What happened here is just a taste of what's to come unless we can put a stop to the madness."

Josephus sadly concurred. "I fear the size and strength of the First Wall will only make the fanatics bolder." He pointed at the north face of the First Wall. "My wife and parents are just beyond there in the Upper City of Zion. So close, yet I fear I shall never see them again. If John or Simon don't murder them, your soldiers will, should they take the city."

"*Should* they take it?" Titus asked inquisitively. "You have doubts, old friend?"

"The Roman army is fearsome. I have seen your work first-hand. Yet you have struggled mightily during this campaign. How many errors and mishaps did you suffer just taking the first two walls? And look at the inner defences. They are much higher and better fortified than anything you have faced. The zealots allowed us to take Bezetha and Tyropoeon. But the Temple and City of Zion; those they will fight to the death."

"So be it," Titus replied, adding thoughtfully, "I have made my share of mistakes during this siege. But, no army in the history of warfare has ever undertaken a conquest such as this. And no general, no matter how magnificent, is devoid of fault. Even Alexander the Great and the divine Julius Caesar committed their share of blunders."

His words were as much to boost his own confidence as to reassure Josephus. Titus knew the rebels had only committed a portion of their strength in the defence of the first two walls; but the Romans had not come at them with their full strength either. Only a portion of the Twelfth and Fifteenth Legions took part in the assaults. The Fifth and Tenth had not been engaged at all. Auxilia and allied troops, who outnumbered his legionaries more than two-to-one, had been confined mostly to patrols and labour details. His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of General Placidus, who had tasked several of his cohorts with searching the ruins for any useful supplies.

"A bit of good news, general," the auxilia corps commander said. "There was a cluster of buildings near the Antonia Fortress...old warehouses. One of

my centurions remembered it from when he was posted here ten years before."

"The city's emergency grain stores," Josephus recalled. "Hanan ordered them built soon after the war began."

Placidus glared at the Jew, whom he still held in disdain. "It would seem these stupid twats burned them during their petty squabbles."

Josephus face turned ashen, and he closed his eyes. The Romans were able to see the columns of smoke coming from the city at the time, but it was impossible to know exactly where it came from or what exactly it was that was burning.

Titus pretended not to notice the Jew's consternation. "Destruction of their grain stores will accelerate their fall."

The auxilia general continued, "We also found a series of hidden tunnels. At first, we thought they might lead under the walls, but it turns out they were used for storage. We found not only more grain, but hundreds of amphorae filled with water."

"Control of this district has changed hands numerous times," Josephus noted, regaining his composure. "My guess is that John of Giscala hid the stores there, and Simon simply never found them."

Titus agreed. "Likely they did not have the time to retrieve them before we took the Second Wall. How much would you say is there?"

"At least a thousand talents of grain," Placidus answered. "Not nearly enough for the entire city, but I imagine it would feed those filthy rebels for a few months."

While this was fortuitous, Titus was quick to check any excess sense of elation. He despised the zealots and longed to see their leaders hanging from crosses or strangled in the Roman Forum, but he could not allow his loathing to turn to arrogance. Both Simon and John were clever men. If they had emergency grain stores in Tyropoeon—a district they so readily allowed the Romans to capture—then surely there were more scattered throughout the city.

What scared Josephus, in no small part due to his family's predicament, was that the zealots would eat while allowing the people to starve.

If only Hanan were still with us.



As with the fall of Bezetha, a pause in hostilities followed while the imperial army destroyed the Second Wall and the district of Tyropoeon. Homes were levelled and the stone was used to build the next line of Roman fortifications. Rebel fighters continued to launch the occasional sortie, though these were mostly confined to the eastern camps along the Mount of Olives and the auxilia patrols south of the city. These were fewer in number and ferocity than before. The defenders now seemed content to wait for the Romans to assault the city's most formidable defences. And just as Josephus feared, the rest of the city was subjected to hunger and terror in equal measure.

Neither John nor Simon would allow any to leave Jerusalem, declaring that to go to the Romans was to betray the will of God. Yet in Lower City, some feared losing their children to starvation and disease more than the threats of divine retribution coming from the fanatics.

In the Essene Quarter, not far from the southern wall, one young woman sought to save her three children from further suffering. Her husband, a humble cobbler, was pressed into service by Simon bar Giora's militias. When he refused to fight and attempted to return to his family, his throat was cut and his corpse nailed to a scaffold overlooking the nearest market. A month had passed, and while flies and carrion birds feasted on the rotting corpse, none dared to cut it down for proper burial.

Night had fallen and the young woman held the hand of her four-year old daughter, while carrying her infant son. Her eldest son, now six, bravely led his family through the darkness. Pilgrims and refugees crammed the city streets, finding wherever they could to sleep. The stench of unwashed bodies and human waste nearly caused the woman to vomit. Zealot factions kept well away from the general populace. It seemed they wanted the people to die in misery. Some had even said that the people's suffering was God's judgment for their lack of resolve. Many who attempted to escape were caught and murdered by brigands, and there was no guarantee the Romans would treat them any better. Yet, the woman knew it was better to accept the risk, rather than the certain death that awaited her and her children, if they stayed.

An old friend of her husband's named Issur had promised to get them to safety. He served with one of the militias and told her he would be on guard duty, alone, at the tower just east of the southwestern gatehouse. Few paid the woman any mind, as she and her children crept down the darkened streets.

Her heart pounded in her chest as they reached the tower. Carefully, she climbed the stone steps, the toddler stirring in her arms.

"Issur?" she whispered cautiously. In the faint moonlight she could see a lone figure atop the battlements at the tower. There was an audible shuffling. He climbed down the wooden ladder which led to the very top. The woman wore a smile of hope. She led her children the rest of the way up the stone steps onto the main rampart. Her baby squirmed in her arms, and she prayed he would remain silent.

"Just until we are away, and then you can cry," she said quietly.

At the top of the wall, she saw Issur carrying a torch. His expression was grim.

Her smile soon turned to fear. "What is it? Do you have the rope and sling, as promised?"

"I have a rope, but I cannot allow you to betray God's people to the Romans."

Six men stepped into the torchlight, brandishing their blades. One man was Simon's most feared henchman, Boaz.

She had seen Boaz a few times and he utterly terrified her. "Issur, what have you done?"

"I am sorry," he replied sadly. "You know I loved you, your husband, and children very dearly. I thought perhaps one day your eldest son and my daughter might unify our families. But even that love cannot undo treachery, nor allow any to escape God's judgment."

Two of the armed men now stood behind the woman, and each grabbed her by the arm. Her daughter screamed. Her eldest son cried out and struck at the men. One of them smashed him on top of the head with the pommel of his sword, rendering him unconscious.

"Issur, please!" the woman pleaded, hoping that her cries would bring someone to help her. "Punish me if you must, but spare my children. Let them live…" A fist slammed into her stomach, doubling her over. Her baby was snatched from her arms.

"The children are God's," Boaz said, his voice cold and uncaring as he held the child aloft. "A pity they must pay the price for their mother's sins."

Without a second thought, he flung the now wailing baby from the city wall.

The woman shrieked. Her screams were unrelenting even as her throat was cut. One of the men slashed open her daughter's neck, and the

unconscious boy was thrown from the ramparts. The woman's vision clouded. She, too, was unceremoniously shoved over the wall, her neck snapping and skull bursting open as she landed on the rocky ground below. All along the wall, and particularly near the gate, were corpses of those who tried to escape the city or were deemed traitors by their zealot overlords.



A Roman cavalry patrol was riding along the far rise, overlooking a stream, when they heard the screams. In the pale glow of the moon, they saw the falling shadow of the woman's body.

"Vile creatures," one of the troopers said with disdain.

"It's not as if the people can expect any mercy from us, once we break the city walls," his section leader stated dismissively.

"Perhaps. But what kind of wickedness would allow men to murder their own women and children so barbarically?"

"The Jews often talk of a place called 'Hell', where all evil doers are tormented for eternity. I've never believed in such a place until now. But Hell is not some mythological plane in the afterlife, it is the very city which we now besiege."



Unable to sleep, John of Giscala took a walk along the inner wall of the City of David overlooking the Siloam Pool. He had heard the woman's screams echoing in the night. He grimaced, his stomach turning in knots, for he knew what had happened. While he had certainly committed numerous atrocities in order to keep the people subdued, he still desperately clung to the remnants of his humanity which allowed him to feel remorse.

"Simon's soul is a blackened void," he muttered. The Giscalan knew the people's plight would only worsen as the siege drew on. He clutched the stone battlements facing the Roman camp to the east, clinging to his obsessive belief that there was a purpose to all this violence and cruelty. The Jews were God's chosen people, and this was their promised land. In his heart, he knew no one could take that from them, not even the mightiest of earthly empires. He steeled his resolve, accepting that all the death and suffering was, indeed, the will of God.

Chapter XV: Legions, receive your pay!

The Roman Camp, ruins of Bezetha
6 June, 70 A.D.
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A noticeable pause came over the siege, affording Titus time to reflect on the flagging morale and discipline within his massive army. As the time arrived for the army to receive its pay, he saw this reprieve as an opportunity to boost the determination of his army while crushing that of his foes. He ordered his legates and regimental commanders to breakfast with him, and he laid out his plan.

"Tomorrow marks the midyear pay period for the army," Titus explained. "As a wise, if rather crass, old centurion once told me, 'Give the army full bellies, overflowing coin purses, and drained cocks; and they will move mountains'."

The crude analogy brought a few chuckles from the assembled officers.

"This also gives us the chance to bring further dismay to our enemies. The zealots lust for gold as much as they want for food; therefore, let them watch seventy-thousand imperial soldiers receive that which they most crave. Most of the city has not seen our army assembled at its full strength. All will parade before the principia in full view of the people, with loud ovations made as to which legion and regiments are to be paid each day. Make a spectacle of it! Let these rebellious Jews see that, while they waste away, our soldiers prosper. I want every man to polish his armour and weapons; make them parade ready, as if marching before the emperor himself. I want our enemies blinded by the sun's glare off our armour."

There is an undeniable truth that has existed since the dawn of professional armies; soldiers tend to despise the pomp and tedium of formal parades. After hours of polishing armour and meticulously going over every piece of kit, the parades themselves involve hours of standing in formation in stifling heat, with every last man's thoughts consumed by hopes that he wouldn't pass out or have his bladder get the best of him. No one ever gave a

damn what the generals and senior magistrates had to say. Even centurions often found the ordeals tedious. Yet none complained the night before the first legion, in this case the Fifth, made ready to march before the prince imperial and receive its pay. Rumour had it General Titus added a small stipend for each soldier out of his personal coffers, though centurions and their subordinate officers vigorously denied this. Money could cause legions to move mountains or, in this case, actually be of good cheer when on parade.

The next morning, most of the army stood in a vast series of formations, covering much of what had once been the Bezetha and Tyropoeon districts of Jerusalem. Legionaries and auxilia infantrymen stood shoulder-to-shoulder, while cavalrymen stood by their horses, groomed, with their kit cleaned and polished. The sight of nearly 70,000 men, all in full armour, was an awe-inspiring and, at the same time, terrifying sight. Even with soldiers crammed close together, the formation extended over a mile from end-to-end and a quarter mile front to back.

In front of Titus' principia tent was a long row of tables where sat the signifiers for every century being paid that day. There were simply too many soldiers to parade in a single day, so one legion, ten auxilia infantry cohorts, and a quarter of the army's cavalry were designated for each day. Even then, the process would take from sunup to sundown. The commander-in-chief ordered most of the army to hold an initial formation on the first day, that the Jews might see them assembled at their full might. After, only those units receiving their wages would remain.



Every rooftop within Upper City, as well as the First Wall, was crammed with curious onlookers. The Romans made such a great show of parading their army that word quickly spread throughout the city. At the sounding of trumpets in the distance, the people were filled with trepidation at the sight of so many men in full armour. The sun was bright and the glare off the soldiers' armour and weaponry was blinding.

"I did not know there was so much iron and steel in the whole of the world," Mathias the Elder said nervously. He clutched his wife close to him.

Judith held his other hand, her eyes wide and her breath coming in short gasps. She squinted her eyes, hoping for a sign of her husband, who she heard

had tried to parlay with the zealots on behalf of the imperial army. All she could see was the glaring of steel, and it hurt her eyes to watch. “He’s out there somewhere,” she said quietly, wiping a tear away. “If only we could reach him.”

“I keep trying to find a way out of the city,” her brother-in-law, Mathias the Younger, lamented. “But not only are the walls swarming with Simon and John’s zealots, our house is under constant watch, even in the dead of night.”

Like much of the beleaguered populace, Mathias and his family knew not who they should fear more, their assailants or supposed protectors.



“First Cohort of the Fifth Legion, come forward to receive your pay!” the centurion primus pilus shouted. His booming voice echoed off the walls of the city. Even those cowering miles away in the Lower City could hear him.

Centurions marched their men over to the long row of tables where their respective signifiers waited with each century’s pay chest. The centurions were ultimately responsible and signed off on their soldiers’ pay chits. But it was the signifiers who actually sorted and paid the men in the ranks, keeping detailed records for each legionary, their years of service, what stoppages were due to be taken from their wages, and what they were actually paid during every four-month period.

Behind the tables, Titus stood with the legates and tribunes from the Fifth Legion. He beamed appreciatively at the impressive sight of his army and listened as signifiers called their soldiers forward in turn.

“Legionary Tiberius Drusus, seventy-five denarii, minus twenty-five in stoppages, for a pay of fifty denarii.”

“Legionary Marcus Carbo, seventy-five denarii, minus fourteen in stoppages, for a pay of sixty-one denarii.”

“Sergeant Julius Metellus, one hundred and twelve denarii…”

And so it went. Those who were literate signed their names to their chits. Those who were not simply left a mark. The imperial army paid its soldiers three times a year. A legionary’s total wages per annum amounted to 225 denarii, minus stoppages to help pay the cost of his equipment, food, a burial fund, and mandatory retirement savings. This meant that during each pay

period, a soldier would walk away with between fifty and sixty denarii; no meagre sum when compared to the lower classes of the empire's population. By comparison, a teacher made roughly 180 denarii over the course of a year —about the same as an auxilia trooper—yet he had to provide his own housing, food, and medical care. And even if a legionary was foolish with his coin and squandered it all in a few days on gambling, wine, and prostitutes, which many of them did, he knew he would never go hungry or want for a place to sleep each night.

And while the lowest legionary earned enough to live somewhat comfortably, those with leadership abilities and education to rise up in the ranks fared substantially better. A decanus in command of a seven-man squad made roughly one-and-a-half times that of his soldiers, with principle offers making double. An optio's wages were three times that of a legionary. Centurions earned ten times that or more depending on seniority. At the peak of the enlisted rank's chain-of-command, the centurion primus pilus earned forty times that of his men, making him an extremely wealthy man. Tribunes and legates who came from Rome's noble classes were already men of wealth and influence, with the army providing many opportunities to increase their already sizeable fortunes.



Four days later, the men of Legio X were anxious to finally stand before their signifiers and receive their wages. It mattered not that they had no way of spending it at the moment. The usual trains of prostitutes, sutlers, and other camp followers were unusually sparse due to the rather austere and desolate conditions surrounding Jerusalem. However, most of the officers agreed that the 'vultures' would soon swarm when they heard an army of 70,000 had just received its pay. Indeed, most merchants who made a living following the imperial armies were well aware of when the legions received a fresh infusion of silver and copper coinage.

"Fifth Cohort of the Tenth Legion, come forward to receive your pay!"

Centurion Nicanor marched his men over to where Signifier Aurelian sat waiting for them. Nicanor and Optio Julius then stood behind him as each soldier was called forward.

Julius leaned over to the centurion. "The lads are certainly excited, even

though they have nothing to spend their wages on here."

"Give it a couple weeks," Nicanor replied. "The merchants, whores, camp followers, and all their associated vermin may have scattered during the lull in the war, but they will return soon enough."

"Nothing like a chance to bury his cock and drink himself stupid to deprive a legionary of his coin," Julius added.

It took half an hour to pay each century. Once the last man made his mark, Aurelian closed his considerably lightened chest and made way for a signifier from the next cohort to take his seat. He then handed the chest to a soldier who'd been tasked as his assistant, before reclaiming the century's signum and taking his place next to the centurion. Nicanor and Julius then began the long march back to the legion's camp along the Mount of Olives. Their defence works were being manned by several cohorts of auxilia infantry while the legion received its pay. It mildly surprised them that the rebels had not launched a sortie while the legion was away.

As they marched past the line of siege platforms and catapults facing the north side of the Antonia Fortress, Nicanor grinned. He saw an old friend talking to some of the crewmen.

"Take over, Aurelian," he ordered the signifier, excusing himself from the formation and making his way over to one of the large siege ballistae.

It took a moment for Gaius to realise someone was standing behind him. He dismissed the crewman as he turned around and gave a broad smile. "By Jupiter's cock." He laughed as he returned Nicanor's salute and extended his hand. "Don't get to see you much, old friend."

"Well, we are just over on the hill," the centurion said with a nod in the direction of the Tenth Legion's camp. "You could pay us a visit, you know."

"It's not that I don't want to, but since General Titus gave me command of all siege works, I barely find the time to sleep let alone see old friends."

"And how does the siege progress?" Nicanor asked. "While the rest of the army fights, our soldiers stare at the temple walls in boredom, fantasising about the last whore they shagged."

"If I'm being honest, it's a fucking nightmare. And I fear it will only get worse."

"Why is that?"

"Because," Gaius explained. "Between what they captured from the routed Twelfth Legion four years ago, and whatever engines the Jerusalem garrison had at the Antonia Fortress, we estimate that the zealots have

approximately three hundred scorpions and forty onagers. Granted, we smashed a few when they foolishly thought to duel with us a couple months ago, plus I am certain others are in disrepair. However, these sixty-foot walls give them a bastard of an advantage. And if they've been practicing at all, they could make our engineers' lives a living hell. Our archers on the ground are largely ineffective shooting upwards at that range. Until we can build up the assault ramps, our siege towers can only provide limited support."

"Well, if you need assistance, just let me know," Nicanor stressed. "I'm sure Bassus can spare a few cohorts from that arduous task of staring at the eastern walls. He won't even let us launch a few ballistae rounds or flaming shot towards the temple."

"General Titus wants to preserve it, if possible," Gaius explained. "You, of all people, should appreciate how much of a prize for Rome it would be, provided we can take it intact."

"Believe me, I know," the centurion replied. "As a Roman I was never allowed inside its walls. But Josephus used to tell me all the time, even when we were children, about how beautiful it was and the riches held within. I envied him as a boy, because I could not see it for myself. I suppose in some ways I still do, strange as that may sound."

"Well, if we can slaughter the rebels without having to destroy it, maybe we'll get a look for ourselves. Perhaps once the imperial eagles fly above their holiest sanctum, these Jews will finally know they've been conquered."

Part VI

Titus makes ready to take the final walls of the city, while Simon and John vow to fight to the death

Chapter XVI: Famine and Punishment

The Roman Siege Camps, north of the First Wall
10 June, 70 A.D.
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The reprieve after the taking of Tyropoeon could not last. Each of the three legions within the main camp was tasked with building one of the massive ramps needed for the siege towers. Gaius Artorius' concerns about the zealots making better usage of the captured siege engines soon proved well-founded. Within days, the rebels began to assail the encroaching siege works. Sorties became a near-constant ordeal, with many attacks supported by volleys of scorpion bolts from the high walls. For the Twelfth Legion, whose ramp was being erected just east of the Tower of Hippicus and a half mile from the tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea, the situation was particularly harrowing.

Three cohorts under Master Centurion Cinna stood in battle formation as work crews attempted to construct the ramp. Wicker braces lined the path, angling upward. Labourers carried baskets full of dirt and rock to fill the space in between. Engineers with spades and wooden mallets hammered each layer into place, hardening the ramp and enabling it to withstand the mighty weight of towers and battering rams. A company of a hundred archers crouched behind the protective hurdles. Fifteen scorpions and six onagers were also ready to defend the work force. And because of the range afforded by the defenders' missile weapons from atop the wall, the legionary cohorts were obliged to keep at least fifty meters behind the rear of the ramp. It was only when the zealots launched a sortie that they deployed forward to counterattack.

One of the soldiers' most hated tasks was being sent forward to retrieve any dead or wounded from the work crews and supporting archers. The wicker hurdles provided a decent amount of protection from arrows and sling bullets, yet did little against a well-placed scorpion shot. Every time a labourer or archer fell, teams of legionaries would rush forward as fast as they were able in testudo formation and drag the fallen back to safety. The

risk was great; a cluster of legionaries provided a ripe target for enemy skirmishers. On several occasions, one or two of the rescuers were shot down and had to be saved themselves.

“General Titus has ordered us to leave no man behind,” Cinna explained to one of the pilus priors, who was concerned about the additional risks to his men.

“I can understand accepting such perils to save the living,” the centurion remarked. “But there is nothing we can do for the dead. It’s a terrible thing, but they should be left until we can safely retrieve them after nightfall.”

There would be no chance for further discussion at the moment. A series of battle cries shouted in Hebrew alerted the Romans that the rebels were attacking the ramps once more.

“Close ranks!” Cinna shouted to his First Cohort.

The two pilus priors from the flank cohorts did the same before advancing along the left side of the massive ramp. The much larger First Cohort made its way down the right, as archers and work crews fled from the coming rebel onslaught.

Soldiers in the front ranks braced themselves as a host of zealots smashed into them. They had already thrown their javelins during a previous assault, and were unable to retrieve them without being subjected to further bombardment from the walls. Legionaries in the subsequent ranks were compelled to keep their shields overhead as arrows and stones were flung from the high walls. The numbers of assailants were too few to threaten the legionary cohorts; however, their intent was not to win, but simply delay. Many zealots were willing to martyr themselves if it meant keeping the Romans out of the inner city and temple. And with each assault more imperial soldiers were killed or injured, adding to the growing cost of the siege.



From atop the battlements, Simon watched the chaotic brawl. For him, the Siege of Jerusalem was now a test of wills. He was not naïve, for he knew the Romans were a fearsome enemy; one he could not hope to best in open battle. He begrudgingly admitted that Titus, and before him Vespasian, were far more formidable than that fool, Cestius Gallus. However, no Roman army had ever attempted to break the impregnable fortress that was Jerusalem. It

was not just the sixty-foot high and impenetrably thick walls, nor the valour of his warriors, which damned their enemies. Simon knew that God himself was the enemy of Rome, despite what the traitor, Josephus, insisted. And if the Almighty found the Jews unworthy of holding onto the Temple, then Simon would see it all burn, taking the Romans with him in a hellfire of death.



If Titus and Simon agreed on anything, it was that the siege was becoming a test of their collective wills. For Titus, failure was simply not an option. The disgrace would be unbearable, for himself, the Flavian dynasty, and especially the emperor. More importantly, he understood that defeat would only embolden further rebellion, not just in recently conquered Judea, but in other troubled provinces. A chief aim of Vespasian's tour of the eastern provinces was to ensure the people of the empire stability. The loss of Jerusalem could undermine the very foundation of the Roman Empire. Of great concern to Titus was the effect the prolonged siege was having on his men.

"This damned siege is proving costly," he grumbled, looking over the latest casualty reports.

Because the height of the walls gave the enemy such a superior reach advantage, it was difficult for the army to get its own engines in place to effectively shoot back at those who mercilessly tormented their engineers and ramp builders.

"It is painful. But what else can we do?" General Thrasea asked.

The most recent battle involving three of his cohorts left thirty dead zealots and a handful of prisoners to be crucified, while six of his men were killed and another fifteen wounded.

"The walls are too damn thick for our battering rams," the legate continued. "And they're too tall for ladders. We *must* get those ramps in position if we're to use our siege towers effectively." Surprising everyone present, he turned to Josephus and said, "I want you to try to talk some sense into those bastards."



Few of the sorties against the Romans came from John of Giscala's faction. Though his men were willing to die for Jerusalem's salvation, he did not wish to throw away any more lives than necessary. Besides, he knew his cunning would undermine the imperial siege works with greater success than Simon leaving more of his men as bloody corpses and crucified prisoners outside the city walls.

A pair of oil lamps cast their glow upon the half dozen men who laboured with worn pickaxes beneath the city's surface. The loud strikes echoed in their ears, each man squinting as sparks and flying bits of rock stung their eyes and faces. The conditions were stifling in the tunnel. And there was the ever-present fear of collapse. Much of their labour was consumed with building support structures to brace the walls and low ceiling, preventing such a catastrophe.

The Giscalan himself spent more time in the tunnel than any. His face was covered in nicks and cuts, his eyes bloodshot, and his bare chest dripping with sweat and grime. He swung his pickaxe with a steady rhythm, relishing the fall of each broken chunk of rock and pile of loosened dirt. While he and others toiled, men bearing baskets carried away the earth and debris. Yet not all shared in John's assured hopes of success.

Nearest to him in the confined space was a thirty-year old warrior who had followed John all the way from Galilee. He fought many times against both the Romans and Jewish traitors. Like most of their fighters, his loyalty to John and his hopes that his master would become King of the Jews was unwavering. And yet, in the cramped space beneath the ground, he battled against rock with a pickaxe, rather than the imperial invaders with his sword. Despite John's constant reassurances, he felt their progress was far too slow. Teams of men laboured day and night. Every foot of progress demanded a fierce toll in sweat and pain. Food shortages were also becoming an issue for the zealots, especially with the loss of the hidden stores in Tyropoeon. Such took its toll as the workers emerged after their savage efforts, only to find too little to nourish their worn bodies.

"It's no good," the man said, sweat stinging his eyes. He beat his pickaxe furiously against the rock wall before throwing the tool into the dirt. "We'll never break through. It's too damned far..."

John was normally a harsh disciplinarian, but he felt sympathy for his men's spirits. He looked at their faces in the faint lamp light and saw expressions of exhaustion and pending defeat.

He grabbed the man comfortingly by the shoulder. “We’ll make it, I promise.” He picked up his pickaxe and began swinging it against the rocky earth once more. “Come, my brothers! This is the path to victory and freedom!”



While John and his chosen men continued to tunnel beneath the city, roving gangs of brigands roamed the streets, preying upon the populace. With no public grain stores available, those with arms fell upon the weak to steal whatever they could in the way of food.

“We need our strength, if we are to fight the Romans,” a zealot captain reasoned as he led a group of twenty warriors through the streets of Lower City, near the Pool of Siloam.

As they approached a two-level building of flats, they had to step on or over numerous beggars. Most of these were destitute pilgrims, and their plight was becoming desperate. One young man, his eyes distant and face gaunt, reached up and grabbed the captain by the tunic.

“Please,” he pleaded, his voice rasping. “My wife and children…”

His supplications were interrupted by a swift kick to the stomach.

“Filthy dog,” the captain snarled. “Had you joined the fight against Rome, you would have been fed and housed. Instead, you cower in the gutter, like rats. Cowards do not deserve to live in the holy city.”

“Then let us go,” the man whimpered, coughing up bile as he clutched at his stomach.

“Why? So you can betray us to the defilers?” The captain was filled with rage. He proceeded to kick and stomp the man repeatedly with his sandaled feet.

The beggar’s wife cried out and stumbled weakly over to protect her husband, only to be grabbed and flung back into the gutter by a pair of zealots.

“Be glad we don’t treat you the same way the Romans would,” one of them sneered.

Leaving the wretches where they lay, the captain hammered his fist into the door of the lower flat. Several of his men ascended the rickety wooden steps that lead to the upper floor.

The door was opened by an elderly man. His head was bandaged and his

left arm wrapped in a sackcloth sling. “What is it you want?” he asked with great irritation. “Have you robbers not taken enough from us?”

“Robbers?” the captain asked, feigning hurt feelings. “Come now, grandfather, is that any way to address your protectors.”

“I am not your grandfather, so do not patronise me. The Romans have destroyed Bezetha and Tyropoeon. Both of my sons died defending the outer wall. And the city’s grain stores were lost, thanks to your wickedness. So tell me, what protection have you given us?”

“Your sons sit at the right hand of God, honoured as martyrs. But I am not here to bicker with you, grandfather.”

The captain was growing impatient. He snapped his fingers and his men shoved their way past the old man, grabbing him by the shoulders and shoving him up against a wall. Inside, the tiny flat was crowded with several women and at least a dozen small children. The oldest was a boy who appeared to be about twelve. He was the only one who looked remotely healthy in this den of starvation.

“Yes, continue to steal from the people you’re supposed to protect!” the old man snarled. “When we have nothing left to eat and our rotting corpses litter the city, what will you do then? Claim that we all died as martyrs?” He spat into the face of one of the men holding him. The zealot punched him in the stomach.

The elderly man doubled over and fell to the ground, though he lost none of his defiance. “Vipers from hell, all of you!”

The zealots turned over the few tables and rooted through some smashed cupboards. When they saw there was nothing to be had, they looked to their captain and shook their heads. The zealot leader then gazed upon the boy. He was taller than most his age with a strength of body and spirit devoid of the others who slinked within the hovel.

“Strong boy,” the captain said, placing a hand under the lad’s chin. “And clever, I’ll wager. They send you out to fetch food for them, don’t they?” The boy said nothing, causing the captain to snicker maliciously. “You have to steal, don’t you, boy? Does that make you any better than us? You may think because you’re feeding your withered grandfather and these sickly wretches that you are doing something noble. None of them will rise up to stop the Romans; your efforts are wasted. But we will fight them, and you shall come with us.”

“I piss on you,” the boy snapped, slapping the captain’s hand away.

“Ah, a feisty one, full of life…good.” The captain then slapped him hard across the face. “All you need now is to learn respect for your betters. And if you don’t want me to spill the guts of every last person in here, you’ll do as you’re told.”

“Are you now forcing children to fight for you?” the lad’s grandfather said, painfully pulling himself up to his feet.

“I expect he’s a good forager,” the captain countered. “We can use resourceful ones like him. And yes, if God wills it, I will put a sword in his hand. If a Roman blade slays him, he will have his reward in paradise. A pity he will not find his family of cowards there.”

The boy’s mother, cowering silently in a corner up to this point, gave a weak cry of protest before a slap from a zealot silenced her. The boy shouted in rage and attacked the man, knocking him to the ground and beating him with his fists. The man’s companions wrenched him off the bloody fighter, dragging him out the door of the flat.

The captain was laughing all the while. “He’ll make a fine warrior.” He then gave a mocking bow of supplication before the old man as he backed away. “God’s blessings, grandfather. Your family’s sacrifice will be rewarded; either in this life or the next.”

As he and his men continued their hateful task of foraging, the captain became even more hostile towards those who attempted to thwart his efforts to find food for his men. By the time the sun set, they had scrounged just enough grain to fill a couple of small sacks, along with some semi-rotten vegetables. However, the boy they had taken would prove useful, as he clearly possessed many skills as a scrounger. And if he proved too much trouble, a knife to the throat would sort him out.



With the odium of crimes being committed by the zealots against the people, many now looked for a chance to escape. Those with young children were the most fearful, for the brigands who terrorised them showed little mercy regardless of gender or age. Life as Roman slaves was preferable to further starvation, while waiting for any number of diseases to destroy them. The only way out of the city was to bribe the guards manning the lesser-known gates. And the more the people were robbed, the less they had to offer. Many times, they were beaten and sent back into the city with their

possessions taken by the guards. There were a select few who managed to escape, either by finding their own way or happening upon a guard whose cruelty had yet to drive him to utter madness.

Titus had prohibited the Passover pilgrims from leaving the city, knowing that the doubling of Jerusalem's population, coupled by the loss of their grain warehouses, would exhaust their food stores in short order. This was confirmed one evening, as he sat to his supper with Tiberius Alexander and a few others.

An auxilia cavalry officer stepped into the tent and saluted. "Your pardon, sir, but we've captured a husband and wife who escaped the city. We felt we should bring them to you at once."

"Very good," the commander-in-chief said, before taking a large bite out of a loaf of bread and a long drink of wine. He ordered one of his clerks, "Send for Josephus."

The escapees were a terrible sight; a young, ragged man, his wife, and their new-born child. Their clothes were torn rags, their faces and bodies filthy, and they stank of sweat and sepsis from numerous infected cuts and gashes. Titus almost gagged and quickly drained his cup. Like his father before him, he always ate the same humble rations as his legionaries, yet even bland porridge and hard bread caused the couple to stare at his supper with ravenous eyes. The prince imperial gave a mischievous grin before taking another bite of bread and several spoonfuls of his beef and vegetable stew.

"You're a cold-hearted bastard," Tiberius Alexander said, with a bemused grin.

Titus kept his eyes fixed on the couple while continuing to eat. "I don't see you offering them any of your supper." His gaze was unflinching. "In a way, I do pity them and wish to show at least some humanity. But to be honest, I am utterly sick of these fucking people. We keep giving them chances to end this war, hand over their leaders, save their precious temple, and be done with it. And yet they still persist in futile defiance. I suspect that watching me eat my supper is the least of the cruelties they've been subjected to."

Josephus entered the tent and was taken aback momentarily by the frightful sight of the haggard couple. "You sent for me?"

"Yes, where have you been? Your tent is just down from mine."

“Something I ate isn’t agreeing with my stomach.” His words felt strange to him, almost perverse, given the state of the Jewish couple who stood before them. “Is their child even alive?”

“Couldn’t tell you. No one wants to go near them. They look far worse than you did after Jotapata.”

Josephus grimaced at the memory. Looking at the horrific sight of the man and woman, he knew it to be true. The weeks of physical torments, starvation, and disease he’d endured paled compared to the months the people of Jerusalem had been subjected to.

“Who are you?” Josephus asked the couple, speaking in Hebrew.

The man’s eyes were still fixed on Titus’ soup bowl and half-eaten loaf of bread. He did not hear Josephus at first.

When he reiterated the question, the man jolted, suddenly aware of the fellow Jew standing before him dressed in a Roman tunic.

“My name is Eli, and this is my wife, Tamara. Our son, Daniel, is scarcely a week old. Please, we must have food so my wife can properly nurse him or he will die.” The man’s eyes were pleading. He cared nothing for his own survival, just that of his wife and son.

As Josephus translated, Titus tossed the bread to the man and slid his wooden bowl to the woman. “I won’t be able to eat, so long as their stench permeates my tent,” he said coarsely.

Josephus thought he saw a trace of pity in the prince imperial’s eyes.

Titus ordered water brought for them. The couple devoured the food as if they had not eaten in weeks; which most likely they hadn’t. The man spoke at length as Josephus asked him a series of questions regarding the state of the people within the city. The Jewish scholar asked about his own family. Unfortunately, the man and his wife were from the poorest sections of the Lower City and only knew his father by name, due to his association with the Temple.

“Few go anywhere near the Temple out of fear of John’s band of murders,” Eli explained. “Any who do so risk being beaten and taken before the pretender, often on charges of sedition and attempting to defect to the Romans. All who are taken away are found guilty and killed. You can see their bodies all along the base of the outer walls.”

“Yes, just follow the trail of stench and flies,” Titus muttered, after Josephus translated.

“But Simon’s men are even worse,” Eli continued. “Every night they

force their way into people's homes. Those who attempt to deny them entry are put to death. They are the fortunate ones. Any who are found with private grain stashes are beaten and their food taken. Those without who appear to be well-fed are bludgeoned even worse, often with arms and legs broken, for having hidden their food from 'God's warriors'. The only ones they spare are those wasted away by starvation and disease."

"How did you manage to escape?" Josephus asked.

"The only way any can," Eli said. "We bribed our way out. Many try but fail. The brigands guarding the walls are evil beyond redemption. Most of the time, they will simply kill the people trying to escape and take their money and possessions. They then disembowel them before throwing them over the wall."

"Wait, why do they disembowel them?" Titus interrupted.

"In order to find any coins the people may have swallowed," Josephus immediately replied, knowing the answer. He asked Eli, "Have you managed to hide any coins within yourselves?"

"A few, it was difficult as our shekels are much larger than most Roman coins. Passing them will be painful, but it is our only chance at surviving; that is, unless the Romans intend to make us slaves."

Eli's expression showed that he partially hoped the Romans would enslave them, for then they would have more regular access to food. They knew not what awaited them beyond the imperial siege camps. Was all of Judea now a wasteland? Josephus translated and then looked to Titus.

"No taking of slaves until we sack the city," he said. "Besides, this lot will cost too much to keep healthy until they are worth selling. No. Tell them after they have eaten, they are free to leave. I'll task a squad with escorting them safely through the camp. Once beyond our entrenchments they are on their own."

Josephus translated. Eli thanked Titus for his generosity and continued with his sad tale.

"The murderers within John and Simon's factions are the only ones with plentiful amounts of food. They still have supplies coming into the city. I do not know from where, or how they are getting in, but occasionally we will see a donkey or cart laden with sacks of grain. They hoard it all, and the people get nothing."

"Why do the people not rise up?" Titus asked in frustration. "They're being bullied, beaten, and killed, yet they do nothing."

“What can we do?” Eli asked. “The people’s loyalties are divided; we’ve been weakened by hunger, have no proper weapons to speak of, and we’ve been leaderless since the murder of Hanan.”

Josephus winced at the mention of his old mentor. Had the Idumeans never allowed John of Giscala into the city, and had Hanan managed to maintain order, there was little doubt they could have come to terms with Rome. Most likely, Vespasian would have ordered the walls surrounding the city demolished and reparations paid to compensate the empire for its losses. Even if the emperor had demanded the leaders to pay with their lives, it was a sacrifice Hanan would have gladly undertaken to save the Jews.

Titus had previously stated that the terms, which Josephus once heard Hanan speak of, were more than reasonable. All of that was now lost. John had unleashed a reign of terror upon the city, made infinitely worse by the arrival of Simon bar Giora, whose violence and cruelty made John’s obscenities against the people seem benevolent.

Having heard all he needed, Titus sought to dismiss the deserters. “Give them extra food and water,” he directed. “Enough to last a few days. Then have an escort lead them out of the camp.”

Whether his order was given out of genuine compassion or simply wishing to appear as such, Josephus could not say. The couple expressed their gratitude profusely. The woman, Tamara, even stated several times that she would pray for God’s blessings on both Titus and Emperor Vespasian.

“Think they know you are the emperor’s son?” Alexander asked, once Josephus left with the couple.

“No idea. Could be they were just being polite.” He raised an eyebrow at his chief-of-staff. “Why is it I never ask you to act as interpreter for me?”

“Because I am usually off somewhere, trying to find out if our damned rations wagons have gotten lost again, or why a shipment of leather that I asked for a month ago has yet to arrive, or who in Hades accepted a shipment of replacement gladii and armour plates that were pitted with rust spots. And don’t get me started on those bloody stone masons I sent for five weeks ago. Besides, my Hebrew is shit.”

“I suppose growing up the son of a Roman magistrate in Alexandria, you never needed it,” Titus surmised.

“My father spoke Latin and Greek like a true Roman. I don’t think he knew more than a few phrases of our ancestral tongue. He did make a half-hearted attempt to teach me Hebrew ‘out of tradition’, as he put it. After four

months of paying for a tutor, he decided it was a waste of good Roman coin. I learned enough to understand maybe a quarter of what that man was babbling just now."

Most tales of those escaping the city did not end as well as the young couple and their infant child. Many of those found outside the city walls were not even trying to escape, just forage for food. Imperial patrols who came upon them consisted almost entirely of auxilia cavalry and infantry. Over half of the soldiers came from ethnicities that were inherently hostile towards the Jews. Men and women alike were mercilessly slain, while the troopers claimed they killed in self-defence. Whether truth or myth could never be determined, nor did their Roman officers care. Samaritan cavalry were particularly wicked, often raping and killing the women, but taking the men as prisoners to be crucified.

The people attempting to escape from Jerusalem knew nothing of the differences in uniform and appearance between legionary and auxilia forces. To them, a Roman was a Roman, regardless of ethnicity. And as tales of their besiegers' malice spread throughout the city, the poor souls trapped within became more desperate for salvation. Even the least devout now prayed continuously to the Lord, that he might deliver them from their endless suffering.



For John of Giscala and his zealots, those not guarding the walls or pillaging food continued to toil with pickaxe and shovel beneath the city. The sounds of their tools hammering away echoed in the growing tunnel. Men who had once been carpenters and stone masons brought hammers and chisels with which to break up the large rocks. Any lumber available was used to build support structures to keep the tunnel from collapsing. It was back-breaking and exhausting work, with only a few feet achieved each day. John remained stalwart, labouring beside his men, wearing nothing but a loincloth, covered in dirt and sweat, his body bearing numerous cuts and bruises.

The work was kept secret from Simon and his faction. Nor was anyone outside of John's chosen fighters allowed near an abandoned warehouse, where the tunnel began. Though crumbling and burned out on the inside from

one of the many fires set during the factions' civil war, it served as the perfect place to begin their trek to freedom, for it was relatively close to the Temple district's western wall. And though it no longer had a roof, the walls shielded the workers from prying eyes. Almost half of the floor space was now covered in chest-high piles of dirt and rock excavated from the tunnel.

"We are underneath the wall," Levi surmised one evening, as he and John emerged with a dozen of their men. Another group bearing torches was getting ready to descend into the tunnel. The work continued through all hours.

"We will need extra supports to make certain it all doesn't come crashing down on us," John noted. "What concerns me is we've struck a large patch of stone. It could take a week or more to cut through to the siege platforms."

"Our fighters are hampering their work far more than the rock hinders us. If the followers of Moses could persevere through forty years of exile in the desert, then we can cut our way through a few more feet of stone."

Chapter XVII: Towers Fall

Roman Siege Camp, ruins of Bezetha
15 June, 70 A.D.



Auxilia Infantrymen

A week passed, with seemingly endless bombardments from Roman engines, coupled by assaults on the siege platforms and various sorties from the rebel defenders becoming a daily occurrence. Every day, men danced with death. Even the smallest of skirmishes ended with mutilated corpses and crippling wounded, adding to the siege's already fearful toll. But despite the constant blood-letting, disease was proving to be the greatest nemesis for both sides. Over a million people had been living in cramped and squalid conditions with Jerusalem, devoid of sufficient food and sanitation for several months. The most desperate for nourishment consumed even the pestilent rats and other vermin. Dysentery was also proving to be a fearful adversary. Torrents of human waste spilled into the streets and homes. The weakest succumbed to any number of fevers, leaving their mourning families with the terrible task of trying to bury them with some sort of charity.

Though conditions for the Romans were far more salubrious, they were not immune to the pestilent pall that hung over every siege in the history of warfare. The sheer numbers of fighting men, and the volumes of the garbage

and waste created on a daily basis, made maintaining the army's health and sanitation an endless struggle. At any time, approximately one quarter of all legionaries and auxilia troopers were suffering from some form of malaise. An appalling statistic historians tended to neglect throughout the ages was that for every soldier killed in battle, two would die of disease.

Those quarters of Jerusalem now occupied by the imperial army resonated this sense of wanton death and destruction. Where once stood the buildings of a prosperous and growing city, with its countless gardens, fountains, and colourful orchards, all was now desolate. Streams and springs, which once fed the fountains and gardens, were now used to water both men and animals, while soldiers attempted to dig a series of sewage streams to wash the filth away from the various camps. The Romans were not there to capture Jerusalem, but to destroy it.

Every last tree within five miles was cut down in order to build the support structures for the ramps and the mighty siege towers. At seventy feet tall, these were much taller than those used to take the outer walls. This finally gave the imperial archers and scorpion crews the advantage of height over their adversaries on Jerusalem's tallest defences. Though tapering slightly the higher they rose, each tower was still roughly ten feet in width at the top. Protruding from the uppermost platform was a large pulley used to lower the heavy ramp, located on the second level. From these, dozens of assault troops could swarm the walls in a matter of moments. There were four such towers; one for each legion's ramp. They had taken weeks to construct. Each required an acre's worth of trees and thousands of pounds of hammered iron plates. On more than one occasion, General Titus was heard to say, "Once these are finished, so will be the Jews."

On the evening of 15 June, Tribune Gaius Artorius reported to the commander-in-chief that the ramps were finished and the towers were being wheeled into position. The prince imperial, Josephus, Alexander, all four legates, plus roughly twenty staff officers and auxilia commanders made their way to the top of Golgotha. From there, they could see all of the impressive works. Legio V and Legio XII were positioned on the north and western faces of the Antonia Fortress, ready to assault the Temple. Those belonging to Legio X and Legio XV faced the north side of the First Wall where they would launch their attacks into the Upper City of Zion. Much of the Tenth Legion's previous encampment along the Mount of Olives was now occupied

by auxilia and allied regiments. It was with no small measure of excitement and zeal that the legionaries from the Fifth and Tenth finally joined the fight.

Titus was visibly pleased. He watched scores of soldiers heaving the huge towers up the ramps and into position. “Excellent work. Maintain skirmishers atop the towers and a robust defence of the platforms. I want six auxilia infantry cohorts and two companies of cavalry protecting each. No doubt those bastards will make a last effort to destroy them.” He then looked to his legion commanders. “Select your assault cohorts and have them stand down for the night. Make sure they rest well; we attack at first light.”

The commander-in-chief was giddy with excitement. No force of zealots, no matter how brave and fanatical, could possibly withstand the onslaught of four legions coming over their walls simultaneously. They simply did not have the numbers or the physical strength to stop them. In the setting sun, Titus stared towards the temple, still standing defiant with the last rays of light falling upon her. “Soon, the eagles will fly above you,” the prince imperial said quietly.

Three months had passed since the imperial army made its initial approach to Jerusalem. Titus had promised his father a quick victory. Though beset by hardships and countless mistakes, he was pleased overall with how quickly they had broken the first two lines of defence.

“And once the lads are into the city proper, with the Antonia Fortress and Temple in our hands, the war will be all but over.”

For the first time in months, Titus dared allow himself to feel at ease. He knew the fighting along the walls would be fierce, but zealot militias were no match for professional legionaries.

“You still intent on joining the assault?” Alexander asked, his voice etched with concern.

“These zealots are nihilistic bastards who are contemptuous of death,” Titus explained. “They will fight with extreme fury, in many cases to the death. I cannot ask my men to accept such risks, if I am not willing to stand beside them. Besides, the Antonia Fortress is the most important strategic position remaining. The sooner I get my ass atop its towers, the sooner I can see where to deploy the next waves of assault troops.” Titus noted his chief-of-staff’s concern and tried to dismiss it. “Don’t worry, old friend, I won’t be leading the initial charge off the ramps. I already talked with General Thrasea and told him I would accompany his second cohort up the tower. By that time, hopefully, his lads and those from the Fifth will have secured the

fortress.”

Alexander said nothing more. His face was still etched with consternation, though he could not quite understand why. Was he afraid the attacks would falter? Would the Jewish rebels prove stronger than expected? Unlikely, since no one from Titus down to the lowest legionaries took their adversaries lightly. And over the past 800 years, no stronghold or city had ever held for long, once Roman siege towers assaulted the walls. Jerusalem may have been the most formidable fortress-city the imperial army had ever attempted to break, but even it could not hold if the legions were over its walls.

And yet, Tiberius Alexander’s heart pounded in his chest with a profound sense of apprehension.



John, Levi, and twelve of their men stood near the right angle in the tunnel that led beneath the two siege platforms facing the fortress. Some of the men were startled when the support beams creaked loudly, and they heard the sounds of enemy towers being rolled into position.

“Easy, friends,” Levi said reassuringly, though he too was unnerved by the noise. He grabbed a hold of one of the support beams and took a deep breath. The lingering clouds of dust in the air caused him to choke and cough violently. The others looked around nervously, afraid the Romans would hear them.

John snorted at their apprehension and shook his head. “Bring up the bitumen, straw, and pitch.”

The Romans above them had levelled the orchards and gardens in and around Bezetha and Tyropoeon in order to build their towers and siege platforms. John had ordered the same done within the temple district and Lower City. The harvesting took place over the past two weeks. Unsuspecting citizens thought perhaps the zealots were building more internal towers, like they did during the fighting against Simon’s faction. Emaciated by hunger and disease, few even noticed or cared. Straw was taken from animal stalls, long since devoid of any livestock. Bitumen and oil were confiscated from builders and the wealthier homes in the Temple district.

It was well after nightfall by the time John and his men emplaced the last of the timber doused in tar and oil, with straw for kindling. The tunnel was

barely beneath the surface, and one of the last measures taken was to cut a few ventilation holes into the earth just above the wooden supports. John knew once the fire was lit, what little air remained in the stifling tunnel would be consumed. The last thing he wanted was for the fires to be extinguished before they swallowed up the Roman towers.

"You've done well, brothers." He stood next to the pile of timber and straw, a torch in hand. "Your endless days of toil have set our people free. Now go…quickly!"

The men hurried back through the tunnel, anxious to breathe the fresh air once more. Only Levi remained. He gave a nod of acknowledgement to his leader. Having witnessed their enemy's relentless tenacity at Jotapata, Levi understood Roman fortitude better than most. He now held out hope that the destruction of their towers would cripple their resolve.

John nodded in return and turned to light the fire. He waited a few moments, making certain the dried timber was burning. Loud crackles echoed, and the tunnel quickly filled with smoke. Covering his mouth with a rag, the Giscalan and his closest advisor walked back up the tunnel. The fire was spreading rapidly, burning the support structures as well as the pile of timber and straw. By the time they emerged from the tunnel, a column of smoke was billowing from the entrance.

"Praise God, we thought we lost you," one of his men said.

"Come quickly!" a warrior shouted from atop the western wall of the Temple complex.

They sprinted up the stone steps leading to the high ramparts, men were already crowding the walls and towers of the Antonia Fortress, cheering loudly and brandishing their weapons. Within minutes, the wooden support structures for the ramps were engulfed in flames. Soldiers atop the siege tower were in a panic, abandoning their posts and scrambling down the ladders to avoid being consumed by the fires.

"The maw of hell opens to swallow up the Romans!" one warrior shouted in glee.

From above, it indeed looked as if some demonic force had split the earth asunder, spewing fire and brimstone, while devouring their wicked engines of war.



The frantic shouts and sound of running feet alerted Titus that something terrible had happened. He had been relaxing in his tent, contemplating trying to get some sleep, when a bewildered legionary burst in.

"General, sir, you must come quickly! There's been a terrible disaster."

"What is it?"

"The siege platforms are on fire…"

Titus did not bother donning his armour. He ran from his tent, following the crowd of soldiers rushing towards the columns of fire that threatened to engulf the towers facing the Antonia Fortress.

"Idiots!" the commander-in-chief bellowed. "Who the fuck allowed the Jews to assail the towers?"

"No one, general," Placidus answered, grabbing Titus by the arm. The auxlia corps commander's face was flushed, his eyes wide in alarm. "The fires came from beneath, as if Hades was trying to bring them down."

Titus wrenched his arm free and rushed to the northern platform. Placidus' words made no sense, and he could not believe that a fire had mysteriously burst forth from the bowels of the earth to claim their engines. He reached the chaotic scene. The iron plates on the tower were starting to melt as the flames took hold of the wooden beams. He saw nary a Jewish rebel, only his own bewildered and terrified soldiers.

"I don't know what happened, sir," the auxilia centurion commanding the guard cohorts said, shaking his head in disbelief. "We expected the rebels to make an assault, but they never came. Instead, they mock us from the walls of the temple and fortress, while fire comes up from the earth. And look there!" He pointed frantically to where the ground was starting to give way in a long line leading between the two platforms.

"This was no work of gods or demons," Titus muttered, suddenly understanding what happened.

The support structures that kept the tunnel from collapsing were burning beneath the surface and beginning to break apart. Sections collapsed completely, revealing a deep trench filled with smouldering embers.

"We couldn't save the towers," the centurion continued apologetically. "By the time we realised what was happening, it was too late."

The north tower creaked loudly in emphasis. Melting iron plates fell and crashed onto the crumbling platform.

"Pull everyone back," Titus ordered.

This was relayed as both towers were teetering; the warning proved

unnecessary. The huge front axle on the north tower snapped, buckling as the left wheel was also consumed in flames. The tall structure rocked back and forth, and after a momentary pause fell with a sweeping crash onto its side. The force of the impact was so great it echoed for miles. The ruins of the burning structure soon collapsed upon itself in a grotesque obliteration of what had just an hour before been a symbol of imperial power.



From atop the Tower of Hippicus, Simon watched the devastation, allowing himself a grin of appreciation despite his incessant loathing of John.

"By God," Boaz said, nodding towards the scene of burning anarchy. "The Giscalan uses the power of dark magic to battle the Romans."

"It was no magic," Simon retorted. Though he had not seen John's handiwork, he knew immediately what had happened. "He used cunning to defeat the defilers. We, however, will use more conventional means to break their remaining platforms. I will not allow this upstart, who would make himself King of the Jews, to claim all of the glory. We will give the Romans a day to lick their wounds. Then we will finish them."



The towers and platforms for the Twelfth and Fifth Legions were a complete loss. The tunnel the Jews dug had collapsed upon itself, leaving a shallow trench leading towards the wall. Plumes of smoke continued to billow forth into the next day, leaving little but charred ruins, chunks of melted iron, and large mounds that looked like mass graves. Titus doubled the guards on the remaining platforms, which had both towers and battering rams sitting atop them, and contemplated his next move. Legates Domitius and Bassus both urged the commander-in-chief to allow them to go ahead with their intended assault. Titus was, for the moment, assailed by doubt.

The day of pause would prove fatal for the Romans. Simon bar Giora reluctantly admired the Giscalan's initiative and the stubborn fortitude of his men. They had used a clever stratagem to undermine the imperial siege towers and platforms facing the Temple.

"We have no such implements in place," Boaz remarked.

The two men stood atop the Tower of Hippicus, watching the patrols of Roman auxiliaries in charge of guarding the remaining siege works.

"Their attempts at starving us have failed so far," Simon noted. "But we cannot stave off hungers indefinitely. We must unleash all our might before we are weakened any further. We attack at midnight."

Ten thousand fighters, over half of Simon's total force, would take part in the assault. There was a great deal of anger and resentment from those who remained to guard and control the Upper and Lower Cities. Simon had promised all a share in the spoils, and a chance to spill Roman blood.

"Once the towers fall, they will break," he pledged. "We will then hunt them, like we did the army of Cestius Gallus four years ago. Only this time, it will spell the final purge of Roman filth from God's promised land."

He at first thought to ask John of Giscala to launch a secondary assault from the Antonia Fortress, then thought better of it. The two factions were still only allies of necessity and would have their own issues to resolve, once the Romans were defeated. Simon was not prepared to share in the glory with his rival, especially when that same rival had already brought down two of the imperial towers.

The moon was full. The wisps of clouds added an ethereal feel to the scene of desolation outside the First Wall. Two cohorts of auxilia infantry were posted to guard the south-facing siege platforms, with three more in ready reserve. For the auxiliaries, particularly those from Syria and Arabia who had an inborn hatred for the Jews, there was a growing sense of resentment. The legions were leading every assault and taking all of the spoils and honours for themselves, whilst auxilia and allied units were confined to guard duty and patrols.

"I wish they would come at us," a Samaritan trooper said. He leaned against his spear, eyes growing heavy.

Each cohort had placed one century on picquet duty. The remainder rested nearby, with many laying up against the wicker hurdles and supports that held up the platforms.

"Agreed," one of his companions replied. "My blade has been thirsting for Zionist blood these past four years. General Titus had best not deny me my chance for revenge."

Both men were once part of the Roman garrison of Jerusalem, and among the fortunate few to escape when the uprising under Hanan ben Hanan

overran the city. Those who had barricaded themselves in the Antonia Fortress were compelled by deception to surrender, only to be butchered by the mob.

"What's that over there?" the first trooper asked, pointing in the direction of the three towers which dominated Herod's Palace.

Beyond the towers, they could see a faint glow.

"Damned if I know. Perhaps they're lighting bonfires in the Praetorium." The soldier was more right than he knew.

The Praetorium, that open air forum which Roman governors used for decades to address the people and dispense justice, was crammed with zealots carrying torches. Simon had hoped to use the high towers to mask his fighters' intentions by placing all of his torch-bearers within. Most of his warriors, under the cover of darkness, stood massed behind the length of the First Wall, waiting for the order to attack. Though many of their catapults and bolt throwers had been destroyed or disabled during the recent skirmishes with Roman siege engines, Simon had sent for those that remained to be placed on the tall ramparts of Herod's Fortress.

As the bleary-eyed auxilia troopers stared vacantly at the faint glow behind the towers, a high-pitched horn blast pierced the night. The reinforced gates of Herod's Fortress flew open with a loud screech, as did those along the First Wall. Dozens of ropes dropped from the ramparts; the more nimble of Simon's fighters quickly lowering themselves down the wall.

"For Judah and Israel!" men cried, as they stormed the tall siege platforms.

The sleepy soldiers were jolted awake, as were their mates dozing near the platforms. The lead centuries formed into a single battle line, spears protruding forward, as the first wave of zealots crashed into them. Many rebel fighters were impaled, their battle cries changing to those of savage pain as their guts were torn through. Others managed to smash their way through the shield wall, striking with their short swords and stabbing spears. Imperial soldiers rushed forward to form supporting ranks behind those who were being quickly overwhelmed.

Several troopers were brutally killed, their exposed throats slashed open. A score of their mates fell, badly injured. The centurions leading their cohorts blew their whistles, signalling for them to withdraw. The shock and impact of the wave of maddened zealots shattered the lead centuries, leading them to scatter in all directions. Fortunately, their companions formed proper battle

ranks and were now surging into the fray, driving the zealots back. Of the two troopers who had first laid eyes on the glow behind the fortress, one had been badly injured with a spear thrust to the leg and was being carried away by his companion.

The auxilia infantry cohorts pressed forward, the men in the rear ranks stabbing away with their spears. Those in front engaged in close combat with the zealots, using their gladii. Their discipline and valour formed an impenetrable wall behind their shields. Slowly, they began to drive the rebels back. Corpses and broken bodies were already forming an obstacle for both sides. A host of enemy fighters soon emerged from the fortress, with over half bearing torches. The wisps of flickering light allowed the Romans to see just how desperate their situation was becoming.

The combined force of the two auxilia cohorts numbered roughly eight hundred men, with another twelve hundred from their reserves making their way into the fray. Though they could not count just how many zealots opposed them, it was clear the imperial soldiers were terribly outnumbered. Two of the three reserve cohorts were compelled to form a right angle off the left of their formation, as thousands of enemy warriors threatened to take them in the flank. The lead cohorts were executing passages-of-lines as best as they were able, trying desperately to keep fresh troops in the fight. The ferocious onslaught of the maddened zealots—many of whom cared little if they lived or died—made such tactics extremely difficult to execute.

At the main Roman camp, sentries were sounding the alarm. Even from a distance, the light of the moon and the thousands of zealot torch-bearers made it plain that the cohorts guarding the platforms were in serious trouble. General Titus emerged from his tent, gritting his teeth in anger at the sight.

The Tenth and Fifteenth Legions had already sounded the alert. Legionaries emerged from their tents, hurriedly attempting to don their armour. Even for the most experienced soldiers, this was a slow, laborious process. Each set of bands on the lorica segmentata had to be tied together with leather cords. It worked best when soldiers paired up and assisted each other. The clinging darkness only made this more awkward. None bothered with their belts, but simply slung their sword baldrics, cinched up the straps on their caligae sandals, and threw on their helmets, before grabbing their shields and javelins and rushing to parade before their officers. Not wishing to foolishly go into battle piecemeal, each centurion pilus prior waited until

all of his centuries were formed up before advancing into the growing turmoil.

As Titus' manservant helped him into his armour, he heard the galloping of hooves and was relieved to see Commander Liberius of Siliana Horse.

"General, sir," the officer said, with a quick salute. "I've kept half my companies in ready reserve. They are ready to ride into battle."

"General!" a heavily accented voice called from off to the left. It was the captain leading one of the troops from King Agrippa's horsemen. Their camp was closest to the right angle between the Antonia Fortress and First Wall. "The rebels are pouring out of the city, threatening the flank of our auxiliaries."

"Your troop and Siliana Horse will accompany me," the prince imperial ordered.

"I'm afraid we won't be enough, sir," the captain replied, his voice etched with fear. "There are *thousands* of fighters spilling out of the city. And the enemy has brought fresh bolt throwers to the walls."

"Damn it all," Titus swore, as his groomsman appeared with his horse. He spoke to one of his aides. "Ride to General Thrasea. Tell him I need six cohorts on the left flank immediately!"

"Sir." The soldier, without bothering to don his own armour, sprinted off into the darkness to seek out the commanding legate of Legio XII.

Most of General Placidus' auxilia corps was scattered around the city, forming a loose blockade. Because their numbers were not concentrated, it was difficult for the Romans to mass their full strength against enemy assaults.

Titus and his contingent of horsemen rode towards the left flank of their ragged battle formations. He could see in the distance hundreds of enemy warriors assailing the siege engines and platforms. The two auxilia cohorts tasked to guard them were in a desperate fight for their lives. They were quickly being overwhelmed by the enemy's sheer force of numbers. Three cohorts each from the Tenth and Fifteenth Legions were unleashing their javelin volleys and charging into the battle. Yet even their combined strength was insufficient to deal with the zealot horde.

As he assessed the situation, Titus heard a loud rushing sound past his ear. He looked up. In the pale torchlight, he saw a pair of scorpions being reloaded by their crews on the rampart. Twenty of these engines, along with four smaller onagers, were bombarding the imperial forces below.

“Find Tribune Artorius,” he ordered one of his staff officers. “Get his onagers and ballistae up and drive those bastards from the walls!” He then drew his spatha and waved for his contingent of horsemen to follow him.



Centurion Nicanor and the rest of the Fifth Cohort stormed into what had devolved into a savage brawl. The situation was incredibly perilous. The auxilia cohorts nearest the platforms had been driven back from the siege works, fatigue and casualties taking their toll. The zealots had taken it far worse in terms of dead or badly wounded fighters, yet their numbers alone drove them onward, like an unstoppable tide breaking over the rocks. The bodies of the dead and badly wounded littered the landscape.

“Nicanor!” Centurion Galeo shouted. “Take Centuries Three through Six and reinforce the right flank. I’ll take the First and Second and try to save those engines!”

“Yes, sir!” Nicanor raised his gladius high. Signifier Julian waved their signum in a circle, rallying most of the cohort to them. *“Detachment…action right, on me!”*

Another cohort from the Tenth soon joined them, though in the dark Nicanor could not tell which one. The auxilia centurions, seeing their approach, ordered their men to withdraw. Their ranks broke, discipline shattered by exhaustion. Nicanor saw one of the officers rushing past him, and he reached out and violently grabbed the man by the arm.

“Form up a reserve,” he demanded. “Get your men under control and help save those towers!”

The auxilia centurion’s face was bloodied and covered in sweat, his right eye swollen half shut. He gave a listless nod and sprinted away with the rest of his men. Nicanor was not sure if the officer had even heard him, let alone intended to comply. In a way, he could not fault the centurion, for his cohort had taken a severe bludgeoning. Bloodied and exhausted or not, they still had their duty to perform. If the remaining platforms fell, it would spell disaster for the entire army.

“Javelins ready!” Nicanor shouted, quickly assessing the strength and disposition of the enemy force to his front. Instead of attacking this fresh wave of Roman troops or pursuing the fleeing auxiliaries, they were turning their attention on the siege works. Dozens of torches had been flung into the

hurdles and support structures, which were slowly beginning to catch fire. Scores of fighters had scaled the tall works and were attacking the towers and battering rams with their torches. Nicanor grimaced, hoping Galeo and the rest of the cohort were able to drive them back. *"Front rank…throw!"*

The salvo of heavy javelins tore into the mob of zealots. And yet, the centurion was distraught to see they had little effect on the fortitude of their enemies. Men were struck down, the wounded and dying screaming in pain. However, their companions seemed to pay them no mind, so incensed were they towards destroying the remaining siege towers.

"Second rank…throw!"

Nicanor and his fellow centurions issued subsequent orders to their legionaries, unleashing hundreds of pila into the zealot swarm. Gladii flashed from their scabbards, and the armoured mass of imperial soldiers charged.



Simon bar Giora grinned maliciously, as he exhorted his fighters to continue pressing the attack. Renowned for his extreme bravery, on this night the rebel leader paced behind the lead ranks of his warriors, spurring them to fight valiantly, as if armoured by the might of God himself. Whenever a section of his battle line faltered, he would rush forward, smashing his sword against the enemy's shield wall, inspiring his men to keep fighting. Only when impaled by a flung pilum or disembowelled by legionary blades did the immeasurable pain wrench his warriors out of their frenzied stupor.

More important than killing imperial soldiers was the attack on their siege engines. Flames were now engulfing sections of the large support structures. Legionaries and auxilia soldiers were scrambling up the earthen ramps, attempting to drag their huge towers and heavy rams away before the works collapsed. The towers would be impossible to salvage. Their immense weight required scores of men to budge. Knowing this, the zealots focused on the battering rams, covering them in burning torches while axemen hacked away at the support ropes and wheel bases. As these caught fire, the iron plates grew extremely hot. Yet the most fanatical of the Judean warriors clung to them, ignoring the pain in their charred hands as they prevented the Romans from wheeling the engines away.

Fire was now engulfing the hurdles and support structures and the ramps started to give way. Sensing this, and knowing there was no more to be done,

the imperial soldiers fled from the burning hulks. Flames licked higher, turning the towers into massive torches which could be seen for miles.



Fury overcoming him, Titus swung his spatha in a hard chop, smashing through the skull of a zealot warrior. The weapon became embedded and was nearly wrenched from his hand as the dying man's thrashing body collapsed. An allied Judean lancer plunged his long spear into the throat of a nearby warrior who sought to take advantage of the prince imperial's disabled state. A cornicen's horn warned the men, as hundreds of soldiers from the Twelfth Legion sprinted towards them. With shouts from their centurions and options, the columns quickly formed into battle lines.

"About damned time," Titus swore. Though he knew the legion's camp was barely half a mile distant, the darkness and numerous obstacles delayed their speed in joining the fight. His anger was directed more at the sight of the burning towers which seemed to mock him. The storm of heavy javelins and the crashing of the Twelfth's cohorts into the zealot horde did little to assuage his feelings of dejection and defeat. The battle continued for another half hour before the zealots lost their momentum, the survivors content to withdraw behind Jerusalem's walls; the columns of fire signalling their victory.



At least a hundred imperial soldiers were killed during the battle, mostly auxiliaries from the two cohorts who'd been tasked to guard the siege works. Four times as many were wounded. Zealot dead were ten-fold that of the Romans, with a thousand bodies littering the field. Most of the enemy wounded were left where they fell, mingled with the bloodied corpses of the slain. Nearly three hundred zealots had been captured, mostly wounded unable to escape. Those men were dragged away to be tortured and crucified; however, timber for the crosses would prove difficult to find.

The rebels cared not about the terrible losses they suffered. Most had already accepted that they were destined to die defending the holy city. The burning of the Roman platforms, accented by the collapsing of their towers, renewed their calls of defiance. Costly as it may have been, their victory was

total.

For the imperial army, no number of enemy corpses or crucified prisoners could change the magnitude of the disaster that had befallen them.

Chapter XVIII: Wall of Death

Roman Siege Camp, ruins of Bezetha
18 June, 70 A.D.
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"We are penned up in a prison of our own making," Titus spat, during his next council-of-war with the assembled legates and senior officers. He slammed his fist down on the table in frustration. "By Hades' cock, how in the bleeding fuck did it come to this?"

After an awkward pause, Placidus spoke up. "Piss on it! Let us swarm the walls with ladders and what towers we still have. Most of the army hasn't even had the chance to bloody their swords yet. They may hold us for a while, but we'll smash our way in."

"And how do you plan to do that?" Legate Bassus retorted. "The elevation of those walls negates much of the effectiveness of our catapults and ballistae. Meanwhile, they are becoming relatively skilled in the use of the engines they captured four years ago. Our existing towers are not high enough to assail the walls. Do you really think we can get men up sixty-foot ladders with the rebels swarming the ramparts? If we're going to storm the walls, we need to raise the banks."

"With what?" Placidus shot back. "Do you see any trees anywhere around here, general? We rendered this place a barren wasteland in order to build our previous platforms. There's nothing left within ten miles!"

"There is one resource which is plentiful in this region," Alexander interjected. "And I agree with Placidus. Building up the banks will prove extremely laborious; we'll have to scrounge even further afield to find sufficient timber. Not to mention, it could likely prove futile. The morale of the men is already badly shaken."

"Then you agree, we must launch a broad assault on the walls," the auxilia commander persisted.

"Just keeping sixty-foot ladders in place with armoured soldiers trying to climb them will be precarious enough," Alexander countered. "With the Jews able to mass their numbers along the ramparts, those not struck down by darts

or falling stones will be cut to pieces as soon as they reach the top. Hundreds will die, and we'll have nothing to show for it." He looked to Titus and let out a resigned sigh. "We must starve them out."

"How?" General Thrasea asked. "We maintain patrols in the low valleys, but there are a hundred ways in and out of the city that we do not know about. Somehow, these filthy twats are still getting some supplies of food into the city."

"We'll build a wall," Titus said at last. His voice in calm contrast to his previous outburst. "I know that infinite resource to which Alexander refers; stone. There is an unlimited amount of stone to be found here between the remnants of the outer walls and all the buildings we've destroyed. We'll invest the entire city in a wall, with forts every half mile. We cannot, of course, envelope everything. The valleys are simply impassable."

"We'll place some of the forts nearest these," Legate Domitius suggested. "That way it'll be easy to post sufficient picquets to keep an eye on any valley or ditch these worms think they can slither through."

While Placidus was not overly fond of the idea, even he had to admit that it was a sounder plan than his own of simply trying to smash their way into the city.



A day later, Josephus rode with Titus around the long perimeter. He was awestruck by the speed and fervour with which the Romans toiled. Unlike slaves in a rock quarry, these men relished the exertion, for they wished to not only starve out the Jews in Jerusalem, but to outperform their mates in the other legions and auxilia regiments. Simply put, Romans loved competition. Titus and his subordinate commanders encouraged their soldiers to best each other in speed and quality of construction. And if there was one skill that imperial soldiers excelled at, besides prowess in battle, it was the building of walls and fortifications.

Large stones were broken and cut into crude blocks and laid in two rows with dirt used to fill in between. All told, the wall and string of forts ran for six miles around the city. It stood ten feet high. With no timber to make steps, these too had to be crafted from stone. The stairs were rough and uneven, but they allowed the soldiers to post sentries every dozen meters along the entire length. The forts were little more than stone enclosures where two to three

cohorts could establish their tents. Auxiliaries maintained security and cavalry regiments kept up robust patrols of the region while the legions built the wall. With each legion responsible for roughly a mile-and-a-half, this was subdivided between the cohorts, on down to each century. With each century responsible for approximately 140 feet of the line, the monumental task suddenly seemed manageable. Josephus said as much to his imperial counterpart.

"Relentlessness is quite possibly the greatest of all Roman virtues," Titus observed. "During all the years of war against mighty Carthage, they most often outnumbered us, were better armed, with far superior generals. We suffered many defeats, including that inglorious debacle at Cannae where fifty thousand were killed in the course of a single day. Yet where is Carthage now?"

Josephus shook his head.

The proud Roman general continued, "Nothing but a patch of barren ground. Hannibal, whose legend has become nearly mythical, knew how to win a victory but not how to exploit it; his own brother said as much. Once he was finally defeated, our greatest rivals in the known world never rose again. We destroyed their great cities, butchered or enslaved the entire populace, and now they no longer exist as a people. Carthage is nothing more than a whisper on the wind; a shadow in the depths of history."

The words sounded foreboding. Josephus wondered if Titus intended for the Jews to share the same fate as Carthage. They continued their ride in silence around the city. The former governor of Galilee could not believe how quickly the wall was being erected.

"It's as if God himself were driving your soldiers on," he said with appreciation, as well as a measure of trepidation.

"Perhaps," Titus replied with a shrug. "You still claim it was his words which foretold my father becoming emperor. If the god of the Jews wishes to grant Rome victory, who am I to question it?"

They soon came upon one of the valleys south of the city. Both men nearly gagged as the wind blew a rancid stench into their faces. While legionaries on the high ground continued to work on their section of the wall and fort, two hundred auxilia infantrymen guarded the way into the valley. They were accompanied by sixty archers, and all had rags wrapped around their faces.

"General, sir," their leading centurion said, saluting and coughing from

the horrible smell.

“By Juno, is there a bloated dead mule nearby?” Titus asked, momentarily perplexed.

“No, sir, though I wish it was. I don’t advise it, but if you follow the valley towards the city wall, you can see for yourself.”

Titus looked to Josephus, who gave a sad nod, suspecting what horrific sight awaited them. The valley was at least thirty feet deep and extremely steep on all sides. Rabbits, snakes, wild dogs, and other creatures once called this area home. Now it was entirely devoid of life.

“It would seem your people picked this area bare,” Titus remarked.

Josephus could only nod again. Tears were beginning to well up in his eyes. It was not brought on by the terrible smell.

There were several small forks within the valley, all of which lead to dead ends. The two men, and a handful of escorts, continued along the main trail until they were within two hundred feet of the wall. They could see the occasional sentry walking the defences. These men seemed listless and paid them no mind. It was not them, but the sight at the base of the city wall that cause them to stop suddenly.

Scattered at the base of the wall, and spilling down into the valley, were hundreds of corpses, perhaps thousands. Some were fresh. Most were bloated with the stomachs burst. Had all the wild dogs not been killed for meat, they would have devoured many of the bodies. Instead, the slain were enveloped by swarms of flies, thick as clouds of black smoke.

Titus’ jaw was clenched, his expression grim. Josephus openly wept at the pitiful sight. Most of the bodies were indistinguishable, having been broken and mutilated when they were flung from the wall. He could see that few appeared to be men of fighting age. A huge number were children. Most of the rest appeared to be women and the elderly. Granted, it was impossible to tell what age many of the deceased had been in life. Their skin had become taught and wrinkled like uncured leather. The sun had turned many of the corpses black.

Titus solemnly shook his head and took a slow breath. “If this is what greets those who come to your holy city, I can only imagine the horrors that lie within.”

The two men had turned their horses around when the prince imperial looked back over his shoulder.

Wordlessly, he dismounted, removed his helmet, and walked towards the

decaying mass that had once been humanity. When he was but thirty feet from the nearest bodies, he mournfully raised his gaze and hands towards the sky.

"This is not my doing!" he shouted to the heavens. While Josephus found Titus' display of sorrow rather moving, the sentiment was not shared by the cavalry troopers accompanying them.

"By Hera's cunt, what's gotten into him?" one of them asked his mates.

"This stench will rot one's brain if you breathe it in long enough," another replied. Their coarse banter ceased once the commander-in-chief made his way back over to them.

For General Titus, his pleas were an attempt to persuade the divines that he was not responsible for the suffering of the Jews. Every day of the siege, he was tormented by a string of conflicting emotions. He pitied the innocents, especially the young children. Yet any caught outside the city that so much as raised a finger of defiance were immediately put to death. The men of fighting age he held in contempt for their failure to stand up against the monsters that brought about their people's misery. For John, Simon, and the zealots there was nothing but undying hatred. Given their sustained strength to continue the fight, Titus reckoned they were the only ones within Jerusalem with any supplies of food whatsoever. He could only hope his encompassing blockade would cause the zealots to share in the people's misery of starvation.

"They rob the people, leaving them to starve, yet they prohibit them from leaving the city," Titus said, shaking his head in frustration, as they returned to his principia tent later that afternoon.

"Those men are evil," Josephus lamented, his sorrow turning to anger. "They claim to love God, yet they defile the Temple and torment his children."

"Well, now that they are completely cut off from the outside world, the murderers and butchers will suffer the same fate as the rest of Jerusalem."



Over the coming days, as the people became more desperate the number of desertions increased, despite the threats from the zealots. One man who managed to escape the torments was named Zacharias ben Phannias. The

youngest son of the high priest, he had managed to sneak away during the night and immediately made his way to the Roman lines. Once out of range of any archers on the city walls, he raised his hands and rushed towards an imperial patrol. He knew just enough Latin to shout, *'I surrender!'* over and over. Anxious for intelligence, they took him to Titus.

"You appear to have been well-fed," the prince imperial remarked, noting the man's more robust appearance.

"Please, I am no zealot," Zacharias replied as Josephus translated. "My father is Phannias ben Samuel, High Priest of the Temple."

Josephus cocked his head slightly. "So it was your father who usurped Hanan?"

"I swear, it wasn't like that!" the young man pleaded. "My father is a simple farmer. He didn't even know what the high priest was. The zealots dragged him into the Temple where John of Giscala proclaimed him as such. I now fear greatly for my father, as well as my three older brothers."

"Have him taken away, fed, and looked after," Titus ordered. His interrogation lead to nothing he did not know already. As son of the high priest, he felt the young man might become useful once they captured the city.



To the Jewish rebels, it seemed as if the Roman wall had sprung up overnight. This was not far from the truth. In just four days the stone encirclement was complete. And with every valley and gorge now blockaded by imperial picquets, Jerusalem was truly cut off from the outside world. The valleys had been the most obvious route into the city, and this was verified during the next few days when numerous pack mules and other beasts bearing food stores were captured. The Romans made a great showing of this, by crucifying every man captured in front of the encircling wall.

As Titus predicted, it did not take long for the rebels to begin running short on food and supplies. Contrastingly, the imperial army had plentiful quantities of rations, due in no small part to the tireless efforts of Tiberius Alexander and the imperial quartermasters. As a way of breaking their foes' spirits, soldiers often had their breakfast and supper atop the walls. They would call out to the defenders, taunting them by waving chunks of bread, all the while shouting phrases in broken Hebrew about how well the Romans

kept their soldiers fed. This mocking incensed the zealots, leading them to lash out even more against the people of the city.

For Phannias ben Samuel, the humble farmer the zealots had so eagerly elevated to the position of high priest, every day was filled with trepidation and fear. He and Josephus' father, Mathias, had been among those who compelled John of Giscala's faction to allow Simon into Jerusalem. He regretted the decision almost as soon as the hateful rebel and his hoard of murderers strolled triumphantly into the city. The subsequent civil war had left the city devastated even before the Romans began their siege works. The high priest blamed all the warring factions for refusing to stand together for so long, and condemned them for the burning of Jerusalem's vast grain stores. Had they not done so, and with proper rationing, the city could have held for a year before starvation set in, even with the Passover pilgrims trapped within.

"I cannot ask God to forgive me for my actions," Phannias lamented when he met with Mathias and his son at their home one evening. "I was so fearful of the Giscalan, yet his cruelties seem like kindness when compared to the tyrant we've unleashed."

"And yet that tyrant controls most of the city," Mathias added. "John holds the Temple district and the City of David, while Simon dominates over all of Zion and the Lower City. So many of our young men of character, their spirits broken by hunger, have joined his cause."

"It is difficult to fault them," the high priest remarked. "In such desperate times, one must do what they can to survive. I know I should not say this, but I was saddened to hear of the defeat of the Roman siege towers."

"You're not alone," the younger Mathias spoke up. "Had Vespasian's army succeeded in taking the First Wall and Temple district, the siege would likely be over. Simon may be mad enough to let the entire city burn around him, but I don't think the Giscalan would allow God's Temple to be destroyed."

"You underestimate his wickedness," his father said reprovingly. "Both Simon and John are determined that, if they are to die, then all will be destroyed around them; some twisted belief that they will be revered as martyrs. It is a sick desecration of our faith. And yet we share in the blame, for we have allowed such men to subjugate our people. Is it any wonder God would abandon us to our fate?"

There was suddenly a loud banging on the main door to the house. Phannias closed his eyes, fearing the worst. The two men rose from their chairs. One of Rebekkah's maidservants had gone to answer the door. The young woman, like so many greatly weakened by hunger, tried to protest the men coming at such a late hour. She was slapped roughly by the captain leading the band of armoured brigands.

"What is the meaning of this?" Mathias protested. "How dare you come in here and strike my servants!"

This was met with a punch to the gut. Mathias doubled over. His son shouted at the assailant and tackled him to the ground, slamming his fist into his face. The young man was grabbed by numerous hands, dragged into a corner, and beaten about the face and body.

"Consider yourself fortunate that we have not come for you," the captain sneered to the younger Mathias. His face was bloodied, with both eyes swelling shut. The zealot turned to Phannias. "High Priest, it is a pity you have chosen to associate with the family of traitors."

"Who I associate with is not your concern," Phannias said, though his voice lacked conviction.

"Oh, but it is. You have committed a terrible sacrilege and must now answer to Simon bar Giora, the true saviour of the faith and rightful King of the Jews. A shame you will not live to witness his blessed coronation."

He snapped his fingers, and his men surrounded the priest. One of the men punched Phannias in the stomach, knocking the wind from him along with any further words of protest. The captain then addressed Mathias the Elder.

"You are coming with us, too. As a token of his good intentions, Simon has decreed that you are to be handed over to John of Giscala, that he might decide what to do about your continued acts of sedition."

Having heard the commotion, Rebekkah and Judith descended the stairs. Rebekkah immediately rushed to the side of her battered son. Judith stood gasping in horror at what was transpiring. Despite all the evils committed against the people, their family had been left unmolested, but under constant observation by the zealots. Perhaps this was because they could have proven useful as hostages, should the Romans take the city. With her husband now being dragged away, Rebekkah knew any chance of negotiating with the Romans was diminishing. It also meant they were losing their potential usefulness to the zealots.

She also pitied Phannias, the simple farmer conscripted into becoming high priest. His position was supposed to be divine and, therefore, inviolable. Yet here he was, having been assailed by Simon's brigands and dragged away, likely to his death. Nothing within Jerusalem was sacred to the murderers who continued to defile the holy city.



As he was hauled before the tribunal within Herod's Fortress, Phannias was horrified to see that his three sons who'd remained in Jerusalem were also in chains. A small mercy that his wife had predeceased him many years ago. What evil it would have been for her to witness the fate of her husband and sons!

Simon bar Giora sat atop the tribunal in the ornate chair once used by the Roman procurators. He wore lavish robes of green and gold, with a bronze circlet adorning his head. Though he had not declared himself king, like that fool Manahem, he sat in judgement adorned as King of the Jews.

"A pity the High Priest should commit treason against God's people," Simon began.

When Phannias opened his mouth to speak, he was again punched in the stomach.

"Do not strike him about the face," the pretender said. "I want all to recognise his countenance when we send him to face God's fury." He then addressed the high priest and his sons, his face filled with hatred. "Your youngest son has deserted to the Romans, while you yourself have been conspiring with the family of the great traitor, Josephus. I have no doubt your remaining sons have been stricken by the disease of treason. Such a blight must be cut out before it infects the rest of the people. You will be taken to the top of the Tower of Hippicus, where both the people and the Romans can see what happens to traitors."

There had been no overtures of a trial, not even the farcical displays by John of Giscala before Simon's arrival in the city. Simon bar Giora had appointed himself absolute ruler of Jerusalem and the Jewish state, and he dared anyone to oppose him. Though the Romans would care little for the death of a handful of Jewish priests, the execution of Phannias and the other traitors would send a message to John of Giscala and the people at large. John may hold the Temple district, but Simon was master of Jerusalem.



It was not just Phannias and his sons who were sentenced to death. Fifteen of the Temple priests were also dragged to the Tower of Hippicus. John had handed them over to Simon's brigands in return for Mathias, whom he imprisoned in a makeshift cell within the Temple grounds. It was midday when the entourage of the damned was taken to the tall tower. Even from their encircling wall, the Romans encamped near the rock of Golgotha could clearly see the grisly display. And though he wished for them to watch, it was mainly for the people of Jerusalem that Simon displayed his mockery of justice.

"People of Jerusalem!" boomed the voice of the brigand, Boaz. "It is with heavy heart that Simon bar Giora, defender of the Jewish faith, has discovered treason among the Temple priesthood. Phannias, the High Priest, has corrupted his sons as well as his peers. He has plotted with the Romans, even sending his youngest son over to them! He must now pay for his treachery with his life, so that his soul might stand in atonement before God!"

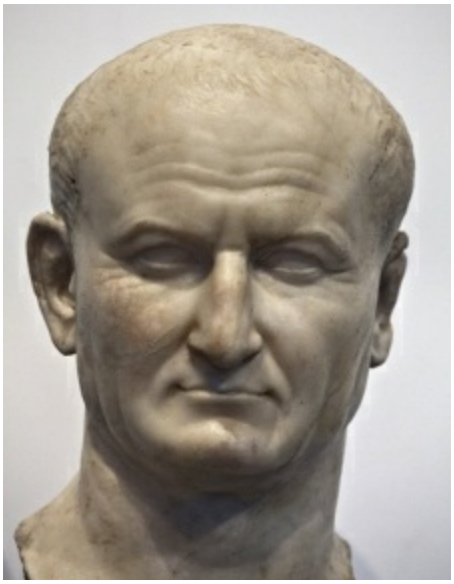
Phannias was then dragged out to the edge of the wall, a zealot pulling his hair back and exposing his neck. The gathered mass of people gasped in horror at what they were witnessing, yet they lacked the strength or fortitude to prevent the pending sacrilege. With a malicious grin, Boaz slashed his blade across the high priest's throat, cutting so deep he nearly severed the head from the spine. As blood gushed from the gash and down the chest of the dying man, his body was shoved over the side of the tower, smashing headfirst onto the rocks below. There was no added ceremony for his sons or the other priests. Their throats were cut, though in some cases they were simply pushed over the ramparts and allowed to fall to their deaths. Half the bodies landed within the walls of the Upper City, yet a subsequent decree by Boaz prohibited giving any a proper burial. Anyone caught trying to take the bodies away would be labelled as traitors and subjected to the same fate.

Before the war, such a gross perversion of the Jewish faith would have sparked a revolt from the people. No one, neither Roman nor Jew, would have ever considered violating God's laws regarding burial of the dead. Nor would they have stood for anyone, let alone the high priest, being barbarously killed without trial. The resolve the people, however, had been completely crushed by hunger and the months of abject cruelty. There were even some

who viewed the high priest as fortunate. His suffering was finally over.

Chapter XIX: An Emperor Victorious

Rome
21 June, 70 A.D.



Emperor Titus Flavius Vespasian

It was on the summer solstice that Emperor Flavius Vespasian returned to Rome. Nearly a year had passed since he was first proclaimed ‘Caesar’, and the people anxiously awaited the day he would ride into the Eternal City. The senate had unanimously elected both the emperor and prince imperial as consuls for the first half of the year; however, as both were absent, the chairs remained vacant. As imperial regent, Licinius Mucianus, was appointed by Vespasian to speak to the senate on the emperor’s behalf, until such time as he returned.

On the night before the solstice, Mucianus rode out to greet Vespasian, whose vessel was docked at the port of Ostia. The ship had arrived late, and the emperor elected to come ashore inconspicuously and take up residence for the night in the house of the port governor. It was here Mucianus found him and tendered his resignation as Regent of the Empire.

“With her emperor returned, Rome no longer needs a regent.”

“And I thank you for your service to both Rome and her people,” Vespasian replied cordially. “I must also congratulate you on your election to

serve once more as consul."

"It is but a suffect term of two months," Mucianus remarked. "Your son-in-law, Cerealis, was selected as my colleague. Our friend, Trajan, was elected to replace me, come September."

"And I promised Bassus I would put in a word for him," Trajan replied, referring to the man who replaced him as Legate of Legio X. He then added, "Of course, that is provided they finish sorting out the rebels in Judea before my term is up."

"Let us hope so," the emperor stressed. "My travels throughout the provinces have kept me blind to what is transpiring in Judea."

Anticipating this, Mucianus produced a series of despatches he'd received from the army besieging Jerusalem. "The last word we received, Titus and the army had broken the first wall. I imagine it is only a matter of time before Jerusalem falls. And with messages taking weeks to reach Rome from Judea, who knows? They could very well have taken and sacked the city by now."

The emperor gave a nod of acceptance. His most difficult task over the past few months had been leaving the prosecution of the war in Judea in the hands of others. Titus was still young, and Vespasian would later attribute his age to some of the mistakes made during the campaign. But he was also surrounded by competent officers and arguably the hardest soldiers in the whole of the empire.

"So, tell me truthfully," Vespasian said, changing the subject. He and Trajan joined Mucianus in the governor's private study. "How will the senate and people receive me? I hear they are overjoyed. Yet, they grovelled with the same sense of adulation towards Otho and Vitellius. Galba's cruelty alienated the mob almost immediately, so we'll dismiss him for the moment."

"Memories of the perpetual crisis from the Year of the Four Emperors is still fresh in most minds," the regent replied. "Even your enemies are relieved that stability and order has been restored."

"Enemies? Bugger me, I never thought I rose high enough within the senate to rate enemies."

"And what of the people?" Trajan asked. "How will they receive their new emperor?"

"The plebs act as if Caesar has already returned to Rome. There are those who love him, and those who are simply thankful that peace has returned. The streets of Rome ran red during Saturnalia. Primus' soldiers and the Vitellians slaughtered each other. Many innocent citizens, whose only crime

was celebrating the holiday in the path of the onslaught, were killed. It was a sobering experience for all who survived."

Mucianus struggled against the urge to speak further ills against his regency predecessor, Antonius Primus. Relations between the two were strained from the moment Primus elected to raise his own division and invade Italia without waiting for support from Mucianus' eastern legions. His actions were not only reckless, they deprived Mucianus of sharing in any of the spoils of victory. He understood, however, that to disparage Primus now in front of the emperor would sound petty and unbecoming. After all, reckless as he may have been, he had still won the day.

"Those with the means to do so have been travelling to Rome from all over Italia and the nearest provinces," he continued. He then looked to Trajan. "I even met with your wife and son. They made their way from Hispania to greet you both."

"Your words fill me with joy," the general replied. "Marcia left Caesarea three years ago, and the last letter I received from her was dated three months ago."

"Your son must be grown to his full measure by now," the emperor conjectured.

"Yes, he'll be seventeen this September. He wrote to me personally, asking if I could secure him a position with the legions."

"I'm certain something can be arranged," Vespasian reassured him. "We'll post him to the first laticlavian tribune vacancy that comes available in one of the less-troubled provinces. If he performs well, perhaps we'll test his mettle with one of the more…shall we say, 'adventurous' frontiers. If he proves to be even half as competent as his father, he will make for an outstanding legate someday."

"And speaking of the legions, Caesar," Mucianus added. "They are unabashedly your most vocal supporters."

"It's easy to see why," Trajan remarked. "You're the first emperor since Tiberius who the soldiers think of as one of their own. Oh, I know Galba was legate and governor in Germania many years ago, but the legions on the Rhine despised him. Besides, I reckon there are a few old veterans and senior centurions still in the ranks who served under you in Britannia."

"The current primus pilus of Legio II, Augusta, was a twenty-one- year-old legionary under your command during the initial conquest," Mucianus stated.

Vespasian gave him a quizzical look.

The regent shrugged. “I was curious, so I checked some of the legion rosters, particularly from Britannia twenty-seven years ago.”

“As long as the senate and people’s respect is genuine and not some farce to gain favour,” the emperor stressed.

“Oh, there are plenty among the senate and equites who are hoping to flatter their way into your inner circle.” Mucianus noted Vespasian’s scowl. “Like it or not, sire, that is the reality of the world you now live in. You are the most powerful man in the known world, and it is only natural that nobles would seek out your favour. The key, of course, is to discern which ones are useful and which are simply nauseating flatterers. But, yes, the common people’s love is sincere.”

“And it is something I must continue to earn.” The emperor laughed, as he ran his fingers through his thinning hair. “I suspect I shall go completely bald by the time the gods are finished with me in this life.”

“Just don’t wear a wig, whatever you do,” Trajan said with a grin. “I hear Otho wore one, and it did not flatter him in the least.”



Though most of the dock workers did not know what Vespasian looked like, they knew that the man who tried to inconspicuously disembark from the huge Octeres-class warship was someone of great importance given the size of his retinue, which included nearly two hundred imperial soldiers. Rumours soon spread that it must be the emperor himself, returned to Rome.

While the night crowds of Ostia chattered excitedly, hoping to actually catch a glimpse of the emperor, Vespasian’s personal guard, Octavianus, was dispatched to the praetorian barracks in Rome. He carried with him orders for two cohorts to immediately make their way to the port city. The former praetorian centurion was also accompanied by a dozen cavalry troopers.

The city of Rome never slept, for it was only at night when wheeled traffic was allowed on the streets. The cobblestone roads were clustered with donkey carts and large wagons laden with goods for the markets, furniture and building materials, as well as great quantities of grain, vegetables, and livestock. It was well after midnight by the time Octavianus reached the barracks. The guardsmen on duty were more than a little surprised to see one

of their former centurions returned.

"Wake the prefect," he ordered the men. "And let him know the emperor calls for him."

While a guardsman raced to Commander Varus' quarters, Octavianus walked his horse over to a fountain near the barracks' large principia building. He had made the seventeen mile ride in less than an hour, and the exhausted beast desperately needed water and rest. A few minutes later he saw Varus, half naked, stumbling down the covered stone steps that led into the principia.

"I'll be buggered," the prefect said. He wiped his eyes and yawned loudly. "Last I heard, Octavianus, Galba had sent you to assassinate Vespasian. No one's heard from you since, so we all reckoned you were dead."

"I should have been, but no. Instead, Vespasian named me as his personal bodyguard."

"So he has returned." Varus' excitement grew. One of Vespasian's earliest supporters, he had commanded the Flavian cavalry corps under Antonius Primus during the civil war. Primus rewarded Varus by appointing him as Prefect of the Praetorian Guard, much to the chagrin of Mucianus, who deeply disliked the cavalry officer.

"He awaits his Guard at the governor's residence in Ostia," Octavianus replied. "I'm to bring two cohorts to escort him into the city."

"Excellent!" the prefect was now full of energy. "I'll make certain the streets are clear and the rest of the guard ready to receive him at the Forum."

Trumpets soon sounded within the barracks, and hundreds of sleepy guardsmen rushed out onto the drill field. Most had thrown on tunics. Some wore nothing more than their loincloths.

"The emperor has returned!" Varus shouted boisterously, bringing a cheer from the assembled mass. "Fourth and Seventh Cohorts are to head to Ostia at once."

"Alright, you heard the commander!" a centurion from the Fourth Cohort shouted. "Put your cocks away and get ready to march!"

As Octavianus watched the men rush back to their billets, he suddenly felt very much out of place. It had been just two years since he departed Rome, yet he recognised few of the guardsmen and none of their officers. Because most of the Praetorian Guard had fought for Vitellius during the war, with many refusing to surrender even as the Flavians laid siege to their barracks,

the surviving tribunes and centurions had all been sacked by Antonius Primus. Individual guardsmen were afforded the opportunity to swear allegiance to Vespasian; any who refused were dismissed from the ranks. This, coupled with casualties suffered during the two civil wars, had severely depleted their ranks. Both Primus and Mucianus had promoted a number of their own soldiers into these vacancies, though the Guard was still very much understrength. Given the level of attrition they suffered during the Year of the Four Emperors from casualties and discharges, only one in every ten currently serving guardsmen had been with the praetorians at the end of Nero's reign.

For the two cohorts selected to escort Vespasian in from Ostia, being the first to greet their new emperor had given them strength and motivation. Within an hour, guardsmen had donned their best tunics, armour, checked the crests on their helmets, stuffed chunks of bread and dried meat into their small haversacks, filled their water bladders, and paraded before their officers. Seventeen miles separated the governor's mansion at Ostia from the Eternal City, and they knew they had to march at the quick-step in order to reach the port before dawn.

Varus had dispatched another cohort to clear a path through the city, in order to expedite their departure from Rome. The plebeians going about their business knew not why hundreds of armed praetorians were marching with haste through the city. Rumours soon began to circulate that it must portend Vespasian's return. A few eager merchants from Ostia, as well as a shipwright who happened to own a horse, rode into the city, proclaiming the emperor's return.

"By morning, there will be a million souls lining the road from Ostia to Rome," a praetorian tribune riding with Octavianus said.



The first rays of sunlight had just crested over the hills to the east when the sounds of nearly eight hundred soldiers marching in step echoed on the cobblestone road leading to the governor's house in Ostia. Emperor Vespasian, who had scarcely slept the previous night, was already in the courtyard, wearing his purple with gold trim imperial robes. Trajan helped him adjust the laurel crown atop his head. The sound of marching guardsmen grew closer. With Arrius Varus overseeing the placement of the remaining

cohorts within the city, Octavianus had taken charge of the escort. One of the tribunes took this as a mild insult, seeing as how Octavianus held no rank or command and had only been a centurion when he was with the Guard. Sensing this, the former centurion told the tribune he could take up his grievances with the emperor, abruptly ending the conversation.

Riding at the head of the procession, he wore his simple red tunic, his gladius slung across his left hip. His humble garb contrasted sharply with the gleaming armour, crested helmets, and ornate shields of the advancing column of guardsmen.

"Cohorts…halt!"

The guardsmen took one extra step, then halted with a loud stomp. Vespasian turned to Trajan. The two men, along with Mucianus, mounted their horses so they might be better seen.

As the emperor rode out of the courtyard, Octavianus drew his blade and shouted, *"Hail, Caesar!"*

This was echoed by the praetorians. Their gladii flashed from their scabbards.

"Hail, Caesar! Hail, Caesar! Hail, Caesar!"

Curious onlookers from the city were now migrating towards the governor's house, watching with rapt fascination. Vespasian saluted the men and then raised both his hands, silencing them.

Octavianus scabbarded his weapon and addressed his sovereign. "Sire, your Praetorian Guardsmen are here to escort you to the imperial city."

The emperor noted the tired, albeit animated expressions upon the faces of the weary guardsmen. They had marched seventeen miles in just over four hours, and he knew they needed rest before making the same trek back to Rome. Mucianus advised him to give the people time to assemble along the route, that they might have a chance to catch a glimpse of their emperor.

As he gazed into the faces of the men in the nearest ranks, Vespasian felt an overwhelming urge to address them directly rather than giving orders to their officers.

"Many of you fought for me during the civil," he began, "while some served under the banner of the pretender. Yet all now stand before your emperor, united under the eagles of Rome. I am deeply honoured to have every last one of you, regardless of respective pasts, as my Praetorian Guard." He paused. "You have marched a great distance, deprived of sleep, and our long day has only just begun. The Governor of Ostia has graciously

opened the gates of his villa to you. All guardsmen are given three hours' leave to rest and have breakfast."

This was met with a loud cheer. The guardsmen expected to be dismissed; however, Vespasian was not finished. He nodded to Octavianus before addressing the men.

"A few of you may recognise the man who led you here. He is one of your former centurions who the tyrant, Galba, dispatched on a mission of murder. He was ordered to slay one who he knew was wrongly viewed as a traitor. Knowing that such a killing would be both unlawful and immoral in the eyes of the gods, he stayed his hand and offered his services to the man he was contracted to murder. A true measure of loyalty is doing what is morally and ethically right, regardless of the consequences. He made this decision without hesitation, knowing the price would be both his life and the fortunes of his family. Instead, the gods have seen fit to spare his life, and his emperor to reward him for his fealty."

Octavianus was struggling to remain stoic. The past eighteen months since Galba dispatched him on his mission of assassination had been a harrowing and soul-searching experience. Vespasian had managed to get word to the centurion's family, who fled to Ephesus, where they lived under the protection of the very man who later won the Flavians the empire, Marcus Antonius Primus. Primus made brief mention of their arrival in a despatch before he rallied his legions for the invasion of Italia. This was the last word Octavianus had received regarding his family.

The emperor continued, "My first decree to the Praetorian Guard is that Centurion Tiberius Julius Octavianus be reinstated with all the privileges therein. He is also hereby elevated to the rank of Praetorian Tribune with command of the Emperor's Own First Cohort."

"I am truly honoured, Caesar," Octavianus said, with a short bow.

Vespasian responded in kind. "Dismiss your men. We march in three hours."



Long before the praetorian cohorts arrived in Ostia, word had spread through all of Rome, and even out to many of the surrounding towns and villages. Work ceased along the Ostia harbour. Dock workers, tailors, masons, carpenters, and even slaves lined the road leading out of the city. For

most, this was the first, and likely last, opportunity to see their emperor in person.

Around the tenth hour of morning, guardsmen emerged from the courtyard of the governor's villa. Having rested and eaten a hearty breakfast, all were eager for the journey back to Rome. Two squads marched a hundred meters from the head of the procession, as a vanguard to keep the road clear. The remainder walked in two files on either side of the road, each file two soldiers wide. The emperor and the more distinguished members of his entourage rode towards the head of the column. Octavianus, as Vespasian's personal guard, was mounted just behind him with Mucianus and Trajan on either side of the pair.

"It's all so strange," Vespasian said. His gaze scanned the throngs of people lining the road as far as he could see. They came by the thousands, many claimed their place along the route hours before.

He gave a self-deprecating chuckle, "The last time the mob lined the roads to see me, it was to throw rocks and mule shit!"

"And yet, even the unruly barbarians in North Africa now sing your praises," Mucianus remarked. "Perhaps they've forgotten their emperor is the same man they hated as governor."

"Then hopefully they forget what I look like. Otherwise, they might find ways of using my statues to wipe their asses."

"You've been Caesar for almost a year," Mucianus noted. "The people from every corner of the empire are anxious to know what their emperor looks like. But don't worry; most sculptors are willing to overlook any imperfections. Busts of the divine Julius show him with a full head of hair, even though he was almost completely bald."

"Yes, the entire reason why we wear the laurel crown is because he was vain about losing his hair," Vespasian replied with mild amusement. "But anyone who carves my portrait will let the people see their emperor as he truly is, blemishes and all."

The procession moved slowly along the road. Vespasian maintained a genial demeanour, taking the time to wave to the crowds from time-to-time. Most of his predecessors had ridden in covered litters, away from the prying eyes of the mob. Vespasian, by contrast, was a man of the people, a soldier-emperor who would not cower behind a silk curtain. Their pace was slow and methodical, the vanguard reaching the gates of the city late in the afternoon. The consensus of the people was that it would be easier to see their emperor

if they left the city rather than battling for a view within the crowded streets. Thus, most who came to greet Vespasian did so along the roadway. Even the children were filled with excitement, crying out with glee as they saw the man in purple robes, a simple crown of oak leaves adorning his head.

Because the crowds had spilled forth from Rome to greet their emperor, the procession moved with greater speed once they crossed into the city proper. The road leading into the Forum seemed almost deserted, but there were large crowds waiting within the massive square. Hundreds of noblemen, including senators and magistrates from the equites, lined the steps and plaza around the senate house. The senatorial delegation was led by Senator Nerva and Cassius Rufus, who had been selected to be Mucianus' consular colleague beginning on the calends of July. The emperor's younger son, Domitian, stood with the senators, dressed in his most resplendent toga. Arrius Varus and the remaining cohorts from the Praetorian Guard lined the Forum and senate house. Vespasian and his entourage dismounted at the base of the steps, though the emperor ascended alone. The noise from the crowds was deafening.

"Hail, Caesar," Rufus said with a bow. "On behalf of the senate and people of Rome, it is with great joy that we welcome our emperor home."

"And for that, you have my thanks," Vespasian replied. He then said to Nerva, "I hope the empire has not gone completely bankrupt during my absence."

"It would have, had Antonius Primus remained regent," the senator said with a derisive grin. "No disrespect intended towards the general, of course."

Vespasian snorted and grinned. He then turned to the mass of humanity crammed into the Forum. They were chanting of his name, as well as unending choruses of *'Hail, Caesar!'* The emperor held his hand high in salute for the better part of a minute before following the senators into the great hall. There was much work to do, and he knew there was no better time than the present to begin.

Chapter XX: Treasures of the Disembowelled

Roman Siege Camp, Jerusalem
25 June, 70 A.D.



Judean Shekels

From the imperial siege lines, Jerusalem appeared to be a dead city. There was scarcely any movement along the defensive walls, and the previously unremitting sorties from the zealots had completely ceased. Whenever the winds blew over the city, the putrid stench of death wafted into the faces of the besiegers.

“Never thought I’d curse the sea winds,” Optio Julius said, as he and Centurion Nicanor led a patrol around the eastern wall.

The two officers were mounted, as was Josephus. Their mission was partly reconnaissance, partly another attempt at negotiation.

“The smell of rotting corpses is something one never gets used to,” the centurion replied. A stiff breeze from the west blew the stench of decay over them.

Signifier Aurelian walked next to them, carrying the century’s standard. “I heard rumour that after the First Battle of Bedriacum, Vitellius said ‘a dead enemy always smells sweet’.”

“Then he was a sick fucking bastard,” Julius remarked.

Josephus remained silent, though he and Nicanor shared the occasional knowing glance. He had seen very little of his old friend over the past few months, having spent most of his time accompanying General Titus, both as interpreter and intermediary for Jews who escaped the city.

“The dead, even one’s enemies, should be treated with charity,” the former Judean general finally said. “The zealots discard bodies so grotesquely, in defiance to our sacred laws. And God now punishes the people for allowing such vile men to desecrate the holy city.”

His words were bitter and filled with conviction. Compounding his anxiety was fear for his family. For all he knew, his wife and parents were already dead. He sometimes wished that those he loved had indeed perished, simply because he did not want them to suffer any more. Every time a small group escaped from the city, he hoped to see his wife, parents, or brother. After a time, he came to realise that hope was a cruel master to serve.

Per Titus’ orders, Centurion Galeo tasked Nicanor and another centurion with escorting Josephus to the Temple’s eastern wall, in order to gage the mood of the defenders. Only a week had passed since the encircling wall was erected. They surmised the effects had been almost immediate, given the amount of food stores and other supplies captured. Under torture, some of the smugglers had given the names and places of where some of these stores were coming from. Titus had immediately dispatched Placidus and a thousand of his troopers to find and destroy these.

The contingent from the Fifth Cohort approached the high wall cautiously, legionaries keeping in close order, shields at the ready. Nicanor had ordered the detachment to halt well beyond the range of enemy missile troops. He then offered to accompany Josephus forward, despite the lingering soreness in his arm.

“Much appreciated, but I think your presence will only antagonise them,” Josephus replied. He then rode at a slow trot towards the eastern gate, where a dozen curious onlookers had gathered along the ramparts.

Because the Temple was not a residential district, the eastern wall was mercifully devoid of the slew of rotting corpses that encircled the rest of the city. He recalled the sad fate of a zealot captain named Judas who attempted to surrender part of the northern First Wall to the Romans. Had he succeeded, the imperial army could have taken both the Temple and Upper City, bringing the siege one step closer to ending. It would have also provided a chance to save Josephus’ family. Instead, the schemes of Judas and his ten loyal companions were betrayed to Simon. They now lay dead in front of the north wall, their throats cut and bodies shattered from the subsequent fall from the ramparts.

“Look alive, lads,” Nicanor said, keeping his voice calm as he sat astride

his horse.

"Think they'll finally see reason?" his fellow centurion asked.

Nicanor shook his head. He had long since given up any hope of a peaceful end to the siege. "These wicked men have descended into the realms of madness. But starvation has to have weakened them by now. If we wait long enough, we'll be able to walk in and take what's left of the place."

Josephus' eyes darted about. He watched the men on the wall, sixty feet above him. Though he wore a set of Roman armour for protection, his head remained uncovered. All of John's men knew his face, even from a distance. It seemed strange that none shouted insults or threats at him. When he was within a hundred feet of the wall he paused, gazing sadly at the magnificent Temple behind the high wall. It was a monument of beauty; a beacon of God's love within this evil world.

"People of Jerusalem!" he shouted. *"I have come once more with offers of peace from General Titus. We know you are no longer receiving any supplies, and that you are starving. I beg of you, cease in this madness, and let our people suffer no more!"*

He then turned his horse and rode parallel to the wall, watching and waiting for some sort of reaction from the zealots. After a few moments, he received his answer.

"Traitor!" a voice screamed from the ramparts. A volley of sling bullets flew towards him. Most fell short or landed wide. One, however, struck him on the crown, splitting his head open. His vision went black as he fell from his horse. Struck on the rump, his mount sprinted away in panic. Fortunately for Josephus, the bullet strike had been a glancing blow, and the profuse bleeding from his split scalp made the wound appear far worse than it was. The rebels, thinking they had smashed in his skull, gave a loud cry of triumph.

The eastern gate was then heaved open, as were several less visible openings within the wall. Scores of zealots spilled forth intent on retrieving the body of the most hated traitor, that they might display his corpse from the walls of the Temple.

Nicanor and his legionaries watched the storm of sling stones descend upon his friend.

"Damn it all," he muttered under his breath. He drew his gladius.

“Centuries on me!”

The other centurion rode over to the right flank of his own century, where soldiers were now sprinting alongside Nicanor’s men towards the fallen Jew. For the individual legionaries, their excitement was driven more at a chance for battle than concern for Josephus. They hefted their javelins up to their shoulders, ready to unleash upon their hated foes.

Nicanor sprinted his horse over to his friend, practically leaping from the saddle and kneeling next to him. To his relief, Josephus was still breathing, but he was in great danger of being overtaken by his former comrades. His eyes filled with rage, the centurion settled into his fighting stance, regretting that he did not have his shield. Yet in that moment, he was willing to give his life to save his friend from what he knew to be a hideous fate.

The fastest zealot sprinter did not seem to notice the centurion. His hateful glare was fixed on the turncoat, whose head he wished to adorn atop his sword. His jaw broke as he took the full force of Nicanor’s punch, his legs coming out from under him as he fell with a thud onto the earth. He did not even get a chance to cry out in pain, as the centurion’s gladius plunged into his throat. Nicanor withdrew the blade before the first gouts of blood spurted forth from the gruesome wound.

Hunger had begun taking its toll on the zealots, and in their mildly weakened state, they were unable to reach Josephus before the Romans. Over a hundred javelins from the two centuries flew in a series of volleys, killing or maiming a number of assailants. The imperial soldiers formed a defensive wall in front of their Jewish ally, which the rebels crashed into with the remnants of their fury. A savage melee ensued. Despite a handful of legionaries falling badly injured in the onslaught, the zealots were clearly getting the worst of the exchange. A dozen of their number had fallen to the Roman pila with thirty more dead or dying from the thrusts of legionary blades. Convinced that Josephus was slain, the survivors quickly withdrew to the city. Archers and slingers atop the wall unleashed upon the soldiers below.

The dead and dying Jews were left where they fell, as few cared anymore whether they lived or died. The most fanatical were convinced that their deaths were in service to God, for which they would be welcomed into the gates of paradise. For those less wrought by madness, their slaying at least brought an end to their suffering.

Nicanor personally dragged Josephus away from the fray, while his

soldiers carried off their own fallen comrades. All told, twenty men between the two centuries had been wounded in the exchange, though fortunately none fatally. Both sides found themselves claiming victory; the Romans for having bloodied their blades while suffering no deaths amongst their ranks, and the zealots rejoiced in thinking the man they hated, even more Vespasian or Titus, had been slain.



"Josephus is dead!" gleeful zealots shouted from the walls and rooftops of Upper City.

The chants of the slain traitor were repeated by all who heard them, and within minutes Josephus' family heard the news that he was dead. Judith stood on the rooftop garden, clinging to Rebekkah, their eyes wet with tears.

"Since Jotapata, I knew I would never hold my son again," his mother said mournfully. "Even now, I am denied the chance to bury my dear Josephus who, in the fullness of time, should have been the one to bury me."

Since the arrest of her husband, Rebekkah had been with her daughter-in-law and a single maidservant. Mathias the Younger went into hiding at his mother's urging, for she feared greatly for his safety. Her other servant succumbed to disease a week prior, and it had taken every ounce of their collective strength to dig a proper grave behind the house.

"God can take me now," Judith replied sadly. "I have nothing left to live for in this world."

Though she wished for death, Judith's pain was magnified by the knowledge that suicide was an offence to God. Was the Lord without mercy? Without forgiveness? Would he further condemn one who had suffered as much as she for simply wishing to end the pain?

That evening, after her mother-in-law had taken to bed, she found her resolve. The only reason she had continued to live, despite the months of deprivation and the onset of famine, was in the faint hope that her husband would see them saved. With Josephus' father imprisoned, his brother in hiding, and his mother slowly succumbing to starvation, Judith realised there was no reason for her to continue. As quietly as she was able, she climbed the wooden steps leading onto the roof garden.

In the midst of Upper City, where once had been the centre of wealth and privilege within Jerusalem, there was now only pestilence and death. Mathias

and Rebekkah's garden lay barren; anything remotely nourishing long since consumed. The zealots had robbed the people of anything of value; food was the only thing they could hide from the gangs of brigands. It filled Judith with guilt knowing that the poorest citizens in Lower City, along with the tens-of-thousands of pilgrims, were in an even worse state. It was a wonder that any still lived in the poverty-stricken quarters of the city, where the stench of death was overpowering.

She sat with her back against the low wall, her eyes fixed on the Temple in the distance. From this vantage, it appeared as a lone beacon within a world of evil. Judith pulled a short rusted knife from the folds of her robes.

"In a city destroyed by desecration, what's one more sacrilege?" Gritting her teeth, her eyes still staring hard at the Temple, she slashed the knife up her left arm.

Despite being rusted, the blade cut deep. The pain was not nearly as intense as she feared. She gasped, sweat forming on her brow. She felt her life's blood gushing down her arm and onto her clothes. All the while, she refused to take her eyes away from the Temple. Quietly she prayed for God's forgiveness, that by his mercy, her beloved Josephus would be waiting to take her into the gates of paradise.

The following morning, Rebekkah was filled with anguish upon discovering the cold, lifeless body of her daughter-in-law. Judith was leaning against the short wall atop the roof, her head slumped against her shoulder, eyes still fixed on the Temple. The pool of blood she sat in had already begun to coagulate, and it would not be long before the flies came to feast.

Rebekkah knelt down next to Judith and gently closed her eyes, as her own filled with tears. "Sweet child," she whispered. "May you find peace in the next life."



Two days later, having rested from his injury, Josephus rode forth again around the wall of the city, loudly proclaiming that he lived despite the best efforts of his enemies. *"Despite this treachery, General Titus offers his right hand of security to any who will abandon this pointless war!"*

The effects of starvation were already being felt amongst the zealots, some of the less stalwart regretting their previous defiance. Growing numbers

began to wonder if there was any point in continuing the struggle. Others expressed doubts as to whether fighting for John or Simon was indeed serving God's will. The rebels guarding the Lower City, by far the most impoverished, were the most susceptible to Josephus' reassurances.

Before their more resilient companions could stop it, two of the small gates were flung open and a couple hundred fighters emerged. Shouts of *'traitor'* spewed from the ramparts. Archers shot at the fleeing mob. Twenty men were struck down by the hasty barrage of arrows. The survivors continued onward, throwing down their weapons and raising their hands in surrender. Due to the steep and impassable nature of the Kidron Valley, which surrounded much of the Lower City, it took some time for the band of deserters to make their way to the Roman siege lines. Legate Domitius and several hundred legionaries awaited them. They could not understand what the Jews were shouting, but their intentions were more than clear. It was fortunate the deserters had come upon legionaries. The Syrian and Arabian auxiliaries were anxious to spill their guts. Domitius ordered the prisoners guided to the nearest fort, where soldiers opened the gate and escorted them in.

Food was brought for them. This proved to be both a blessing and a curse. Having consumed what they stole from the populace, and with their meagre resupplies now cut off, the zealots were suffering the same effects as those they previously robbed. Famine atrophied their bodies, as well as their stomachs. The greed for nourishment consumed many, and some devoured the bread given by the Romans with such ravenous zeal, they brought about their own demise. Within minutes, these men doubled over in agony as if stabbed through the guts.

"What in Hades is the matter with them?" a confused legionary asked.

"They're starving," his decanus answered, grasping their terrible plight. "Their shrunken stomachs are being ripped apart from the inside."

The companions of the afflicted knew the reason for their friends' pain, yet there was nothing to be done to save them. Unable to withstand the pressure of sudden gluttony, their intestines burst inside their bodies, leaving them screaming in horrifying pain as sepsis and shock slowly claimed their lives. For the survivors, it was a bitter sight. Their friends had survived the months of siege and escaped from their murderous overlords, only to be killed trying to relieve their terrible hunger.

The remaining zealots were gathered together and escorted to a section of

the camp surrounded by a tall barricade. A soldier from the Judean loyalists was summoned to act as interpreter for General Domitius. He relayed Titus' directive to the prisoners. The commander-in-chief saw no purpose in utilising their own food and resources to keep the men alive. They were too few in number to sell to the slavers, plus he hoped that a show of clemency would convince other Jews in the region to put aside any thoughts of further rebellion.

"In his mercy," the Jewish interpreter translated, "General Titus, the Prince Imperial, has decreed that those who surrender willingly and throw down their arms will be treated with moderation. You will be kept here under guard for a period of three days. Food and water will be brought to you twice a day. After which, you will be released to return to your homes outside the city. But do not mistake Roman mercy for weakness. Any who draws blade again will meet with the severest of punishments."

The Judean soldier nodded in emphasis to the row of crosses in front of the camp. The rotting bodies of many an unfortunate rebel fighter were being devoured by carrion birds and flies. The men said nothing, sitting with their heads bowed, their minds clouded by exhaustion and deprivation. Doubtless all of them had friends hanging from the gruesome crosses.

The meagre quantities of food they'd allowed themselves to consume had awakened their dormant appetites, though they were more prudent with the rations the Romans brought to them that evening. In the coming days, it would become plain to all just how fortunate these few were.



The siege wall along the Mount of Olives, the sector once occupied by the Tenth Legion, was now manned predominantly by Syrian and Samaritan auxiliaries. Antipathy between Jew and Samaritan dated back millennia. And while most Samaritans held little love for their Roman masters, their hatred for the Jews led to many joining the ranks of the imperial auxilia in Judea. Those from the old Jerusalem garrison, who had escaped annihilation, remembered well the diabolical treatment their mates received at the hands of the rebels. The line between actual atrocities and fantasy became blurred, with the Samaritans willing to cast off their discipline in favour of retribution. Adding to this age-old hostility was the terrible vice of greed. Word about the escapees from the city swallowing coins to hide them from the zealots had

spread throughout the army. Patrols of auxilia troopers intended to see for themselves if the stories were true. Titus may have offered his right hand of security to those willing to surrender, but the auxiliaries' voracity overcame their predisposition to following orders.

It was night, and a rush of desertions had come over the ranks of the zealots, with many common citizens also hoping to escape further torments. It was perhaps the largest mass absconding from the city. There were dozens, possibly hundreds, of shadows crossing the vast open ground.

"Would you look at that?" an infantryman whispered to his mates. They hunkered low in a small defilade, waiting to spring an ambush.

"Time to make some money, boys," their section leader said, as he drew his gladius.

A horn blew and with the rage of inborn hatred and lust for coin, the Samaritan and Syrian auxiliaries sprang up from the ground. It was immediately clear that these particular soldiers cared not whether the Jews escaped the city intending to surrender. The deserting people panicked. Few were armed, and even those who were stood no chance against the furious onslaught. Screams filled the night as men, women, and even children were run through by spear and sword. Some fled to where they knew the legions were encamped, though most of the rest ran back towards the city. There was no mercy shown by the onlookers on the ramparts. They unleashed salvos of arrows down upon the people who they decried as traitorous defectors.

Knowing they only had a limited amount of time before their senior officers rode onto the scene and ordered a halt to the killing, the maddened soldiers split open the guts of all they slew, digging around feverishly despite the vile stench that erupted from the burst entrails. Some poor souls were still alive as they were disembowelled. Troopers shouted in glee when they found filthy coins hidden in their victims' bowels.

Such malice and abject greed would further complicate the Romans' efforts to subdue the city. Both Simon and John would use the slaughter to show that the armies of Caesar intended to murder all Jews. There would still be nightly forays from those able to escape the city who would rather take their chances with the barbarous auxiliaries. Yet, there would be no more mass desertions from the zealots.



Titus seethed with fury when he heard about the massacre. He first ordered all perpetrators be put to death. When it was explained that the guilty numbered in the thousands, and they would have to slaughter entire regiments of auxiliaries, he had all soldiers posted along the Mount of Olives paraded before him.

“Greed is a most wicked vice,” he began, “Especially when it undermines the very efforts of this war. I gave the people of Jerusalem my right hand of security that if they would surrender, Rome would treat them with mercy. Your butchery, brought on by desire to steal what coins you can find in the corpses of the dead, has marred our efforts to end this siege. Each of you swore an oath to the emperor, senate, and people of Rome, that by your service to the empire you would rise up to become better men than your uncivilised fathers. Your actions here, in direct defiance of orders, is unbecoming of Roman soldiers. It is the act of barbarians, unworthy to serve in the armies of Caesar. Let all know that further defiance and lapses in discipline will not be tolerated. Any violators can expect the harshest of punishments, as can their officers. To the centurions and their subordinate officers, I hold you directly responsible for this! If you cannot compel your men to follow orders, then I have no use for you. I will find officers who can.”

The prince imperial spoke at length, harshly berating the men. Inside, he knew his words would have little effect. Given the number of raids they had contended with over the past few months, it was impossible to tell, when a mass of people came from the city under the cover of darkness, whether they were refugees or zealot raiders. And one order he could never give was telling his men to hesitate in defending themselves.

He now hoped more than ever that the siege would end soon. Disciplinary issues were a common problem during a prolonged siege, even amongst legionaries. Besides the constant fevers and other debilitating diseases brought on by the squalid conditions, boredom and frustration were a besieging army’s greatest enemies. Every day, centurions and other officers dealt with a variety of offences from the ranks; the most common being irritated soldiers fighting with each other. Titus had ordered floggings kept to a minimum, as they left soldiers debilitated for some time, and the chance of the wounds becoming infected under these conditions was severe. And yet, they still became a daily occurrence. For some of the more incorrigible,

particularly amongst the auxiliaries, even the loss of a month's wages was not enough to keep them in line. It was of little wonder that some of the Samaritan and Syrian troops, whose only link to civilisation was the uniform they wore, would commit such barbarism in defiance of orders.

Such were the difficulties Titus had to contend with, and he often found himself wondering how his father would have handled these terrible lapses in order. He had to remind himself that it was Titus, not Vespasian, who was commander-in-chief of the imperial armies in the east. Sometimes he would remind himself that even Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great had to deal with similar difficulties.

Chapter XXI: Desecration of the Temple

The Temple of Jerusalem
July, 70 A.D.



The inner Temple and Holy Sanctum

In addition to the lack of rations and growing hunger amongst his warriors, a new dilemma now faced John of Giscala. Not only were his men starving like their enemies, their lust for gold and silver was inexplicably much stronger than their want of food. The Idumean soldiers in particular were complaining that they had not been paid in months. When they approached Simon bar Giora, he curtly told them to go see John, who controlled the temple treasury.

"We are professional soldiers, not mercenaries," Jacob bar Sosias complained bitterly, though the lines between *soldier* and *mercenary* were quickly becoming blurred. "Unless you want me to march my five thousand troops out the city gates, you will find a way to pay us."

Knowing he had little left to lose, John brought Jacob, his senior captain, Levi, and his other close advisors in to the massive treasury within the Temple district. The vaults were under constant guard. The threat of a painful death hung over any who dared steal from that which belonged to God. As the large wooden doors swung open, Jacob gasped. There were not just chests of gold, silver, and copper coins, but ornate chalices, large menorahs,

medallions on gold chains, and countless pieces of jewellery.

John sighed as he walked over to a long table lined with a variety of rare and valuable artefacts. He held aloft a large silver pitcher adorned with intricate scrollwork.

“This was a gift from Emperor Augustus Caesar and Empress Livia to the high priests of Jerusalem more than eighty years ago,” the zealot leader explained. “That our predecessors kept such unholy vestiges within God’s blessed sanctuary defiles the sanctity of this place. And there are other such wicked articles which blinded the priests because they were of gold and silver. But we can purify such relics of evil, so that good may come of them.”

Jacob gave a grin of lustful greed. “Let us melt them down and stamp them with the symbols of Holy Zion, that we might pay those loyal fighters who continue the struggle in God’s name.”

It was not just the gifts from past Roman emperors and eastern monarchs which were subjected to the fire. John had utensils, plates, and other sacramental vessels melted down, claiming they had been defiled by the priests convicted and executed for high treason. In truth, he was baffled by the immense greed for coin from his fighters. Perhaps it provided a means of distraction and the presumption of wealth. Deep down he knew it was all futile. A man could adorn himself with all the coin and jewels in the known world. When all was said and done, however, man could not eat gold.

“It keeps them fighting,” Levi observed, as he and John watched their smiths hammer out coins from the melted gold and silver. “And should we win the day and defeat the Romans, they will have earned their newfound wealth.”

John simply nodded and folded his arms across his chest. It seemed surreal that he possessed one of the largest treasure troves in the world. Up until this moment, it had been all but worthless to him. That his fighters seemed to desire gold more so than food was profound and, indeed, disturbing.

He made overtures to his men, offering a substantial reward to any who managed to bring food to the Temple. The Roman blockade had halted all provisions coming into the city. With enough gold to bribe them, his warriors would find inventive ways to scrounge enough nourishment to sustain them.



John’s opening of the temple treasury may have sated the greedy appetites of his fighters for the time being, but it did nothing to ease the suffering of the starving populace. The full effects of the Roman blockade became known within a few days. A deserter named Manneus ben Lazarus escaped while on guard duty near the Antonia Fortress. Having heard the horror stories regarding deserters who ran afoul of the Syrian and Samaritan auxiliaries, he was thankful to have been captured by legionaries. Manneus was known to Josephus, a friendly acquaintance during their younger years.

“The entire city is dying,” the rebel explained after he was brought before the prince imperial.

Titus was joined by Placidus, as well as the legionary legates, for breakfast. “Good.” The commander-in-chief took a bite of cooked meat. “That means the siege is working.”

“The Giscalan tasked us with counting all of the bodies outside the city. Though his stubborn heart remains hard, he is not the unfeeling monster that is Simon bar Giora.”

“How many bodies?” Josephus asked.

The man lowered his eyes and took a deep breath, the magnitude overwhelming him. “By our last count, at least 116,000. Both John and Simon demanded payment for any corpse taken outside the walls for burial. I was the one tasked with tracking the coins received. But this number is by no means total. It does not count those buried within the city, nor those killed for treason and flung from the walls. And there are even greater numbers lying dead in the streets and in their homes.”

“I’ve heard rumour that over half a million may have already perished,” Titus persisted, anxious to know if there was truth to what some of the deserters had told him, or if it was an exaggeration.

“It is possible. I have not counted the bodies, only the coins. Nor have I ventured beyond the Antonia Fortress for over two months. Greed has consumed my fellow warriors. What grain we had was sold at a talent of gold for a ten-pound sack of wheat. And once it’s sold, it is usually taken back by force within a day or so. The people are so desperate for food they’ve taken to scouring the sewers and sifting through dung piles for undigested grains. Entire families have perished from starvation and a plethora of diseases that afflict most of the populace. Entire houses are filled with bodies, with no one left to give them proper burial. It would not surprise me if there were more

dead than living within Jerusalem."

Josephus fought back tears. Even General Titus was moved by the terrible plight.

Only Placidus seemed to relish the fearful news. "Serves the bastards right," he muttered. "One can smell the stench of death from miles away. Give it another month, and we can simply walk in and take the place."

Titus said nothing and dismissed the man, ordering that he be fed and set at liberty. Though he'd made clear to the auxiliaries that any man found committing atrocities against those attempting to surrender would face severe punishment, he feared the psychological damage had already been done. He also knew his threats to the auxilia were in vain. All any had to say was that the rebels attacked them rather than attempted to surrender. The zealots had pulled many such tricks on the imperial army many times already, and there was little sympathy to be had from the ranks for those struck down and gutted without mercy. That many a corpse was found with a few coins in their bowels only added to the soldiers' lust for plunder.

Josephus followed Manneus from the tent, calling to him as a pair of legionaries escorted him to a temporary holding pen.

"Ah, Josephus," the emaciated fighter said wearily. "I wondered if I would get a chance to speak with you away from your Roman masters." He then noted Josephus' bandaged head. "You know, I have cursed your name many a time since we heard about the fall of Jotapata. And yet, I find myself glad to see you still among the living."

"Both Jew and Roman alike have tried to send my soul to God. That wicked creature from Giscala attempted to take my head even before Jotapata. His severity may be milder than Simon, but it is still he who desecrated the Temple and murdered Hanan. I will never forgive him for that, and neither will God. But I did not come to speak to you about John of Giscala."

"You wish to know about your family." Manneus gave a tired nod, as they reached the pen.

A legionary shoved him in, though was careful not to lay a hand on Josephus, who accompanied the prisoner. A wooden bowl with some day-old stew and a stale crust of bread was given to Manneus. He sat and ate ravenously for several minutes. Though noticeably gaunt and worn, he was in better health than some of the prisoners they had taken in recent days, particularly the poor souls who were so malnourished that their stomachs

burst when they tried to eat.

"Your father lives, though he has been arrested," Manneus said, at last. "The late high priest, Phannias, was found in your family's house; both were put in chains. You saw what happened to the priest and his sons. Simon handed Mathias over to John, as a sign of good faith in their uneasy alliance. I do not know where John has taken him; it could be anywhere within the Temple district or City of David."

"What of my wife and my mother?" Josephus asked, anxious for any news at all of those he loved the most.

"Sadly, I do not know. As I said, I have not left the Antonia Fortress in over two months. And since Upper City is in Simon's territory, our faction never ventures there."

There had been no public proclamations regarding Judith's death, and Josephus' brother privately buried her in the barren garden behind their home before going into hiding once more. For all Manneus or anyone else from John's faction knew, Josephus' surviving family was still under house arrest in Upper City. As he finished his stew, the rebel prisoner's next words filled Josephus with dread.

"If I were you, I would pray nightly that God has already claimed their souls; whether by starvation, Roman blades, or murder from our own kinsmen. There is no hope left for them. Ask God to take them from this wicked world, that they might suffer no more."



For those still determined to hold the city at all costs, it was becoming clearer day by day there would be no victory. Zealot and citizen alike starved, with more succumbing each day, while the Romans feasted. And each sally left more Jewish fighters dead or badly wounded. The slain were the lucky ones. With no medicine or sufficient supplies of clean water—for rotting bodies and disease had polluted many of the wells—the gravely injured simply lingered before infection or other ailments took them.

The imperial army, meanwhile, was having difficulties of its own, though not of the magnitude of suffering inflicted upon the city. Morale was flagging, for despite the sorry state of the defenders, they were still no closer to taking the inner city. Titus had ordered foraging parties to scour every scrap of timber within fifteen miles of Jerusalem, ripping up every tree and

shrub in order to build support structures for new siege platforms. The labour was exhausting for both man and beast alike, as soldiers had to travel ever further afield to find any trees or lumber worth taking.

"What a barren, featureless wasteland," Optio Julius said one afternoon as he and Nicanor led their century on one of the labour details.

The centurion was particularly distressed by the pitiful sight. "I grew up in this land," Nicanor lamented. "Judea was once a fertile paradise covered in fruit trees, palms, flowering bushes, and lush groves of tall grass. As a boy, I used to climb the trees and play in the fields with my friends." He shook his head sadly at the memories of a happier time.

He continued, "For over two thousand years, visitors from the far corners of the world wrote of Jerusalem's tranquil beauty. Even as a Roman, I could see why the Jews believed it to be the Promised Land given to them by their god. Now…there is nothing left but barren soil and rock. The fields of grass have been consumed by our draught animals and horses. We continue to fell every remaining tree, so they can be hauled back to the city in order to build more siege works. In time, none will ever believe that Jerusalem was once a jewel of beauty in an otherwise ugly world."

Because they had marched twelve miles this day and spent the entire afternoon toiling in the destruction of what remained of the scenic landscape, Nicanor decided to rest his century that night and return to the siege in the morning. Two other centuries from the Fifth Cohort were with them, along with several hundred auxiliaries and a few dozen engineers. The engineers, led by Nicanor's old friend, Gaius Artorius, were tasked with sorting the lumber between that which could be used to build towers, and what was only good for hurdles and ramp supports. Much of what was declared useless scrap was utilised for camp fires that evening.

Nicanor and his principle officers sat near their own fire, while the centurion's manservant cooked their supper. Gaius was exhausted and covered in sweat when he joined them. Even the officers bore their share of the labour, if for no other reason than it helped bolster their soldiers' already strained morale.

"Care to go for a walk, old friend?" Gaius asked. Though he was greatly fatigued, Nicanor slowly rose to his feet. The two men ambled away from the fires to the edge of their marching camp, where sentries guarded onager ammunition wagons utilised to carry lumber.

"Something on your mind?" the centurion asked.

“I spoke with General Titus earlier this morning, before we departed. He’s under a lot of strain, and I wonder if it might do him in. The Jews are starving; over half of them are already dead. Yet, we cannot seem to break into the inner city.”

“Their stubbornness is far greater than ours,” Nicanor observed. “They starve while our men feast. Disease destroys them, while we remain in relatively good health. Each time they come forth from the walls to attack, they step on the backs of their dead, while leaving more corpses on the battlefield, and *still* they persist. Since I was a child, I learned that a Jew’s resolve surpasses that of even the most stalwart Roman.”

“They know we have to build assault ramps once more,” Gaius reckoned. “And I fear, as I know General Titus does, if the rebels succeed in destroying them again, we’ll be finished. Not only will the morale of our soldiers be crushed but look around. There is nothing left to take.”

“Then we’ll simply have to camp the entire legion next to our ramp,” Nicanor reasoned. “Because of their relentless fury, some of our more impressionable young legionaries are starting to think the zealots are unstoppable no matter how many we slay. I overheard some of the lads questioning whether our gods are stronger than theirs.”

Gaius scoffed. “I am surprised that any one, on either side, places any faith in the gods. The Jews claim their god is both just and benevolent, yet he allows them to suffer unspeakable torments. What kind of loving deity allows children and babies to starve to death? Is it just, that they suffer for the crimes of their fathers?”

“And what of our gods?”

The tribune shook his head in disgust. “If they even exist, they are probably laughing at us. It’s just as likely a big fucking game to them; Mars and Victoria collaborating with the Jewish Jehovah, placing wagers to see who breaks first.” He spat on the ground to emphasise his contempt. “Whether we win or lose this battle, it will not be because of the gods.”

“It will be because you kept up an intense bombardment upon the walls,” Nicanor said, with a good-natured grin. “I’m not so blasphemous to pray to Gaius Artorius, but I will place faith in his ability to destroy any captured scorpions and onagers the rebels may still have. And I will keep faith in my legionaries; that by their relentless courage, they may keep those bastards from wrecking the siege ramps. No pressure on either of us, old friend.”

Chapter XXII: Like the Walls of Ancient Jericho

The Antonia Fortress, Jerusalem
3 July, 70 A.D.



The Antonia Fortress

Within days of the scavenging expedition's return, construction on the first of the siege ramps was underway. Gaius and Vorenus placed a score of onagers, along with sixty scorpions, in a long line facing the Antonia Fortress. Earthworks standing six feet high were built up to give these machines a better platform to fire from. Three heavy siege ballistae were positioned along this rampart, and for two days all engines unleashed a merciless barrage upon the fortress and Temple walls. During the bombardment, Vorenus called the tribune over to a place just in front of the line of scorpions.

"Over there, sir." He pointed to where the collapsed tunnel ran under the wall. Gaius squinted his eyes and then saw what caught the centurion's attention.

"By Victoria," he breathed.

Running directly up the wall was a series of long cracks. And though the tunnel had collapsed during the burning of the siege platforms, the ground was shallow and devoid of any support for the massive weight of the fortress wall.

“Get a pair of battering rams ready,” the tribune ordered. “And bring up that massive bastard, Nico. I’ll inform General Titus.”

Despite this exciting revelation, there was a more immediate threat to address as Gaius hurried back to the commander-in-chief’s camp, half a mile away. John of Giscala had ordered another massed attack on the Roman siege works, only this time he found an entire legion waiting for him. Five cohorts from Legio X were formed into battle lines, with the remaining five holding in immediate reserve.

“Here they come, sir!” a decanus on the scorpions shouted to Vorenus.

The centurion grinned maliciously as he watched the first waves of rebel fighters spilling forth from a trio of gates along the fortress wall.

“Scorpions, fire at will!” the centurion bellowed, his voice carrying down the entire line. “Onagers, decrease range and switch to flaming shot!”

The clusters of Judean warriors were subjected to a savaging from the Roman scorpions, with the heavy bolts slamming through men, and oftentimes embedding themselves in one of their mates behind them. Every onager crew adjusted the torsion ropes of their engines and were now unleashing flaming pots of burning oil against the lower half of the wall. In the growing darkness, streaks of fire filled the sky like the hammering fists of a hundred demons. Each burning pot shattered against the wall, sending gouts of liquid fire onto hapless fighters below.

Still onward the rebels came, for they were supported by several thousand Idumean soldiers. The best troops in John’s army, he had used them sparingly during the months of siege. Their leather armour covered in rows of rectangular plates afforded them substantial protection compared to their allied warriors. They were also the only professional soldiers the zealots had, and John hoped their discipline, combined with the sheer numbers of his warriors, would break the imperial legion that now opposed them. However, they were assailed not just by scorpion, onager, and the scores of archers supporting the legion. As they drew close, volleys of javelins flew from legionary ranks, inflicting hundreds of casualties. Fallen warriors and spent pila created a series of obstacles and tripping hazards.

Tribune Artorius had just returned, accompanied by Titus and Alexander, who watched the unfolding fray. The Jews were fighting with fierce determination, but even with the Idumeans having some measure of success with their long-bladed spears, the prince imperial noted a distinctive difference between this attack and previous sorties by the enemy.

“They’re breaking,” he said plainly. He pointed to a mass of rebels hesitantly engaging the Tenth Legion’s battle lines. “Look at them. Four weeks ago they would have flung themselves into our shield wall. Now they hesitate.”

“Hunger has weakened them,” Alexander acknowledged. “I doubt that it’s hampered their bravery, but how hard can one fight when completely spent?”

Gaius then pointed to the weakened section of the wall illuminated by burning streaks of fire running down the defences. “You can see there, general, their own bloody tunnel has undermined the wall. With your permission, once we drive these bastards back, I’ll deploy the rams forward.”

“Very good,” the commander-in-chief said appreciatively. He then ordered one of his aids to find Legate Bassus and order his reserve cohorts to protect the rams. “Have his men bring up pickaxes and pry bars,” he added. “See if they can help bring this gods-damned wall down.”



From his position atop the tallest tower of the Antonia Fortress, John of Giscala bitterly watched his warriors battle in vain to break the Roman lines.

“Our torch-bearers cannot even get close to the platforms,” Levi said, dejectedly. He nodded to the First Wall off to their left. “And where is our ‘ally’, Simon? He sits on his ass and lets us do all the dying. If he were to send just half his fighters into the Roman flank, they would break, and we could destroy their towers once again.”

“Even if they get past the wall, we still have another surprise for them,” John said reassuringly. He gazed down below, where hundreds of men were carrying stone from demolished houses and building a second wall behind that of the fortress. “The Romans aren’t the only builders in this land.”

Though he did his best to hide his apprehension, John was unnerved by the undermining of the wall. At fifteen feet thick, it was impenetrable to battering rams. He had thought it would hold, despite the tunnel collapsing underneath. However, after enough pressure and time, even the surest structures will crumble. The foundation had cracked, and now the weight of the wall was tearing itself apart. He also knew their attempts at building an inner wall were an act of desperation.

“What else can I do?” he quietly asked, as he gazed up into the night sky.



The battle at the ramps continued for some time unabated. Onagers relentlessly bombarded the walls, while scorpions and archers struck down many a rebel fighter coming into the fray. Despite the lack of ferocity when compared to previous sorties, the Jews still fought with a tenacity worthy of respect from their relentless foes. It had become a battle of resolve, as well as blood. Notwithstanding the protection afforded by their armour and their discipline that kept them behind their shield wall, legionary casualties were mounting. And despite executing passages-of-lines every few minutes, the Romans were starting to fatigue. Those in the subsequent ranks spent as much of their time carrying or dragging away fallen comrades as they did resting.

Sensing the distress of his lead cohorts, General Bassus ordered his cornicen to sound the advance, sending his reserve cohorts into battle. This wave of fresh troops, coupled with the storm of javelins that preceded them, finally broke the zealot attack.

“Deploy the rams,” Gaius ordered his siege crews, as they watched the rebels scatter.

Warriors fled back towards the city walls, with legionaries in pursuit. Gaius and Vorenus ordered their onagers to cease unleashing flaming shot, and to commence bombardment of the ramparts. However, as the pursuing legionaries reached the wall, they were assailed by a barrage of arrows, throwing spears, sling bullets, and even large chunks of stone from the high wall.

Soldiers hefted their shields overhead, forming a modified testudo as men in the lead rank set to work with their pickaxes. A trio of battering rams, including the enormous Nico, were slowly wheeled into position by scores of crewmen.

Gaius walked next to them, keeping low as flaming arrows flew from the ramparts. “Over there,” he said to the leading decanus on Nico, pointing to the weakened spot on the wall. Several of the vertical cracks were nearly a foot wide, and the massive stones were starting to break down upon themselves. The sergeant shouted orders to his crew to adjust their approach.

The collapsed tunnel still served as an obstacle. The left-side wheels on one of the other rams fell into the shallow trench, nearly tipping the machine

over. It took the strength of thirty men heaving it from the outside to right it, all the while being subjected to barrages of arrows from the Temple wall. Two men were killed and several others badly injured before the ram was fully out of the trench.

Meanwhile, the survivors of the Judean assault had escaped behind the wall. Hundreds of defenders atop the defences continued their relentless barrage of every missile weapon available to them. They seemed to ignore the terrible threats they faced from Roman engines. There was nary a reaction, even as one man had his head struck from his body by a ballista stone; his friends sprayed with blood, bone, and brain. Another fell screaming from the wall; a scorpion bolt protruding from his guts.

With extreme effort, the crew of Nico straddled the machine over the trench, the supporting rams on either side. A loud crack heralded the commencement of hammering the wall. As it was fifteen feet thick, they had no chance of actually breaking through; however, Gaius hoped the continuous impact would weaken the already compromised section. Some of the large base blocks had cracked and came loose, and within twenty minutes of reaching the wall, the attacking legionaries had pried four of the support stones from nearest the tunnel. However, they were taking a fearsome punishing for their efforts, and Bassus ordered his cornicen to sound the retreat. The rams continued their work for the better part of an hour before they, too, were recalled.

“A difficult struggle,” Bassus admitted, as he joined Titus on the siege line.

The enemy’s counter-bombardment had ceased, and the Romans called a halt to their own barrage. After the past two days, their stores of fire pots and ballista stones were becoming depleted.

The legate made note of this. “I wonder which side will claim victory this night.”

“It’s another bloody stalemate,” Titus muttered. “Keep your legion on alert. Come morning, Legate Thrasea and the Twelfth will relieve you.” He signalled for Alexander to follow him, and the two men retired to the principia tent for the night.

Over by the battering rams, Gaius leaned against Nico, catching his breath. He was drenched in sweat, and he could feel his tunic sticking to his body beneath his armour. “I thought for sure the wall would break,” he said dejectedly.

“Give it time, sir,” Vorenus said. “The strength of the wall has already been compromised by their own tunnel. The lads from the Tenth managed to remove some of the support blocks, and our rams shook the very foundation. It may not be tonight or tomorrow, but the supposedly unbreakable wall of the Jerusalem Temple is not long for this world.”



Indeed, the wall was further weakened than even Vorenus realised. The hammering of the rams not only widened the cracks in the wall, but disturbed the earth and debris which had fallen into the collapsed tunnel. In the encompassing darkness, zealots atop the wall failed to notice the cracks which now ran all the way through the upper ramparts.

A suffocating silence came over the battlefield, much like every night after a savage brawl. The only sounds came from the zealot wounded, who occasionally cried out piteously for their friends to come save them. Any such attempts were met with a barrage of scorpion bolts. Some of the rebel sentries called down to their stricken companions to cease in their crying like old women, to relish the pain and pending death as their final sacrifices to God.

It was during one such exchange of bitter words that a loud scraping sound was heard by the men on the high wall. This was followed by a snap, as the strained mortar holding an entire line of support blocks gave way. The men, who moments ago were verbally tormenting their fallen brothers, suddenly panicked as they understood what was happening.

“Like the walls of ancient Jericho!” one lamented.

The ramparts they stood atop suddenly split apart, crumbling as if they were smashed by an unseen fist. A large breach opened in a crashing storm of stone and mortar.

Half-a-dozen men were crushed when they fell sixty feet to their bloody deaths. A ten-foot high guard tower nearest the breach also collapsed in a crashing heap, adding to the destruction. The surviving sentries were dumbfounded. Only an hour before they had loudly proclaimed that no power on earth could break the walls of the Temple district.



In the glow of the early morning predawn, the battered soldiers of the Tenth Legion watched in awe as the wall seemed to collapse on its own. A thick cloud of dust filled the air, blowing over them with a breeze from the east. Soldiers coughed and choked, as they struggled to see. Within minutes the cloud dissipated. The large breach, approximately fifteen feet wide, beckoned to them.

One legionary quipped, “Seems they’ve left the door open for us.”

The sound of the crashing wall echoed for miles. Titus, who had only slept for perhaps an hour, emerged from his tent. Throwing on just his tunic and sandals, he rushed to the siege line. He allowed himself to smile for the first time in over a month. Legionaries cheered and pointed to the large breach in the wall. Josephus heard the calamity and came running as well. Though he hated seeing any of the holy city left in ruins, he was in many ways relieved. The way into Jerusalem now lay open to them. He hoped that in the coming days they would purge the Temple of defilers, and of equal importance, save his family from the robbers and murderers.

“It would seem your god favours us after all,” Titus said, to his Jewish companion.

Chapter XXIII: Taking of the Fortress

Antonia Fortress, Jerusalem
4 July, 70 A.D.



Roman aquilifer
Photo by Cezary Wyszynski

With the large breach now opening like the maw of a hideous beast, John of Giscala feared the Antonia Fortress could not be held for much longer. It mattered not. He still held the Temple itself, as well as the City of David. And he would make the Romans bleed for every step they took into Jerusalem.

"The secondary wall should hold them for a time," Levi said.

He and John gazed down from one of the towers atop Antonia. Below them, the crude wall they had constructed over the past few days seemed meagre in the shadow of the massive outer wall, which now lay torn asunder.

"They can have this damnable fortress," John said, his eyes burning with rage. "But they shall never take the Temple!"



Titus and his senior officers gathered at the siege engine ramparts,

looking towards the breach. And, while relieved to see the seemingly impregnable wall broken, there was a measure of dismay when they saw the second wall about fifty feet behind the first.

"Damn it all," Placidus swore. He gave a short, mirthless chuckle and shook his head. "It would seem your Jew isn't the only one of these bastards who is clever."

It was as close to a compliment as the auxilia corps commander had ever given Josephus, who he still viewed with derision. Titus and Legate Domitius both nodded. They recalled many of the cunning, albeit frustrating stratagems Josephus had deployed against them at Jotapata.

Tribune Gaius Artorius, who had also been at Jotapata, stood with his hand on his chin, studying what he could see of the second wall. He was not nearly as dismayed as some of his counterparts. "It's not that tall," he surmised. "I would say it's less than half the height of the outer wall. And if they've so hastily erected it, I'd wager a talent of silver that it's not very strong. Get a ram in there and we'll knock it down in an hour."

"That space is too confined for a battering ram to work efficiently," Titus noted. "It would be difficult to protect. Any support troops would be subjected to enfilade bombardment from the fortress towers." He shook his head in frustration. "Can't see a damned thing from here; we'll have to send a sortie in to probe the defences."

"It will be paramount to suicide for any who volunteer," General Bassus remarked.

The commander-in-chief closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Fortune had given them this massive breach in the otherwise impenetrable wall, yet they were treating it as if were another setback or defeat. His next words he spoke loudly, so every soldier assembled on the plain could hear him.

"My fellow soldiers, to spur men to accomplish that which entails no peril is inglorious and a waste of time. We recognise valour of those who hold contempt for such dangers; for the risks of attacking that wall will be many. But if we falter now, then we disgrace ourselves, for these Jews know they are beaten, accepting death rather than slavery. Who among us has not lost friends to enemy blade? Whose souls now live forever in Elysium? I do not fault any man who would rather save his life, that he might succumb to old age in the years to come. And if we can hold the Antonia Fortress, then the city will be ours. Fortune will be reaped by the survivors, but eternal honour goes to the fallen."

There was a great stirring in the ranks, for Titus' words struck deeply. These were not the hollow words of a typical Roman senator who would exhort men to die in battle, whilst he remained safe. The prince imperial had suffered many of the same hardships as they and, on many occasions, accepted even greater risks.

"Your pardon, sir," a voice said, behind them.

The assembled officers turned to see a short and painfully thin auxilia soldier.

He was with the Assyrian infantry cohorts, yet his ancestry was black African. The trooper removed his helmet and gave a short bow to the prince imperial. "I submit to you, Caesar, let me lead the attack. I pray fortune favours me. If it does not, then my death will not be unexpected. I will gladly die in your service."

"What is your name, soldier?" Titus asked.

"Sabinus, sire. My ancestors came from the African continent, and though we've lived in Assyria for three generations, we remember well the valour of our ancestors."

"Find your volunteers, Trooper Sabinus. I promise, whether you live or die this day, history will remember you."

The soldier nodded, donned his helmet, and drew his gladius. "My friends!" he shouted to his mates. "Caesar has spoken, the wall must be taken! Who will come with me?"

Inspired by his display of bravery, eleven soldiers from his cohort drew their blades and followed the fleet-footed trooper as he sprinted towards the breach. Zealot skirmishers still manned the Temple wall and Antonia Fortress ramparts. These were reinforced during the night in anticipation of a Roman attack. Arrows, sling bullets, and thrown darts flew down from the high defences onto the men. Their shields and armour absorbed the barrage; a short spear and several arrows embedding themselves in Sabinus' shield. A sling stone struck his thigh, yet his stride did not founder as he ran into the wreckage.

Fallen stone and debris from the outer wall had left a large mound of broken rock that fell against the second wall. The African trooper, much faster than his companions, leapt up the large pile of stone with such speed the Jews atop the inner wall were unable to react. He plunged his blade into the guts of one hapless defender. The man, who'd been wearing a captured hamata chain mail tunic, screamed as the rusted links burst under the force of

the soldier's thrust. Sabinus wrenched his weapon free and smashed his shield into another zealot, sending the man falling from the wall. A rickety wooden scaffold served as the walkway along the rampart that was now swarming with enemy fighters. Many more were rushing from the fortress and Temple complex, flinging darts and rocks at the maddened soldier.

Behind the frenzy, the eleven troopers from Sabinus' cohort were racing into the breach to aid their friend. They were assailed by arrows and heavy rocks dropped from the towers. One man was struck down when a huge broken block smashed into his helm, snapping his neck and crushing his skull. Another suffered a blow to the thigh from a throwing spear, knocking his legs out from under him. He gave a loud cry, clutching at the bloodied and broken limb. So great was the bombardment, that the auxilia soldiers were forced to come together, linking their shields overhead, unable to scale the broken mass of rubble to assist their comrade, who was now in a fight for his life.

Up on the scaffolding, four zealots were slain in a matter of moments by the African trooper. He attacked with a speed and strength that contrasted sharply with his seemingly frail appearance. Besides the first man he stabbed through the guts, the warrior who fell from the wall had snapped his neck. Another had taken a sword thrust to the throat, while one more had been smashed in the face by Sabinus' shield before being impaled through the bowels. The rebels attacked him from both sides, unwilling to allow a single imperial soldier to best them. Their fellow warriors below continued to fling their spears and stones towards the man, who was now bleeding from the face, arms, and legs.

Screaming with a fury that resonated from the depths of hell, the auxilia trooper slammed the bottom edge of his shield into the stomach of one assailant, before swinging his sword down in a hard chop with such force it severed his head from his body. Gouts of crimson gushed from the shredded neck stump of the thrashing corpse. Sabinus grinned with ferocious bloodlust. His own strength was failing, however, and he knew he could not last much longer. His companions were battling their way up the rubble embankment. They, too, were being surrounded by the growing swarm of enemy fighters. Two were dead, and given the quickly growing pool of blood beneath the trooper with the gravely injured leg, he was well on his way to Elysium.

A spear then plunged into the back of Sabinus' leg, driving him to his knees. He continued to swing his weapons with fury, injuring a pair of zealots

before one of their number managed to stab him through the throat. Despite the horrifying pain, the auxlia soldier grinned maliciously at his foes. Blood spurted past his clenched teeth. To their credit, his comrades had killed or injured nearly a dozen zealots. Their wounds were great, and they too risked being overwhelmed and slain. Forming a circle, they slowly made their way back towards the breach. The entire skirmish, from the time Sabinus rushed the breach to the ignominious retreat, had lasted a scant few minutes. As the survivors withdrew, two centuries of legionaries from Domitius' Fifth Legion reached the breach. Their shields formed a protective testudo from zealots unleashing spear and stone from the heights. They kept their discipline and surrounded the wounded soldiers with the protective shell of shields as they pulled back to the siege line.

This time, there were no cheers or insults hurled from the Judean defenders. Four imperial soldiers lay dead. Yet so ferocious was their onslaught, especially that of brave Trooper Sabinus, that they left three times as many slain and twice as many more wounded. And though his bloodied corpse lay still atop the inner wall, none dared venture close to Sabinus, lest the demons of hell revive him to wreak havoc once more. General Titus would keep his promise, telling Josephus to write of the brave man's actions, ensuring they would survive through the ages.



A lull came over the field that lasted the remainder of the day. Titus was now confident a broad assault could capture the breach, as well as the fortress. Given the confined space, however, casualties would be high. His army had already suffered much, and he did not wish to lose any more soldiers than necessary. He decided he needed more intelligence gathering, before storming the breach.

That night, eleven legionaries and a decanus from the Legio V were skulking around near the ruins, scouting the defences and how they could be taken. It was still three hours till midnight, and all was deathly quiet. The soldiers had left their shields and helmets behind, wearing just their segmentata armour and sword baldrics. Feeling brazen, the decanus crept through the breach, carefully making his way up the pile of fallen blocks. Still all was silent. The zealots had removed the bodies of their own dead. The corpse of Sabinus still lay in a coagulated pool of blood atop the wall.

“Where the fuck are they?” one of his soldiers whispered, as he joined his squad leader.

The rest of their men gazed about frantically for any sign of the enemy. They were just able to see the shadowy forms of two zealots sitting atop the high wall, their backs to the ramparts. Several legionaries cocked an ear towards the men and were convinced they heard snoring. The defences appeared to be mostly deserted at the Antonia Fortress as well.

What baffled the decanus even more was when he noticed a side door to the fortress half open, nearest the inner wall. Giving a devious grin, he turned to his soldiers. “I have an idea,” he said in hushed tones. “Wait here, and don’t make a sound until I return.”

This made the soldiers extremely nervous, leading them to crouch low in the shadows that hung below the fortress wall. As quietly as he was able, the decanus made his way back to the Fifth Legion’s temporary camp near the tower platforms. He gave the password to the sentries on duty. He saw the legion’s aquilifer sitting by a small campfire with a cornicen and two cavalry troopers from the Judean horse contingent.

“Gentlemen,” the decanus said, offering a salute to the aquilifer.

“What can we do for you, sergeant?”

The decanus evilly replied, “How would you fellas fancy helping my lads and I capture the Antonia Fortress?” He then looked to the aquilifer. “What say you, sir?”

Though he held no actual command authority, the rank of aquilifer was equivalent to that of a centurion primus ordo. The position was one of the most revered and honoured within the imperial army. In addition to serving as paymaster for the entire legion, he carried the eagle into battle and was the soldier all others rallied to in a crisis. When he heard the decanus’ plan, he understood that time was not a luxury they had. He directed the cornicen to fetch his horn while he grabbed the legion’s eagle from his tent. He was determined to raise it atop the ramparts of the Antonia Fortress, or be damned to oblivion should they fail.

All was still silent as they returned to the breach where the gathered legionaries waited.

“Is this all you brought?” one asked, in a hushed whisper. “Where is the rest of the legion?”

“Wasn’t time to rally them. Besides, we’ve got our good aquilifer here to lead us.”

“I told the sentries to inform General Titus once they hear the trumpet blast,” the senior officer added.

The cornicen gave a nervous grin and hefted the awkward circular horn.

The small band of soldiers climbed onto the wall, following it to where it ran perpendicular with the fortress. The cornicen’s horn scraped across the wall as he pulled himself up with some difficulty.

“Careful with that damn thing!” a legionary whispered harshly. Still all was silent from within.

There were no steps, just a rickety ladder that had seen better days, leaning against the corner of the wall. The decanus went down first, followed by three of his legionaries. They drew their gladii once they reached the bottom, hugging the wall as they approached the door. The aquilifer and cornicen descended next, followed by the remainder of the legionaries and the pair of Judean cavalry volunteers. The door led into a narrow corridor which ran the length of the fortress wall. Inside was a second door leading into the main courtyard. The decanus carefully pushed it open enough to see dozens of zealots slumbering.

The decanus nodded his head towards a flight of stone steps up to the defences. He stepped out into the night air, fearing they might be discovered at any moment. He was astounded; every sentry visible on the ramparts was fast asleep. He wordlessly signalled for half his men to go left along the wall, while he and the rest went right. Every rebel they found was quickly slain by a legionary placing a hand over his mouth, and slashing his gladius across the throat. It took nearly thirty minutes for the two sections to make their way around, for they also had to clear each of the four corner towers. Finally, when the last sentry was slain, they came together. The decanus slashed the throat of his final victim, his hands and forearms now soaked in blood. He waved his men to follow him back to the stairs that led into the southern wall. Should their bluff fail, they would need to flee the fortress in a hurry.

“Ready to make some noise?” he asked the cornicen.

The man gave a nervous nod and licked his lips as he took a deep breath and hefted the horn. The sound of ear-splitting blasts awoke all within three miles of the fortress. The notes were the signal to attack, alerting the sentries at the Roman camps.

The Judean troopers began frantically shouting in Hebrew, *“The Romans have taken the fortress! We are undone…flee!”*

The sleepy-eyed rebels in the fortress could see the imperial eagle

silhouetted against the night sky, gleaming in the moonlight. Not knowing who the terrified shouts came from, only that they were spoken in their native tongue, caused many to panic.

"The legions have the fortress!" the frightened men shouted, in turn. The large iron gate that led into the Temple district was hurriedly opened. Hundreds of fighters fled into the night.

Atop the wall, the Romans called out in triumph, hurling insults down at their fleeing adversaries. "Alright, lads," the decanus said. "Let's get the gates open and let our friends in!"



While a pair of soldiers rushed down the steps to throw open the northern gate to the fortress, a sentry rushed into Titus' principia. The commander-in-chief was lying on a table getting a much-needed massage by a pair of slaves.

"Sir, we've taken the fortress!" the soldier said breathlessly.

"What do you mean we've taken the fortress?" Titus demanded, shoving the slaves away and sitting upright. "This better not be a joke or I'll have you flogged…"

"It's true, sir," one of Titus' aids said, as he, too, quickly entered the principia. "Some legionaries and the Fifth Legion's aquilifer…they snuck into the fortress, slew the guards, and scared off the rest."

"My armour," Titus said, snapping his fingers to the two slaves.

Twenty minutes later, the prince imperial made his way to where the Fifth Legion was rousing itself; soldiers donning their armour and weaponry as fast as they were able by the pale torchlight. He sought out Legate Cerealis, who was speaking with his primus pilus and another centurion.

"What's happened?" Titus asked.

The notes from the cornicen echoed from the fortress towers once more.

"One of my damn patrols," the legate said with disbelief. "They found a way into the fortress and captured the ramparts. I have two cohorts making ready support them now."

"Have them fall in on me," Titus ordered, drawing his spatha.

"Alright, you heard the commanding general!" the master centurion shouted to his nearest soldiers. *"Cohorts Three and Five…follow Caesar!"*

He then looked to his legate, who nodded his consent. The primus pilus barked a series of subsequent orders to his own First Cohort, who made their

way towards the breach.

Cerealis directed two cohorts to support the First, while the rest of the legion stood ready and awaited further orders. He then joined General Titus and the lead cohorts as they ran towards the western and northern gates of the fortress. These had both been opened and they spilled into the courtyard, centurions and their subordinate officers ordering the ramparts taken and the large southern gate secured.

Titus, meanwhile, made his way up the stone steps accompanied by Legate Cerealis and the centurion to whom the raiding soldiers belonged. The legionaries were sharing a laugh with the aquilifer and cornicen who was red in the face from playing his horn for nearly twenty minutes without ceasing. The men came to attention as their commander-in-chief walked over to them, his face betraying his bemusement.

"General," the decanus said, with a sharp salute. "Welcome to the Antonia Fortress, sir."

"Damn it all, sergeant," the centurion named Julian said, shaking his head in disbelief. "I send you on a patrol to scout the enemy defences, and this is what you do?"

"To be fair, sir, there really weren't any defences to speak of. The bastards were all asleep."

The aquilifer then addressed Titus. "And I do apologise, sir, for placing the legion's eagle in jeopardy. But I knew the rebels would run once they saw the eagle claiming their towers. Since there was no time to get permission, I figured I would ask your forgiveness instead."

"Nothing to forgive," the prince imperial reassured them. "You men have done well."

Down below, a fierce battle was underway. Fighters from both John and Simon's factions had rallied to the Temple district and were assailing the surging mass of legionaries, who had since made their way through the breach.

"Well done," Centurion Julian said, as Titus left them. "I'm going to re-join the century. You remain here and keep an eye on things. Since you don't have your helmets or shields, I can't exactly use you on the battle line."

Titus made his way along the ramparts to the southern towers, where he could better watch the growing battle and direct his troops. There was a wide-open space between the fortress and the inner temple that was now swarming

with enemy warriors. Meanwhile, the Fifth Legion's cohorts were heading into battle piecemeal, as they came over the inner wall or attacked from the fortress itself. It was midnight, and even by the moonlight it was very difficult to see. Wisps of clouds obstructed the moon, adding to the confusion. Imperial soldiers struggled to maintain their battle lines. Many legionaries ended up amid their foes, with no way of telling where their friends were. Conversely, many rebels did not realise there were Romans lost among them.

Many incursions broke down into frenzied brawls between individuals, with neither side able to tell where their battle lines began and ended. The Romans' armour and training gave them a decisive advantage in single combat; however, with both factions of Jews sending all their fighters into the fray, their numbers eventually proved overwhelming. Whatever antipathy Simon still held for John of Giscala, he knew that losing the Temple would be catastrophic for both factions.

Reserve cohorts from the Fifth Legion were rotated into the fray as the battered ones from the initial assault attempted to withdraw. The fighting continued for several hours, with neither side gaining any sort of advantage. The bodies of the slain and wounded lay strewn about. Many of the wounded were so disoriented they didn't know the way to their own strongholds. Exhaustion was taking its toll, particularly on the badly outnumbered Romans who often found themselves fighting against several opponents at once. With the first glows of dawn, all surviving combatants were at last able to see where they were, as well as their friends and enemies. By this time, fatigue was greatly hampering the legion's ability to press the attack. With no follow-on forces able to make their way into the crowded breach, they were compelled to withdraw to the fortress.

Centurion Julian found himself fighting a series of solo battles along the southern wall of the Antonia, near where the inner wall intersected it. Unable to find his own century in the confusion, he had withdrawn to the ramparts. As the sun began to rise in the east, the centurion noted a band of legionaries who were disorganised and lacking cohesion. They were being surrounded by numerous enemy fighters anxious to spill more Roman blood.

"Damn it all," Julian swore. He rushed down the steps and sprinted to the fray. He smashed his shield into the back of one zealot, sending the man sprawling onto his face. He then thrust his gladius beneath the ribs of another, piercing the man's heart. So quick were the centurion's strikes, only traces of

blood managed to seep onto his blade. He shouted in rage, hammering Judean warriors with his shield and plunging his blade into the exposed guts of others. His ferocious onslaught scattered the Jews before him.

As he reached the disjointed formation, he grabbed hold of a tesserarius who appeared to be the senior officer present. “Get your men into a gods-damned formation already! Form ranks and get back to the fucking fortress!”

“Sir,” the officer said, giving a near-listless nod. He was clearly exhausted, his face covered in sweat and blood. With a deep breath, taking advantage of the brief reprieve brought on by the centurion, he ordered his men into four ranks. Finding their discipline once more, the legionaries complied, forming a wall of shields and swords the equally fatigued rebels could no longer exploit.

For Centurion Julian, however, his own safety was now in dire jeopardy. He continued his one-man onslaught as the contingent of soldiers withdrew. Fearsome as he was, the Jewish rebels renewed their attack, refusing to cower in the face of just one man. His assault reminded them of the African trooper who brazenly assailed the inner wall by himself, just two days prior.

Unfortunately for Julian, it would not be the prowess of his foes that would be his undoing, but a far more benign source. The grounds of the entire Temple district were paved with smooth tile, which at times proved slippery. And like all imperial soldiers, the centurion wore caligae sandals. The soles were covered in rounded hobnails. While these were ideal to gain purchase on rugged or muddy terrain, his feet slid across the tile like it was ice.

As Julian started to back away from his assailants, he was compelled to lunge into one attacker, knocking him down with his shield. At that moment, his sandaled feet skidded out from under him. He fell with a crash onto his backside, his armour clattering on the tile. Unable to rise to his feet before being swarmed by a score of enemy fighters, he swung his shield in a hard sweep. The bottom edge snapped the shin of one zealot who fell screaming to the ground. The rebels surrounded him, hammering away with their short swords and trying to impale him with their spears. He ignored the numerous injuries he was suffering and continued to fight from his back. He thrust his gladius up in a hard stab, emasculating one attacker and piercing his bladder. A swinging chop severed the lower leg of another. He pulled one assailant on top of him, using the man as a shield, who was inadvertently struck by a dozen strikes from his comrades.

Despite his crippled position, the centurion managed to swing and thrust his gladius with unnerving speed, making it difficult for any to get close enough to wound him. He even tucked his chin, so the cheek guards on his helmet might protect his otherwise exposed neck. But, like Trooper Sabinus before him, the enemy's numbers soon proved too great. Though he mortally wounded at least one more man with a stab through the guts, while injuring numerous others, he was now bleeding from the face, arms, and legs. With his strength failing, a zealot managed to slash his blade across the centurion's throat. His sword arm fell to his side. The bloodied weapon clattered on the tiles, and his soul departed this world.

Chapter XXIV: Unholy Sacraments

Antonia Fortress, Jerusalem
10 July, 70 A.D.
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As the sun shone into his face, Titus was filled with both frustration and hope. The past days had brought fortune and despair in equal measure. The walls were breached, and the Antonia Fortress was now theirs. However, he lamented the loss of so many brave imperial soldiers. And, he was discouraged that the zealots had not yielded any ground whatsoever within the Temple district.

"It's like Josephus told me," he said to Alexander. "When it comes to their sacred temple, these Jews are willing to fight to the death."

They descended the steps of the fortress leading down into the parade square.

"One cannot fault them for that," his chief-of-staff replied. "The Temple is all they have left. Their attempts at independence have failed, the land that was once the Kingdoms of Judah and Israel are again under Roman control. Their allies to the south, the Sicarii, have abandoned them. And if the Temple should fall, there will be nothing left for the zealots. By their own actions, they have demonstrated no love for the rest of the city, and their cruelty towards the people shows their utter contempt for humanity."

Titus paused for a few moments and looked towards the inner sanctum. It protruded tall and proud over the city walls. "And what does the senior-ranking Jew in the Roman army think about the temple?"

"I may worship the same God as my kinsmen, but there is little else I share with them. You know I have always considered myself a Roman, first and foremost. While I have long held the assertion that Judaism is perfectly compatible with Roman law and customs, I am part of a very small minority. Even the moderates, such as Hanan ben Hanan, felt Jews could not assimilate into Roman culture without offending God."

"And the temple?" Titus persisted.

"I don't wish to see it destroyed any more than any other Jew. However, I

feel it has been desecrated beyond redemption. If God ever truly lived within its walls, he has long since departed. From a purely artistic perspective, it would be a shame if it were laid waste."

Alexander's words sounded strained to Titus, almost forced. Like his father, he knew Alexander's loyalty to Rome was absolute. And yet, he constantly lived under a racist stigma from much of the imperial nobility. There was plenty of bickering from the senate and equites when he was named Procurator of Egypt. This was one of the most sought after postings for a member of the lesser-nobility, second only in importance to Prefect of the Praetorian Guard. Many among the equites complained voraciously that such a prestigious governorship had gone to a 'filthy Jew'. Even among the emperor's most ardent supporters, who should have acclaimed Tiberius Alexander for his courage in being the first to declare Vespasian emperor, there was little but contempt and only grudging acceptance. Titus knew there wasn't much he could do to assuage the feelings of scorn towards his chief-of-staff, despite his exemplary performance during the campaign. Instead, he continued down the steps in silence to where a single cohort from Legio V was arrayed in parade formation.

Standing in front of the formation was General Cerealis, along with the legion's aquilifer, the centurion pilus prior of the cohort, and the cornicen who joined the raiding party that took the fortress. Several of the commander-in-chief's staff officers were nearby, one bearing a scroll, another a stack of silver torques. The two Jewish loyalist soldiers from the raid stood off to the right. As he eyed the formation, Titus noted, conspicuous by his absence, was the fallen valiant Centurion Julian, whose position was now occupied by his century's optio. The prince imperial took his position in the centre, in front of the assembled senior officers.

"In war," he began. "Every soldier, from the commanding legate to the newest legionary, must know when to unquestioningly follow orders and when to exercise his own initiative. We praise bravery in battle, yet a soldier's mind is a greater asset than his blade or armour. Some of the bravest among us, who would have been singled out for their gallantry, are no longer with us. Men like Centurion Julian and Trooper Sabinus, who must now receive their just reward from the gods. And while we mourn their loss, and that of every loyal soldier of Rome who has fallen during this onerous campaign, we temper those feelings of sorrow with pride and honour for the bravest among us who remain standing. It is because of the initiative of those

we call forward today, that we hold the Antonia Fortress, and no longer must look up at its walls from the outside. These men used their cunning and bravery in equal measure to achieve victory, and for that we honour them."

Titus nodded to the staff tribune holding the scroll, who then read the list of names:

"Aquilifer Gaius Marcellus, Sergeant Tiberius Carbo, Legionary Marcus Licinius, Legionary Decius Cicero, Legionary Marcus Silvanus, Legionary Gaius Strabo, Legionary Aulus Porcius, Legionary Lucius Aemillius, Legionary Sextus Curius, Legionary Manius Claudius, Legionary Spurius Octavian, Legionary Aulus Horatius, Legionary Tiberius Fabius, Cornicen Servius Collabella, Trooper Yeshua ben Levi, Trooper Ezekiel ben Judas."

The sixteen soldiers came forward and stood at attention before the commander-in-chief. Titus took a torque from another staff officer and pinned it to the cloak of each soldier, clasping each by the hand, in turn. While normally he would have addressed the Judean auxiliaries in front of their own cohort, he found it fitting that they be recognised next to their legionary brethren. It was a way of demonstrating that, despite the hellish war they had fought over the past four years, there were still many Jews who were loyal to Rome. For Cornicen Collabella, it was an especially proud moment. For musicians, whose duties involved relaying orders and playing marching music for the army rather than fighting, there was little opportunity for them to distinguish themselves. Collabella was now the only trumpeter within the Fifth Legion, and possibly the entire army, to be decorated for courage.

Having pinned the last torque, Titus addressed the assembly.

"For gallantry, cunning, and extreme bravery in the face of the enemy, you are each awarded the *Silver Torque for Valour*. As a token of my personal gratitude, and that of your emperor, Titus Flavius Vespasian, I award each of you a bounty of five hundred denarii. It is because of you that the eagles of Rome fly above Antonia once more."

He then saluted the men. They returned the courtesy. The cohort then broke into a loud applause, with shouts of approbation coming from the men in the ranks. While some may have envied their mates for this recognition from the prince imperial, there was no question that their initiative, which would have been decried as madness had they failed, had won the day. Now the army could turn its attention to the next phase of the conquest; the taking of the Temple district.



As he met with his own councillors, John of Giscala was showing the signs of wear from the relentless months of warfare. His greatest stratagem, which had destroyed the Roman siege platforms, may have also hastened their own downfall. He was now desperate to avoid any dissension from his men. When one referred to the breach in the wall as ‘the fist of God’, John ordered the man whipped and then flung from the highest walls as a Roman sympathiser.

“Simon’s forces have withdrawn back to Upper City,” one of his captains noted.

“Then we can now deal with one enemy instead of two,” John reasoned. He sought to reassure the doubters amongst his men. “The Romans may have taken the fortress, but they failed miserably to capture the Temple. The paving stones drink of their blood and thirst for more. It was through misfortune that we lost the Antonia Fortress, not any sense of courage or stratagem on the part of the Romans.”

Their council was interrupted by the entrance of one of John’s guard captains. Like most of the zealots, he was filthy and unwashed; his face and body showing signs of emaciation from ongoing want of food. Yet, his eyes remained fierce and defiant.

“What is it?” the rebel leader asked.

“It’s Josephus. He stands outside the Temple wall, demanding that you parlay with him. Many of the priests have gathered to hear him. The rooftops and walls of the Upper City are also crammed with spectators.”

John let out an exaggerated sigh. “Then I’d best go see what our wayward friend desires. Perhaps he intends to give back the fortress, before we butcher the rest of his imperial overlords.”

Accompanied by Levi and most of his captains, John slowly walked over to the western wall. Ascending the steps, he sneered with contempt at the sight of Josephus, who stood alone, devoid of his Roman armour. Fifty feet behind him was a company of infantrymen made up of bootlickers from the traitorous King Agrippa’s army. Behind them were several hundred legionaries, flanked by Syrian archers.

“I see the great traitor stands in the blood of his masters,” John said with emphasis, for the large square was saturated with dried, crimson pools.

“The blood of Jews mixes with that of the Romans,” Josephus replied. He

then smiled at Levi, despite the latter's glower of hatred. "Levi, it warms my heart to see you still live. I pray God continues to spare you, that we might put aside the sword and embrace each other as brothers once more."

Levi said nothing, but continued to stare with undying abhorrence at his former friend.

John snorted and spoke for his confidant. "We do not welcome as brothers those who betray the will of God and side with his enemies."

"You say the Romans are enemies of God, yet what have you been?" Josephus retorted. "It was not they who slew our priests and desecrated the Temple. I've noticed, since you allowed Phannias and most of the college of priests to be murdered by that creature, Simon bar Giora, there have been no daily sacraments made, as is required by our laws. Even during the darkest times of war and enslavement, the Jews have always respected God's holy shrines and offered up their sacrifices to him. General Titus is a gentile who does not subscribe to Jewish laws, yet even he finds your lack of reverence towards the Almighty to be a perverse sacrilege."

"Your Roman master can rot in the pit of hell," John shot back. "Say what you have been ordered to, witless puppet of despots, and be gone."

"Curse me all you want, but I am still a Jew. You, however, are a vile wretch; a wicked beast who takes food from the people and the sacraments from God! Yet even at this late hour, it is not too late to repent, to seek God's forgiveness for your wicked crimes. You ask me what my message is from General Titus, and it is this; come out from the Temple. If you are determined to fight until the last, then so be it. But do not defile the Temple or allow the city to suffer any more. Name the place of battle and let your fighters, as well as those of Simon, bleed for your cause. For the sake of the people, and for the sanctity of the Temple, I implore you to end this war in a manner which will not be offensive to God."

The warriors on the wall began to laugh, though there were many among the remaining priests, as well as those watching from Upper City, who were moved by Josephus' words. Among these were a pair of priests named Yeshua and Joseph. Having somehow survived the purges of both John and Simon, they were the last from the college of priests who had held their postings since before the war. Josephus knew both men well, having spent much of his early manhood in service to the Temple. Having heard all they wished to, the two men slinked away to confer with a number of Temple workers who felt the same as they. With the Romans now threatening to

assault the holy sanctum itself, the time for resistance was over.



It was not just the priests who felt the time had finally come to give themselves up to the Romans, accepting the risk that they might be killed as traitors before they could escape. Many of the witnesses from Upper City were convinced that the only way to save their lives was to surrender to General Titus. These were the wealthier families. Though cruelly treated and having suffered the deprivations brought on by starvation and disease, their condition was far less pitiful than the poor citizens from the Lower City districts. Most of these people—those who had not already given up their ghosts—were in such a fearful state of starvation that even if set at liberty, few had any hope for survival.

Simon emplaced as many of his fighters as he could spare in the northern neighbourhoods of Lower City. From there, they could launch sorties against the imperial forces laying siege to the Temple. By this point, his army was severely depleted of fighting men, having suffered thousands of casualties over the past months while losing many more to a plethora of the same diseases that laid waste to the city. He simply did not have the numbers remaining to fully man the walls of the Upper City and Herod's Fortress while still fighting the Romans for control of the Temple. And while he was more than willing to let John's fighters do most of the bleeding, he knew if the imperial army seized the inner sanctum, he would never reclaim it. Therefore, he left only a scant number of guards, mostly the wounded and infirm, to serve as watchmen along most of the remaining defences.

John's army of zealots and Idumean soldiers was equally depleted, though they were able to concentrate their numbers in a more confined space. The eastern wall of the Temple, as wells those surrounding the City of David, were minimally manned. He knew a Roman attack from the east was unlikely, what with the bulk of their forces concentrated near the Antonia Forces.

Because of this, Yeshua and Joseph were able to escape with comparable ease. As two of the only remaining priests who could perform the sacraments, they were given a measure of latitude and freedom of movement by John's fighters. With the help of a deserting zealot, they crept out of the city under the cover of night via a small gate along the southeast section of the City of

David. The steep slopes of the Kidron Valley precluded the Romans from even attempting to launch an assault from this direction, so it was often left unmanned. The stench of rotting corpses strewn all along the wall made the men wretch. Yeshua fought back his tears, praying fervently for the souls of those whose mortal remains had been so grotesquely desecrated.

And while the priests navigated the blackness of the valley, scores of Jewish nobles absconded from Upper City, using ropes with slings to lower themselves down. Many silently gave thanks to God that they had escaped without rousing the guards. In the same breaths, they lamented their family members who were either unable or unwilling to throw themselves upon the mercy of the Romans. Anticipating possible desertions from this quarter, Titus ordered that all soldiers placed on picquet duty be either legionaries or Judean loyalists. He still deeply mistrusted the Syrian and Samaritan auxiliaries and did not want to risk a repeat of the gruesome slaughter of so many who had attempted to defect. Though he was tempted to dismiss the lot of them as ill-disciplined renegades, he knew he needed every soldier he could muster if Jerusalem was to be taken.

A series of shouts from imperial sentries alerted both Jew and Roman alike of the escapees. The priests, as well as the numerous citizens, were taken into custody without any blood being shed. The zealots, aware of the defections, doubled the number of guards along the walls and again threatened with death any who would betray them to the Romans.



The following morning, the prince imperial met with the assembled mass of absconders. They numbered nearly a thousand total and were not in nearly as fearful a state as the poorest of Jerusalem’s citizens. Titus noted, though there were both men and women among the throng, there were very few children. Even among the wealthy, children were the first to succumb to pestilence and the want of food. As he walked through the crowd, most remained seated, eating crusts of bread the Romans had offered them, keeping their eyes downcast. They had escaped the horrors of death that awaited those who remained, but knew they were now slaves; subject to the same fate as their ancestors in Egypt during the time of Moses. Titus sought to reassure them. Using Josephus as an interpreter, he spoke at length to the people.

“People of Jerusalem, know it is with friendship and compassion that the emperor welcomes you. You fear you will be sold into slavery, but that is not how Rome treats those who willingly desert their vile oppressors. Caesar wishes you to know that he faults none of you for not deserting sooner. You were kept as slaves by those who have defiled your holy city. There is a city to the west, Jamnia, where Jews wishing to escape from the tyrants John and Simon have been allowed to resettle. A school of Judaism has even been established by one of your most revered scholars, Yohanan ben Zakki.”

There was a great stirring amongst the people, for they knew Yohanan well. At one hundred years of age, he was the oldest known man still living in Judea. He was so revered as a rabbi and scholar that no one, not even John of Giscala or Simon bar Giora, would dare threaten his person. Even the Sicarii butcher, Eleazar ben Yair, esteemed Yohanan as one of God’s chosen messengers. He had left the city two years before, surrendering to Vespasian, who he proclaimed as *‘Lord Emperor’*. For all the people knew, Yohanan had been either enslaved or killed. To hear that he lived and was allowed to establish a rabbinical school in Jamnia was the first piece of blessed news the poor citizens of Jerusalem had heard in months.

Titus continued, “A contingent of imperial cavalry will escort you to where you will be welcomed by your fellow Jews. But know that this is not compulsory, for you are not slaves. Any not wishing to head for Jamnia are free to go where they please.”

Titus’ words brought much relief to the Jews, though few appeared to even acknowledge his presence. Knowing both Simon and John would declare these people had been murdered by the Romans, thus preventing further desertions, Titus invited a number of the more well-known Jewish nobles to accompany some of the Judean loyalist cavalry in patrols around the city. They could call out to those who remained trapped inside, letting them know that the Romans had treated them charitably. This would prove to be yet another vain attempt at finding a peaceful end to the hellish struggle for Jerusalem, for John was clever in speech and was able to convince the beleaguered people that these nobles only said such things under extreme duress. As the Calends of August approached, Titus and the imperial army prepared for the savage battle to seize the Temple.

Chapter XXV: Fires of Fury

The Temple District, Jerusalem
August, 70 A.D.
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For both Roman and Jew alike, it was clear that the rebels were using the Temple to make their final stand against the imperial onslaught. Titus had ordered the ramps and siege works facing the Antonia Fortress dismantled and re-established within the Temple district. Those facing the First Wall leading into the Upper City were left in place, for the commander-in-chief reckoned there would be numerous fighters who would refuse to hand the city over even after the Temple fell. A week after ordering the ramps moved, Titus called a council of war to decide how to proceed with the arduous task of taking the inner sanctum.

"If General Placidus had his way, he'd burn the bloody thing down," Alexander remarked.

"And why not?" the auxilia commander replied bitterly. "These filthy bastards have made our soldiers bleed with every step into Jerusalem. By Juno's cunt, why should we allow them any sort of reprieve? If we spare that abomination, they'll use it as a rallying place for future rebellions."

"No," Josephus interrupted, shaking his head. "The rebels have desecrated the Temple, and the people know this; but you can restore it." He then looked to Titus. "Please, general, I beg of you."

"Oh, get stuffed already!" Placidus shot back. "Your fucking people think they can rebel against Rome and get away with it. I say we teach them a lesson that will stand the test of time. General, your father told me to break these people before we even assaulted Jotapata. And what better way to smash what remains of their resolve?"

Alexander interjected, "While I understand General Placidus' reasoning, I must agree with our friend, Josephus."

"As if your opinion matters here," Placidus spat. "You're a damned Jew, so of course you want your precious temple spared!"

"Alright, Placidus, you've made your point," Titus said. He then turned to

his legates. “What say you?”

The legion commanders were equally divided on the issue. Bassus and Cerealis, who had only joined the fray during the past year, agreed with Placidus; the temple should be razed to the ground. Conversely, Domitius and Thrasea were of the opinion that measures should be taken to save the structure.

It was a bit of a surprise coming from Thrasea, for it was his Twelfth Legion which suffered most during the early days of the war. However, his resolve at preserving the temple was rather tepid. “It would make a fine prize,” he noted. “However, I don’t want to lose a thousand troops taking the damned thing. Save it if we can, but let us not put our soldiers at any more risk than necessary.”

Titus looked to Josephus.

He gave a nod of resignation and then replied, “If you were to see the inside of the Temple, you would marvel in its beauty. Save it, and decide for yourself if it compares to that of the most magnificent monuments in Rome.”

“It would be a fine prize,” Titus said, after a few moments’ pause. “It will be our gift to the emperor. No doubt he will wish to see if for himself, should it prove to be as magnificent as you say.”

Privately, Titus admitted that part of his desire to save the Temple of Jerusalem was simple curiosity. He had heard countless stories about its grandeur, that it possessed a volume of wealth that rivalled even the most ostentatious palaces in Rome. His motives were also political. If the Romans saved the temple, they could rightly claim they had preserved it, saving it from the desecration of the zealots. Having made his decision, he and his commanding officers set about planning the coming assault.



From a distance, one would gather that the Antonia Fortress was connected directly to the Temple. This was an illusion. There was, in reality, a distance of about sixty meters between the two. Wooden porticoes connected them; however, Titus was reluctant to use these for the attack, fearing they could be cut or set fire. Instead, he selected a force of a thousand soldiers from each legion, along with an equal number of auxilia infantry. The vast open space of the Temple district allowed him to finally utilise his corps of cavalry; and so a thousand were selected from their ranks as well.

Scorpions and archers manned the walls of the fortress, though their support would be limited to any engagements that occurred within about two hundred meters of their high walls.

Over several days, while legionaries toiled with bringing the support structures and endless baskets of dirt from the ramps, battering rams levelled the eastern wall of the Antonia Fortress. Titus ordered this done so that the legions might unleash their full measure at once, rather than trying to get several thousand men piecemeal through a couple of gates. On the afternoon when the last of the wall was levelled, Titus ordered his assault troops to prepare for the attack.

"We will wait until midnight," he explained. "The Jews are exhausted from fighting and want of food. We've caught them sleeping before. This will be our best opportunity to catch them off-guard."



Though his reasoning was sound, given recent history, Titus had underestimated the inhuman resolve of his foes. A huge force of zealots guarded the walls of the inner sanctum, and he knew they would have to be defeated before they could assault with siege towers and ladders. Of great concern for the Romans was the tile paving stones, which proved difficult to maintain purchase on in their hobnailed caligae. Many recalled the ignominious fate of Centurion Julian. As such, a few elected to remove their sandals and go into battle barefoot.

"I'd rather get sore feet than fall on my ass and gutted by a zealot spear," a decanus explained. Centurions allowed their men to remove their caligae, if they chose to do so. They, too, were concerned about losing their footing.

Even under the cover of night, the sound of thousands of marching feet and the clattering of horse hooves announced the imperial army's approach. Far from being sound asleep, the zealots had learned their lesson and were ready for the coming onslaught. With shouts and horn blows, they rose up and attacked the Romans with surprising fury.

So quick was their assault, that the lead ranks of legionaries were unable to employ their javelins and were forced to drop them and draw their gladii. Subsequent ranks unleashed punishing volleys despite their inability to see their enemies and inflicted numerous casualties. The regiments of horse rode in a wide arc around the right, hoping to exploit the Judean flank. They, too,

were hindered by the slick paving tiles that prohibited their horses from advancing at more than a trot.



Atop the fortress ramparts, Centurion Nicanor joined his old friend, Tribune Artorius. They watched the ongoing battle below. Though initially distraught that the Fifth Cohort was not selected to represent the Tenth Legion, he could now see that the battle was degrading into a frenzied stalemate.

“Every time we think these Jews are beaten, they continue to surprise us,” he lamented.

“And my scorpion crews can’t see a damn thing,” Gaius added. “That’s why I ordered them to overshoot rather than under. As for my archers, they are fucking useless in this mess.”

“Do you ever miss being on a battle line?”

“At times; though you know my sword arm never did fully recover after Bedriacum. Had I been returned to the line, there’s a good chance I’d be a rotting corpse by now.”

Gaius ordered his archers to stand down, and for his scorpions to focus their attention on any movement they saw along the inner walls. The entire northern and western expanses of the Temple district had become one massive battlefield. It was difficult to see any sort of details, but it appeared, to the south, the attacks had stalled.



Titus’ assault force was being assailed on two fronts; John attacking from the temple itself, and Simon’s fighters coming from Lower City. As was the case in every battle leading up to this, the Jewish warriors’ fanatical resolve clashed against Roman discipline and armour. And though the imperial army overall had them badly outnumbered, the confines of urban combat precluded them from utilising their superior strength. Because the rebels were fighting from well-established positions within the city, during every single engagement they had held the numerical advantage. Such was the case once again during this battle for the Temple district. Though Titus had mustered his largest assault force yet, numbering nearly nine thousand strong, the

combined forces of John and Simon had them outmatched by more than two-to-one.

Rather than giving the Romans a decided advantage, the clinging darkness had evened the odds. No one, from the observers on the fortress towers to those on the ground, could gage the enemy's strength or disposition. For their part, the Jews needed only to hold their ground and prevent the Romans from storming the Temple.

For Titus it was especially maddening. He knew that any success or failure in this siege fell upon his shoulders, and it frustrated him to know he had misjudged his foes' steadfastness yet again. He stood on the battle line with the cohorts from his former legion, the Fifteenth Apollinaris. Master Centurion Ralla welcomed his former legate to fight beside his elite First Cohort. The primus pilus was wounded during the chaotic struggle and was bleeding profusely from a sword thrust to the leg and was carried to the rear of the formation.

Instinctively, Titus picked up Ralla's shield and assumed his position on the battle line, giving the orders for passage-of-lines while enduring the same risks as his soldiers. In the darkness, the zealots did not realise it was the prince imperial who faced them on a battle line. Had they known this, there was little doubt they would have focused all of their efforts on his death or capture. And while Titus' courage endeared him to his soldiers, it also prevented him from maintaining control over his army. However, as he would later state to a critical Tiberius Alexander, "No one could have coordinated the army in the black of night."

After several hours of exhaustive struggle, both sides began to slowly withdraw from the struggle. The narrow approaches into the fortress and Temple district prohibited the Romans from utilising a reserve force to exploit any enemy weaknesses. As for the Jewish rebels, they had no reserves left, and at two hours before sunrise their strength failed them as well. With neither side able to claim victory, both Roman and Judean armies withdrew to their respective strongholds. The imperial forces always made every effort to extract their dead and wounded; however, in the darkness many of their fallen were unintentionally left where they fell. With nihilistic contempt for death, the zealots of both factions left their dead and badly injured. Any who could not save himself was left to his fate.



The following morning, two thousand legionaries from the Fifth and Fifteenth Legions, along with twice as many auxilia troopers, attempted to scale the walls of the temple itself. Many accepted the hazard of attacking via the wooden cloisters that connected the temple to the Antonia Fortress. The hope was that the zealots would be too spent from the night before to make a viable defence.

The sun shone into the faces of the assaulting legionaries as they raised their tall ladders against the eastern wall to the inner temple complex. The ramparts were covered in wooden porticos, painted with silver and gold leaf. The first legionaries up the ladders were met with a fearful surprise as dozens of zealots rose up from behind the defences, gave a loud cry, and attacked. One poor man took a sword thrust to the face, sending him falling to his death forty feet below. Another was pulled from the ladder and his throat cut before being unceremoniously dropped from the wall.

The deaths of their mates filled the remaining soldiers with fury, and they gave a cry of their own as they stormed the porticos. Ten ladders leaned against the ramparts, limiting the number of attackers who could storm the defences at one time. However, in less than a minute, legionaries had successfully scaled the porticoes and driven the zealots back far enough to allow their companions safe passage. Enraged soldiers plunged their gladii into the exposed guts of their foes, sending the rebels fleeing from the ramparts. At the same time, hundreds of auxilia troopers stormed across the tall cloisters that connected the Antonia Fortress to the inner temple complex. From Titus' observation point atop one of the fortress towers, it appeared the temple would fall within the hour.

"Fire!" A frantic voice shouted near the northeast ramparts of the temple wall. The commander-in-chief grimaced, as he saw plumes of smoke rise from the defences. All along the ramparts, the porticos were being set ablaze by the desperate zealots. The timber was extremely dry, flames devouring the covered wooden structures in a matter of moments.

"Sound recall," Titus ordered his cornicen.

Down below, he could see legionaries already scrambling down the ladders. As the flames consumed a section of the ramparts, one of the ladders became dislodged and tipped onto its side, sending several legionaries falling to their deaths. A few who survived the fall, saved only by their armour, were so badly crippled they would never walk again.

Along the defences, a hundred zealots refused to retreat into the temple courtyard; instead sacrificing themselves by preventing the Romans from retreating. The connecting cloisters were already ablaze with fifty auxilia troopers trapped by the zealots and the encompassing inferno. The rebels cared nothing about their own deaths, seeming to relish the horrifying pain brought on by the extreme heat of the flames. In their desperation, several of the auxiliaries jumped from the ramparts. Only one survived, and this was because the man's friend below offered to help catch him. Sadly, though the trooper survived, his leg was broken and his friend killed.



Titus came down from the fortress as the wounded were being carried away to the nearest camp hospital. He would later learn that thirty legionaries and sixty-five auxilia troopers were killed during the disaster and another forty wounded between them. It left the prince imperial extremely bitter, knowing a disproportionate number were dead because they had been consumed by the fire now encircling the temple complex. He said to Josephus, "If your people's hell exists, there is the wall leading into it."

Josephus swallowed hard, suddenly fearful for the safety of the holy sanctum. While the temple complex was very large and the fires along the ramparts of little threat to the structures within, he feared the Romans would, in their growing fury, destroy it all.

As a flustered Tribune Gaius Artorius walked the path between the fortress and the rows of tents serving as a field hospital, he was stopped by a group of soldiers bearing an injured auxilia trooper on a stretcher.

"Beg your pardon, sir," one of the men said. "But you're Tribune Artorius, the head siege engineer?"

"I am."

"Well, you're not going to believe it, but this fellow has the same name as you."

"Does he, now?" Gaius gave a bemused grin and looked down at the man.

His face was sweaty, and he gritted his teeth in pain, clutching at his broken leg. "Yes, sir…my name is Sextus Artorius. My family came from Germania Superior."

Gaius gave a nod of appreciation. "Given my family's history in Germania, it would not surprise me to learn I have cousins among the lesser-

civilised realms of the empire." He then added with a wink, "Of course, we won't tell the other members of the equites that we might be cousins."

"Of course, sir," the trooper said, trying to smile through the pain.

"Do take care, 'cousin'," the tribune stressed. "I hope your leg mends properly."

"Thank you, sir." Sextus did his best to salute the tribune before his mates carried him away.

"You really think he might be a relative of yours?" Centurion Vorenus asked, having overheard the conversation.

"No idea. I know my father and grandfather served for many years along the Rhine. Who knows? Maybe one of them sired a bastard or two that decided to take the family name."

Chapter XXVI: Storming the Gates of Heaven

Antonia Fortress
9 August, 70 A.D.



Burning of the Temple

The burning of the cloisters and the terrible deaths of scores of imperial soldiers was crushing any lingering feelings of mercy among the Romans. Few gave any thought to taking the Temple intact; instead, their thoughts were consumed with exterminating the bastards who had incinerated their friends. Even among the Jewish loyalists there were feelings of anger that conflicted strongly with saving the greatest bastion of their faith.

"Why has God allowed so many of those who would preserve his holy places perish?" many an allied Jewish auxiliary bitterly asked.

It was these same soldiers who brought to Titus a pair of deserters who fled from the flames of the cloisters. These men were well known to the Jewish loyalists, who beat them about the face and body before dragging them before the prince imperial.

"These filthy rats were caught fleeing from the fire," the Judean captain explained. "This piece of shit is Ananus of Emmaus. He is one of Simon's chief henchmen and executioners."

"I have done my duty," the man protested. "No different than any of

you."

The Jewish captain responded by punching him in the stomach. After a moment, Ananus righted himself and broke into a fit of maniacal laughter. He addressed Titus, for he spoke passable Latin.

"And what of you, Roman? You gave us your right hand of security, a promise that any who surrendered would be treated charitably."

"You were driven to desert out of cowardice rather than any natural inclination," Titus retorted. "I know well the barbarism you have inflicted upon your own people. Any who remain in the temple do so because they are unwilling to face justice for their crimes. I should nail you both to crosses and make an example of you."

"You speak of the cruelties we inflicted on our people, yet are they any worse than yours? Tell me, defiler, how many Jews have been butchered by your own hand? How many women and children? Or do you have your lackeys do your killing?" He shook his head. "Slay me, I no longer care. My soul is already dead, and you cannot hurt me anymore. All our deaths will prove is that the word of a Roman prince is as worthless as pig shit."

Though the prince imperial was filled with utter contempt for these pathetic creatures, his sense of honour overcame his rage. "Take them away and release them into the wilderness," he ordered the Judean captain.

"Wait, what about food?" Ananus asked. "We've had so little in days."

Titus glared at him and added, "Have him whipped first and then released. Twenty lashes should constrain his tongue."

Needing to clear his mind, the commander-in-chief took a long walk around the siege works surrounding the inner sanctum. He had tasked five cohorts from the Fifth Legion with securing the southern approaches into the Temple district from incursion by Simon's forces. That the two prisoners taken were both from his faction meant John's zealots within the temple could be substantially reinforced. Regardless, he knew that starvation and casualties had taken their toll. If only he could break the walls to the inner sanctum and be done with it! The booming crack of battering rams echoed as crews attempted to undermine the walls, as well as the northern and western gates.

"It's no good, general," Tribune Gaius Artorius reported, as he walked over and saluted. "These walls are the soundest of the entire city, except perhaps those of Herod's Fortress. The individual blocks are extremely thick and jointed. Even Nico has been ineffective."

“What of the crews working with pry bars?” the commander-in-chief asked.

“They’ve had a bit more success,” Gaius conceded. “However, all they’ve managed to do is undermine a few of the outer blocks on either side of the north gate. They cannot even reach the next row, and because the blocks are jointed, those directly above the gap will not budge. To be honest, sir, I’m not sure what else to do. We saw what happened when we tried using ladders.”

“And according to Josephus, the only way down the ramparts was via wooden stairs, which are likely burned away.”

Gaius shook his head in frustration. The tribune was clearly flustered. After all the months of bloody toil, when they were so close to claiming the temple of the Jewish god, the inner sanctum seemed almost impregnable. “Only one thing left we can do.” He looked Titus in the eye, sensing his consent. “Burn the gates.”



The gates to the inner sanctum were massive and took a dozen men to open and close. Over two feet thick, they were held together by bands of both iron and silver. Battering rams had relentlessly pounded away on them for days. Still they would not budge. A few Judean soldiers stated perhaps God was holding the Romans back.

“Unlikely,” Alexander said to Titus, having heard such talk. “I am still of a mind that God has abandoned this place. The gates are wood and metal, nothing more.”

He and the prince imperial watched as scores of soldiers carried wood, brush, and straw, forming a large pile against each of the gates. Much of the kindling was taken from the outer siege ramps which had since been dismantled. As the first flames licked up the piles of dry timber, the zealot defenders withdrew from the walls.

“Come on, come on,” Titus said quietly, watching intently for the flames to engulf the gates. The fires, particularly those of dried brush, were now burning extremely hot, making it impossible for any of his men to get close to them. Finally, after more than an hour, the thick timber of the western gate caught fire. The flames climbed up to the top, the intense heat quickly melting the silver bands. Rivets popped, and soon the thick iron bands began to fall away. The assembled mass of imperial soldiers cheered, as they

watched the flames engulf each of the gates. Once consumed, there would be nothing left to stop them.



The next day, Titus met with his senior leaders for a final council of war before storming the gates of the temple. With Alexander, Bassus, Cerealis, and Thrasea were the Judean procurator, Antonius Julianus, and King Agrippa's senior general, Externius. Both had recently arrived from Caesarea and were anxious to observe the final pacification of Jerusalem. When asking their advice on what should be done, General Placidus stressed once again that they should destroy the temple.

"Even if the Jews continue to occupy the inner sanctum and fight us there, I do not wish to avenge ourselves on an inanimate object," Titus countered.

"I agree," Cerealis remarked. "Let us slaughter the zealots and crucify their leaders, but keep the temple as a prize for the emperor."

"Rams are smashing away the remnants of the gates," Bassus added. "And siege crews are clearing away the debris. So far, there have been no sorties made by the zealots to stop them."

"Very good," Titus replied. "Then we'll finish work on clearing paths for our soldiers. Place ample guards on each of the gates, allow no one in or out. Have your assault cohorts get plenty of rest. We will take the temple tomorrow at dawn."



"We are finished," Levi muttered dejectedly.

It was a strange thing to say, having just repulsed the Romans from the walls. Yet even watching their ladders fall, with soldiers being smashed upon the paving tiles, could do little to assuage their feelings of impending defeat. The fires upon the gates had engulfed the outer cloisters and porticos, driving their men away from the walls. The only reason the Romans would not be able to assault over the ramparts was because the wooden stairs had also collapsed. Now, two of the massive gates were annihilated by both fire and battering ram. The path to the sacred Temple was wide open to the imperial army.

John said nothing as he, Levi, and a few others sat atop the stairs that led into the inner sanctum. In the past, he had ordered men killed for speaking of anything except total victory. But at this late hour, even he knew the end was imminent. Every man trapped within the Temple understood this. Simon bar Giora, who still held Herod's Fortress, was perhaps the only man who still believed the Romans could be defeated.

"If God is to deny us victory, then we can at least end this as martyrs," he said at last. John then stood and addressed the gathering mob. "Brothers, hear me! I will not sit here and wait for the Romans to spill my blood within God's holiest shrine. We must now take the fight to them and let the defilers know they will not set one foot within this sacred place so long as any of us draws breath!"

Despite the weeks of deprivation, and now the dejected assumption that the end was near, his men still rose up and gave a loud cheer, raising their weapons high. With the volunteers from Simon's faction, who'd come to help defend the Temple, John's surviving forces numbered roughly four thousand fighting men. It would be enough.

It was early evening and the Romans had yet to attack. He speculated that they would not come until morning. The attempted night-time assaults had gone poorly for them, and he assumed they would not want to make their final sortie against the Temple blind.

The imperial camp to the south of the inner Temple appeared to be the weakest. John's only regret was there was no way to send word to Simon, so that his fighters could launch a simultaneous assault from Lower City, catching the Romans from both front and behind. He could only hope that the sounds of fighting would alert his wayward ally, spurring him into action. Granted, he knew little about the state of Simon's remaining forces or their condition. If there was any strength or resolve left in them, then surely they would throw the last of their might into this final defence of the Temple!

There were no trumpet blasts to announce the attack. John, having donned his armour, drew his short sword and started to run towards the smouldering ruins of the south gate. As they stepped into the outer Temple district, the mass of zealots gave a loud battle cry and charged the imperial soldiers.

The Romans, however, were ready for them, unleashing their javelins before drawing their blades and settling into their fighting stances. In a testament to their courage, the Jewish vanguard showed utter contempt for

death, even as many of their friends fell to the storm of javelins. One man, impaled through the chest, appeared to grab the shaft of the javelin and drive it home, hastening his own demise.

They smashed into the walls of legionary shields, many begging for death. The Romans were happy to oblige, as swaths of zealots were killed or badly maimed in the opening moments of battle, either by pila volleys or flashing stabs from imperial blades. Those who sacrificed themselves by crashing into the shield wall managed to open a series of gaps in the line. These still proved difficult for the next wave to exploit, for the bodies of their dead and dying friends had created a series of tripping hazards in the dark.

Because the Romans knew the rebels would make one last sortie of defiance, they were well prepared for the onslaught. There were no mad rushes of frantic soldiers attempting to make their way into the fray, blinded by the night. Instead, they were already formed into battle lines, their discipline and armour protecting them against the zealot swarm.



The Siliana Regiment of Horse was paraded in the courtyard of the Antonia Fortress, having been designated as the army's mobile reserve force. Commander Liberius heard the sounds of fighting in the distance and ordered his men to stand-to and make ready to ride out. He then saw Titus running along the ramparts, his gaze fixed on the growing battle.

"What news, general?" Liberius called up.

"The rebels have launched a sortie out of the south gate," Titus responded. "Take your regiment and flank those bastards. I'll have six cohorts of auxilia infantry ready to support you."

The cavalry officer shouted a series of orders to his men. Within moments all were mounted, lances and swords at the ready.

Liberius drew his spatha and called over his shoulder, *"By companies, echelon right, on me!"* He kicked his horse into a canter.

His men raised their spears and swords high and shouted in a surge of fury. The hooves of their mounts clattered on the broken paving stones, as five hundred imperial horsemen rode towards the sounds of battle.

The relief came not a moment too soon for the five cohorts from Legio V. Outnumbered more than two-to-one, they were starting to buckle under the zealots' relentless surge. Hundreds of fighters were threatening their left

flank which compelled the entire formation to shift to meet this threat. The battle lines now curved in an arc, almost reaching the southern wall that separated the Temple district from Lower City. Had John been able to coordinate with Simon bar Giora, this force of legionaries could have been enveloped from behind and destroyed long before help arrived.

Commander Liberius sensed the distressed state they were in. At one hundred meters he kicked his horse into a sprint.

"Charge!"

The cries of rage from the wall of horsemen caused many a zealot to turn about in confusion. They had placed all their focus on destroying this band of legionaries, yet they neglected to plan for the other imperial forces in the area. As his lines of troopers crashed into the horde, with horses bowling men over from the sheer weight of their onslaught, Liberius thrust his spatha downward catching a Jewish fighter on the side of his crown. The blade cracked the skull, tearing away strips of flesh as the warrior fell to the ground, blood spurting from the wound. He cried out, as he was trampled by the subsequent waves of imperial horsemen.

The charge of the Siliana cavalry shattered the zealot's assault on the Roman left flank; however, the majority still continued to press their attack on the cohorts' centre. Dead and wounded continued to fall, the ground becoming slick from blood and entrails. The slippery terrain made it difficult for either side to press any sort of advantage. After half an hour of savage fighting, fatigue began to overwhelm the Jewish zealots. While the Romans were comparatively well-rested and fed, the rebels had been suffering months of food deprivation and malnutrition. Despite their fanaticism and courage, they simply did not have the physical strength left to sustain their assault.

John continued to swing his sword wildly, smashing it against the shields of the imperial soldiers in front of him. He tried to get his men to exploit the opening whenever legionaries executed a passage-of-lines, yet their fatigue was great and the Roman drill too quick and precise. He found himself tripping on and over the bodies of the fallen. As his men were slowly pushed back, he implored them to press the attack once more.

"No! Do not give them any ground! Keep fighting!"

The soldier to his front tilted his shield, smashing the zealot leader in the face with the bottom edge. Fortunately for John, the legionary's momentum was halted by several bodies at his feet, and he only caught him with a

glancing blow. Still, it was enough to rattle the zealot. He stumbled backwards into the arms of several of his warriors. Their attack foundering, they dragged their wobbly leader back to the inner sanctuary.

On the Roman left, Commander Liberius was wheeling his companies away from the battle, intent on reforming and executing another charge. Once the zealots had recovered from the onslaught of their last assault, the close quarters fighting had evened the odds considerably, with the imperial horsemen unable to manoeuver effectively. Several troopers, along with a decurion, were struck down or wrenched from their mounts and slain. The maddened Jews continued to hack away at their shattered bodies long after they were dead.

"*Reform!*" Liberius shouted, raising his spatha high once they were clear of the scrum. His trumpeter, bleeding from a hideous gash to his right arm, managed to raise his horn and sound the order.

Many of the zealots took this withdrawal to mean they had won the day, and they renewed their assault on the Fifth Legion's cohorts. However, the Roman infantrymen had reformed their battle lines, with fresh troops rotated into the front rank. They countered the Judean assault with a charge of their own, shattering the rebel assault with the weight of their armour and shields. The sounds of hundreds of auxilia infantrymen rushing towards the fray alerted the surviving zealots, compelling them to withdraw into the Temple, lest they be surrounded and torn to pieces.



For John of Giscala, it had been an exhausting ordeal. He had a terrible headache, and he was greatly fatigued. Nearly a quarter of his remaining zealots had been left dead or injured on the blood-stained grounds of the outer Temple district. For those who had not been able to escape behind the inner wall, only one fate awaited them; crucifixion.

"Such is the fate that awaits all of us," the zealot leader muttered under his breath. He had no way of knowing how many Romans had fallen this evening. It was enough to know that their blood mingled between the paving stones, and that his warriors were keeping their oaths to make the invaders pay a terrible price for every scrap of ground.

"Rest now, my friends," John said. "Tomorrow we shall stand or fall by

the grace of God."



A red sky dawned the next morning, adding a poetic and visceral feel to the scene of carnage that had become the district surrounding the temple. The previous evening's assault had done nothing to hinder the Romans' resolve. If anything, it added to their ferocity. The zealots had to know their cause was lost, and that the imperial soldiers held the continued attempts at defiance as contemptuous and futile.

"Fortune favours the bold, but not the foolish," Tiberius Alexander said, as he joined Titus near the assault forces at the western gate.

The commander-in-chief concurred, his expression stoic. He knew the Jewish temple would fall this day, and with it the last bastion of zealot defiance. He also knew that, as Josephus had predicted, the defenders would fight to the death.

Select cohorts from Legio XII were given the honour of attacking via the north gate. Master Centurion Cinna and his men were anxious to finally avenge themselves for Beth Horon. Titus' own Legio XV, led by Legate Domitius, would attack from the west. Legio V still maintained a defensive position to the south, keeping a watchful eye for any incursions from the Lower City. Legio X was kept in reserve; its cohorts encamped within and just west of the Antonia Fortress. The remainder of the army, including most of Placidus' auxilia corps, maintained the string of forts surrounding the city.



Just outside the north gate to the temple, General Thrasea had given Master Centurion Cinna and the First Cohort the honour of leading the assault. The primus pilus' gaze was cold, his heart pounding in his chest as the horrifying memories from four years ago surged to the forefront of his mind. So many of his friends and brothers-in-arms had perished during those terrible days, and he was determined to at last give their spirits justice. Indeed, it was only by unbreakable discipline and Fortuna's favour that any of the Twelfth Legion had survived the ordeal.

Cinna drew his gladius and turned to address the assault cohorts. "*Today, the blood of our brothers will at last be avenged! There will be no retreat, no*

surrender. Those of us who fall will be welcomed into Elysium by those who've gone before us. And those who survive will reap the honour and glory of having destroyed the murderers of our brethren, so that their spirits may at last rest in peace. Roma Victrix!"

"Roma Victrix!" his legionaries shouted, raising their gladii in salute. Every soldier, from the survivors of Beth Horon to the newer recruits who had since bled beside them, was filled with the bloodlust of vengeance.

In the distance, the echo of a dozen cornicen horns reverberated throughout the city. Cinna gritted his teeth, his greatest struggle was not allowing his own bloodlust to overcome his discipline. He waved his gladius in an arc, and at a quick jog led the First Cohort towards the gate.

Hundreds of enemy fighters awaited them on the other side. They were still feeling the ill effects of the previous evening's battle, and they quickly bowed under the crashing wall of shields. While the elite First Cohort held the centre of the battle line, the follow-on elements broke either left or right, attempting to envelope the zealots and pin their backs against the inner sanctum.

From the east, the Fifteenth Legion, led by General Titus, surged into the inner courtyard. No Roman had ever set foot inside this holy site, and as Josephus watched from his place near the legion's aquilifer, he fought back tears of sorrow. He was still a man who revered God's holiest of shrines, and to watch Jew and gentile massacre each other on its steps was an abomination.

The inner courtyard contained a number of buildings besides the inner sanctum, and the space was very confined. The zealot attempts to keep the Romans at bay were quickly proving futile, as more and more imperial troops stormed into the complex. The few remaining priests cried out in dismay. They stood atop the tall dais which served as the sacrificial altar. These men were shown no mercy and were butchered by rampaging legionaries.

Along the north side, the battle was quickly turning into a slaughter. The emaciated rebels proved no match for the relentless onslaught of the Twelfth. And while it was only right that they be allowed to take part in this final assault, the Fulminata Legion's fury would prove impossible to contain.

Among the smouldering ruins of the north gate were piles of burning embers. A legionary, whose name was lost to history, skewered a large brand with his gladius. Seeing a gap in the battle lines, he rushed towards a large

wooden window painted in gold leaf. Silk curtains were draped on the inside. The soldier thrust the glowing embers in, quickly setting them afire. Grinning in malicious glee, he re-joined his century's battle line as fire took hold of the temple.



The fires began to spread at an alarming rate, as flames engulfed the interior drapes and dry wooden porticos. John was leading a last stand on the steps into the sanctum when he was alerted to this disastrous turn of events.

"No!" he shouted in horror. While he had prepared himself to die defending God's Temple, the thought of the sanctum being destroyed was unfathomable.

Six hundred years had passed since the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, had destroyed the previous temple. That God would allow this to happen again shattered what remained of John's soul.

Ordering most of his men to maintain the fight on the steps, he grabbed twenty fighters and rushed into the inner sanctum. They ran through the foyers and hallways, past the Holy-of-Hollies, and into the long row of back rooms now billowing with smoke. The outside porches were swarming with Roman soldiers. As zealots grabbed what buckets of water there were, along with heavy blankets and draperies to put the fires out, they were slain by the imperial soldiers, many of whom cared little for their commander-in-chief's sentiments about saving the temple as an ornament for Emperor Vespasian. Their hatred was directed not just at the zealots, but at Judaism itself.



An additional tragedy for Josephus was the fate of his beloved father, Mathias. The old priest was kept in a locked room at the back of the Temple. John had repeatedly referred to him as his guest, even providing him with a meagre ration of food and water, yet there was no mistaking he was the Giscalan's prisoner. Sadly for Mathias, the burning of the rear porticos sealed his fate. He could hear the sounds of fighting, and he knew the zealots would not hold for long against the imperial army's overwhelming numbers. The smell of smoke told him of the more immediate danger. He banged on the door, screaming for any who could hear to release him. His pleas were in

vain, for even if any did wish to set him at liberty, the flames now consumed the corridor. Mathias choked on the clouds of black smoked that now filled the room. It was a small mercy that he succumbed to smoke inhalation before the fires consumed him.



Titus took a deep breath of satisfaction. The soldiers of the Fifteenth Legion quickly routed what remained of zealot resistance. Within twenty minutes of storming the gates, the rebels were slain or had fled. Those who escaped via the east gate would find two regiments of auxilia cavalry waiting for them. Still, there were other passages and tunnels unknown to the Romans, which some of the fighters managed to reach before they could be cut down.

The prince imperial's sense of relief, however, was short-lived.

"God have mercy," Josephus said quietly. The Jewish scholar then pointed to the north side of the Temple. *"Look!"*

Titus swore under his breath. *"Idiots!"* The commander-in-chief found Legate Domitius and Master Centurion Ralla, urging them to follow him into the temple.

Josephus followed in despair. He had finally returned home, only to watch as the very symbol of God's beauty was being consumed by fire.

"Get water!" Titus shouted to any who could hear him. "Put the damned fire out!"

He repeated his orders time and again, yet was completely ignored. No pleas or threats moved his soldiers, and more than once he heard legionaries shouting, *'Burn the fucking place to the ground!'*

The army had gone completely mad. The legendary discipline of the legions dissipated into savage barbarism. Hundreds of temple workers and acolytes lived within the temple. These men were dragged onto the steps, where their throats were cut. A sickening waterfall of blood covered the once-sacred stairs, pooling at the base. Knowing that it was hopeless, Titus sheathed his spatha and started to slowly walk into the inner sanctum.

"What are you doing, sir?" Domitius asked in confusion.

"I want to see it for myself before our army destroys what's left."

Most of the inner rooms were still intact. Only those along the northern wall were burning. Titus knew the Temple of Jerusalem was not long for this

world. Accompanied by Josephus, who openly wept, he walked calmly through the various rooms and holy places. The tapestries were gorgeous, covered in gold and silver thread, some depicting scenes from Judaism's ancient history. The furnishings were elegant, rivalling even those at the imperial palace in Rome. The piles of tableware and other implements were made of gold, silver, and highly-polished bronze.

"It is as beautiful as you said," Titus said to Josephus with sad appreciation.

Satisfied with the unstoppable destruction of the temple, soldiers now ransacked every room, carrying away the piles of treasure and valuables. Four men were required to heave each of the large chests of coin. Tapestries were torn from the walls. The large minora and sacred vestments were carried on the backs of the strongest legionaries. Titus could not help but think, if his soldiers had been as efficient in their feeble attempts to put the fire out as they were in plundering anything of value, the temple might have been saved.

A large door leading from one of the long corridors into the back rooms of the structure suddenly burst, a ball of fire shooting forth. Smoke now filled most of the temple. There was nothing left he could do. The prince imperial closed his eyes for a moment, attempting to seer the tragic beauty of what he had seen into his mind. He and Josephus emerged onto the blood-soaked steps. Hundreds of legionaries were gathered around, waving their weapons in the air and giving shouts of triumph.

Seeing their commander-in-chief, the horde of soldiers began shouting his name, *"Titus! Titus! Titus!"*

A chest of coin sat near the top of the steps. A centurion and his optio grabbed handfuls of gold and silver, flinging them towards the prince imperial. Uncertain as to what else he could do, Titus drew his spatha. He bowed his head slightly as coins rained down on him, and raised both arms at an angle above his head. He was filled with a score of emotions, ranging from mourning the loss of his sacred prize to immeasurable relief. He smiled broadly in equal measures of elation and sorrow.

All the while, his soldiers continued to chant his name. *"Titus! Titus! Titus!"*

Chapter XXVII: Legions…let them learn!

Jerusalem
12 August, 70 A.D.
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For John of Giscala, there was nothing left but shame and sorrow. He was deeply humiliated that his courage failed him at the very last. He fled to the subterranean labyrinth beneath the city rather than face death like a true champion of God. Levi and perhaps twenty of his men were with him. A few likely managed to escape via other secret passages unknown to the Romans. For the majority, however, only death awaited them. Those who survived the slaughter would be savagely tortured and hung from crosses.

"All men must die," he muttered in the darkness, speaking to no one in particular. "The greatest tragedy is the loss of God's sacred Temple. By allowing this sacrilege, I have forfeited my place by his side." John's words were filled with remorse and shame. He finally understood, as repulsive as it may have been, that he should have accepted Josephus' entreaties to surrender. He then chastised himself for allowing such repugnant thoughts to enter his mind.

It was Levi who helped soothe his shattered conscience. "Perhaps this was the will of God. If his people cannot have the temple, then neither shall the Romans. Better that it be destroyed than desecrated with their false idols."

"We were spared for a reason," John thought aloud. "If we were meant to die, our blood would be mingling with that of our brothers. That we still live means the dream of freedom for the Jewish people survives."

"What can we do?" one of his men asked.

"For now, we wait. We find what stashes of food may still remain, and we wait for the Romans to leave. After they've gone, we will begin rebuilding Jerusalem."



The suffering of the Jews had not ended with the destruction of the

Temple. The gates of Upper City had been flung open, a multitude of people surging forth to try to save the sacred structure. Numbering over six thousand, nearly half were women and children. Legionaries surrounded them, killing many in their fury. Meanwhile, the fires had spread to the outer buildings of the temple complex, which were mostly made of wood. Knowing that it would be impossible to save any of these, the Romans plundered them, carrying the staggering piles of loot to the outer district. The vaults made of stone were left intact. As for the poor citizens who had hoped to lend assistance in putting the fires out, the Romans mercilessly trapped them inside the growing inferno. None would escape with their lives.

The imperial army withdrew into the outer Temple district, watching from a distance while everything burned. The inner sanctum was constructed of stone, but most of its support pillars and inner structures were made of wood. Once these were consumed by fire, the proud stone walls collapsed upon themselves in a series of deafening crashes.

"At least we saved the treasure," Titus heard a legionary say as he, Josephus, and Alexander walked past the formation surrounding the mighty hoard.

"He's right, you know," Alexander said, his arms folded across his chest. The Alexandrian Jew looked at Josephus. "Tell me; you spent many years working here, did you know this much treasure existed?"

Josephus shook his head. "No…I mean, I knew the wealth of the Temple was immense, I just did not realise it was this vast. But then, Solomon first raised his shrine to God on this spot 1,130 years ago."

"A long time to amass a fortune," Titus conceded. He walked over to one of the many chests of gold. He opened it and sifted through the ancient coins. "Some of these must be a thousand years old." He then looked to Alexander. "Well, we've taken the temple, or rather what's left of it. Once the fires have died down, we will raise the imperial eagles upon the high altar, offering sacrifices to the gods for our victory."

"Of course, our victory is not complete," his chief-of-staff observed. "We do not know whether John of Giscala perished in the blaze. And Simon bar Giora still holds Herod's Fortress and Upper City."

"The temple is destroyed, and with it the will of the zealots," Titus stressed. "And, yes, I do truly believe they are broken this time."

The following day, the eagles of all four legions, along with the regimental standards from the auxilia corps, were paraded before the eastern

wall of the temple ruins. A bull was sacrificed atop the charred and bloody steps of the Jewish altar. Roman priests offered thanks to Mars, Victoria, and Bellona. Titus then rested his army for a period of five days, securing the vast treasure for its long journey back to Rome. That it was the largest fortune ever taken by a Roman army helped salve the prince imperial's regret over his failure to save the temple itself.

Over a thousand wounded prisoners were taken. The most gravely injured were left to die or had their throats cut. Those still in relatively strong health were whipped and hung from crosses. Timber for these was taken from the support structures of the inner siege ramps. The once sacred Temple district was now lined with hundreds of these fearsome spectacles. The crosses were ten to fifteen feet high. Blood dripped down the tall poles; the condemned zealots having been whipped and scourged to the point that many had their flesh flayed from their bodies.

On the morning of the fifth day following the temple's destruction, five priests were captured and brought before Titus. They begged the commander-in-chief to give his right hand of security that their lives might be spared. Titus, however, was no longer feeling charitable.

"You have had months to turn yourselves over to me." His voice was cold as ice. "The time for pardon ended with your holy house. Had you surrendered before its destruction, both your sacred places and your lives might have been spared." He then nodded to the decanus leading their guard detail. "Scourge and crucify them."

The priests' piteous cries for mercy were met with blows from legionary fists and the pommels of their gladii. It was a cruel sentence to pass; however, the remnants of Titus' sense of compassion had died in a storm of fire.

That same day, sentries manning the outer wall that overlooked Upper City came to the prince imperial, stating that both of the zealot leaders, John and Simon, wished to meet with him. Hoping that they had at last come to their senses, Titus agreed. But because he suspected there was still much animosity towards Josephus, Titus left him at the camp. Instead, he tasked the Judean loyalist general, Externius, to act as his interpreter.

The First Wall, which protected the north of Upper City, intersected the western wall of the Temple district. These had once been connected by a stone bridge which now lay in ruins. It was on the First Wall side that Simon and John, along with Levi, Boaz, and twenty of their captains clustered.

Across the bridge arrived Titus with Alexander, Externius, the four legates from the legions, Tribune Gaius Artorius, and a century of legionaries.

Titus brought a camp stool, which he sat upon as he appraised his foes. While he had seen John of Giscala on a couple of occasions, most notably when Centurion Nicanor had been shot, he had never laid eyes on Simon bar Giora. All the men across from him looked terrible. Their faces were filthy and battered; beards were scraggly and unkempt. Their clothing and armour looked as if it had never been cleaned or maintained. But even more than their shabby bodies, the men's very spirits seemed broken. The zealots stood silent, waiting for Titus to open the discussions. The prince imperial spoke slowly, allowing Externius time to translate for him.

"I hope you are satisfied," he said. "Without hope of victory, driven only by selfish desires, you have inflicted unfathomable miseries upon your own people and brought about the destruction of your holy houses. You *knew* the power of Rome was unstoppable, and yet you refused to yield! You seriously thought your band of murderers could stand against an empire whose borders stretch from Arabia to Britannia? You are either mad or the embodiment of wickedness."

He paused for a few moments, waiting to see if they would reply. There appeared to be a few mutterings amongst the men. When none of them responded, Titus continued to vent his anger towards them.

"We allowed you to have your own kings, your own laws. We protected you from your age-old enemies. Rome respected the sanctity of your temple. We built up your nation using Roman coin, bringing wealth and prosperity to your people! At one time, I could have forgiven your lashing out against the despotism of Nero's corrupt governors. You were rightly aggrieved, yet we could have come to an amicable peace. But instead, you murdered those who could have negotiated that peace, and instead led your people to ruin! As you stand before me, I will treat you with that justice which you so denied even your own citizens. Your lives are in my hands. Surrender unconditionally, and I will take you alive and spare your people any further suffering. The Upper and Lower Cities will remain unmolested by my soldiers. But know that there will be justice. Those who have propagated this war will be dealt with appropriately. Those found innocent will be set at liberty. These are Caesars terms, and they are not negotiable."

Externius finished translating. Simon and John spoke at length with a few of their closest councillors and military captains.

After a few minutes, John of Giscala addressed the Romans. “We cannot accept your terms,” he said flatly. “We surrender the city, but not our persons. All we ask is that we be allowed safe passage beyond your surrounding wall. Jerusalem is yours, do with it as you see fit. But leave us and our women and children to God.”

The words filled Titus with a renewed sense of rage. He was offering them a chance to end the war peaceably, even after all the suffering and carnage. That they still chose to act, in what he viewed as defiance, sealed their fate in his mind.

“How dare you,” he said coldly. “How dare you even think you can dictate terms to Caesars legions? So be it. You would do well to try escaping, for your fate is set. And by your continued defiance, you have sentenced your city to oblivion.” He shouted over his shoulder to the assembled formations of imperial soldiers, *“Legions…let them learn!”*

A cry of bloodlust and fury erupted from the mass of legionaries and auxilia troopers. Dejected, though not entirely surprised at this outcome, John, Simon, and their assembled leaders quickly departed from the bridge. They knew they had some time to make preparations. Upper City was still surrounded by a high wall, including the imposing Herod’s Fortress on the western side. The Romans would doubtless attack the undefended Lower City first. To the few who remained alive in that quarter, death by imperial blades would be a merciful end.



Titus tasked the Tenth and Twelfth Legions with leading the sack of Lower City. “Do what you will,” he told his legates. “Let your men know the city is theirs.”

Despite their initial enthusiasm with pillaging the Jewish capital, the imperial onslaught lost its momentum within the first hour. There was simply nothing left to plunder. Lower City was where the poorest citizens lived, and the zealots had scoured every last neighbourhood for anything of value months before. There was also the unholy stench of pestilence that enveloped the city from within. It was a scent which had permeated the entire region, yet its pungency was magnified ten-fold as the legions stormed the city. Houses were filled with decayed bodies, half-eaten by flies and maggots. The streets were just as wretched, for they were crammed with the corpses of both the

poorest citizens, as well as hundreds-of-thousands of Passover pilgrims. Raw sewage mingled with the corpses, adding its own nauseating stench to the decaying bodies.

It became difficult to discern the living from the dead, and when legionaries plunged their blades into bodies to make certain, they often burst; the horrific smell causing the soldiers to vomit uncontrollably. So great was the stench of disease, that the legionaries feared they, too, would become infected. The numbers of sick within their own ranks was already high, with numerous imperial soldiers succumbing to sickness over the past few months.

"This is pathetic," Bassus said to Thrasea, as the two legates stood atop a house near the top of the slope leading down into the Lower City.

"There's nothing to gain here, except dysentery and whatever else these people are infected with," Thrasea concurred, holding a rag over his nose and mouth. "Let's open the gates and burn this fucking place. Any who are still alive can walk away from here for all I care."

Bassus agreed, and within an hour, the order was passed down to both legions. Titus cared little when he heard about his legates' decision. The few who remained alive within Lower City were in such a pitiful state that no slave driver would bother with them.

Judean cavalrymen rode along every street and alley, shouting in Hebrew, *"By the mercy of General Titus, the Prince Imperial, all citizens of Lower City are free to leave. Depart now, before the city becomes consumed by fire!"*

It took some time for the survivors to begin stirring. Because they had suffered the worst deprivations, it was a wonder any were still counted among the living. Many of these came from the fortified City of David, where they had bribed their way into at least some measure of protection from John of Giscala. Yet even these poor souls were emaciated from hunger and disease. Many were missing teeth, their cheeks sunken, eyes protruding, skin worn like leather. The hands of the young were withered like those of old men. A regiment of King Agrippa's Judean mounted archers formed a loose corridor for the people to follow. The only way out was through the Kidron Valley, along the south-eastern face of the Mount of Olives. The once lush and beautiful gardens were no more, making the land unrecognisable to the people. A section of the surrounding wall had been dismantled, allowing them passage. Only a few legionaries and auxilia troopers were curious enough to watch the mournful procession.

In all, perhaps 40,000 people emerged from Lower City. The rest were either dead or too weak to move. By mid-afternoon, the district was set ablaze by the legions. A vast column of smoke and flame billowed mournfully towards the heavens, lasting for several days. The burning of hundreds-of-thousands of bloated corpses added its own pungent stench. The Romans could only hope that any lingering pestilence was also consumed by the fire.

With the temple and most of the city now in ruins, Titus' army turned to the sacking of Upper City and taking of Herod's Fortress.

Chapter XXVIII: The Fall of Jerusalem

Roman Camp, west of Herod's Fortress
16 August, 70 A.D.
***

"A magnificent work of military engineering," Gaius Artorius said appreciatively, as he and Centurion Vorenus surveyed the old fortress. Smoke still billowed from the ruins of Lower City, casting a pall upon what remained of Jerusalem.

Because the army's senior officers were convinced that the rebels would capitulate, once the temple was taken, the investiture of Herod's Fortress had been ignored up until this point. Titus understood its strength, having been given a thorough explanation by auxilia troopers who had previously been posted to Jerusalem.

"Battering rams will be useless against those walls," Vorenus noted.

"There's nothing for it. We'll have to build ramps yet again and assault with siege towers."

When Gaius went to meet with General Titus, both Josephus and his old friend, Centurion Nicanor, were meeting with the commander-in-chief. Titus called for Nicanor, since he had spent much time during his youth in the city and knew well the layout of the fortress. Though Antonius Julianus was Procurator of Judea, he had only been recently appointed by Vespasian and had never even been to Jerusalem.

"The towers are very strong," Nicanor was explaining as Gaius entered the principia tent. "There are no wooden porticos to set fire to, and even if you demolished the gates, they are not very large. Any assault force attempting to breach the defences that way will be chopped to pieces."

"That is our assessment as well," Gaius concurred, as he joined the meeting. He gave a nod of acknowledgment to his old friend and former mentor. "We'll have to assault with ramps and siege towers."

"We only have two towers remaining," Alexander noted. "And since they currently sit within the ruins of Tyropoeon, it will be a nightmare to wheel them into position along the western wall of the fortress."

“We’ll make it happen,” Gaius reassured him.

Titus glanced over a crude map of the city. “We’ll constrict the camps to surround the fortress and Upper City. There is no point in maintaining a large perimeter any longer. All four legions will concentrate their efforts on the fortress itself. Placidus, your auxilia corps, along with Externius’ Judean soldiers, will establish two of your ramps along the First Wall and two more along the defences separating the Upper and Lower City.”

For Josephus, his sorrow at the loss of the Temple was compounded by fear for his family. Since they had not been among the deserters, he slowly began to reckon that for them there would be no escape. For all he knew, they were already dead. And with defeat imminent, what use were they as hostages to Simon and John? He did not even bother to pray for their safety. If God had allowed a million to perish during the Siege of Jerusalem, what were a few more?



As the Romans began building ramps and siege works once again, Simon bar Giora held out hope that he could still hold onto Herod’s Fortress and the Upper City. However, his army was too depleted in numbers and physical strength to launch any sort of assaults against the Romans. And with the Idumeans now attempting to surrender, he had imprisoned what remained of them. Not only did this cost him a thousand potential fighters, but it also required him to task warriors with guarding them. John of Giscala had disappeared into the subterranean caverns with several hundred of his closest followers, soon after their meeting with General Titus. Though there was no hope of escape, they reckoned that once the city was destroyed, the Romans would leave and they could emerge in safety.

“Filthy cowards,” Simon spat, when Boaz made mention of this. “We do not need their scum.”

He had ordered his men to hold the walls at all cost against the Roman towers. It took eighteen days for the ramps to be completed. And while rams were ineffective against the bases of the walls, they proved able to bring several towers down, once they reached the tops of the ramps.

On the morning of the nineteenth day, Simon stood with a hundred of his best men as they watched the approach of one of the siege towers. Enemy archers and bolt throwers bombarded them, and his men hunkered low behind

their shields. Still, many were struck down, their bucklers offering only scant protection. As the tower halted, they heard orders shouted from behind the large ramp. For the first time since the siege began, Simon felt afraid. His men sensed this, their own exhaustion and deprivations denying them the strength to continue the fight. As the ramp slammed down onto the rampart, the zealots fled. Scores of legionaries stormed the wall, shouting in fury as they slew those too slow to make their escape. Herod's Fortress soon fell with scarcely a blow struck.

Simultaneously, General Placidus personally led the attack on the First Wall. He and his auxilia troopers were compelled to use ladders, yet they found the defences completely deserted. The last remnants of Jerusalem had fallen.



Imperial troops stormed into Upper City. Most of the remaining zealots had fled into the caverns beneath the city. Following news of their victory, Titus came into Herod's Fortress via one of the siege towers. He was accompanied by Legate Bassus, whose Tenth Legion had led the assault.

"These walls are strong indeed," Titus said appreciatively. He stood inside the Tower of Hippicus, where Simon bar Giora had conducted most of his operations against the Romans. He then descended the steps which lead to the principia. It was here that a previous governor, Pontius Pilate, had reluctantly ordered the death of a man named Yeshua ben Joseph, whose followers had proclaimed as the son of God. That had been more than three decades ago, and the few who remained had founded an obscure sect of Jews called 'Christians'. But on this day, Titus had better things to concern himself with than one among the many various cults that were offshoots of Judaism.

As he stood atop the tall dais, Placidus and several of his regimental commanders strode into the forum. It was perhaps the first time Titus had ever seen the auxilia corps commander smile.

"The city is ours, general!" Placidus shouted triumphantly, raising his fist in the air. "The lads are rounding up what citizens remain."

"Very good. And they're following my orders, I take it?"

"They are," Placidus reassured him. "Every last legionary and trooper knows only to kill those who are armed. Because this was the wealthy quarter of the city, I imagine they'll have better luck acquiring plunder than they did

in the pestilent districts of Lower City."

"Whatever they find is theirs. We'll use the plains of Bezetha to hold the prisoners until we decide what is to be done with them."



In the house within Upper City where Josephus ben Mathias spent his youth, his mother, Rebekkah wearily emerged onto the rooftop as she heard the commotion coming up the street. She then heard the sound of running steps from within the house. She smiled as she saw her eldest son.

"Mathias," she said, embracing him. "Praise God, you still live."

"The Romans are storming the city," her son explained. "We have to leave, now!"

Rebekkah gave a weary nod, and the two started down the steps leading into the house. Having seen the fires which consumed the Temple, she feared for her husband. And with her daughter-in-law having taken her own life, her sons were all that remained.

As they reached the ground floor, they were greeted by a pair of zealots. Their swords were drawn, eyes filled with hatred.

"The Romans have taken the city," Mathias explained needlessly. "Please let us pass. There is no quarrel left between us."

"Oh, but that is where you are wrong," one of the men snarled. "Your brother's unholy masters may have won this day, but we still have God's work to do."

The man lunged at Mathias, thrusting clumsily with his sword. The young man grabbed the zealot by the wrist, smashing his hand against the wall and forcing him to drop his weapon. Mathias then slammed his fist into his assailant's jaw, knocking him unconscious. He grabbed the man's weapon and plunged it into the back of his companion. The zealot screamed, his back arching and the sword falling from his hand. As the warrior fell to the ground, Mathias was horrified to see his mother lying against the wall, her hands covering her bloody stomach.

"Mother!" he pleaded, falling to his knees, his eyes wet with tears.

"It's alright, my son," Rebekkah said, forcing a smile through the pain. "They can't hurt me anymore. Go now, and do one thing for me…live!" She placed a hand gently on his cheek before breaking into a coughing fit. Blood streamed out the corners of her mouth.

Fighting back his sobs, Mathias kissed her on the forehead and stood. He growled at the stricken zealot slowly regaining consciousness. With a howl of despairing rage, Mathias stabbed the man repeatedly in the face, throat, and chest. Gouts of blood spurted onto his face and chest. He screamed in fury while continuing to stab his prey.

Giving one last look at his mother, whose eyes were open but lifeless, Mathias stepped out onto the chaotic street. People were fleeing from a rampaging column of imperial soldiers. Their swords were drawn, and a number of young Jewish men lay slain in the gutter. With nowhere to run, Mathias flung the sword behind him and raised his hands in surrender. He closed his eyes as a legionary rushed towards him. He felt a hard blow to the head, and his world went black.



The sacking of Upper City took several days. Imperial soldiers stormed down every street and alley, ransacking each home and shop they came across. While the citizens were in a poor state of health, many having perished during the months of siege, they were a far cry from the near-dead wretches they had come across in poor districts of Jerusalem. Though some were killed by overanxious soldiers, the Romans by this point were collectively tired of all the butchery. Even the Samaritan auxiliaries restrained themselves from killing indiscriminately. However, many terrible crimes were committed against the women of the city, most falling victim to the army's brutal lust. Their screams filled the streets as they were violently raped, with none escaping from the Romans' savagery.

Back at his principia tent, Titus was told of a rather unexpected visitor who'd arrived at the camp. He, Alexander, Josephus, and a few others made their way to where a man wearing a legate's cuirass had dismounted his horse. His entourage consisted of his wife, a handful of magistrates and merchants, twenty mounted guards, and a few slaves.

Titus broke into a fit of laughter as he recognised the man. "By Apollo's cock! Marcus Antonius Primus; the self-proclaimed most corrupt Roman to ever win an empire."

"A pleasure to see you as well, Titus." The legate grinned and extended his hand. "And I think my blunt honesty adds to my charm, don't you? I

reassured your father that I was only good for one thing, and that was fighting. Mucianus sent me packing once he returned to Rome, but at least the emperor knows who won the imperial throne for him."

"Didn't stop you from plundering the imperial palace, or so I heard."

Primus shrugged. "It was there for the taking. Since I didn't want the consul's chair, and I knew that any proposed governorships would come to nothing, I set my own price for winning the war for Vespasian. Two wagons of loot and a few dozen palace slaves sufficed. And speaking of slaves, I'm sure you wish to know why I am here."

"Oh, believe me, I am intrigued. I take it you are now into marketing more than just wine from your vineyards."

"You know me, never one to miss an opportunity to make a few talents." Primus then turned to one of the magistrates accompanying him. "You remember our old friend, Sextus Fronto?"

"It's been many years," Titus said, acknowledging the man. "I hope Primus has not robbed you of your purse during what must have been a long journey from Moesia."

"Not yet," Fronto replied with a grin. "Though I do sleep with one eye open. I was appointed deputy governor of Moesia, and when the commanding legate of the Seventh Legion expressed interest in seeing what was to be had from the prisoners taking during the Siege of Jerusalem, I felt it best to accompany him on the governor's behalf."

"Ah, so they left you in command of the Seventh Gemina," Titus said.

"It was the only thing the emperor could think to do with me. I still have one year left on my current command tour, though Vespasian rather candidly stated he intends to extend me for another three years when this one is up. So how about it? Where are all the prisoners you've been taking over the past few months?"

"There aren't any yet," Titus said. He went on to explain the pitiful condition of the poorest Jewish survivors but promised Primus and Fronto that there would be plenty to choose from, once the legions finished sacking the richest quarters of the city. He grinned wickedly at Fronto and said, "Since you're here, I may have a little job for you."



Sextus Fronto was no stranger to the slave trade. He had served as the

senior magistrate in charge of sorting prisoners taken from the abortive raid by the Rhoxolani across the Danube, a few years prior. He knew there was money to be made in human trafficking, and he, along with Antonius Primus, wished to make the most of the Siege of Jerusalem before the eastern markets became so saturated that the slaves lost their value.

Fronto spent the following two weeks going through the prisoners captured from the Upper City. His first task was to execute any who had committed crimes against Rome or the people. These men he had whipped and crucified. The elderly and infirm were also put to death; not out of any sense of malice, but as a practical measure. It simply was not feasible to feed and house those who could not be sold to the slave markets. And after four years of bitter warfare, Titus was no longer feeling charitable. Though he had allowed his legates to free 40,000 of the survivors from Lower City, most would likely perish during the journey to wherever they thought they might find food and salvation.

Of the young men, Fronto took several thousand of the strongest and most attractive and separated them from the rest. These would be the prisoners paraded through the streets of Rome during the triumphal celebrations. Every other man and boy over the age of seventeen would be sent to the mines in Egypt. The women and children would be sold to the slave traders.

In what would be the only fortunate news for Josephus, his brother Mathias was spotted among those slated to be taken to Rome. The Tenth Legion was tasked with guarding these men, and it was perhaps divine intervention for Mathias the Centurion Nicanor recognised him. Of his own volition, he ordered the man freed and brought to Josephus. The two brothers shared a tearful reunion, their joy mingling with sorrow as Mathias told Josephus of the deaths of Judith and their mother, and the probable demise of their father. Mathias was given food and water, and allowed to return to his home in Jericho. Having been missing for many months, his wife and children likely assumed he was dead.

“At least one family will have reason to give thanks after all of this,” Josephus remarked, on the morning of his brother’s departure.

“And what will you do now?” Mathias asked. “You know you always have a place to stay, if you’re ever in Jericho.”

Josephus shook his head sadly. “I am the most hated man in Judea. Even our countrymen who stayed loyal to Rome view me as a traitor. If I remain in Judea, my life is forfeit. And I cannot complete the task which the divines

have set before me, if I am dead."

Mathias gave a nod of understanding. He knew the feelings of antipathy that existed throughout the Jewish people, both rebel and loyalist alike, towards his brother.

Josephus went on to explain the task General Titus had given him; to chronicle the sad tale that was the Great Jewish Revolt. "I have the patronage of the emperor," he explained. "And with that, I will tell not just the story of this tragic war, but of our people. I now believe that is why God allowed me to survive Jotapata, that I might tell the story of the Jews for all posterity."

"Then may God grant you long life and happiness, dear brother." These words filled Josephus with overwhelming emotion, and he embraced his brother while fighting back his tears. As he watched Mathias depart, leading a lone donkey bearing food and water, Josephus knew this was the last time he would ever see his beloved brother.

While Josephus mourned the deaths of his wife and parents, he was gladdened that Mathias had survived to return to his family. Fate would intervene once more, however, when the former governor-general of Galilee accompanied Titus as a guest for a banquet being thrown by the recently arrived Marcus Antonius Primus.

Ever the extravagant one, Primus brought his own pavilion tent, which rivalled the size of Titus' principia. His personal baggage train was twice that of the prince imperial's, as it was laden with tables, décor, as well as statuary and other finery. Titus suspected that some of it came from the imperial palace in Rome. Among these was a bust of the defeated pretender, Vitellius. In an extremely inappropriate display, Primus set the bust on his table at the banquet, saying he always enjoyed dining with the man he'd wrested the empire from. After all he had witnessed over the past few years, Titus felt a little bad taste was actually fitting.

On this particular evening, Josephus was given his own dining couch at the head table, next to Titus. It was his first time attending a Roman banquet, and even under a tent with nothing but the rocky ground beneath their feet, it was a spectacular feast. Candles and oil lamps added to the ambiance as night fell. Behind Primus' couch were several columns, each topped with the bust of one of the four men who had claimed the mantle of 'Caesar' during the Year of the Four Emperors; the exception being Vitellius, whose bust sat atop the head table. It was the first time Titus had seen a bust of his father. The artistry was superb, and as Vespasian had demanded, he was shown in his

true likeness, receding hair and all other blemishes included.

The food was humble by the usual standards of the Roman nobility, yet it suited old soldiers like Titus and Primus. Marcus Antonius Primus was a man who loved all the comforts of wealth and privilege, yet he was also a practical man, who had shared in the same deprivations as his soldiers during his numerous military campaigns. It was difficult to keep fruit and vegetables fresh while on the march, so their feast consisted mostly of breads, cheeses, and meats from various livestock Primus brought with him. And, of course, there were copious amounts of wine to consume. Many casks came from Primus' vineyard estates in Ephesus.

"To the emperor, senate, and people of Rome!" Primus shouted, raising his cup in salute.

The words were echoed by the assembled guests, with each of the legates offering their own toasts to the various gods and legions responsible for their victory in Judea.

Josephus drank just enough to show politeness to their host, who fascinated him greatly. Throughout the night, he heard various stories about General Primus that exhorted his valour in battle, while decrying his lack of virtue in equal measure. Strangely enough, the legate never denied any of it.

During the second course, which consisted of roast lamb and dates, Josephus' gaze fell upon one of the serving girls. His heart leapt into his throat, and he abruptly stood from his coach.

"Easy there, old friend," Titus said, with a chuckle. "Just go outside if you have to piss that badly."

"It's not that…I know her!"

"Which one?" Primus asked, looking over his shoulder. He then shrugged. "Oh yes, her. I got her after you lot took Jotapata. She's a delightful woman, who my wife absolutely adores. Her name is…"

"Devorah!" Josephus practically shouted, causing the woman to nearly drop her serving tray.

Her eyes grew wide when she saw Josephus for the first time in four years. She set the tray down and the two rushed towards each other, embracing in front of the startled Romans.

"What in Hades is all this?" Primus asked. "Is she your man's lady friend?"

"I don't know," Titus said, shaking his head. He called out, "Josephus! Explain yourself."

The Jewish scholar quickly told them Devorah's story; that she was the woman tortured by the Romans into revealing his location following the Siege of Jotapata. He explained that Centurion Nicanor had arranged for her to be spared and her wounds cared for. That Primus had purchased her as a slave was rather perplexing.

"To think, I've had an even greater prize in my possession these past few years than I realised," the legate mused.

"Please, Titus," Josephus pleaded, for the first time calling the prince imperial by his given name. "She must be given her freedom."

"Now just a minute," Primus protested, sitting upright on his couch. "Our friend, General Titus, may be the prince imperial and heir to the empire, but this woman is still my property. She is not his to give away."

Titus noted the pained expression on Josephus' face, and for the first time since the destruction of the Jewish temple, his heart felt pity.

"What if we purchased her?"

"I've already told you how much my wife adores her," Primus retorted. He then whispered to Titus, "She finds a certain amount of eroticism from such exotic creatures."

"I'll give you six hundred denarii," Titus said, his eyes still fixed on Josephus. "That is far more than you paid for her."

"True, but then the fellow who sold her to me did not know her value. Even with the scars covering her back, she is still worth far more." He paused, as the prince imperial turned his gaze towards him. Primus knew that Titus was determined to take his favourite slave and give her to his Jewish friend, so he decided to handle it the best way he knew how.

"Eight hundred denarii," he countered. "Plus I want three of the finest young women you managed to capture; preferably ones who are not missing teeth or who were too torn up by your lustful soldiers."

"Five hundred denarii and two replacement slaves," Titus countered. Knowing he would not get a better offer, the legate nodded affirmatively.

"We'll make it official after the banquet," Primus said, before clapping his hands, catching Devorah and Josephus' attention. "Back to work, woman. You can have your freedom after we've finished feasting."

Around midnight, when the noble Romans were mostly passed out from various states of inebriation, Josephus and Devorah left the banquet tent. Four years had passed since they last saw each other, and Josephus never heard

what happened to her. Though Nicanor had ordered a medic to see to her wounds, Josephus was surprised she had not succumbed to infection.

“Some wounds run deeper than even the scars wrought by Roman whips,” Devorah remarked. “I am surprised by your forgiveness, since it was I who betrayed your location in the well.”

“As I told you then, there was nothing to forgive. I’ve had a more difficult time forgiving myself. You only told them my location while being tortured; I collaborated with them. Doubtless that our people’s historians will damn me, and I will forever be known as the great traitor to the Jews.”

“You did what you had to do,” Devorah reassured him. “And besides, you have the histories of our people to write. I think that is your true purpose in this life. But what of my own fate? You have freed me from Roman bondage, but where will I go now?”

“The only place you can go.”



All told, approximately 97,000 prisoners were taken from Upper City. This was a pitiful number when one recalled that the total number of persons trapped within Jerusalem had exceeded one million. Less than half of these had been residents of the holy city; the rest were pilgrims visiting during the Passover. Blinded by reverence to their god, they completed the week of worship, only to find themselves trapped and subjected to months of starvation, disease, and murder. Only a scant few of the pilgrims survived to return home with tales of horror from what they had witnessed.

When the last of the prisoners were taken away to be sold by slavers, Josephus lamented, “Jerusalem died this day.”

Chapter XXIX: Long Life and Happiness

Catacombs beneath Jerusalem
September, 70 A.D.
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With every passing day, more of those hiding in the catacombs perished. The air, which was already stagnant, now stunk with the stench of rotting corpses. The darkness was consuming, and the fugitives had nothing to eat. The breaking of John's spirit came when he awoke to find his wife, whose head still rested on his shoulder, had perished. He knew not whether it was night or day as he crept slowly along the cavern floor. The sound of voices speaking in a foreign tongue alerted him and the few who remained able to stand.

"The end is come," Levi whispered, as he saw the flickering glow of torches approaching.



"Just follow the stench," Optio Julius said, as he led six squads from his century along the jagged tunnel. His decani carried torches, while legionaries prodded the bodies they found, making certain they were dead. They sifted through the pouches and sacks they found, seeking any treasure the zealots had looted.

There was a sound of muffled voices and clattering coming from the nearest bend. The soldiers brandished their gladii and proceeded with caution. A voice then called out in broken Latin, "Hold, Romans! We wish to surrender. Offer us your right hands of security, and we will give ourselves up to you."

"Is that so?" Julius asked. "And who is it that demands our right hands?"

"John of Giscala, the one-time ruler of the free Jewish state."

Upon their exhibiting before General Titus, the captured zealots were immediately sentenced to death, with the exception of John. As an enemy 'king', his fate would not come until after he was paraded through the streets

of Rome. For Levi and the others, scourging and death upon the cross awaited them. Though he had no more tears left to shed, John watched in sorrow as he stood chained near the long line of crosses. Few had the strength to even cry out as they were first whipped and beaten.

His thoughts drowning in the abject pain of his body, Levi's very soul was filled with doubts about all that had transpired since the rebellion began. He had stood beside Josephus at Jotapata, been the only survivor from the small band that sought help for the besieged, and then joined with John of Giscala's faction. As the whip slapped into his torn and exposed flesh, Levi wept piteously. Unbeknownst to his tormentors, his tears were not for the agony he was subjected to, for he now felt his punishment was just. His tears were for the Jewish people, whose destruction he in part blamed himself for. As his shattered body was hung from a tall cross, he was able to see the smoking ruins where the Temple of Jerusalem once stood. His last words would be repeatedly whispered for the remaining hours of his life.

"Please forgive us; we knew not what we had done…"



While volunteers with the strongest stomachs scoured the subterranean caverns beneath the ruins of Jerusalem, the rest of the army set about destroying what remained of the city. Battering rams and pry bars brought down the walls and buildings made of stone and stucco, while fire was used to destroy whatever could be devoured by the flames. Only the great towers of Phasaelus, Hippicus, and Miriamne were spared the ram, as was the western wall of the Temple district. Posterity would name this the *Wailing Wall*. The purpose of these being left standing was so future generations could see that the Roman army had conquered a formidable fortress city.

"Thus does Jerusalem come to an end," Josephus said mournfully, as he and Centurion Nicanor watched the battering rams lay waste to Herod's palace. "An unfitting demise to the greatest city the world has ever known."

Nicanor gave a sad nod of consent. While both had been to Rome and marvelled in its ageless splendour, there had been something special about Jerusalem, even for the pagan Roman. With every garden, tree grove, park, and even the fountains destroyed, one would never know that such beauty had once existed in a place that was now so utterly desolate.

“A generation of madmen brought this about,” the Jewish scholar added, though his friend did not know if he referred to the zealots or the Romans. Perhaps Josephus felt the culpability was equally shared. Doubtless the written accounts, which Titus ordered him to continue working on, would absolve the prince imperial and his legions of any wrongdoing. All histories are biased and written to appease their sponsors. Yet, even Nicanor knew the Roman army was far from blameless.

“Sadly, I know that as the years pass, I will forget what was once here,” the centurion thought aloud. “When I am an old man, describing the place of my youth to my grandchildren, will the memories be real or a faded myth?” He then turned to his friend. “And what will you do, now that the war is over?”

“Titus has offered me a place of honour with his entourage and even my own residence at the imperial palace in Rome. I would be a fool to decline his offer. Besides, there is nothing left for me here. My wife and my parents are gone. My brother offered me a place to stay in Jericho. However, we both know that if I did try to remain in Judea, I’d be dead before winter.”

“He’s right, you know. I don’t think he is safe, either. Just being your brother makes Mathias guilty in the minds of those who still sympathise with the zealots.”

Josephus nodded, though he had faith in his brother, and that he would survive. “And what about you, old friend? Does Centurion Nicanor remain with his legion?”

“What choice do I have? General Titus has ordered the Tenth to remain here, building our camp upon the remains of Jerusalem. I imagine in the coming years, the Jews will rebuild the city. It is too holy a place for them not to. And there is still some fighting left to do. The Sicarii maintain the fortress of Masada, and I imagine we’ll have to deal with them sooner or later. I still have a few years left before I can retire from the ranks. So let us hope that one of those ‘dagger men’ doesn’t manage to cut my throat before then.”



The Great Jewish Revolt was officially at an end. Titus sent detailed despatches to both his father and the senate, candidly detailing their bitterly won victory. It was now autumn, and the prince imperial had a number of

tasks he still needed to accomplish in the east. These were mostly diplomatic, plus there was the logistical undertaking of getting the vast treasury back to Rome. Four cohorts from each legion were selected to return with him. They would be the fortunate ones to march in the coming triumph. Among these were every soldier, regardless of status as legionary or auxilia, who had been decorated for valour during the course of the campaign.

Titus understood that, with the winter storms rendering the seas unnavigable, he would not be returning to Rome until the following spring at the earliest. Before he left for Caesarea and the army dispersed to their various garrisons, General Titus wanted one last moment with his soldiers.

The plain where Bezetha once stood was now a massive parade field. While awards for valour were most often administered at the century and cohort level, Titus wanted his last act as commander-in-chief to be personally recognising his soldiers who had distinguished themselves by their bravery and conduct. Legates and regimental commanders were tasked with compiling the lists of every soldier whose officers and peers alike commended as most worthy.

A large tribunal was erected, from where Titus could address the entire army. Following this speech, he would spend more than a week personally rewarding his best and bravest.

"Soldiers of Rome," he shouted, his booming voice carrying loud enough for all to hear. "Standing before you this day, commemorating the victory which you have won, is the greatest honour I will ever know. Every last one of you has faced dangers beyond measure, the deaths of countless friends, and hardships the citizens of Rome will never understand. By your own acclamation, a number of your fellows have been sent to Rome to act as imperial governors and representatives of the army to the emperor and senate. Know that my affection and admiration for you knows no bounds. I am proud of you. Your emperor, who once served as your commander-in-chief, is proud of you. We love all of you as if you were our sons, for the bonds we share are stronger than those of birth. My last act as your commanding general is to personally bestow the honours upon those who have been unanimously proclaimed as the bravest of the brave."

The army met his words with a resounding cheer. Blades were drawn and raised in salute as Titus was proclaimed *imperator*; the highest honour an army could bestow upon its commanding general.

Over the following week, each legion or regiment paraded before the

prince imperial. The officers of each cohort would then come forward, naming each soldier who was to be decorated. To each who received the *Silver Torque for Valour*, Titus also gave a donative of three hundred denarii from his personal treasury. To centurions and tribunes who had distinguished themselves, the prince imperial presented them with a silver spear head and a reward of a thousand denarii. The most renowned heroes, those who had risked their own lives to save those of their companions, were awarded the *Civic Crown*. Consisting of a simple crown of oak leaves, it was the most prestigious award a soldier of Rome could hope to attain. Sixty of these were presented throughout the army and every last recipient, regardless of rank, was also given a bounty of a thousand denarii.

The day following the last of the awards, Titus and his entourage left for Caesarea. The rest of the army soon departed for their home garrisons. Legio X, supported by four cohorts of auxilia infantry and a thousand horsemen, would build their fortress on the ruins of Jerusalem. The Twelfth Legion, which had previously been posted to Raphanea in Syria, was dispatched to a place called Meletine along the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia. From there they would establish a new, permanent fortress. Legio V would make the long march back to their garrison at Oescus in Moesia, along the Danube River. Titus' former legion, the Fifteenth, also had a long journey ahead of them. The fortress at Carnuntum in Pannonia Superior had been their home for more than fifty years before they were posted to Syria, four years before the outbreak of the Jewish rebellion. After an absence of eight years, they would at last be returning home.

Placidus' auxilia corps was disbanded. The individual regiments returned to their home nations to take up their postings once more. The general himself joined Titus' entourage and looked forward to assuming his place within the Roman senate once more. While the prisoners and select cohorts for the triumph made their way to the port capital of Caesarea, Titus and his entourage first ventured to King Agrippa's capital of Caesarea Philippi, escorted by the king's regiments. Titus intended to sponsor elaborate games to honour his ally, as well as enrapture the loyalist Jews whose fealty he was ever grateful for. He would then winter in Caesarea before returning to Rome, where he was already being proclaimed as the greatest military leader in a generation. While he himself viewed this as a terrible exaggeration, there was no denying the difficulty and scope of his great victory.

On a more personal level, Titus' journey to Caesarea Philippi saw him

reunited with his lover, Queen Julia Berenice. As co-ruler with her brother, King Agrippa II, many within the royal court suspected it was she, and not Agrippa, who had provided the Romans with the bulwark of both funding and allied soldiers. Whether this was done out of loyalty to Rome or her lover, one could not say. It mattered not. The war was over, and the Herodians were now as deeply ensconced with the imperial family as their father, King Agrippa I, had been.

For his part, the current King of the Jews relished the thought of his sister eventually becoming Empress Consort of the Roman Empire. Such a merger between the royal and imperial houses would make for a magnificent dynasty. Despite her being twelve years older than Titus and beyond childbearing age, the prince imperial loved Julia Berenice deeply. He knew there were many within the imperial nobility who would object to their union, yet he did not care. One day, he would rule the Roman world, and Julia would be by his side.



In the days following the prince imperial's departure, life became routine once more for the Tenth Legion as they established their fortress near the remains of Jerusalem. While stone to build walls and fortifications was plentiful, the region had been devoured of timber. Soldiers therefore continued to sleep in their tents, while General Bassus sent a request to the Syrian governor to send sufficient quantities of lumber with which to build proper barracks blocks and bunks for his soldiers.

On the seventh day of their fortress construction, there was a disturbance from amongst a stone pile near the western gatehouse. Legionaries gathered around as several large rocks collapsed into a previously unseen hole. A pair of hands emerged, and a man wearing a white robe and purple cloak emerged. His face was filthy and haggard, yet the vestments he wore were immaculate. Legionaries drew their blades and surrounded the man.

"Who in the bleeding hell are you?" a decanus demanded.

The man stood tall and proud, raising his hands to the heavens and proclaiming, "I am Simon bar Giora, rightful King of the Jews."



Night had come to the port of Caesarea, yet for Yaakov, his work day had only just begun. A shipment of wool needed to be offloaded from a merchant vessel. The same ship would then be loaded with amphorae of olive oil bound for Rhodes. It had been three months since he was given the job, and while it was hard work, he was thankful to still be alive and able to make a living.

It was no small irony to Yaakov that it had been a Greek family who took him in and showed compassion to his previously sorry state. Antipathy between the Jews and Greeks was especially prevalent in places like Caesarea, where Hebrew speakers were reviled as repugnant traitors and subhuman vermin. The past four years of war had only intensified these hateful feelings. And yet, following his escape from Jerusalem, it had been a Greek man named Nepos, who worked as a shift supervisor at the docks, that took him in. In private, Nepos had explained to Yaakov that he was a follower of a deceased Jewish teacher named Yeshua, who taught his followers to love all men, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or beliefs. He gave Yaakov a job, working nights offloading cargo from merchant vessels.

This particular evening was quiet, for only one other ship needed to be unloaded, and this had been some amphorae of wine. Yaakov reported to Nepos once the vessel bearing oil was loaded and the wine and wool stored within the warehouse. The Greek man thanked him and told him he could have the rest of the night to himself.

While the rest of the workers lounged and dozed along the docks and the side of the warehouse, Yaakov stood with his arms folded, gazing at the moonlight dancing on the water. While he was indebted to Nepos and his family for taking him in, he spent nights like this pondering if this was God's great plan for him. Had he suffered the hardships of war, been one of the only survivors of the slaughter at Jotapata, endured weeks of starvation, escaped the horrors of Jerusalem following the Passover, only to spend the rest of his days unloading cargo on a Roman dock in Caesarea? Was there really no divine plan for him after all? Had his survival not been the will of God, but simply dumb luck? He reckoned he would never know for certain. As he let out a loud sigh, he heard a voice behind him.

"Hello, Yaakov." He turned to see the face of a man he'd once loved, and later grown to hate. Disbelief was the only emotion that made any sense to him at the moment.

"Josephus?" he asked incredulously. "In God's holy name, what are you doing here?"

“I could ask you the same, though I am glad to have found you.”

“Are you now?” The old feelings of anger were welling up inside Yaakov. Though he knew John of Giscala to be a wicked man, he could not help but have been influenced by the damning words he’d said about his old friend. And Levi, who had been like a brother to Josephus, had condemned him as the unholy traitor. As Yaakov had been witness to Josephus’ surrender to the Romans, what else could he think but that these men were correct, that his old friend and mentor was a hateful conspirator? Josephus suspected this, and he lowered his eyes for a moment.

“I understand if you despise me. I could speak at length about how John poisoned your mind with his venomous words, but you were there. You may not believe my motives, but it was God himself who saved us. By your harsh countenance, I know you are unmoved.” A tear formed in his eye. His feelings of joy at finding his lost friend were drowned in the sorrow of knowing that the young man, whom he loved dearly, held nothing but hatred for him.

Yaakov gritted his teeth, as he spoke. “If I did not think your Roman friends were lurking in the shadows, I would gut you like a fish and throw your corpse into the sea.”

“No, I do not need them to protect me,” Josephus said, shaking his head. He then paused. “But you are right; I’m not entirely alone.” Instead of explaining what he meant by this, he said, “Yaakov, you have always been like a brother to me. No matter what hatred may still live in your heart towards me, please accept that I wish you nothing but long life and happiness.”

He then looked over his shoulder and a young woman stepped into the light.

Yaakov gasped. He had not set eyes on her in years and long assumed she was dead. So great was his sense of incredulity, he at first thought he was seeing a ghost. “God have mercy…Devorah?”

“I am here, Yaakov,” she said with an emotional smile. A joyful tear ran down her cheek.

She slowly walked over to him, and the young man placed his hands gingerly on her shoulders. The two shared a kiss and embraced each other, holding tight lest they be torn apart once more. As Yaakov rested his head on her shoulder, Devorah looked back to Josephus.

He smiled, then turned to walk away. As the darkness of night enveloped

him, he made one last request to the divines for Yaakov and Devorah.

"Long life and happiness."

Appendix A: Historical Requiem - The Jews and the Romans

Simon bar Giora was taken to Rome where he was marched in chains through the city as a captured enemy king. He was then executed by strangulation in the Forum.

John of Giscala was also paraded through the streets of Rome in chains. For reasons unknown, he was spared execution. Instead, he was sentenced to life imprisonment, which was a rare form of punishment in Rome. It is unknown if he was placed within the Tullianum prison on Capitoline Hill or sent as a slave to one of the numerous mines. After which, he disappears from history.

Eleazar ben Yair and the Sicarii continued to hold the fortress of Masada. Though they had recognised neither the Romans, nor any of the various Jewish governments, they were at last drawn into the conflict with Rome. In 73 A.D. the imperial general, Flavius Silva, laid siege to Masada with the Tenth Legion. A nearby hill was completely demolished and used to build a massive ramp—a phenomenal feat of engineering even by modern standards—which allowed the Romans to roll their siege towers up to the walls. Though at first vowing to fight to the death, Eleazar and his men instead murdered their own families and then committed ritual suicide. When the Romans stormed the walls the next morning, the only survivors they found were an old woman and several children she had hidden from their fathers' blades. One of the survivors was rumoured to be Eleazar's own son, though his eventual fate is unrecorded.



Ruins of the Herodian Fortress of Masada
The Roman Assault Ramp is to the left

King Agrippa II remained a staunchly loyal ally of Rome. For his fealty to Vespasian during the civil war, as well as the support in manpower and supplies to Titus during the Jewish Revolt, he was granted additional lands and named a Praetor of Rome. He became close friends with Josephus, supplying him with much of the material that would be used in his *Histories of the Jews*.

For unknown reasons he never married, had children, nor named any of his nephews as possible heirs. He died around 92 A.D. as the last monarch of the Herodian Dynasty. The Roman Empire immediately absorbed his lands into the province of Judea.



Titus celebrated his victory with a series of games in Caesarea. Unable to sail during the winter months, he at last returned to Rome in the spring of 71 A.D. He was awarded a *Triumph* by the senate, at which time the more distinguished Jewish prisoners and the massive spoils in gold and silver taken from the Temple were paraded through the streets of Rome. As was tradition, the prisoners—with the exception of John of Giscala—were executed in the Forum.

As the heir to Vespasian, Titus became very active in the governance of the Roman Empire. He and his brother, Domitian, were both granted the cognomen of *Caesar* by the senate. He held the consulship seven times during his father's reign, often acting as his personal representative to the senate. He was also named Prefect of the Praetorian Guard, with Tiberius Julius Alexander serving as his colleague. In 75 A.D., his long-time lover, Queen Julia Berenice, joined him in Rome. Titus intended to marry her, though this was vehemently opposed by much of the senate and populace. Despite the fact that Berenice had been raised as a Roman, many still viewed her as a 'foreign' queen, much in the same vein as the still-hated Queen Cleopatra of Egypt. The idea of an eastern monarch eventually becoming Empress Consort of the Roman Empire was unthinkable. Titus finally relented, and he sent Berenice away from court. The two never saw each other again. Berenice disappears from history, and her eventual fate is unknown. As she had ruled jointly with her brother, and the Herodian Dynasty ended with his death in 92 A.D., it is possible that she died before him. The fate of her sons is unknown.

In June of 79 A.D., Vespasian died, having ruled as Emperor of Rome for ten years. Titus became the first biological son to succeed his own father as Caesar. The 'scandal' of his affair with Julia Berenice was forgotten, and he proved to be an exceptionally popular ruler. Like his father, he refused to prosecute anyone for slander against himself, though Titus took it a step further and ended the practice of treason trials for slander against anyone, even deified emperors. Cassius Dio quotes him as saying, *'It is impossible for me to be insulted or abused in any way. For I do naught that deserves censure, and I care not for what is reported falsely. As for the emperors who are dead and gone, they will avenge themselves in case anyone does them a wrong, if in very truth they are demigods and possess such power.'*

Titus' reign was wrought with many challenges, one of which was another fire in Rome in 80 A.D. Though not nearly as disastrous as the Great Fire of 64 A.D., it still burned many residential districts. Of even greater catastrophe was the eruption of Mount Vesuvius the year prior. The cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum were buried in fire and ash, and upwards of twenty-thousand citizens perished. Titus responded by ordering massive funds from the imperial treasury used to aid the survivors. Despite the care and generosity shown, many began to wonder if, perhaps, the gods themselves were displeased with Rome's new emperor.

During the spring of 81 A.D., Titus oversaw the opening of the massive Flavian Amphitheatre now known as The Colosseum. The games, which were named in honour of his late father, lasted a hundred days. To further appease the masses, small wooden balls were dropped or thrown into the crowd, inscribed with the name of a prize that the owner could redeem. These included gold, elaborate clothing, as well as slaves and pieces of treasure taken during the Jewish Revolt. The games themselves were known for their extreme ferocity with animal fights, hunts, and prisoner executions happening in massive numbers. In order to sate the public's lust for blood-sport, many of the gladiatorial matches were to the death; a practice that, contrary to popular myth, was extremely rare. The timing was fortuitous, given the calamities that plagued the first year of his reign, and Titus became one of Rome's most popular emperors.

In September of 81 A.D., Titus was touring the Sabine provinces in Italia when he fell gravely ill and later died. Both Suetonius and Dio record his last words as being, *'I have made but one mistake'*. What that mistake actually was is left to speculation. Both state that Titus died of natural causes though the Greek sophist, Philostratus, claims he was poisoned by his brother, Domitian. Philostratus wrote this claim more than a hundred years after Titus' death, and he does not support it with any substantive evidence. Of course, there was much speculation about his death, given he was only forty-one years of age and in fine health, yet nothing was ever definitively proven. His reign was eventful but brief, lasting just over two years. As he had no sons—his only child being his then-unmarried daughter Julia—he was succeeded by his younger brother, Domitian. The new emperor's first act was

to have his brother deified. He also ordered the erection of the triumphal Arch of Titus which still stands to this day.



The Arch of Titus, Rome



Josephus accompanied Titus to Rome in 71 A.D. He became a Roman citizen and took the name *Titus Flavius Josephus*, in honour of his former adversaries who had since become his patrons. He married three more times in quick succession, though none of his wives' names are given. The first was a freed Jewish slave who soon left him. The second was an Alexandrian Jew by whom he had three sons, though only one survived to manhood, and little else is known about him. Josephus later divorced her and married once again in 75 A.D. His fourth and final wife was a Greek-Jewish woman from Crete.

Her name is unknown. It is said she was from a distinguished family, and she and Josephus enjoyed a long and happy marriage. They had two sons named Flavius Justus and Flavius Agrippa. Both became wealthy members of the aristocratic Romanized Jewish class in Rome. Josephus still maintained his Jewish faith, though in a much less orthodox manner, similar to King Agrippa and Queen Berenice. Referred to as *Hellenistic Judaism*, they emphasised that Jewish beliefs were still compatible with Roman law.

Under the patronage of the Flavian emperors, Josephus worked diligently to produce his massive works which we still have to this day. These include *War of the Jews* (the primary source for this series), *Antiquities of the Jews*, *Discourse to the Greeks Concerning Hades*, *Against Apion*, and his autobiography, *The Life of Flavius Josephus*. In addition to a monetary pension, he was granted lands in re-conquered Judea; however, he never returned to the land of his birth. He died of natural causes in 100 A.D. during the reign of Emperor Trajan, at the age of sixty-three.

Josephus remains a controversial figure even to this day. His harshest critics call him a traitor to his people, in part because of his failure to die with his companions at Jotapata. Of course, it is understandable why he viewed suicide as pointless in the face of defeat, not to mention that it was forbidden in Judaism as an affront to God. Perhaps he did, in fact, hope to bring about a peaceful solution to the terrible conflict. An even greater reason for the feelings of betrayal is that he became a Roman citizen, took on a Roman name, and raised his sons as Romans. However, it should be remembered that whatever one may think of Josephus or his motivations, had he not survived Jotapata and later became a Roman citizen, we would never have been graced by his extraordinary works. *Antiquities of the Jews* alone encompasses twenty volumes and is the most detailed recording of Jewish history in existence. Whether or not he was ‘the great traitor’, it is because of him the histories of the Jewish people survive.

Appendix B: Historical Requiem - The lands of Judea

With Jerusalem laid waste and the sacred Temple destroyed, the Great Jewish Revolt came to an end. Though pockets of resistance would continue until the fall of Masada in 73 A.D., any sense of organised revolt was shattered. According to Josephus, one million were killed during the sacking of Jerusalem. While he is often accused of exaggerating these numbers, he cites a number of Roman censuses taken during the time to corroborate his estimation. Contrasting sources are also non-existent. But whether or not overstated, the loss of life was indeed horrific. More than half the dead are thought to have perished from disease and hunger rather than by Roman blades. The Holy Temple was never rebuilt. The western wall, also known as the Wailing Wall, is all that remains and is considered a sacred place in modern Judaism.

The vast treasure that was taken from the Temple was used to fund a number of building projects in Rome. In 72 A.D., Emperor Vespasian ordered the construction of the most impressive of all these; a massive arena unlike any the world had ever seen. It would take eight years to complete, and at its peak could hold up to 80,000 spectators. At the time called the Flavian Amphitheatre, we now know it as The Colosseum.

While a relative peace fell over Judea and the eastern provinces for a generation, it was not to last. An even greater rebellion, known as the *Bar Kokhba Revolt*, erupted in 132 A.D. during the reign of Emperor Hadrian. Far more organized than the Great Jewish Revolt, the death toll for both sides was horrific. Legio XXII, Deiotariana, suffered such terrible losses that it was disbanded. As many as 400,000 rebel militiamen and an additional 800,000 civilians were killed. Emperor Hadrian subsequently absorbed Judea into the greater province of Syria, renaming the former Jewish holy land as Syria Palestine. The surviving Jews were permanently expelled from Jerusalem.

Following the end of Roman rule during the fifth century A.D., the next 1,400 years would see the Jewish Holy Land claimed by early Muslims, the

Christian Crusades, the Ottoman Empire, and finally the British Empire. The longed for Jewish State, first proclaimed by Hanan ben Hanan in 66 A.D., was at last realised on 14 May 1968, with the international recognition of the Nation of Israel.

Appendix C: Roman Military Ranks

Legionary – Every citizen of the plebeian 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 armour. (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 honour, 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 manoeuvre 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 the centurions primus ordo. Though the number of soldiers under their direct command was fewer, these men were senior in rank to the centurions 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
Decani – 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

Author's Final Thoughts

I first contemplated writing about the Siege of Jerusalem while still working on my previous Roman series, 'The Artorian Chronicles'. I knew that I would continue to write historical novels set during the Roman Empire, and this was the next logical step. At first, I envisioned a single, stand-alone volume. However, as I began my research, predominantly following the works of Josephus, it became abundantly clear that this would likely turn into a trilogy. I wanted to be as thorough as possible, for to do otherwise would be a disservice to those who fought and died during the horrific struggle that was The Great Jewish Revolt.

The first two volumes of this series, 'Rebellion in Judea' and 'Vespasian's Fury' came to me rather quickly. However, I was also well aware of the actual history, and that the civil war which led to Vespasian becoming Emperor happened simultaneously as the Jewish revolt. I therefore figured I would pen a stand-alone novel to tell this story. Once again, I seriously underestimated the level of detail required to tell this story correctly. At well over a thousand pages, I was compelled to split this 'side story' into two volumes. In the end, while I am very pleased with how this series came to be, I should have had far greater foresight. While 'The Great Jewish Revolt' and 'Year of the Four Emperors' are *technically* two separate series, in reality, they go together, with the 'Four Emperors' volumes chronologically falling between 'Vespasian' Fury' and 'Fall of Jerusalem'. Hence, why I often amalgam the names of the two series into one, while listing the individual books in chronological sequence. Had I done better prior-planning, I would have made them into one series, likely under a different (and less jumbled) name. I can only hope that this lapse on my part does not diminish readers' enjoyment of this series.

As noted above, my primary source for this work was Josephus' *War Against the Jews*. It seems, however, that one cannot even mention Josephus' name without causing controversy. The moment one says they used him as a source, there is almost an immediate backlash, stating that he was heavily

biased, character-assassinated his rivals, and wrote of the Flavians in overly flattering terms. Having actually read his collected works, I find this criticisms to be only partially true. Yes, there was definitely a lot of bias, as is true of any other historian who lived through the events he or she describes. The problem, which many grudgingly admit, is we don't have contradictory sources to compare with. Roman historians, such as Tacitus and Cassius Dio, pretty much corroborate with what Josephus says, but in far less detail. Where I did feel there was definite bias was in his descriptions of his rivals, in particular John of Giscala and Simon bar Giora. He paints them as demonic monsters, devoid of any moral scruples. While I tried to take into account Josephus' personal enmity with them, his accounts are really all we have about either of the zealot leaders. And if even half of what Josephus says is true, regarding the atrocities they committed against their own people, then it is really difficult to portray them in any sort of favourable light. It is never my intent to cast any characters in my books as one-dimensional archetypes; however, in the cases of Simon bar Giora and John of Giscala, I found it very difficult to do otherwise. Where I did attempt to express sympathy was towards the Jewish citizens, who were caught in the middle of the terrible struggle, blameless of any guilt, yet who suffered the most.

Regarding Josephus' supposed 'hero worship' of Titus, I only found this to be partially true. While some of his feats sound straight out of The Iliad, Josephus is also very candid about the numerous mistakes both Titus and Vespasian made during the war, some of which were near-catastrophic for the Romans.

I must also confess to the reader that this series was extremely taxing for me to finish. While I have been passionate about Roman history since around the time I was twelve, for a few years now I've been ready to move on. Hence the delays between volumes of this series as I worked on other novels set during my other favourite period in history, the British Empire. For those who waited diligently for me to complete this story, you have my apologies, as well as my thanks. While I do intend to write a lot more about the British Empire, especially in light of the success of my first book on the Anglo-Zulu War called 'Brutal Valour', I don't see myself ever fully abandoning Ancient Rome. I already have planned a stand-alone novel about a gladiator during the opening games of the Flavian Amphitheatre in 81 A.D., which will help

segue into my next planned Roman series, tentatively titled, ‘The Artorian Dynasty’. When I get around to this is another question, as I have numerous works in my head that I am anxious to put to paper. Just know that the story of the Artorians will continue for some time.

In the end, what I originally envisioned as a single, stand-alone novel of perhaps 400 pages turned into five volumes and well over 2,200 pages. I cannot complain, though. While this has been a very difficult (and at times extremely depressing) story to tell, it has been a privilege for me to do so. I can only hope that fans and readers will feel the same when reading it.

James Mace
December 2016

Further Reading / Bibliography

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The Great Jewish Revolt and Year of the Four Emperors



A Note of Thanks from the Author

Thank you for taking the time to read ***Soldier of Rome: The Fall of Jerusalem***. This book was a long time coming, and I am glad to finally complete this story for all the readers who've been asking me when it would be finished (yes, I know I was a bit overdue!).

For up-to-date information about upcoming books, as well as important people and dates in history, please subscribe to my monthly Mailing List.

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If you enjoyed ***The Fall of Jerusalem***, I would be most grateful if you could post reviews on either Amazon or Goodreads. Reviews are crucial for independent authors. The more substantive and candid, the better, for it helps us improve our ability to write and tell stories.

To find more of my books, please visit my author's pages:
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Thank you again for taking the time to read ***The Fall of Jerusalem***, and for allowing me to share stories from history with you.

In gratitude,

James