Soldier of Rome

The Last Campaign

Book Six of the Artorian Chronicles



James Mace

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No one is free who does not lord over himself.

- Emperor Claudius

This final book of the Artorian Chronicles, and indeed the entire series, is dedicated to my fellow Soldiers who I served with during my own career in the 'legions', especially those of 2nd Battalion, 116th Cavalry

Sine Mora! Ave Immortalis!

The Works of James Mace

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

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

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

The Great Jewish Revolt and Year of the Four Emperors
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Napoleonic Era
Forlorn Hope: The Storming of Badajoz
I Stood with Wellington
Courage, Marshal Ney

The Anglo-Zulu War
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Preface

Following the assassination of Emperor Gaius Caligula in 41 A.D., his uncle, Claudius, assumed the imperial throne. After establishing his legitimacy and stabilizing his position with the Roman Senate and people, he looks to legitimize himself militarily. His eyes turn towards Britannia; the elusive isle that even Julius Caesar failed to conquer.

Far from being unknown to the rest of the world, various Britannic peoples have maintained trade relations with the continent, and a few of the tribal kingdoms have even formed alliances with Rome that extend back decades. Constant warfare, however, has left the isle in a state of perpetual instability. When several allies call upon Rome for assistance in their volatile struggles, Claudius seizes the opportunity to finish what the Divine Julius started almost a hundred years before.

In Ostia, Centurion Artorius spends his days as a police commissioner, while only holding an honorary posting with the legions. Soon after Claudius' ascension, however, he is recalled to active service with his former legion, the Twentieth Valeria, where his peers proclaim him as the new master centurion. It has been generations since the empire expanded its borders via conquest, and Artorius readies his men to spearhead a massive invasion force in what he knows will be his last campaign.

Cast of Characters

Soldiers:

Titus Artorius Justus – Centurion Primus Pilus, Master Centurion of the Twentieth Legion
Magnus Flavianus – Artorius' closest friend and Centurion Primus Ordo
Gaius Praxus – Centurion Primus Ordo
Tiberius Valens – Centurion and longtime friend of Artorius and Magnus
Metellus Artorius Posthumous – Artorius' adopted son and a centurion with the Fifth Cohort
Aulus Nautius Cursor – Former tribune of the plebs, given command of the invasion's cavalry forces
Tiberius Stoppello – Admiral in the Roman Navy
Hansi Flavianus – Magnus' brother and ship's captain under Admiral Stoppello

Other Romans:

Claudius Caesar – Emperor of Rome
Aulus Plautius – Commander-in-Chief of the Roman invasion force
Titus Flavius Sabinus – Legate of the Ninth Legion, Plautius' second-in-command
Flavius Vespasian – Brother of Sabinus, he commands the Second Legion
Honorius Geta – Legate of the Fourteenth Legion
Valeria Messalina – Wife of Claudius and Empress of Rome
Diana Procula – Wife of Artorius
Marcia Marcella – Daughter of Artorius' childhood love, Camilla

Britons:

Togodumnus – King of the Catuvellauni tribe and leader of the resistance against the Roman invasion

Caratacus – Brother of Togodumnus, conquers the Atrebates in order to establish his own kingdom
Cartimandua – Queen of the Brigantes and a Roman ally
Venutius – Husband and consort to Cartimandua, their relationship is strained by his loyalty to Caratacus
Verica – Exiled King of the Atrebates, a tribe that was overrun by Caratacus
Cogidubnus – Great-nephew of Verica and his appointed heir as King of the Atrebates
Donan – King of the Durotriges confederation and staunch ally of Togodumnus
Alaric – A man of Germanic origins, who was raised by the Brigantes and who has returned from many years in the east
Landon – Friend of Alaric and member of Queen Cartimandua's bodyguard

Roman Military Ranks

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

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

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

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

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

Aquilifer – This man was a senior signifier bearing the eagle standard of a legion. (*Aquila* means eagle.) This standard was the most important possession of the legion – losing it brought shame and humiliation to the entire legion. This position carried great honor, though it is debatable whether or not he wore any headdress or animal skin. It is known that he

carried a small, circular shield called a *parma* instead of the legionary scutum.

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

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

Centurion Primus Ordo – The elite First Cohort's Centuries were commanded by 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
Decanii – 610
Tesserarii – 59
Signifiers – 59
Options – 59
Aquilifer - 1
Centurions – 45 (approximately 80 men to a century)
Centurions Pilus Prior – 9
Centurions Primus Ordo – 4

Centurion Primus Pilus – 1
Tribunes – 6
Chief Tribune – 1
Legate – 1

Prolog

Lugdunum, Gaul
January, 74 A.D.
***

The blade gleamed in the lamplight and as Magnus caught his reflection, he did not see an old man. In his mind he saw one far younger, full of vitality and strength. It was as if the weapon were possessed by the spirit of the youth who had joined the legions so many long years ago; at a time when he was really little more than an overgrown boy, tossed into the brutal and unforgiving world on the Roman frontier. That he had kept the same weapon all these years was remarkable; the blade had slain many of Rome's enemies, and in his hands it felt as if it possessed a life of its own.

It was a façade, of course; for he was very old now. He came from a long-lived line and had done and witnessed more than most would in ten lifetimes. After so many years in the ranks, his greatest struggle had been allowing the younger generation to deal with the woes that besot Rome after he left the legions.

"Father," the voice of his son caused him to smile as he turned towards the half-opened door. "Everyone is here, and the grandchildren are asking for you…rather boisterously, I might add."

"Give me a few minutes, son."

The young man, Titus, saw the gladius in his father's hands and immediately understood. He understood his father well enough to know that there were moments when one did not ask questions, just let the old soldier alone for the time being. As soon as the door was closed, Magnus sheathed the weapon and looked into the spacious trunk he'd pulled it from. It had not been opened in many years, yet somehow he found it calling to him; perhaps because he knew his grandchildren would want to hear stories of his 'adventures' in the legions. And yet, what he found within gave him reminders of a much darker time.

Inside, folded up, was his once-gleaming scale armor with the harness that bore his phalerae campaign disks and other decorations. On the left side of the chest was his battered helmet that still bore his centurion's crest, and in the upper right, almost as an afterthought, a piece of cloth was folded over a

circular shape. It was the brittle remains of his Civic Crown that he'd been awarded at the Battle of Braduhenna forty-six years prior. His old crumpled cloak was rolled up haphazardly underneath.

"That which consumed me for so many years is now but a faded memory," he said quietly.

Magnus' pillar of support in his years away from the legions had come from his family. He had met Ana, who had been a childhood friend of his sister Svetlana, while on leave from Britannia, and they had married soon after. He was privately ashamed that he had taken her as his wife simply as a means of forcing himself to finally let go after the death of the only woman he had ever loved. As the years passed, he came to love Ana, as well as the two fine sons she'd born him. But now she was gone as well. And despite Magnus' efforts to convince him to do otherwise, his youngest son, Hansi, had joined the ranks as soon as he came of age. He currently served with the Second Legion, Augusta, at a fortress called Isca that had been raised in western Britannia four years prior. It filled him with both pride, as well as fear, knowing that his son was posted on the same violent frontier he had once been; perhaps fighting the children and grandchildren of some of Magnus' former enemies.

It had not been easy, leaving the army behind after so many years serving under the eagles. The greatest difficulty had been being forced to sit idle when the empire erupted into civil war six years earlier, after the death of the despondent and hated Emperor Nero. In the span of a year, four men had claimed the mantle of Caesar. Magnus had kept his personal feelings to himself, though friends and acquaintances would constantly ask the 'old soldier' his thoughts on who he felt had the most legitimate claim to be emperor as the war raged on with various factions staking their claim through violence and bloodshed. Magnus always deferentially stated that his loyalty was to Rome, though he privately held out hope for the empire when the legions in the east declared his former commander, Vespasian, emperor. It had pained Magnus that he was in no position to draw his sword in support of the one man he knew was worthy of ruling Rome. Fortunately, Vespasian, the man who had helped conquer Britannia, would emerge triumphant, bringing stability and peace to the empire. In the five years since becoming Caesar, Vespasian had proven to be as benevolent as he was strong, the brutal suppression of the Judean rebellion notwithstanding.

The sky had been dark grey all day and now it was black. The sun had set, and the storm that had been brewing all afternoon was blowing hard and cold. But amidst the storm was Magnus' large, warm house, and the occupants ignored the wind and the rain that started to fall outside.

In the modest dining hall, it was full of warmth and laughter with children playing games and running amok through the house, the adults drinking wine and sharing gossip as well as the latest news while lounging on couches that surrounded the long table. As he joined the family, Magnus would reach out sneakily and swipe one of the smaller children as he or she went tearing past the table. They would squeal with laughter as Magnus swung them high in the air then caught them in his old, but strong, arms. He would kiss them and put them down, giving their bottoms a smack and send them off again.

He was very content. It had been an easy journey from Rome and the Nordic realms for the members of his extended family. Amongst the gathering were his eldest son, along with his wife and their children. In addition to his youngest son, his late wife, Ana, was the only other one absent.

Magnus' sister, Svetlana, smiled privately every time he tossed another child in the air. The older he got the more he reminded her of their grandfather. Every time he laughed she was surprised that it wasn't Mad Olaf returned.

Later, after the little ones wore themselves out and most of the family was drunk on various libations, they all gathered around the fire in a small antechamber, telling stories. It wasn't long before someone asked Magnus to give them a tale from *The Chronicles of Artorius*.

"Oh, you don't want to hear that old tale do you?" he asked reluctantly, heaving a great sigh as if it were an arduous task.

There was a chorus of "Yes, yes! Please Grandfather!" from the children.

They knew his game and crowded around Magnus, the little ones pushing each other in their attempts to sit on his lap. Magnus roared with laughter and insisted on telling them a different story. But they would have none of it. They wheedled and teased him, with their parents cheering them on, until he finally relented.

"Alright, *alright!"* he bellowed.

There was instant silence and the children sat down on the floor as close to him as they could, eyes big and faces beaming. Magnus plucked up two of them and put them on his lap. The twins were four years old and fiercely

proud of the privilege of sitting on Grandfather's lap tonight.

There were many sagas in the family, whose lineage was a unique amalgamation of both Nordic and Roman. Some days it pained the old Norseman to see that the youngest generation of his family was all but removed from their Nordic roots. He supposed it was simply the way of things; when a people became Roman they over time were completely assimilated, their foreign ancestry buried as generations passed.

He quietly contemplated this for a moment before returning his thoughts to which stories he would tell. The Chronicles were of Magnus' dearest friend, Artorius, whom his first born son had been named after, and who Magnus often referred to as, *'the bravest man I ever knew'*. Though the Norseman had been very much a part of every battle and adventure within, he always preferred to leave himself out of most of the stories, or at least diminished in role.

Years ago, Ana put his stories of Artorius into written form. It was difficult in some ways for Magnus, for the stories were written similar to a Nordic saga, oftentimes embellished, while also devoid of the graphic horror that he and his friends had suffered during those harrowing years. The perception of valiant heroes, worthy of Valhalla, who achieved great glory in conquest for the Roman Empire, sat uneasy with the former centurion. What his children and grandchildren never heard were the ghastly details regarding friends who bled to death in battle, suffering abject pain and terror; or the slaughter they wrought upon entire towns, when orders were to give no quarter, not even to women and children. He swallowed hard in the abject realization that there were those killed by his blade that had been no older than his two grandchildren that now sat on his lap.

Even when he was awarded the Civic Crown after the Battle of Braduhenna, Magnus never felt like a hero. Perhaps then, that was why he made his tales about his friend, rather than himself. Strangely enough, the written saga had ended after the campaigns in Judea, though this was in part because Magnus simply never spoke about Britannia to Ana, or indeed anyone. There were memories that were simply too painful to gloss over or twist into song.

The original script was safely wrapped in a chest, as it wasn't needed. Over the years the family memorized *The Chronicles* and in some ways, Magnus blamed them for Hansi choosing to join the legions. His sons, and now his grandchildren, never tired of hearing about Centurion Artorius and

his wife, the Goddess Diana. As with all sagas the story was often overstated, but fairly true to form. That added dramatization, with traces of fiction, had helped Magnus distance himself from the savage and ugly brutality that really was.

The old man adjusted the twins more comfortably on his lap. Most days he felt almost as young and strong as ever, but those days were swiftly diminishing. Having his children and grandchildren were like a fountain of youth, and he took advantage of it whenever he could. He felt like he did in the early days of the legions whenever he recited *The Chronicles*. He paused for a moment and then shook his head. For reasons he could not explain, perhaps because of the memories brought back from his old trunk, he decided in that moment that he would not tell this particular tale in the epic poetry of a saga. It was time, even for the youngest of his grandchildren, to know the truth about the horrors of war and what had happened all those years before.

"I think," he said, "it is time I tell you all about the final harrowing saga of Artorius and his legionaries. But be warned, my beloved, this story is not simply one of adventure. It is one of immense personal tragedy that fell upon your grandfather so many years ago." He then looked up at his son. "That is why I never told your mother, or any of you, about those days in Britannia. They were full of horror and extreme terror, as well as personal bravery. It is time for you to know about the last campaign…"

Thirty-four years earlier

Chapter I: Gate of Kings

Kingdom of the Atrebates, Britannia
April, 40 A.D.
***

The rains had ceased, and the ground was sodden and cold. The fog clung to the ground like a sinister shroud; ready to envelope the armies of two rival kings that faced each other across an open field. Copses of trees dotted the landscape with a small brook separating the two opposing forces. Though difficult for the outside observer to see through the engulfing mist, one of the armies substantially outnumbered the other, and their warriors were full of confidence and ardor as a result of their assured victory. That their vastly outmatched adversaries had decided to fight rather than capitulate, only fueled their inherent bloodlust.

"Our enemy reeks of fear," a warrior said to his leader, a powerful warlord named Caratacus.

"Their folly in opposing me will be paid in blood." Caratacus was a big man, with dark hair pulled back and well-groomed whiskers. He carried a large two-handed sword slung over his back, His brother, Togodumnus, was king of a neighboring tribe, and he had sent a large number of warriors to aid Caratacus in installing himself as king of the newly-conquered lands. A powerful and wealthy man who owned many fine weapons, Caratacus had on this day elected to wield his favorite battle axe that was capable of cleaving limbs and heads from bodies with a single blow.

Contrary to popular belief on the mainland, the peoples of the Isle of Britannia were anything but united. Consisting of more than a dozen kingdoms, they were as diverse culturally and ethnically as those who populated the continental Roman Empire. The loyalties of individuals lay with their tribes rather than any sense of larger nationality. In fact, the very term *'Briton'* was an absurdity that meant nothing to those who inhabited the mysterious and volatile isle. Wars were constant, even though none of the kingdoms had anything resembling a permanent standing army; the concepts of supply and logistics needed for a prolonged campaign were completely foreign to them. Instead, every man of fighting age could be called to arms at any time to serve his king. Wars were mostly short in duration and extreme in

brutality. The inability of any of the kingdoms to field a large army for prolonged periods prevented the isle from ever becoming anything resembling united. That did not stop the constant state of conflict, particularly as larger kingdoms attempted to annex the lands of their smaller neighbors, either by coercion or violence of action.

Warriors were armed at their own expense, and as such the majority carried spears, hand axes, or clubs, with simple oblong or circular shields. Those of greater wealth and social status would carry swords or in some cases large battle axes. Few, if any, wore anything passing for body armor. Courage was their only protection, and for the army on the eastern side of the brook, they would need all they could muster.

Before the sounding of the war horns, Caratacus met with those who would help him lead their men into battle.

"Your brother, the king, sends word from the south," a messenger reported. "The silver mines are ours! Several villages were abandoned, the rest surrendered without a fight."

"That is because Verica has every warrior in his pathetic kingdom here, across that trickle of water," Caratacus remarked. He then spat on the ground.

That Togodumnus was leading part of the army personally added to his reputation as a strong warrior. The actual defeat of the Atrebates' army, however, he would leave to his brother who would install himself as their king.

"Time to end this farce of a conflict." Caratacus then brandished his axe and signaled to the nearest horn player. With the dropping of his axe, the Catuvellauni began their advance.



"It never ends," an old man lamented from across the field as he leaned against his great sword. His name was Verica, ruler of the small kingdom known as Atrebates in southern Britannia. Opposing him were familiar nemeses, the Catuvellauni. A kingdom of far greater size and power, they had been pressing the Atrebates' borders, encroaching on their lands since well before Verica became king, twenty-five years earlier. King Togodumnus had now become so brazen as to send his brother to conquer Atrebates and establish his own kingdom, with himself as overlord.

"And our friends have abandoned us," a young warrior said through

gritted teeth. His name was Cogidubnus, Verica's great-nephew. His blondish hair came just past his shoulders, and he was clean shaven, which caused him to stand out amongst his fellow warriors. He also carried a metal buckler and his weapon of choice was a Roman-style gladius.

"Even if the Cantiaci and Iceni both joined us, our numbers would still be too few against the Catuvellauni," Verica observed somberly. "Most of their army is out plundering our lands, sacking villages, and laying claim to our precious silver and tin mines. The force that Caratacus leads against us is but a fraction of his total strength."

"And he still outnumbers us three-to-one," Cogidubnus growled.

"I would rather die than be Caratacus' slave!" another warrior spat as he clutched his spear to his chest.

A war horn sounded from across the way, and a mighty battle cry erupted from the Catuvellauni as they brandished their weapons in the air before slowly advancing. Their faces and bodies painted in various blue patterns, and their eyes mad with savagery.

"And so it begins," Verica muttered. Due to his advanced age, he was not fit to personally fight; an affliction that emasculated and humiliated him deeply. Instead, it would be for his nephew to personally lead their warriors to their destiny, while their king was confined to simply watching with a small handful of bodyguards.

"Your warriors are with you, uncle!" Cogidubnus asserted. "The Catuvellauni possess neither honor nor courage; they will not lay claim to Atrebates without spilling much blood. And I intend to have amongst that shed be Caratacus' own!" He then gave a brave shout and held his sword high, his warriors echoing his calls to battle.

Cogidubnus was wrought with both rage and despair, though he did his best to mask these feelings. He knew that neither side possessed any advantages in either weaponry or tactics. This battle would be decided by numbers alone, despite his reassurances to his uncle. The maddened cries of both sides grew louder as they approached the brook. Suddenly, several dozen Catuvellauni sprinted forward, bows in hand. A haphazard volley of arrows followed, cutting down numerous Atrebates warriors as they sought cover beneath their crude shields. The shouts of rage were replaced by those of pain from the stricken. Cogidubnus flinched as a warrior to his left was impaled through the neck by a stray arrow. The man dropped his weapons, clutching at the arrow as blood spurted forth, his tongue protruding

grotesquely as he fell to his knees, eyes wide in terror. The Atrebates had a few archers of their own, and these men took aim and unleashed a spattering of arrows in return. Cogidubnus' mouth twisted in a defiant sneer as he watched a few Catuvellauni warriors fall.

His fear then left him, turning to rage as he gave a renewed cry of wrath, breaking into a sprint, his fighters following. The brook was shallow and very narrow, and in a few bounds Cogidubnus crossed, lunging forward and plunging his gladius into the stomach of a Catuvellauni warrior who stood taunting them while brandishing a large spear. His adversary howled in agony as he clawed at his ruptured intestines. The Atrebates prince shoved the dying man aside, and as his fighters sprinted across the brook, a fierce melee ensued. Despite the ferocity of their charge, as well as their extreme bravery, the Atrebates were simply too badly outnumbered. Warriors found themselves in a brawl with two, or sometimes three, enemy combatants at once. One would tie up the Atrebates' shield with his own while his fellows would plunge their weapons into his guts. Individual melees resembled more of a pack of wild dogs attacking a stricken cow rather than a battle amongst warriors. The end result was never in doubt.

And yet, it was anything but a one-sided slaughter, for the Atrebates bore the courage of despair, knowing that lest they hold, all would be lost for them and their loved ones. As the Catuvellauni drove them back into the brook, they left in their wake many dead and horribly maimed fighters from both sides. Spears plunged into hearts, swords and axes hacked off limbs, while large clubs smashed the brains out of their victims.

His warriors still attempted to stand their ground, and Cogidubnus found himself stumbling back amongst the slick rocks that lay scattered about the bank. He swung his buckler in a punching motion, the edge catching one of his assailants across the temple, rendering him dazed as the Atrebates prince stabbed him through the cheek with his gladius. It was then that he spied Caratacus. And while Cogidubnus was no small man, Caratacus was a monster in comparison. He wielded his great axe with ease, bringing it down in a vicious chop that cleaved through the shoulder and arm of a hapless warrior. He then swung his weapon in a backswing, decapitating the man.

"Vile bastard of hell!" Cogidubnus shouted as he attacked the usurper.

He caught Caratacus off-guard with a lunging blow to the head from his buckler. He followed through with a quick stab that caught the Catuvellauni leader in the side. It was a painful, but mostly superficial wound, and

Caratacus caught the prince in the head with the back of his fist before bringing his axe to bear. His eyes were red with fury as he smashed Cogidubnus' shield, the metal buckling under the onslaught. The shock of the smash shot numbing pain through the young warrior's arm, and he found himself suddenly facing more than just Caratacus as a number of enemy warriors came to their leader's aid. His chance at slaying the Catuvellauni's war chief was quickly lost, and he stumbled back across the brook, which was now filled with dead and dying men. A hand reached up piteously, catching Cogidubnus on the boot as he splashed past the poor wretch, whose guts had been splayed open by a Catuvellauni sword. And yet the prince knew there was nothing he could do for the man or, indeed, any of his numerous warriors who lay strewn about with sickening and ghastly wounds that they would soon succumb to; that is, unless the Catuvellauni were feeling somewhat merciful and put the men out of their misery.



King Verica watched the battle unfold, his head bowed in sorrow. The entire brawl had lasted maybe a few minutes. Survivors of his army now fled in all directions, their only saving grace being that neither side had any cavalry with which to conduct a pursuit.

"My king, we must leave the field at once!" a warrior from his bodyguard pleaded. "If you are lost, then there will be no hope left for our people."

Verica nodded reluctantly and allowed himself to be helped onto one of the only horses on the field. The triumphant shouts of the Catuvellauni echoed in his mind as he, and a few mounted guards, fled south.

"Uncle!" Cogidubnus shouted, running up behind him. "We must make for the grove of Ancasta, along the River Alre[1]. I will hold Caratacus as long as I am able and then meet you there in two days."

Verica could only nod in reply and as he spurred his horse away from the scene of death, he gave a sad look back. Despite his despair, he managed a smile of deep-set pride at his great-nephew, who continued to stand defiantly in the face of Caratacus' oncoming hordes, even as friendly warriors fled in all directions. There was no cohesion to be found in either side, and it was only the occasional single enemy fighter who would come at the Atrebates prince. Verica watched as Cogidubnus smashed a warrior across the head with his buckler and thrust his gladius into his heart, beneath the ribcage. He

then sprinted up a short, rocky knoll and shouted a series of curses towards their hated foe. Another brazen enemy warrior came at him, only to stumble on the slick stones and fall on his face, allowing Cogidubnus to dispatch him with a slash of his gladius across the throat. Even from a distance, Verica could see the blood spurting forth as the man thrashed about. His nephew then gave one last battle cry towards their enemy before sprinting away, leading many of their enemies to chase after him and away from his great-uncle.

"Courage worthy of a king," Verica said quietly as he and his small escort turned their horses about and rode away.



"Our enemies flee like cowards!" a warrior shouted triumphantly pointing to where Verica rode off on his horse. "The lands of the Atrebates are ours!"

"They have always been ours, we just had to remind them of it," Caratacus corrected, clutching his injured side. The wound had bled a great deal and was now a dark, coagulated mess. The Catuvellauni prince, who would now be king of Atrebates, was a hearty man, who had been dealt far greater injuries in his years of fighting. The gash in his side would be little more than a nuisance for a while as it healed and scarred over. "We will fill our coffers with silver and tin, enriching our kingdom further. And tonight I will dine in Verica's great hall before I burn it to the ground!"

All about him lay dead and dying men; the sounds of felling axes and spears striking flesh as his warriors viciously finished off the wounded Atrebates. Their own wounded were being dragged away by their comrades. Medicines and methods of healing were very archaic for the Catuvellauni, relying heavily on druidic magic, and as such many of his warriors would eventually succumb to ghastly infection and death.

"A terrible, yet wondrous sight," Caratacus observed. "Our victory is now complete, and tonight we will sing of triumph and conquest in honor of our glorious dead!"

As evening fell upon the isle, the triumphant hordes of Caratacus marched into the Oppida Hill Fort that had once served as the seat of King Verica. The inhabitants offered no resistance, leaving the gates open. Survivors of Verica's army had warned the people, with many fleeing. Still,

most remained, for they had nowhere else to go. After all, who could they now turn to, abandoned as they were to their enemies? They hoped for clemency from their new master and understood that any further defiance would only be met with further pillage, rape, and brutal death.

"No members of the deposed royal family to greet us," a warrior scoffed.

"Verica was a widower with no sons," Caratacus said as he rode through the gate on a magnificent charger.

Crowds of people lined the dirt path. Some hung their heads while others gazed at the large warrior curiously. In a land in constant turmoil, such occurrences of rulers deposed by mightier warlords were all too commonplace.

"His only surviving relative was his brother's grandson, who may very well be a feast for the crows by now. And even if he is not, he is of no threat to us. Atrebates is ours now, and the people look upon their new king!"



Verica feared for the safety of his great-nephew, thinking like Caratacus that the young prince may have perished. Such thoughts filled him with despair, coupled by extreme fatigue and lack of food to be found on the road leading south and west towards the grove of Ancasta. The two days of riding had been extremely hard on the now-deposed Atrebates King, and as they reached the grove, barely a mile from the sea, he had to be helped gingerly down from his mount. His once proud army was scattered; perhaps a dozen men were now with him, with a handful more waiting in the grove that had been sent on ahead by Cogidubnus.

"I should have died with my men," Verica lamented quietly.

"And then who would our people look turn to?" The voice of his nephew was the first welcome sound the king had heard since he'd first been told of the Catuvellauni invasion. Cogidubnus stepped out from the trees, his face pale and eyes red from exhaustion and strain. The king placed a hand on his shoulder.

"There is one who can lead them," he said tiredly, "and I am not he. But tell me, nephew, what of your family?"

Verica's wife had passed on years earlier, and the couple had been childless. Cogidubnus was the grandson of Verica's late brother and was his only living male relative. The young warrior had a wife and two infant sons.

“You need not worry, uncle,” he reassured. “I took precautions before we departed for war. Sorcha and my children are safe.”

“Safe?” Verica asked. “Where in these lands can they possibly be safe? Even if he thinks you are dead, Caratacus will offer a large reward for their capture, in order that he may be able to parade them in chains!”

“It is not within these lands that I sent them,” Cogidubnus explained cryptically. “But come, uncle, we must rest here tonight. Tomorrow all will be revealed.”

Verica was too exhausted to press any further. His guards laid out a pair of blankets for him to lie on, as his nephew and several of his men produced some cold rations of dried meat and fruit. He could hear the gentle current of the River Alre, which ran just over a short rise beyond the grove.

“We sent a couple men down to the river to catch fish, but I’m afraid any fires would be ill-advised,” a warrior stated.

“Agreed,” Cogidubnus nodded. “We must rest under the shadow of the trees tonight. I doubt that the Catuvellauni are attempting any pursuit, but we must not be careless. I only pray it does not rain. We are in what is now their lands and Caratacus will have eyes everywhere.”

The meat proved tough and stringy, though for the half-starved king and his men, it helped sate their rumbling stomachs. A few warriors came back bearing a basket of fish.

“There is a fishing village near here,” one of the men said. “We did not see much activity, and no sign of Caratacus’ warriors, so we should be safe for now.”

They ate in silence, uncertain as to what they should do when morning came. Only Cogidubnus seemed to have any sense of reassurance about him. His aura gave Verica a trace of hope that he had not felt since the word first came to him regarding the Catuvellauni attack on his kingdom. For the first time in a week he allowed himself to fall into a deep sleep as darkness of night completely enshrouded the grove.

The rains came just before dawn but were mercifully brief, with the thick canopy of trees protecting the small, haggard group of exiles. Engulfed in an early morning fog, Cogidubnus led the contingent the remaining short distance along the river to the sea. He grinned as he spotted the large ship rolling in the surf near the inlet of another small river[2]. His warriors were startled by the sight.

“By the gods, who are they?” one of the king’s guards asked.

“The only friends we have left,” Cogidubnus explained. “The king asked me to send word to our allies once we heard about the Catuvellauni incursion. I ask your pardon for my presumptions, uncle, but I sent dispatches to *all* of our potential friends, not just those in Britannia.”

“Romans!” a warrior spat in disgust.

“By Sulis, why have you called upon them?” another grumbled. “They create nations of slaves and dare to call it ‘peace’!”

“And who else would you have me call upon?” Cogidubnus retorted. “The Iceni? The Cantiaci? Well, I did, and they did not so much as raise a finger when we appealed to them for help! Forgive me, uncle, but even your brother, King Eppillus of the Cantiaci left us to the mercy of Caratacus.”

“It would appear,” Verica finally spoke up, “that Rome is our only ally not to completely abandon us.”

“Ally,” the first warrior scoffed. “We had dealings with their merchants, though I would hardly call that an alliance.”

“On the contrary,” Verica said, “Our relationship with Rome goes far deeper than many realize. My father, King Commius, served with Julius Caesar during his Conquest of Gaul, from where, as you know, many of our people originate. Despite their later falling out, both I and my brothers maintained a subtle, yet firm rapport with Rome. My eldest brother, Tincomarus, spent the early years of his reign in Rome after the rise of Emperor Augustus Caesar. Tincomarus and Eppillus had a falling out, in a story which would take too long to tell now; suffice it to say, Tincomarus fled to Rome, where he spent the remainder of his days. After I assumed the kingship of Atrebates, and Eppillus took Cantiaci as his own, I renewed an alliance with Emperor Tiberius, who had just become emperor the year before. And though this alliance may have been forgotten by most, it would seem at least one of Tiberius’ successors intends to honor it.”

“What, with a single warship?” the warrior said, his voice still full of doubt. “What can they possibly bring us?”

“For now, time to regroup,” Cogidubnus explained. “Come, they will not wait for us long.”

As the contingent made its way down the long path that led to the narrow beach, they spotted a number of marines from the Roman vessel waiting for them. They were armed similarly to legionaries, though their armor was lighter and their shields smaller and oval shaped, allowing for greater mobility aboard ship. Their captain, a tall, blonde Norseman, stood at their

head. He wore a sailor's tunic with a gladius strapped to his hip; his hair was cropped above the shoulders, and his face shaven. His northern ancestors may have once been long-haired barbarians, but his demeanor noted that he was clearly 'Roman'.

"King Verica," he said in their native tongue as he stepped forward, giving a short bow of respect. "I am Commander Hansi Flavianus of the Imperial Navy. I am here to take you to Rome."

"Rome?" a guardsman asked, perplexed. He then glared at Cogidubnus. "That was your plan? Forcing us to flee to *Rome*?"

"We are not fleeing," the prince explained, keeping his voice calm. "Like I said, we are regrouping. And no one is forcing you to go anywhere. Those of you who do not wish to depart with us are free to leave. Take your chances with Caratacus if you wish; I'll not fault you for it. Those who will stand by their king will accompany us."

The twenty or so men who had thus far journeyed with them talked quietly amongst themselves for a moment. Finally the first warrior spoke, "I'm with you, my prince, as are most of the lads. The rest ask your pardon if they cannot accompany you."

"Please understand," another spoke up. "We have families that we cannot abandon, not with Caratacus as their lord. Forgive us, sire."

"There is nothing to forgive," Verica said reassuringly. "I release you from any oaths you may have taken. Return to your families, and may Freya go with you."

He then noted that the warriors who remained were mostly young and unmarried. Those with families still in Atrebates, he could not fault for staying to try and protect them. These men bowed and quickly took their leave of their king for the last time.

"It is time," the Roman officer said. "My men will help you into the ship, and then we must set sail at once."

"How long until we reach Rome?" Cogidubnus asked. Like all those who accompanied him and his great-uncle, none of them had any comprehension as to the vast size of the Roman Empire or the seas that surrounded its northern and western borders.

"At least two weeks, and that's if the seas cooperate. Come."

Verica nodded reluctantly and then looked back inland. Though it was a foggy and gloomy day, his heart was rendered at the thought of, what he felt, was abandoning his kingdom and people.

“Will I ever return?”

“That,” Hansi said, “is for the emperor to decide. You will find that Rome is the gate of kings.”

Chapter Endnotes:

1 – River Itchen in Hampshire, England, near what is now Southampton

2 – River Hamble

Chapter II: Demon's Dagger

The Imperial Palace, Rome
14 January, 41 A.D.
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"It is time," Cassius said quietly as the group of conspirators crept down the stairs into the well-lit underground passage beneath the imperial palace. Outside they could hear the sounds of the cheering throngs that were attending the latest in a series of games put on by the emperor, Gaius Caligula. As a member of the Praetorian Guard, it would cause no alarm that Cassius was armed. However, the other members of the conspiracy had to keep their weapons hidden beneath the folds of their togas. As such, they carried short daggers instead of soldiers' gladii.

Cassius Chaerea was a highly decorated former soldier who had served Rome since his days as a young tribune during the reign of Augustus. He was best known for having saved the lives of over a hundred legionaries during the disastrous ambush in Teutoburger Wald, Germania, more than thirty years earlier. He had further distinguished himself during the campaigns of retribution under Germanicus Caesar; his commanding general once telling the Emperor Tiberius that Cassius was, perhaps, the bravest man he had ever met. It was this reputation that later led to his transfer from the legions to the Praetorian Guard, where he established himself as one of their more respected leaders.

In recent years he had risen through the ranks as a senior officer within the Praetorians; an unusual posting, given his secret loathing of the imperial family. Though he served Augustus faithfully during his early days as a soldier, he never forgave the emperor for appointing the dreadful Quintilius Varus as commander of the Rhine Army, for it was he who led the Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth Legions to their destruction in Teutoburger Wald. Cassius also believed that any retribution should have been dealt swiftly, not six years later, and only then after the death of Augustus. And while he had respected Tiberius as a soldier, as he was one of Rome's greatest commanders who could rightly boast that he'd never been beaten in battle, as emperor, Cassius found him wanting. Ironically, Tiberius himself would have been one of the first to agree with this!

In an interesting twist of fate, he had helped uncover a conspiracy against Tiberius, which was wrought by Cassius' own commanding officer, Lucius Aelius Sejanus. He gave a sinister grin, knowing that he had saved one emperor, only to assassinate his successor ten years later.

The men walked quickly down the passage, their sandals echoing on the cobblestones. The praetorian tribune, along with several of his accomplices from the senate and a few guardsmen who were complicit in the plot, walked quickly along the corridor that ran beneath the busy streets between the palace and the circus. Far from being a dank, uninviting tunnel, it was spacious, lit with numerous torches, and served as a means of numerous patricians and other important persons to avoid the stifling crowds.

"Why, Senator Marcus!" a voice said enthusiastically to one of Cassius' companions.

Despite being the emperor's personal pathway, it was by no means secret. In fact, it was commonly used by senators, magistrates, and members of the imperial household when coming and going from the palace. The man who greeted them was a senator, whose name Cassius could not recall at the moment. He furrowed his brow when he saw the sweaty complexion of his friend, despite it being a cool January day.

"By Juno, are you feeling alright?" he asked.

"Yes, f…fine," Marcus said quickly. His left arm was clutched close around his middle, giving the appearance that he was having stomach pains when, in fact, he was concealing a gladius beneath the broad purple stripe of his toga.

"The good senator has been feeling a bit off," Cassius spoke up, "but this has not prevented him from coming to pay his respects to the emperor. Gaius Caligula awaits our pleasure and, as you know, he does not like to be kept waiting."

"But of course," the inquisitive senator said before bidding farewell to Marcus.

The other conspirators also let out sighs of relief. Cassius was the only one who appeared calm and focused. But then, what did he expect of men who'd had a soft living in Rome and never had to draw a blade in anger? Still, he knew they were resolved in their conviction to free Rome from the tyrant. He did not need them to be skilled with their weapons like legionaries, just willing to stab one man who had wronged them all grievously. One of the

senator's had had his wife invited by Caligula to attend a special banquet at the palace, only to have it become a depraved orgy, where the poor woman was subjected to malicious sexual cruelty by the emperor, as well as many of the drunken guests. Even a number of slaves of both sexes had had their way with her. In her shame and despair, she killed herself after confessing to her husband what had happened. The senator vowed to avenge her, consequences to himself be damned.

This was but one of many such incidences, and the four years of Gaius Caligula's reign as Caesar had been a twisted paradox. Despite being the son of the legendary general, Germanicus Caesar, those closest to him saw none of his father's noble qualities. Like many, Cassius wondered if he was the son of Germanicus at all. His sexual promiscuity with both young boys and girls may have raised a few eyebrows; however, it was the incestuous relations that he had flaunted with three of his sisters that caused the most revulsion amongst the nobility. His cruelty towards women was profound. His first wife had died giving birth to a stillborn child, and many speculated that this had ruined the young man. His second wife was only his consort for six days, after being forced to divorce her first husband. Caligula promptly became bored with her and later had her banished on rumor that she'd returned to her first husband. His third wife had also been forced to divorce her husband, a former consul named Regulus, who also accompanied Cassius this day.

"Today I avenge my wife," the first senator said coldly, clutching his weapon beneath the folds of his toga.

"And I, mine," Regulus said quietly.

After being forced to divorce him in order to marry the emperor, Caligula subsequently divorced her six months later, forbidding her from sleeping with or associating with any other men.

"Today we avenge *Rome*," Cassius added as soon as they passed a group of entertainers who were heading back up the passage towards the palace. Even though their mission may have been a matter of patriotism for their nation, it had also become a matter of personal survival for the men.

Caligula was emotionally unstable, prone to fits of rage where he would sometimes order the immediate execution of those who displeased him. Such actions had surpassed the bounds of legality and common decency, yet there were none in the senate or the patrician class who would dare oppose him. Indeed, two of the senators who accompanied Cassius had only been spared execution by the intervention of Caligula's current wife, Caesonia, as well as

his uncle, Claudius. Declaring himself a living deity, he demanded to be worshipped as a god. In a strange turn of events, he staged a number of legions for a supposed invasion of the isle of Britannia, only to order the soldiers to unleash their javelins into the waters and to ‘attack the sea’ in order to suppress his divine rival, Neptune. This had been fortuitous for the legions, as the emperor had neglected the very basics of logistical support needed to conduct an invasion, and had they crossed the channel they would have eventually met with disaster once their supplies ran out.

And yet, despite his erratic behavior, the squandering of most of the vast imperial treasury that his predecessor, Tiberius, had left, Caligula was loved by many of Rome’s common people. It meant little to the plebeians if their emperor cut down a few patricians or cavorted with their wives, and whatever happened with the legions on the frontier was a different world that few gave any mind to. Caligula gave them the proverbial *bread and circuses*, making the people forget Rome’s pending bankruptcy with a plethora of games and endless festivals, the irony being that such costly celebrations were only hastening pending demise. It was as if the annual holiday of Saturnalia had become a daily event throughout much of the year.

As Cassius and his conspirators continued down the tunnel, they saw a number of senators and other magistrates, who were gathered with the emperor. Caligula was addressing a troupe of young male dancers who were scheduled to entertain him later at the palace. Also with him was his uncle, Claudius, who quietly excused himself as the squad of praetorians and senators approached. He gave a friendly nod and smile to Cassius, who he had always viewed as a friend. He also shot knowing glances to Marcus and Regulus. Whether he knew what was about to happen, no one would ever say.

Not content with the protection offered by the praetorians, Caligula had a personal bodyguard made up of Germanic warriors who were fiercely loyal to him. This in itself could be seen as a private joke to the young emperor, given his extreme dislike of their people. He was prone to referring to things he disliked as ‘German’, as if it were a form of profanity. These particular guards wore hamata chain armor and carried oblong shields and long stabbing spears. They also rarely left Caligula’s side, yet so anxious had he been to address the group of entertainers, that he’d left them mostly behind as he’d exited the imperial box at the circus. This was fortuitous for Cassius, for

the last thing he wanted was a brawl to ensue between these fearsome warriors and his outnumbered praetorians. Besides, they had further work to do once the hated tyrant was slain!

A few German guards were lingering by the large double doors at the base of the steps that went up into the arena. As inconspicuously as possible, a pair of Cassius' guardsmen skirted past the crowd and over to the doors. Each man stood at a door, hoping he could shut it fast enough once their commander gave the signal.

"Why, Cassius, my dear little Venus!" Caligula said boisterously as the praetorian approached him. The term 'Venus' was one of many insults the emperor hurled at Cassius almost on a daily basis, and was in reference to a serious groin injury he'd suffered years before that sometimes caused his voice to crack. "To what do I owe this delicious pleasure? Come to see these fine young specimens perform? Well, sorry if any strike your fancy, for they are only for my amusement. Now what is it? I'm awfully busy right now!"

"The watchword, Caesar," Cassius said, his left hand clutching the scabbard of his gladius that was strapped to his hip. His knuckles were white from his hard grip, and his blood was surging through his veins, like it had always done before battle. There was no turning back.

"Hmm," Caligula said in mock contemplation as he tapped his finger on his lips. "Well, since we are celebrating my divinity today, let's say *Jupiter*. He's been rather fussy ever since I taught Neptune a rather harsh lesson."

"I have one that's better," Cassius said coldly. *"Justice!"* His weapon flashed from its scabbard as the praetorians at the end of the corridor quickly pulled shut and braced the large double doors with a loud slam. Confused talk in German could be heard on the other side, and soon there was a loud pounding on the doors that echoed throughout the corridor.

"You dare draw your weapon in the presence of your emperor and god…" Caligula's words were cut short as Cassius plunged his gladius into his groin, eliciting a high-pitched scream of agony.

The other guardsmen, along with Regulus, Marcus, and the others, drew their weapons and swarmed the emperor as shouts of fear and shock echoed from the gathered crowd. They stabbed the emperor repeatedly, his white and purple robes ripped and splashed with bright crimson. Marcus gritted his teeth as blood spurted onto the blade of his weapon as he thrust it into Caligula's back. Regulus slashed his weapon between the shoulder and neck, driving him to his knees.

“No!” Caligula shouted in terror and agony as large splotches of blood saturated his robes. “I’m a god, you cannot kill me!”

Blood gushed from the fearful wounds as he continued to scream in pain, the dousing of his toga coming as a stark mockery of his imploring cries of his own divinity. It was as if Cassius and his men were deliberately striking where it would be most painful, yet not immediately fatal. Finally, as Caligula started to fall onto his face, Regulus grabbed him by his blood-soaked hair and slashed his gladius across his throat. The emperor’s eyes rolled into the back of his head as dark scarlet gushed from both the wound and out of his gaping mouth. All the while, the sounds of frantic pounding on the large doors grew ever louder as the cross brace began to break.

“We need to go,” one of the praetorians said. “Those damned Germans outnumber us, and they will be in a rage when they see their beloved emperor.”

“At least this hated affair is now over,” Marcus said quietly, sweat forming on his brow.

“No,” Cassius said, shaking his head. “It is not done yet.” He spat on the emperor’s twitching corpse that lay face down in a pooling mass of blood. He turned to walk away, his eyes filled with murderous rage.

“Cassius!” the senator said, grabbing him by the shoulder of his armor. His face was filled with dread as he sensed what Cassius intended. “We agreed, only Caligula was to die.”

“Things change, Marcus,” the praetorian said coldly. “Now unhand me!”

As the men fled back up the corridor, the brace over the door behind them snapped, and swarms of Caligula’s German bodyguard rushed into the corridor. Upon seeing their emperor lying in a growing pool of blood, his body stabbed and slashed in dozens of places, they flew into a rage. Bystanders who had not fled, but instead watched the macabre execution of the emperor, suddenly became targets for the Germans’ rage. They assailed anyone in the vicinity, causing another wave of panic, as even the troupe of dancing boys were assaulted by the burly men with heavy spears.

Down the other end of the tunnel, as they reentered the imperial palace, Marcus stopped and grabbed Regulus by the shoulder of his toga. Word of the emperor’s assassination had already started to spread, and fear gripped those within the house as Cassius and his praetorians set about their fearful task.

“By Diana, what is he doing?” Marcus asked, fearing the answer.

“I would say he’s trying to singlehandedly restore the republic,” the former consul replied quietly.

“Or settle his own petty scores,” Marcus retorted. “And what of Caesonia…and Claudius? Surely Cassius will not harm them! Caesonia is innocent of any of her husband’s crimes, and Claudius has always thought of Cassius as a friend!”

“I fear that friendship alone will not be enough to save him from Cassius’ wrath,” Regulus lamented. “As you said, we all agreed that only Caligula should die. I regret that we cannot stop Cassius, though I will have no further part in this. Come, let us leave this place.”



Unbeknownst to Marcus and Regulus, Claudius had been privy to their conversation; listening from a balcony that overlooked the entrance to the underground passage. Panic had erupted within the palace, and he now found himself gripped in fear as he searched for his wife, Messalina. The young woman had been married to Claudius by Caligula four years prior as a cruel joke, given that the then twenty-year-old was young enough to be Claudius’ daughter. Still, he was very much in love with her. She had since borne him a daughter and was now nine months pregnant with their second child.

It was the cry of another child that alerted him. The door to one of the many rooms along the upstairs corridor was flung open, and Claudius recognized Cassius Chaerea and another praetorian entering. He stumbled along and was able to watch as Cassius was approached by Caligula’s wife, Caesonia. Ten years older than the slain emperor, and more plain than pretty, she was still a kind-hearted woman who sought the best in everyone. She and Claudius had been close, and she’d even looked after his daughter on occasion.

“Oh, Cassius, thank the gods!” she said as she held her one-year old daughter up against her chest. “What has happened? Please tell me!”

“I think you know,” the praetorian said coolly, removing his helmet and drawing his gladius.

The woman closed her eyes in realization, yet she refused to show any of the terror that welled up inside her. “And what will you do?” she asked, swallowing hard.

“Free Rome from the rule of mad tyrants that fancy themselves as gods.

And that can only happen when every member of the imperial family is dead. I am sorry."

"No," Caesonia said, shaking her head as her eyes filled with tears. "Kill me if you must, but spare the others. My daughter is barely a year old. And what of Claudius and Messalina? Venus have mercy, Cassius! Claudius is your friend!"

"And that is why his death will bring me no joy," he replied.

Claudius' eyes grew wide, and he slowly backed away, not wanting to believe what he was hearing. He broke into a hobbling sprint as he heard Caesonia scream. What he did not know was that her cries were not for herself, but for her daughter. Seeing her child's bloodied remains, she then bravely offered her neck to Cassius, who slashed the artery open and shoved her roughly onto the bed, where she twitched violently as death took hold.

Claudius was now terrified for himself as well as his family. Caligula had insisted on keeping his uncle ever by his side over the past week. He did not even know where Messalina and his daughter were. He further cursed himself for being unable to protect them. He stumbled into the antechamber of the imperial throne room, shouts and terrified screams echoing along the corridors of the palace. Without any other options presenting themselves, he elected to hide behind a large curtain. Shamed, and feeling both feeble and a coward, he wept.



Chaos ensued both within and without the palace as word of the emperor's murder spread like wildfire. What was impossible to gauge was just how many were involved in the conspiracy. While most of the senate would hail the hated Gaius Caligula's demise, for the praetorian guard it was a different matter entirely. Only a small handful of officers had been complicit in the plot, with most of the rest remaining loyal to the office of emperor, which they were sworn to protect. That their prefect had gone rogue and violated his oath appalled them. Whatever their personal opinion of Gaius Caligula, it was not up to them to remove an emperor from power, and by doing so a dangerous precedent had now been set. Furthermore, if the imperial line was dead, the senate would have little use for them. They would either be sent to the legions or simply left unemployed.

A large number of these men, led by a centurion named Cornelius,

stormed into the antechamber. With the emperor dead, Cornelius took it upon himself to try and save the remaining members of the imperial family before Cassius got to them. For the moment, he was too focused on his task at hand to lament that a man he'd looked up to his entire life had lost all control of his senses. Like many, Cornelius could not completely fault his commander for killing the emperor, yet his rampage of murder against the innocent had taken his vengeance over the cliff and into the abyss of madness.

"By Juno, what have they done?" he said as his men fanned out.

"Possibly started a civil war," his optio, a former legionary named Gratus, grumbled. "Some may think they've restored the republic, yet you know as well as I that there are those amongst the senate, as well as legion commanders, who think they should be Caesar. And meanwhile, with no emperor, what's to become of us?"

"Sir," one of the men said, holding up a silver pitcher, "it'd be a shame to let those damned Germans or other looters get their hands on these. Mind if we help ourselves?"

"Normally I would have you flogged for making such an insolent suggestion," the centurion stated coldly. He said no more about the matter and, with a subtle nod from Gratus, the men simply shrugged and started to grab anything of value they could readily carry back to their camp. As they did so, Gratus noticed something unusual behind one of the curtains that his men were tearing down in order to use as makeshift sacks.

"Hey, Cornelius," he said, drawing his gladius. He quickly pulled the curtain aside, revealing the terrified Claudius, who shrank away from the heavily armed praetorian. "Well, what have we here? You think it's one of the assassins?"

"P…please don't hurt me!" Claudius pleaded as the optio brandished his weapon menacingly. "I j…just want to find my family and leave!"

"Hold fast!" Cornelius snapped. "He's not a conspirator; it's the emperor's uncle, Claudius. He's Germanicus Caesar's brother. Put your weapon away, Gratus."

"Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt him," the optio replied, his face breaking into a broad grin. "I'm going to *salute* him."

"What are you on about?" the centurion asked, puzzled.

"Think about it," Gratus replied. "He's the only surviving member of the Julio-Claudian line who could have a legitimate claim to the imperial throne."

Cornelius' eyes brightened, and Claudius' grew wide in startled

realization as to what the praetorian optio was suggesting.

"N…no!" he protested, his head twitching violently. "W…what you propose is madness! J…just let me g…go find my wife!"

"Are you insane?" Gratus retorted. "Your nephew's German guards are on the rampage, and the conspirators are still loose. We don't know who all of them are, and unfortunately for you, they're mostly dressed like us."

"If either of them finds you, you're a dead man," Cornelius added. He then addressed his optio. "Get him out of here, Gratus. Take some men and see to it he's delivered safely to the Castra Praetoria. I'll use the remainder of our force to find his family."

"Understood," Gratus replied. He then bowed to Claudius with his gladius extended in salute. "This way, *Caesar*."

The halls of the palace were mostly deserted as the praetorians led the muddled Claudius along the corridors. Two of the men practically carried him, as his limp made their pace unnervingly slow. As they approached the main entrance, a troupe of German guards came bursting from one of the side passages.

"Shit," Gratus uttered through clenched teeth.

As the Germans approached them with shields and spears ready to strike, the two squads of praetorians formed a protective wall in front of Claudius.

"*Gladius…draw!* Protect the emperor!"

"Halten!" the lead German said to his men, holding his spear to the side to stop their advance. He had heard Gratus' order, and speaking passable Latin, he understood what had been said. He cocked his head to one side, giving the group of praetorians, who stood battle ready with their weapons drawn, a perplexed gaze. He then addressed Gratus in heavily accented Latin. "This…emperor?"

"That's right," the optio replied. He hoped to bluff his way past the Germans and avoid a bloody fight. He stepped in front of the large man, who stood at least a half-head taller than him, and met his hard stare. "This is your new emperor, now show him some respect!"

Whatever Gratus' racial prejudices towards what he considered 'barbarian' peoples; this German was clearly a thinker. He, too, understood that with Caligula dead, the only way to quickly restore order and give them the best chance of bringing the assassins to justice was to install a new emperor as soon as possible. He gave the optio a nod of understanding before turning to address his men.

“Hagel den Kaiser!” he shouted, holding his spear high.

His men appeared at first baffled by this assertion from their commander, yet none of them so much as uttered a word in protest. He then turned and bowed deeply to Claudius, who was still in a state of disbelief and simply stood with his head twitching slightly.

“Call off the rest of your men,” Gratus ordered the German as the praetorians sheathed their weapons and started to lead Claudius away once more. “Let them know that Tiberius Claudius Nero Germanicus is their new emperor, and they *will* swear fealty to him!”

The German nodded in understanding before shouting subsequent orders to his men who formed up into two lines, weapons held in salute as Gratus and his men led Claudius between them.

“I don’t know about you, sir,” Gratus said quietly to Claudius, “but I think I may need to change my loincloth after that!”



As Marcus and Regulus fled from the imperial palace, they were stopped by Aulus Nautius Cursor, Tribune of the Plebs. With him was a man the two senators recognized as Titus Artorius Justus, a centurion who had led the First Italic Cohort in Judea and now served as police commissioner for the nearby port of Ostia. He had arrived to make his weekly reports to the magistracy when he and Cursor had heard rumor of the emperor’s assassination.

“Hold, senators!” the tribune said abruptly. “It appears to be chaos both within the palace and at the circus. Tell me what’s happened.”

“The emperor is slain,” Regulus said plainly.

The tribune then noted the blood on the hands of both men, as well as the splatters on their togas. He understood.

“Please know that we only slew Caligula,” Marcus added quickly. “Unfortunately, Cassius has taken things further. He’s gone mad and started killing anyone associated with the imperial family.”

“Let us pass,” Regulus urged. “We must convene the senate at once!”

“Well, fancy that,” Artorius said as they watched the two men walk quickly down the street. “They commit murder, of the emperor no less, and they fret about needing to convene the senate.”

“And neither of us made an attempt to stop them,” Cursor replied

coarsely. “I doubt any of their peers will shed a tear over Caligula. However, if Cassius has lost his mind and gone on the rampage, he could tear apart the very fabric of the empire.”

“I seem to remember a crisis you went through about ten years ago, dealing with another maddened praetorian; though it pains me to make the comparison, for I’ve always held Cassius Chaerea in the highest esteem.”

“As have I,” the tribune concurred. “And it is an unfair comparison, at least when looking at their motives. Sejanus sought to usurp Tiberius for his own selfish gains. Cassius believes he is actually serving Rome by slaying the entire imperial family. Yet it will create nothing but chaos if he succeeds. The senate will squabble amongst themselves as to whether one of them should become Caesar or if they should try and restore that antiquity known as the republic.”

“None of them were even born the last time the senate ruled Rome,” Artorius added. He shook his head. “And what of the legions? With no imperial heir, who’s to say they won’t try and appoint one of their own?”

“Exactly,” Cursor emphasized. “The last thing we need is several thousand of your comrades bearing down on the city. That is, at least, where Cassius’ actions parallel those of Sejanus. In both cases they risk destabilizing the entire empire and turning our own legions on us.”

At that moment they saw Cassius and a small group of Praetorians leaving the palace. Like Marcus and Regulus, they made their way towards the senate.

“I would say one of us should try and bring him to his senses,” Artorius said, “but I think we’re far too late.”

“It is never too late,” another voice said behind them.

They turned to see a young senatorial legate named Vespasian walking towards them. “Come, let us make a stand for Rome.”

Chapter III: Savior of Rome

Temple of Jupiter
14 January, 41 A.D.
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"Noble senators!" Cassius said, his face hard but determined as he addressed the assembly. He still wore his armor, with his helmet tucked beneath his left arm. He continued, "It was with heavy heart that I broke my oath and struck down our emperor. Know that I did this not for myself, but for Rome. Our nation was on the verge of financial collapse, while Gaius Caligula made a mockery of all our ancestors fought and died for. I tell you this; we have suffered under the rule of the Caesars long enough! I implore you, the noble fathers of Rome, to restore dignity and take your places as the rightful heads of the state. I ask that we once more become a beacon of light for the world and restore the republic!"

The praetorian's words were met with a standing ovation from those members of the senate present. The sounds of the crowd were deafening outside, and the senators who had elected to hear his words were still making their way into the chamber. Many seats remained vacant, their occupants too terrified to come into the city. Night had come to Rome, and most had fled to their private estates, waiting to see what would happen once the chaos surrounding Gaius Caligula's assassination died down. No one even knew if the body had been taken away, or if it still lay in a coagulated puddle of blood in the tunnel beneath the palace and Circus Maximus.

All told, there were perhaps a hundred members on hand to hear Cassius' speech. It would fall upon them what to do in light of the revelation that the Praetorian Guard, minus Cassius and his fellow conspirators, had named Caligula's uncle, Claudius, Emperor.

The consul, Quintus Pomponius, stood and raised his hands, silencing his overly boisterous peers. His fellow consul had already declared himself for Claudius, perhaps to save himself from the wrath of the praetorians, and had refused to be present at this meeting.

"An impassioned speech, Cassius," he said, "one worthy of a hero of Rome such as yourself. While this body cannot condone murder, we are inclined to sympathize with your motives, and should give you our thanks for

ridding us of a hateful tyrant. However, before we go any further, I feel we must recognize Marcus Julius Agrippa, who has asked to speak on Claudius' behalf."

The man he referred to was more commonly known as Herod Agrippa, and though a foreign prince from Judea, he had been raised within the imperial household in Rome. Indeed, he dressed and conducted himself like a Roman, and was more respected by them than his own people. He was also a lifelong friend of Claudius, and as such had come to the senate to speak for him. There were others present as well; the plebian tribune, Aulus Nautius Cursor, as well as the Ostia police commissioner and former Centurion Pilus Prior, Titus Artorius Justus, though these two kept near the entrance to the temple, acting as mere observers for the moment. They had accompanied two well-respected military leaders, who also happened to be brothers. Their names were Flavius Sabinus and Flavius Vespasian. Though the legions would not learn of Caligula's death for a number of weeks, they took it upon themselves to speak on behalf of the army, understanding the disposition of both the legionaries as well as their commanding generals.

"Senators," Agrippa said as he strolled to the center of the chamber. "Please know that Tiberius Claudius sympathizes with you and understands why you do not wish to have another emperor on the throne. He also understands that there are those who would wish to raise troops with which to prevent his assumption of the title of Caesar. Claudius implores that no Roman blood be shed on his behalf. However, as our friends from the army, Sabinus and Vespasian will attest, you must also understand that the majority of our legions will swear fealty to the emperor, preferring the rule of one man over many. Whatever soldiers we may raise with the senate will be but an untrained mob that will be readily swept aside. I have acted as your ambassador, but now I think it is time the noble members of this house address Claudius directly and attempt to compel him to lay down the government willingly. And if he will not, then you *must* hear his case for maintaining the position of emperor, rather than restoring Rome to a republic."

"We thank you for having spoken on our behalf," Quintus replied. "I know it is a heavy burden for you, given your friendship with the…*emperor*. I think it also only prudent that we hear directly from those representatives who can readily speak on behalf of the legions." He was clearly disappointed with Herod's speech, and so he hoped that Sabinus and Vespasian would

provide the reassurance the senate was looking for, in that they would not have another Caesar, but would rather hand the rule of Rome back to the senate.

"Consul," Sabinus said, stepping forward, "members of the senate. I do not wish to convey upon you a false sense of hope in the restoration of the republic. Our friend, Agrippa, speaks true in that the army as a whole is loyal to the office of the emperor. I must take this even further and implore the senate *not* to try and compel Claudius to step down from his position as Caesar. As the nephew of Tiberius, uncle of Caligula, and brother to the late Germanicus Caesar, he has more legitimate claim to the imperial throne than any. If he is induced into renouncing what is rightfully his, then the legions will be left to decide amongst themselves who should be Caesar. And make no mistake, the army *wants* a Caesar! I do not need to reiterate the calamity this will be for Rome, should we attempt to restore the republic. The legions will make war upon each other, as well as the city, vying for ultimate power, all the while leaving our frontiers unprotected."

"You speak for the good of the people," Quintus said, cutting Sabinus short. "But we must now hear from the people's representatives in this matter." He was becoming desperate at this point to find allies who would side with those in the senate wishing to restore the republic.

Surprisingly, many had already stated that they would feel safer under the rule of an emperor, rather than relying on the senate to be the sole rulers of Rome.

It was a desperate gamble, but all Quintus and his friends had left. He nodded to Cursor. "Tribune, what say the people?"

"Consul," Cursor replied, stepping up next to Sabinus. "The people stand with Claudius and the legions. He holds the rightful claim to be Caesar and, in the interest of the people, I ask the senate to confirm him in this capacity and stand with him in unity."

"Very well," Quintus said with a nod of resignation. "As we do not have enough members present to have a quorum, this will have to wait until a delegation meets with Claudius, and we can recall all members of this body." He made ready to dismiss the assembly, when Cursor raised his hand, interrupting him.

"Your pardon, consul," he said. "There is one last issue to be dealt with."

"Yes?" Quintus asked.

Cursor closed his eyes momentarily and took a deep breath, hating his

next words. And yet, justice required it of him. “It is with extreme regret that the people must also demand the arrest of Cassius Chaerea and those responsible for the murder of Gaius Caligula and his family.”

“Are you mad, Cursor?” Cassius said, stepping forward, his face filled with rage.

“I am sorry,” the tribune replied, “but the actions of this afternoon must be called into account. If the killing of Gaius Caligula was justified, then it must be shown to be so. Remember, whatever his follies, he was loved by many of the people, and they will call for justice. Let the case be made that his killing was not murder, but necessary for the good of Rome. And then there is the other matter; the slaying of his wife and infant daughter. For that, Cassius, there can be no justification.”

As a squad of praetorians walked into the center of the senate floor, Cassius’ head dropped, and his eyes closed shut. It was as if, in that moment, he came to realize the magnitude of his crimes. Their faces full of trepidation, they disarmed their commander of his gladius and led him away. Cursor hung his head, ashamed at having to call for the arrest of one of Rome’s most renowned heroes. He quickly left the hall, Artorius following him.

“You look unwell,” Artorius said as they stepped out into the night air.

The tribune’s face was pale, and he looked as if he might become violently ill. The crowds outside the temple had started to disperse as Cassius was led towards the prison adjacent to the nearby Temple of Concord. Cursor had some hateful memories of this place, and he wished to leave at once.

“I asked the senate to order the arrest of one of the greatest living Romans,” he replied, wiping a small handkerchief over his sweating brow, as they walked down the long flight of steps towards the forum. “Cassius Chaerea is one of the bravest soldiers who ever lived, as you well know. But his crimes this day must be held in reckoning, as much as we may hate the thought.”

“What do you think will happen to him?” Artorius asked.

“Were it only Caligula he slew, probably nothing,” Cursor stated, echoing what both men surmised. “The people may shout and make a scene for a short time while demanding justice, but that will die down soon enough. A viable court case could be made to show that Rome was, indeed, in mortal peril because of Gaius Caligula, making his violent removal justified without setting a dangerous precedent.”

“I agree, no one can fault Cassius for murdering Caligula,” Artorius concurred. “However, he went too far. I hear he not only killed the lady Caesonia, but that they bashed his daughter’s brains against the wall. Fucking barbaric…”

“Thankfully, it is not for us to decide his fate,” Cursor concluded as the two men walked along the forum where small groups of lingering onlookers remained.



Cassius declined to be tried in the courts and, instead, demanded that Claudius take personal responsibility for his fate. He was brought before the new emperor the following morning, and while his hands were bound together, he was granted his request that he be allowed to remain in his praetorian armor. Amongst those to accompany him was Gaius Calvinus, a retired centurion primus pilus and former plebian tribune who had fought beside Cassius at Teutoburger Wald and, later, during the Germanic Wars. What his purpose of being there was, no one could say for certain. He simply stood in stoic silence as they waited for deliberations to begin.

A dozen ranking members of the senate were also gathered within the audience chamber at the palace. Two of the senators that had taken part in Caligula’s assassination, Marcus and Regulus, were also present at Claudius’ insistence. They were terrified as to what would happen to them should Claudius condemn Cassius for murdering his nephew. Marcus was a personal friend of Claudius, and the two had shared many perils together during Caligula’s descent into madness towards the end of his reign. Still, the senator knew his friendship would not be enough to absolve him of murder.

Claudius himself paced slowly in front of the imperial throne, clearly vexed. He and Cassius shared a knowing glance, each understanding that the emperor’s decision was inevitable. In truth, Claudius was not legally Caesar yet, for he had not been confirmed by the senate; therefore, he declined wearing the laurel crown or imperial purple on his toga. However, those present were glad to hand him the responsibility of deciding the praetorian’s fate.

“Cassius Chaerea,” Claudius said slowly, doing his best to avoid stammering and to keep his head from twitching. “You are a champion of our people, having served Rome for many years. Your acts of valor in battle are

legendary…”

“Respectfully, Caesar,” Cassius interrupted, “I would rather we not recall my entire career, but deal with the matter at hand, lest we be here all day. You know what you must do.”

“That I do,” Claudius replied with a sad nod. He walked slowly towards the praetorian, looking him in the eye. “I will not condemn you for the death of my nephew. Though he was my brother’s son, one does not have to look hard to understand that his death probably saved many lives. While murder must never be condoned, we can show clemency here, knowing that circumstances were desperate, with no other viable options available. Therefore, the charge of murder against Gaius Caligula is hereby dropped.”

There were some quiet murmurings of approval amongst the senators present. It was also clear that by dropping the charge rather than rendering a verdict of *not guilty,* the fear of setting a dangerous precedent had been avoided.

“However,” Claudius continued, “it was agreed amongst you all that only Caligula should die. You went beyond that. You murdered an innocent woman and her baby. What grievances had they committed against you or against Rome?”

Cassius remained silent. Nothing he could say would change the minds of Claudius or any of those present. He had committed a terrible atrocity. Even in his own mind he could no longer attempt to rationalize his terrible actions.

The emperor continued, “For years I have called you friend; your kindness to me and my family much cherished. And yet, I heard in your own words that you meant to murder me, along with my wife and daughter. Instead of cutting down one, you sought to slay the entire imperial family!”

“I’ll not deny it,” Cassius confirmed. “The republic was far greater to me than our friendship. I took a risk for her, and I lost. The republic is truly dead, and while I am now filled with remorse, I do not regret dying with it.”

“Understand, you have left me no choice,” Claudius emphasized. He turned and walked back to the imperial throne, sitting down before speaking again. “Cassius Chaerea, you are hereby condemned for the murder of Caesonia and her daughter, Julia Drusilla.”

“I don’t ask for your forgiveness, Claudius, but for your understanding,” Cassius replied as guardsmen grabbed him by each arm to take him away. He looked at each of the men, then back to the emperor one last time. “Gods go with you, Caesar. I pray that you do not have to pass too many sentences of

death, lest one be passed on you. After all, is that not how we do things now?"

His words turned the emperor's stomach, and he nodded with his head towards the door, prompting the guards to take Cassius away. Calvinus, who stayed silent throughout the entire ordeal, remained where he stood. Claudius then turned his gaze towards the assembled senators.

His old friend decided to take the initiative. "Caesar," Marcus said, stepping forward, "what is to become of us?"

"You are a fool, Marcus, if you thought you could restore the republic," Claudius chastised. He then addressed all the senators present, his voice stern and without trace of stammer. "I am an old republican myself, as you all well know. But we cannot undo the past. Your predecessors in the senate saw fit to hand ultimate power to Augustus nearly seventy years ago. Not one person in this room was even alive when that happened, and the few amongst your peers that were, were but mere children then, with no concept as to what the republic actually was. It is a dream long dead, where it will remain. Rest assured, senators, I will do nothing unconstitutional. I am not like my nephew who fancied himself a god. I am just a man like yourselves. I would rather you deal with me as your colleague and peer. Know that I will make no crucial decisions without first hearing your voice, as well as that of the plebian assembly. I ask that we stand together, as emperor, senate, and people of Rome."

Though his speech did not elicit any outright applause, there were positive acknowledgments heard as the senators talked quietly amongst themselves, with a few nodding in approval. Claudius was quietly congratulating himself. He had gone the entire time without stammering once. He addressed Marcus directly once more.

"As for what will happen to you, Marcus, you heard me tell Cassius. I will not condemn anyone for the death of Gaius Caligula. Those who murdered Caesonia and Julia have been sentenced and, therefore, the matter is now closed."

The senators all bowed deeply as they made their exit, Marcus most of all. One man remained. Though not a senator, Claudius knew who he was, his reputation in the legions exemplary, and his service as tribune of the plebs commendable.

"Gaius Calvinus," Claudius said, acknowledging the man. "I know that C…Cassius is a dear friend of yours, but do n…not ask me to spare his life."

The emperor silently cursed himself that his stutter had returned.

"That is not my intent, Caesar," Calvinus replied, at last breaking his silence. "It is true, Cassius is a close friend and brother-in-arms. The battles we fought in together forged a bond between us that can never be broken, even by death. He also understands the gravity of his crimes and asked me to make a final request on his behalf. He asks that he be executed with the sword that he used to slay Caligula."

"Granted," Claudius nodded. When Calvinus did not make to leave he continued, "Anything else?"

"Yes, Caesar," Calvinus replied. "For myself, I ask that I be his executioner."



The cell was surprisingly well-lit despite the scarcity of windows and only a single door. As it sat atop the Capitoline Hill, the narrow slits high on the wall let in a surprising amount of light. The former praetorian had been returned to his cell, which would now serve as his place of execution that very afternoon. Rather than making it a public spectacle at the top of the Gemonian Stairs, the emperor had granted him a private death. Claudius wished to give him at least some dignity, despite Cassius' terrible crimes. Cassius paced back and forth; his sentence read, he had made peace with whatever gods there may be and impatiently awaited his fate. The rattling of a key in the lock of his cell door echoed, and the metal door swung open with a loud creak. Cassius smiled sadly as Calvinus entered, carrying his scabbarded gladius clutched in his hands.

"Calvinus," Cassius noted with surprise as his friend approached him and drew the weapon. His eyes were damp, face pale, and knuckles white as he clutched the gladius.

"The emperor agreed to allow you to die by the same blade as Caligula," Calvinus replied. "And as your friend, I asked that I be permitted to grant you a quick passage into the next life."

"That was very kind of both of you," Cassius noted.

Calvinus shook his head and dropped the weapon, which clattered on the stone floor, before slumping down on a nearby bench. Cassius was kneeling and readying himself for death.

"I don't want to do this," Calvinus said with much despair in his voice.

“When we cut our way out of Teutoburger Wald all those years ago, I never thought it would end like this. Only two others from my century survived that horrid ordeal, and it is because of you we survived. More than a hundred men owed their lives to you after that.” The memory was so long ago, that it seemed almost surreal to both men. “What happened, Cassius? Caligula, yes, but why Caesonia? And by the gods, why her daughter?”

“If you bear any love for me, old friend,” Cassius retorted impatiently, “then question me no more. Many days I think I should have died in Teutoburger Wald. Perhaps the gods would have looked upon me with favor for having fallen in battle. But no matter. Come, strike true and send me on my way. There is a coin in my pouch; place it in my mouth after I am dead, so I can pay Charon for passage across the River Styx and not be left on the shores in limbo for a hundred years.”

“Of course,” Calvinus replied, standing and picking up Cassius’ sword.

“At least you’re not some quibbling fool who doesn’t know how to handle a weapon properly,” Cassius noted. He then leaned forward and bravely stuck his neck out for Calvinus, who nodded in reply.

“Gods be with you, Cassius Chaerea.”

The emperor had ordered that those executed for Caesonia’s murder should be decapitated rather than simply have their arteries cut. Cassius kept his blade sharp, and with his eyes wet with tears, Calvinus swung the weapon down in a hard blow that severed his friend’s spinal column, killing him instantly. It only took one subsequent slash to sever his head completely from his body. Calvinus dropped the gladius next to Cassius’ thrashing body. He then found his friend’s coin pouch and retrieved the single gold aureus. It bore the image of Augustus, and Calvinus wondered if Cassius had carried it with him since Teutoburger Wald. He took Cassius’ head and laid it on his chest, placed the coin in his mouth before leaving. He quickly left the cell, battling against his despair as guards entered the room to retrieve the corpse for disposal. Thus did the life of Cassius Chaerea, one time hero of the Roman Empire, end in contradiction of the slaying of a tyrant, tarnished by the murder of innocents.

Chapter IV: Vow of Honor

Ostia, Italia
April, 41 A.D.
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Artorius returned to Ostia following the arrest of Cassius Chaerea. He had only been called to remain in Rome in case the city police, known as the vigiles, proved unable to maintain order and he would have to call in his own men. It had proven unnecessary, and with the senate quickly, though in some cases reluctantly, confirming Claudius as the new Emperor of the Roman Empire, order was quickly restored. The execution of Cassius Chaerea and the praetorians who had also murdered Caesonia and her daughter quickly quelled any public outcry for justice. Thankfully, the people also had a genuine affection for Claudius; a man who many felt had been neglected and never given his due by the rest of the imperial family throughout his long life.

Within his first three months in power, Claudius made good on his promise to work in cooperation with the senate, among which he still had a number of longtime friends. By necessity, he paid a bounty to the members of the Praetorian Guard, as well as an equal sum to every soldier within the legions. A substantial portion of this had come from his personal funds. Though some viewed it as the emperor attempting to buy the loyalty of the army, it was an understandable donative that ensured the legions would, in the very least, give ‘the brother of Germanicus’, as he was sometimes known, the respect his position warranted.

“As long as nothing untoward happens to him, I think Rome is at last in good hands,” Cursor noted as he and Artorius rode their horses along the road that split off from the Via Apia and led towards the docks in Ostia. The plebian tribune was taking a much-deserved holiday though, of all places, he chose the Isle of Capri, where the Emperor Tiberius had lived in self-imposed seclusion for years. His wife, Adela, was already there, awaiting his arrival.

“For me, it matters little who is emperor anymore,” Artorius noted. “I have my little assignment here that they created for me, where there is little to no actual work to do. To be honest, my greatest enemy is boredom.”

“Not quite the life of the legions,” Cursor observed.

“It’s no life, really,” Artorius grumbled. “Though I am but a commander

of vigiles, I technically still hold a billet of centurion primus ordo. This means that since I have never been officially discharged from the legions, I cannot submit my petition to be elevated into the equites. And unless I'm an equite, I can never run for any sort of public office."

"A series of technicalities meant to stifle you completely," Cursor grumbled as he dismounted his horse and clasped his friend's hand before boarding the waiting ship. "I am sorry, old friend. I do wish it had ended differently for you."

"As do I," Artorius replied. "My political enemies were very patient, and after what happened in Judea, they were able to exact at least some retribution." He then watched his friend make his way up the boarding ramp and was soon on his way to Capri. He reckoned, perhaps, it was time he took his wife on a holiday as well; a very long one.

For Artorius, it had been four years since his return from the east. The Battle of Mount Gerizim, which had seen over a thousand Samaritan rioters slaughtered by both auxiliaries as well as Artorius' own legionaries, had cost him his command of the First Italic Cohort. Though never criminally charged, he was removed from his position, with the cohort disbanded and its members sent back to the legions. Artorius was the only one not to return to the ranks, instead being named *Prefect of Vigiles* for Ostia which was, essentially, command of an urban cohort, meant to keep the peace on the busy docks of the port city. Though his men were more agreeable to work with than the undisciplined auxiliaries that had plagued him in Judea, they were nowhere near the caliber of legionaries.

Although he and his wife, Diana, were grateful to be home after many years away, their lives had been beset by personal tragedy. Within six months of his return, Artorius' father had finally succumbed after many years of poor health. That winter, his stepmother, Juliana, had fallen violently ill and died before the spring.

"They were such wonderful people," Diana said one evening as they lounged on the couches in their small dining hall. "A pity I did not get to spend more time getting to know them."

"Father's health had been declining for many years," Artorius noted. "When he was younger, he was able to work through the pain of the leg injury he suffered in the legions many years before I was even born. But as time went on, it slowed him considerably, and the stress of owning the

vineyards took its toll on him. I wish he had accepted Cursor's offer to buy the place or, in the very least, let me purchase the vineyards from him and install an overseer. I had spoken once to Juliana about it, and she seemed to embrace the idea. Sadly, father's pride would have none of it."

"Cursor and Adela do seem to enjoy having a place just outside the city," Diana observed. After Juliana passed on, Artorius had asked his friend if he was still interested in purchasing the villa and vineyards, which the tribune was. "Do you ever regret selling him your childhood home?"

"No," Artorius replied, shaking his head. "It's been twenty-six years since I left. It ceased to be 'home' for me a long time ago. After Father and Juliana died, I no longer felt any connection to the place."

It bewildered Diana to hear her husband mention just how many years had passed. He was now forty-three, she was forty-five, and yet neither of them looked or felt remotely close to their age. Though both Artorius and Diana were physically in the prime of health and looked far younger than they were, the memories of all that had transpired over the years was sometimes overwhelming. A decade had passed since they left the Rhine frontier for Judea. The battle they had fought on their sea voyage with a renegade pirate ship sometimes felt like it had happened within the last month, rather than ten years ago.

Their reminiscing about the past was interrupted by their freedman, Proximo, who entered with a short bow.

"Forgive me, sir, but you have an honored guest."

"Guest?" Artorius asked. "But we are not expecting anyone. Who is it?"

"Centurion Metellus Artorius Posthumous," the freedman answered, as in walked Artorius' adopted son.

He was in full armor, wearing the harness with his phalerae campaign medals and decorations. His helmet, which he carried tucked under his arm, bore the transverse horsehair crest that denoted his rank.

"Son!" Artorius shouted, jumping to his feet.

"This is a most welcome surprise," Diana added as she rose more slowly from her couch.

"And a centurion, no less!" Artorius said with emphasis after he embraced his son. Though biologically his nephew, and only eleven years younger than he, Artorius still loved and regarded Metellus as if he were his son by birth rather than adoption.

"It happened two months ago," Metellus explained as he handed his

helmet to a servant who also took his belt and gladius from him. Proximo helped him out of his armor as he explained, “I meant to write and tell you, but since I was being given leave, I figured I would see you in person long before the post ever arrived. Granted, I underestimated the speed of the imperial post and overestimated my own abilities to acquire transport clear to Ostia from Cologne, but still I am glad to have told you in person.”

“Well, this does call for celebration,” Diana stated as a number of the household staff helped Metellus out of his armor and took his equipment for him. “You must join us for supper.”

“Gladly,” the young centurion replied. “But first I have official business I need to take care of that involves you, Father. Can we speak privately in your study?”

“Of course,” Artorius replied.

Metellus then turned to Diana. “Apologies, Mother. I will gladly join you as soon as I finish with the formalities of my coming here.”

“We’ll talk outside,” Artorius stated. “My office is too small and feels rather stuffy in the evenings.

“Of course.” It seemed strange to Diana how the two men could immediately change from the joy of seeing each other after being apart for four years, to that of formality as they exited the room.

“Well, do tell,” Artorius said as they walked onto the small patio that was enclosed by large shrubs. “What official business could the Rhine army possibly have with me?”

“It’s been ten years since you left the Twentieth Legion,” Metellus observed, bringing with him a leather satchel which he set on a nearby bench. “That being said, your reputation has continued unabated.”

“I’d hate to think what my reputation there is now,” Artorius snorted before taking a long pull of wine. “I was but one centurion out of many when I left. And after six years as a cohort commander, I was relieved in disgrace after Mount Gerizim.” There was a lingering trace of bitterness in his voice. Though he’d come to accept that he no longer commanded soldiers of Rome, despite on paper holding the rank of centurion primus ordo, it aggrieved him that he had not left the legions on his own terms. He never said it openly, but Diana knew that he felt he had left things unfinished with the Roman Army. Metellus was aware of this as well. “No one in the ranks faults you for what happened with those Samaritan bastards,” he explained. “In fact, most credit

you for achieving such a decisive victory against a numerically superior enemy. Our brethren in the legions could care less about who we slaughtered that day. A victory is a victory to them. Our actions may have caused a political debacle, but from a tactical standpoint the legions view your actions as brilliant."

"That, at least, is good to hear," Artorius replied. "Still, it doesn't matter. My time as a soldier of Rome is long over."

"I wouldn't say that," Metellus replied, reaching into his bag and producing a pair of scrolls. "Some of the younger soldiers, who were but legionaries or decanii when you left, are now centurions and options. They remember you winning the *Legion Champion* Tournament several times, and none have forgotten how you held the flank during the Battle of Braduhenna. And don't forget, two of your closest friends now serve with the First Cohort."

"Yes, I was glad for Magnus and Praxus," Artorius remarked with a smile. "Their promotions were long overdue. I suspect one of them will become primus pilus before too long."

The First Cohort housed the elite troops of the legion. It consisted of five centuries instead of the usual six, though each century was at double-strength of one hundred and sixty men. Four of the commanders held the rank of *centurion primus ordo* and were, in fact, senior in rank to the cohort commanders, serving as tactical advisors to the commanding legate in addition to leading their own troops. The remaining century in the unit, along with the entire cohort, was led by the *centurion primus pilus*, who also served as the master centurion of the legion and was third in command behind the senatorial legate and chief tribune. It was also the pinnacle of an enlisted soldier's career, and the only rank within the Roman Army where the holder was elected by his peers. Artorius was proud to hear that the year before his closest friends had been promoted to centurion primus ordo.

"Our master centurion met with a terrible accident three months ago," Metellus continued. "Gangrene set in and he died a few weeks later."

"Who was it?" Artorius asked, concerned that it might have been an old comrade.

"No one you knew," Metellus reassured him. "He'd come to us as a centurion primus ordo from the First Legion. Well, during the Centurions Council to name his replacement, both Magnus and Praxus refused to stand

for the position."

"Why the hell would they do that?" It exasperated Artorius that his friends, who had come so far in their respective careers, would decline a chance at the highest rank any of them could ever achieve.

"Publicly, both said that they lack the necessary experience," his son explained.

"That's a load of shit," Artorius scoffed. "If I ever see those two again, I'll beat the piss out of them!"

"Most of the cohort commanders are new to their positions as well," Metellus continued. "It was the oddest thing that we had such a high turnover amongst senior leaders around the same time. Only two of them put their names forward for consideration. Both were Civic Crown recipients. While this holds a lot of sway, Magnus managed to get a third candidate onto the ballot, albeit in absentia."

He then handed his father the first scroll, which bore the official seal of the imperial post. As Artorius read, his eyes grew wide.

Centurion Primus Ordo Titus Artorius Justus,

In recognition of your lifelong career of service, distinguished conduct, and superior leadership qualities, you are hereby promoted by acclamation of your peers to the rank of Centurion Primus Pilus and appointed Master Centurion of the Twentieth Legion, Valeria.

Signed,
Aulus Plautius
Governor-General, Germania Inferior

"How can this be?" he asked as he read the official order. "I don't understand why the centurions of a legion I left ten years ago would elect *me* to be their new primus pilus!"

"Perhaps in your absence, your reputation turned to legend," Metellus shrugged with a grin. "I will say this; many of us believe that our new emperor will try and finish what his nephew proposed doing with Britannia, only with an actual invasion force and not just ordering us to attack the sea with our weapons and then 'plunder' seashells as booty from Neptune; that was an embarrassing, fucked up gaggle as I've ever seen. Any potential

operations are all speculation and rumor, of course."

"It would have to be at this point," Artorius observed. "Claudius has only been on the throne a few months. I doubt that conquering new lands for the empire is foremost on his mind right now."

"Agreed. However, we've been keeping ourselves ready for any such potential campaign, regardless of who is Caesar. And like I said before, most of our cohort commanders are very new, plus the two other centurions primus ordo have scarcely held their billets longer than Magnus and Praxus. The chief tribune is eager enough, but like all young senators who acquire this posting, he is young and inexperienced. And as for our commanding legate, well let's just say he does not exactly command respect from the ranks."

"Who is he?"

"His name is Lucius Glabrio," Metellus answered. "He means well, but his greatest weakness is his age. He's at least twice as old as any of his peers in the Rhine army and probably has grandchildren my age! He also has little to no experience at all. Honestly, I have no idea how he got the position, given how the patricians will practically knife each other in the back in order to get command of a legion. I feel bad, because he's an agreeable enough fellow and even friendly with the lads. Thing is, the men don't need a friend. They need a commanding general who can lead them in battle. But since we don't have that, it was decided we would influence the leadership within the legion as best we could, and that was by selecting a primus pilus that the centurions have confidence in and who our legionaries will follow. And just so you know, there wasn't even a runoff vote. You garnered more than sixty percent of the vote right from the start. Your two competitors even consented that you were the best choice to guide the Twentieth in whatever endeavors the emperor may send us on."

As his son spoke, Artorius read and then reread the order, still in shock at how his life was suddenly turned upside down.

"This is all unexpected," Artorius said after a few moments of silence. "I honestly don't know what to say."

"It's what you wanted, isn't it?"

"It is," Diana answered for him as she stepped through the archway. "Forgive me, but you two were gone for a while, and I thought I'd better check on you." She then walked over and took her husband by the hand.

"You're not opposed to leaving home for the Rhine again?" Artorius asked.

“Home is wherever you are, my dear,” Diana replied, kissing him gently.

“There will be much to do before we leave,” Artorius noted, still trying to grasp what had just transpired. He then added with a chuckle, “I don’t suppose we’ll be able to buy back our old manor house in Cologne.”



Among the dispatches Metellus brought with him were the official notifications to the government bureaucracies that oversaw the appointment of public magistrates, and in light of Artorius’ recall to the legions, a replacement was named for him as prefect of the Ostia vigiles almost immediately. The house he and Diana stayed at was owned by the government and was for the prefect, so there was no need to worry about the strain that came from trying to sell. And at the legion fortress on the Rhine, the master centurion had his own rather spacious house, which would suit them unless they decided to find someplace larger away from the fortress.

“A rather painless transition,” Artorius’ replacement, whose name escaped him, noted.

“Just a matter of signing all the necessary documents that relieve me of responsibility for the vigiles and passing it on to you,” he replied. “My household goods will be ready to move within a week, though the army has given me a month to make preparations before I have to start my journey back to the Rhine.”

It was beautiful, sunny day, and they had the shutters open as well as the main doors leading from the office. The new prefect was looking out the window when he saw a young woman walking towards the entrance to their building.

“Well, fancy that,” he said with a grin. “There’s a pretty thing. Do you know her?”

“Can’t say that I do,” Artorius replied as the woman walked into the building. He went back to signing documents when one of the vigiles escorted the young woman in.

“This lass is here to see you, sir,” he said to Artorius.

“Very well.” He then looked to his replacement. “Will you excuse us?”

“Of course. I think we’re pretty much done here anyway.” He eyed the woman over before leaving.

Artorius then made his own assessment. She was rather fetching and

looked to be in her early twenties. She was very shapely, with auburn hair that reached just past her shoulders. There was something about her that seemed familiar to Artorius, but he could not place from where. For some reason, she kept looking at the floor and was fumbling with her hands. His eyes then fell upon a leather cord around her neck that seemed out of place with the rest of her garb. Whatever hung from it was tucked into her stola.

"Well, my dear," he said, folding his hands in front of him. "What is it I can do for you? To start, do you have a name?"

"My name is Marcia Marcella," she replied, looking at him and swallowing hard. It seemed as if she was awestruck to be in his presence, which Artorius found made him uncomfortable. Her next words nearly caused him to fall over. "My mother was Camilla Corda. I…I think I may be your daughter."

Chapter V: Oceans of Time

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Artorius paced back and forth behind his desk, hands clasped behind his back. He had met the young woman once before, albeit twenty years prior, just after the death of her mother, who she resembled subtly. It was that resemblance that caused Artorius to sense a familiarity about her.

“You certainly are Camilla’s daughter,” he noted. “You even wear your hair, and kind of carry yourself, like she did.”

A flood of memories came over him, though they were more long-lost feelings rather than remembrances of specific events. Even though Camilla had been his first love, twenty-four years and countless experiences had passed since he last saw her. He then noticed the small medallion hanging around her neck that had fallen out of her stola. It was well-worn on its leather cord, but if one looked closely they could still see the image it bore of the goddess Diana.

“This may sound strange,” Marcia said, following his gaze and grasping the medallion, “but I remember when you gave this to me. It’s silly, I know, given that I was barely three. I have no recollection of my mother and can only envision the heat of fire and clouds of black smoke from her funeral pyre. And yet, I have never forgotten the gallant soldier who gave me this.” She then palmed the old medallion reverently.

“Your mother gave that to me, just before I left for the legions,” Artorius explained. “After she departed this life for the Plain of Asphodel, I felt it was only right that it pass on to you.”

“Then you do think you are my father?” Marcia asked, her eyes wide with hope.

Artorius’ expression and slight shake of the head dashed those thoughts. “No,” he replied. “Though I wish I was. When, precisely, were you born?”

“The man whose house I lived in, for I never called him ‘father’, said I was born at the end of May, a year following the triumph of Germanicus Caesar.”

“And would he have any reason to lie to you about this?” Artorius persisted, as Marcia slowly realized where the conversation was leading.

“No,” she said, swallowing hard. “I don’t think he knew of your existence nor did he care what transgressions my mother may have done. He divorced

her soon after I was born, blaming her because I was not a boy."

"If we can assume that your date of birth is as you've been told, then it is impossible for me to be your father. The Triumph of Germanicus was in May, a full year before you were born. I returned to the Rhine as soon as it ended, and I never saw your mother again. I am truly sorry, and believe me when I say that I felt a bond with you when I gave you that medallion. I had hoped at that time that you were mine, but I knew, even then, that it was impossible. Though I never saw your mother again, I also think that if there was any chance I had a daughter, she would have told me."

"I understand," Marcia said, her eyes downcast and wet with tears.

"Does Marcellus know you came to see me?" Artorius asked.

"Only if he has eyes that can see from Tartarus," Marcia scoffed. "For if my mother is where good spirits go in the afterlife, then he is surely where they are punished. He went mad years ago and, mercifully, left us last year."

"I heard he was a wealthy man," Artorius conjectured. "I take it that he left you well off?"

"He had a lot of debts," the young woman replied. "I was forced to sell the house, along with many other things, in order to cover them. But yes, I was left with enough that I will not starve in the gutter. Forgive me, sir, for my intrusion."

Clearly upset that her lifelong dream had been so abruptly shattered, she quickly made ready to leave and as she turned, she almost stepped into Metellus, who was walking through the open doorway.

"Beg your pardon, miss," he said, placing a hand on her shoulder to steady her as she stumbled. "Not interrupting anything, I hope."

"Not at all," Artorius said quickly. "Marcia is the daughter of an old friend. Marcia, may I present my son, Metellus."

"Honored," she said with a short curtsey before looking up into the face of the well-built and handsome centurion.

"Please, the pleasure is all mine," Metellus replied taking her hands in his.

"Metellus, be a good man and escort her home," Artorius directed. "She has had a bit of a rough morning and doubtless could use some company."

"That won't be necessary," Marcia replied awkwardly, her voice shaking.

"Nonsense," Metellus said, noting the look in his father's eye. He then linked his arm in hers. "It would be a privilege. Come, we'll follow the path along the shore. The sea air will do you good!"

Artorius smiled as the two left, then collapsed into his chair and let out a deep sigh. After a few minutes, he was feeling cramped in the office he was soon to vacate, and so he stepped out onto the balcony as the cool breeze off the Mediterranean gusted into his face. In the distance, off to his left, he could just see Metellus walking with Marcia along the beach. He couldn't tell for certain, but it almost looked as if he was holding her hand. Artorius nodded in approval and looked up to the heavens.

"Dear Camilla," he said. "Your spirit lives through her. If only I could have called her 'daughter'."



It had been a long journey for Alaric as he stepped onto the shores of the southern coast of Britannia. As there were no direct passages available from Caesarea in Judea to the isle, he had had to gradually make his way west, stopping off in whatever port the ship he was on was bound for and then trying to bribe his way onto the next vessel. His years of experience as a mariner allowed him to sometimes offer his skills in lieu of payment. Still, it had taken several months for him to get as far as northern Hispania. And when no other ships could be found that were heading north, he made his way on foot to Burdigala[1], a port city in Gaul. Here he had found a trireme bearing wine casks bound for the southern coast Britannia. Though he would have preferred finding a ship that would take him to the eastern shores near the Kingdom of the Brigantes, he was happy simply finding any ship that got him closer to his journey's end. His offer to man an oar was readily accepted by the sailing master, and a week later he found himself standing on the shores of the isle he'd left seventeen years prior.

Though a German by birth, he had been raised in the house of King Breogan of the Brigantes, many miles to the north. As one of the largest kingdoms in the land, their size and power alone ensured a relative sense of peace for their people. They were too large for other tribes to risk quarreling with them; they also did not bother their neighbors, as their lands were ample to the point that any further annexations would prove too cumbersome to administer.

By contrast, the lands to the south had seen much turmoil in Alaric's absence, with the numerous tribes in a near-constant state of warfare. He had hear rumor while in Gaul that the kingdom of the Atrebates[2] had been

conquered the year prior by the Catuvellauni, led by their king, Togodumnus and his brother, Caratacus. Indeed, the impacted dirt road Alaric traveled took him past the burned out remains of the Atrebates' king, Verica's former stronghold. The charred ruins had been left as a reminder of what happened to those who opposed Caratacus. Roman merchants had once held substantial trade relations with the kingdom, which was rich in silver and tin. As Caratacus detested the foreign purveyors, they had either fled or been driven off.

"Every corner of the world is savage and unforgiving," Alaric noted as he pulled his cloak close around him. He had been exposed to brutality and death at a young age, when his village in Germania was destroyed by the Roman Army and the inhabitants massacred. As far as he knew, he and his mother, Milla, were the only survivors. He had not seen his mother in many years, and he hoped she was well.

During his years in both Rome and the east, he had witnessed similar cruelties that men seemed to inflict upon each other with reckless abandon. Men killed to gain power, as well as for sport. Alaric found it hypocritical that the Romans would refer to certain races as *barbaric*, whilst forcing men, women, and beasts to brutally slay each other for the amusement of the mob in vast arenas. In this sense, he found *civilization* to be, at best, a relative term, subject to one's own interpretation. At worst, it was an agreed upon fiction.

There was one who had tried to teach a different way of thinking; the way of love and compassion for all, even one's bitterest enemies. The man had been a teacher from the city of Nazareth in Judea. Alaric's lifelong struggle to reconcile himself with the Romans who had destroyed his people led him to listen to the Nazarene's teachings voraciously. And yet even this man of divine peace had met an ignominious and ghastly end. Betrayed by his own people, he was subjected to a savage scourging before he met his end via the crucifix. To be fair, Alaric knew that the blaming of the entire Jewish people for this noble man's death was short-sighted and naïve. In reality, it had only been members of the Jewish religious leaders, the Sanhedrin, who had called for the Nazarene's execution. The common people had loved him, and many still professed to follow his teachings. There were even those who professed that the teacher had risen from the dead. Whatever the truth or myth of these beliefs, even the Romans, who never shied from unleashing their cruelest of

punishments, had been extremely reluctant to carry out the Nazarene's execution.

These events had left Alaric even more lost and confused. He spent the next eight years wandering the east, sometimes with friends and disciples of the Nazarene, other times alone. When the coin he had accumulated during his years as a mariner started to run low, he decided it was time to leave the east. Judea was every bit as volatile when he left as when he'd arrived, and he secretly wondered if the area would ever know peace. His months-long journey had at last returned him to the shores of the one place he had thought of as 'home'. And yet, he found he was still searching, his years of experience providing more questions than answers.

He kept to himself, traveling with his hood over his head whether the weather was fair or foul. No one bothered him, not even the occasional band of armed men who he assumed were part of King Caratacus' personal guard. A week after passing through the occupied remnants of the Atrebates kingdom, he at last reached the northern lands that had been his boyhood home, ever since he and his mother fled the onslaught of the legions. Though Isurium Brigantum was the capitol of the Brigante Kingdom[3], the village Alaric now approached was about twenty miles to the south on the border of Corieltauvi[4]. As he walked along the hard packed dirt path, which was slick from the spring rains, he saw a pair of riders approaching him. Though devoid of armor, both men were armed, each carrying a lance and oblong shield. Both wore earthen colored tunics, belted around the middle, and each had a bronze helmet hanging off their saddle packs. They were relatively clean, unlike the grubby farmers and laborers Alaric had seen, and he suspected they were part of the king's guard. They stopped when they noticed him, one of the men eyeing him suspiciously.

"You're a stranger to these lands," the man said. He spoke in his native tongue, which Alaric had not used in many years. It took him a minute to form his words, during which time he could not help but think the horseman looked familiar to him.

"Not a stranger," he replied at last. "I've simply been gone for many years."

"Indeed." The man dismounted and walked towards Alaric, who suddenly broke into a fit of laughter. "You find something in jest, or are you completely mad?"

"Not mad," Alaric said, smiling broadly for what felt like the first time in

years. His laughter was brought on by his recognizing of the man who stood before him. Despite his longer hair that was pulled back, and a lengthy mustache that ran well past the corners of his mouth, Alaric still recognized him. “It’s been many years, Landon.”

“You know my name?” The man looked at him while trying to recall where they had known each other. His eyes then grew wide in realization, for his childhood friend was more recognizable, as he was devoid of facial hair and had kept his hair cropped shorter. “By Belenus…Alaric!”

The two men shared a boisterous laugh and embraced heartily.

“I’d given you up for dead years ago!” Landon asserted. “When the king granted his leave for you to depart, I thought your poor mother would die from sorrow.”

“My mother,” Alaric said, pausing before continuing. “Is she…”

Landon shouted some words back to his companion, seeming to avoid the question. The mounted warrior nodded and turned his mount about. “I asked him to send word to the queen, letting her know that you’ve returned. Your mother remains a guest of the royal house.”

“Queen,” Alaric noted. “Then I gather King Breogan rules no more.”

“He passed on to our ancestors seven years ago,” Landon explained as the two men started to walk towards the village, the warrior leading his horse as he told his friend as much as he could about all that had transpired since his departure. “Cartimandua is now our queen. She married an older warrior named Venutius not long after her father’s passing, though they have no children.”

“So she’s married now,” Alaric said quietly to himself. Though the woman who was now queen of the Brigantes had always regarded him as a younger brother, his feelings for her had always been more than that between siblings. It was folly, of course. She was several years older than he, and the only child of the king, while he was little more than a refugee from a defeated tribe in Germania. Now, seventeen years later, she was a queen, and he felt like he was still a refugee seeking the protection of her people.

“And what of you?” Landon asked. “I would think you’d have found yourself a bride on the other end of the world.”

“No,” Alaric replied with a chuckle. “No wife for me, at least not out there. What about you?”

“Oh, yes,” his friend said with a mocked, tired sigh. “We have three daughters and a son, ranging in age from twelve to three. I was fortunate to

gain my posting as a member of the queen's guard, otherwise I'd be stuck tilling the earth from dawn till dusk, or risk being crushed in the mines, in order to meet out a living for them. I am part of a small detachment that the queen has posted near the lands of the Corieltauvi. We act as messengers for her, while also serving as an early warning to any hostile encroachments into our lands. Given the size of our lands and the manpower we can muster, few would dare provoke us. Still, after watching the Catuvellauni overwhelm the lands of the Atrebates, it is hard to tell who we can call 'friend' these days."

Near the edge of the village sat a small cottage. Its walls were whitewashed stone with a thatched roof. Outside, a woman was speaking quickly to a pair of young girls, one of whom was holding the hand of a small boy.

"Now keep an eye on your brother!" she admonished as the children scampered off. She smiled at her husband, kissing him on the cheek, and then assessing the young man who accompanied Landon. "And who is this, my dear?"

"This is Alaric," Landon answered. He introduced his wife. "Alaric, you remember Mercia?"

"I do," he replied, taking Mercia's hand and kissing it gently. She was still pretty, though her body had felt the effects of bearing four children over the years. "A pleasure; it has been so many years."

"It has," Mercia replied, though her expression showed she was still trying to dig back into the distant past to recall the young man. Her eyes suddenly brightened. "Of course! Mila's son, who came to us from Germania."

"The same."

"You can stay with us tonight," Landon asserted. "It is late, and it looks like rain this evening. Our home isn't much, but at least it puts a roof over your head and walls to keep the wind and rain out."

"I'll gladly sleep on the floor if need be," Alaric chuckled. "I've slept in fields and under trees for the past week."

"In the morning I will go with you to Isurium Brigantum," Landon added. "We will reunite you with the queen, who will undoubtedly be overjoyed to see you."

Landon was the first familiar face Alaric had seen since his return, and the sight of an old friend was very reassuring. He noticed, though, that he'd said nothing more about Alaric's mother, though he assumed that was

unintended. The inside of Landon's small cottage was very humble indeed. Yet it was more than many in the land had, who simply lived in tents or shanty timber hovels. There was a stone hearth, where Mercia had a large caldron filled with boiling meat and vegetables. A large straw bed was set off in the corner, with a smaller one to the side for the children. That evening they all gathered around a small table as the rain echoed off the roof and walls. It sounded like a virtual gale, and Alaric was glad to be inside on this night. Landon's children were particularly boisterous, which impeded any conversation between the adults, but in the end he did not mind. He was grateful for finding both hospitality and friendship on this stormy night. As the fire coals glowed softly that night, he lay curled up on the floor, his head resting on his balled up cloak.

The next morning they made the remaining trek to Isurium Brigantum. They were compelled to share Landon's horse, as spare mounts were impossible to find, lest one had a substantial amount of coin they were willing to part with. The township was as Alaric remembered with the numerous farm fields surrounding the town, and a large market square that was abuzz with activity as foreign merchants displayed their wares to the Brigantes. Above it all on a small hill was the great hall that had once belonged to King Breogan and was now his daughter's. As they approached the large doors of the hall, they dismounted and Landon greeted one of his fellow guards.

"An old friend has returned home and is here to see the queen," he said.

"Apologies, friend," the guard said, "but the queen had to leave. She had pressing business to the south and said she may be gone a couple months. The council of elders is overseeing the day to day affairs of the kingdom."

"What of my mother, Milla?" Alaric asked excitedly.

Landon's face was suddenly downcast, as was the guard's.

"I'll take you to her," Landon said.

They walked around the massive hall to a small copse of trees that overlooked the valley that stretched out below the backside of the hall.

"She lies here," Landon explained.

"What do you mean?" Alaric asked, appalled. "You said she was still a guest of the royal house!"

"And from here she is," his friend explained. "Forgive me, my friend. I know the queen would have wished to tell you personally, which is why I avoided speaking of Milla. Had I known Cartimandua would not be here to

receive you, I would have told you before."

"Leave me," Alaric said, "I wish to be alone for a while."

"Of course." Landon promptly left his friend, his face filled with sorrow and regret.

Alaric walked amongst the trees, longing to see his mother's face once more. His heart broke as he slowly came to understand that she was gone. The strong woman who had once been a Germanic war chief's wife, and who had the strength to carry him across the raging River Rhine when he was just a child, was now gone. He said a quiet prayer and thought about the paradise that the Nazarene had spoken of during some of his teachings. Alaric dared to hope that perhaps his mother was there, reunited at last with his father.



Artorius' consternation at having met Marcia Marcella was evident as he joined his wife at dinner that evening. They had always been very open about their respective pasts, so Diana knew about Camilla, as Artorius did about her previous husband. Such transparency made it easier for Artorius when he confided what had transpired that afternoon.

"Camilla's daughter is now a woman," Diana said. She then made a rather astute observation. "You wish she was yours, don't you?"

"It's a strange feeling, I admit," Artorius confessed. "I have only seen her twice in my life, and the last time was when she was but three years old. I never had the patience or desire to have children, and yet when I saw her after Camilla's funeral, I wished more than anything that she was mine."

"Had you taken a different path when you were younger, and not joined the legions, then perhaps she would have been."

"It's true," Artorius noted. "Our experiences, and how we grow from them, define our destiny. In another life, perhaps, but it was not to be in this one."

"Wasn't Metellus going to join us?" Diana asked, changing the subject as her maidservant brought her a chalice of wine.

Two household slaves brought in trays of cooked chicken and fresh vegetables, as well as a bowl of dates.

"I extended the invitation to him," Artorius replied. "Though I did also ask him to escort Marcia home. Perhaps he found himself a bit distracted." He smiled and winked at his wife as he took a long drink off his wine cup.



The sun had long since set and Metellus and Marcia still walked along the beach. It was as if she needed someone she could open up to after all these years, and she spoke very fast, telling him everything she could about herself; growing up in Rome after the death of her mother, with a father that preferred inhaling mind-altering substances while spending most of his time in the company of effeminate men and young boys.

“It’s not that he was cruel to me,” she explained. “Rather, he acted as if I did not even exist. I would deliberately misbehave just to try and catch his attention and make him at least acknowledge me. Instead, he would tell one of the servants to ‘take care of the child already’. Strange as this may sound, I would have preferred his scorn rather than indifference.”

“I never knew my real father,” Metellus replied. Upon Marcia’s inquisitive look, he in turn told her about being raised in Germania with his mother; his father being killed in battle before he was born. He explained how when she was dying she told him all about his Roman lineage and that he should seek out his father’s brother, Artorius.

“I wondered,” Marcia replied. “From the looks of you both, I did not think him old enough to be your father.”

“It’s true,” Metellus remarked. “He is only eleven years older than I, but no less of a father for that. As for my mother, she never remarried, and she never ceased loving the man who sired me, that I was also named after.”

“At least she knew what love was,” Marcia said. “How did you know where Artorius was?”

“I didn’t, or at least I wouldn’t have, had not my father’s former centurion sent a letter to my mother, telling her that he and Artorius both served within the same legion. Because my father was dead, I had no proof that I was a Roman, so I did the only thing I could think of and enlisted into the Auxilia.”

Upon Marcia’s further insistence, he told her all about his first year as an auxiliary infantryman, and how at the Battle of Braduhenna, he and about thirty other troopers were separated from their unit and, by chance, ended up fighting alongside Artorius and his legionaries, on the extreme right of the entire army.

“We were both badly wounded that day,” he explained. “Honestly, I don’t know how it is either of us survived. The war against the Frisians ended soon

after and, while convalescing, I was able to finally meet Artorius in person and tell him who I was."

"And he believed you?"

"According to him, my resemblance to my father is uncanny. Several years later I met my grandfather, and he said the same. At the time, however, I knew I needed something I could show him. What I had were a series of letters he had written to my father, when Artorius was a young boy and my father was a soldier in the legions. My mother never got rid of them, perhaps she knew that someday I would have to find my uncle and claim what was rightfully mine."

They continued to walk in silence for a few minutes as Marcia tried to take in all that he had said. It was a clear night, and the crescent moon glowed off the water as the waves lapped gently over the sand. Metellus was momentarily startled when he felt her reach over and take his hand.

"And now you're a centurion in the legions!" Marcia noted respectfully. "A pity we could not have met much sooner."

"There is time," Metellus said. "I have another three weeks left on my leave before I have to start my journey back to the Rhine."

"Then we'd best make the most of it," Marcia replied with a smile. This walk with the young centurion seemed to be exactly what her wounded soul needed. Since she was a young girl she had longed to find the man she thought was her father. Finding that he was not had shattered her hopes, and yet now she dared to think that perhaps events were transpiring as they were meant to.

Guide me, mother, she thought wordlessly to herself.

Chapter Endnotes:

1 – Bordeaux, France

2 – Silchester, England

3 – The Brigante Kingdom covered much of what is now Northern England, as well as portions of the Midlands. Their capitol was in what is now Yorkshire. A tribe of the same name also controlled several counties in Ireland, though if these were the same people is unknown.

4 – English East Midlands

Chapter VI: A King in Exile

The Imperial Palace, Rome
July, 41 A.D.
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It had been twenty-six years since Verica had succeeded his elder brother as king of the Atrebates. They were but one tribal kingdom among the many that inhabited the Isle of Britannia. Originally of Gallic and Belgic origin, they were a conglomeration of various peoples who came to be ruled by the kings of Atrebas. One of the smaller kingdoms on the isle, their far more powerful neighbors constantly pressed their borders. Verica's twenty-five year reign had been one of near constant turmoil, until finally Caratacus decided to do away with his kingdom altogether and annex the lands as his own in a short but brutal war of conquest.

Though the king and a small escort had been saved from capture by a Roman warship, they had not been allowed to see the emperor after their arrival. At the time, Caligula was making a spectacle about his pending invasion of Britannia, and so he felt he had no need to deal with those who could not even hold onto their lands in the face of barbarian invaders. As such, Verica and Cogidubnus had remained just outside the city, in the area known as *Campus Martius*, or *Field of Mars*. It was populated mostly by foreign dignitaries and hosts of those waiting to get into the city proper. Their stay was comfortable enough, and they were put up in a block of rooms near the Baths of Agrippa. Both the king and the few warriors who accompanied him were in awe at the sight of the imperial city. The tents, small cottages, and even the great meeting halls of the Britannic kings were but humble shanties of squalor when compared to the massive and ornate structures that dotted the Roman landscape.

Now, after a year in exile and seven months following the assassination of Gaius Caligula and the rise of Claudius, Verica was at last summoned to the imperial palace. The elderly Briton was helped by his young great-nephew as they were escorted up the steps by several squads of praetorian guardsmen. The massive city was worlds apart from where Verica had come. He stood for a moment in awe of the massive stone pillars and gigantic statues portraying men and deities; seeing them up close for the first time.

“These men will restore us to our rightful place,” he asserted, as he looked over at his nephew, Cogidubnus.

“A bitter irony that we must first subjugate ourselves to a foreign emperor,” the young man said, for what must have been the hundredth time since they began their journey several months before. “I petitioned them for assistance when no others would come.”

“And what would you call Caratacus and the Catuvellauni?” Verica retorted. “Are they not a foreign people who now occupy our kingdom? We have not the size or strength to resist them like the Brigantes, who sat idle while our people were slaughtered and enslaved. Caratacus sacked our capitol and sits in my great hall, provided he has not burned it to the ground. We may share similar ancestry and religion, but he is just as much a foreigner to us as Emperor Claudius of the Romans.”

As the two men conversed, a tall, bald Roman in a resplendent toga, accented with a narrow purple stripe, descended the steps to greet them. He was well built with a prominent nose, and he carried a small ornate baton in his right hand.

“King Verica,” he said, “I am Aulus Nautius Cursor, Tribune of the Plebs. On behalf of the people of Rome, I welcome you.” He then placed his hand over his heart and gave a short bow of respect. “I am to escort you to the emperor, who is most anxious to meet you.”

“And I him,” Verica replied. “I am glad he is a more receptive host than his predecessor was.”

With the decades of trade between their nations, plus status as a Roman ally, the king had learned to speak Latin at a very young age. As he had elected to dress in Roman garb, while cropping his hair shorter than usual and shaving so as not to stand out as conspicuously, the trace of foreign accent was the only thing that betrayed Verica’s origins. Cursor’s mouth twitched knowingly at the king’s last remark, though he held his tongue. He waved his hand towards the entrance of the palace and guided the men up the long steps.



With Metellus’ leave at an end, he would be making his way back to the Rhine soon. However, he would not be traveling alone. Though his union with Marcia may have felt a bit rushed, Artorius was by no means disappointed. It proved to be a rather small gathering, as Marcia only had a

handful of friends, and all of Metellus' companions were with the legions in Germania.

"A pity my father isn't here to see this," Artorius said quietly as he took Diana's hand. "Given the kindness he and Juliana showed Camilla at the end of her short life, how fitting that her daughter now joins our house."

"Those who we love never really leave us," Diana replied, squeezing her husband's hand in emphasis.

Marcia was practically beaming in her radiant white gown and floral crown. Metellus had elected to wear his uniform, minus the helmet. His armor was highly polished, as were the phalerae discs that adorned his chest. The priest bound their hands together and recited a few prayers for long life, happiness, and fertility. As he finished, Metellus and Marcia spoke their very brief vows as they became husband and wife. As they slowly walked through the small number of guests, Marcia released her husband's hand and embraced Artorius.

"Finally, I can call you 'father'," she said with a tear rolling down her face.

To which he replied, "And I, at last, have a daughter."



Claudius had looked forward to his meeting with the exiled allied king. It was only seven months since he became Caesar, yet with no other plots or seditious talk of trying to restore the republic. He could now focus his attention on crucial matters both within and outside of the empire. Though the son of Germanicus had been an abysmal failure as emperor, the soldiers were willing to extend their fealty to their revered former commander's brother. The general populous may not have liked the emperor curtailing the excessive festivals and expensive celebrations, yet he had promised to still honor Rome's sacred holidays with proper festivities. And besides, with wasteful spending curtailed, the imperial coffers had begun to grow once more. Now was the time to, at last, give audience to the exiled Britannic king.

Claudius sat on a throne on a small dais that rose a few inches from the floor. A number of senators and equites were also present; many out of curiosity, to see for themselves this exiled foreign king who came to them for aid. The emperor was flanked by several men on the dais. Ever-present was his freedman clerk and advisor, Narcissus, and next to him was a prominent

senator named Aulus Plautius.

Plautius was a battle-hardened soldier who had put down a slave revolt in southeast Italia seventeen years prior, subsequently served as suffect consul five years later, and now served as governor-general of Germania Inferior. Now in his late forties, and despite much of his hair on the sides and back graying, he was still in solid health and had lost none of his tenacity or prowess. He was also one of the few senior members of the senate who was battle tested, a proven strategist, and had the ability to take the long view of a campaign.

In addition to experience, Claudius knew he needed men who were young enough to be of an innovative mind and willing to think beyond the borders of conventional wisdom. Standing on the other side of him were two brothers who possessed both of these traits, Flavius Sabinus and Flavius Vespasian. Though only in their early thirties, they had already established their military credentials through previous campaigns on Rome's frontiers. Sabinus was a year older, well respected by the legions, and had a slight edge in experience, and yet he readily admitted that it was his younger brother who was the true military genius between them. Many generals possessed tactical savvy and were best suited for leading their men into battle, while others were more apt at looking at the overall strategic view of the campaign. Vespasian was that rare commodity who possessed both traits in equal measure. Plautius held both brothers in high regard, and it was he who recommended them to the emperor.

Though no one was specifically talking about a military operation in Britannia, the previous emperor, Caligula, had toyed with the idea. And if a deposed ally was coming to them for aid, then Roman honor would compel them to act decisively.

"The noble Verica, King of the Atrebates!" the porter announced as a short fanfare was sounded by a pair of horns.

"King Verica," Claudius said slowly, both to be sure the Briton could understand him, and also so he made certain not to stammer. "I welcome you to Rome, as one ally to another."

"Honored, Caesar," Verica replied, with a bow. To do so forced him to lean over his walking stick, and his nephew kept a hand on him for balance. Seeing this, Claudius signaled to the porter.

"A pair of chairs for our guests," he ordered.

Tribune Cursor assisted the porter before taking his place next to Sabinus

and Vespasian.

"I'll come straight to the point," Verica said as he eased himself slowly into the chair. "I am a king in exile. My lands, at least those not destroyed by the invaders, now fall under Caratacus of the Catuvellauni. Despite being one of the smaller kingdoms within the isle, we have always remained a loyal ally and trading partner to Rome."

"Indeed," Claudius concurred. "Your rates for silver and tin have always been very generous."

"I would gladly hand over much of the silver within my kingdom to be rid of the scourge of Caratacus," Verica replied candidly.

This remark brought some quiet mutterings from amongst the senators and equites, and even Plautius' face twitched in a half smile. The emperor, however, was utterly serious as he leaned forward and rested his chin on his steeple fingers.

"Access to your silver mines in exchange for restoring your kingdom to you is a fair offer," he said slowly. "But know that any expedition we mount cannot be simply to depose one ruler in order to restore another. By your own words, you are a small kingdom. What happens if we restore you to power by force and then leave?"

"If Rome comes, then she is there to stay," Cogidubnus said with an expression of understanding.

"We have other allies and trading partners to think of," Plautius explained quickly. "The tribes of Britannia are in an endless state of war with each other, as your situation well illustrates. Rome can bring stability and order."

"At what price?" Cogidubnus asked. When the Romans did not reply, he let out a resigned sigh. "There will be many, especially amongst the tribal nobilities, who resent the interference of outsiders. And while we are grateful for whatever assistance you can render, your very presence could unite many of the rival factions in an effort to expel you from our lands."

"Does your nephew speak for you?" Claudius asked Verica.

"He speaks for my people," the king replied. "It is he who we ask you to restore as ruler of the Atrebates, not me. I am an old man, decrepit and hardly the warrior that needs to be an example to my people. No, it is he who must lead us now."

"And by your words, do you still seek our help?" Claudius asked Cogidubnus.

"Yes," the young man said, slowly nodding his head. "I simply wish to

confirm that which I suspect. Rome comes to not just aid an ally, but to conquer a province."

"And you would find this disagreeable?" Claudius asked.

While the Atrebates appreciated the emperor's candor, it unnerved them a bit, the thought of their lands, as well as those of their neighboring tribes, being occupied by foreign soldiers. Still, they knew they had little choice but to accept it or leave their people under the rule of Caratacus and an endless state of conflict.

"I only ask that once we are restored, you treat my people with the respect and dignity due to allies and friends," Cogidubnus stated. "I do not wish to replace one usurper with another. And as my great-uncle says, much of the silver mines are yours, provided our people are not neglected or mistreated. I also want your assurance that Roman soldiers will be there to protect us from those who would label us traitors to our common ancestors."

"The Atrebates are allies and friends of Rome," Claudius asserted. "And you are recognized as their rightful king."

Cogidubnus nodded in respect and then asked, "When will your expedition be ready to launch?"

Claudius looked to Plautius for an answer, though he, in turn, glanced over to the Flavian brothers. It was Vespasian, having the soundest grasp of logistics and movement of large armies, who spoke.

"Two years," he said flatly.

The two Atrebates leaders looked at each other with expressions of disappointment.

The general was quick to explain. "As you said, it will take a massive force to conduct a full-scale invasion. And whatever forces take part in the expedition, many will be there to stay. We do not have spare legions and auxiliary regiments just lying about."

"Forces within the empire will have to adjust to cover those regions on the frontier previously manned by the invasion force," Sabinus added. "It is already August. We could perhaps launch a strike with a single legion and a few thousand auxiliaries, but how long would they be able to hold any kind of ground, especially if their presence does, in fact, unite many of the tribes against us?"

There was a long pause as the words of the two generals sank in. Rome may have been the largest empire the world had ever seen, with an army that bordered on invincible, yet they were not gods. They could not simply make

forty-thousand men appear from nowhere, ready to invade and conquer Britannia in one fell swoop. Both Verica and Cogidubnus bore looks of consternation that the emperor sought to ease.

"More than a century ago," Claudius remarked, "Julius Caesar learned a hard lesson when it came to invading Britannia with too small of a force. He was driven to the sea, and his men who fell died in vain. I will not make that same mistake. Plautius, how many legions do you anticipate you will need?"

"Four, Caesar," the general replied. "We will also require a substantial number of auxiliaries, especially cavalry. All told, this invasion force will require between forty and forty-five thousand men."

"Most of next campaign season will be spent in logistical preparations," Vespasian continued. "An army marches on its stomach. And unless we intend to purge Britannia of all its food resources, which will not win us any friends, then we need massive quantities of rations for our troops, as well as animal fodder. There is also the matter of wagons for the artillery, blacksmiths, spare parts for weapons and armor, and a host of other logistical necessities. It is a different kind of endeavor when one has a standing and well-equipped professional army, as opposed to part-time warriors."

The words were not meant to insult either of the two Britannic leaders, yet they felt undeniably humbled at the thought that this vast empire could afford to field a massive armed force; where each soldier was a warrior by profession, and every one of them equipped with better weapons and armor than even the wealthiest tribal king.

"This will be an epic undertaking," Claudius said. "One that I think will continue for many years to come. But you can rest easy, my friends, knowing that Rome stands by you. You will remain here as my guests, until such time that you are restored to the throne of the Atrebates by the blades of legionaries."

Deliberations and preparations would begin another day, and the emperor dismissed the king and his great-nephew, who thanked him for his promise to assist them and their people. As they made ready to leave the hall, they were met by the porter.

"You are to remain in the imperial palace as the emperor's personal guests," the man explained. "It is far more comfortable here than in those flats at the Field of Mars."

"They were still far better than the predicament our people find themselves in," Verica muttered.

“But we still thank Caesar for his hospitality,” Cogidubnus added.

Though visibly flustered that Roman soldiers would not be coming to their shores sooner, they knew they had no choice but to wait. They soon left with the porter, who promised to have accommodations for them that were befitting an allied king.

As the throng exited the audience chamber, the emperor spotted the plebian tribune and called to him.

“Tribune Cursor!”

“Yes, Caesar,” Cursor replied, turning about and walking back to the dais.

“I was d…disappointed when I heard you will not be seeking re-election when your term is up.” Claudius privately cursed himself for his stammer, but was thankful that at least his voice had not failed him when the Atrebates were present.

“I became a suffect plebian tribune simply to fill in for the remainder of the previous holder’s term,” Cursor explained. “That was ten years ago. I’ve been elected to this post three times now, and I feel it is time for me to step down.”

“Tell me,” Claudius said, stepping down from the dais, “in all that time have you found Rome worth serving again?”

He referred to an emotional conversation the two had shared many years prior. Tiberius was still emperor then, and Cursor had helped expose the plot of his praetorian prefect, Lucius Aelius Sejanus, who sought to overthrow him. The emperor’s retribution had exceeded the bounds of justice, even going so far as to order the execution of Sejanus’ youngest son and daughter, who were still underage. That they were also Claudius’ niece and nephew mattered not to the vengeful emperor. And because the order had come from Tiberius himself, Cursor was unable to use his tribunician veto to overturn the sentences. Both he and Claudius had witnessed the horrifying spectacle, which degraded even further when the young girl was forcibly raped while the noose was placed around her neck, so that sacrilege would not be committed by the execution of a virgin.

After that night, Cursor damned Rome as an empire not worth defending. Yet despite his vehement disgust and broken spirit, he was compelled by friends to stand for reelection as plebian tribune and, surprisingly, won easily. Ten years later, these painful memories came flooding back with Claudius’ question, and he took his time in answering.

“Tiberius was one of the greatest military leaders Rome ever had,” he

said. “And if one could ignore his perpetually gloomy demeanor and volatile temper, he was in many ways a great emperor. He finished the wars in Germania and maintained a lasting peace throughout most of the empire thereafter. He also left Rome with more coin in its coffers than in her entire existence. And yet, the cries of those children, whose deaths he ordered, will always haunt me. The lifelong admiration I held for Tiberius died with the innocents.”

“My u…uncle’s decline was a slow one,” Claudius observed. “I w…was once told that it began with the death of my father, when I was but an infant. He was later forced to divorce his wife, who he deeply loved, and was compelled to marry Augustus’ daughter, my Aunt Julia. Her scandalous behavior and banishment humiliated him, and he never married again. Just five years after his ascension, he was accused of having my dear brother, Germanicus, murdered. I never believed it, n…nor did my mother. Sejanus’ betrayal later drove him to the brink, and finding out his son was murdered by his own wife plunged him into oblivion. I do not say this to excuse what he did, for his vengeance was terrible indeed. But I cannot damn him, despite the pain the executions of those children caused me. Is it possible to have endured as much as he and not be driven mad? Could you deal with it? Could I?”

“Many dared to hope once more when Tiberius died and Gaius Caligula took the throne,” Cursor continued, ignoring the question. “Spoiled brat he may have been, he was a son of Germanicus. It was thought that perhaps his father’s noblest traits would come through. Sadly, he possessed none of his father’s noble qualities. I mean no offense, Caesar, as he was your nephew.”

Claudius simply smiled and shook his head. He understood, perhaps better than any, the madness that consumed Gaius Caligula. Claudius had been very close with his brother, and Germanicus was universally hailed as one of Rome’s greatest generals and statesmen. Even the gods themselves would not be able to explain how a great man like Germanicus Caesar had sired such a wicked creature.

“And now?” the emperor persisted. “You were always direct and honest, even when my uncle was at his most volatile, so p…please do not let your candor fail you now. Is Rome worth fighting for?”

“Forgive me,” Cursor said, “but you’ve only been on the throne for several months. You’ve yet to even celebrate your first Saturnalia as emperor. I know your qualities as a man, for you were my friend long before you

became Caesar. You treat the senate with respect and rule *with* them rather than *over* them. So to answer your question, I have found an emperor worth serving beside. Whether or not Rome is deserving, that is yet to be seen."

"Your not seeking reelection may give you an opportunity to find out," Claudius stated. "You understand the colossal undertaking we are proposing in Britannia. The terrain there is rough and heavily forested in places. Legionaries alone will not be enough. We will need cavalry, and lots of it. An entire corps of horsemen will be needed if we are to conquer even the southern portion of the isle. They will need a leader, one of rational thought, decisive action, who can be trusted with independent command, answerable only to the commander-in-chief. So I ask you this, not for Rome and not as your emperor, but as your friend; will you do me the honor of leading my cavalry?"

Cursor was stunned by the enormity of what Claudius was asking him. Despite his longing to retire to private life, as well as his promise to his wife many years before that he would never again ride into battle, he knew there was only one answer he could give.

"It is I who am honored to accept," he replied, clasping Claudius' hand.

This was perhaps a breach of protocol, as one did not ever lay hands on the emperor, but then Claudius had asked him as a friend, rather than as his emperor.

Cursor's heart was pounding in his chest as he left the imperial palace. His immediate concern was how his wife, Adela, would react. After thirteen years of marriage she knew her husband intimately, and she would also understand that such an offer of command from the emperor was not one to be ignored lightly. He would have to leave for the frontier by the next spring to begin consolidation and training of his forces. Would Adela accompany him? He certainly hoped so! There were also many intrusive thoughts and trepidations about the coming expedition, not least of which was the very reasonable chance that he would not be coming back. The sky was overcast as he stepped out onto the street. He closed his eyes and raised his head towards the heavens.

"Let me find what I seek," he said to whatever force in the universe may have been listening, "and then consign me to oblivion."

Chapter VII: Somewhere Far Beyond

Fortress of the Twentieth Legion, Cologne, Germania
August, 41 A.D.
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Metellus had been required to return to the fortress after his month of leave, but Artorius had no such orders. He would make certain to pack up as much of his household as reasonable, though he knew his return to the legions would be temporary, a few years perhaps, and then he intended to return to Ostia. He also rightly suspected that his reassignment had been at least partially influenced by the rumblings coming from Britannia.

Tribune Cursor's selection as commander of all cavalry forces in both Gaul and Germania only added to the speculation. He would finish out his term as tribune of the plebs, which would end at the start of the new year, and join his regiments the following spring. He and Adela had been kind enough to host a dinner for Artorius and Diana before their departure for the Rhine. It was strange in a way for Artorius, returning to the house he grew up in, only now it was owned by his friend rather than his family. And while he knew his way around, it did not feel like his childhood home anymore.

"How is Adela handling your return to active service?" Artorius asked when the two men were alone in Cursor's study after dinner.

"She understands," he replied. "She held back her tears, only saying that she was glad I found something I could fight for again. To be honest, that is only partially true. I *hope* I have found that which I seek, but I will not know for certain until well after we have launched the invasion and landed across the channel."

"And what exactly is it that you seek?"

"A chance to build, rather than destroy," Cursor explained. "Not to sound overly idealistic, but I want to leave the world, or at least part of it, a better place than I found it. Britannia, I think, will give me that chance."

"And is Adela accompanying you to the Rhine?" Artorius asked.

"She is, for she understands my intent. Between us, old friend, I do not think I shall be coming back from Britannia. We've already arranged to sell the house and the vineyards, and I foresee a new life for us across the water. Of course, all of this is dependent on the success of our mission and my not

getting killed in the process."

He let out a dark chuckle at the last assessment. It was a cold reality, though; even if the invasion went as planned and the tribal kingdoms were quickly subdued, there would still be Roman soldiers paying the ultimate price in blood. Artorius took a deep pull off his wine and wondered silently if he would be returning from Britannia. His conversation with Cursor confirmed his suspicions that the emperor intended to conquer the province. It all made sense in the end. Claudius needed to secure his military credentials, as this would maintain his popularity with the people, along with strengthening his own personal security. And demonstrating that Rome stood by her allies also gave Claudius enormous political influence, regardless of the circumstance that required said allies to become subjects of the empire.

"Claudius is determined to make his name in Britannia," Artorius observed. "And we will be the ones who make it for him."



"Welcome home, brother!" Cartimandua said, extending her arms and embracing Alaric. "Forgive me for missing you, but I had pressing business away south. Had I known you'd come back to us, I would have delayed a day in order to be here to greet you."

Though it had been two months since his return, this was the first time he had seen the queen. The years had only added to her beauty, enhancing her womanly features. She was tall for a woman, almost able to look him in the eye. Her light brunette hair was braided on both sides, which were pulled together in the back. She wore a thin, gold band around her head as a type of crown. Her long gown was lightweight and colored in earthen tones. The queen of the Brigantes resonated both regality and strength.

"My queen," Alaric said, bowing deeply.

"Please," Cartimandua said, taking him by the hand which brought a shiver up his spine. "When it is just us, we can dispense with the formalities. Walk with me; I want to hear all about your travels."

"Of course," he replied, "but first I want to know about my mother."

Though the day was warm, if a bit overcast, Cartimandua shuddered slightly, as if chilled. She said nothing for a few moments as they strolled amongst the hedgerows that ran along the grounds behind her great hall.

"Forgive me," she said once again. "I should have first offered my

condolences to you. You know she was very dear to me as well."

"What happened?" Alaric persisted. "She was not an old woman, and her health had never been poor."

"Dear brother, you've been away for many years," Cartimandua said. "Your mother aged considerably over the last few years. She and my father were very close. Although they never married, nor made public any sort of relationship, it was plain to me that there was much more between them than just close friends and companions. When he passed on seven years ago, she took it very hard."

"I am sorry," Alaric replied. "Breogan practically raised me, and was the only father figure I ever knew."

"His death was unexpected," Cartimandua remarked. "He fell ill during a really bad winter, yet he refused to be bedridden or cease in his work. He weakened himself to the point that by the time he did rest and recover, it was already too late. Milla insisted on not leaving my side during the time of mourning, though I think this was as much for her own sake as mine."

"And I was long since gone," Alaric added, suddenly struck by feelings of guilt.

"You must not blame yourself," the queen consoled him. "You had to find your own way in the world, and your mother never faulted you for it. She did always hope that she would see you again, but as the years passed, she assumed something tragic had befallen you. Before she left us, she told me *'I go to be with my husband and son'*."

"She assumed your father was now with your mother," Alaric surmised, quickly wiping a tear from his eye. "And naturally she wished to be with my father again. A tragedy that she thought I had also passed into the afterlife."

They walked in silence for some time. The rolling terrain extended as far as he could see from the top of the hill. Just to the east was the port village, where both merchants and fishermen plied their wares.

"I understand you spent time in the Far East," Cartimandua said at last.

"Somewhere far beyond," Alaric replied. "I was at sea for a number of years, never fully appreciating just how large the world really is. The lands of the east are dry, hot, and arid; far different from the temperate climate here. Not nearly as green, though beautiful in its own way. The people are fascinating, albeit they share one common aspect with us, in that they are constantly fighting each other. One sad lesson I learned is that the world is a brutal place no matter where you go."

“Yes, the Judeans are quite the peculiar race,” Cartimandua concurred. When she noted Alaric’s perplexed look, she explained, “I have met a couple in my time. The occasional wealthy merchant has landed on our shores, although this is extremely rare. Traveling this far from their homeland is very costly, not to mention fraught with risk, as I’m certain you are far more aware than I. And the resources we do have, namely precious metals, can be found in other parts of the world readily enough, so there is no real need for them to ever journey this far except out of personal curiosity.”

“You mention *the world*, yet you never say *Rome*,” Alaric observed.

“Anymore they are practically one and the same,” the queen sighed. “Tell me, in all of your travels, did you ever spend time in any place not annexed by the Caesars?”

“Only here, when I returned home,” Alaric said. “And I wonder how long that will last. Mother was terrified that the legions would one day march upon our shores.”

“She was correct in her assumption,” Cartimandua replied. “The reason for my journey south was to meet with both members of the Catuvellauni, as well as a few nobles of the Atrebates who have chosen exile over being subjects of Caratacus. King Verica has gone to Rome with the intent of one day returning with a host of legionaries who will restore him to his throne; at least that’s what the exiled nobles said.”

“I thought you were not opposed to the idea of Romans coming to Brigante?” Alaric asked as they reached a small stone wall that overlooked a short cliff. Below them stretched vast farm fields, worked by both Brigantes as well as slaves.

“I don’t,” the queen replied. “But you understand I have to be very cautious. We know little about this new emperor, other than he is the uncle of the previous madman who sat on the imperial throne. If he elects to support Verica, will he make a farcical show of force, like Gaius Caligula did? Or perhaps launch an expedition with too few men, like Julius Caesar a hundred years ago? Either of these is possible, just as much as he will send a massive army, large enough to conquer the entire isle. If I side with the Romans prematurely, any coalition that is raised against them can be turned on us. And if I side against the invaders, and they do in fact come to conquer, then they will take our lands and annihilate my people. Whether the pride of our warriors can accept it or not, a Roman Army unleashed is an unstoppable killing machine.”

“So I have seen,” Alaric said darkly. “I spent time in Rome itself and have seen many wondrous things within the various corners of their empire. Yet what you cannot see on the polished marble surface is that their civilization was founded on the subjugation and destruction of other races.”

“All nations are built in such a way, not just Rome,” Cartimandua asserted. “When you left on that merchant ship all those years ago, I thought that perhaps you would make your home in some exotic land.”

“Home,” the young man remarked, shaking his head. “I’ve never known such a place, not even here. Although I suppose this is as close to a home as I will ever have. Something told me I had to come back, though in all honesty, I have not known what to do with myself.”

“Landon tells me you acquired some skill with a sword,” the queen observed.

“A little,” he shrugged.

“He also says you acquitted yourself well in battle during your travels.” Cartimandua’s words caused Alaric to stop abruptly. She gently pressed him further. “It was for the Romans that you fought, wasn’t it?”

“Believe me, I did not fight alongside the Romans willingly. I had no choice if I wanted to live.” He went on to tell the queen about his time aboard a Roman warship that was bound for Judea, and of their battle against a renegade pirate ship. He explained how he’d used his share of the prize money from the captured vessel to live on while in the east.

“I am vexed as to what I should do over the next couple years, should the legions march on Britannia.” Alaric raised an eyebrow at this, and Cartimandua was quick to explain. “Like I said, my business in the south had to do with the Atrebates. You may have passed through their lands, or at least what used to be theirs, during your journey.”

“I did. And I saw the burned out remains of what I guess was once their king’s great hall.”

“Verica was a friend and valuable trading partner,” the queen stated. “His former nobles, now living in seclusion, told me the Atrebates were Roman allies. If true, and if their king has left for Rome to petition them to restore him to power, you can bet they will come. Claudius has not been emperor long, and honor will demand he stand by his allies.”

“You have not said what you will do if the Romans come to Britannia.”

“Trust me, brother, when I say it’s not a question of *if*, but rather *when*,” Cartimandua replied. “Unlike the Atrebates, we are a very large kingdom.

Our lands cover much of middle Britannia, up to Caledonia[1]. We even still possess territories on the east coast of Hibernia[2]. And Caratacus, for whatever he has done to the Atrebates, is highly respected amongst all the tribes, and is also a close personal friend of my husband."

"Ah, yes, your husband." Alaric cursed himself for being unable to hide his gloomy feelings at the mentioning of Venutius.

"My dear Alaric," Cartimandua consoled, sensing the hurt tone in his voice, "I have always known your feelings for me. Ever since the day you and your mother came to our shores, I have always viewed you as a younger sibling. As we grew older, I knew your feelings were different than mine for you."

"I also knew that it could never be," he confessed, his face turning red and eyes downcast. "You were the daughter of a king, and I nothing more than a refugee from a defeated Germanic tribe."

"You are right; it can never be between us. But know that I do cherish your love for me, for it is something that is otherwise unknown in my life. Make no mistake about my husband. Ours is a political alliance, meant to keep the various factions within the kingdom united. The issue with us being so large is that our diversity is both strength and a weakness. There has never been love between us, and Venutius has not shared my bed in years. I also know that he will be easily swayed by Caratacus, as well as those tribal leaders who would oppose the Romans."

"And what of you?" Alaric asked once more. "You have not answered my question. You told me once, many years ago, that you would welcome their presence in our lands. Do you still feel that way, now that they may be on our doorstep?"

"Britannia is not a unified nation," Cartimandua continued to explain. "I suspect that even in a thousand years the various tribal kingdoms will still be in constant conflict with each other. Were they united, perhaps the Romans would think twice about launching an invasion. As it is, the Atrebates going to Rome will give their emperor all the justification he needs to invade. And with the kingdoms of this isle divided, the legions will simply roll right over each one in turn. Those who align themselves with Rome will be welcomed as friends and assimilated into the empire. Those who oppose them will face annihilation. Your people learned the harshest of lessons; that the Roman Army unleashed is virtually unstoppable. I will not allow my people to share their fate."

It pained Alaric to hear Cartimandua talk so. Was it cowardice or prudence that guided her? The truth was, most people in the world wanted nothing more than to be left to lead their lives in peace. Whether their taxes went to a local king or a foreign emperor, they cared little. He stated this to the queen.

"That may be true," she concurred. "However, the average peasant is also not a free-thinker. They are easily swayed by strong leaders. Doubtless a number of our nobles will wish to join Caratacus and his brother, Togodumnus, who propose to lead the resistance. I intend to keep Brigantes neutral for the time being, and I will need every friend I can muster if I am to keep my nobles in line. I also will need eyes everywhere, and I understand you need work."

The abrupt change of topic startled Alaric, and he stumbled upon his words as he tried to reply. "Y…yes. I mean, I have done the occasional carpentry task, as well as helping those who may need extra labor in their fields, but nothing permanent."

"A common laborer is no place for my dear brother," Cartimandua asserted as she turned to face him. "I'm offering you a place amongst my personal guard. If you still love me, you will accept."

It put him on the spot, though both knew there was only one answer he could possibly give.

"Honored, my queen." Alaric took her hand and kissed the back of it before bowing.

"Can you ride a horse?" the queen asked.

"Not very well," Alaric admitted.

"You will learn. You have some skill with a blade, and any other proficiency can be learned. What is not learned is loyalty, and that is the quality I need most. My guard is not just to protect my person, but to be my eyes and ears throughout the kingdom. Report to Landon, he will see to your equipment and start your training. I am glad to have you with me, Alaric. Perhaps your return was the gods' way of sending me a protector."

"Perhaps," he replied with a smile.



The trek to Cologne had taken more than a month, with Artorius and Diana traveling first by ship to Massilia in southern Gaul, then by road north

through Lugdunum. Upon reaching a merchant port along the River Rhine, just north of the Alpes, Artorius had arranged for their baggage, along with most of their servants, to be transported by river barge all the way up to Cologne. He and Diana, along with her maidservant, his manservant, Nathaniel, and their freedman, Proximo, would finish the journey by road. Artorius, Diana, and Proximo would ride their horses, the other servants confined to walking. Proximo was now in his early sixties, and ever since being given his freedom by Diana, he'd saved his coin and purchased himself a fine Arabian charger. Though he still worked just as vigilantly as he had before, given his age, Artorius and Diana were glad he was able to ride. They continued through Gaul and into Germania, stopping each night at roadside inns or whatever towns and cities their path took them through.

At last, after weeks of riding and what must have been a thousand miles on the road, the enormous fortress came into view. They rode out of a grove of trees along the road that served as the main artery between the northern empire and Italia. They had essentially retraced their steps from when they had left the Rhine on their journey to Judea. The ever-growing city of Cologne had sprung up in the fortress' wake decades earlier and ran right up to the edge of the River Rhine.

"It would not surprise me if the city spans both sides of the river in years to come," Diana said with a grin.

"If that happens, we may actually bring civilization to the barbarians," her husband noted, referring to the untamed lands just across the river, populated by warlike tribes who shared an extremely violent history with Rome.

A Roman fortress was a sight to behold, and the one at Cologne was even more impressive as it housed two legions instead of the usual one. Its walls stood approximately fifteen feet high and were manned by the occasional sentry, as well as scorpion ballistae every few dozen meters. Running along the outside length of the wall was a wide ditch filled with sharp stakes and various entanglements. It was all for show, however, as the Romans were not of a defensive mindset. Even if assailed by the largest of enemy armies that had them substantially outnumbered, the legionaries would spill forth and brazenly meet their foe head-on. It was this guile and aggressiveness that unnerved their adversaries far more than the defensive walls of the fortress.

The gatehouse was very large, with double gates that would allow passage of both men and wagons in both directions. Ever manned by a squad of legionaries, it was almost always left open, and only partially closed at

night.

"This is where it all began," Artorius said quietly, taking a deep breath as they approached the gate.

"Ave, Master Centurion!" a soldier on duty shouted, raising his pilum high in salute as Artorius and Diana rode through. It was surprising that though he traveled in civilian garb, the soldier had recognized him immediately. Artorius thought the man looked familiar and surmised that he may have been one of his legionaries long ago.

"Ten years away, and they still recognize you," Diana observed with a quiet laugh.

As they dismounted their horses, the decanus in charge of the gate approached the pair and saluted. Artorius returned the courtesy, realizing that this was the first salute he'd been given since he left Judea.

"Welcome home, Master Centurion Artorius," the sergeant said. "Your presence is required by the commanding legate."

"Understood," Artorius replied. "Have a couple of men escort my wife and servants to our quarters."

"Yes, sir." The decanus then shouted some orders to a runner, who made his way over to the nearest barracks.

"Time to report for duty, *master centurion,*" Diana smiled as she kissed her husband on the cheek.

Artorius left his horse with her and slowly made his way through the fortress towards the Principia, taking in the sights of the ever-hectic daily life of the legions. In some ways it felt like, though he'd been away for a decade, he'd never really left. Out of curiosity, he strolled past the barracks of his former unit, the Third Cohort's Second Century. Coincidentally, they were assembled in full armor and kit, making ready for a road march that each unit made three times a month. Artorius frowned slightly when he did not recognize either the centurion or optio. He did note a few familiar faces amongst the older decanii and legionaries, who in turn shot him a knowing glance, but that was it. The century he had spent sixteen years with was completely foreign to him now. And yet, there was still a sense of familiarity about it.

"The names will change, but the faces remain the same," he reasoned as he continued on his way. Though he longed to reunite with his old friends who he knew he would find in the first cohort, he had other matters to attend to first.

“Artorius!”

The shout startled him and he turned about to see the first truly familiar face since his arrival. His face broke into a broad grin as the man who called his name walked quickly towards him.

“By Juno…Valens!” he said, forgetting his task for a moment and walking back to embrace the man he’d served with for decades and who’d been his optio in Judea. He then noticed that his friend who, though in his tunic, wore his gladius on his left hip instead of his right, and he carried a vine stick. “Well, I’ll be buggered. They made you a centurion!”

“It came as a bit of a shock to me as well,” Valens said with a nonchalant shrug. “Wasn’t the easiest thing, coming back after we’d been gone for a number of years. Because they promised I’d keep my rank, I slid into a vacant optio position that did not make the unit’s centurion, or the fellow he was going to promote, happy.”

“And how did you handle that?” Artorius asked, not sure if he wanted to know the answer.

“Same way I always do,” Valens replied. “I got them both piss drunk and arranged for some suitable ‘entertainment’. One’s a lot less likely to hold a grudge after having their cock drained a few times.”

“You never cease to amaze me,” Artorius chuckled, shaking his head. He then asked, “Where are you assigned now?”

“Fifth Cohort, same as Metellus. I have the Second Century, he has the Fourth. Tyranus, the centurion who replaced you when we left here, is our pilus prior. A solid officer, that one; I would like to have worked with him in our younger days. As far as cohort commanders go, I’d say he’s better than Dominus, though not quite as good as Vitruvius or Proculus were.”

“And where does he rate compared to me?” Artorius asked, folding his arms.

“That I’ll never say,” Valens replied with a wink. “One answer would insult you, and the other would be a false, flattering ass kissing. And you, sir, will get neither from me. But no matter; it is good to see you again.” He then extended his hand, which Artorius readily accepted.

It was midmorning by the time he walked up the short flight of steps that led into the principia; the rather ostentatious and ornate building, decorated with columns, statues, and frescos along the walls that served as the legion’s headquarters. His hobnailed sandals clicked on the polished stone floor as he made his way through the main foyer to where the legate’s office was. He

would have his own office here as well, for his duties would extend to the entire legion, not just the first cohort. Seated behind a desk outside the legate's office was the another welcome sight, and it caused Artorius to burst into laughter.

"Camillus!" he said boisterously, causing the man to bolt upright. One time the signifier for Artorius' century, he had been the legion's aquilifer for at least a decade. In addition to being in charge of all the legion's finances, he also carried its sacred eagle standard into battle.

"Well, I'll be damned," Camillus chuckled as he stood from his desk and extended a hand to his old friend. "Come back to us after cavorting in the east, finally!"

"I thought you would have left the legions years ago," Artorius conjectured.

He noted that Camillus, who was a few years older than he, had traces of grey just beginning to show in his close-cropped hair. And yet, his face still maintained much of its boyishness that made it impossible for anyone to guess his age.

The aquilifer simply shrugged. "I can call it a career anytime I want. I was considering it last year, but now I'm not missing out on the emperor's big expedition across the sea. Sure, it'll mean hanging on for at least a couple more years, as well as risking some druid chopping off my head and using it as a pot, but I'd never forgive myself if I did not take part in turning the page of history."

"I suppose the whole of the empire knows about the proposed invasion, even though nothing's been officially posted," Artorius sighed.

"That, and anyone within a thousand miles of our borders," Camillus laughed. "You can bet every tribal kingdom in the whole of Britannia knows of our intentions. We can only hope they remain too engrossed in their constant infighting amongst each other. Otherwise there will be a million of those bastards to greet us on the beaches. I just hope for a sunny invasion in the summer, because the waters of that sea are bloody cold!"

"Is the legate in?" Artorius asked, changing the subject.

"In a manner of speaking," the aquilifer replied, rolling his eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, to be honest, he came in this morning but I haven't seen him since. Apparently he's taking his afternoon nap."

“So it’s true then,” Artorius grumbled.

“Ah, Metellus filled you in a bit, did he? When I gave him his leave papers, along with your promotion orders, I asked him to give you fair warning. Of course, Metellus doesn’t know but half of it. Don’t get me wrong, I actually like Legate Glabrio. He very affable and all, but the thing is he just so…well, *old*. I have no idea what his age is, but one would think he was older than my grandfather who’s been dead for twenty years. He has no command presence at all, and he comes across as one who should be sitting on a bench, telling stories to his grandchildren, rather than trying to lead men into battle. The only thing keeping the lads from mocking him openly is fear of the lash from their centurions, who at least respect the office, if not the man.”

“How did he get the posting?” Artorius asked in frustration. “There are perhaps six hundred eligible members of the senatorial class who could hold command and only twenty-five legate postings in the entire empire. In theory, only those with the best military credentials get a vacancy when it comes available. How did one who is so unfit to lead men into battle acquire one?”

“Like everything else,” Camillus explained, “politics. I don’t know the details, but it seems he was on rather friendly terms with Gaius Caligula, who granted him the position last fall. The only person who can remove him is the emperor, and he won’t because Glabrio hasn’t technically done anything wrong. And therein lies the problem; he hasn’t done *anything*.”

“And a legate’s tour is three years,” Artorius noted. “So it looks like we’ll be taking him with us.”

“Provided he doesn’t have a heart attack on the voyage across the channel,” Camillus chuckled darkly.

“What about the chief tribune?” the master centurion asked.

“He’s alright,” Camillus shrugged. “But like all of them, he has little to no experience. His name is Sempronius, and I’m guessing he’s about twenty-five. He’s probably even more frustrated than the rest of us, because he’s supposed to be second-in-command and learning all he can from the legate. It’s difficult enough getting a chief tribune position, and one’s success or failure usually determines if they will ever get command of a legion. Well, if he goes his entire tenure without learning anything tactically or strategically useful, he’ll never get a command. That’s the odd thing, it seems most of our senior leaders are either young, or at least inexperienced in their positions… you included.”

“Well, at least I’ve led a cohort into battle,” Artorius stated, not taking his friend’s assessment as an insult. “What can be that much different at the legion-level, besides the number of men?”

“Plenty,” Camillus emphasized. “And if I were a gambler, I would guess that most of the responsibility for the running of the legion will fall upon you. Many of the legate’s duties Glabrio simply will not bother with, and Sempronius cannot do them all on his own. I’d get ready for a lot of long days and sleepless nights, even if we weren’t planning to hop over and say ‘hello’ to the blue-painted barbarians across the water.”

“At least one senior leader has lengthy experience in his posting,” Artorius laughed, causing Camillus to shrug once more.

“Sure, I’ve been aquilifer for more than ten years,” he confessed. “And the signifiers are all rather pissed, wondering when I’m going to retire or simply fall over dead, so one of them can take it. But what am I, really? I’m honestly just an overpaid bookkeeper who carries a shiny metal bird into battle while sweating under a cumbersome lion’s pelt. And do you know what a smelly bitch that damned thing becomes when it gets wet? But seriously, I actually have no command responsibility at all, and the only person I answer directly to is…well, *you*.”

“But you also understand the inner workings of the legion,” Artorius persisted. “I have a feeling that I will need that experience quite often. So perhaps we should both be ready for long days and sleepless nights.”

“Already been happening,” Camillus said with a wink. “Who do you think answers most of the imperial post from here? Hell, I’ve even got access to the legate’s signet ring and can place the official seal on absolutely anything I send out!”

The double-doors to the left of Camillus’ desk opened and out walked a stooped old man that Artorius could only surmise was Legate Glabrio. He had a pleasant demeanor about him, but he looked rather frail and his eyes were both squinted. Both men still stood at attention, deferring respect to Glabrio’s rank, regardless of any personal doubts they may have harbored regarding his leadership abilities.

“Ah, Camillus,” he said. “Anything of interest come in the imperial post today?”

“Yes, sir. A dispatch informing us that Aulus Plautius is being appointed commander-in-chief of the Rhine Army.”

“Plautius,” the legate said, furrowing his brow. “Oh, yes, I remember

him! Quite the spry, driven young man. Well, if that is all, then I shall retire for the evening."

Artorius shot Camillus a quick glance, puzzled at the legate's remark, given that it was still midafternoon. The aquilifer subtly shook his head.

"One more thing, sir," Camillus said. "Our new primus pilus has arrived."

"Oh, and who is he?" It took a moment for Glabrio to notice Artorius, who finally spoke.

"Master Centurion Artorius, reporting for duty, sir."

"Yes, well I'm sure Camillus can fill you in on everything. I swear he knows more about what goes on within this legion than any of us! You two carry on, then."

"Sir!" both men replied as they watched Glabrio slowly walk out of the foyer.

He seemed puzzled for a moment that it was still broad daylight, but then shrugged and continued on his way.

"Not the reception you were expecting," Camillus said with a cocked grin.

"Not at all." Artorius shook his head, completely baffled by what he'd just seen. "He looks more like someone's great-grandfather who should be rocking children on his knee, rather than the commander of an imperial legion. And if I recall, Plautius is approaching fifty…"

"He's forty-six," Camillus corrected.

"Yes, well that's still hardly a 'spry young man', as our legate assessed."

"I didn't bother telling him what else came in the post," Camillus said, his demeanor serious as he tossed a pile of dispatches onto his desk. "You'll want to read through these later, as they are quite detailed, laying out the plans for next year's shifting of forces within the empire. Fortunately, our task is pretty simple."

"Oh?" Artorius asked as he started to scan the top parchment.

"Sure. All we have to do is hold in place and keep training, while also serving as a staging area for rations and equipment."

"That means the fortress is going to get rather crowded," Artorius observed.

"Granted," Camillus acknowledged. "Still, our remaining static is a good thing; as it will give all of our newer senior leaders sufficient time to assimilate into their positions. We also have one of the shortest routes to the debarkation point, whenever the invasion does launch."

“Any idea where it will be from?” Artorius asked as he quickly scanned several of the pages.

“One dispatch mentioned Gesoriacum,” the aquilifer answered. “It’s about two weeks march from here and only perhaps twenty miles from the Britannic coast. And in the meanwhile, you may as well take some time getting to know the First Cohort. With every other responsibility being dumped on you, you won’t be able to spend nearly as much time with them as you’d like, even though they will be the ones you lead into battle.”

“Well, at least I have Magnus and Praxus to help me there,” the master centurion noted. He then handed the dispatches back to Camillus. “Do me a favor and put these in my office. I’ll start going through them this evening.” He started to walk away before stopping and saying over his shoulder, “And Camillus, do keep the legate’s signet ring, but let me know before you send any official correspondence from here.”

He left the principia feeling a little perplexed. He wasn’t sure what he’d expected his return to the legions to feel like; it was an odd amalgamation of familiar and foreign. And given the caliber of the legates he’d served under throughout his career, he was extremely disappointed in his current legion commander. A legate was expected to be old enough, with sufficient experience, that he could make sound tactical and strategic decisions on his own, even with little to no time for deliberation. He also had to be young and fit enough that he had the stamina for running a sustained campaign, while also setting the example for his men. In the few minutes he had seen him, Artorius surmised that Glabrio possessed none of these traits. All the same, he understood that it was not up to him to decide whether or not a senatorial legate was fit for command. Nor could he influence the emperor in who should command the legion. His duty now was to enforce the standards of training, discipline, and conduct within the legion. He owed that to his legionaries!

He decided to begin with an assessment of his own First Cohort. He walked over to the drill field and found one of their centuries practicing individual weapons drill on the six-foot training stakes. An optio was pacing the line, shouting commands to his men, who would then either smash the thick poles with their shields or attack with their wooden practice gladii. The first thing that stood out about these men was their age. Acceptance into the elite First Cohort was restricted mostly to those with at least sixteen years in the ranks, who had proven themselves in battle, and who were noted for a

career of distinguished conduct. Some legions boasted that they required their men to be of a certain height as well, giving them a more formidable appearance. However, one thing Artorius had noted in his career was that one's fighting prowess had little to do with how tall he was.

Given that the First Cohort was always kept at full strength, sometimes exceptions for membership were made for soldiers who were slightly younger, yet had still acquitted themselves well throughout their careers. Even so, Artorius noted there was not a man on the training field who looked younger than thirty. Indeed, most of the legionaries who assailed the training stakes appeared to be anywhere from their early thirties to just over forty. And because they were exempt from guard duty and fatigue details, all they ever did was train to fight. A legionary in the First Cohort was also paid as much as a decanus in a regular line century. The incentives for membership were enormous, as were their expected standards and fighting capabilities.

The optio blew his whistle and the men ceased in their exertions. *"Stand easy!"* he shouted. *"Squad leaders, assess your sections!"*

"Optio," Artorius said as he stood behind the man, who quickly turned to face him.

"Sir?" he asked; his eyes then growing wide as he recognized his new centurion primus pilus. "By Mars! *Hey, lads, it's our new master centurion!*" He then saluted sharply, which Artorius returned.

"Which century are you?"

"First Century, sir!" the soldier replied with enthusiasm. "I guess this means I'm your optio…provided you'll have me, sir. Name's Parthicus; Titus Minicius Parthicus."

"Titus Artorius Justus," Artorius replied, extending his hand. "How long have your men been on the stakes?"

"About an hour," the optio answered. "I've got the lads running in two-minute drills; two on, two off. That lets us simulate rapid passages-of-lines. And don't let the age of these men fool you, sir. The First Cohort sets the standard in physical condition and battle readiness in this legion!"

"As it should be," Artorius replied. "Come see me in my office after the evening mess. I need to at least get to know the man who will be leading my century. Between my duties to the cohort, as well as having to provide oversight to the rest of the legion, I doubt I will get to spend nearly as much time with these men as I ought."

"Not to worry, sir," the optio replied. "These men can win battles in their

sleep. All we do is fight! No gate guard or shit-shoveling details for us. Trust me, master centurion, even if we never see you before the day of battle, we'll be ready."

"Carry on then, optio," Artorius said with a nod.

His second-in-command saluted and went back to his men, shouting orders for them to make ready to start again. Artorius let out a sigh of relief and smiled for the first time since his arrival. Even just a brief glimpse of seeing his men perform their most basic close combat drills filled him with confidence. Whatever lapses there may have been in their legate, the men in the ranks had confidence in each other. They were still the same hard, disciplined killing machines they always were. It filled Artorius with pride to be leading such men once more.

Chapter Endnotes:
1 – Scotland
2 – Ireland

Chapter VIII: Valeria's Return

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The hot bath water was a godsend to Artorius at the end of the day. One of the privileges of being the legion's centurion primus pilus was he did not have to share facilities with the men in the ranks. Though he was not above public bathing, on this evening he was glad to have his own private, albeit far smaller, personal bath. It still had a small warming room, heated bath, cold plunge, and a pair of tables for massages and getting one's skin scraped clean. He leaned back against the edge of the heated bath, a wet cloth over his eyes. As he started to drift off, he heard a loud banging coming from the front door, followed by some protests by his servant, Nathaniel.

Artorius chuckled as he heard a familiar voice say, "Piss on that, he'll make time for me!"

The sound of sandaled feet on the stone floor echoed quickly as the rather abrupt guest stepped through the open doorway off to the side of the small heated pool.

"Oh, this is nice," the voice snorted. "First time I've seen you in four years, and you're sprawled out naked with your cock hanging out!"

"Good to see you too, Magnus," Artorius replied calmly. He took the cloth off his eyes and threw it at his friend. He was shocked to see the Norseman stripping out of his tunic. "What in Hades are you doing?"

"Hey, even us First Cohort centurions don't get our own private bath," Magnus retorted. "There's plenty of room, so I won't be all rubbing up against you. Now move over!" With a loud splash, Magnus sat down on the far side of the bath, just across from his friend. "There, that's better. And how was your first day back in the legions?"

"Odd," Artorius replied, unsure what else to say as the Norseman snorted in reply. Despite being away from each other for several years, his and Magnus' demeanor made it seem as if he'd never left.

"That's putting it mildly," Magnus said. "I don't envy you, old friend. With such a weak excuse of a legion commander, much of the burden will pass on to you."

"So everyone keeps telling me," Artorius grumbled, rolling his eyes. "And I haven't met the chief tribune yet. I hope he has, at least, some potential, even without experience."

“He wants to learn, so that says something,” Magnus noted. “And, of course, our staff tribunes are typical six-month-and-done types who are doing their compulsory service in the legions. Leave the bureaucratic shit to them. Also, don’t think that you’re in this alone. I’m sure Camillus filled you in on some of his behind-the-curtain methods for keeping the legion functioning. And you’ve got me and Praxus. The other two First Cohort centurions are decent fellows, too. Honestly, I have never had an easier posting in my entire career!”

“Yes, I’ve seen how the First Cohort pretty much runs itself,” Artorius observed.

“That they do,” Magnus continued. “And as the ‘elite’ troops of the legion, we spend probably twice the amount of time training as the other cohorts, with still plenty of downtime for the men.”

“And speaking of training,” Artorius said, “I will need to get your input on what essential tasks we need to focus on this year. Since we’re not dealing with the logistical nightmare of relocating just yet, we have time to make certain we are ready for next spring.”

“I took the liberty of calling a meeting of all cohort commanders tomorrow,” Magnus remarked. “It’ll be in the late afternoon, following the First Century’s long run. Your optio can fill you in on the details.”

“Oh, fuck!” Artorius shouted as he suddenly splashed his way out of the tub. “I’m supposed to meet with him this evening!”

“Mind if I stay here, then?” Magnus asked as Artorius sprinted naked out the door and down the hall. When his friend didn’t answer, the Norseman shrugged. “Right you are.” He then placed a cloth over his eyes and leaned back, letting the heated waters sear into his pores while wondering if Lady Diana would let him borrow her maidservant to give him a massage.



Caratacus was growing uneasy. His annexation of the Atrebates was but a minor inter-tribal affair. And as small as the kingdom was, its downfall was scarcely acknowledged by the other kings and chieftains within Britannia. Some of the Atrebates nobility had proven quarrelsome, and he regretted not capturing or killing their king. He had a couple of nobles put to death recently for trying to stir up the populace against him. And while this quieted the people for the time being, as long as their king remained alive in exile, those

who loathed being ruled by the Catuvellauni still held out hope.

When word reached Caratacus that Verica and his great-nephew, Cogidubnus, had fled Britannia altogether and were seeking help from the Romans, he requested a private meeting with his brother and overlord, Togodumnus. He had also summoned one of the most respected druids within the isle, an elderly sage named Archantael. They met in his great hall, which Caratacus had had rebuilt, after destroying the previous one.

"So Verica has gone cowering to the Romans," Togodumnus scowled, resting his chin in his hand. His other hand rested on the pommel of his large two-handed great sword, which stood upright near his chair.

Caratacus and Archantael sat on either side of the table, with Caratacus giving Togodumnus his seat at the head. He had dismissed his servants once they served them food and drink, lest there be unfriendly ears that could hear their talk. A pair of warriors guarded the entrance to the hall, with orders that no one was to enter.

"And the armies of Caesar will march on our lands once more," Caratacus grumbled. "I thought we rid ourselves of their scourge a hundred years ago!"

"Their strength has grown over the past century," Togodumnus said. "Few of our people have ever left this isle and crossed over into their lands, which are vast beyond comprehension. However, we must remind them that the Romans are still just men, not gods."

"And it is to our gods that we must turn," Archantael spoke up. "They are the only force that can unite the kingdoms."

"Which is where we will need your services, old friend," Togodumnus noted. "You are well-respected amongst the druids, and you can move about freely amongst the various kingdoms without fear of assault."

Caratacus then said, "With your leave, brother, I will need our best scouts to go to the mainland and learn of their intentions. For now, all we have to go on are rumors spread by merchant sailors, as well as the self-imposed exile of a deposed feeble king. The fact that he even lives gives the more rebellious peoples of this land hope."

"I will go myself," Togodumnus asserted. "My lands are secure, and I have much experience with the Gauls and Belgics. I want to witness the Romans' intents with my own eyes."

"I still must enforce order on our new lands," Caratacus said. "The silver and tin of the Atrebates will do much to fund our war efforts. And with the help of the gods, through our friend Archantael, I will ascertain who amongst

the kings of this isle who will side with us or the invaders."

"We should offer an initial sacrifice to the gods," the druid replied. "And first must be those nobles of the Atrebates that continue to resist your rule."

"Agreed," Caratacus concurred. He was far more devout in his theological beliefs than his brother, who simply viewed religion as a means of controlling the ignorant masses. "There are six we have imprisoned; four men, two women. It will be a fitting offering. Conduct the sacrifice tomorrow at dawn." The old druid nodded in reply.

"There are only two ways to rule people," Togodumnus added, "fear and love. It will be some time before the people of Atrebates grow to love you, though defeat of the Romans will aid in this. But for now, my brother, you must use fear as your device of control."



It was an hour before sunrise when Artorius joined the men of the First Cohort's First Century. Due to the necessity of an early rise, he had kept his meeting with Optio Parthicus the night before very short. He reasoned there would be time to get to know the man better as time went on. Magnus had spoken well of him, and so far it seemed he had firm control over the century, which was enough for Artorius.

"The rain pissed on us good last night," Parthicus noted as the master centurion joined his men.

The century's one hundred and sixty men were stretching and limbering up as they made ready for the day's exertion.

"Ground will be a little soggy for the first couple miles, but the skies promise to be rather clear today. At least I saw some blue skies to the west, where the wind is coming from."

"Five miles out, five miles back," a decanus said as he stretched his lower back. Though he had marched endless miles in his years in the ranks, this was the first time Artorius had been with an entire unit that was readying to run such a distance.

"Different kind of conditioning," Parthicus explained. "Makes our men faster and more mobile, plus we're then able to cover longer distances in a hurry during battle without exhausting ourselves. Of course we do this in just our tunics, with sword baldric, water bladder, and some light rations, rather than full kit. Still, we've found that this supplements our training nicely. Our

other centuries go on longer runs as well, usually three to four times a month."

The men were soon joined by the tesserarius, whose name Artorius had yet to learn. Though they were technically his, he felt almost like an outside intruder, given that days like this would be about the only times he would spend directly with them.

"We've found that when we do the compulsory twenty-five mile marches in full kit three times a month," the officer added, "our men can travel substantially faster than the rest of the legion and still have more energy when time comes to set up camp at the end of the trek."

"That's because the rest of the legion is made up of a bunch of fucking girls!" a legionary shouted, eliciting a few laughs and further insults from his mates.

"Belay that shit!" Parthicus snapped. He turned back to his commander. "Sorry, sir, but the lads' one vice is they are a bit on the arrogant side."

"Well, perhaps they have a reason to be," Artorius chuckled. He then took his place at the head of the column. Whatever their tasking was, it felt good to be leading fighting men once more. *"First Century, fall in! At the double time…march!"*

As the glow of the predawn lit the world around them, Artorius made every effort to regulate his breathing and set a quick, yet manageable pace for his men. By the first mile he was breathing hard and drenched in sweat, despite the cool air of the morning. He begrudgingly acknowledged that while he'd been sitting docile on his ass for the last few years these soldiers had been training constantly, keeping themselves ever battle ready. Still, he was not about to look weak in front of them, and he was thankful that a little past the second mile his legs started to loosen up and his breathing became more controlled. With such a distance to cover, combined with the large number of legionaries clustered together, they moved more at a rhythmic jog rather than an all-out run.

At the mile castle that marked five miles from the fortress, he called his men to a halt. For the first time since they started, he finally turned to face them. They were all sweaty and breathing heavy, though mostly no worse for wear. He hoped none of them could see his expression of pain and exhaustion. He was already feeling humbled by these legionaries, though he took it as a necessary lesson, and that he would endure whatever pain was needed in order to gain their confidence.

“A decent pace,” Parthicus said as he walked over to him, taking a drink off his water bladder. “Just remember, sir, the men still need to be able to function later, so let’s not go so hard that they can’t walk tomorrow.”

“It’s I who won’t be able to walk tomorrow!” he retorted with a laugh as he tried to stretch out his legs, which were starting to cramp.

“Well, just take it easy on the lads on the way back, if you would, sir. And also, a nice cold plunge after always helps. It’ll make you shriek, not to mention your balls will shrivel up a bit, but it’s the best thing to help the legs recover.”

The run back actually felt better to Artorius than their trek out, though he heeded his optio’s advice and set a more measured pace. Whether they made their way back quicker or not, it certainly felt far more invigorating for the master centurion. It was midday when he halted his men outside the gate to the fortress. As soon as he dismissed them, they gave a loud whoop and started sprinting towards the river.

“Well, come on, sir!” Optio Parthicus shouted back to him. “The water’s as frigid as my former girlfriend, but don’t worry, your balls will drop again soon enough!”

Artorius chuckled and followed the men through the trees down to a man-made dock that led down into the River Rhine. The men had constructed a type of pool in the river that allowed the current to come in and out without the hazard of sweeping them away. Most of the legionaries were already naked and splashing about in the cold water. The master centurion stripped down and plunged in after them, fighting back the urge to yelp as the freezing waters bit into him with a shock. He sank down to his neck and let the cold bite into his flesh. He had removed his sandals and reached down to feel his numbing feet, where a couple of blisters were forming. He knew there was nothing for it, and that his feet would simply have to adapt to the impact if he was going to continue these runs with his men.

“Oy! Master Centurion, Artorius!” a voice shouted.

He looked back and laughed when he saw it was another long-lost old friend, Gaius Praxus.

“If you’re done playing, the cohort commanders await you.”

He held up his friend’s tunic and sandals, which Artorius snatched from him as he came out of the water, shivering as a gentle breeze caught him.

“Good to see you, too, you old bastard,” he said as he braced himself against Praxus while pulling on his sandals.

His legionaries continued to splash about while shouting obscene names at each other, and were oblivious to his absence.

Optio Parthicus had been right. The cold water had done his legs some good, though he figured he would still be sore and limping the next day.

"Tell me, Praxus," he said as they walked through the fortress gate, legionaries on duty saluting as they passed. "Do you go on these types of runs with your century?"

"Whenever I can," Praxus replied. "Though in all honesty, I can manage it maybe once a month. And you'll be lucky if you can do even that. I've already spoken with Magnus and the other centurion primus ordo, and we all agree that we need to help you shoulder the added burdens that will come over the next year, especially since getting a viable legion commander seems out of the question."

"Hence my meeting with the pilus priors," Artorius emphasized. "I figure I'll be seeing them a lot more than the men of my own century."

"You are correct there, sir," Praxus added boisterously. "Hell, I hardly even see my own son anymore! Not sure if you knew that Ioan joined the ranks."

"I did not."

"He's with the legion, in the Tenth Cohort. And like you were with Metellus, I've had to let him make his own way, though to be honest, having a son in the legions makes me feel awfully old!"

"Well, you're six years older than me," Artorius noted, "you're hardly the virile young man you once were."

"Fuck that, I can still wield a gladius and my cock with the best of them!" his friend scoffed as they approached the principia. "Here we are then."

The meeting hall within the principia held a number of tables, as well as a raised platform at the far end with a very long table. During meetings of the centurions' council, this was where the master centurion and those of the First Cohort sat. It was also used by tribunals during court martials. On this particular day, it was Artorius, the primi ordinones and the cohort commanders who occupied the hall.

Artorius and Praxus made their way to the long table. The only non-centurions present were a pair of clerks, who sat on either side of the master centurion. As Artorius was scanning some notes he'd made the night before, one of the cohort commanders stepped onto the dais.

“Centurion Tyranus!” Artorius said with a grin, standing and extending his hand.

“Ave, master centurion,” Tyranus replied.

“I was just told yesterday that you made centurion pilus prior,” Artorius observed.

“Yes, three years ago they gave me the Fifth Cohort,” Tyranus said. “And I hope you do not take offense, but I was one of those who ran against you for the position of primus pilus.”

“No offense taken.” He then paused in thought for a moment. “I heard that both men who put their names in for consideration were Civic Crown recipients. I did not know you had one.”

“Two, actually,” Tyranus corrected. “My first came at Braduhenna, though since you and I were scarcely acquainted before you departed, I would not expect you to have known that. I was awarded a second not two months after you left for Judea.”

“Oh, yes,” Artorius remarked. “The punitive expedition against the Marsi in Germania that I had to miss out on. A real bitch that was! I never heard anything about it, so I assume it must have gone well.”

“Well enough. The Marsi are so close to our border that we only spent maybe a month in Germania. The legion awarded me my second Civic Crown during a raid. One of the lads was wounded in the arm and couldn’t hold on to his shield. I grabbed him just as the German archers unleashed a volley on us and pulled him beneath my own shield. I didn’t think anything of it until after the campaign when I was called before the entire legion. To be honest, I had forgotten the whole incident and was a little embarrassed for receiving the Civic Crown again.”

“You remembered one of the most important aspects of leadership,” Artorius noted. “And that is, our lives are no more important than those of even the lowest-ranking of our legionaries.”

“My men knew that though I could be a harsh disciplinarian, who was never one to spare the lash, I would have given my life for any one of them.” Tyranus paused for a moment then made another observation. “You know your son is one of my centurions. He commands our Fourth Century.”

“I hope he does well by you,” Artorius stated. “And if he does not, that you would readily tell me.”

Tyranus chuckled in reply. “Metellus is about the least of my worries,” he said. “If he has a glaring fault, it’s that he is far too hard on himself.

Sometimes he sets his own expectations unreasonably high. He won't admit it, but I think he sometimes feels like he's living in your shadow; probably even more so now, with you being our master centurion. But don't worry, I'll break him of it well before we ever leave for the lands of oblivion."

"Beg your pardon, sir, we're ready to begin," one of the cohort commanders stated, cutting short his conversation with Tyranus.

Artorius recognized a few of their faces, but regrettably not their names. He reckoned he would get to know all of them well enough. The Second through Tenth Cohorts were each led by a centurion pilus prior, and consisted of six eighty-man centuries. At full strength, a cohort could have as many as four hundred and eighty legionaries. The elite First Cohort, with its five double-strength centuries had a total compliment of around eight hundred legionaries. They were also the most experienced, with an average time-in-service of fifteen to twenty years. Their centurions, though having fewer men under their command, were actually senior in rank to the cohort commanders and served as tactical and strategic advisors to the commanding legate. The fourteen men who sat around the long table in the meeting hall were the most experienced men in the entire legion. Regardless of who was in command, it was they who would lead their men to either glorious victory or ignominious destruction. And with their assistance, Artorius began to lay out the training plan for the legion for the following year, as well as quelling any unsubstantiated rumors that may have been persisting throughout the ranks.

Chapter IX: March to Glory

Gesoriacum, Coast of Belgica
May, 42 A.D.
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Fall passed into winter and winter soon gave way to spring. In Rome, Emperor Claudius continued to strengthen his hold on the empire. In the sixteen months since his ascension, the legions had reaffirmed their loyalty, while members of both the senate and equites felt an immense sense of relief no longer serving a maniacal tyrant who fancied himself a god. And all the while it was thankfully quiet along the Rhine frontier.

Artorius had established a sound working relationship with the centurions of the legion. He had also taken to mentoring the young chief tribune as much as he was able. On those occasions when Legate Glabrio did make an appearance, Artorius or one of his centurions would simply reassure him that they had matters in hand, and he would always leave it at that. For Artorius and Diana, they found themselves resuming their old habits from the time before they'd left the Rhine. Despite the vast changes that had occurred in both Cologne, as well as to themselves, over the years, they essentially resumed their lives where they had left off. The most substantial changes had been Artorius' duties, as well as them living in the house provided within the fortress, rather than their own dwelling in the city. Diana had gone to their former manor house, which was now owned by a wealthy merchant originally from Ravenna. She had toyed with the idea of possibly purchasing the house; though the owner made it very clear he had no intention of selling.

"I make a fortune off the legions and have expanded into an entire forum's worth of shops, as well as two brothels, within the town," he had said. "The weather here is damned awful when compared to northern Italia, but as long as soldiers are willing to depart with their coinage so readily, I have no intention of leaving."

Diana was, at first, disappointed but then realized it mattered not. A message that came to the fort via the imperial post in the early spring would start the transition not just for Artorius and Diana but the whole of the empire. In the message, Plautius had ordered all senior officers within the Rhine Army to join him at the coastal city of Gesoriacum[1] in Belgica, just

across the channel from the Isle of Britannia. As Legate Glabrio stated he was not feeling well enough to travel, he sent his chief tribune and master centurion in his place. Artorius had insisted on Magnus coming with him, leaving Praxus to oversee the First Cohort. Two dozen cavalrymen acted as their escorts.

It was ten days' ride by horse, and as the contingent from the Twentieth Legion crested a small hill just to the east, the port city came into view. It was not very large, with the majority of buildings lining a series of docks and boardwalks along the water's edge. The roads leading down the slope were lined with thick groves of trees, making their way down to the beach. A large inlet from the sea cut into the coastline, creating an ideal natural harbor. In addition to the constant flow of merchant vessels, a pair of Roman warships was anchored in the bay. Just off the sandy beach, in an open field near a long row of trees, was where Plautius had erected his camp. A massive tent, dyed in deep red, sat in the center. It was surrounded by the tents of a vexilation cohort from the Second Legion, Augusta. Along with the legionaries was encamped an ala of cavalry. The typical trench, lined with palisade stakes, encompassed the camp; not so much because of perceived threats, but rather to the keep curious and disruptive civilians at bay. A squad of legionaries guarded the east entrance; the decanus calling the men to attention and saluting as Artorius and his companions rode into the camp.

"Check on our accommodations," Chief Tribune Sempronius ordered, "I will report to General Plautius."

"Yes, sir," Artorius replied. The men dismounted and left their horses with a pair of groomsmen.

"A heavy burden he bears," Magnus noted as they watched Sempronius walk towards the principia tent. "With our commanding legate an incapacitated wreck, the onus of command falls on him and by extension, to you."

"We talked extensively about that over the past few months," Artorius remarked as the two centurions made their way through the camp. "Like all chief tribunes, he is young with little to no experience, but he is surprisingly pragmatic and eager. He listens well, has a grasp of how cohorts operate in battle, and has a natural talent for logistics."

"Well, I do hope he's a quick study," Magnus said.

"The coming conquest will make or break him," Artorius observed. "I think if he survives the invasion, he just might make a fine legate someday.

We owe it to both our men, and to Rome, to make certain that he does. Though, at least from Glabrio, he has learned how not to be!"

As they walked through the camp, they soon found the centurion pilus prior in command of the vexilation from the Second Legion, who pointed them towards a row of tents just behind the principia.

"Each legate and chief tribune has their own tent," he explained. "However, as your legate did not make the journey, then I suppose one of those tents is yours, master centurion." He then addressed Magnus. "I apologize, sir, that we don't have suitable quarters for one of your rank."

"I'm fine sharing a tent with the men," the Norseman replied. "I'll sleep under the stars if necessary."

"That won't be necessary," the centurion chuckled, relieved that Magnus was not one of the insufferable types who demanded that subordinates go out of their way to accommodate him. "If you'll come with me, I'll see what we can arrange." Artorius gave the Norseman a friendly smack on the shoulder and made his way over to his tent. He was rather impressed by the quarters given to him. Senatorial officers certainly lived to an exponentially higher standard than men in the ranks, even in a marching camp. The tent was about twice the size of that shared by an eight-man squad, with a large camp bed, writing desk, a standing wardrobe, as well as several small decorative columns. A chest-high pillar by the desk was topped with a recently sculpted bust of Emperor Claudius. A small bunk for his manservant lay next to the large opening to the tent. Nathaniel had just finished helping him out of his armor when the flap was pulled open, and he was joined by Sempronius.

"I see you're getting settled in," the chief tribune observed. "Not bad accommodations, eh?"

"Feels kind of wasteful to me," Artorius remarked. "You could house sixteen legionaries in this one tent."

"At this stage in your career, I would say you've earned it," the chief tribune replied. He then addressed his reason for calling. "The command groups from the Fourteenth and Ninth Legions are expected to arrive this evening. We are to meet with Plautius tomorrow after first watch."

"Understood."

That evening he joined Magnus for a stroll down towards the water. Both men stood with their arms folded across their chests, feeling the sea breeze blowing through their hair while the waves lapped endlessly against the sand. Ships continued to sail to and from the harbor, with the port carrying about its

business almost as if it were oblivious to the large presence of Roman soldiers at its doorstep.

“I suspect that by this time next year we will be standing on those distant shores,” Artorius speculated.

“New adventures and new challenges,” his Nordic friend added. “This will not be like our campaigns of retribution or suppression of rebellions.”

“Agreed. And whether we rule through temperance or intimidation will be determined by those people across the water.”

“It is a strange feeling,” Magnus noted. “The emperor may tell us that we invade to restore an allied king, yet the reality is we go to conquer a province. Rome will bring many things to Britannia, and the people will have a chance to rise up out of the squalor of their existence. And yet, we don’t really do this for them, do we?”

“No,” Artorius said, shaking his head. “We do this for Rome, not the barbarians. Personally, I could care less if those unwashed hordes wish to live in squalid shit and continue to destroy each other. However, if the emperor says we must conquer and Romanize them, then that is what we will do. It is a harsh reality, my friend, in that all great empires and civilizations are wrought through brutality and subjugation. It is simply the way the world is.”



For having never ridden a horse in his life, Alaric had proven a quick learner. He had taken the time given to him by Cartimandua to mourn for his mother and then fully committed himself to his duties. Landon was the primary equestrian trainer for the queen’s guard, and he spent the winter months training his friend to ride. Protection of the queen was but one of their duties, for they also served as her messengers both within the kingdom and throughout the lands. Another tasking involved watching the main roads leading into the kingdom, as Landon had been the day he reunited with Alaric.

“We’re the only full-time soldiers the queen has,” he explained one spring morning when Alaric noted how busy and scattered they usually were. “While everyone, including women, is expected to take up arms as necessary to defend Brigantes, the people are mostly farmers, miners, fishermen, and laborers. Even a kingdom as large as ours cannot afford to employ and equip a permanent standing army. You’ve seen how humble my dwelling is, and

yet I am more fortunate than most of our people. At least the queen was gracious enough to give you a small room within her great hall."

"For that I am grateful," Alaric confessed. "It's very small and barely has enough room for a bunk and a chest for my personal belongings. But then, how much room do I really need? That I am often invited to sit at her table is an even greater honor. As a member of her guard, as well as one she regards as a brother, no one questions my presence. Still, I find her husband to be rather boorish and insufferable."

"Landon!" The two men looked behind them to see a rider from the guard galloping up the road from the southwest.

"What news?" the guards' commander asked as he turned his horse about.

"Caratacus of Catuvellauni comes," the rider explained. "He rides from Atrebates and seeks an audience with the queen and consort. He'll arrive in Isurium Brigantum in two days."

"Very well," Landon replied. "Ride on and inform the queen and see if she has any instructions for us."

"Why is Caratacus coming here?" Alaric asked as the messenger rode away, clots of mud from the damp path kicking up in his wake.

"The queen is expecting him," Landon answered, "or rather her consort is; boorish and insufferable as you duly pointed out."

"What business has he this far north?"

"Hard to say," Landon replied. "Cartimandua expressed her displeasure at his conquering and brutal subjugation of the Atrebates. The ghastly druidic sacrifice they made of six of their nobles has also brought them the queen's loathing. All the while Venutius has praised Caratacus for bringing stability and order to the southern kingdom. But I do not think that Caratacus coming here has to do with the annexation of a tiny realm."

"Why not?" Alaric asked, his friend turning to face him. "We have both witnessed the queen's revulsion to some of his actions."

"True, but then the Kingdom of Brigantes is one of the largest in this land," Landon said. "And as the queen told you, we even have claim to certain territories across the sea in Hibernia. These did not just manifest themselves as part of our lands. All kingdoms are wrought through conquest, and if Cartimandua were to openly chastise Caratacus for conquering the Atrebates, it would be viewed as hypocrisy and quite possibly provocation for war."

"Then what?"

“As you will see, we have eyes everywhere,” Landon stated. “The dozen or so men of the guard whom you’ve met are but a fraction of us. Caratacus’ brother, King Togodumnus, sailed for Belgica a few months ago. We sent a small group of men across the channel as well, and they saw a camp outside the trading port of Gesoriacum. Though the actual number of soldiers was but a few hundred, they clearly noted the eagle standards of four Roman legions.”

“Rome…” Alaric’s voice trailed off and he closed his eyes, his heart suddenly pounding. “It was only a matter of time, I suppose.” His thoughts suddenly turned to his mother and he broke into a cold sweat. “She came here to escape from them,” he whispered. “Perhaps it is a mercy that she never lived to see them land upon these shores.”

“What was that?” Landon asked.

“I never told you where I came from originally,” Alaric replied, turning to face his friend. “It is time I did.”

As they were the same age, and Alaric had only been a boy of four or five when his mother brought him to Britannia, Landon had never given much thought to his friend’s origins when they were growing up. Alaric had also been but thirteen when he left Brigantes. So it was with great interest that Landon listened to his friend tell of the Marsi people in Germania, a great race of warriors who lived along the River Rhine, near the frontier of the Roman Empire. His mother never told him why the Romans had come to destroy their village, though a conversation he had with a centurion many years later led him to believe that it was in retribution for what the soldier had called an ignominious betrayal by the Marsi.

Alaric remembered little of Germania and regretted that he could not recall what his father had looked like. All he had were stories Milla had told him, along with a few details the Roman soldier had given him.

“Do you think the centurion had any reason to lie to you?” Landon asked.

Alaric shook his head. “I don’t think so. He was completely unapologetic regarding the destruction of my people. He said his brother had been killed years before, during an ambush that the Marsi took part in. I don’t think he was trying to be provocative, though if he was, what could I have done about it? He was heavily armed, with a number of his men within earshot. But no, I think his words were simply a way of reinforcing to me just how cruel the world is. And those who think otherwise will be enslaved or killed by the strong.”

“And yet from the way you talk,” Landon said with his brow furrowed, “I cannot tell if you hate the Romans or not. I mean, I can certainly understand your mother’s abject fear of them. And yes, I think that perhaps it was a mercy that she passed on long before they came here.”

“I tried to hate them,” Alaric replied. “It’s hard to explain, but I have always felt more confusion than anything when it comes to Rome. During my travels, I ended up serving aboard one of their warships. It was there that I was taught both sailing and how to fight with a gladius.”

“So the story I heard about you fighting pirates alongside the Romans is true?”

“It is,” Alaric admitted. “Something else I am glad my mother never knew. I sometimes think she would have rather I died rather than draw a blade and fight for them. And when I was in the east, I met a man; a Judean teacher. His followers to this day claim he was the son of God.”

“Which god?” Landon asked.

“They have but one, so I assume he needs no other name. I cannot say for certain. I did not spend time learning about the Jewish beliefs, only what this brave and noble man taught us. He said that we should love not just our neighbors, but also our enemies. Though he didn’t call them by name, it was clear that he was referring to the Romans.”

“Well, was he the son of their god?” Landon persisted.

“I don’t know,” Alaric shrugged. “It’s possible. I mean, if we believe in the plethora of deities that we’ve been told live within the water, the earth, and the sky, then why not? But whether he was, that’s not what’s important. What matters is that he brought a message of something other than hatred. I’ve carried it with me, though I do not know if I can truly forgive the Romans for what they did to my people, and what they continue to subject others to who dare to stand against them.”



Artorius and Sempronius walked into the entrance of the principia tent the morning following their arrival in Gesoriacum. A pair of legionaries stood guard, and inside were gathered the men who would lead Rome in its first conquest in generations.

As commander-in-chief of the expeditionary force, Aulus Plautius would

not directly command any of the legions, instead relying on his subordinate legates. Flavius Sabinus had recently assumed command of the Fourteenth Gemina, with his brother, Vespasian, leading the Second Augusta. The Ninth Hispania, which was at the time posted in North Africa, was led by the venerable Gnaeus Hosidius Geta. He was a battle-hardened veteran who, despite being barely thirty, had already completed two command tours. His reputation was particularly fierce following his victories in Mauretania. The only legate missing was Glabrio of the Twentieth Valeria.

The legates, chief tribunes, and master centurions all sat at a large oaken table in the center of the tent. Equite tribunes and other senior centurions sat on chairs along the outer walls of the tent. The only exception to this was Artorius' old friend, Aulus Nautius Cursor, who being in command of the task force's cavalry was seated at the head table. Artorius gave a nod of respect to his friend.

"Gentlemen," Plautius said. He stood at the head of the table, a freedman clerk on either side and a stack of documents piled on the table in front of him. "Next spring the conquest begins!"

Though this was a commonly held consensus, the general's words made it official. The term *conquest* also made this far different from the usual expedition, emphasizing that once the invasion force landed in Britannia, they were there to stay.

"As you well know," Plautius continued, "this will be a massive undertaking. Given the volatility of Britannia, I suspect that the mission of conquest and pacification will continue long after we have passed the sword on to our sons and grandsons. This will not be a mere show of force with a mock attack on the sea, like what happened just a couple years ago. Nor will we make the same mistakes as Julius Caesar and invade with too few troops. The emperor's father, Drusus Nero, once predicted that a successful conquest of Britannia would require four legions, with an even larger compliment of auxiliary forces. As we shift forces within the empire to compensate for uprooting the invasion force, you can see who will now be responsible for the regions your legions have covered for many years."

The clerks then quickly passed around a series of parchments to each legion commander. The scroll handed to Sempronius and Artorius read:

> *Legio II, Augusta in Argentorate, Germania*[3] *–*
> *Replaced by Legio VIII, Augusta*

Legio IX, Hispania in Vindobona, Pannonia[4] – Replaced by Legio X, Gemina

Legio XIV, Gemina in Carnuntum, Pannonia[5] – Replaced by auxiliaries

Legio XX, Valeria in Cologne, Germania – Not replaced, Legio I, Germanica to remain in place

"Logistics stores of rations and construction equipment have been staged in Cologne," Plautius continued. He then looked to Sempronius for confirmation.

"Yes, sir," the chief tribune replied. "We have sufficient pre-cut lumber to build at least two full-sized wooden forts. Extra grain siloes have also been built just outside the fortress with several farms for growing vegetables and raising livestock acquired. I estimate that we currently have enough raw food stores to feed four legions for approximately six months; half that if we factor in the auxiliaries."

"We're building a large supply depot here as well," Plautius added. "While we can certainly forage once we land in Britannia, the emperor wants to keep this to a minimum. Taking from those we intend to rule does not win us allies for Rome. And while a certain amount of plunder from those we forcibly subjugate is expected, our long term goal is to pacify the people, not turn them against us. After we're established, it will take the strength of both diplomacy, as well as the sword to conquer Britannia."

Scribes next handed each group a rudimentary map showing the southeast coastline of the isle. Their current location in Belgica was also marked. Three large arrows pointed towards various points on the coast, with subsequent markings showing a rough approach each group was to take towards a river that ran into the sea to the north.

"We will land in the Kingdom of the Cantiaci," Plautius said. "They are closest to our lands, and we can establish a foothold and initial base of operations there with supply lines running across the channel to the continent. The Atrebates, whose king the emperor has promised to restore to power, are located to the west of Cantiaci. They were conquered about three years ago by a powerful kingdom known as the Catuvellauni. They, and their allies,

will be our most significant threats."

"What of the Cantiaci?" Geta asked. "Will they offer resistance?"

"I have the reassurance from a deputation sent by their king, Eppillus, that they will not," Plautius replied. "Their lands are small and the number of warriors insubstantial. I suspect they will welcome us, as they live in fear of the Catuvellauni. Plus, Eppillus is the brother of King Verica of Atrebates. Our first test of diplomacy will be how we treat the Cantiaci. If we show temperance, then others will see the good will of Rome. If subjugate them with an iron fist, it will only unite the other tribes against us. We want to keep hostile and undecided peoples divided as much as possible."

"That does not mean that our landing will go unopposed," Vespasian noted. "The Catuvellauni and their allies will march right through the Cantiaci lands. Eppillus does not have the strength to oppose either them or us, and so he will simply have to wait and try to make amends with whoever the victors are."

"We also cannot land our entire invasion force at a single point," Plautius said, drawing their attention back to the maps. "Therefore we will launch three divisions simultaneously. I will accompany the Ninth and Fourteenth Legions to the north. The Twentieth will land to the south of us, with the main corps of cavalry. The Second will be on the far left and will have the largest contingent of auxiliaries in support, scouting and covering the left flank of the army."

"What of the Atrebates' king?" Vespasian asked. "Our approach will run just parallel to their lands. Do you wish him to accompany me?"

"No," Plautius replied. "He will be with me, as I will be first to encounter King Eppillus, who will announce the return of the Atrebates king to them. Once we land we will merge into two battle groups. Sabinus will command the right wing, Vespasian the left. Each legion will have a certain amount of autonomy, as long as they continue to advance while meeting my intent. Our main objective for the first phase of the invasion is this river here." He then pointed to a spot on the map which showed two large bays on the east coast, each leading into a river. Plautius pointed to the smaller one to the south.

"This is the River Medway. The terrain of this land is heavily forested and hostile. Geta, your North African troops have the least amount of experience in these conditions, which is why I'm pairing you with Sabinus and the Ninth. Our cavalry and auxiliaries will be crucial in rooting out bands of raiders who, no doubt, will try and wear us down with hit-and-run tactics.

However, by the time we reach this point, we hopefully will have goaded our enemies into facing us in open battle. Britannic warriors are very prideful, and the longer we remain in their lands, the greater the blow to their esteem and perceived valor amongst the people. While prudence may dictate holding onto initial gains and then engaging individual tribes one by one, after they've gone home for the harvest, I intend to run a highly aggressive campaign. If we brazenly engage a large coalition in open battle and smash them, it will help quell thoughts of further resistance."

After a few logistical details, Plautius dismissed the men. As the assembled leaders stood and saluted, Artorius had hoped to have a moment to speak with his friend, Tribune Cursor. However, he was interrupted by Vespasian, who called he and Sempronius over to a secluded corner.

"I wanted to speak with both of you in private," the legate said. "As you can guess, Plautius is furious with your commander for foregoing this meeting."

"If I may speak plainly, sir," Artorius said, "we are still speculating as to how Glabrio ever received command of the legion in the first place."

Sempronius grimaced, thinking this would lead to a sharp rebuke from Vespasian.

The general simply snorted and gave a mirthless smile. "From what I gather, he was a favorite of Gaius Caligula," he said. "And he is a personal friend of the emperor. I doubt that Legate Glabrio is any more enthusiastic about taking part in the invasion than you are having him with you. However, as he still will have a year left on his appointment, none of you have any choice in the matter."

Both Sempronius and Artorius looked crestfallen by this.

"Sir, can't Plautius have him removed?" the chief tribune asked, exasperated.

"Unfortunately, no," Vespasian replied, shaking his head. "Only the emperor can fire him, and that's not going to happen. However, Plautius did come up with a somewhat viable solution. Glabrio will come to Britannia, but not with the Twentieth Legion. He will accompany Plautius as part of his staff, though still holding the position as legate of the Twentieth Legion. I understand this puts an added burden on both of you, as you will be the ones having to actually lead the legion into battle."

"And that is why Plautius placed us in a battle group under you," Artorius

conjectured.

"Correct, master centurion," Vespasian confirmed. "Regardless of who holds what position officially, I will essentially be in command of both legions. Not to worry, my chief tribune has already completed one tour and is damn near ready to become a legate in his own right. And my master centurion has served in the ranks longer than I've been alive. You both know how to lead men into battle, so I'll not interfere with the Twentieth directly. Just know that I will not be far away."



Landon's assessment was more accurate than he realized. Both the queen and her consort knew the reasons for Caratacus coming to their kingdom. Cartimandua surmised soon after Togodumnus' departure for the continent that he and his brother would soon be attempting to rally every kingdom in the isle to their cause. And given the size of Brigantes, Caratacus had decided to pay his respects personally.

Twenty men accompanied the warrior king; three mounted, the rest on foot, and all heavily armed. Caratacus dismounted his horse, handing his great axe to one of his men before embracing Venutius.

"You are most welcome, noble friend and ally!" Venutius said enthusiastically.

The queen was more reserved, but still cordial in her remarks. "We do welcome you, Caratacus of the Catuvellauni," she said. "A feast has been prepared in honor of your visit."

"It is I who am honored," Caratacus said with a formal bow before the three entered the queen's great hall. The other men who had come on horseback were Catuvellauni nobles who Caratacus had installed as vassals within Atrebates, and they also accompanied their king into the great hall. The remaining warriors were sent to rallying square, where warriors gathered when summoned by the queen. Here they would enjoy their own feast with those who they hoped would soon join them in the coming fight.

"What news have you of the Romans?" Venutius asked, cutting to the chase as he and Caratacus sat across from each other at the longest table. Cartimandua sat at the head and listened to the two men while she ate and drank in silence. While her consort was very gruff and often times belligerent in his speech, she was far more measured and languid in her responses.

“They are coming,” Caratacus confirmed with a nod as he took a bite of roasted beef, quaffing it down with a long pull of ale. “Not this year, though. My brother guesses they will come either next spring or early summer.”

“I had heard of movements of large bodies of Roman troops on the mainland,” Venutius said. “Are we certain they will not invade our shores this season?”

“Togodumnus and a number of our best scouts have been scouring the landscape,” the Catuvellauni king replied. “There is a massive shift happening within their empire. And while there are Roman soldiers congregating around the settlements on the coast of Belgica, their numbers are too few to constitute an invasion force at this time. They did, however, spot the standards of four legions posted in a camp outside Gesoriacum.”

“A leaders’ reconnaissance,” Venutius observed.

Caratacus nodded in reply.

“As you know,” he continued, “Verica of the Atrebates fled to Rome like a whipped dog after we annexed his lands. I had even offered to make him my chief warlord for the region! He could have essentially kept his lands without a drop of blood being spilled, and all I asked for in return was a reasonable tribute and acknowledgment as his king. He refused, and I was forced to put down his warriors and burn his hall to the ground.”

“A senseless loss of life that he could have avoided,” Venutius asserted.

Cartimandua stared hard at him. She found her husband’s flattery nauseating, yet she still maintained her silence.

“And if successful, the Romans will demand far more of him than you, my noble friend.”

“And that is why I have come to you,” Caratacus said. “Your kingdom is large and the number of warriors you can call up vast. My brother is seeking out our worthiest friends and allies to stand with him against Rome. I decided to come to Brigantes personally.”

“Even if we joined you,” Cartimandua finally spoke up, “the combined numbers of your warriors and mine would not be enough to repel a full-scale invasion from the Romans.”

Venutius cringed at his wife’s emphasis on the fact that their nation’s warriors fell under her command and not his.

“The kingdoms of this land are divided, with many bloody rivalries going back centuries. Who’s to say any of them will stand with you?”

“I can unite them,” Caratacus emphasized. “No doubt a few of the weaker

nations will bow like frightened children before the invaders. Their numbers are so few that we can do without cowards who pose as warriors. I already have pledged an alliance with the Silures[2], who have promised me every fighting man they have to expel the Romans."

"A strong ally to have," Venutius observed.

The Silures were indeed one of the most warlike and feared tribes in all of Britannia, with a reputation of being willing to fight to the death rather than capitulate.

"And they will willingly fall under yours or your brother's command?" the queen asked, her tone implying a rhetorical question that did not need answering.

"They will fight," Caratacus restated.

Cartimandua continued to eat in silence for most of the evening, listening intently as her husband and the king talked of smashing the Romans and driving them into the sea before they could even claim a single scrap of Britannia. But unlike Venutius, who was already overstepping his authority by all but promising to send warriors to Caratacus, she knew the political situation within the isle was far more complex. This Catuvellauni warrior was no doubt very charismatic and would most certainly forge a sizeable alliance from many of the kingdoms. However, she also knew that while warlike tribes such as the Silures would prove strong allies, others would offer only tepid support that would be unreliable at best. And there were others who would either attempt to remain neutral or, perhaps, even welcome the invaders. Certainly the conquered Atrebates would be amongst these, as well as the Cantiaci, whose lands were on the southeast coast. The channel of the sea was narrowest between their lands and the Roman Empire.

"Thank you, Caratacus," Cartimandua spoke up, interrupting the men. "We have much to discuss and will let you know our intentions in due course. Meantime you will remain as my guests this evening."

"But your husband has assured me that the Brigantes will aid us," the king said, his face twisted in puzzlement.

"A premature assurance, and one that was not his to give."

The words clearly angered her consort, who looked down and scowled in frustration.

"But I promise you that we will bring your request to our council and then render our decision after we determine what is best for our people."

Caratacus snorted and rose to his feet, making ready to leave. "I should

have known," he said with a trace of contempt in his voice. "King Breogan was a lapdog to the Romans, yet I had hoped his daughter was of braver stock."

"You will have our answer in due time," Cartimandua persisted, keeping her voice calm. "Insult my father again and you will no longer be counted among the friends of the Brigantes."

Her words bit into her husband, though Caratacus appeared unaffected.

"Apologies," he said. "I only hope that when the time comes, the Brigantes will recognize who their true friends are." He then nodded to Venutius and promptly exited the hall.

"What have you done?" Venutius snapped as soon as his friend was out of earshot. "You would deny our people a chance at martial glory whilst making an enemy of one of my closest friends? We risk war with Caratacus after he deals with the Romans!"

"And what do we risk if we do join him?" Cartimandua replied smoothly. "Even if Caratacus is able to raise up half this isle to fight the Romans, does he think they'll all willingly subjugate themselves to his command? In all of Britannia, every king and war chief's bravery is only matched by his ego. He may be able to rally masses to fight, but he will not be able to control them. And just how long does he think he can keep such a force in the field? The Romans can simply wait them out, if they wish, and then overwhelm each tribe individually at their leisure."

Venutius spat on the ground in contempt. "Caratacus is right. I thought I had married a warrior queen, not a Roman boot-licker!"

"You forget yourself, *husband*." Cartimandua's eyes narrowed, her patience waning. "It is I who rules Brigantes, not you, and it is I who is responsible for the welfare of our people. Never forget your place or attempt to undermine me in front of guests ever again; else I'll divorce you and cast you out of my house!"

Venutius bowed and backed out of the hall, though his face was twisted in a defiant sneer. As soon as he left, Cartimandua found herself sweating, and she had difficulty breathing. She was startled when the outer door was opened and Alaric walked in.

"My queen," he said, quickly noting her disturbed demeanor. "I apologize if I've come at a bad time."

"Not at all," she replied, wiping a hand over her face and quickly composing herself.

“I just came to tell you that Caratacus and his escort have been put up in a guest house, although they looked more than a little put out.”

“That’s hardly surprising,” the queen grumbled. “And I suppose most of this evening’s intended feast will go unconsumed. Those impudent bastards would lead my people to destruction and death!” She then paused and looked down momentarily. “Forgive me, brother. I know these times will not be easy for you, given your history with the Romans.”

“I finally told Landon about my past,” Alaric remarked. “He was fascinated, though I cannot say he was surprised. And as much as it pains me to say this, I think mother’s passing was in some ways a blessing. I fear what she would have done if she witnessed legionaries marching across our lands.”

“You know I have an entire kingdom to concern myself with,” Cartimandua replied. “I shall need you to be my eyes in the southeast. You and Landon will take a handful of men and ascertain the intentions of the Cantiaci. It is their kingdom where the Romans will most likely land, if and when they come.”

“Yes, my queen.”

Chapter Endnotes:
1 – Boulogne-sur-Mer, France
2 – Southern Wales
3 – Strasbourg, France
4 – Vienna, Austria
5 – Between Vienna and Bratislava, Austria

Chapter X: Final Preparations

Fortress of the Twentieth Legion, Cologne, Germania
February, 43 A.D.
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For Sempronius and Artorius, and indeed for the entire Twentieth Legion, the announcement that they would be operationally falling under Vespasian during the coming campaign came as a huge relief. Though Legate Glabrio remained at the fortress, he became involved ever less and less in the daily operations of the legion and seemed to be all the gladder for it. Sempronius had given him a daily summary of the legion's activities and orders from Plautius, yet he hardly paid them any mind. By February, the chief tribune had ceased in even doing this, with nothing ever being said. Camillus continued to work many of the daily administrative tasks, though per Artorius' directive, he always cleared any correspondence with him before he pressed the legate's seal into the wax. Four of the six equite tribunes had also voluntarily extended their tours, so as to take part in the invasion.

There had been great emphasis the previous summer on water training and seeing who the best swimmers within each cohort were. Over the winter months, the legion redoubled its efforts on the essential basics of close combat warfare. Artorius had also added extensive training on countering guerrilla warfare. Because the Britons were lightly equipped, faster on their feet than legionaries, and familiar with the terrain, the best the Romans could do was employ defensive measures to minimize the effects of their enemies' attacks. This was maddeningly frustrating to the soldiers, who hated the idea of being able to do little more than hide behind their shield walls while the Britons attacked them at will with missile weapons.

"You cannot outrun them," Centurion Metellus admonished his men during one such training session. "If you try, the formation collapses and we're all fucking dead!"

His response was in rebuke of one of his men's remarks about not wishing to 'just stand here, taking it'. Soldiers were cursing under their breath as they marched in testudo formation, where legionaries in the center would hold their shields overhead, covering those in the front and sides. It required the men to get in very close and their movement slowed to a virtual

crawl, but it was the best way to protect against arrows, throwing spears, and sling stones. Metellus had tasked a number of men from another century to pelt his soldiers with blunted stakes and training javelins in an attempt to get them used to facing such tactics. He quietly admitted to himself that he hated this as much as his men, especially when a training javelin skipped off the top of his shield and cracked him on the helm.

"Stay with it!" he shouted as his century continued to get pummeled; the soldiers simulating the marauding Britons laughing and shouting insults at the formation.

Artorius watched from a distance as those pelting the slowly advancing formation laughed amongst themselves. Once the century reached a point towards the end of the snow-covered drill field, Metellus barked a series of commands, his legionaries forming into battle lines in a matter of seconds. He halted the formation, addressed his men briefly, and then dismissed them. He was chuckling to himself as he walked over to his father, removing his helmet and rubbing the sore spot where the blunt training javelin had struck him.

"Hateful type of training," Artorius observed.

"Hateful but necessary," Metellus replied. He then looked at his helmet, which had a noticeable dent in it. His forehead was bruised, which he rubbed once more while looking at the mark on his helm. "Bugger me, they got me good out there! Had that been a real javelin, I'd probably be dead…"

"Possibly," Artorius remarked. "At least you didn't take one in the throat, like I did last week. Lost my voice for a few days after that."

"Yes, and I'll bet the soldier who threw it was shitting himself after," Metellus laughed.

"Undoubtedly," Artorius grinned. "Not every day, though, that a ranker can strike his master centurion and get away with it. I saved the admonishment for myself and recommended to his centurion that he give him a day pass for such an impressive throw."

The duty day had ended with Metellus' century being the last on the drill field. The sun was already setting, and the two men walked across the fortress towards Artorius' house. The streets were congested with carts and various covered pallets of supplies that would be needed once they made their final march to the coast. Since the Twentieth Legion would not be returning to Cologne, their half of the fortress would be renovated into a supply depot. For the men of the First Legion there was a sense of jealousy that they were

not the ones headed for Britannia.

"Another month and we will start for the coast," Metellus stated.

"How is Marcia taking it?" Artorius asked. While preparing his men for a lengthy campaign, not to mention permanent move, his son was also adjusting to life as a husband and father. He now had a one-year old son, Titus, and Marcia was pregnant with their second child. Though Marcia hoped for a daughter, they both felt that two children were more than enough, especially as they came very early in their marriage.

"Her greatest fear is our children having to grow up without their father, as I did," Metellus replied. "In our profession, death in battle or any other number of nefarious ways, is always a possibility. And this is the first time I have gone to war since I've known Marcia. She was not in my life when we fought at Braduhenna or during our years in Judea. She also has apprehensions about coming to Britannia, should we be successful in establishing a province there."

"It won't be easy," Artorius noted. "Some will welcome our presence, many will be indifferent, and still there will be others who will fight us to the death. They have the advantage of knowing the terrain, and their warriors will undoubtedly outnumber us. And as you saw, they have the ability to hit us at will with skirmishers while then fading away into the forests."

"A damned bloody nightmare," Metellus grunted. "And what advantages do we have? Better weapons and armor, of course; but can we get them to face us in the open?"

"That may be our greatest challenge," the master centurion replied. "And if they do have a decided numerical superiority, then we could quite possibly lose that battle which we seek. I think this will become a campaign of logistics and diplomacy as much as brute force. Whether using skirmishers or a massed force, the Britons cannot keep their warriors on campaign for very long. As none of the kingdoms have a permanent standing army, they have no concept of maintaining warehouses of rations and equipment to be used during a protracted campaign. Like most barbarians, their wars are very short, lasting maybe three or four months. By fall, those warriors not dead or crippled return to their farms. And if the issue cannot be decided diplomatically by their leaders during the winter months, they will fight it out again in the spring. Therefore, once we establish a stronghold for operations, it will be crucial that we keep our supply lines to the continent open, while making as many friends as possible. In turn, we can march on the kingdoms

one at a time as they try and conduct their harvest."

"A substantial challenge," Metellus remarked with a furrowed brow. He shrugged. "Well, Julius Caesar did it against the Gauls for nine years!"

"Exactly. And when Vercingetorix failed to break Caesar's lines of logistics, he knew he was beaten. There was no beating him in open battle, and so all he could do was fall back to his stronghold at Alesia. My only hope is that it doesn't take us nine years to break our enemies in Britannia."

It felt strange to Artorius, leaving Cologne, this time never to return. The legion would be making its new home somewhere in Britannia. Though Diana was returning to Rome, Marcia had decided to remain in Cologne, until such time as her husband sent for her.

"There is nothing for me to return to in Rome," the young woman had explained to Artorius. She had sought out her father-in-law, once she knew their time on the Rhine was growing very short. Though late in her pregnancy, she insisted on going for a walk, as she complained about having spent too much time lying about as it was. Diana was watching after Titus while Marcia and Artorius strolled along one of the paths near the river.

"You do know it could be a couple years until it's safe for families to travel to Britannia," Artorius emphasized. "I cannot fault you for not wishing to return to Rome. However, I know Diana would be more at ease if you and the children stayed with her."

"Her offer is very kind," Marcia replied. She grinned. "And I know it is not just she who would feel safer if I took my children and returned to Rome. But please understand, Father, my life is with Metellus, and I have to be able to stand on my own, like any good soldier's wife. I have made friends here, and we will look after each other. After all, I am not the only one whose husband is heading off to war for Juno knows how long." She then stopped and they turned to face each other, Marcia placing a hand on the side of his face. "You have been very kind to me, and I love you and Diana very much. But it is for us to make our own way in the world now."

Artorius gave a sad smile and kissed her on the cheek. Though he had not been a part of Marcia's life, he knew he had always loved her since the time he had seen her as a young child. She may not have been of his bloodline, but he felt as if she had always been his daughter.

"Your mother would be overjoyed if she were able to see you now," he said.

“I never knew her, and yet I miss her deeply,” Marcia replied. “That sounds silly, I know.”

“Not at all,” Artorius replied, shaking his head. “There are many things we simply cannot understand, and I think the depth of bond between a mother and her child is among those. I am thankful that your children will not grow up deprived of their mother.”

Marcia kissed him on the cheek and then held him close. “Look after my husband, lest my children be deprived of their father.”

They returned to the fortress where Diana lay on a couch, baby Titus fast asleep in her arms. Marcia took the sleeping babe in her arms and kissed Artorius and Diana each on the cheek as she left to spend one last evening with Metellus.

As he reminisced about his words to his daughter-in-law, Artorius tried to remain stoic during his farewell evening with Diana. And yet it was understandably wrought with deep emotion. Both had known the risks when he returned to the legions. Little was said as Diana took him in her arms and kissed him passionately. He carried her up to their bedroom, silently hoping that this would not be the last time he made love her.



It was not just the Romans who knew where the key to their victory lay. At the heart of the former kingdom of the Atrebates, Caratacus called a meeting of the leaders who had pledged to aid him in the pending struggle against the invaders. In addition to his brother and the chief druid, Archantael, there were at least a dozen tribal kings, along with retinues of their subordinate war chiefs.

“You’ve done well,” he said to Archantael as they walked along the short rise that led to where his warriors had erected a stockade and small fort.

“Many revere our ancestors and the commonality of our gods enough to at least put their differences aside for the time being,” the druid replied. “I regret those who did not heed the call of the gods.”

“Yes,” Caratacus said quietly as they approached the throng of kings and warriors.

“Hail, Caratacus, my brother!” Togodumnus shouted, raising his great sword high.

“We will send the Romans to hell!” another man exclaimed.

The king noted the vigor of these men.

"They see you as a savior and one who can unite them," Archantael remarked. "Give them their triumph over Rome and, I daresay, you could become king of most of the isle."

Caratacus grinned but said no more as he led the leaders from each tribe into the meeting hall at the center of the hill fort. His staunchest allies, the Silures, were different in appearance than their fellow Britons. Possessing a darker complexion and black, curly hair, it was rumored that their ancestors had come from Hispania many generations before. Their leader was a fierce warrior named Silyen. A big man, similar in stature and build to Caratacus, his face was devoid of facial hair, though that atop of his head was thick and rather unkempt. He had several scars marring his otherwise handsome face, and his left eye was glassy and clouded.

"We are with you," he said with a deep voice as the assembled war leaders sat at the long table. "But what of those who are absent?"

"The Cantiaci are closest to Rome," Caratacus answered. "I have little doubt that that is where our enemies will land. They have asked to remain neutral for the time being, having few warriors and fearing what should happen if they ally themselves to the losing side. I should have taken their lands when we conquered the Atrebates."

"Gut the cowards and take their women in retribution for their cowardice," Silyen spat.

"And what of the Iceni?" another war chief asked. "Their lands sit just north of the Cantiaci."

"King Prasutagus is being strangely quiet," Togodumnus answered.

"He's an opportunist who will try and placate the victors," Silyen grunted. "To hell with him! My greater concern is with those north of my lands, the Brigantes. Are they with us or not?"

"Their kingdom is very large," Caratacus observed. "It is also very much divided. From what I saw on my journey through their lands, I would say that half the warriors would readily fight for us, including the consort, Venutius. However, Queen Cartimandua has refused to commit their forces one way or the other. And despite Venutius' protestations, their warriors remain in Brigantes. It does not matter."

"We will deal with that mewling bitch in due time," Togodumnus remarked. "If need be, we will help Venutius overthrow his wife and take their kingdom for himself."

“He is a worthy ally, even if Cartimandua is not,” Caratacus concurred.

“At any rate, my scouts have confirmed that four legions are massing on the coast of Belgica,” Togodumnus said. “Their standard deployment is to have an equal or greater number of auxiliaries with them. From what we gathered, they are placing a large emphasis on cavalry. I would put their total numbers at forty to forty-five thousand men.”

“We can amass four times that many!” one of the war chiefs spoke up. “Let us meet them on the beaches and drive them back into the sea!”

“If we assemble our entire army too soon,” Togodumnus replied, “then we risk running out of food before we have a chance to face the Romans head on. They may simply wait for us to disperse. And if they see all of our warriors waiting for them on the shores, then what’s to stop them from simply diverting their warships to another landing point? Do you propose we chase them up and down the coastlines?”

“What then?” the war chief asked. “Do we simply let the Romans land?”

“No,” a warrior named Banning replied. “My men will fight them wherever they land! Who is with us?”

“Easy, friend,” Togodumnus said. “Those in the west have the greatest distance to travel, and so I will call upon them only when we are ready for a decisive encounter.”

“Bah!” Banning retorted. “We will meet the Romans on the beaches, and if they push us back, then we will harry them over every inch of ground they take. Every glade, every tree, every blade of grass they claim will come at a fearful price. You called us here to fight the Romans, not sit on our asses and let them march at will across our lands.”

“Agreed,” another man spoke up. “And if we harass them, they will be thoroughly demoralized by the time we face them in open battle. By then those kingdoms who flounder in their allegiance will know who the victors will be!”

“We must be decisive, but not hasty…” Caratacus began.

“And who the fuck appointed you our supreme leader?” Banning interrupted. “Every man here is a king in his own right and not subject to yours or anyone else’s demands. What right have you to decide when and where we fight?”

“It was we who sent word to form this alliance,” Togodumnus retorted, his anger rising at the insult to his brother. He had vainly hoped that the cause of fighting a common enemy would temper the egos of the assembled war

leaders. It was not to be. Instead, having so many gathered together only made them more prideful. Several side arguments started to break out about exactly who was in command of this alliance.

"Enough!" Togodumnus boomed, slamming his fist onto the table. "Let those who wish to face the Romans on the beaches do so. If they are successful, then the glory can be theirs alone. I and my brother will focus on observing and harassing the Romans until such time as we are ready to face them in battle, at a time and place of our choosing, not theirs. Those who survive attacking them during the initial landings can join us anytime they wish."

"Fuck this," Banning snarled, pushing away from the table and standing. He glared at the two Catuvellauni brothers. "Those who will join me in facing the Romans on the beaches, come!"

"Aye!" several men shouted, rising to their feet.

"I wish you victory and glory," Togodumnus said, despite Banning's sneer. "And if you are denied this, those of you who live can rejoin us; hopefully, a little wiser as to the true nature of our enemy."

It was not the answer Caratacus hoped for, but he knew his brother was right to try and compromise, while still extending the hand of friendship despite the impudence shown. Banning and several other leaders simply nodded and left the table. They were conversing amongst themselves as to where they would await the arrival of the invaders. Deciding to let it be for the moment, Caratacus left the hall, his brother accompanying him.

"Vanity will be there downfall," he grumbled.

"Every man here leads a host of warriors," Togodumnus reasoned. "It is only natural that all should be vain to a degree, you included."

"As I am still your vassal, it should be you who must lead this coalition," Caratacus observed. "That is if it doesn't fracture itself before a single Roman sets foot on our lands!"

"Perhaps," his brother shrugged. "I feel your frustration, believe me. In addition to being prideful, these men have most often been at odds with each other."

"And yet if they cannot stand together, we're all damned!" Caratacus cursed, shaking his head. His brother's continually calm demeanor told him that Togodumnus understood more about the larger political scheme than he did.

"Let Banning and the others bleed for a while. They will come back to us,

provided enough of them survive. And if not, then they were never worthy allies in the first place."

"Togodumnus!" a voice shouted from behind them.

"King Donan," he replied, acknowledging the man who ruled a loose-knit group of tribes in southwest of Britannia.

"The Durotriges Confederation stands with you," Donan asserted. "I have many warriors I can bring to the cause, but as you say, we have a great ways to travel. My warlords have already pledged their support. Give us the word, and we will come with all speed."

"I will have messengers ready to ride to you," Togodumnus replied. "Before the next harvest we will send for you."

"You are a worthy ally," Caratacus added. "I promise you will get what's due to you before this is over."



"Twentieth Legion! Forward…march!" Cornicen horns sounded and nearly five thousand legionaries began the slow march out of the fortress. As they reached the gate, where a number of spouses and family members sadly watched their departure, Artorius leaned over in the saddle of his horse and gave his wife a parting kiss.

"I believe it was the Spartan women who used to say *'return with your shield or on it',*" she said. This brought a broad grin to Artorius' face. Diana had a way of saying the right thing, and her words reassured him as he led his men through the gate and towards their destiny. He never looked back.

Two weeks later, the Twentieth Legion reached the ever-growing camp at Gesoriacum. Hundreds of warships lined the coast with many more anchored at sea. Merchant traffic had ground to a halt, and every dock in the large harbor was now occupied by a military vessel. Any scrap of land that was not a major road or farm field was now covered in legionary tents. Plautius had acquired a large inn at the center of town to serve as his temporary principia until the invasion force launched. Artorius was impressed by the coordination of even the simplest tasks, such as stabling and maintaining the horses for the officers converging on the large building. Between the legates, chief tribunes, equite tribunes, master centurions, centurion primus ordos, as well as auxiliary regimental commanders, several dozen groomsmen were required to

take care of their mounts. These, along with other numerous support staff, had been waiting for the coming soldiers for over a month.

Given their proximity to Gesoriacum, the Twentieth Legion had been the first to arrive at the staging area. The remaining three legions, plus auxiliaries, had been on the march as soon as the frost was off the ground, and within a month the region became a massive army camp. As a testament to Roman efficiency, advance parties from every legion and auxiliary regiment had staked out their unit's campsites with designated areas for living, mess, and latrines. The latter were especially important, as forty-five thousand men would generate copious amounts of human waste, and its proper disposal was crucial to minimize the threat of disease to both themselves as well as the local population.

"Like cogs in a wheel," Artorius observed one morning to Sempronius as the two walked down the narrow street leading to the principia.

Most of the work at this stage was done by the logisticians, ensuring that supplies and rations where staged where they needed to be, ready to ship across the channel as soon as the invasion force established a secure base of operations. For most of the soldiers, there was little to do but wait while their leaders finalized the plans for the pending assault.

The citizens of Gesoriacum resigned themselves to the fact that their town and surrounding areas was occupied by tens-of-thousands of soldiers. And with all seaborne mercantile activity ground to a halt for the time being, they did their best to make the most of the situation. Merchants eagerly plied their wares to unsuspecting legionaries and auxiliary troopers, often at inflated prices. And various forms of entertainment flocked to the city from across the region, hoping to part the soldiers from some of their coin before they left. Indeed, it appeared as if the majority of women walking the streets were prostitutes. Sempronius made a note of this.

"The lads are tense, not to mention extremely bored," Artorius shrugged. "I'm glad for any form of release they can get, as long as it doesn't involve fighting with the locals or each other. Hopefully we won't be here for very long. I suspect that as soon as the weather and seas are even remotely compatible, we will be on our way."

"I hope so," Sempronius replied. "If we are forced to delay, they will drink the town dry of its wine and ale, wear out all the prostitutes, and then resort to brawling."

"Even the most disciplined of armies is prone to lapses if left idle," the

master centurion concurred as they approached the inn. The eagles of the four legions were posted just outside the entrance, guarded by two squads of legionaries, who would also keep curious onlookers at bay. As they walked into the crowded outer foyer, a tribune approached the men.

"Plautius is meeting with all legion commanders upstairs, sir," he said to Sempronius, who nodded in reply.

"You'd best come with me," the chief tribune said to Artorius.

Upstairs, the commander-in-chief had procured a large suite normally reserved for passing dignitaries and foreign princes. Gathered at a large round table were Plautius, Sabinus, Vespasian, and Geta, along with Tribune Cursor. Artorius grinned when he saw another familiar face standing over the table. It had been a few years, but there was no mistaking the tall, bald mariner.

"Commander Stoppello," he said, extending his hand to naval officer.

"Actually it's *Admiral* Stoppello," the sailor replied with a chuckle, clasping his hand firmly. "You saw all those ships in the harbor?"

Artorius nodded.

"Well, they're all my responsibility now."

"Tiberius Stoppello was appointed admiral of the fleet by the emperor," Plautius added. "It is he who will get our invasion forces to Britannia."

"A far cry from when you had but a single ship," Artorius noted.

"If I still had any hair, this posting would have caused me to lose it," the admiral added with a laugh.

Artorius greeted and shook hands with Cursor briefly before Plautius interrupted them.

"You can exchange pleasantries later," he said curtly before calling their attention to the crudely drawn map. "Gentlemen, as you can see, we are divided into three battle groups. The largest will be on the right, consisting of the Ninth and Fourteenth Legions. I will be with this group and will attempt to establish communications with the Cantiaci as soon as possible. They are our surest allies in the region and most viable at helping us establish our initial base of operations."

"And I will be on the extreme left with the Second Legion," Vespasian added. "In addition to driving the enemy further inland, we will see if we can ascertain the demeanor of the Atrebates. Will they welcome the return of their king under a Roman flag or have the past three years been sufficient to assimilate them into Caratacus' kingdom?"

“Which leaves us in the center,” Sempronius said.

“The Twentieth will establish a beachhead and temporary base of operations for the majority of our cavalry,” Plautius remarked. “Tribune Cursor will accompany your force in the second wave once you’ve cleared any resistance from the beaches.”

“As offloading horses from warships is a slow and arduous task,” the cavalry tribune added, “I will need you to secure the landing site before we come ashore. After which, we will link up with the left and right divisions, forming lines of communication for the entire invasion force.”

“It will be crucial that you establish communications with me as soon as practicable,” Vespasian emphasized. “That way both legions can support each other.”

Plautius then continued, “Though our immediate mission is to restore the sovereignty of an allied king, all of you know that our long-term goal is to conquer a new province for the empire. Several tribal kingdoms are known to be openly hostile, particularly the Catuvellauni under King Togodumnus. It is his brother, Caratacus, who now rules Atrebates. Intelligence gathering will be just as important as the actual fighting, for we need to know which tribes are aligned with him, and which ones are indecisive about whom they want as their friends. That is why an overwhelming show of force will be necessary once we land. Allies will be welcomed into the empire as friends. Those who oppose us will be smashed into the earth! Admiral Stoppello has the ship assignments for your legions. We launch in two days.”



During the final days of preparation, Centurion Magnus had quite an unexpected turn of events. It was late morning, and the Norseman had just returned from taking his century on a short run along the coastline when he saw her. His face broke into a broad grin as he saw a beautiful woman walking at the head of what appeared to be a hundred or so Syrian archers. Her light olive skin glowed in the afternoon sun, her long black hair pulled back tight against her head. She wore a light mail shirt, belted around the middle, which seemed to only accentuate her figure even more.

“Dismiss the men,” he said hurriedly to his optio before sprinting away. *“Achillia!”*

The woman stopped abruptly, startled at first, and then her own smile

matching his. She calmly but deliberately made her way over to the centurion and stood before him with her hands on her hips.

"Well, fancy that," she said with a cocked grin. "Didn't think I'd ever see you again."

Unsure what to say and despite being sweaty and disheveled from his morning exertions, Magnus took Achillia in her arms and kissed her deeply. She was at first startled by this, her eyes wide in bemusement. She then groaned softly and wrapped her arms around him, kissing him back.

"What are you doing here?" Magnus finally asked.

"Allied detachment," Achillia explained, taking him by the hand. "I decided a while ago to quit fighting for money in the arenas, that my skills could be better used to serve the empire."

"But you're not auxiliaries," Magnus noted.

"No," Achillia replied with a shake of her head. "And besides, as a woman, I cannot officially join the ranks anyway. I am, however, still a Roman citizen with a sense of duty. And if I may flatter myself, I am a better shot with a bow than any in the entire army. So I formed a company of my own archers and petitioned Plautius to take us on as hired skirmishers."

"You're mercenaries then."

"When you look at it, my dear, we all are," she replied with a casual shrug. "You and your men get paid to fight, as do mine. Since the invasion force needs all the additional help it can muster, I think the commander-in-chief was glad to add a few more bows to his arsenal. My skirmishers move quickly and can be very useful when it comes to picking off enemy leaders."

Magnus found all he could do was laugh at the implausibility of it all. Here was the most stunning woman he had ever met in his life, who he'd last seen fighting as a gladiator in Judea, and now she was leading a contingent of volunteer skirmishers that would be accompanying them in the invasion of Britannia.

"The fates must be very kind, to have placed us together again," he said, turning to face her.

"Or very cruel. After all, it is extremely dangerous." The smile on her face contrasted with the coldness of Achillia's assessment.

"Well, since we do not know where, exactly, Plautius will place you within the army, what say we take the time we do have to reacquaint each other?" Magnus had a deviant grin on his face, which Achillia readily matched. In that moment, he felt like the most fortunate man in the whole of

the empire.



As they left the principia, Sempronius went into a private meeting with Vespasian while Artorius hailed Tribune Cursor. The two had only seen each other in passing since their return to the Rhine. This was the first, and possibly last, time they'd have to reminisce before the invasion.

"Who would have thought we'd end up here?" Artorius chuckled. "To think that a few short years ago I was cast out of the legions, and you had long since left the sword behind for a career in politics."

"It would seem that life has taken us full circle," Cursor added. "I promised Adela that after Braduhenna I would never more draw a blade in anger."

"She took your heeding the emperor's call rather well, I thought."

"She did not like it, but she understood," the tribune explained. "In the end, I really had no choice, and not because the emperor personally asked me to command his cavalry. Adela knows me better than any, and I think she saw that I had some important matters left unfinished even before I did. I spent many years away from the army, yet when I returned I knew I was doing the right thing."

"It was the same with me," Artorius remarked. He paused, his brow creased in thought.

Cursor could tell there was something that had been troubling his friend for a long time. "Listen, about the letter you sent me when I was in Judea. I've always meant to ask you about it, but…"

"I never faulted you for not responding," the tribune quickly interrupted. "Honestly, I never expected you to. I mean what could you say?" The letter referred to was one that Cursor had written to Artorius twelve years prior, after the fall of Emperor Tiberius' praetorian prefect, Lucius Aelius Sejanus. It was Cursor, and small handful of others, who discovered the praetorian's plan to usurp the emperor.

"Well, just so you know, I never told Pilate," Artorius assured him. "I'm not sure which would have hurt him more, that it was an old friend who destroyed his benefactor or that said benefactor was an ignominious traitor? What surprised me is that you sought reelection as tribune of the plebs after all of that."

“It wasn’t easy,” Cursor admitted. “I did what I had to do, bringing down he who betrayed the empire. But when Tiberius ordered the deaths of Sejanus’ two youngest children, I broke inside. Did you know they defiled the young girl while the noose was around her neck? Their rationale was that it would offend the gods to execute a virgin. As if they would be better disposed towards raping an innocent child before murdering her!” Though a dozen years had passed, the horrifying events of that hateful night still haunted the tribune. He pulled out a small kerchief and wiped his brow.

“Claudius was there that night,” Cursor continued. “He absolved me of any blame in the death of his niece and nephew, for you remember at the time he was married to Sejanus’ sister and was very close with the children. And in those few moments we shared, we promised each other we would attempt to find something in Rome worth fighting for. That is why I sought reelection or, at least, that was what I told everyone. After ten years, I was tired. Adela worried about me, she knew that I had yet to find that which I sought and my soul was tormented as a result. Claudius becoming emperor and offering me command of the army’s cavalry corps restored that hope. Adela laments that I must now break my promise of never drawing my sword again in anger. She told me that it may be the only way to salvage my sanity and my very being.”

Artorius was aware of at least some of the events that had transpired in the aftermath of Sejanus’ downfall, though he did not know about the repugnant violation of the traitor’s innocent daughter. “And to think, Tiberius was once one of the greatest men to lead Rome’s armies into battle,” he said quietly.

“That is why I was so torn over what he’d done,” Cursor remarked. “I was the one who informed him about Sejanus’ betrayal, as well as later, when it was proven that Sejanus also had a hand in murdering Tiberius’ son. When I last saw the emperor, I did not recognize him anymore. Gone was the unbeaten general who had led the legions to countless victories. He was always cold and distant, but even his first years as emperor showed him to be a strong leader.”

“I think, had he died before his son, he would have passed into eternity hailed as one of the greatest men to serve Rome,” Artorius conjectured. He then asked, “Have you found what you seek?”

“We shall see,” his friend replied. “I will say this; I do not think I will be returning from Britannia. Oh, I don’t mean to say that I foresee my death, although that is always a very real possibility. No, something tells me my

future lies within that isle that we now seek to place under Roman rule. I have told Adela as much, and that we should be ready to sell the vineyard when the time arises. As it is right now, we have a tenant farmer renting it from us. I hope it does not trouble you that I should seek to sell your childhood home."

"It is not home for me anymore," the master centurion assured him. "If it was, I never would have sold it to you in the first place. I may have been raised there, but I was still a boy of seventeen when I left. And with parents gone, any thoughts of 'home' are not to be found there. But now to the present, for we have a long journey ahead of us before we can even think of such things."

"Agreed," Cursor replied, extending his hand. "I daresay, within the next few days, we will be writing the pages of history."



That anyone knew exactly where to go and which ship to board amazed Artorius. The camp had been torn down, all tents and supplies loaded onto wagons and pack mules. Representatives from each of Stoppello's ships, usually the sailing masters, guided each unit to their ship. Two centuries could fit aboard each vessel with cavalry regiments requiring more with their horses. A full third of the transports were dedicated to logistics stores, along with a handful of men to aid the quartermasters once they unloaded.

As the mariner assigned to guide the Twentieth Legion's First Cohort's First Century to its assigned ship, Artorius saw the massive lines of legionaries, auxiliary troopers, and cavalrymen hustling to get up the planks. As each ship took on its payload of men and supplies, they would cast off, though each had to take extreme caution so as not to ram into other vessels coming and going from the partially enclosed harbor. Artorius knew there was nothing he could do but follow the man and trust in those whose duty was to coordinate that journey across the channel and subsequent landing. He only hoped that once ashore, the correct units were landing with him.

"You're fortunate, sir," the sailing master said as they reached the boarding plank of their assigned ship. "You get to sail to Britannia aboard Admiral Stoppello's flagship."

"Welcome aboard, Artorius!" the admiral said excitedly, climbing down from the upper rear deck of his ship as the master centurion and his men

stepped off the boarding plank. Judging by his blood-shot eyes, Stoppello had barely slept in days, the enormity of his task bearing down on him. However, in addition to being a first rate sailor, he was also a logistics master and knew how to coordinate even as large and chaotic of a debarkation as this.

“Just tell us where you want us,” Artorius replied.

The wind and movement of hundreds of ships under oars had made the waves very choppy, and the ship rocked about erratically. Stoppello and his sailors scarcely noticed, though Artorius had to stop for a moment, lest his dinner spew forth onto the deck.

“Right up here, near the prow of the ship,” Stoppello said, waving his hand towards the open space at the front, which normally would have been covered in cargo.

The sun was beginning to set, and both Plautius and Stoppello wanted to make certain all vessels were at sea and in formation before night fell. As the flagship, Stoppello had elected to be among the last to depart.

“Let the men ground their armor but have them stay close,” Artorius ordered Parthicus. “Get some rest if they can, but I want everyone suited up and ready to assault by the time the isle is in sight.”

“Yes, sir,” the optio replied. He in turn said a few quick words to the principle officers and squad leaders.

Before the ship even pulled in its gangplank, the men were out of their armor and lounging on the deck near the front of the ship. Many were using their armor for pillows and back rests.

“Where would you like me?” Camillus asked, walking up to Artorius, who had just finished removing his armor.

“For now, wherever you want,” he replied. “Just be sure you find me well before we go ashore.”

“Of course,” the aquilifer said as he set the eagle down near his armor and kit. “Oh, by the way, before we left, Glabrio asked me about his signet ring. I told him he must have lost it; he never mentioned it again.”

“Probably forgot all about it,” Artorius grunted.

In the background, he could hear orders being shouted by both Stoppello and the sailing master. The ship lurched in the surf as oars slapped into the water, pulling them away from the docks.

“And I shouldn’t use that anymore; just keep it as a souvenir. Plautius gave Sempronius his own signet ring and told him his seal is to be used for the Twentieth Legion.”

“Fair enough,” Camillus shrugged. He turned back and watched the still hectic coastal town as the ship slowly put distance between them and the imperial mainland. “Think we’ll ever see home again?”

“Who knows,” Artorius replied. He then nodded towards the setting sun that glowed red just over the water. “What I do know is that our destiny lies there, just beyond that horizon.”

Chapter XI: Invasion

Off the coast of Britannia
April, 43 A.D.
***

“They are coming!”

The frantic cry alerted Banning. In many ways it came as a relief to the young war chief. He had more than ten thousand warriors from various tribes all along the coast and keeping them fed and supplied was already proving to be a nightmare, even in the early spring. They had readily taken from the Cantiaci, whose lands they now occupied, for they knew that their king intended to ally himself to Rome.

“They come to us at the start of our campaign season instead of the end,” he said with satisfaction to one of his sub-chiefs.

“They certainly are brazen,” the man replied. “Attacking in the spring when we can mass our numbers, rather than waiting until the fall when we must return for the harvest.”

“The Romans want battle,” Banning asserted. “And we shall give it to them!”

He walked out of the hut that he’d taken for the night and went out to the edge of the cliffs. The early morning fog masked their numbers, but he caught the occasional glimpse of approaching Roman warships. The sea gave the illusion of closeness, and the war chief knew that despite their apparent proximity, it would be at least a couple hours before the first assault wave landed. He then turned to an accompanying messenger.

“Send word to our reinforcements,” he ordered. “Tell them their quarry approaches.”

As he stared out into the sea, his heart was filled with loathing towards Togodumnus and Caratacus. To him, they were blustering cowards who failed to take decisive action that could drive the Romans from their lands before they so much as got off the beaches. He just hoped the number of warriors he had would be enough. If the invasion force was as large as they’d been told, then they would have fleets of warships landing at various points all along the coast.

“Damn you, Togodumnus!” he growled, shaking his head. He walked down towards the beach, where a coven of druids were assembled. “You know what you must do.”

“Of course,” the elder druid replied, his eyes and mouth barely visible from beneath his hooded cloak. “When one lacks allies, it becomes time to call on the gods.”

“Good,” Banning said with a nod. “And now you will bear witness as to how true warriors fight!”



The invasion fleet was enormous. From the prow of his vessel and to his left and right, Artorius could see nothing but other ships in either direction. The sea was choppy, though the waters were only about chest deep where they were to launch the assault. It would be a rough landing, but as the initial wave would be carrying only their weapons and armor it would be passable enough. Though it was now midmorning, the sky was dark, and the wind gusted in his face. Along the short beachhead and up on the cliff he could see numerous fires burning.

“The First Cohort will spearhead the attack,” the chief tribune ordered during the preparations. This came as no surprise, as the First had far more soldiers, who were all highly experienced.

When the scout ships had conducted their reconnaissance of the landing site it was empty, and they did not know whether or not there would be any resistance. The ground at the top of the cliff was reported to be relatively flat and devoid of dense growths of trees. As the First Cohort had the most men, they would move up the beach and secure a large enough area on top of the cliff for the rest of the Twentieth Legion. Once established, a signal would be sent back to the second wave of ships, which contained the majority of the army’s cavalry corps.

The Second Augusta, Ninth Hispania, and Fourteenth Gemina Legions were all making similar landings at various points along the coastline. Even though all the ships had left the coast of Belgica around the same time, it was impossible to coordinate a true simultaneous landing. Those vessels bearing the Second Legion would have to first make their way a number of miles to the southwest before landing, and the very large task force carrying the Ninth and Fourteenth Legions had an even longer trek to the north. As such, the

Twentieth Legion would be the first to land in Britannia.

"Depth, two fathoms!" a nearby sailor shouted over his shoulder as he pulled in the knotted measuring rope that told them how deep the water was. Legionaries had donned their armor and were making ready to disembark.

"Standby to reverse oars!" Admiral Stoppello shouted to the sailing master who was overseeing the rowers. Camillus, the aquilifer, stood next to his master centurion on the prow of the ship, the legion's eagle standard clutched to his chest.

Once they hit the shallows the legionaries would have to slog about a hundred meters through the surf before they hit the beach. It was then that Artorius first heard the ominous chants coming from the beach. Dozens of figures in hooded cloaks stood around the fires, their faces hidden, and hands held in front of their chests in prayer. Dozens more lined the beach, their chants carrying over the wind and seeming to permeate the very air the legionaries on the ship breathed. They grew even louder as the vessel lurched to a halt in the shallow waters.

"Fucking druids," Camillus cursed as Artorius turned to face his men.

"First Century…up!" he shouted. *"Form up to advance!"*

The soldiers reluctantly got to their feet, clutching their shields and javelins close to them as the sinister chants grew ever louder, carried on the increasing gusts of wind. Optio Parthicus shouted a few curses as he tried to motivate the men.

"What the hell's gotten into them?" Artorius growled as he turned his gaze front once more.

"You have to admit it is a rather riveting performance," Camillus stated with his usual good nature. "Face it, the lads are superstitious. Even the most battle-hardened veteran still fears the gods of darkness and those who can harness their unholy power."

"And you don't?" Artorius asked.

Camillus simply shrugged. "I've had a good life. What's the worst they can do to me?"

Behind them they could hear mutterings from the men laced with words of druids, magic, and curses. Artorius knew they had to move immediately, lest irrational fear upset the entire operation. If his own men were being so adversely affected by the druids' spectacle, he knew it had to be playing havoc on the men aboard the other assault ships.

"They'd better follow us when we go over," he grunted.

Camillus simply grinned. “They’ll follow *this*,” he emphasized, holding up the legion’s eagle. The aquilifer then turned and addressed the legionaries.

“Soldiers of the Twentieth Legion!” he shouted, holding the eagle high. “You cower like old women before a handful of barbarians in ratted cloaks! Their gods do not hold power over the eagle! Will you let this sacred standard fall into their hands?”

“No!” a legionary shouted, eliciting similar affirmations from the other soldiers.

Camillus gave a sinister grin. *“The eagle advances!”* he shouted. *“Will you follow it to glory or allow it to fall into their vile clutches and damn yourselves for eternity?”*

He then turned about, and holding the eagle aloft, threw it over the front of the ship into the foaming sea. The standard tumbled end over end before slamming into the sand in the shallow surf. He looked back briefly and saw the looks of horror on the faces of the legionaries before jumping over the side.

“The eagle stands, and it faces the enemy!” Artorius shouted, pointing towards the standard.

He watched as the aquilifer surged through the crashing waves, retrieved the standard, and started to advance towards the beach alone.

“Fearless bastard,” Artorius grinned. He turned towards his men with a look of fierce determination.

“To the eagle!” he shouted as he jumped over the side of the ship and to his fate.

He landed with a hard splash, plunging briefly beneath the waves before leaping to the surface. The water was bitingly cold, and Artorius stifled a shout as the frigid surf shocked through his body, chest-high waves knocking him about. The current of the tide was deceptively rougher than it appeared, and he struggled to maintain his balance as he drew his gladius and slogged his way towards the beach, holding his shield over his head, lest it become waterlogged. The sight to his front was surreal; the dark skies accented by the fires of druidic pyres. About a hundred meters away his friend, Camillus was casually making his way through the rolling waves, the eagle standard draped over his left shoulder, with his weapon drawn.

For the aquilifer, marching towards certain death with the legion’s sacred standard in tow seemed like the most random, yet natural thing to do. His

rationale had always been that if he was going to die, then he'd best make a good show of it. How he'd survived three decades in the legions was anybody's guess. The sandy beach itself was empty; it was the grassy slope that led up towards the over-watching cliffs that the druids burned their pyres and cast their dark magic. The gusts of wind felt surprisingly warm as Camillus made his way out of the surf, the water squishing out of his sandals and running off his legs, belt, and armor. He almost nonchalantly planted the eagle into the sand.

"Rome has returned!" he said as he glanced around, looking for enemy warriors. The druids, who were perhaps a hundred meters up the slope, continued their unholy chants, shrouded in their grayish cloaks. The aquilifer unslung his small round shield. "Well, bugger me, where are they?"

His question was quickly answered by the sounding of a war horn, followed by unholy battle cries from a grove of trees off to his left, where he now saw there was a large earthen path. Dozens of warriors soon appeared, running at a dead sprint for the lone Roman who had dared to defile their lands with the imperial standard. Camillus grinned and turned to face them, quickly limbering up his sword arm. In his peripheral vision, he could just make out the streak of a high-sailing javelin that slammed into the side of an enemy warrior, who was rushing so fast that the force of the pilum impaling his side knocked him clean off his feet. Subsequent javelins followed sporadically as legionaries quickly slogged their way through the rolling waves. Many carried their shields high across their backs in order to keep from having to drag them through the surf.

"That's more like it," Camillus said quietly as he saw his master centurion bound through the last few feet of tide, accompanied by about twenty legionaries. The rest were scattered out in the sea, trying to get onto the beach and support their friends. Leaving the standard where it was, serving as a rallying point for the rest of the cohort, Camillus raced over to join Artorius and do his part to begin the conquest of Britannia.

It was haphazard for the master centurion as he and his men tried to form some semblance of a battle line in the face of their onrushing assailants. The melee was very chaotic, and several of his men were cut down as they were swarmed by numerous warriors. Still they kept driving forward as more of their mates splashed through the rolling waters and quickly moved in to reinforce them.

Artorius knocked down one attacker with a shoulder tackle with his

shield, a nearby legionary finishing the man with a stab to the throat. He then looked back over his shoulder and watched as Praxus and the Second Century formed up on their right, encountering similar resistance from a band of enemy warriors who sought to drive them back into the sea. Behind the assault force, the central catapult on Stoppello's large ship unleashed a large flaming pot of Greek fire over their heads, smashing amongst the rocks where their foes were bounding over. Though it had missed them directly, it was enough to startle the Britons into pausing their attack momentarily.

"Praxus!" Artorius shouted. "Secure the right flank, I'll take the center. Magnus will take the left, as soon as he lands, with the remaining two centuries following me in reserve!"

"Sir!" Praxus acknowledged before shouting subsequent orders to his men.

Stoppello's flagship fired one more flaming catapult shot as it backed away from the beach. This one landed amongst a large mass of Britannic warriors with a splash of fire dousing a number of them. The barbarians had never witnessed such fearsome weapons such as ships that could 'breathe fire'. The effects terrified a number of them. Their stricken companions crying out in agony as their flesh was devoured by the flames. Several staggered into the surf, where they were immediately cut down or drowned by the approaching legionaries.

The ship bearing Magnus' century was approaching rapidly from their left, and Artorius' signifier quickly raised and swung the signum, letting them know their orders. The signifier aboard ship sent an acknowledgement back as the vessel fired a shot from its catapult towards the tree line the Britons had come from. The master centurion was relieved that at least his centuries were where they were supposed to be. He just hoped the same was true for the remainder of the legion!

The stab of an enemy spear glanced off Artorius' shield and grazed his right shoulder. It was utter madness for the master centurion, for he had to not only coordinate the landing and formations of the entire First Cohort, but he had enemy warriors in his face, attempting to spill his guts. Another stab went inside his shield, deflecting off his segmentata armor. Artorius managed to catch the man with a punch from the pommel of his gladius before subsequently plunging the blade home, beneath the ribs. It was a repugnant, yet all too familiar, experience for him as the warrior cried in pain during his final moments while his life's blood gushed onto the master centurion's hand.

Artorius kicked him hard in the guts, knocking the dying man onto his back as he wrenched his weapon free.

With the Roman warships covering the landing troops with their catapults, the Britons started to withdraw in face of the unholy onslaught of fire. Magnus' Third Century met only light resistance as they assaulted up through a large outcropping of rocks, bypassing the path and heading straight to the wood line.

"First Century, guide to right, link up with Praxus!" Artorius ordered.

His men quickly complied, with Optio Parthicus taking his position on the far end and their battle line joining with their companions, who were still meeting stubborn resistance from the Britons.

"Fourth Century is up!" one of his centurions said as he quickly approached Artorius.

"Very good," Artorius acknowledged. "You'll follow me in reserve. Praxus is still engaged. We'll use the Fifth Century to reinforce them."

It was a remarkable feat of coordination that the First Cohort was able to maneuver so fluidly in spite of the utter chaos around them. The resistance from individual enemy warriors was brave and determined, but it was also sporadic and haphazard. If they did in fact outnumber the Romans, they made no effort to fight as a single cohesive unit.

Artorius and his legionaries continued to make their way up towards the grassy slope, which the druids had since abandoned, but left their pyres burning, adding an ethereal feel to the ongoing battle. A volley of javelins from the Fifth Century, combined with continuous fire from the warships, soon broke the enemy resistance on their right.

"Sir, we need to continue the advance," the Fourth Century's commander emphasized, looking back over his shoulder, where the next wave of warships were reversing their oars, with legionaries jumping over the sides. "It looks like the Second and Fifth Cohorts are starting their landing."

"Would love to stay with you," Camillus said as he smacked Artorius on the shoulder, "but I'd best head back down to the beach. Everyone's going to make straight for the eagle, and I need to direct the cohorts where they need to be."

"Alright, go," Artorius said, nodding his head towards the beach. He noticed the aquilifer's gladius was stained with crimson, and he figured Camillus had decided he needed to spill a few splashes of enemy blood to start off the invasion.

He then signaled for his cornicen to sound the command to double-time. Upon the rapid notes of his horn, the First Cohort, minus Magnus' men, who were assaulting the tree line on their left, advanced at a quick jog up the slope. They veered past the burning pyres and made their way to the top, anticipating an enemy horde awaiting them. Artorius was surprised to see it vacant. The sun was now coming through the dispersing clouds as if in a sign that their enemy, along with his dark magic, had simply vanished.

"Artorius!" Magnus shouted as he quickly made his way over. "That wood is a more than just a grove, it's an entire damned forest. We can see movement, so we know they're in there, but I cannot clear it with just my century."

"Understood," the master centurion replied. He then looked down at the beach below, where he saw Sempronius linking up with Camillus, who was directing the landing cohorts. Artorius quickly assessed the situation and then addressed his friend. "I'll have the Second Cohort reinforce you."

"Alright, but know that we cannot land any more troops on the left," Magnus noted. "There's nothing but jagged rocks and a short cliff beneath the trees."

"Well, then the rest of the legion will have to swing out to our right," Artorius concluded. "The Second Cohort will anchor the left with you tying in off their right. I had hoped to have the First Cohort in the center, but it looks like that plan is completely fucked."

"Hey, at least we all landed together," Magnus remarked with a grin and a wink before turning to rush back to his men.

Artorius gave a brief smile and nodded. Whatever the situation, his Nordic friend would always make the most of it and adapt. Seeing Magnus was secure in his position for the moment with the rest of the cohort established in its battle lines. Artorius quickly ran back down the slope and waved to Sempronius.

"Rome has returned!" the chief tribune said excitedly, in an echo of Camillus' earlier statement.

"Sir, the woods on our left are thick and cannot be cleared with just one of my centuries," Artorius quickly explained. "I'm going to send the Second Cohort to reinforce them. The rest of the legion can assemble and start its advance inland off to my extreme right."

"I'll pass the word," Sempronius concurred. "I watched your men battle their way up the beach but cannot figure where the enemy has run off to. I

thought for certain we would meet stiffer resistance on the beach."

"They left a number of wounded behind," Artorius observed. "Perhaps we can gather some information from them."

"They'll talk or die," the chief tribune asserted. He then directed Artorius, "Return to your men. Once the rest of the legion is ashore, we'll assess our movement inland."

"Yes, sir." Though the chief tribune lacked experience and was relying on him far more so than he would have liked, Artorius still knew it was preferable to having their invalid of a legate trying to lead them. At least Sempronius was showing that he was not afraid to make a decision.

As he climbed his way back up the slope, his legs already stiffening from the exertion of the day, Artorius saw off to his left the Second Cohort marching up the wide dirt path that led to the grove, where they would coordinate with Magnus. He was startled when he returned to the First Cohort and found they had pushed forward to the edge of a nearby forest. With his own century on the left, there was a noticeable gap between him and Magnus.

"What is happening?" he asked his optio, who was coordinating the removal of several wounded legionaries.

"Archers and slingers," Parthicus replied, "lots of them. Not two minutes after you left, they opened up on us. Fucking cowards scattered as soon as we assaulted the tree line. We pushed into the trees to, at least, provide some cover and not allow them easy targets."

"Pull three squads and have them reform at an angle on our left," Artorius directed. "We cannot even see Magnus, and I don't want our flank exposed."

"Yes, sir."

"There you are!" Praxus said as he approached from just behind Artorius' men. "This landing's been a giant cluster-fuck, what with the lads freaking out about druids and all, but I think we're finally getting some semblance of order."

"That's a relief," Artorius replied dryly. "My horse hasn't come ashore yet and trying to coordinate the entire damn legion is impossible on foot."

"Let Sempronius handle that," his friend replied. "The cohort commanders know their orders; they won't go wandering off on their own."

"We were supposed to be the center of the assault," Artorius reminded him. "But instead we are now on the extreme left."

His friend simply shrugged. Praxus was just as difficult to rattle as Magnus, and Artorius was glad to have their levelheadedness in what

otherwise appeared to be random mayhem.

"No operations plan, regardless of how well thought out, ever survives beyond first contact with the enemy," Praxus thought aloud. "Reconnaissance was shit leading up to the invasion, and the terrain on the left was far more treacherous than was originally thought. Either that or we just landed in the wrong damn spot, which is entirely plausible. We saw a number of assault ships veer to the right before unloading their troops. I'm guessing they also found the terrain impassible."

"Well, at least we've secured this beachhead," the master centurion said as he looked back towards the sea. Dozens of ships were still anchored out amongst the rolling waves, awaiting orders to offload their troops and various cargoes. Artorius then made his decision. "Time to bring the cavalry ashore. We'll use them to root out those fucking cowards who hide from us amongst the trees."

He made his way back down the slope once more to find Camillus.



"There's the signal!" a sailor on the prow of the large Quinquereme said.

Tribune Cursor gave a sigh of relief before turning to Centurion Taurus. "I will accompany Indus' Horse ashore. The auxiliary infantry will assist with the offloading of supplies."

"Understood," Taurus replied.

The tribune then walked over to where his mount was already hanging from a large sling off a specially-made crane that used a series of pulleys for handling crates and livestock. He gently rubbed the horse's muzzle before signaling to the sailors to drop him over the side. There were two cranes on each side of the ship, and with several horses already spooked by the chaos of activity on the ship's deck, it was a struggle for their riders, and the sailors, to keep them still long enough to get the slings beneath them without getting kicked for their efforts.

Cursor was grateful that his own beast was surprisingly calm, and as the animal was hoisted over the side of the ship, he climbed over the railing and dropped himself into the surging waters. As the legionaries had secured the beach, he had left his armor strapped to his horse in hopes of keeping it dry until he got ashore. The water was freezing, and Cursor struggled to keep his shivering under control as he took the bridle of his horse and led it through

the choppy seas. A gust of wind caught him as he stepped onto the sandy bar, waves lapping beneath his sandaled feet. As he unstrapped his armor, he saw that it was soaking wet. All he could figure was that his horse must have stumbled into the surf at some point, thereby drenching his armor.

"Damn it all," he swore under his breath, then deciding he wouldn't even bother to don a dry tunic.

Twenty or so troopers were also coming ashore, some had attempted, like the tribune, to keep their armor dry, others had not bothered and made their way through the seas fully kitted. The men were all from the legendary regiment, *Indus' Horse*, which had gained its formidable reputation during the Rebellion of Sacrovir and Florus in Gaul more than twenty years prior.

"Inform your commander that I want the regiment formed up in columns on the beach," Cursor directed a nearby squad leader, who helped him finish putting on his armor. "I'm going forward to ascertain the situation before we advance further."

"Yes, sir."

The tribune then donned his helmet, with its black accents, lion's head on the crown, and magnificent red plume. From a tactical standpoint, he hated wearing such ostentatious garb, which like his muscled cuirass armor, would distinguish him as an officer even from a great distance. By the same token, he knew that his men needed to be able to identify him quickly during battle, and like all leaders he accepted the risk involved with being so readily noticeable.

It was a short ride up the slope to where Artorius and the First Cohort were holding. Sempronius had taken the rest of the legion staff, along with the aquilifer, further to the right, trying to center himself on the rest of the legion.

"Artorius!" Cursor shouted as he rode up and quickly dismounted. The master centurion jogged back to the tribune and saluted before clasping his friend's hand.

"Glad to have you with us!" he said. "We've been harassed by archers, but they seem to have gone to ground for the moment. Think you can root them out for us?"

"I'm bringing up Indus' Horse as we speak," Cursor replied, bringing a knowing grin from Artorius, who had fought beside the regiment during the very actions where they earned their renown. The tribune then explained further, "Rome does not have a lot of recent experience with amphibious

invasions, and it is a slow process getting cavalry ashore. The rest of the regiment should be up within an hour, but the other two will not hit the beaches before dark. Still, once the rest of Indus' Horse is up, we can help drive those bastards into you."

Artorius shook his head. "No, that will take too long, when now we just need to keep driving forward. I recommend you link up with Sempronius and let him know I will push forward with the First and Second Cohorts, and that he can use your cavalry to screen the front of the rest of the legion."

"That works for me," Cursor replied as he remounted.

"First Cohort!" Artorius shouted. *"Make ready to advance!"*



Though Banning had relished watching legionaries fall to his archers and slingers, he was distraught over how many of his warriors had been killed or captured on the beaches. That the Roman warships could breathe fire had come totally unexpected, and his men were still shaken by having watched a number of their friends burned alive.

"The Roman legion has landed all of its men," one of his scouts reported to him. "They're cavalry is coming ashore as we speak."

"Damn it all," Banning muttered. He knew his warriors were too few to face a legion head-on, and if they had cavalry with them, then that boded ill for his skirmishers. He, begrudgingly, made his next decision. "We will withdraw for now. But know this; this war has only just begun! I promise you, the Romans will continue to shed blood and tears over every inch of ground they crawl through!"

A war horn sounded a single note, and scores of warriors appeared from the thickets and groves of trees, running towards their rally point, several miles inland. Banning had hoped to punish the Cantiaci further for their lack of fortitude in the face of the invaders, but with the sounds of advancing legionaries, he knew there was no time.



It was almost nightfall by the time the Twentieth Legion established its perimeter and encamped for the night. Aside from the initial skirmish on the beaches and harassment from enemy archers, they had been largely

unopposed. Sempronius had placed the principia near a large cliff that would give sentries an over watch of the beach, where supplies were still being ferried ashore under torchlight. A large fire burned outside the massive tent, while inside numerous torches and lamps added a degree of warmth.

"At least it's slightly warmer than on the Rhine," Artorius noted as he entered the principia and removed his helmet, which he handed to a nearby servant.

The legion's headquarters was a mass of activity, as equite tribunes and staff officers sorted through all the logistics, as well as reports from each of the cohorts. Also present were the centurions of the First Cohort, as well as Tribune Cursor.

"It went a lot better today than I first anticipated," Sempronius said as he glanced over a hastily scrawled map that showed the positions of his cohorts that were stretched out on a long line that formed a haphazard semicircle that used the cliffs to cover their backs. His face was pale with eyes that were bloodshot.

Artorius surmised that the young chief tribune had not slept in a week.

"In the morning I'll send out patrols to establish communications with Vespasian and Plautius," Cursor said. "Once we accomplish that, we'll post auxiliaries between each task force, preventing the enemy from flanking us."

Sempronius simply nodded in reply, too exhausted as he was to do any more than let his senior officers formulate their plan. "What of our losses?" he asked.

One of the staff tribunes walked over with a parchment.

"It could have been much worse," the young officer replied. "All told, we lost six, with about another twenty wounded."

"Regrettable, but acceptable," Artorius surmised.

"The burning pyres that still light up the beach can be used to dispose of the dead," Centurion Tyranus offered.

"Those wounded who will be unable to continue in the campaign are being carried back to the ships for return to the mainland," Artorius observed. He then added, "I can't help but wonder if, perhaps, they are the fortunate ones; being as they thought they'd be gone for years, quite possibly forever, only to be invalided back to Belgica on the first day of the invasion."

"I'd feel fortunate just being able to get some sleep right now," Sempronius mumbled to himself.

"What of the prisoners?" Artorius asked. "Any of them talking?"

“Not yet,” the staff tribune replied. “The legion’s interrogators were among the last to come ashore, and that was just before dark. They’ll get to work in the morning.”

“Alright,” Sempronius said tiredly. “Tribune Cursor, have your patrols sent out by first light. I want to know the status of the other legions as soon as possible. That’s all for now; good work today, everyone.”

Artorius left the principia and walked over to the edge of the cliff. The day seemed to fly past him, with the entire landing and initial assault becoming little more than a blur. The sky was black, with only a few stars shining through the dense clouds. In the invisible darkness below, he could hear the waves crashing against the jagged rocks. For the first time since they’d left Gesoriacum, his thoughts turned to his wife.

‘Maybe for years, maybe forever’, Diana had told him the night before he departed.

He chuckled to himself when he thought about her last words to him as he left, regarding Spartan women telling their husbands and sons to return with their shields or on them. That strong and beautiful confidence is how he would always remember her. In the days and months ahead, it would provide a beacon that would give him strength during the darkest of times.

Chapter XII: Shadow Empire

Camp of the Ninth and Fourteenth Legions
April, 43 A.D.
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Plautius was relieved when he received word from both Sempronius and Vespasian. Both task forces had been met by enemy skirmishers on the beaches, though these engagements had been relatively short with only a small number of casualties. The commander-in-chief's own task force had not been opposed at all as they came ashore. Unlike the massive cliffs to the south, the landing point for the Ninth and Fourteenth Legions was a long sandy beach that ran several miles along the coast that faced east into the sea. Not so much as a single warrior stood in their way as they slogged their way ashore. The following morning, both legions had pressed forward, still without any sign of enemy opposition. By midday they reached a river crossing. Reconnaissance cavalry had gone ahead, reporting back that it was here that a delegation from the Cantiaci kingdom chose to meet them.

"This spot is good," Sabinus noted. "The river appears large enough for our smaller transport ships, and the area is relatively flat with ample room to erect a fort."

"It is," Cogidubnus said as he joined the Roman leaders. "This is the River Stour, whose mouth to the sea is but a few miles to the north from where we landed. Securing this position here will give you unfettered naval access back to the continent."

"I agree," Plautius said. He turned to a centurion. "How far have we come today?"

"About fifteen miles, sir."

"Far enough," the commander-in-chief nodded. "This is where we will establish the first permanent Roman presence in Britannia!"

"My brother's stronghold is not far from here," Verica said. The old man was fatigued by the long trek of the past two days, yet his eyes glowed with renewed determination.

"Have some of your warriors escort my scouts to him," Plautius directed. "Let him know that Rome has returned."

Verica simply nodded in reply while Cogidubnus shouted the orders to

the men of the king's escort. Plautius then directed that a proper Praetorium be erected with which to meet their tentative allies. A large dais was hastily constructed with a red cover to shield from the sun or inclement weather. The eagles of both legions were posted on either end, with six-foot pillars topped with busts of Roman deities lining the back. At the center of the dais, just behind where Plautius' chair was placed, was a life sized statue of Emperor Claudius. Like many depictions of Roman nobles, his facial features were correct, though his body highly stylized. Rather than looking frail or in any way infirm, the body of the statue stood erect and was ripped with muscle.

Soldiers began the construction of field fortifications consisting of entrenchments topped with palisade stakes along the perimeter of the Roman camp, with others constructing an actual wooden gatehouse on the western edge, facing towards the river. This would give the Cantiaci delegation the impression that this would be more than a temporary marching camp. Eppillus had clearly received word of the Romans' landing, for when the scouts and their Atrebates escorts returned, they informed Plautius that the Cantiaci king was on his way to meet them and was just a couple miles down the road.

Verica and Cogidubnus waited just across the river. Though the river crossing was well within sight of the camp, they went out alone. Plautius had rightly assumed that it would make a better impression upon the Cantiaci king if he were greeted by his own kinsmen, rather than the foreign invaders. He watched with interest from the dais, which sat just fifty feet behind the gatehouse that his soldiers were constructing. Twenty or so warriors, armed with long spears and oblong shields, walked on either side of the path. In the middle was what Plautius reckoned were elders of the Cantiaci. At the head of the delegation was a very old man who walked with the aid of a long staff.

"Welcome home, uncle," Cogidubnus said quietly to Verica as they watched the approaching delegation make its way along the dirt path across the river. Verica gave a sad smile as he spotted his brother.

King Eppillus was a few years older than he and, in fact, had been ruler of the Atrebates until acquiring the lands of the Cantiaci by virtue of his marriage and being named his father-in-law's sole heir. Rather than expanding his lands, he had given Atrebates to his younger brother. He walked upright, but required a large walking stick to steady himself. His long hair was pulled back, with a long mustache running down to his chin on

either side. Both were completely gray. His face and eyes betraying the fatigue brought on by old age and a lifetime of war. He wore multicolored robes of red and blue, and a short broadsword on his left hip.

"My brother," he said in a strong voice that contrasted his tired appearance, "at last you have returned to us! I welcome you not only as my kin, but as one king to another."

"No," Verica replied, slowly shaking his head after embracing Eppillus. "I return as your brother, but not as king." He then nodded to Cogidubnus. "Our great-nephew now leads my people. It is he who you will address as your fellow king."

"Honored to see you once more, uncle," Cogidubnus spoke with a respectful bow.

"Please," Eppillus said, placing a hand on the young warrior's shoulder. "You are not required to bow before your peers. Welcome, King of Atrebates!"

"The question now," Cogidubnus remarked, "is will you align yourself with the Romans who come to restore our kingdom. They await you there, just across the river."

"Even if they weren't here to offer my kinsmen their lands back," Eppillus replied, "I doubt they will give me any other option. Living as we do, just a short sail from their empire, I know well their fearsome reputation. I was an invited guest of Germanicus Caesar during his campaigns against Arminius and his alliance. Those who reject their offers of alliance are dealt with brutally. Still, I hope they will offer us better terms than Caratacus did you."

Cogidubnus then led the delegation of Eppillus and several of his war chiefs the short distance to the Roman camp. The makeshift Praetorium was just inside the compound, and Plautius had watched the proceedings from his chair on the dais. A chair sat on either side of him, and these were occupied by his legion commanders, Sabinus and Geta. A number of senior officers and centurions were also present, though they stood on the ground around the dais. The path leading from the gatehouse was lined with legionaries not on palisade or gate constructing duty. While Plautius was practical enough to know that soldiers on campaign needed to be concerned more with serviceability, rather than appearance of their uniforms, those legionaries tasked with lining the path had been directed to ensure their armor was highly polished with fresh paint applied to their shields. He wanted to give the first

king within Britannia the best impression he could of Roman power. To add to the display, several siege engines were conspicuously placed off to the sides, a short ways behind the Praetorium. Both Plautius and his generals were in their best armor as well.

"Noble Legate Aulus Plautius of Rome," Cogidubnus spoke as the delegation approached the dais, "I present to you King Eppillus of the Cantiaci."

"Welcome," Plautius said, remaining in his chair.

"It is I who welcomes you," Eppillus replied. Given the proximity of his lands to the Roman Empire, it was little surprise that the king was fluent in Latin.

"Know that Rome comes in friendship," Plautius emphasized. "We trust you will join us in the spirit of mutual cooperation, as your brethren have." Though his words were pleasant enough, the firm tone of his voice let the Cantiaci king know what he suspected, that he really did not have a choice in the matter. Rome would dictate the terms of this meeting.

"First I must know, what is it you offer our people, and what will you demand in return?"

Plautius grinned in appreciation of the man's blunt honesty. "We will restore your brother, or rather your great-nephew, to the throne of Atrebates. You will remain king of the Cantiaci, with a generous donative from the emperor and all the benefits of his friendship. Your people will be given protected status as provincials of the Roman Empire. Any outside tribes who threaten your lands will feel the wrath of the legions."

"And in return?" Eppillus persisted.

"As I said," Plautius replied, "your personal donative will come from the emperor. Therefore, all taxes once levied to your person will now be rendered unto Caesar. You and your people will subject yourselves to Romanization. Think of this as an added benefit; for Rome will bring civilization, infrastructure, better roads, bathhouses, sewage systems, medicine, and education."

"And for all this, you will demand obedience," the king conjectured.

"Total obedience," Plautius emphasized. He stood and reached for a scroll which Geta handed to him. He and Sabinus also rose from their seats. Plautius then read, "*In the name of the Emperor Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, and by his divine authority, I hereby claim this land as the Roman province of Britannia. As an establishment of this directive, the*

people of Cantiaci are hereafter a client-kingdom of the Roman Empire and are to swear fealty to both their king and to Caesar."

He paused to assess the effect this would have on the delegation. Cogidubnus closed his eyes for a moment, knowing that his establishment as King of Atrebates would come at a similar price. He would be king, but subservient to Caesar.

Eppillus nodded in understanding, not necessarily liking the proposal, but in no way was he surprised.

Plautius then descended the dais. "If you find the terms agreeable, there is one more thing you must do." He looked to the warriors who accompanied the king. "These men are leaders within your kingdom?"

"They are," Eppillus replied.

"Then they can bear witness." Plautius clenched his left fist and held it out, showing the imperial seal on the ring he wore. "Swear your allegiance to Caesar and be welcomed as a friend of Rome."

Letting out a quiet sigh, but knowing there was nothing else for it, Eppillus nodded to his brother and great-nephew. Cogidubnus helped him down onto his knees. He then looked up at the Roman general for the last time as the ruler of an independent kingdom. He closed his eyes and kissed the ring, causing some stifled grumblings from his accompanying chiefs.

"Rise," Plautius directed. He turned to his assembled officers. "The Cantiaci are now our provisional and under Roman protection. And this place is hereby named *Durovernum Cantiacorum*[1], and its garrison tasked with the defense of this district."

With the formalities complete, Plautius directed that chairs be brought for their guests. A table was also carried over, with servants bringing wine and other refreshments.

"And what is Rome's first directive to my people?" Eppillus asked after accepting a cup of water.

"Administrators will arrive in the coming weeks to assess property and tribute requirements," Plautius replied, "as well as laying the foundation for the buildup of Roman infrastructure. But for now, we shall require scouts to accompany my men as guides."

"Our lands go as far as the River Medway," the king explained. "Beyond that you are in the kingdom of the Atrebates, though it is now populated by Catuvellauni warriors and some of their allies."

"And who are their allies?" Sabinus asked.

“We don’t know who all of them are,” Eppillus replied. “I heard talk of dark-skinned warriors accompanying Caratacus.”

“That would be the Silures,” Cogidubnus observed. He then explained to Plautius, “They are a brutal and extremely violent-prone race of people from the mountains on the western coast of the isle. Their lands are hundreds of miles from here, so it is intriguing to know that they have men riding with Caratacus so far from home.”

“There numbers will be thankfully few,” Eppillus said. “No one in these lands can venture away from their homes for months on end, lest their crops falter and their people starve.”

“Who else do you know of?” Plautius persisted.

“The Durotriges are a confederation of tribes in the southwest,” Eppillus answered. “Their king has openly expressed hostility towards Rome and offered, at least vocally, his support to the Catuvellauni.”

“I know King Donan,” Cogidubnus spoke up. “Their territory borders ours, and we have had numerous disputes with him in the past, sometimes bloody ones. His brashness is likely due to his distance from here, and also because his lands possess some of the strongest hill forts in all the land.”

“We’ll deal with him in due time,” Plautius said. He then looked to Eppillus. “When you return to your people, inform them that Rome comes as both master and friend. My men are under strict orders not to steal from or abuse your people in any way. In due time, they will not even notice the presence of our legionaries.”

“Very well,” the king replied as warriors helped him to his feet. “Anything else?”

“Yes,” Plautius answered. “Send a message to Atrebates that their king has returned.”

As Eppillus and his delegation left, Cogidubnus spoke up. “It is time I returned to my people,” he said as he watched his great-uncle cross the bridge.

“Agreed,” Plautius replied. “I will have an escort of cavalry accompany you. You will join up with Vespasian and accompany him into the lands of the Atrebates. You understand, of course, the terms for using Roman soldiers to drive the Catuvellauni from your lands.”



Alaric, Landon, and their men had watched the imperial armies come ashore to the south of the mouth of River Stour.

“So many,” Landon said, his mouth open in awe as columns of legionaries began their march in the distance, small numbers of cavalry riding ahead of them and along their flanks. Innumerable warships still lay at anchor just off the coast, adding to the formidable spectacle.

“And this is but a portion of their total force,” Alaric surmised. “The queen asked us to find the Romans, and we’ve found them. Should we return and inform her?”

“Inform her of what?” Landon asked. “We found the Romans, but we do not know their dispositions, total numbers, or even where exactly they are headed. And since we do not have a mandate from the queen to parlay with them on her behalf, we cannot exactly just ride up and talk to them, now can we? Besides, even the most direct route home will still take us at least ten days to return by. No, we’ll follow the Romans for now, see if we can better ascertain their intents, and then return and let the queen know what we have found.”

Alaric did not like the idea of, essentially, leaving Cartimandua blind as to the information about the arrival of the Roman invasion force. However, he knew his friend was correct. There was every likelihood that maritime merchants would have spotted the imperial fleet and informed the Brigantes upon reaching their docks. They also knew that from the small groups of unknown horsemen they had seen scattered about, they were not the only ones watching the Romans.



To the north, word had, in fact, reached Queen Cartimandua and the Brigantes of the Roman landing. Not only had passing merchant ships informed them of the massed Roman fleet that lined the southeastern coast, but as Caratacus and Togodumnus were embroiled in trying to rally their allies for a cohesive strike against the invaders, they sent several emissaries to once more try and compel the queen to send warriors to their aid.

“We cannot stand against the Romans alone!” a delegate emphasized. “If we do not unite, they will roll right over each of our kingdoms, one by one. Will you sit back and watch your kinsmen fall under their oppression as slaves?”

“Kinsmen you say,” Cartimandua replied before taking a sip of mead. “And tell me this, did you feel the same fraternal affection towards the Atrebates when you slaughtered and enslaved many of their people? Or how about King Verica’s great hall, which Caratacus had burned to the ground? And what of those nobles who your druids used as human sacrifices?”

“My lady,” the emissary replied, “now is not the time for us to squabble amongst ourselves. The Romans…”

“I know perfectly well what the Romans are capable of,” Cartimandua interrupted. She rose and walked slowly around the table. “And if I were to send warriors to your aid and your alliance is still defeated, what then becomes of my people? Will Caratacus help us defend Brigantes when the Romans raze our villages to the ground? He finds us an ally and friend when it best suits him, yet I would not trust him as far as one can spit.”

“We must be diplomatic…” Venutius started to say.

The queen slammed her hand onto the table, silencing him, while never taking her eyes off the Catuvellauni messengers. “Go now, and tell your king that Brigantes sides with neither Togodumnus nor Rome.”

The emissary rose from the table in disgust and started out of the hall. At the entrance, he turned and spat on the floor in contempt. In truth, they had had little luck garnering support from the larger tribes, including the Iceni, whose lands were directly south of Brigantes, along the coastline. Still, this did little to ease their contempt for Cartimandua, given that her husband wished to join the alliance and was prevented from sending warriors by her alone. The consort, infuriated with his wife, rose from the table and followed the men out.

Chapter Endnote:
1 – Canterbury, England

Chapter XIII: Ashes from the Oath

Kingdom of the Atrebates
May, 43 A.D.
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Six weeks had passed since the invasion force landed. Plautius had tasked the Ninth Legion to finish the fort at Durovernum Cantiacorum while the Fourteenth Legion pressed forward a few miles further inland. All told, the new Roman province of Britannia extended no more than twenty miles from the coast. What he had acquired so far was little more than a foothold on the isle. What frustrated the commander-in-chief was not fierce local resistance, but rather the lack thereof.

"Where the hell are they?" Plautius grumbled as he stood with his arms folded across his chest. Below he could see an open plain of tall grass, with groves of trees scattered throughout.

Auxilia skirmishers were advancing towards a farm settlement in the center of the valley. On the low ridge, just behind where Plautius and his senior officers watched, legionary cohorts were arrayed in battle formation, ready to advance should the auxiliaries run into trouble. But as they had not been so much as shot at by a single archer since landing, the soldiers' greatest enemy had become boredom.

"The lads are ready for a brawl," Geta said. "The Second and Twentieth Legions have been engaged by sporadic bands of skirmishers, but that's about it. Hell, no one even put up a fight when they marched into Atrebates! I think our force is too concentrated for the enemy to risk engaging us."

"Which means the tribes are still divided," Plautius observed. "Were they a unified coalition, they would doubtless strike one of our task forces while we're still split up. The men may hate the incessant tedium, but if our adversaries are unable to mass against us, then dividing and conquering them will be all the more easy."

"We will be rolling into summer soon," Geta remarked. "Any native mobilizations will take a couple months to assemble, and since their campaign season is so short due to lack of logistics, then I suspect we will not have to wait them out for long."

"And yet our intelligence gathering is fucking atrocious!" Plautius spat.

“There may be dozens of tribes on this isle, but I’ll be damned if I can tell any of them apart.”

“Tribune Cursor has scattered reconnaissance patrols ten miles out, accompanied by Cantiaci guides. At least we can get an idea of the terrain our enemy may use, if and when they finally decide to face us.”

As the men spoke, an auxilia centurion rode up on his horse and saluted.

“The village is cleared, sir,” he said. “Our guides confirmed they are Cantiaci farmers. They say the River Medway is not far from here, beyond that are the lands of the Catuvellauni.”

“Hmm,” Plautius though aloud. “Have they seen any signs of enemy warriors?”

“They say they haven’t, sir,” the centurion replied, shaking his head.

“Of course they haven’t,” Geta grumbled, not believing the report.

“Most of the locals will prove useless for intelligence,” Plautius surmised. “However, as long as they are docile and do not get in our way, that is fine. We’ll concentrate our forces here and see if, perhaps, our continued presence will not goad the Catuvellauni into facing us. And if it doesn’t, then we will cross the river and burn their lands until it does.”



“Venutius should give that little bitch a good whipping!” Caratacus growled upon hearing news from the emissaries who returned from Brigantes.

“Their people are split on whether or not to join us,” Togodumnus remarked. “At least half the warriors side with Venutius, yet they will not move as long as Cartimandua forbids it. That vile woman is nothing but a coward.”

“No,” Archantael said, joining the men. “She is no coward. She is an opportunist. But all is not lost, my friends. For we do still have ample allies. I bring word from the Corieltauvi.”

“They have never been our friends,” Togodumnus scoffed.

“True,” the druid replied, “but then neither have they been your enemies. Your rapport with each other has been one of indifference, yet now they come to face the common enemy. They send word that they come with warriors.”

“That fellow, Banning, is of the Corieltauvi,” Caratacus said. “Perhaps

his brazen attempts to fight the Romans on the beaches proved useful after all."

"And you do have the Durotriges, Dumnonian, and Belgae," Archantael added, "all willing to serve you, noble Togodumnus, in battle against the Romans."

"The Dumnonian are an ancient and noble house," Togodumnus said. "And King Donan of the Durotriges has proven to be a faithful friend. How many total warriors do they bring?"

"At least sixty-thousand," Archantael replied. "I called upon the gods to send us allies, and they have answered. But now they will demand a sacrifice for their favor."

"And they shall have it," Caratacus confirmed. He then turned to his brother. "The Roman forces to the south are still separated. One legion is in Atrebates; no doubt making a great show of restoring their king. No matter, I will reclaim those lands soon enough. The other is making its way north, supported by at least one regiment of cavalry. It is time our enemies shed tears of blood, and we will give the gods their sacrifice of human flesh."

Togodumnus nodded in reply, then signaled for the druid to leave them. "Walk with me, brother."

The meeting hall was shrouded in a grove of trees, yet extending down a small slope into the valley below, a great camp was emerging. The campaign season was upon them, and King Togodumnus had sent a decree that every available man and boy of fighting age was to rally to his call. That they would be fighting a foreign interloper, rather than native tribes that they shared at least some kinship with, had brought much enthusiasm and even more fighting men than even Togodumnus had reckoned.

"Your hit-and-run tactics against the Romans cause them some annoyance," the king conjectured, "but it won't stop them. And if we rely on those alone, we risk alienating the people who would brand us as cowards for refusing to stand and fight them decisively."

"With all of our warriors and immediate allies," Caratacus observed, "we have nearly ninety-thousand men under arms. From what our scouts have reported on the Roman strength, that alone gives us a two-to-one advantage. If Archantael is correct, and King Donan's confederation brings an additional sixty-thousand, we will have enough to sweep the Romans back into the sea!"

"The army will be vast," his brother concurred, "but we will not be able to keep so many men fed and in the field for more than a month or so. Our

enemies are converging north, and I suspect they are headed for the great river[1]. It runs into the sea and would be of strategic value to them. The river to the south[2] serves as the boundary between my kingdom and the Cantiaci who, like despicable cowards, have pledged allegiance to Rome."

"I will send most of our warriors there," Caratacus remarked. "The Romans are anxious for battle even more than we are. If we mass on the far side of the river, they will have no choice but to come to us where we will have the advantage."

"And while you bring our fighters to the land between the rivers, I will take a thousand men and attain the gods their sacrifice." Togodumnus then paused. There was something else he had been meaning to tell his brother for some time. "Keep rallying our allies. I may be king, but you are the great warrior who can unify the tribes of this isle. You have a weapon that is even greater than your axe, and that is your voice. Men, even kings, listen to you. It was you who brought the Silures to our cause, and I believe it is because of you that King Donan also comes. I see greatness in you. You were only denied the right to rule our people because of our dates of birth."

"Brother, I have always served you loyally," Caratacus emphasized. "I am in your debt for using your own men to secure me a kingdom amongst the Atrebates. And by defeating the Romans and sending what's left of them back to the continent cowering like whipped dogs, I will make good on my obligations."

Togodumnus then dismissed his brother and went to find the chief druid. He found him in his hut, sharpening one of many long knives that he used whenever he needed to perform a sacrifice to the gods. The crude shelves were lined with clay jars filled with pungent herbs and other foul-smelling components. Togodumnus was happy not to know their origin.

"You will accompany me," he said. "Together we will find our sacrifice for the gods."



The Atrebates were at first fearful of the armored soldiers who rode into the settlement that served as their capitol before the conquest by the Catuvellauni. While wealthy leaders amongst their people may have a sword and basic mail armor, every single soldier who marched with the Romans carried a sword and wore armor. Though these men were all cavalry, it was

the empire's infantry that was even more fearsome. In addition to banded plate armor that seemed impenetrable, every man also carried a large curved rectangular shield, painted in patterns of red and gold with a brass metal boss in the center. That they fought side by side, forming their shields into a wall, meant that most of their enemies never got close enough to test their armor against whatever weapons they may bear.

As villagers and elders gathered in the town square, whose market had been cleared in anticipation, they saw three men riding at the head of the column of Roman soldiers. In the center was their general, who wore a polished breastplate, shaped like a muscular human chest. His highly ornate helmet had a large crest that ran front-to-back, and he wore a dark red cloak over his left shoulder. To his right rode Verica, the last free king of Atrebates, and on his left, Verica's great-nephew.

"Our king has returned!" an elder said in rapt anticipation, eliciting cheers from the assembled peoples.

Vespasian dismounted and strolled towards the center of the large square. While his legion encamped about twenty miles to the east, he had taken a regiment of cavalry, along with a single cohort of legionaries, to pay visit to the kingdom of Atrebates, which flanked the western edge of their advance. Troopers fanned out on either side of him, creating a large empty space. The smell was terrible, and the legate reckoned this place was where livestock were slaughtered and sold. It stunk of excrement and rotting flesh, making his stomach turn.

"A little Romanizing will change that," he said quietly to himself. Even in the most civilized of imperial cities, where the smell from meat butchering and produce markets was pungent, at least there were proper means of disposal, to say nothing for the sewage systems that would flush away human waste. Vespasian figured that the building of a proper sewage system alone would decrease disease and increase life expectancy exponentially.

A raised platform used for the town crier, as well as for showing slaves during market, stood off to one side. Soldiers cleared the space around this, and Vespasian wordlessly mounted, accompanied by Verica, Cogidubnus, and a local guide who would act as an interpreter for the Romans.

"People of Atrebates!" Vespasian began. He spoke slowly, pausing frequently to let the interpreter translate and to gauge the people's reactions. "You have been liberated from the usurper, Caratacus, by the divine power of Emperor Claudius Caesar of Rome. Your former ruler has graciously

abdicated in favor of his great-nephew, who now leads you. Atrebates is now a client state of the Roman Empire, and I present to you your king, Tiberius Claudius Cogidubnus!"

Cogidubnus stepped forward to address the crowd, which was still unnervingly quiet. He had partially 'Romanized' his name, as a means of showing his allegiance to the emperor who restored him to his throne. This strange merging of names was his way of showing unity between Atrebates and Rome. He spoke at length to the assembled elders and villagers; the crowd continuing to grow as he talked. Vespasian could not understand a word that was spoken, though the interpreter assured him that the new king of Atrebates was imploring his subjects to thank Rome for her generosity, and that they should be thankful for their salvation from a vicious tyrant.

"He's laying it on thick," Vespasian muttered. For all he knew, Cogidubnus could have been calling him every insult known to his people; but as long as they understood their lot and obeyed their new masters, he could have cared less. After a few minutes, Verica stepped forward and shouted a loud acclamation that, in turn, was echoed by those in the square. This caused Vespasian to jump, for it was the first time the people had uttered more than a few stifled words amongst each other. The people then collectively knelt before their new king. Verica, being rather infirm and unable to kneel, gave a deep bow instead. The crowd soon dispersed and went about their business as if nothing of significance had just transpired.

"That's it then?" Centurion Taurus, who had accompanied Vespasian, asked.

"Your average peasant could give a vat of piss who rules them," the legate explained. "Whether it's Caratacus or Cogidubnus by way of Emperor Claudius, all they care about is being left relatively alone to live their lives as they see fit. If we left and Caratacus regained power, they would most likely swear the same fealty to him once more."

The formalities complete, Vespasian decided to take a walk through the village. A small column of dismounted troopers accompanied him and Cogidubnus. The king appeared relieved, but also on edge.

"Something vexes you?" the legate asked.

"If I may speak freely," Cogidubnus replied, "I am placed in a tenuous position. I may be king, but I am still a servant of Caesar."

"You could remain in exile," Vespasian retorted. "And know that Rome did not have to restore you to the throne. However, it is far more amicable for

all that your people have their own ruler, and that you remain a client king. Send the required tin and silver every spring and no Roman soldiers will step foot within your lands uninvited. You will serve as a buffer between us and the unconquered lands to the north and west. And I promise you, as not only the first king to agree to Roman rule, but also the one who brought us here in the first place, the emperor intends to be very generous with you and your people."

"And for that I am grateful," Cogidubnus replied. "Please pardon me if my expressions showed ingratitude. I was simply stating that this will take some getting used to; my people serving me, while I serve Caesar. You will also forgive me if I do not accompany your legions for the time being. My people need their king."

"That they do," Vespasian concurred. "You most likely will not see any Roman bureaucrats until at least next spring, what with the region still unstable and many kingdoms still extremely hostile to our presence."

"And who will these bureaucrats be?" the king asked tentatively.

"Of course there will be those responsible for tax collection," Vespasian replied. "However, there will also be plenty of builders and engineers. And the first thing I would recommend is having them install a proper sewage system. No king should live in shit and squalor."

Cogidubnus smiled at this last remark. He admired this particular Roman, who was but a couple years older than he. And despite their vast differences in culture and experience, he truly viewed Vespasian as a friend. Having spent the better part of three years in and around Rome itself, Cogidubnus had seen for himself just what their civilization and advanced technology could bring to a nation. And if Rome was willing to bring such prosperity to his people, then he was content to serve as a client king of Caesar.

Chapter Endnotes:
1 – River Thames
2 – River Medway

Chapter XIV: An Unholy Sacrifice

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The trek north was slow for the Twentieth Legion, stretched as they were in a long column that extended more than a mile back down the narrow dirt road. Vespasian had heard rumor that a massive army was being assembled to meet them, someplace to the north, near a great river. The Second Legion was approximately a day's march to the southwest, and Artorius' orders from Vespasian had been to take the Twentieth to the northeast, where Plautius and the rest of the army were expected to meet them. Sabinus and the Ninth Legion were to suspend building activities around Durovernum Cantiacorum and had joined up with the Fourteenth Legion and a large number of auxiliary regiments.

Artorius hoped they were on the right path, and that they would meet Plautius before finding the main enemy force. He reckoned that as long as their journey kept taking them in a northeasterly direction, they would find the rest of their army sooner or later. The sky was growing dark, and the master centurion instinctively wrapped his cloak around himself as he rode towards the head of the column.

"I've sent an ala of cavalry to screen our movement," Sempronius explained as his second-in-command joined him. "The undergrowth is so damn thick that they can do little but scout ahead on the road."

"About the only good thing to come from these cursed woods is, at least, they'll offer some protection from the rains," Artorius replied as the first drops of a pending deluge splashed off his helmet.

"It seems for every two days of sunshine, we get at least one cloudy and one rainy," the chief tribune snorted. He looked up at the ominous sky as they passed underneath a narrow opening in the tree canopy. "Most of the rains here pass quickly enough, but I think we're in for a bad storm here."

Within a minute of their conversation, the rains began to fall in earnest. Legionaries hunched beneath their packs, drawing their cloaks in close. While these offered some protection from the weather, there was nothing to stop the unpaved path from becoming a virtual quagmire. Soldiers found themselves having to push the baggage carts and supply wagons, slowing their movement to a crawl. Artorius was grateful for the thick undergrowth of briars and sticker bushes on either side of the path, for it meant the chances of

enemy warriors hiding in them were lessoned greatly. Their adversaries knew the lay of the land, but they were still subjected to the same torments brought on by inclement weather and inhospitable terrain. The dense clouds and thick mass of trees made it seem like night, and Artorius almost failed to notice the cavalryman who rode up to them.

"The path splits up ahead, sir, about a mile," the man said to Sempronius. "The ground is more open there, and we can spread out."

"Excellent!" Sempronius replied over the echo of rain splashing off the tree canopy as well as his helmet. "If we are correct, that road will take us north to the rally point. Have your men scout ahead. We'll encamp near the crossroads and wait for the Second Legion to catch up with us."

The trooper saluted and turned his mount around in the narrow space before riding at a slow trot back up the sodden path.

"You see, Artorius," the chief tribune said, for the first time calling the master centurion by his name instead of his rank. "This day is not so bleak after all."

Artorius cracked a quick smile as they instinctively pressed on. Behind them were two of the military tribunes, who were also mounted. And behind them marched Camillus, who held the legion's eagle high in defiance of the incessant rain. Artorius swore he could hear the man humming to himself, and even the vilest of weather could not cast a gloom over his perpetual good nature. With him were the other standard bearers of the legion, along with a selection of soldiers from the First Cohort who acted as their guard. The Fifth Cohort marched at the head of the column proper, just behind the eagle. Every day on the march, different cohorts took turns marching at the head; both as an honor of being closest to the eagle, while also accepting the greatest risk should they come under attack.

The winds whipped the rain into their faces for a moment, but then Artorius noticed in the west that the clouds had broken up. It was late afternoon, and the sun was just now visible, along with several patches of blue sky. The rain ceased to fall, and the sound of the wind amongst the trees grew ever louder. Artorius threw back his cloak, which whipped up behind him in the wind for a moment.

The road forked up ahead, with their current path taking them even further into the woods. The branch to their right curved around to the north, where the terrain appeared to be more open, at least on the right-hand side of the widening road.

“More thick woods on our left, it would seem,” Sempronius said as they turned onto the road and surveyed the rolling plains in the distance. “Can’t see where the damned cavalry have pushed out to.”

“Our only option appears to be to the right,” Artorius observed. “We can bring the legion out of a single column and spread the cohorts out while keeping the baggage carts on the main road.”

“Very well,” Sempronius nodded. “Pass the word back that the lead cohort will remain with the wagons, the rest will break off to the right and continue to advance in cohort columns. Now let’s just hope the terrain is at least somewhat hospitable and not a fucking bog out there!”



Unbeknownst to any of the Romans, the woods on their left only seemed to be thick and impassible like the ones they had just come through. In fact, they were little more than a façade, devoid of thick undergrowth. Just beyond them the ground was relatively flat and easily passible. It was here that Togodumnus waited. A thousand warriors hunkered in the woods, anxious to deal a critical blow to the invaders. Behind the woods, where the Romans could not see, were a dozen or more chariots. Though best suited in battle on flat terrain, for this mission their speed would be crucial. Togodumnus knew his force was too small to defeat even a fraction of the Roman Army that marched out of the woods, but then he did not need to defeat them in open battle; not yet. He saw a group of men riding at the head of the emerging column of legionaries. He grinned sinisterly as he pointed to the younger leader with an ornate helmet and crest that ran front-to-back.

“That one,” he said to one of his warriors, who nodded in reply. He then looked back at Archantael and said quietly, “The gods will have their sacrifice.”



Artorius started to think the rains might be passing for good, as the sky was now showing larger pockets of blue. He was admiring the terrain that opened up on their right, allowing himself to appreciate the beauty of this green land, when a sling stone swished past his head and smashed into the helm of Chief Tribune Sempronius. A storm of rocks hammered into the

young officer, sending him sprawling from his horse, face-first into the saturated ground with a splash. Sporadic arrows flew from the trees, one skipping off the master centurion's plate armor, causing him to instinctively fall off the far side of his horse.

"Bugger fuck!" he shouted as he landed hard on his stomach, knocking the wind out of him for a moment. As he leapt to his feet, he saw one of the tribunes take an arrow through the neck. He fell to the ground, clasping at the shaft that had broken in half, gouts of dark crimson flowing out as he succumbed.

"Fifth Cohort…up!" Artorius shouted as he unstrapped his shield from his panicking horse. A loud war cry echoed from the far tree line and hundreds of warriors soon descended upon him. Realizing he was for the moment by himself, the master centurion started to quickly back away, throwing off his cumbersome cloak and drawing his sword. Camillus was quickly by his side, planting the eagle into the mud, unslinging his buckler, while drawing his own weapon.

"Can't very well let you die all by yourself!" the aquilifer said with a macabre chuckle.

Behind them, legionaries were dropping their packs and trying to remove their soaked cloaks as they raced to their master centurion. The lead century, coincidentally led by Centurion Metellus, managed to stay on the road. Those falling in behind them were compelled to form their battle lines on the short slope of slippery grass behind Metellus, many of them sliding and falling as they went. All still had their leather rain covers on their shields, and they looked like a disorganized wreck. In reality, they had moved with great speed and discipline, and as their foe sprinted up to the road, Metellus' order opened the battle properly for the Romans.

"Front rank…throw!"

With a shout of rage, the legionaries unleashed a storm of javelins that cut into their enemy with a vengeance. A number of warriors fell dead or stricken by the fearsome weapons. Despite this, they advanced so quickly that there was no time for subsequent waves, and those centuries that were still forming up behind Metellus were forced to drop their javelins and draw their gladii.

As Artorius' and Sempronius' horses panicked and bolted back down the column, the master centurion and Camillus found themselves at the center of the fray, with warriors driving hard into them with a crash. As commander of the Fifth Cohort, Centurion Tyranus quickly assessed the danger his men

were in, and he pushed out further to the right with three centuries, in order to prevent them from being flanked. Back along the road, word quickly passed that they legion was engaged. Rather than letting panic overtake them, the centurions maintained order and discipline, with the Fourth Cohort forming its battle lines at a right angle from the Fifth. Given the direction their enemy had attacked from, they surmised that the woods were not very thick, and by forming up as they did they were able to press the flank of the Catuvellauni. The Third Cohort was behind them, and they started to make their way between the forks in the road, attempting to get behind the grove of trees from which the Britons had emerged. It was slow going, with many legionaries becoming temporarily stuck in the mire that lay hidden beneath the tall grasses.

With Sempronius down and possibly killed, Artorius knew he needed to coordinate the overall battle, yet he could not move; pressed as he was with enemy combatants to his front and the Fifth Cohort behind him. All he could do was stand and fight. For the time being he was little more than a legionary on the line.

He tilted his shield and slammed it into the kneecap of a warrior to his front, bringing the man down in a howl of pain. Artorius went to lunge forward and finish him, only to lose his footing in the slick ground and slip down to his knees. His anger boiling over, he scrambled forward, swinging his gladius in a hard slash, catching the injured warrior on the inside of his leg. He knew he'd struck an artery, because the wound immediately starting gushing dark red. A spear came down on his back, deflecting off the plates of his armor as he crawled backwards and awkwardly got to his feet.

The rain-soaked ground allowed neither side an advantage, though it appeared to be helping the Britons most, as they were at least able to hold their ground. On dry terrain, even the bravest of warriors stood little to know chance against the legionary shield wall. As it was, the Romans could not maintain sound enough footing to press the advantage. Yet as the Fourth Cohort unleashed its javelins and started to assault the Catuvellauni right flank, war horns sounded and the rampaging horde started to rapidly withdraw. To his right, Artorius spotted their cavalry returning up the road, yet in the sopping earth their horses could only move at a slow trot. The lightly-equipped Britons were able to run from the battle without fear of any kind of organized pursuit.



And while the Romans gave a loud cheer, thinking for the moment that they had won a victory of sorts, it was Togodumnus who had made good on his objective. The unconscious officer was tied by his wrist to the back of the king's chariot. They had not far to go, for a sacred grove existed but a few miles away. And as the Romans had not mounted any sort of a pursuit, Togodumnus knew they could take their time and conduct the sacrifice to the gods properly.

The horde of warriors who had accompanied him had scattered in multiple directions in order to throw off the Romans. The king regretted the dead he had left behind, and he knew that any warriors captured would likely be tortured and killed. Still, it was a risk they all accepted when they joined Togodumnus on this mission. Perhaps their deaths would appease the gods even more, knowing that they had died bringing them their sacrifice.



The rains had ceased, though the sky was still dark. In the west one could just see the falling sun and a few patches of blue sky. The entire battle had lasted only a few minutes, and the soldiers now had to deal with its grim aftermath. There were five dead, including the hapless tribune who'd taken an arrow through the neck. And twenty had various injuries, though most of these were, thankfully, minor. What troubled Artorius most was the one soldier who was unaccounted for.

"Sir," the pilus prior of the Third Cohort said, as he walked over to the master centurion and saluted. "It's about Chief Tribune Sempronius."

"Have you found him?"

"Not exactly," the centurion replied, shaking his head. He then led Artorius through the grove their enemy had attacked from, which was now occupied with legionaries who were establishing their camp for the evening. As there was not a scrap of dry wood to be found, they would have to settle for burying their dead. Enemy corpses would be left to rot. A group of legionaries stood over what looked like drag marks and chariot wheel tracks in the flattened grass. A soldier held up a smashed tribune's helmet and torn cloak.

"Bastards drug him away," the legionary spoke. "But I don't think it was

as a prisoner to be ransomed."

"Explain," Artorius said.

"Well, sir, I am originally from northern Belgica. My father was a merchant, and so I have dealt with the Britons, mainly traders, many times before I ever joined the legions. They would tell us stories about the druids and their penchant for human sacrifice. As I was a young lad, I thought they were just fables meant to scare children."

"The druidic practice of slaughtering people to appease their vile gods is well-known," the man's centurion added. "We found a pile of human skulls two days ago, arrayed on a makeshift burnt altar. Apologies for not mentioning it sooner, sir, but as our mission is taxing enough as it is, I knew you had better things to concern yourself with than a pile of charred skulls on a block of stone."

"Then I fear the worst for our chief tribune," Artorius said, shaking his head. His eyes burned with anger. "I want him found!"

"Sir," the centurion said, pulling Artorius off to the side, out of earshot from his legionaries. "It will be dark soon, and if they were dragging him behind a chariot, they are long gone. And if we are being honest with ourselves, he is likely already dead. We can mount a pursuit, but I strongly advise we not leave until morning, lest we risk even more lives."

"Understood," the master centurion replied glumly. He hated the thought of abandoning one of their own to a hideous fate, but there was little else they could do. Their cavalry might be able to make an effective chase, but they were too few in number and the risk was unacceptable under the circumstances. "Did we take any prisoners?"

"We captured ten of the bastards," Tyranus answered as he walked over to the master centurion. "These are mostly badly injured, and I figured we would just cut their throats and let them bleed out."

"And I have no interpreter, so I cannot even get any useful information out of them," Artorius grumbled. "I don't suppose any of them speak our tongue?"

"I doubt it, but we'll find out," Tyranus replied.

"What about you, soldier?" Artorius asked the legionary from Belgica. "Can you speak to them?"

"I only know a few words, sir," the man replied. "And with a dozen dialects in this land, gods only know if what I say will make any sense. But I will try."

In addition to the rage that burned inside him, Artorius came to the stark realization that he was now in command of the legion. With his senior officers in the First Cohort still back down the column, he sought out Camillus, the surviving equite tribunes, as well as those pilus priors available.

"It will be dark by the time the rest of the legion arrives," he told the gathered men. "Is the open terrain passable or is it boggy?"

"In places, sir," Tyranus replied. "The men can march through it readily enough, but the wagons will have to remain on the road."

"Very well," Artorius remarked. "We will push forward towards the open ground beyond these trees and establish our camp there, placing the road in the very center. Vespasian and the Second Legion are about two days march from here. We will wait for them here while we send out search parties to find our chief tribune."

"Beg your pardon, sir," the legionary from Belgica said as he walked over and saluted. "My centurion ordered me to come inform you at once."

"What of?"

"Well, I was able to catch just a word here and there, as most of their babble was gibberish to me. But I did make out the words *sacrifice* and *sacred grove*."

Artorius gave a nod and waved the soldier off, who saluted and left. "I want the prisoners scourged and crucified," he said with ice in his voice.



"Yes," Archantael said as he eyed Togodumnus' prize. "The gods will be most pleased!"

The grove was dedicated to the deity Anextiomarus, who was also known as the *Great Protector*. This made it an ideal location for Archantael to perform the ghastly ritual that the Catuvellauni king hoped would bring them divine powers and ultimate victory. If nothing else, it would serve to inspire the more superstitious amongst his people and compel them to bring everything to bear against the invaders.

The battered body of the Roman chief tribune was hung upside down; arms and legs splayed out and tied to crossed poles. His armor was stripped away, and his body was badly beaten from the pelting of sling stones and the rough dragging behind a chariot. He was bleeding from multiple places, unconscious, and scarcely clinging to life. Togodumnus and his chief

warriors gathered around as Archantael placed a wicker basket beneath the Roman, while uttering ancient chants in a language so old that none of the non-druids could understand him. There were several of Archantael's hooded peers circled around the sacrifice, holding torches and echoing their leader's chants.

The chief druid spoke faster and louder, looking up to the blackness of the heavens in the night sky briefly, before plunging a long blade into the lower abdomen of the unconscious Roman. The unfortunate young man twitched violently, but mercifully did not regain consciousness as the druid sliced him open, disemboweling him as his guts and copious amounts of blood splashed into the wicker basket. The druid then reached in and removed the still twitching heart, which he dropped amongst the guts with a sickening slap. Streams of foul liquid ran out the bottom as Archantael carried it over to a stone alter. It was partially hollowed out, creating a large bowl in the top, which was covered in burning timbers.

The druid gave one last unholy chant before dumping the contents of the basket onto the flames that spattered and sizzled with wafts of black smoke and the putrid smell of burning human organs. All the while the Catuvellauni king stood motionless, watching the sacrifice intently. The gathered druids continued to chant over the sound of hissing flames and wafts of black smoke.

"The gods have given us their blessing," Archantael said at last, turning to face his king. "On the field of battle, between the two rivers, you will have victory."

Chapter XV: Faceless Gods

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The arrival of Vespasian at the Twentieth Legion's camp early the next morning, a full day ahead of schedule, delayed their pursuit of the captors of their chief tribune. The legate became rather vexed when Artorius told him of their skirmish the day before and the disappearance of Sempronius.

"Take three cohorts and one regiment of cavalry to find him," Vespasian directed. "I'll go with you. Have the rest of your men remain in camp. I came to inform you that the Second Legion is but half a day's march from here. We will combine both legions into one division and continue our trek north to link up with Plautius."

"Yes, sir," Artorius replied before turning to address Centurion Magnus. "Any other word yet out of the prisoners?"

"Not yet," the Norseman replied. "The interrogators are working on them as we speak."

"My interpreter is also back with the column," Vespasian added. "I doubt you will get anything of use out of those vermin."

"Scourge and crucify them," Artorius said coldly. "I want them strung up as a feast to the vultures and crying to their foul gods before we return." He then donned his helmet as his servant walked over with his horse. The master centurion quickly mounted and nodded to Vespasian.

It was fairly easy, following the ruts created by the numerous chariots that had been hidden behind the grove where the ambush took place. Artorius and Vespasian rode at the head of the cavalry, which kept a slow enough pace to keep the infantry cohorts close, should they run into more trouble. They were regrettably denied the chance of retribution as they came to a small glade. Here most of the chariot tracks broke away in various directions, though a couple made straight for the clearing. They did not have to go far.

Artorius' stomach lurched as they came to the macabre scene. The stench of burned flesh still permeated, and the corpse of Sempronius hung grotesquely from the crossed poles. Flies covered much of his splayed insides, and crows were already pecking at his flesh. His finger, that had borne his signet ring, had also been removed.

"Cut him down," Artorius ordered the nearest cavalrymen, who

reluctantly dismounted and walked over to the maimed body. Some of the men held their hands over their mouths as one drew his spatha and cut the ropes holding the remains of their chief tribune.

"Rome can tolerate many things," Vespasian observed, his eyes fixed on the men as they laid out the tribune's body. Two others began the task of digging him a makeshift grave. "We even respect death at the hands of worthy adversaries. But something we will never accept is the wicked practice of human sacrifice. I want the druids exterminated! All within these isles will soon learn that anyone caught practicing their repugnant religion will be flogged and crucified!"

"These lands belong to our enemies," Artorius stated. "I think we should send a harsh lesson to them."

"Sir, there is a settlement not far from here," a trooper spoke up. "Should we start there?"

"Yes," Vespasian replied. He turned to Artorius. "As soon as the Second Legion arrives we will wipe them out!"

"Sir," Artorius nodded. He was unsettled, not by the legate's orders, but by the long dormant feelings of hatred tearing up inside him.

Though he had fought in numerous campaigns and participated in the utmost horrors of war, he had not felt this type of burning rage in many years. His quiescent sense of bloodlust, which had been brought on by the death of his brother and his quest for revenge during the Germanic wars, now reared its hideous head once more. To Artorius, those who would gut a human being as a sacrifice to their unholy gods were not men, but monstrous beasts that needed to be exterminated.

"Rome will fight horror with horror," he said darkly.

Though the sun had come out on this day, there was a blackened mood that dominated the Roman camp, especially when Sempronius' ghastly fate was confirmed to them. Two of the prisoners had died of their injuries while under torture, though the remainder now lined either side of the road on hastily erected crucifixes. A legionary paced the road in between them, carrying a corded whip. Occasionally he would lash one of the prisoners, who would cry out in pain momentarily before falling silent once more.

"We did get some more information out of them, thanks to your interpreter," Magnus said to Vespasian as they met within the principia tent.

"And?" the legate asked.

"A lot of it was nonsense about the gods of their underworld swallowing

us up. The one part that did make sense was *two rivers*."

"There are two great rivers that run through the Catuvellauni lands," Artorius said.

"The southern one is the River Medway, which is near the rally point Plautius has established for the army," Vespasian added.

"Our assessment is that that is where Togodumnus intends to finally face us," Magnus conjectured. "The terrain is likely to be most advantageous to them there, and I would guess that what they did to Sempronius was to appease their vulgar gods before they face us."

"Plautius wants a battle," the legate said, folding his arms across his chest. "And a battle we shall have! But first, there is some unfinished business we must see to here."



The settlement was, in fact, a small hill fort that overlooked a number of farm fields. Vespasian had tasked the Second Legion with surrounding the oppida, and left the honor of conducting the assault to the Twentieth. Their rage burned fiercely at the ghastly way in which their chief tribune was butchered, and they were eager for revenge.

"That 'fort' is little more than a stockade," a scout reported as Artorius met with the cohort commanders. "A few shots from the onagers will bring it right down."

"Any idea as to their overall strength?" Centurion Tyranus asked.

"Judging by the number of farms, as well as the size of the oppida itself, I would say no more than a thousand total persons," the scout replied.

"Of whom maybe a couple hundred are warriors," Magnus remarked. "This is going to be easy."

"Perhaps," Artorius agreed. "But I do not want the men acting carelessly with their lives. Their anger needs to be focused, not reckless. They need to look at this as a 'bloody drill', and I want this done with discipline as well as extreme aggression. Once our siege engines smash through their walls, we will conduct a broad assault on all sides simultaneously. If possible, take their leaders and holy men alive; our orders are to kill all the others."

"Sir, what of the women and children?" a centurion asked.

Artorius' cold stare was all the answer the man needed, and he simply nodded in reply. The master centurion dismissed the pilus priors and made

his way to where the First Cohort was assembled.

The area around the oppida was mostly wooded, with a number of wheat fields encircling the hill fort. The fields, as well as most of the structures, appeared to be deserted as their denizens fled for the safety of the stockade.

“Fear,” Artorius said as he was joined by Magnus. “They know their fate and even now they pray to their false gods for salvation.” He exhaled audibly, removed his helmet, and wiped a rag across his sweaty brow.

“Are you feeling alright?” the Norseman asked, his eyebrows raised and hands clasped behind his back. “It’s a bit brisk out today, and yet you’re sweating like you just came out of the bathhouse.”

Artorius ignored him for the moment, as he watched onagers and scorpions being sent forward under the escort of several auxiliary infantry companies. They had orders to start the bombardment once in position; Centurion Praxus was overseeing the operation and would report once completed.

Knowing that they had some time, Artorius pulled Magnus off to the side, out of earshot of their men. “Do you remember the first time we ever sacked a barbarian village?”

“It’s been many years but, yes, of course I do.”

“And do you remember what I did?” Artorius persisted, his expression wrought with concern and uneasiness at the memory.

“You went a touch insane, but what of it?” Magnus asked. “You were avenging your brother; none of us really faulted you, despite your periodic acts of barbarism. I will say, you’ve calmed down considerably over the years.”

The loud slap of throwing arms from the onagers unleashing their heavy stones interrupted them momentarily.

“Those feelings that I’ve suppressed for so long are returning,” Artorius stated as the first salvo of catapult shot smashed into and around the barricades in the distance. He thought for a moment he heard screams of terror coming from within the pitiful fort.

“Because of what happened to Sempronius?” Magnus knew the answer, but felt the need to prompt his friend. Whatever issues Artorius was having, he needed to at least address them before the assault commenced.

“It’s not the same level of hatred that stemmed from my brother’s murder,” Artorius said. “But the similar feelings of loathing are there; that these aren’t really men we face, but animals. It’s one thing for me to lose my

head a bit back when I was but a legionary in the ranks. However, I now have to command the entire legion, and it would not set a good example if I go off like a damned heathen berserker."

"Just give the orders and let the men handle it," Magnus replied.

In the background they could hear the commands being shouted by the section leaders of the siege engines. Soon another wave of heavy stones was launched against the ramparts. Some onagers had shot over or landed short on the previous volley. Adjustments were made ensuring even more shots hammered the stockade, which was bursting apart.

"The most complicated issues in my head, and yet you have a way of making them so damn simple," Artorius chuckled as Magnus smacked him reassuringly on the shoulder.

"After all these years, it's what we do," he said before nodding his head back towards where their cohort waited in anticipation for the order to advance.

Though still burning with anger, and his stomach turning in knots like it always did before any engagement, the master centurion and acting commander of the Twentieth Legion strode confidently to the front of the First Cohort to observe the work of his siege engines. It was not taking very long. The stockade to their front had mostly collapsed, and onagers were now firing both heavy stones as well as fire pots in hopes of catching some of the thatched roofs ablaze. As the recent rains had kept both timber and thatch perpetually soaked, there was a lot of thick smoke but little fire.

"Advance the scorpions," Artorius ordered.

As each century had a scorpion attached to it, there were fifty-nine of these within the legion. Given their much lighter weight and ease of maneuverability, it took little effort to carry the bolt-firing ballistae forward to where the hapless defenders of the oppida were in easy range. Though resistance would be minimal, Artorius was taking no risk of unnecessary casualties amongst his infantry.

With their barricades smashed, the people clustered on the small hilltop were exposed to the merciless barrage of scorpion bolts and onager shot. Artorius' face twitched as he watched a small group huddled together take the brunt of a large catapult stone. Their bodies were smashed to pieces, with limbs severed and one young man's head burst like a melon.

"Sound ceasefire," the master centurion calmly said to his cornicen. As the notes resounded on the trumpet, he drew his gladius and took a deep

breath. “Sound the advance!”

The call to advance on the town was echoed by the cornicens of the various cohorts, and as one unit the soldiers of the Twentieth Legion converged on the hilltop, their measured footfalls resonating with an ominous cadence upon the ground. Legionaries trampled through the fields of crops, driving the scattered livestock before them. As they made their way up the short slope, Artorius noted a number of bodies strewn about victims of the scorpions and onagers. Many of those who lay broken on the ground were still alive. Some had smashed limbs with bones protruding through the skin, others had arms and legs completely missing and were bleeding out, waiting for death to come.

The people cried out in terror as legionaries fell upon them, killing without mercy. As his flanking cohorts had scaled the slope quickest, Artorius halted the First Cohort and took in the scene of death that played out before him. He quickly noted the lack of men of fighting age amongst the throng.

“Sound the recall,” he told his cornicen, who looked at him with a raised eyebrow for a moment.

As the call sounded on his horn, legionaries in the fray immediately ceased killing. Artorius then made his way forward and quickly found Centurion Tyranus, whose Fifth Cohort had assaulted from the right flank.

“There’s nothing but old people, women, and children here!” the pilus prior said with a shake of his head.

“Hey, we found their druid!” a legionary shouted triumphantly as they dragged a battered old man and threw him at the feet of the master centurion.

“How do you know he’s a druid?” Artorius asked.

The legionary sneered and dropped a basket containing the tops of several charred human skulls.

“We found these in his tent, sir,” the soldier replied.

“Bastard needs to be strung up by his balls,” another legionary scoffed.

“At ease!” Tyranus barked. He then looked to his master centurion. “What would you have us do, sir?”

“Crucify that one, along with any of their leaders,” he replied with a nod towards the druid. While moments before he had considered putting the rest to the sword, he was suddenly having doubts. He could not very well release them, and yet he was assailed by visions of his younger self, who would not have hesitated to slay the lot of them. Vespasian rode up on his horse,

interrupting his thoughts.

"Why in bloody hades did you cease your attack?" the legate snapped. "I told you to wipe this place out!"

"Sir, we've captured their chief druid, who will be crucified," Artorius explained. "Any warriors and other leaders will meet the same fate." He paused for a moment, then spoke slowly as a plan formulated in his head, "The slave drivers will be wanting to ply their trade soon enough, and there are ample women and children we can sell to them at a hefty profit. If we then burn the oppida, and take or destroy their food stores, we still meet your overall intent."

"Feeling a bit merciful, are we?" Vespasian asked as he dismounted his horse and removed his helmet.

"Not at all," Artorius lied. "Most of the warriors from this settlement have run off to join our enemies. If we simply kill their families, they will be filled with the courage of despair, having nothing left to live for. If they learn that their wives and children are now Roman slaves, then so much greater is their torment."

"An interesting assessment," the legate replied, his pragmatic mind turning over everything Artorius had said to him. He then shrugged. "If we crucify every druid we find, that will avenge Sempronius sufficiently, while perhaps dissuading the practice altogether. Very well, there appear to be several hundred useful slaves from this group. From what I hear, the slave traders arrived not long after the initial wave of the invasion force, so we'll give them their first taste of business. Any who are too old or unable to travel will be put to the sword."

"Yes, sir." Artorius turned about to see a small number of warriors who'd been tasked with defending the oppida.

Several were badly injured, and all bore looks of both despair and utter hatred.

"The lads are gathering wood to make the crucifixes," Tyranus reported. "There are sufficient poles from their smashed ramparts to do the job."

They were soon joined by the other cohort commanders, as well as the First Cohort centurions.

"You heard the legate's orders?" Artorius asked.

"We'll start segregating the prisoners now," the Sixth Cohort commander replied.

"One last thing," Vespasian interrupted as he walked back over to the

men. He pointed to a very young warrior who did not look as badly injured as some of the others. “Spare that one. I want at least one witness to go back to Togodumnus and let him know what we’ve done, and what we will continue to do.”

“You wish us to release an enemy warrior so he can fight us again?” a centurion asked.

“Cut his hand off first,” Vespasian replied nonchalantly. “And keep two of the others alive as well. I want them interrogated thoroughly before we dispose of them.”

Chapter XVI: The Gathering Storm

Near the River Medway
June, 43 A.D.
***

The Roman invasion force was at last gathered in one location, ready to strike a decisive blow against their enemies. All four legions, plus auxiliaries were arrayed along the southern side of the river. Across the wide river their foe awaited them.

"Scouts have confirmed what you garnered from your prisoners," Plautius said to Artorius. "The enemy has gathered all his strength on the far bank."

The commander-in-chief had called a meeting of all of his senior officers to devise a battle plan with the intent of delivering a single decisive defeat on their enemies. Along with the legion commanders were Tribune Cursor and his senior regimental commanders, was Admiral Stoppello, whose ships were anchored in the harbor a few miles east, where the river opened into the sea.

"What do we think they're full strength is?" Sabinus asked Cursor, whose scouts were still riding up and down the river.

"All told, perhaps one-hundred thousand," the cavalry commander answered, "possibly more. I still have several reconnaissance patrols to the southwest that haven't reported back yet. They're also trying to find us a viable ford because, as you can see, where we stand now is damn near impassible."

"The terrain is wooded in places, but also relatively flat," Centurion Taurus spoke up, having led one of the scouting missions personally. "They have little cavalry, but what they do have are chariots and lots of them. Some of the lighter ones are probably for carrying archers to harass us; but they also have a number of heavy bastards with large blades protruding from the wheel hubs."

"No doubt their intent is to use these to break our shield walls," Vespasian conjectured.

"Well, if there are any fords that our scouts find," Plautius added, "you can bet Togodumnus knows about them."

"Possibly," Cursor replied. "Remember, these are not his lands. Even our allies among the Cantiaci are uncertain as to whether the river can be crossed

safely. Several of them are riding with my remaining patrols."

"Whatever they find, we need to at least make a show of force here," Vespasian said.

As the men conferred, a rider stopped just outside the tent. He spoke quickly with the guards at the entrance and was ushered in. He was a cavalryman from Indus' Horse, and he looked soaked and out of breath.

"Forgive my intrusion, sir," he said with a sharp salute to Plautius.

"Never mind that," Plautius replied with an impatient wave. "What news do you bring?"

"We're still trying to find a place for the legions to cross," the trooper replied. "However, we did manage to get eyes on the remainder of the enemy force."

"Well?"

"The Durotriges confederation has joined our enemy. Their warriors were still spread out on the march, but most of them will arrive this evening."

"How many?" Geta asked.

"We apprised their numbers around forty-thousand, sir."

The cavalryman's report brought some stifled groans from the assembled leaders.

"Well, we wanted a decisive battle, and now they're obliging us," Vespasian chuckled.

"Are these numbers in addition to the hundred thousand Togodumnus already has assembled?" Geta persisted, ignoring his fellow legate's attempt at humor. He shook his head when the trooper nodded. "Damn it all, they outnumber us three-to-one! And with no viable crossing for the river, plus heavy chariots arrayed against us, we're looking at a fucking blood bath!"

"Perhaps," Vespasian shrugged. Despite being slightly younger and less experienced than his peers, the commander of the Second Legion possessed such a level of tactical and strategic intuition that when he spoke, even Plautius listened. He continued, "If your scouts were able to swim across the river unseen, then we can get at least a sizeable raiding party over to the other side without causing alarm."

"And what are you proposing they do against a hundred and forty thousand men?" Geta asked. His voice betrayed his doubts. However, he was still hopeful.

"Nothing," Vespasian answered. "We don't do shit to their warriors. What we do is eliminate their chariots. Their morale will take a serious blow,

to say nothing of the knowledge that they will have to face our legions head-on, once we find out how to get them across." He then turned to Stoppello. "Admiral, can any of your ships sail these waters?"

"It's wide enough, though we don't know for certain how deep the river is," Stoppello replied. "However, I am reasonably confident that my smaller triremes can get as far as our camp. After that, we risk bottoming out in the shallower depths. What are you suggesting?"

"Fire support," Vespasian answered, bringing a grin from Plautius.

"I like the way you think," the commander-in-chief replied. He then directed the naval officer, "Stoppello, a dozen ships loaded for bear with catapults, ready to harry our foe with solid shot and fire."

"I need two days to prepare," the admiral stated. "My triremes only have a single catapult, and to transfer additional siege engines from the bigger ships will take time."

"Then two days is what you have," Plautius said. "Meanwhile, we'll keep searching for viable fording points and gather any additional information we can about our adversaries. That is all."

The sky was glowing red in the west behind him as Artorius walked over to the riverbank. He was soon joined by Tribune Cursor, who stood with his arms folded across his chest.

"Think your lads can find us a way across this?" the master centurion asked his friend.

"Even if they can, I doubt it will be practical for forty-thousand men to use all at once," Cursor replied. "We could always pick up and move to the southwest, in hopes of finding a way around the river. However, I agree with Plautius that our best chance of smashing the barbarians is here. After all, there is nothing to say that they won't change their minds about fighting us or simply shadow us the whole way around, ambushing our men once we do find a crossing. No, we must find a way to beat them here."

"Then I guess a few of us will be getting wet," Artorius chuckled. He thought for a few moments before speaking again. "You know, we don't all have to cross together."

"What are you thinking?" the tribune asked, looking over at him with a raised eyebrow.

"I agree, make a show of force here," Artorius began. "But if Stoppello is going to be using his ships for fire support, then why not use them to land at least some of our troops to the east?"

“A capital idea,” Vespasian said behind them.

“General, sir,” Artorius said as he and Cursor turned and saluted the legate.

“I came down here to think a little bit, too,” Vespasian said. “But do go on. What else are you proposing, master centurion?”

“Leave two legions here,” Artorius replied. “Have them bear the brunt of the assault, while another launches its attack by ship from the east.”

“And the fourth legion?”

“They can go with the cavalry, find a way across the river, and then envelope the enemy’s western flank.”

“An interesting concept,” Vespasian remarked. “Alright, I’ll mention it to Plautius. And don’t worry, I’ll make sure he knows who to give credit or place blame on.” He winked at his last remark as he made his way back towards the principia.

“You know,” Cursor said, “the reality may be that there simply aren’t any viable crossing points close enough for men carrying heavy weapons and armor.”

“Well, not with that attitude…sir,” Artorius replied with a short chuckle.

“Artorius!” The shouted call from Vespasian alerted them, and they turned to see Vespasian standing just outside the large tent, signaling for the master centurion to join him.

“Plautius must think you’re on to something,” Cursor remarked.



The young warrior had struggled to find his way to Togodumnus’ camp, delirious from loss of blood and the shock at having his hand severed with the stump subsequently cauterized with a red hot piece of iron. A small group of Durotriges fighters had found him lingering outside their camp fire soon after they finished their march into the two rivers. Their intent was to join up with Togodumnus in the morning, and these men immediately took the badly injured young man to King Donan. Rains had started to fall, and they beat down on the hut of animal skins the king’s men had erected for him. A fire burned in the center, and the young man was helped into a small wicker chair and given a hide blanket to wrap himself in. One of the camp women brought him some ale.

“Bring him food, as well,” Donan ordered.

“T…the Romans did this,” the young man said, his voice trembling badly. “I must f…find King Togodumnus.”

“It’s alright lad, we’re friends of your king,” Donan replied, placing a hand on his shoulder. “We are joining up with him to expel from our lands those bastards who did this to you.”

As he ate, the man told about the horrors inflicted upon them by the invaders, including the horrific machines they used that could spit both fire and stone. His ramblings sounded delusional, which was of little surprise given that he had a bad fever, and his skin burned to the touch. What Donan did understand was that the Romans were without mercy, taking into slavery all who they did not kill outright. They had also committed a terrible sacrilege by crucifying the village druid. Even in their bloodiest conflicts with hated enemies, no warrior within Britannia was allowed to harm a druid; their sacred persons being inviolable.

“If even half of what he says is true,” a war chief said after the lad had fallen asleep from exhaustion, “then we are facing a different sort of enemy. What demonic monsters are these Romans?”

“Not monsters,” Donan said, shaking his head. “They are still men, though clearly men with neither soul nor honor.”

“We still have bands of warriors making their journey who are strung out between here and Dunium. I only hope the warriors we do have is sufficient.”

“As do I,” Donan agreed. “Togodumnus has assembled quite the mighty host, yet I fear that many of these bands of warriors are, at best, unreliable and, at worst, traitorous.”



The Ninth and Twentieth Legions would soon be breaking down their camps and making ready to march to their assault points. The Second and Fourteenth would remain in place, as they would be attacking their enemy head on across the river. Auxiliary regiments were scattered throughout the lands, already taken by the Romans with only a few infantry cohorts available. Several squadrons of cavalry were dispersed between each battle group to serve as both messengers and mounted support. However, Cursor was sending the majority of his corps to the west. Even if they could not find a suitable bridge or ford, his men could still readily swim their horses across the river. He had also placed these men under the command of Centurion

Taurus, as he had elected to personally lead the pending nighttime raid against the enemy chariots.

As evening fell upon the enormous camp, with the sun glowing red in the west, Admiral Stoppello arrived, along with several of his ships' captains. Accompanying them was a company of what appeared to be Syrian archers. Magnus' face broke into the broadest grin Artorius had ever seen as the Norseman raced over to the advancing group. It was only then that Artorius spotted Achillia, who Magnus took into his arms and kissed passionately. Though the sight made him miss Diana, Artorius was happy for his friend as he watched Magnus lead Achillia away towards his tent.

Artorius sighed and then as he walked towards the principia, he saw two Britons being roughly handled by a group of dismounted cavalrymen, who were taking them into the large tent. As he was headed that way anyway, the master centurion decided to investigate further.

"We found these two skulking about," a trooper said as Artorius entered. "No doubt spies of Togodumnus!"

"I'm telling you, we are not spies of Togodumnus!" the Briton with blonde hair said. His ability to converse in the Romans' tongue startled them. He shook free of the grip of the trooper. "We are Brigantes, not Catuvellauni!"

Artorius stared at the young man for some time before he finally realized who he was.

"Hold up!" he said quickly, walking over to Plautius and the other senior leaders. "I think I know this man." He then walked over to the Briton. "I do know you, don't I? *Alaric*?"

"You do," he replied, recognizing the master centurion. "We sailed to Judea and fought those pirates all those years ago. And we met again at the crucifixion of the Nazarene."

"That's what I thought," Artorius said quietly. He looked up at the auxiliary troopers. "Unhand them."

"Do you mind telling us what the hell this is about?" Plautius snapped in irritation.

"Respectfully, sir," Artorius replied. "It's a long story that I would prefer to tell another time. But suffice to say that I can vouch that these men are, in fact, Brigantes and not Catuvellauni."

"We are members of Queen Cartimandua's personal guard," Alaric

explained.

"So you're not here to spy on us, then," Plautius surmised.

"We've been observing you for some time," Alaric replied candidly. "But our task was for our queen, not Togodumnus."

"Plautius, these men can probably tell us the disposition of the Brigantes and if they are siding with the Catuvellauni," Vespasian said.

"I assure you, we're not," Alaric emphasized. "But then neither have we sided yet with Rome. You must understand our queen's prudence in this matter."

"She's waiting to see who the victors are," Plautius concurred with a snort.

"Believe me," Alaric replied, "she has no love for Togodumnus. If she did, she would have sent our warriors to join him, and they are many. We are simply members of Cartimandua's guard, as well as her eyes and ears. We have no mandate to speak on her behalf. However, I know her, personally, and can attest that her intention is to eventually forge an alliance with Rome."

"Very well," Plautius stated. "Once we are finished with Togodumnus and whatever allies he has rallied against us, you will return to Brigantes and summon your queen to me. In the meantime, you will accompany General Vespasian and note well what happens to those who would dare oppose the might of Rome."

"Release his friend," Vespasian ordered the auxiliary troopers. "He can return to his people tomorrow. This one will remain with us. Stable both of their horses, these two can bed down with the Syrian detachment."

Forgetting his original business in the principia, Artorius promptly left and followed the men outside, where night had fallen and only the glow of torches cast their light about.

"I'll take this one," he told the troopers, who simply saluted and left with Alaric's friend. He walked with the young man towards the edge of the camp. "Strange that we should find each other here of all places."

"Our lives seem to have come full circle once again, Roman," Alaric replied. "Forgive me, but despite what would appear to be an intertwining of our destinies, I never once learned your name."

"Artorius," the master centurion replied. "You say our destinies have been intertwined. Explain."

"You were there when my village was destroyed," Alaric replied. "I know you were, I can sense it." When Artorius did not speak he continued, "I was

raised in these isles in the house of King Breogan. I grew up alongside Cartimandua, who I now serve. I think it was fated that we would end up on the same vessel bound for Judea."

"Why would you say that?" Artorius asked. "We never actually met then, and before tonight the only time we have spoken was after the Nazarene's crucifixion."

"That may be," Alaric replied, "but that makes our paths no less drawn together. You told me that you joined the army to avenge your brother, who was killed in an ambush that my people, the Marsi, took part in. In turn, when Rome unleashed its legions upon Germania, how many fell by your blade? And how many of those were even warriors, let alone those who might have taken part in Teutoburger Wald? Your hatred and bloodlust consumed you…"

"And how the hell would you know that?" Artorius snapped, the young man's words clearly striking a nerve. "I've spoken with you once in my entire life, and yet you presume much!"

"It is only because it should have consumed me, as well," Alaric replied. "You lost your brother. I lost almost my entire family. My father died in battle, so at least that was an honorable end. But what of my aunt and my cousin, who was just a newborn babe? I remember little from that time, as young as I was, but I do remember seeing her soon after she was born. She was scarcely a week old and completely blameless of any crime, and yet she was butchered by your legionaries."

Artorius said nothing as they walked over to one of the ramparts near the river. Torches had been placed every twenty meters with sentries dispersed throughout. His face was sweating, despite the cool evening breeze that blew in off the water. Dark and foreboding memories had assailed him in recent days, and talking with this young man of a race he had tried to exterminate laid them all bare.

"It is a vicious cycle," Alaric said, collecting his own thoughts. "Hate begets hate and, in the name of retribution, the savage killing never ends. And yet, no one even knows where it all began or who struck the first blow."

"Why then did you fight alongside us, your mortal enemies, when we faced the pirates on the way to Judea?"

"I was on the ship because I needed the work," Alaric explained. "I was hired on as a skilled laborer and was never a member of the Roman navy. And when the pirates attacked, what choice did I really have? They would

have killed me as readily as any of you, and had I not fought against them, then I would have been executed for cowardice. I had also made friends with the sailing master." He was caught off guard when Artorius chuckled at this. "You know him?"

"His brother is my best friend," Artorius said. "Hansi now has command of his own ship."

"I am happy for him," the young man replied. "Still, I knew I could not stay aboard a Roman warship any longer, so I took my share of the prize money from the sale of the pirate vessel and journeyed throughout the east, searching."

"For what?"

"Another way," Alaric answered. He went on to explain about his first meeting with the teacher from Nazareth, and his message of love and compassion. "When he first told us that we should love not just our neighbor, but also our enemy, it felt as if he was speaking directly to me; almost as if he knew about my past. He said we should love and forgive…"

"And have you?" Artorius asked. "It must be difficult to forgive those who continue to conquer foreign lands, and who are as ruthless as ever in both battle and subjugation of other peoples."

"Sometimes it is not possible to forgive," Alaric surmised. "But if I can forgive even one person, then that is something."

"You understand, I am still a soldier of Rome," Artorius replied, comprehending his meaning. "I, too, heard the Nazarene's message, but that does not stop me from doing my duty. And whether I like it or not, that duty often involves killing."

"I cannot judge one way or the other what you or the legions do in this campaign," Alaric said. "As my queen seeks friendship with Rome, then Alaric of the Brigantes must become a Roman ally. As for Alaric of the Marsi, while I can never forget or put entirely behind me our people's violent history, I know that further hatred is not the answer. And so I forgive you, Centurion Artorius, soldier of Rome."

Chapter XVII: Mighty Rivers Run

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“Second Legion will cross here,” Vespasian said the next day, nodding towards the shallow crossing hidden in a thick grove of trees. The woods and undergrowth were so dense, it was little wonder no one ever bothered to check and see if this particular point of the river was shallow enough for man and horse to cross. An auxiliary infantryman was grinning broadly as he waded out into the center, which came just up to his chest.

“The current is still deceptively strong,” a centurion noted as the auxiliary soldier was pulled under, frantically surfacing a minute later, about fifty feet further downstream. “We should still use the pontoon boats to get across.”

The men of the Second and Fourteenth Legions had been felling trees and constructing small rafts to create a pontoon bridge over the past two days. Leadership had also been scouting the riverbank in order to find the most viable place for launching that allowed enough tree cover to keep their movement concealed, while also being passable enough for legionaries to execute the operation at night.

“We’ll have a couple of our ablest swimmers drag ropes across for the men to lash the pontoons to,” the legate directed. He turned to Artorius. “The Twentieth will head west, up the river. There the woods are dense enough that you can get the entire legion across without anyone noticing. Are you sure about your plan?”

“It’s the best we can do,” the master centurion replied with a shrug.

“In the very least you can provide a blocking force,” Vespasian noted, “as well as preventing additional enemy reinforcements from reaching this place.”

The legate had originally considered altering the plan and keeping the Twentieth Legion where it was. However, he dismissed this when he considered that having even two legions in such a confined space was going to prove cumbersome, let alone three. Artorius made note of this as well.

“At least this way the Twentieth Legion can act as a mobile force and still find a way to crawl up Togodumnus’ ass,” he remarked.

The Ninth Legion had departed before dawn and was uniting with Admiral Stoppello’s fleet along the coast at the enormous mouth of the river.

They had roughly eighteen miles to cover. Even with the lack of viable roadways, they were still expected to reach the coast by late afternoon. The remaining auxiliary infantry cohorts were part of the right wing division as well, along with approximately half of Tribune Cursor's cavalry corps. The Twentieth Legion would begin its move at dusk in order to mask its movement. Artorius and Geta then finalized the last few details of the battle plan with Vespasian, to whom Plautius had given overall control of the center and left wing.

As the sun set, Artorius took his place at the head of the legion. He had dispersed the equite tribunes throughout the column in order to coordinate the large mass of soldiers, should they become disoriented or scattered. With the only road consisting of a narrow fisherman's path that was, perhaps, wide enough for two to three men to walk abreast, Artorius had directed the legion to form two additional columns that would parallel the path and cut directly through the large forests.

The master centurion mounted his horse with the ever-present Nathanial walking next to him, taking the reins whenever Artorius needed to dismount. Camillus walked next to him, carrying the eagle aloft. There was no fanfare of trumpets nor any shouted orders echoed down the columns. Artorius simply started along on his horse at a slow walk, legionaries eventually falling in step behind him. He kept a measured pace, as the columns to his left had a far more arduous trek through the woods in the dark.

Those at the head of each column carried torches, not just to provide light for the guides, but also so that they could orient off each other. Tribunes regularly passed messages along to Artorius, and several times they had to practically halt the entire legion as they clawed their way through some of the more impassible thickets of brush and undergrowth. It felt like it took an hour just to go the first mile. Fortunately for them, as the river wound its way south, the ground opened up. The legion was able to spread out and speed up its pace.

"The rest of the trek on this side of the river should go smoothly enough," Artorius said to Camillus. "Troopers from Indus' Horse said where the trees become thick again is where there is a narrow enough place for us to cross."

"I only hope it is more passable on the other side," the aquilifer noted. "We do little good if we're confined to these damned forests the entire trek."

Artorius said no more, knowing his friend shared the same concerns he did. Many confined areas prevented the legions from forming battle lines, and

having no real idea as to the lay of the land was maddening. He surmised that if Togodumnus was electing to fight the Romans in this region, then the ground must be fairly open in order for him to accommodate his own massive army. Of course, that was all conjecture. For the moment, all he could do was follow the river until he found a place to cross, while hoping it would not take so long as to do the Vespasian's assault force any good.



It was after dark, and Caratacus sat outside his small tent up on a rise of ground overlooking the valley below, which was dotted with thousands of campfires. The coming fog was already obscuring the wood line along the river, and he feared that his brother was mistaken to think the Romans would not attempt to cross over at night. The woods on the far side shielded most of their camp from view, even from Caratacus' high vantage point. The best they could tell was that Romans still occupied the camp and had not moved. Still, between the thick forests and the river as obstacles, detailed reconnaissance was virtually impossible for either side. Two enormous armies faced each other, separated by only a short expanse of water, and yet blind to each other's actual strength and disposition.

He took some comfort from the vast number of fires that burned in the valley, around each huddled a group of warriors who would be ready to give their enemy the decisive battle both sides so desperately wanted. And yet, even the numbers of fighting men made him uneasy.

"Can't sleep, brother?" Togodumnus asked as he knelt down to join him, wrapped in a blanket of animal skins. "I confess that slumber is deprived of me this night, too."

"I worry about the stability of our alliance," Caratacus replied, deciding to forego his concerns about the Romans making a night crossing.

Togodumnus had already scoffed at the notion, and further stated that even if the Romans did manage to pull off such an impossibility, that just meant they had less time to wait before smashing them into oblivion.

"They are anxious, and the longer Rome delays, the more of them that may decide to abandon the campaign and go home. And there are those who refuse to follow the orders of any but their own war chiefs, many of whom are damn near hostile towards us."

"I admit I have little faith in many of our so-called friends," Togodumnus

replied. “The Silures are the only ones I know we can rely upon, and yet they are few in number. The Durotriges mean well, but many of them are still miles from here. King Donan assures me they are coming with all possible speed, and more of them do arrive every day. As for the rest…well, they did come to this place with the intent of fighting the Romans, and for now that is enough. Once our chariots smash into their compressed ranks, the legions will be scattered and our warriors can finish them off. Those who have refused to ally with us, the Brigantes and Iceni to name a few, will be diminished in power and influence in our lands. Even our most reluctant allies will renew their calls for friendship, seeing the power of our warriors unleashed.”

“Venutius of the Brigantes wishes to join us,” Caratacus noted. “It’s his bitch of a wife who is queen and simply waiting to see who wins before choosing sides. I have considered taking a band of warriors and helping Venutius wrest control of Brigantes from Cartimandua, once and for all.”

“A bold move,” Togodumnus concurred. “And one that certainly has merit. However, that, my brother, is for another day. Once the invaders are defeated, we will be in a much greater position to dictate the ruling of these lands.” He gave Caratacus a friendly smack on the shoulder as he stood and returned to his tent. Caratacus simply sat and watched the valley below. Off to his left he could see the camps of various tribes who had committed warriors to the cause; and though he could not see the sea in the distance, he knew their alliance’s force stretched all the way to the mouth of the river. In that he took some solace, hoping that by the morrow their sheer force of numbers would break the Romans, should they finally decide to attack. Togodumnus had accepted risk in keeping his armies massed together under the assumption the legions would come to them. However, he did base this on the knowledge that if the Romans simply wished to wait them out, then they never would have left the security of the lands they had already conquered. They would have dug in and waited, rather than coming to them. No, the invaders were looking for a battle, and now they simply had to wait for them to make the first move.

Caratacus also thought back to Archantael’s sacrificing of the young Roman officer. Whether he believed in the power of the druids or not, his warriors did, and the chief druid had promised them victory *‘at the land between the two rivers’*. There was nothing else for it, and as his eyes finally started to grow heavy, the Catuvellauni war chief and one-time usurper of

Atrebates allowed sleep to come.



“This looks like the place,” Artorius said as he held a torch over the water. “The water is too deep to wade across, but at least the current is calmer here, and it is a shorter distance to the far bank.”

“With all due respect, old friend, I’d like to know what in Odin’s name you think you’re doing?” Magnus asked as Artorius stripped out of his armor and tunic.

Lying near the Norseman were several great coils of rope that his men had spent the better part of the previous afternoon tying together.

“If I may flatter myself, I am one of the ablest swimmers in the entire legion,” Artorius replied. “And I cannot ask one of my men to do something I am not willing to do myself. Just be sure you stay with it and make sure the ropes don’t get hung up on anything on this side of the bank. I daresay, even with the calmer current I’ll be a ways downstream by the time I get across.”

Refusing to hear any more words of protest from his centurion, Artorius tied two lengths of cord around his waist. These were smaller and would be easier to carry across than dragging the heavy ropes. They, in turn, were tied to the thick coils they would use as a makeshift bridge. His feet sunk halfway up his calves into the thick, boggy mud; each step a chore as the muck sucked to his legs. The ground abruptly fell off as he stepped into the actual river, falling face-first with a hard splash. He lurched to the surface, thankful that, in the pitch black of night, none of his men had witnessed his clumsiness.

“You alright?” Magnus asked, hearing his friend’s fall.

“Nothing wounded by my pride,” Artorius replied with a grim chuckle as he continued to wade forward. After a few meters, the water came up over his chest, and he leapt forward, swimming with long, deliberate strokes, while trying not to concern himself too much over the current that was deceptively fast. He felt the ropes pulling on his waist as several of his men kept them taught, lest they get swept away and hung up on trees and river undergrowth.

Though it was only a couple hundred meters across, Artorius was exhausted from the exertion by the time he reached the far bank. With the ropes extended and dragging in the river, they felt like they weighed a ton, and he found he could only crawl on his hands and knees up the sandy embankment. He, at last, pulled himself upright, holding onto the branches of

a leaning tree. He unbound the first cord from his waist and started pulling on it rapidly, his men on the other side keeping tension as the main rope itself started to uncoil. They managed to keep it just above the waterline, and within a minute Artorius had the first thick rope in hand. He wrapped it several times around the nearest tree that looked stable enough to support the weight of crossing legionaries without uprooting itself.

On the Roman side of the river, Magnus waited impatiently, only allowing himself to breathe a sigh of relief when he saw the second coil being pulled across. This one would be tied off at a higher level, allowing legionaries a handhold as they crossed over.

"Secure the bottom rope and make sure it's tight," he said quietly. He then turned to Optio Parthicus. "Get your men ready to cross. Only go two to three at a time. Too much weight on those ropes and you'll sink right into the current; never mind the possibility of uprooting whatever Artorius has the ropes secured to."

"Understood," Parthicus replied. He whispered instructions to his first squad of legionaries, who all strapped their shields and javelins to their backs. "Have Master Centurion Artorius' kit ready and let him know he can come back for it as soon as the first squad is over."

Artorius shivered in the cold as he huddled behind the large tree he'd secured the ropes to. It was a strange feeling, being on the enemy side of the river, devoid of his weapons and completely naked. And yet, despite the discomfort of the cold, he found it exhilarating, as if he were thumbing his nose to the fates and daring them to try and strike him down, exposed as he was. The tree and the ropes groaned quietly, and he sensed the added tension as the first legionaries began to make their way across. Encumbered with their weapons and heavy armor, no doubt, they were taking great care with their footing and handholds, lest they fall into the river and never rise again. Artorius stared hard into the blackness ahead of him, yet with the thick undergrowth it was difficult to see anything. He could also feel a fog rolling in, which gave him an even greater chill.

After what seemed like an agonizingly long wait, alone on the enemy side of the river, he heard the telltale splash of the first legionary, who had misjudged where the dry ground was and landed in ankle deep water next to the embankment.

“Bloody piss!” the soldier swore quietly as he pulled himself onto the dry slope, his sandals squishing.

“Over here, soldier,” Artorius whispered.

The legionary gave a grin of relief when he saw his master centurion.

“It’s going to be slow going, sir,” the soldier replied as he unbuckled his shield and javelins. “We gave each other about ten meters before spacing, and we’re still damn near up to our ankles in the river by the time we’re halfway across.”

Artorius gave a nod of understanding. “Once your squad is across, push up through the trees about twenty meters.”

“Yes, sir.”

A short while later a second legionary stepped onto the bank, the master centurion pointing him over to where his friend was positioned. A quick calculation and Artorius knew they could only get, perhaps, three hundred men over every hour.

“This won’t do,” he grumbled as soon as the first squad had finished crossing. He grabbed onto the rope and started to make his way back. A stiff breeze caught him about halfway across, though thankfully the wind was actually warm. He looked up at the half moon, which glowed brightly despite being socked in with clouds and permeating mist. Despite how tight they had made the lines and the thickness of the ropes, being stretched out over a long expanse made them sag substantially. Even without his weapons and armor, and being the only man crossing, Artorius could feel the splash of water on his bare feet as he reached the center of the river.

Upon reaching the Roman side, he saw Magnus and Praxus talking with their senior logistician. As soon as the master centurion stepped off their makeshift rope bridge, the next squad of legionaries began their trek across.

“It’ll take us an entire day to get everyone over at this rate,” Artorius grunted.

“We have enough rope to make one more rope bridge,” the logistics officer said.

“We’ve already tasked men with getting these over to the other side,” Praxus added.

“Very good,” Artorius replied. “Still, with the sun rising as early as it does here, we’ve got maybe seven hours to get as many men over as possible, to say nothing of finding our way back towards the enemy camp.”

“At least we’re not the main effort,” Magnus noted. “And what of the

supply trains? We had hoped to find a bridge or passable ford with no such luck. We can't very well send them back."

"Nor is it wise for us to be cut off alone in enemy territory with no hope for resupply of rations and medical supplies," Praxus added. "We've played that game before."

His last remark was in reference to the infamous Battle of Braduhenna, and they were determined to not allow themselves to be placed in such a precarious position again.

"There's nothing for it," Artorius sighed. "Detach two cohorts with the logistics trains and have them find a way around. There *has* to be a bridge or fording somewhere along this river. With our luck, it's probably a few hundred meters further on, or we just missed the damn thing. Once they find it, they can follow the river back and link up with the legion then. Meantime, we'll simply have to press forward with the assets we have. Vespasian is counting on a single, decisive engagement tomorrow, and we have to be there in order to block our enemies' routes of escape, as well as prevent reinforcements from reaching them."

Artorius walked back to where his kit was laid out. He was surprised to see Optio Parthicus standing with a fresh tunic for him.

"Beg your pardon, sir, but I went through your pack and found this for you, seeing as how you didn't have a spare laid out, and your other one got soaked when you dropped it in a puddle. I would have given you one of mine, but seeing as how you're about twice the size I am, I don't think it would fit. And I don't think you want to go into battle tomorrow all soggy."

For the first time that evening, Artorius cracked a smile. It was a relief for him, knowing that he had leaders within the legion who were capable of making decisions on their own and did not rely upon him for everything. It was even better having an optio who watched out for him when he was too preoccupied to look out for himself.

"The lads are securing the second bridge now," Magnus said as Artorius finished lacing up the ties on his segmentata.

"Excellent!" Artorius replied as the Norseman then helped him into his phalerae harness, belt, and sword baldric. "I'll return over that one so we can make sure it can hold the weight."

Despite not knowing what waited for them on the other side, as well as his uncertainty over whether or not his supply trains could even get across, he was filled with confidence, knowing that in a crisis his legionaries could

adapt and still execute their mission.



While the legions struggled to get their initial rope bridges in place, a detachment of cavalry, along with several hundred Batavi auxiliary infantry, achieved an even more impressive crossing of the river. Most had spent their youths swimming in even more treacherous waters, and the legionaries on the southeastern bank were awestruck as the auxiliaries leapt into the river with the same exuberance as if they were boys playing back home again.

Though a good swimmer in his own right, Tribune Cursor found himself relying heavily on the aquatic skills and tenacity of his horse, as he clutched the saddle for all he was worth. Many of the Batavi made the trek in full kit, and Cursor was impressed as he watched some of them float past him in the darkness, calmly pulling themselves along even as their weapons and armor weighted them down. Though their hamata chainmail was far lighter than the segmentata plate worn by legionaries, it was still no small feat that they made their way across, encumbered as they were.

As he made his way through the thick growth of reeds and tall grasses on the far side, the Tribune noted that the Batavi had already formed a vanguard and were pressing forward. One of their officers was waiting for him, and he wordlessly signaled for Cursor to follow him. The Tribune left his horse with one of his cavalrymen and crept along behind the man, trying his best to keep quiet as they hunkered low through the thickets. They came up a short embankment lined with sporadic trees. As the two men hunkered down behind a large briar bush, Cursor gasped at the sight across the open plain. Hundreds of war chariots were arrayed in a massive column, with sizeable gaps between each rank in order to give room to limber up the horses when they made ready to go into action.

“This must be every damn chariot in all of Britannia!” the officer whispered. He then observed, “They intend to let the legions get a number of their men across, and then smash into them like a giant hammer.”

“Chariots are worthless without horses,” Cursor noted. He nodded towards the east as the faintest glow of the predawn illuminated the area. “An hour until the sun rises. It is time to move, and let us hope the legions are able to secure their pontoon bridges!”

As a veteran of Braduhenna, where he received Rome’s highest honor,

the *Grass Crown,* Cursor understood the peril his men would be in, should the legions fail to emplace their bridge and make their way across. Being cut off and surrounded was the ultimate feeling of hopelessness, and while his cavalry would have a reasonable chance of breaking away and outrunning the barbarians, his Batavian infantry would have no means of escape. And honor would not allow Cursor to abandon even one of his men.



Though his plan was similar to Artorius', Vespasian had a narrower crossing, and since his was the main effort for the coming battle, he had access to all of the rafts and pontoon bridge material. Several squads of legionaries had gotten to the other side in a similar fashion as Artorius and his men, though the rest were now waiting for the pontoons to be placed. The Twentieth Legion would require hours to cross over, when what Vespasian required was speed once he was ready to attack. It was quite a feat of Roman engineering, to say nothing for it all being accomplished under the cover of darkness and with minimal talk amongst the soldiers carrying out the task.

The pontoons for this particular bridge were prefabricated over the previous couple days, using logs lashed together to make short rafts. They were large enough for a squad of legionaries to stand on. Though heavy and cumbersome, they were manageable when carried by groups of men who were used to working together. The support ropes were laid out across the water, with the pontoons going in between. As the first was laid into the water, soldiers quickly tied the ends to the support ropes, repeating the process as they formed their bridge across the short stretch of water. Within less than an hour, the bridge was in place, and although it curved substantially in the middle, where the river current dragged against it, Vespasian knew it would do the task required.

"We're ready for the general advance, sir," Master Centurion Lyto reported. "No signs of the enemy yet from the pickets on the far side."

"What in Juno's name is wrong with them?" the chief tribune asked. "They're just going to let us across?"

"We have a report from Cursor's auxiliaries," Lyto explained. "Togodumnus has arrayed hundreds of war chariots off to the left of where we're crossing."

"He intends to let us cross, then hit us in the flank with his chariots while

his warriors engage us from the front," Vespasian observed. "Provided Cursor waits until just before dawn to take out their horses and chariots, we can catch them off-guard. I also doubt that Togodumnus thinks we're brazen enough to attempt a water crossing at night, and he cannot be altogether certain that we will attack at all." He then turned to his chief tribune. "I will take half the legion across now, you will remain with the rest in reserve. Once we push out far enough, I will get the signal back for you to bring the rest over. We'll them form into a single front, with the Fourteenth Legion becoming the reserve."

The young man looked crestfallen at first at the thought of having to stay back, but then realized quickly enough that with the size of their enemy, he would get his share of fighting soon enough. Behind them, Master Centurion Lyto led the first century of men over the river, where he would coordinate the initial placement of his men. With any luck, to say nothing of careful preparation and discipline, Togodumnus would be met with a nasty surprise come morning.

Chapter XVIII: Hammer the Winds

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The frantic calls from war horns, and what sounded like the cries of a thousand terrified animals, awakened Togodumnus from his fitful slumber. The Catuvellauni king threw off his bearskin blanket and stumbled from his tent. The sky was now cloudless, in a show of just how rapidly the weather changed on the isle, and the rising sun in the east blinded him temporarily as it first broke over the horizon. Shielding his eyes with his hand, he scanned the valley below. Enemy skirmishers were appearing from the woods in a statement of Roman audacity; for the main attack would, in fact, come right at them from across the river.

It was as the king expected and why he had left his chariots concentrated near his main camp. And yet, as he looked off to his right, he could see a large number of his war chariots still in their staging area with no horses being limbered up.

“Why have they not moved?” he asked aloud. He then turned to a messenger. “Have our chariots manned at once! They must smash the Romans as they cross the river, before they can establish their battle formations!”

“Yes, my king.” The man quickly mounted his horse and rode at breakneck speed down the hill, not knowing that most of the Roman legion to their front was already across the river and making ready to advance out of the wood line.

Togodumnus quickly threw on his mail shirt and baldric. He was baffled by the great confusion below, as warriors seemed slow to engage the Romans. Behind their vanguard of auxiliary skirmishers he could now see the distinctive red shields and gleaming armor of legionaries.

“Damn it all!” he swore. “Where are my chariots? Why do they not ready themselves to attack?” He summoned his horse, quickly mounting and riding to see what the issue was. As his horse cantered down the slope, he came upon Caratacus, who had spent the remainder of the night with his warriors on their temporary mustering field. It was he who had discovered the reasons for his brother’s frustration, for he had intended to personally lead the charge of heavy chariots that would drive the Romans back into the river.

“The Romans have driven off or killed all of the chariot horses!” he

shouted in dismay. “Their light auxiliaries crossed during the night and just as the sun rose, killed or spooked them all. We were almost trampled by the mad rush of those that had escaped the slaughter.”

“Bastards,” Togodumnus growled. He took a deep breath through his nose, finding his resolve. “No matter. Brother, you will take our warriors and drive the Romans back into the river. Our numbers alone will prove too much for them. I will go and rally our ‘friends’ and see why they delay.”



“Steady lads!” Vespasian shouted as he leapt from the makeshift rope bridge. Soldiers of the Second Legion were still getting used to their commanding general’s ‘lead-by-example’ mentality that had not been seen since the days of Germanicus Caesar.

Vespasian had told his senior officers that he could not very well coordinate the battle from behind a wall of trees on the far side of the river. Therefore, he had dropped his cumbersome cloak and grabbed one set of spanning ropes just as the latest wave of legionaries reached the far side. A few sporadic enemy skirmishers were battling with one of his centuries off to his left, though these were mostly disorganized bands of frenzied warriors with little to no coordination or mutual support.

The Britannic fighting men were extremely brave, and in single combat equal to or, perhaps in some cases, even better than legionaries. However, besides their inferior weapons and being mostly devoid of armor, what they lacked was discipline and the ability to work together. This was evident as individual warriors would smash their weapons against the Roman shield wall with no coordinated effort to dislodge the legionary formation, which was steadily growing as more soldiers crossed the river.

As he watched a barbarian smash his great sword against the shield of the centurion on the far right of the century near the crossing point, Vespasian drew his gladius and quickly high stepped through the tall grasses towards the fray. So intent was the man on killing the centurion, he was oblivious to the even greater prize of a Roman general until the last moment, when Vespasian plunged his weapon into the barbarian’s back. The man cried out through gritted teeth, dropping his weapon as his back arched and spasmed. The legate wrenched his gladius free as blood gushed from the deep wound.

“Centurion,” he said calmly, “push your cohort to the left and start

advancing towards the enemy camp. We need to make room for the others."

"Sir," the man replied before barking out subsequent orders for his men.

As Vespasian turned back, he saw his second wave of men crossing as fast as they were able, though with the weight of their weapons and armor they could only risk putting a few men on the pontoons at a time. Each man moved at a slow jog, watching his footfalls and keeping his eyes on the feet of the man in front of him until they reached the end, where they leapt from the bridge and made their way into the growing fray. Centurions and their principle officers were always the first over, accepting the greatest risk of falling prey to their still-mobilizing enemy while waiting for their men to fall in on them. As legionaries stepped onto the bank, their squad leaders would direct them to their places in the formation, while simultaneously getting accountability of their men. Discipline and training made their efforts instinctive, and Vespasian was impressed by just how quickly his legion was making its way across the river. The first half of his legion was now across; just enough to form a viable battle front.

A cornicen had finished making the trek and quickly ran over to his commander, along with the master centurion, who had placed his First Cohort in what was to be the center of the formation.

"Sound the advance," Vespasian ordered. He then turned to the master centurion. "The rest of the legion is forming a reserve. As we push forward, the ground looks like it opens up, and we can commit them to the wings."

"Yes, sir," Lyto replied as he drew his gladius and joined his First Cohort. On the far side of the river, the Fourteenth Legion was already forming up in columns, anxiously awaiting the order to cross.

The notes sounded on the cornicen's horn, and the aquilifer soon joined them. With a handful of legionaries acting as his bodyguard, the legate of the Second Legion stepped off with his men. To his front, the barbarians were forming up into a massive horde and sprinting towards them. Their resounding war cries striking terror into lesser men. With no way of knowing whether the Ninth Legion had affected its naval landing or if the Twentieth successfully crossed its position on the far left, all Vespasian could do was lead his men forward, to where the battle now began in earnest.

Legionaries unleashed their javelins, leaving scores of enemy casualties in their wake. This made their companions slightly less bold, as the screams of the badly maimed resounded above their war cries. With swords drawn, the Romans advanced together as an impenetrable beast with quickly

stabbing blades for teeth, ready to bite at those who foolishly stepped too close to them.

Vespasian called for his horse. Although he preferred to fight on foot with his men, he knew his place under these circumstances was not on the battle line. As the Second Legion pressed out into the open, the legate got his first clear view of the immediate tactical situation. Though the enemies' numbers were vast, they seemed very disjointed with little to no sense of cohesion. Many who now faced the advancing Roman line were suddenly hesitant about pressing the attack, not least because of the numbers of killed and badly injured warriors who had been struck down by the volleys of javelins. This hesitation was by no means cowardice, but rather that inner desire for survival that all men and animals are born with. It was strange, too, in that it appeared that various bands of barbarians had not so much as left their campfires. Still lingering about, as if they were oblivious to the battle.

Vespasian watched as one warrior, probably a high ranking leader, gave a loud shout and charged forward with his large sword held overhead. A large band of his men followed, and they crashed hard into the Roman shield wall. A proper melee ensued, with centurions conducting passages-of-lines as their men wore down every couple minutes. With each successive assault more of the barbarians fell, killed or maimed on legionary blades. The Romans were suffering casualties as well, though these were comparatively few, protected as they were by their superior armor and disciplined tactics. Many of the wounded were helped to the rear of the formation by their friends in subsequent ranks, though a hapless few found themselves pulled off the battle line by their foes, where they were subsequently hacked to pieces. And yet the legion kept pressing forward, inflicting a terrible toll upon the Catuvellauni and their allies. If Togodumnus had thought numbers alone would win the day, he sadly had never considered the disciplined might of the armored Roman war machine.

Vespasian rode his horse down the line, watching as the reserve cohorts of his legion fanned out in either direction, taking their positions on the ends of the advancing force. Behind him he could also see the first wave of soldiers from the Fourteenth Legion following their eagle across the river. Overall, his portion of the battle was being executed as intended.



“The legion is across. All cohorts are ready to advance,” a tribune said, as the sounds of trumpets and enemy war horns sounded in the far distance.

“Very good,” Artorius replied with a nod. “How far away do you suppose those are?”

“Hard to say,” the tribune replied. “They’re very faint, so my guess would be about ten miles.”

It was a strange circumstance, given that the equite tribunes were his political and social superiors, and yet because of how the chain-of-command worked within the legions, it was he who gave the orders.

He was still shivering from the cold of his swim which, despite his strength and physical prowess, had drained him completely. The sun was slowly rising, and the master centurion was grateful that the skies were relatively clear.

“Rider approaching, sir!” a legionary shouted.

Artorius was immediately alert and looked off to his left-front, grinning as he recognized the cavalry officer who rode up and quickly dismounted.

“Centurion Taurus!” he said, extending his hand. “I thought we’d lost your lot in the crossing.”

“We found a viable fording point a few miles downriver,” the cavalry centurion explained. “But the woods and undergrowth were so damn thick we could scarcely move. Had to make our way due west for a mile or so until we found our way out and then double-back. That’s where we saw them.”

“Who?”

“Enemy reinforcements,” Taurus explained, “about eight to ten thousand strong. They’re making their way up from the southwest.”

“That’ll be the Durotriges,” Magnus surmised. “They will have been on the march for at least two weeks.”

“I thought there were far more of them,” a tribune said.

“Oh, there are,” Magnus replied. “And, I daresay, most of them are throwing themselves against Sabinus and Vespasian’s shield walls, provided they got across without meeting disaster. But the Durotriges are a confederation rather than single tribal kingdom. I figure these twats probably saw an opportunity to take part in the glory, once they heard just how massive an army Togodumnus had assembled.”

“That also means our rear cohorts with the baggage trains will run right into them,” Praxus added. “If they see our supply trains, no doubt the Durotriges will make a play for them.”

“Our mission is to protect the flank, as well as preventing further reinforcements,” Artorius observed. “We’ll meet these bastards head-on and smash them into oblivion! How far are they?”

“About six miles,” Taurus answered. “My men intercepted a rider from Togodumnus, who had just reported to these men that there is a major battle in progress, and they need to move quickly. About a mile north of here the ground opens up, and you should have no issue deploying your battle lines.”

“Form the legion,” Artorius ordered his senior officers. “Have all cohort commanders report to me immediately. Let us hope that if they have spotted our logistics trains, those two cohorts are enough to hold them in place. Taurus, inform Vespasian and let him know our legion’s disposition. My apologies to him for not being able to crawl up Togodumnus’ ass like I intended, but unfortunately, we will not be able to hit the main enemy force in the flank without leaving ourselves exposed to attack from behind.”

“Keep them from reinforcing Togodumnus, and I’m sure Vespasian will be most grateful,” Taurus said before riding off, following by a swarm of auxiliary cavalry.

“A bit of a relief to have seen friendlies on this side of the river,” Magnus thought aloud.

“Indeed,” Artorius replied. He then gave his next orders. “Have the legion form into four marching columns ready to move into battle formation once we close with the enemy.”



“The Romans are pushing us back, my king!” a messenger said frantically. “We can’t seem to mass our numbers effectively against their shield wall.”

“We have many times the strength of the Romans now facing us,” Togodumnus growled. “What do you mean we are getting pushed back?”

“Sire!” another man said as he rode up. “A second Roman legion has landed near the mouth of the river. They are supported by warships, unleashing great fire upon our men who tried to stop them.”

Togodumnus shoved the men aside and quickly walked over to the edge of the small hilltop. In the distance, off to his left, he could just make out the sails of several Roman vessels in the deep waters. He even thought he could see the flaming shot from one of their catapults.

“Send word to my brother,” the king ordered. “He is to drive the Romans back into the river. I will deal with those who are landing by sea.” He called for his horse and quickly sped down the gentle slope of the hill.

Bands of warriors were slowly making their way towards the battle, though many seemed to lack guidance or initiative. It was as if they were hoping the issue would be decided before any of them had to do actual fighting. The reality was their army was so vast that it had become unmanageable. It was proving to be impractical for either the king or Caratacus to coordinate such a massive and unwieldy force. And for those bands of warriors not of the Catuvellauni, they felt less inclined to press the attack once they crashed into the Roman lines and felt the biting death of legionary steel.



Plautius watched from the deck of Stoppello’s flagship as waves of legionaries disembarked near a small creek that intersected with the main river. The smaller Roman triremes had been equipped with multiple catapults, which they used to send flaming shot over the heads of the advancing soldiers, raining down amongst the barbarians that were attempting to rally upon the far bank. Archers from the closer ships unleashed volleys of flaming arrows as well, driving their enemy back and allowing the infantry time to form up on the sloping terrain that led away from the river. The ground here was coarse and sandy, covered in low grasses, weeds, and small yellow flowers.

“Our enemy is a disorganized rabble,” Plautius noted with contempt. “They outnumber us significantly, yet they do little to try and stop my men from forming up on their side of the river.”

“A little fire does a lot to cower the superstitious,” Stoppello remarked as the catapult on a nearby trireme sent a flaming ball in a high arc. It smashed on the rocks near a slowly advancing band of barbarians, who immediately scattered and fled back towards their more wary friends.

“I only hope Vespasian’s crossing is going well,” the commander-in-chief noted. “His is the crux of this operation; this is little more than a sideshow to draw off more of Togodumnus’ warriors.”

On the field across the water they saw a more daring horde of their foes, at last, make a concerted attack against their still-forming lines. Legionaries

were quick to unleash a storm of javelins before drawing their gladii and charging headlong into the barbarians.

“This outcropping of land rests between two great rivers,” Stoppello observed. “The river to the north is substantially larger than this one and can handle even my much larger Quinqueremes. I suspect that if we are successful here, the enemy will try and cross that one in order to escape from us. I recommend dispatching a flotilla of ships to cover that river and harry them in the event they try and flee.”

“A solid plan,” Plautius noted as the admiral gave the orders to his signalman, who in return passed the message to a nearby river barge that acted as messenger between the larger vessels.

On the far shore, Sabinus and his men had formed their battle line at a right angle from the river, allowing the warships to continue to harass the flank of the barbarians with catapult and archers. The Syrian allied detachment under Achillia had disembarked behind the legion and was providing additional support with harassing volleys into the barbarian ranks. Their enemies were holding their ground well in the ensuing bloody grind against the legions. Given their numbers, they could withstand the disproportionate casualties they suffered. It was the fire from the ship-borne catapults and archers that proved most demoralizing. And so the bloody business of the day continued.



As he came down the hill, the sounds of the main battle reverberating not far away, Togodumnus was flabbergasted when he came upon an entire force of allied warriors who were still gathered around their campfires. Not one was armed for battle, a few still slumbered, while others ate. “What is the meaning of this?” Togodumnus snapped. “Do you not hear the sounds of battle not a mile from here?”

“We hear it,” a warrior shrugged. “Seems we have plenty of time to finish our breakfast.”

“You pile of vermin shit!” the king shouted. “You will arm yourselves for battle this instant!”

“I think not,” another man said, who Togodumnus recognized as the war chief, Banning. These men were of the Corieltauvi, a tribe just north of Catuvellauni, who they had fought border skirmishes with in recent years. It

was a curse for Togodumnus, having to rely upon shaky alliances with many whom they had recently drawn blood against.

"My men will attack when they are good and ready," the war chief persisted. "And let us hope that your own warriors have not cut and run already."

"Even now, you would let our past differences risk us both losing everything against the Romans," Togodumnus growled at the man. "You are a vile coward and no warrior!"

"Go fuck yourself!" Banning retorted. "You dare call us cowards, yet where were the Catuvellauni when my warriors were spilling their blood on the shores of this isle? We implored you to join us on the beaches, and you did nothing! You are not my king, Togodumnus, so do not ever try and order my men again! Consider yourself fortunate to have us here, lest we abandon you to deal with the Romans, like you did us."

The king knew further arguments were pointless, and so he rode away towards the fighting in the west. False friends like Banning were a greater threat to him than even the Romans. Once the invaders were dealt with, he would teach those impudent bastards a harsh lesson!

As he approached the western wing of the battle, where the Romans had landed another legion, his men had been driven further inland by the fire from the enemy warships, yet their numbers were still proving sufficient to withstand the onslaught of legionaries. Once out of range of the catapults, the battle became one of attrition, and Togodumnus guessed that the issue would not be decided before the day was finished.



"Sir, there they are!" a soldier cried out from off to Artorius' left.

The additional Durotriges bands had, indeed, spotted and attempted to take the supply wagons of the Twentieth Legion, who had found the same fording point used earlier by Taurus and his cavalry. The master centurion was thankful that he'd detached two cohorts to protect them, as he'd originally only intended to send one. The legionaries had formed a protective square around the supply train with the wagons formed into a crude circle. The Durotriges were taunting them and attacking with small groups of warriors, who were attempting to achieve a break in the Roman line. Outnumbered nearly ten-to-one, it seemed like only a matter of time before

the cohorts were overwhelmed and slaughtered to a man.

"Battle formation!" Artorius shouted, the cornicen echoing the order with blasts from his trumpet. The Durotriges were, at first, shocked to see most of a legion now bearing down on them with cohorts fanning out into battle lines. Many of them abandoned the attack on the supply trains and, instead, moved in a confused mass towards the advancing legionaries.

Despite the fairly open terrain, Artorius found it impractical to place his entire legion on line, even with just eight cohorts at his disposal. Instead, he positioned five cohorts in front with about ten to twenty meters spacing between. The remaining three formed up behind these, staggered between the gaps. This gave a large enough frontage, while also allowing for greater control and situational awareness, as well as maintaining a needed reserve. Camillus instinctively fell in just behind Artorius and off to his right. Though his purpose was to carry the eagle and use it to relay any visual signals, as well as watching for any indications sent back from the other cohorts, his sword arm twitched, anxious as always to take part in the fighting.

The warriors coming at them were at first sprinting, but as the more fleet-footed grew closer to the advancing wall of shields, they suddenly slowed their pace, allowing their friends to catch up before advancing again. These particular fighters had never faced Roman soldiers before, and to see thousands of men marching together with such discipline, while also encased in heavy armor behind a wall of brightly-painted shields was, in the very least, unnerving.

"Fight with courage," Magnus said, beginning a Nordic battle chant he had heard from the time he was a child. "Fight with honor, and if you must die, then do so with the gratitude that you died in battle. Today is a good day!"

"Steady lads!" Artorius said, as much for his own benefit as his men.

The centuries behind him slowed their pace slightly, allowing for a greater distance between ranks. The barbarians to their immediate front, though at first slowed by indecision, were soon carried forward by their comrades on a wave of fury.

"Javelins ready!" Artorius shouted, drawing his gladius as his men hefted their heavy pila to throwing position. The subsequent centuries had not readied their javelins yet; the First Cohort having adopted the practice of each rank unleashing its pila just prior to executing its first passage-of-lines.

Their enemy was getting closer. Even moving at a dead run, it was still an

anxious few moments before they closed. Artorius' eyes were fixed on one younger man with a filthy red beard who carried a woodsman's axe. It served as a reminder that these were not professional soldiers, but simply men who became warriors when the need rose to defend their homes or when summoned by their king. As they drew closer, Artorius could hear the man's battle cry over the wall of sound coming from his companions as he raised his axe over his shoulder.

"Javelins…throw!"

The Durotriges were caught off guard by the storm of javelins suddenly unleashed upon them. Many, who thought the Romans may use them as stabbing spears, were suddenly impaled or had their shields punctured and ripped from their arms. Warriors suddenly found themselves stumbling over their stricken companions, many of whom cried out in pain as their guts were punctured through. One poor man had taken a pilum through the bowels and was pinned to the ground as a result. He gasped for air as the agony overwhelmed him. The hideous entrance and exit wounds seeping both blood and excrement. Another javelin slammed clean through a warrior's heart, bursting out his back. Though he was killed instantly, his body continued to stumble forward a few feet, eyes glassy and vacant, mouth open as he collapsed just in front of the legionary who slew him.

Artorius braced himself behind his shield, his gladius protruding forward at hip level. With his head being the only viable target for his opponent, he quickly ducked down as the barbarian's blow came crashing down, driving forward and knocking the man off balance with his shield. He rotated his hips and thrust his gladius deep into the warrior's stomach while still keeping low. The entire struggle had lasted maybe a couple seconds, and Artorius was immediately back behind his shield. As instinct took over, he was relieved to note that age had not slowed down his reflexes.

There had been no order for his men to draw their gladii; each soldier unsheathing his weapon as soon as he let his pilum fly. Despite the losses they had already incurred, the Durotriges came at the Romans with brutal tenacity. Spears, clubs, axes, and the occasional sword smashed into the shield wall as the Romans continued to press forward, their gladii stabbing forward repeatedly. The barbarians were valiant, though lacking the reckless abandon with which many of their Germanic adversaries had fought with in past campaigns.

"Set for passage-of-lines!" Artorius shouted, the command being echoed

down the line. Upon hearing his, Magnus shouted a subsequent order, directing his men to unleash their pila. The following storm of javelins went over the heads of or, in some cases, between the soldiers in the front rank. The Durotriges warriors fell back in disarray as they were mauled once again.

"Execute passage-of-lines!"

The javelins giving them a split second of breathing space, the soldiers in the front rank turned sideways, holding their shields against their bodies, as those in the second rank rushed past them, smashing their shields into their reeling enemy once more. Artorius and his men passed through Praxus' and the remaining two centuries, all of whom had their javelins ready to fly.

As he reached the rear of the formation, Artorius took a drink off his water bladder and wiped a rag over his forehead. He then looked around to try and get a sense of situational awareness. As best he could tell, the remaining cohorts were pressing forward with no noticeable breaches in the lines by the Durotriges. Behind him, he could see two of his reserve cohorts, each marching slowly while following the main battle line. The master centurion reasoned that if he could break their enemy before deploying his reserves, he would use them to conduct the pursuit. He noticed that from a distance the terrain looked relatively flat. It was, in fact, full of small defilades and rolling mounds. The left wing of the First Cohort was moving laterally along a short rise, while the right was stuck in a saddle with no real ability to get a larger look at the overall battle.

"Can't see a fucking thing down here," he swore quietly.

"If we can keep pushing these bastards back, that rise to our immediate front should provide a decent vantage," Camillus observed.

Magnus was soon giving his men the order to set for passage-of-lines with Praxus' legionaries hurling the next volley of heavy javelins. This tactic was proving demoralizing for their enemy, far more so than the conventional method of employing all javelins before closing with the gladius. From the enemy's perspective, once the storm of death passed, it was over. Here the First Cohort was continuing to throw measured volleys at close range, leaving scores of casualties in their wake. As the line continued to move forward, they found themselves stumbling over the bodies of their fallen adversaries. A few were dead with many more wounded and unable to extract themselves before the Romans overwhelmed them. Many of these were quickly dispatched by legionaries in the subsequent ranks.

Ten minutes later, as the fifth rank made ready to call for passage-of-

lines, the cohort reached the top of the knoll. As Artorius and the first rank smashed forward into the brawl once again, they noticed the barbarians were starting to give ground at a much faster rate. Clearly they were starting to fall apart, and Artorius wanted to press the advantage home as quickly as possible.

"Camillus!" he shouted, as he shoved an enemy warrior back with his shield. "See if you can tell whether the entire barbarian horde is breaking yet!"

The aquilifer slammed the base spike of the eagle into the ground and sprinted a few feet up to the highest point, quickly scanning around them.

"They're pulling back on the right wing!" he replied excitedly. "It looks like they are attempting a fighting withdrawal. I can't see the left, though. There's another damn rise in the way."

"Signal the reserve cohorts to attack!" the master centurion ordered. It was maddening, trying to coordinate an entire legion, while at the same time dealing with individual warriors who wanted to spill his guts. The man to his front looked haggard and exhausted and was starting to back away quickly. Camillus' visual signal was met by the blaring of the cornicens' trumpets from behind the line. Unbeknownst to Artorius, a band of rather brazen barbarians caught sight of the legion's sacred standard and made a rush for Camillus, who quickly drew his sword and unslung his buckler as he made ready to defend the eagle.

To the outside observer it was a fascinating sight, watching as three cohorts of legionaries filed between the five to their front, immediately fanning out in both directions and forming their own battle lines with rapid precision. Though the Durotriges force remained mostly intact, exhaustion and casualties had sapped their will to fight, and their withdrawal was quickly turning into a rout. Many within the reserve cohorts did not even get to throw their javelins before their enemy broke into a run. Instead, they became occupied with conducting a pursuit, while killing or capturing as many warriors as possible.

As the last of the First Cohort crested the short rise, Artorius and his men gave a shout of triumph, watching the remnants of the Durotriges flee for their lives, leaving their dead and abandoning the badly injured to their fate.

"Bastards won't be back in a hurry," Magnus said with a satisfied grin.

All around them soldiers were leaning against their shields and breathing hard. They were exhausted, having not slept in two days. The night crossing, which had proven clumsy and slow, had been equally demoralizing, knowing that they were confined to a minor support role and not expected to get any real fighting in. Having instead caught an entire army of enemy reinforcements out in the open and scattering them filled the men with a well-deserved sense of triumph.

"You're bleeding, sir," a legionary said, looking down at Artorius' forearm.

"Damn it all, so I am," the master centurion observed with a chuckle. It was a deep gash on his forearm, yet he scarcely felt a thing. "Eh, nothing a wash and a wrap won't fix."

"Artorius!" a frantic voice said behind him. He turned to see it was one of the tribunes.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's Camillus, our aquilifer…"

"Yes, I know who he is!" Artorius snapped, battling the sudden feeling of dread that came over him. "What about him?"

"He's dead, master centurion."

Artorius' elation at the legion's decisive victory suddenly turned to dismay and sorrow as he walked back along the knoll and came upon the body of his fallen friend. The legion's sacred eagle still stood, planted into the ground with Camillus' blood-soaked arm wrapped around it. The aquilifer's eyes were wide open, his head turned to the side with a stream of blood coming out of the corner of his mouth. Half a dozen dead barbarians lay around him, and his gladius was soaked in blood.

"No," Artorius whispered, fighting against the tears as he dropped to a knee, placing his hand on Camillus' arm. It was still warm; only the blooded gash in his stomach from where a barbarian sword had penetrated his scale armor that was now soaked in blood and bodily fluids gave away that his friend was dead.

Near the body knelt a young, battered legionary. He was down on one knee with his head hung low and face wrought with emotion. His smashed helmet was lying next to him; his forehead bearing a nasty gash that bled profusely. There were three more dead enemy warriors next to him.

"Artorius," the tribune said. "I am sorry to interrupt, but you need to know something."

“Yes?” He fought to compose himself and rose to his feet, unable to look down at his friend anymore, lest it break him completely.

“This soldier broke formation when he saw Camillus fall,” the tribune explained. “Those three bastards fell by his hand as they tried to take the eagle that Camillus still clutched as he was dying.”

“Help him up,” Artorius ordered two of the legionaries who stood over their friend. “What is your name, son?”

“Legionary Marcus Amatius, sir,” the young soldier said, his voice trembling.

“A soldier would normally be flogged for breaking formation,” Artorius said slowly, still struggling to keep control over his voice. “You, on the other hand, did so not out of cowardice, but in order to save the sacred standard of this legion.”

“He fought off a number of those fuckers, not just the ones he killed, sir,” one of the legionaries spoke up. “Took a beating for it, too.”

“Camillus was a mentor to me,” Amatius replied. “I sometimes got assigned to working as his aid at the legion’s headquarters. He died saving the eagle, and I could not let his sacrifice be in vain.”

“Where is this man’s centurion?” Artorius asked.

One of the soldiers immediately sprinted away, returning moments later with a centurion from the Sixth Cohort.

“Your legionary singlehandedly saved the eagle from falling into enemy hands,” Artorius explained. “He is to carry the standard for the remainder of this campaign, and I want an appropriate award from you sent up the chain-of-command.”

“Yes, sir,” the centurion replied, glancing approvingly at the soldier, who was now being propped up by his friends.

Artorius turned to his cornicen. “Sound the cohort commanders’ call.” He stepped away, unable to look again at the body of Camillus, yet overwhelmingly aware that his dead friend lay just a few feet behind him.



By late afternoon, Vespasian could see his legionaries were wearing down, despite the commitment of reserve cohorts and continuous passages-of-lines. The hour was growing late, and the Catuvellauni alliance had simply failed to break. There was nothing for it, and he was going to have to halt his

legion soon and establish a defensive perimeter for the night. The barbarians were slowly withdrawing, though it was anything but a rout. Every time the Romans tried to press the advantage, they held their ground and the battle continued in a bloody grind with neither side giving way. As evening fell, Vespasian gave the order to halt with his men entrenching and preparing defenses. There were also details sent back to bring over what food and supplies they could manage while also evacuating the wounded. The lack of harassment from the barbarians told the legate they were, at least, as worn out as his men.

"Sir, there are several riders approaching from the east," a sentry reported as the soldiers continued to establish their camp for the evening.

Vespasian walked over to the east entrance to his camp and saw that it was his own brother, along with a handful of escorts.

"Glad to see you're still with us," Sabinus said as soon as he'd dismounted and embraced Vespasian. "I decided to come see you personally, rather than dispatching a messenger."

"We had a hard go of it today," he replied, "but we're still here. How goes it on the right?"

"Stoppello's ships provided excellent support for my men," Sabinus replied. "The barbarians are anything but organized. From what we could see, a large number of them pissed off before the fighting even began."

"Hard to believe they came all this way just to run away before striking a single blow," Vespasian remarked.

"The firestorm wrought by Stoppello's ships undoubtedly played a role in that," Sabinus explained. "But even more so, it tells me that this alliance between the peoples of this isle is anything but sound. They are brave, but ill-disciplined. It would not surprise me if men refused to fight over something as petty as determining which one of their war chiefs was in command. In all honesty, though, we Romans are not above such squabbles ourselves."

"Agreed," Vespasian conceded. "However, I take it you were not able to decide the issue today either?"

"Not entirely," Sabinus replied. "Once we got beyond the range of Stoppello's artillery, they became more brazen in their attacks. Like you, we wound up in a slog that lasted most of the afternoon. Our casualties are comparatively lighter than theirs, and yet they would not give way. Believe me, brother, I will never doubt the courage and tenacity of the Britannic warrior! What of Artorius and the Twentieth Legion on the left?"

The two legates sat down on camp stools around a small fire. As all tents and most of the baggage had been left on the other side of the river, they would be sleeping under the stars this night. Vespasian just hoped that it did not rain!

"The last word I received came from a cavalry centurion whose men had spotted enemy reinforcements coming from the west. He informed Master Centurion Artorius, who took the Twentieth Legion to face them. I had hoped to use them to press the flank of our foes here, but if he's battling a sizeable enemy force and keeping them from supporting Togodumnus, then so much the better."

"We need to reestablish lines of communication with them as soon as possible," Sabinus noted. "Depending on their disposition, Plautius wants them to advance north and prevent as many of the barbarians from escaping as possible. Meantime, the Fourteenth Legion has orders to relieve you."

"Relieve?" Vespasian asked, almost indignantly.

"Relax, brother, you will still have a role in deciding the outcome of this battle. Geta's men have been kept in reserve this whole time and have been kept fresh in order to smash the enemy center. The force in front of you is still where they number the strongest. The Fourteenth Legion will advance past your position and launch its assault at dawn. With any luck, Togodumnus will think he's still facing you and will not realize he's battling against replacement troops. Your men will form up in reserve behind him, ready to move as needed."

"I understand," Vespasian replied.

It was a sound plan, one that Plautius was correct to implement. After all, they had not expected the barbarians to be able to last the entire day against them, as lengthy force-on-force battles were extremely rare. The commander-in-chief had had the foresight not to commit all of his forces at once. Auxiliaries were scattered amongst the newly-won territories, providing security and establishing more permanent camps, while Cursor's cavalry regiments were dispersed between the three legions, preventing any errant enemy forces from flanking them.



While soldiers of the Twentieth Legion gathered up the dead and wounded and secured the supply trains, all cohort commanders and

centurions primus ordo were gathered in a large semicircle with Artorius standing in front of them. He had scrawled out a basic diagram of each cohort's position during the battle and was now gathering all pertinent information to send up in his report to Plautius.

"It was the Fourth and Tenth Cohorts that won this for us so decisively," Praxus observed, taking his vine stick and drawing out where the supply trains had been posted, along with the two cohorts of legionaries who had acted as their escorts. "The barbarians essentially forgot about them when they saw us coming. Only those immediately engaged with them stuck around, and they were disposed of readily enough."

"Once they were driven off, we reformed into battle lines and attacked in support of the left wing," the pilus prior of the Fourth Cohort explained.

"Their attack allowed us to roll the barbarians up rather quickly," added the commander of the Second Cohort, who had been anchoring the left of the main battle line.

"We were pretty stagnant on the right," the pilus prior of the seventh cohort confessed. "In all honesty, it was an indecisive brawl for most of the day. We'd inflict the occasional casualty, but they weren't exactly willing to commit fully, rather they simply stood back shouting curses and taunts after we hit them with our javelins. They didn't break as a whole until they saw their friends running. After that, they collapsed completely."

"Well done, everyone," Artorius said. "I want you to pass on my personal commendations to your legionaries. They've been through a lot of shit over the past two days, and when it came time to throw down, they did not hesitate. Their discipline and bravery is in keeping with our legion's moniker of *The Valiant*. I'll need a total count on your dead and wounded, as well. Thankfully, our losses were not as crippling as they could have been." These last words bit into him, seeing as how one of the fallen had been a dear friend, not to mention the legion's aquilifer.

"Sir, what of the rest of the battle?" Centurion Tyranus asked.

"No idea," Artorius confessed. "For all we know, Vespasian either smashed the main barbarian force into oblivion, or they could have been cut of an annihilated; we simply don't know whether the larger battle has been won or lost. Seeing as how we've heard nothing, we need to be extra vigilant this evening. The men need rest, but they also need to keep their eyes open."

Chapter XIX: The Alliance Shatters

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Like the rest of the army, Artorius' men had established a marching camp for the night, the only difference being they were no longer within sight of their enemy. Without having as nearly a decisive advantage in numbers, the reinforcements from Durotriges had broken and fled. Some had made their way to the northeast, towards where Artorius could only surmise the rest of the enemy army awaited them, while most of the rest had fled to the west, back towards their homeland.

As his men established their camp, he counted himself fortunate for having secured his baggage train. His men had both rations and tents for the night, along with needed medical supplies to care for the wounded. There were a number of dead to deal with as well, twenty in all, including Camillus. Time for a formal ceremony honoring their sacrifice would have to come later. For now, Artorius had ordered a pyre built to dispose of the bodies, lest they fall victim to scavenging animals or wandering bands of enemy warriors. He insisted on personally laying Camillus' body on the mound of wood and bodies.

It was this burning pyre that allowed the messenger from Plautius to find them in the dark of night. He came escorted by several auxiliary cavalrymen, as this side of the river was still mostly hostile and to send out a lone messenger would be a foolish endeavor.

"Your men are fortunate to have their tents to sleep under tonight," the man noted as he walked with the master centurion towards the principia. "The Second and Ninth are all encamped under the stars tonight."

"I took a calculated risk and was lucky the barbarians did not overrun my supply train and make off with it all," Artorius said as he read the message. "Seeing as how the late reinforcements from the Durotriges have been beaten, I can have the Twentieth Legion ready to advance on the enemy's main flank tomorrow."

"Yes, sir," the messenger replied. "Anything you wish me to take back to Plautius?"

"Yes. Give him a note regarding my losses in dead and wounded, and let him know we will advance on the enemy at dawn."

"Very good."

As he made his way back to his tent, Artorius was joined by Magnus, whose face was pale and his eyes red. He had known Camillus just as long as Artorius and had counted him amongst his better friends.

"I know casualties are always inevitable," the Norseman said awkwardly. "But damn it all, why did it have to be him?"

"He was the bravest man I ever knew," Artorius said quietly. "You remember during our first campaign, when he was our signifier? And he stuck that German in the chest with the signum?"

"I remember," Magnus said with a short laugh. "He calmly said afterwards that he feared getting the shit beat out of him by Centurion Macro more than he did being killed by the enemy. Personally, I think he was just being modest."

"After he tossed the eagle over the side of the ship and advanced with it by himself through the surf towards that mass of druids and barbarian warriors, I knew he was not afraid of anything. I've known men of deep religious faith, as well as complete atheists, and yet one thing they all shared in common was a deep fear of death. Not Camillus, though. And if he was ever afraid, then he was the greatest actor to ever live, because I never saw it."

"I only saw him show fear once," Magnus said. "It was the year before you came back to us, when his wife was dying. He told me his greatest dread would be leaving his daughters completely orphaned."

Artorius let out a sad sigh and shook his head. He had forgotten momentarily about Camillus' two daughters, who were now fourteen and eleven. "Everyone who dies in battle leaves someone behind," he said. "Our legionaries cannot marry, yet many have common-law wives and children… anyway, I cannot think on this anymore. Our mission is not done yet. I will shed my tears for Camillus and the others when the time is right. And Magnus…"

"Yes?"

"Make sure when the time is right that I *can* shed the tears for our friends. If I am not the same wreck that I was after Vitruvius, Decimus, and Carbo all died at Braduhenna fifteen years ago, then my very soul is lost."

"Of course," Magnus replied. "And you be sure to do the same for me, as well as Praxus. After all, he knew Camillus even longer than we did."

"I want him remembered," Artorius continued, "If not his name, at least his actions. Thousands of years from now, I want people to know the bravery

of one man who stormed the beaches of a hostile foreign land alone, carrying the eagle of Rome to the furthest corner of the world."



The night passed uneventfully, with both armies weary from the previous day. Artorius was awake and armored up an hour before dawn. His centurions were rousing their men, who with their usual discipline immediately started to break the camp down, albeit with the typical muttered curses and grumbling that's been prevalent with soldiers since the beginning of time. Cohort commanders reported to him as soon as they'd broken down their section of the camp and had their men ready to march. It was Magnus who informed him when the First Cohort was ready.

"Very good," Artorius said to his assembled leaders.

The four surviving equite tribunes were also on hand, and he intended to use them to coordinate between units, as he himself would be marching with the First Cohort in the very center.

"This terrain is pretty open, so we'll advance in loose battle order, allowing plenty of room for movement between each cohort. The first five will take the lead, baggage trains in the center with the remaining cohorts in reserve, that is, until we spot the enemy. The large river is approximately ten miles north of here. We suspect we'll run into one of the main roads that lead to a bridge. Provided Vespasian and the other legions are successful today, no doubt there will be a large number of refugees fleeing this way. And while we cannot completely pen the enemy in, we are to kill or capture as many as possible. Any questions?" When there were none, he told them, "Return to your cohorts, make ready to move out!"



For Vespasian, there was no long search to find the enemy. They were encamped barely half a mile from where his legion had dug in for the night. But unlike legionaries, they had simply slept where they had fallen down, posting only a few men to serve as lookouts.

Geta and the Fourteenth Legion had slipped past the Second during the night, and as the glow of the predawn cast its light on the ground, a cornicen sounded his horn, ordering the legion to advance. Geta rode at the head of his

legion, anxious for battle. Though a lesser commander may have resented having his entire legion placed in reserve on the previous day, Geta was an experienced enough legate to surmise that the issue would not be decided in a single day. And now, with a fresh legion facing an enemy who'd already suffered untold casualties, as well as massed desertions from many of their supposed allies, he was poised to strike the decisive blow for Rome.

"Smash these bastards into oblivion and perhaps the emperor will grant me a triumph," Geta said quietly to himself. He then gave the order to his cornicen, "Sound quick step!"

Vespasian was shocked to see Geta ride at a full gallop ahead of his men as they charged the beleaguered ranks of the barbarian army. The enemy warriors seemed equally shocked at the Roman legate's audacity, and yet their focus on him allowed the legionaries to close within just a few meters before unleashing their javelin volleys. Warriors closest to Geta were the focus of the legionaries closest to him, and these fell in bloody heaps. It looked for a moment as if the legate was risking being killed or captured, yet the cohorts that flanked him on either side drew their gladii and charged, driving hard into their foe. Battle was soon joined in full, and Vespasian could not help but wonder if Togodumnus was surprised at just how vigorous the Romans now attacked his army. No doubt he would soon realize he was facing two legions instead of one.



Togodumnus was, in fact, valiantly trying to rally his warriors into holding their ground against this fresh Roman onslaught. He remained on foot this day, using his own example to inspire his warriors. It was Caratacus who rode up to a low rise and scanned the battlefield, realizing what had transpired in the night. No matter how brave his men were, they were still battered from the previous day's fighting, their numbers dwindled by casualties and the loss of their supposed allies. Only the Silures, who had been unable to bring their full might to the field, remained, along with King Donan of the Durotriges. Donan's force had also suffered a reversal, as an entire army of late arrivals was assailed by a Roman legion to the southwest and destroyed. Caratacus knew this same legion now threatened his right flank, and he'd heard no word from his men who were supposed to be

engaging the legion that had landed by ship near the mouth of the river.



A timely-executed charge by Tribune Cursor and two regiments of cavalry broke whatever resistance the barbarians on the right had left to offer. The tribune having rejoined his cavalry soon after leading the night raid to disable the enemy chariots. Most of these men were not Catuvellauni, and they felt no desire to die anymore for Togodumnus and his cause, which was quickly becoming lost. The majority started to run north, towards the much larger Tamesis River, just over a mile away.

"Hold up!" Cursor ordered, reining his horse in. He turned to Centurion Taurus. "We'll screen them and keep them pressed against the river. Admiral Stoppello has a little surprise in store for these bastards."

Taurus nodded in reply, barking out a series of subsequent orders to his subordinate leaders. Cursor then galloped his horse back to where the Ninth Legion was making a slow, yet deliberate pursuit. He found both Sabinus and Plautius riding in front of the advancing legionaries, along with an ala of their indigenous cavalry.

"Sir, we are channeling the enemy towards the river," Cursor reported. "I've ordered my men not to attack, except for any stragglers that break away from their main body. As long as they are lulled into thinking they have a means of escape, they'll continue to run and not directly engage us."

"Well done, Cursor," Plautius said. He turned to his fellow legate. "Sabinus, the Ninth Legion will press on to the northwest until it reaches the river, then turning to continue the pursuit of the barbarians. Hopefully Vespasian, Geta, and Artorius will have driven off the remnants of their opposition by then."

"Barring any unforeseen disaster, it would seem we have a total victory in the making," Sabinus said with a smile.

"Well, let's not congratulate ourselves until it is over," Plautius replied. "Cursor, I'll ride with you. Sabinus, carry on."

They saw the glowing balls of fire sailing in high arcs, well before they caught sight of the fleeing barbarians or Stoppello's ships in the river. Their enemies were caught in a hateful position; if they stayed close to the river they were subjected to the hell storm of flaming catapult shot and arrows

from the warships, and if they wandered too close to the Roman cavalry, they were quickly dispatched with lance and spatha. They also knew that the Ninth Legion was close behind them in pursuit. Their only chance at life was forward, towards the bridge.

A flaming pot smashed against a warrior's head, exploding in a spray of liquid fire that doused those closest to him. Shrieks of pain and terror echoed with even more hapless souls stumbling too close to the bank, only to be subjected to a storm of burning arrows unleashed from the nearest Roman vessel. Several more fell dead or badly injured. Those who still lived knew not who they should hate more, the Romans who inflicted death upon them or Togodumnus and the Catuvellauni, who had dragged them into this conflict.



Artorius and his legionaries saw the remnants of the enemy force engaging Geta and Vespasian around the same time his cohorts on the extreme left spotted the Tamesis River; those barbarians who had not already fled were being hemmed in on three sides. The master centurion then saw one of the tribunes riding over to him.

"Artorius, there is a large bridge about a mile from here," the man said excitedly. "The barbarians appear to be making a run for it, although they are still in somewhat good order and not yet broken, despite being pressured by the Second and Fourteenth Legions."

"Once they spot us, they'll break for sure," Artorius conjectured. "Have the three cohorts on the left head straight for the bridge, I'll lead the rest and hit these fuckers in the flank."

The tribune nodded and rode off.

Artorius turned to his First Cohort centurions, who marched directly behind him. "Are your legs warmed up yet?"

"Just give the word," Praxus said.

"Let us have at those bloody twats!" a nearby legionary spat.

Artorius drew his gladius and grinned sinisterly. *"Twentieth Legion!"* he shouted. *"At the double-time…march!*

The cornicen sounded the order with trumpet blasts, alerting all who had not been within earshot of the master centurion.

Unlike the previous day, where the legion had been fighting along a much shorter frontage, here his troops were spread out in a single line of cohorts.

There was also greater spacing between individual soldiers with overlapping files, in part to give the barbarians a false sense of just how many of them there were, and also to allow ease of movement during the advance.

"There they are!" a legionary next to him soon shouted excitedly.

Artorius could just make out the mass of Catuvellauni warriors, who were battling it out with the Fourteenth Legion.

"Now they've spotted us," the master centurion grinned. He then lashed out at their foe, "Feel free to break any time, you cowardly bastards!" He had it stuck in his head that their adversaries were practically beaten and would run in terror at the sight of another legion advancing on them.

They were approaching at an angle, to the left-rear of the Fourteenth Legion, and Artorius was surprised when he saw a large mass of warriors break away from the fray and start rushing towards them.

"Well, well," he said calmly, "it seems they wish to play after all. *Javelins ready! First Cohort…compress files!"*

As his men lifted their pila to throwing position, they shifted to their left and right, closing the gaps between individual soldiers. As the cohorts on either side of them conducted the same maneuver, it created an even wider gap between each formation. And yet, the Roman Army was a highly-drilled and disciplined force, and with a short series of orders from the cohort commanders, all units started to converge on the center. They were almost in position as the Catuvellauni closed the distance and gave a unified war cry as they broke into a sprint.

"Front rank…throw!" As had happened so many times throughout Artorius' career, a salvo of heavy pila sailed through the air into the ranks of the barbarians.

The Catuvellauni, having faced the Romans before, immediately halted their charge and dropped down behind their shields. Though their shields were little more than small oblong wicker or painted boards, they still offered some protection and yet, while casualties were not as drastic as before, what the pilum storm did do was deprive many of their enemy of the use of their shields. Javelin points slammed through wicker and board, the pliable shafts bending and wrenching the shields from their owners' hands. And as the pilum had a tendency to bend, it also made them impossible to throw back.

"Gladius…draw!" Artorius shouted, blood pumping through his veins.

"Rah!" his legionaries shouted. A sharp snap sounded as their weapons flew from their scabbards.

Artorius took a last deep breath before giving his next order. *"Charge!"*

While legionaries were normally unnervingly silent just prior to closing with their enemy, his men gave a battle cry loud enough to be heard in Elysium. The barbarians towards the front of the horde suddenly found themselves virtually defenseless, deprived as many of them were of their shields. The Romans smashed into them with brazen fury, Artorius tilting his shield and slamming the bottom edge into the unsuspecting face of an enemy warrior. The man dropped his club, screaming in pain as the heavy shield smashed his nose and knocked out several of his teeth. The master centurion lunged forward and slammed his gladius through the man's throat.

Rage consumed Artorius as he and his men brawled with the host of Catuvellauni warriors. The ghastly murder of Sempronius, as well as the death of Camillus, fueled his anger. Axes and clubs hammered his shield, sending numbing shocks up his arm and shoulder. And yet he continued to fight, smashing away with the boss and edge of his shield, while stabbing with the gladius in fury. The line continued to advance, his men matching his wrath. It was then he realized they'd been fighting for almost ten minutes at a blistering pace, and he needed to withdraw his front rank.

"Set for passage-of-lines!"



Despite the initial shock of facing a fresh legion of Roman soldiers, Togodumnus was confident his army could prevail. Though many of their so-called 'allies' had abandoned the field without a fight, the king was glad to be rid of them. Warriors had told him that Banning and his men had fled with scarcely landing a blow. Once the issue with the Romans had been decided, he would deal with them one by one. The Silures had remained loyal, few as there were at the moment. Once they could be certain as to the safety of their own lands, hordes of warriors from the mountains would spill forth onto the enemy occupied territories. The Durotriges had also kept their vow and continued to fight alongside the Catuvellauni, despite having one of their reinforcing armies scattered by an errant Roman legion.

"The Romans continue to drive us back, brother," Caratacus said.

The two kings now sat astride their great horses, watching the battle unfold. Even with the additional legion that had come up from the southwest, the battle was still a virtual stalemate, which suited Togodumnus.

“We outnumber them still,” he replied. “And once they think they’ve driven us to the bridge, we will withdraw across and dare them to come at us.”

“Over there!” Caratacus said with alarm, point to the east with his sword.

To their dismay they could see the fleeing mass of what had once been the left wing of their army.

“Their cowardice will become infectious,” Togodumnus growled. He then ordered his brother, “Stay here and rally our men, I will head for the bridge and turn those bastards around myself!”

As he reached the edge of the River Tamesis, the Catuvellauni king first caught sight of not just the Roman cavalry that pursued his broken force, but also several warships that sailed parallel to the fleeing mass, firing their catapults and volleys of arrows into their ranks. Seething with rage, Togodumnus turned his horse about and rode the short distance to the bridge, placing himself in the way of any who would attempt to flee without his permission.

“Lost!” a warrior shouted. “The battle is lost!”

Others called out similar lamentations, which only served to fuel the king’s anger.

“Turn back, you fucking cowards!” he screamed at them. “Your king stands, and you will stand with him!”

His words shamed a number of warriors into ceasing in their flight. Unfortunately, this only made them an easier target for the nearest warship, whose catapult unleashed a fireball that burst amongst them, dousing several in searing flames. As the warriors screamed in pain, the king’s horse reared up at the sight, throwing him off before sprinting away.

As the king staggered to his feet, the same vessel began to turn so as to place its broadside towards the bridge. Scores of archers lined the rails, loosing volleys into those who attempted to make their way across. Togodumnus thought, at first, that if he could rally these warriors, they could, in fact, attack the nearest warship. They were mostly decent swimmers and could certainly overwhelm the slow-moving ship, should they be able to board.

Before the king could attempt his plan, a flaming arrow slammed into the side of his neck. He gasped, his mouth agape as he clutched at the arrow, the burning shaft scorching his hand. His warriors, recovering from the shock of the fireball, stood in horror as a further pair of arrows buried themselves in

his chest and side, driving him to his knees. As his eyes clouded over, Togodumnus knew that his demise would bring about the death of both the alliance, as well as the Catuvellauni kingdom.

Caratacus, who had not seen his brother fall, was still rallying his men near the Romans' battle line. Though unable to fully stem the tide of fleeing men, the force of his personality and extreme courage was able to maintain some semblance of order as his men withdrew either along the main bridge or along the southern bank, heading west. The battle may have been lost, but the man who did not know he was now king of his people was determined to fight on.



Night had fallen by the time all of the senior leaders within the army arrived at Plautius' principia tent. Their combined efforts, the iron discipline of their men, supplemented by the murderous fire support of Stoppello's warships, had led to a decisive victory for the invasion force.

"The enemy is on the run," Sabinus stated as he signaled for servants to distribute wine chalices to all the men present. He then raised his cup. *"Roma victrix!"*

"Roma victrix!" the men shouted in unison before taking a long pull off their wine.

And while Artorius had been disappointed at not taking part in the main thrust of the battles, his men had performed well, preventing the Durotriges from reinforcing Togodumnus, as well as cutting off several avenues of escape and taking a number of prisoners.

"Any word on total losses for both days of fighting?" Plautius asked.

"Yes," Vespasian said, reviewing a wax pad where he'd scrawled numerous notes throughout the evening while compiling different reports. "First off, it would seem that Togodumnus did not have such a cohesive alliance after all. Most of his army never even engaged us and simply ran once the fighting started. I'll be candid, sir, whatever the discipline and valor of my men, I doubt they would have held had our enemies been able to mass their numbers effectively."

"As it is, I would hazard to say that any large-scale fighting is almost over," Geta added. "That's not to say the barbarians are finished, but rather

they will now mistrust each other even more and will stick to smaller hit-and-run tactics, like they did before."

"Well, that being said," Vespasian continued, "preliminary counts look like we can reasonably assume that over five thousand enemy warriors were killed these past two days. We've taken nearly twice that number in prisoners, many of whom are wounded. I would hazard it to guess there are at least a similar number of enemy wounded that managed to escape."

"And better yet," Sabinus said. "Rumor has it that Togodumnus himself was killed during the battle, near the bridge that leads across the great river. We extended our camp to this point and have men standing guard over the body. We'll take you up there in the morning so we can verify, Plautius."

"Bring some of the prisoners to make certain it's him," Plautius directed. "And if Togodumnus is, in fact, slain, then so much more becomes our victory. Our foes now appear to be scattered and leaderless."

"If I may speak up, sir," Artorius said. He was normally quiet during such meetings of the senior leadership, but as he had been acting legion commander for most of the campaign, he knew he had earned the right to speak his mind. "There will always be someone to step up and replace the fallen leaders. In this case, Togodumnus has a brother, Caratacus, who from what I've been able to gather is an even more effective and charismatic leader than Togodumnus was."

"Duly noted," Plautius acknowledged. He then turned back to Vespasian. "What about our casualties?"

"Combined losses between all battle groups came to three hundred and fifty-five dead with about three times as many wounded; regrettable, but acceptable, sir."

"Agreed," Plautius confirmed. "We'll cross to the north side of the river tomorrow and establish a more permanent camp there. I know the men are exhausted, but we cannot tolerate a substantial enemy presence in this area, and they must be driven off or killed."



Caratacus, the new king of the Catuvellauni, felt very much alone. Though he had not seen his brother fall, there had been many who did, and the fact that he had failed to rally with the remnants of his army spoke volumes. Also among the dead was Silyen, the leader of the Silures. Only

King Donan of the Durotriges confederation was at the king's fire that night, and his news proved even bleaker for Caratacus.

"I am sorry, my friend," Donan said consolingly. "But with the losses we've suffered already and with the collapse of the alliance, we must look to our own borders. As it is, there will many fewer of us to take in the harvest this year. And for all we know, the Romans could have launched a second invasion force and be ravaging my lands even as we speak."

It was a hard blow for Caratacus, but in truth one he could not fault Donan. After all, the Durotriges had traveled more than a hundred miles outside of their own kingdom in order to stand with the Catuvellauni, even though the Romans had not made a single aggressive gesture towards them.

Caratacus said as much.

"It is only a matter of time until Rome comes for us," Donan said. "They are like locusts, consuming everything in their path; ever hungry, desiring more. I am sorry to have to leave you, my friend. You have a way of rallying people to you, even more than your brother did. No disrespect meant to him, for he died valiantly. I also do not mean to place more of a burden upon you, but I think that you will soon become the face behind the resistance to Rome. And once I can ensure the safety of my lands, the Durotriges will stand with you once more."



Artorius stood looking down towards the expanse of the river below. The Tamesis was substantially larger than the last river they had crossed, though thankfully this had a useable bridge, plus their enemy appeared to be all but beaten. He hoped that in the morning they would confirm that King Togodumnus was, in fact, dead; his alliance of tribal kingdoms completely shattered.

He looked down at the gash on his forearm that had since scabbed over and was now wrapped in a bandage. It was simply the latest of many scars his body had endured in his decades serving as a soldier of Rome. Though he was still very fit and immensely strong, Artorius knew his body simply did not heal as fast as it once had. The nights without sleep before and after a major battle also took its toll on him far more than it had in the past. And while Artorius refused to ever consider himself anything remotely resembling 'old', he had to acknowledge that he was not the young lad who joined the

legions all those years before. The fact that he found himself thinking about the past so much, only served to drive this point home.

Perhaps he was finally reaching the end of his fighting profession. Diana certainly would not object! He let out a sigh as he thought about his wife. Not a day passed that he did not long to hold her once again, twenty years together doing nothing to dissipate his desire for her. As he lay down on his camp bed and allowed sleep to take him, he could almost feel Diana next to him, her gentle touch soothing after the savagery and loss he'd suffered the past few days.

Chapter XX: Send for Caesar!

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“Is this him?” Plautius asked.

The slain man at his feet was large and well built. His tunic, while filthy and now soaked in blood, was of naturally brighter colors than his contemporaries. He also wore a light mail shirt, though it had failed to withstand a pair of arrows that jutted forth from the chest and side. Perhaps most telling was the large sword that lay next to his outstretched hand. A much higher quality weapon than those found on even the nobles they had killed or captured, it was a large two-handed great sword with a highly polished blade and a pommel that was wrapped in leather cords; practical, yet fitting for a warrior king.

The prisoner, who’d been one of Togodumnus’ war chiefs, suddenly fell to his knees, his eyes wet with tears. His hands trembled as his face turned red with sorrow and anger. In a cry of hatred, he lunged forward and grabbed the king’s sword. He quickly spun around, but before he could get to his feet, a legionary’s hobnailed sandal stomped him hard across the head, sprawling him backwards. The soldier rapidly drew his gladius and plunged the blade deep in the war chief’s guts. The man’s eyes rolled back into his head as he clutched his bleeding stomach. The legionary spat on him contemptuously.

“Apologies, sir,” the soldier said as he turned to face his commanding general. “I could have easily subdued him without killing him.”

“I’ll never reprimand a legionary for being quick and precise with his weapon,” Plautius replied. “Besides, his reaction told me what I wanted to know.” He picked up the Catuvellauni king’s sword, admiring its balance and craftsmanship. “This is a fine weapon,” Plautius noted as he showed the blade to Sabinus before handing it to a nearby soldier. “See to it this gets placed in my luggage.”

“Sir!” the legionary acknowledged with a sharp salute before he took the sword away.

“With Togodumnus dead, his brother fled, the alliance shattered, and the remnants in this region cornered,” Plautius thought aloud, “I think it is time we send for Caesar.”

“And what for?” Sabinus asked. “No disrespect intended, but Claudius is no soldier, we don’t exactly need him here.”

“True,” the commander-in-chief conceded. “However, he needs his victory to be seen so that the triumph can be his. Why do you think we invaded this damned isle in the first place?”

“Well, there is a lot of fertile land,” Sabinus observed. “Not like Rome actually *needs* it, though. And they may have some precious metals, but nothing that cannot already be found in ready supply within the empire.”

“Exactly,” Plautius replied. “We invaded for one reason alone; so that Emperor Claudius could claim that he succeeded where even the great Julius Caesar had failed. He can also claim to have stood for justice, as he restored an allied king to his throne. Let’s just be honest with ourselves, Sabinus, this invasion was a political conquest, nothing more.”

“You don’t seem very distraught over the notion,” Sabinus observed.

“I’m not,” Plautius replied, shaking his head. “I simply accept things for what they are. Besides, a new province requires a new governor, and who do you think the emperor will turn to? Don’t mistake me, though, when Claudius asked me to assemble and lead his invasion force, the last thing on my mind was having my own province to govern.”

“Still, it is a sufficient reward for the conquering hero,” Sabinus said, causing Plautius to laugh. “I reckon all wars are political in the end. Well, let us send for Caesar, then!”



With a lull in activity while the army waited for the emperor to arrive from the continent, Artorius took it upon himself to honor their dead. Most of the fallen had come from the regular cohorts, and he left the ceremonies to their respective centurions. Of the thirty-five dead the legion had suffered during the two days of fighting, four were from the First Cohort, along with Camillus.

The cohort was arrayed in parade formation, weapons and armor still battered from the previous days’ fighting. The four centurions primus ordo stood in front of the formation. Though Legionary Amatius was not officially part of the cohort, he still stood with the eagle, which he would carry until such time as a replacement for Camillus was promoted. Artorius had also given the young soldier leave to return to his century later that day in order to attend the military honors being rendered to a friend of his who was slain during the battle.

Artorius slowly stepped in front of the formation and faced his men, his hands clasped behind his back. He spoke calmly, though he found his voice was already starting to break. “Today, we honor the sacrifice of our friends, who have paid the ultimate price for Rome and the empire. Every man lost is a son of a grieving mother, often times a father to now-orphaned children, and always a brother to his friends in the ranks. Remember them! *Gladius… draw!”* As his men drew their weapons, Artorius closed his eyes and proceeded to, in what was a tradition going back hundreds of years, recite the names of each man killed three times.

“Legionary Gaius Fronto! Legionary Gaius Fronto! Legionary Gaius Fronto!”

“Legionary Sextus Villius! Legionary Sextus Villius! Legionary Sextus Villius!”

He paused briefly before reciting the last name, quietly hoping that this would be the final time he would ever have to do a call to the fallen for one of his friends.

“Aquilifer Manius Camillus! Aquilifer Manius Camillus! Aquilifer Manius Camillus!”



Claudius’ arrival was nothing short of a grand spectacle that had been months in the planning. Upon receiving word that the invasion force had landed, the emperor made ready to move his seat of government from Rome to Gesoriacum. The consuls had been given authority to speak on his behalf in all affairs except those of the gravest importance. As the thousand-mile journey over land would have taken months, Claudius had elected to travel by ship, despite his violent seasickness. This long trek around Hispania and up the northern coast of Gaul still took the better part of a month. Claudius had brought an entire fleet of ships which carried his personal baggage, several cohorts of the Praetorian Guard, a dozen senators and their necessities, as well as several new war machines that he intended to give to his commanding general in Britannia. Therefore, once Plautius had sent for him, it took but a few days for word to reach Claudius, who was anxious to set foot on his newly-won conquest.

The emperor rode in an ornate chariot drawn by a team of spectacular Arabian horses. He wore a brightly polished breastplate with a purple cloak

flowing in the breeze behind him. Atop his head was the customary laurel crown that he wore to official functions. Behind him rode a dozen senators, to include Glabrio, who looked as disinterested as ever. Behind them marched four cohorts of the Praetorian Guard. A company of Syrian archers followed, though it was what came next that capped off the grandiose display. The trumpeting of elephants at first seemed unreal to the legionaries who stood in parade formation, lining either side of the open road. Four of them came into view, heavily armored, with covered baskets atop, where rode their North African handlers.

All four legions lined both sides of the road in cohorts of six ranks. Auxiliary cohorts stood in formation behind the legions, with the cavalry regiments arrayed behind them. As the emperor rode past, he held his arm high in salute to his brave legions. Artorius and the other master centurions drew their weapons and turned to face their legions.

"Gladius…draw!" he shouted. Swords flashed from their scabbards and were held up in return of the emperor's salute.

As one, the soldiers gave a loud ovation, *"Hail Caesar! Hail Caesar! Hail Caesar!"*

Claudius face broke into a broad smile and as he passed, Artorius surmised that this was the happiest moment in the emperor's long life.

At the end of the road stood the Praetorium that Plautius had ordered erected. A great red tent stood in the center where the four eagles of the legions stood posted, along with the regimental standards of the auxiliary units that had taken part in the invasion. Plautius, Vespasian, Sabinus, Geta, and Cursor all stood outside the entrance, each man wearing his best armor. King Cogidubnus was also there to greet the emperor; Plautius having extended the invitation to him soon after the battle between the rivers. Though he'd kept his longer hair, he now wore a Roman style toga, complete with a broad purple stripe of the senatorial class, denoting him as their peer.

"Ave, Caesar!" the commander-in-chief said as Claudius awkwardly dismounted from his chariot.

His limp and other physical limitations did not give the appearance of a conquering leader but, then again, the divine Augustus had hardly looked the role of the soldier, either.

"Plautius," Claudius said, clasping the legate's hand. "You've done well, conquering a p…province in such a short t…time." Secretly the emperor cursed himself for his stammer, but Plautius seemed not to notice.

“We’ve established a province, Caesar, but the work has only just begun,” Plautius replied candidly as he led the emperor into the massive tent.

Inside was lined with work tables, couches, as well as an entire dining room setup and numerous columns bearing statues and other décor.

“King Cogidubnus,” Claudius said with a respectful nod towards the Atrebates monarch.

“Hail, Caesar,” he replied, placing a hand over his heart and bowing at the waist.

Servants helped the emperor out of his armor and onto a waiting couch where a large map was spread out on the table. Rather than showing the entire isle, it detailed the southeast portion where the invasion force landed, where decisive battles had taken place, as well as the current borders, following the latest battles.

Plautius pointed to the spot where the camp now stood. “This great river here is called *Tamesis*[1] by the locals. *Camulodunum*[2] is the name of the fortified town about forty-five miles north of here. It is the costal capital of the Catuvellauni, who have made up the core of resistance we’ve faced.”

“Their king, Togodumnus, was killed during the last battle,” Vespasian added. “His brother, Caratacus, has fled, though we do not know where yet. He may be in Camulodunum, or he could have fled to the west with his closet allies, the Silures.”

“I know who they are,” Claudius remarked. “Beastly people, prone to violence and w…war.”

“I’ll give them their due,” Geta said. “They fought like lions, but quickly fled once the rest of their alliance scattered.”

“For now we don’t have to concern ourselves with them,” Plautius said, getting the men back to the task at hand. “Camulodunum is the last stronghold of the Catuvellauni. As such, we sent for you, Caesar.”

“So that I…I could claim victory over our enemies,” the emperor said with a raised eyebrow. He then noted how Plautius looked taken aback. “Oh, come off it, man. I kn…know why you sent for me; so that I could say that I personally triumphed in the end. It was very thoughtful of you, though I know your men could have finished this on their own. Still, my coming here will not be a total waste, as you saw by the elephants I brought with me.”

“Those will serve to terrorize the Catuvellauni,” Vespasian concurred. “Hell, they terrify our own men!”

“Quite,” the emperor said with a nod. “I have also brought you some new

siege engines that you may or may not be able to use, depending on h…how much fight the barbarians have left in them."



"Bugger me, would you look at the size of that thing!" Master Centurion Lyto said as Artorius walked over to where his peer was staring at what appeared to be an oversized scorpion. It had the same double-arms with a tension rope in the center and was drawn back by a pair of hand cranks. The long trough that the firing rope slid along was tilted back so that the weapon was set to fire at high elevation. What was baffling about the entire contraption was its sheer size; more than double the height of a man, and instead of bolts it shot large catapult stones, much larger than those flung by the onagers.

"Siege ballista, sir!" a centurion said as he stepped down from an inspection he'd been making of his weapon. "The emperor brought ten of these to supplement your artillery arsenal. It can fling stones far heavier than an onager and nearly twice the distance."

"It is a fearsome machine," Artorius conjectured. "What I want to know is how much does the damn thing weigh? I mean, can we conceivably carry these contraptions with us on campaign?"

"Well, she's not as heavy as she looks," the centurion answered. "However, I confess the weight and logistics are still an issue; not just with the ballistae themselves, but with the number of ox carts necessary to carry sufficient ammunition. Still, if you ever need to break an enemy fortress, this is the weapon to do it with."

"Of that I have no doubt," Lyto concurred. "My chief of artillery will want to have a look at these."

"Of course," the centurion said with a nod. "Please know, too, that we brought our own crews and logistics staff of cart drivers, ammunition handlers, and stone masons."

"Well, that does mean a few more mouths to feed, but we'll make due," Lyto said, extending his hand to the centurion. "Welcome to the Army of Britannia."

The centurion accepted his hand before Lyto and Artorius left him to continue in his work.

"Fuck me!" Artorius said with a laugh. "Alright, logistics and

transportation issues aside, I would still love to see one of those in action. Hard to believe the emperor brought us ten of those monsters!”



Three days later, as Claudius rode in his chariot at the center of the massed column that marched towards the rebel stronghold at Camulodunum, he appreciated the stamina and intestinal fortitude of the Roman legionary. While it was uncomfortable for him having to stand for long periods, the emperor could not help but marvel at the soldiers who marched with not just their armor and weapons, but packs full of rations, entrenching tools, and various personal effects. Combine this with the fact that they could march between fifteen and twenty-five miles per day, depending on the terrain, and build a fortified camp every night was a colossal feat in its own right. Claudius made mention of this to Plautius on the third night of their march.

“They are the reason you control an empire that stretches from here down to North Africa and east to Mesopotamia,” the legate remarked.

They sat on couches inside the Praetorium tent while the incessant rains that had been falling since midafternoon resounded loudly outside.

“You know I used to envy my b…brother,” Claudius thought aloud. “He was the great soldier who lived with his men, sharing the same hardships, and leading them by his own example. I’ll be straight with you, Plautius, I f…feel like a fraud by comparison.”

“You and Germanicus each led in your own way,” Plautius replied. “I’ll grant that you’re not the soldier he was, but then neither was Augustus. And besides, the men do not expect you to be like them. In fact, they’d prefer it if you did not resemble them at all! As long as you ensure that Rome continues to feed and pay them, make certain they have the equipment they need, good generals to lead them, and above all that you honor their sacrifice for the empire, you will always have their loyalty and respect.”

“Hmm, you know in one of those aspects I have failed one of your legions,” the emperor remarked.

Plautius knew exactly which legion Claudius referred to, though he kept his silence.

“Glabrio is a personal friend and was a favorite of my nephew, who gave him his command of the Twentieth Legion. But he is an old man who never had a command in his life, and I curse myself for not correcting this

deficiency long before you launched the invasion. Friendship is no r…reason to give an unfit senator command of a legion."

"If I may add, Caesar," Plautius said, "there are three hundred serving members of the senate, with two to three times that number who are part of the patrician class. With only twenty-five legates in the entire empire, it is imperative that we select only those who are most fit for command."

"You've done well with the other legions," Claudius said. "The two Flavian brothers have proven their mettle, as has Honorius Geta, though he was already highly experienced with an enviable record. It angered me to no end when I heard that Glabrio did not even cross the channel with his legion, and it broke my heart when we received word about the ghastly death of his chief tribune, Sempronius. And ever since then, command of the legion has fallen on the shoulders of its master centurion."

"Artorius," the commander-in-chief observed. "He's a solid leader with a long record of service. In fact, he served under your brother during the Germanic Wars. However, I can tell that having to be responsible for the entire legion, compounded by his already arduous duties as master centurion, has been wearing him thin. If by succession-of-command a centurion primus pilus does have to take command of the legion, it is only supposed to be for a short interim. That he has led the Twentieth through most of this campaign is a testament to his leadership."

"Quite," Claudius concurred. He looked up briefly at the shadows cast by the oil lamps as he noted that the rains had ceased for the moment. He then continued, "I'm sending a dispatch to Rome, demanding that a replacement legate and chief tribune be sent over at once. Have you any recommendations?"

"I do, Caesar."



Artorius was grateful that the rains had stopped as he slowly made his way over to where the legion's pickets were posted. While this would normally be handled by their own centurions, he felt it only right that his men see that he was concerned about their wellbeing. A pair of torches, placed a few meters in front of the main entrance, cast a soft glow upon the otherwise dark night. The cloud cover was still thick, despite the rains having ceased for the moment. There were four legionaries on duty at the entrance, all turning

to face him as he sloshed through the sodden grass.

"Master Centurion," one of the men said with a respectful nod.

Artorius had put out a directive that soldiers on guard shift were not to salute officers, lest they draw unwanted attention from enemy eyes outside the camp. On this cold evening, Artorius only wore his belted tunic and gladius with his thick cloak wrapped around him. Still, his men knew his face well enough to recognize him in the dim light.

"Here, keep your eyes front, you sodden bastards!" a decanus barked as he walked quickly over from the other direction. Upon seeing his master centurion his tone softened. "Beg your pardon, sir."

"It's alright, sergeant," Artorius replied. He noticed that one of the men had his left arm in a sling, while another had his helmet off, showing a damp bandage that was wrapped around his head.

Indeed all of the men showed signs of minor battle injuries, including the decanus, whose face and forearm bore fresh gashes that were just starting to heal.

"Just went to rouse the squad leader for our replacements," the decanus said. "Of course, like the rest of us he said he couldn't sleep this night."

An elephant trumpeting caused one of the men to roll his eyes in exacerbation.

"Even if we weren't going into battle tomorrow, we wouldn't be catching any sleep as it is with those damned things making a racket all night!"

"If we can hear them, so too can the Catuvellauni," the decanus reasoned. He then turned to Artorius. "Think there's any chance we'll use those tomorrow, sir?"

"Probably," Artorius replied. "The emperor will like to see them in action. And besides, the barbarians of this isle have never seen an elephant or any of the heavy siege engines we've brought. Should they be so foolish as to fight us tomorrow, they'll be in for a nasty shock."

"And how are you holding up, sir?" the decanus asked. His question caused Artorius to raise an eyebrow.

"Say again?"

"It's just…well, the thing is, with no legate or chief tribune, the lads know you've been run ragged since this campaign got underway and they're a bit concerned. That's all."

"Are they now?" the master centurion replied. He breathed deeply through his nose and spoke slowly but with much force in his voice. "You tell

the men, *sergeant*, that my wellbeing is not their fucking concern. A legionary's focus is the men next to him on the battle line. Beyond that, he needs to see to the disposition of his leaders one level higher; that would be you. And as long as they know the mission, as well as the commander's intent, that is all they need to concern themselves with regarding their senior leaders. Do you know the commander's intent?" The question was directed at the legionary with the bandaged head.

"Yes, sir," the man said. "It's to force the Catuvellauni into capitulation; by coercion if possible and force if necessary."

"Well spoken," Artorius replied. His voice was still hard, but the soldier swallowed hard and tried to force a half smile. Artorius continued, "If your cohort commander has an issue with my health and wellbeing, he will address it with me. You men need to focus on each other, as well as your decanus. And sergeant, your concern is foremost these men, then your optio, and possibly your centurion. Are we understood?"

"Yes, sir," the men all said together.

"Know that while we hope the Catuvellauni are already broken, they may still have some fight left in them. Look after your brothers on the line and don't concern yourself with me. It's enough that I have to lose sleep every night worrying about every last one you." Artorius was half grinning at this point, which made the men feel at ease. He had not meant to come across as overly harsh in his rebuke. However, he wanted his men focused on their task at hand, not whether their master centurion was getting enough sleep at night.

The truth was, having to command the entire legion was wearing Artorius thin. Despite his decades in the ranks, most of the duties required of a commanding general were completely foreign to him. The styles of leadership and command responsibilities were completely different for a legate as opposed to a centurion. And for the last few months, Artorius had found himself in the unenviable position of having to do both. As he walked back to his tent, exhaustion finally getting the best of him, he hoped that sooner rather than later Rome would send a competent legate to take command of the legion.



Neither Roman nor Catuvellauni could sleep that night. While Camulodunum was well-fortified, Caratacus could see in the faces of his war

chiefs that their will to fight had mostly left them after the river battles and the death of Togodumnus. The hall was surprisingly vacant as many of their leaders, who despite surviving the battle, had refused his summons.

"I know most of you are feeling like the Romans have won," he said candidly. Some of the men looked down or away, as if ashamed. "Well, aren't you?"

"What can we do?" one of the leaders asked. "The emperor himself has arrived with reinforcements! You can hear the calls of those wretched beasts with the giant tusks."

"We could not stop them at the rivers," another spoke up. "And now that our friends have abandoned us, what would you have us do?"

Caratacus stood and glared at the men. "I would have you make your stand here and now! Not all of our allies have abandoned the fight. The Durotriges are regrouping in the southwest, and the Silures need only see that we are still willing to make a stand against the invaders, and they will send a host of warriors to our aid." He paused and let his words sink in, knowing they were mostly futile. When he spoke again, he surprised his men. "Very well, I release all of you from your oaths. If none of you have the stomach to defend your lands, so be it. Surrender to the Romans tomorrow, to live as their slaves and be done with it."

Though the wagon carried what personal effects they had, the real reason Caratacus wanted it was for his wife, Dylis, who was eight months pregnant with their second child and unable to ride a horse. Their young son rode next to her. Not everyone had deserted Caratacus either; nearly a dozen noblemen were accompanying him, as well as nearly a thousand warriors and their families.

"We are with you, my king!" a warrior said determinedly.

Caratacus' heart was heavy as he made ready to lead these people into exile. And while the Silures were willing to accommodate them, there would be no rest for any of them. Most of these people were farmers and general laborers, and now they would have to fight in order to survive.

"This is not the end," Dylis said, taking her husband's hand. "We will return once the Romans are vanquished, and you will be rightfully restored as king!"



The following morning, the Romans made ready to march on Camulodunum. Onagers and the heavy siege ballistae were arrayed in a long line facing the southern wall of the stronghold. The emperor's war elephants, supported by Achillia's archers, created a vanguard in front of the men of the Second Legion, who had been selected to either accept the Catuvellauni surrender or lead the attack. Claudius himself rode a horse next to Plautius and the other legates, flanked by a mounted detachment of Praetorian Guardsmen.

Vespasian had elected to carry the emperor's demands personally to the Catuvellauni. He rather audaciously rode his horse at a slow canter towards the gate of the city. It was half opened and as he approached, a group of older men came out to meet him. They were dressed better than the usual unwashed barbarian, their gold and silver trimmed robes denoting their noble status. The eldest of the men stepped forward and started to speak in his native tongue. Though Alaric had taken to serving as his interpreter, Vespasian had elected to ride forward alone, and so a younger man who accompanied the group of elders translated.

"My lords bid you welcome to the lands of the Catuvellauni. We look forward to our meeting with the emperor of Rome."

"Where is Caratacus, your king?" Vespasian asked.

The young man did not translate for the elders, but simply answered the question himself. "He is gone, along with many of his followers. Please know that the Catuvellauni now desire peace between our peoples. Our dead are many, and there is great mourning throughout the lands."

"The emperor's terms are simple," Vespasian replied sternly, "total surrender and absolute obedience to Rome. Reparations will also be made for the losses incurred during this war, and the Catuvellauni will subjugate themselves to the Roman governor. Certain border territories will also be ceded to King Cogidubnus of Atrebates. Rome promises to be a fair and just ruler with your people enjoying the benefits of all imperial subjects. Know that your only other option is utter annihilation."

The young man swallowed hard and translated as best he could. The elder's face appeared sad, but unsurprised, by the demands. After all, what could they expect after having taken up arms against Rome? They had stood against the invaders and lost. Without another word, the elder closed his eyes and nodded.

“Open your gates,” Vespasian ordered, “and make ready to receive your emperor!” He then signaled back to Plautius.

A sounding of numerous trumpets followed, with drums beating a cadence as the first wave of legionary cohorts marched into the town. They were soon followed by the praetorians, then the emperor, Plautius, the accompanying senators, and their entourage. Cursor followed with the Indus’ Horse regiment, several more cohorts of legionaries taking up the remainder of the column. Their presence was simply a show of strength, and as soon as they marched through the town, they would disperse back to their camp to await further orders.

For the people of the Catuvellauni capitol, this was their first time seeing the feared Roman soldiers up close. Many were slightly shorter than they, but being encased in their gleaming armor, even the most slender appeared much larger. And whatever their natural body types, every legionary was more muscular, especially in the legs, due to the constant marching in full armor and kit that combined weighed in excess of sixty pounds. They also marched in step to the cadence of the drummers, their uniformly painted shields and mostly identical armor giving the appearance of a single entity rather than a mass of individual soldiers. The armor and weaponry of even a single legionary was more costly than any but the richest war chief or king could afford, giving emphasis on the professional nature of the Roman Army, as well as the empire’s immense wealth.

A large dais occupied the center of the town, normally used by the town crier as well as traveling merchants. Claudius and his legates dismounted here, with the emperor being helped up the short steps. He did his best to hide his cursed limp; no doubt cognizant of the Catuvellaunis’ puzzlement at how so frail a figure could command the mightiest army in the world. Plautius had taken the young man who translated for Vespasian with them onto the dais. The elders of the kingdom stood at the base, just in front of the mass of people gathered to see the Roman emperor.

“People of Catuvellauni,” Plautius began. He spoke slowly, pausing periodically so as to allow the young man time to translate. *“Behold your emperor, Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus!”*

The gathered crowd remained silent, unable as a whole to fathom the true meaning of the words as they were translated for them. The young man struggled with Claudius’ full name, but soon got it spelled out.

Plautius continued, *“Kneel in subjugation and show your obedience to*

Caesar and to Rome!"

The young man looked at him and swallowed hard. He dreaded the words, and even more so what would happen should the people fail to head the command. Plautius would normally have considered such a humiliating spectacle to be excessive; however, given that the Catuvellauni had as recently as two days prior been fighting a war against Rome, a sign of utter dominance was required.

The young man's eyes were closed hard as he shouted Plautius' command. The elders looked at each other and, knowing they had little choice, each went down onto a knee, heads bowed before the stand. Whether this was done in respect or simply because they could not bear to look upon the Romans, it did not matter. A few uncertain words were whispered amongst the crowd, but soon they followed the lead of their elders and all knelt before the dais.

Were Claudius a lesser man, like his nephew Gaius Caligula had been, the spectacle would have swelled his ego and given him extreme delusions of grandeur. As it was, he found the experience to be very humbling and almost embarrassing. Feeling that the show of subjugation was complete, he stepped forward, placing a hand on Plautius' shoulder, who took a step back in deference.

"Newest subjects of the Roman Empire," Claudius said. Ironically, he found that when he spoke loudly, his stutter often disappeared. *"Let us never draw another weapon against each other. Never again will I ask you to kneel before me. Now rise and begin a new era as friends of Rome!"*

Their young translator appeared relieved to say these words, and the people of Catuvellauni uneasily rose to their feet. Most were baffled by the spectacle, though they were relieved that the fighting was now over. Those diehards who would fight the Roman occupation to the death had already fled with Caratacus. The people who remained simply wished to go about their lives in peace. Though they would mourn the loss of their fathers, brothers, and sons who had been slain in the battle, as well as the more numerous who were maimed and in many cases crippled, there was, overall, a sense of relief amongst the Catuvellauni.



That evening, Claudius called a meeting with the elders of the kingdom.

They were invited to a great feast at the Principia, and rather than being paraded as conquered subjects, the emperor saw to it that they were treated as welcome guests. The young translator, whose name they learned was Tristan, was in attendance as well. Plautius had decided to keep him on as his interpreter, as he spoke the dialects of most of the Britannic tribes. The need to translate kept the pace of conversation slow, but Claudius was pleased with how receptive the elders were.

"Welcome, friends," he said as soon as all were seated.

The Catuvellauni were unaccustomed to lounging on Roman couches, though they did their best to give a good appearance.

"I must tell you that while you will now answer to a Roman governor, rather than your former king, I have no desire to replace you with Roman magistrates as leaders of your people."

"We appreciate your magnanimity," one of the elders replied.

"You know your people best and how to govern them," the emperor continued. "Rome will not interfere with the daily rule here. Tribute will remain mostly the same as it once was, but know that you will now benefit from Roman trade and infrastructure."

"And over time, I suppose we will all become Roman," another elder spoke up.

Claudius raised an eyebrow as this was translated for him. "Do you find this disagreeable?" he asked, the elders knowing it was a loaded question.

"Those who would continue to fight against Rome have already fled," the first elder said quickly. "Our people simply wish to be left in peace."

"And they shall," Claudius replied.

"You must understand, there are many benefits to falling under the rule of Rome," Plautius added. "Our soldiers will now defend your lands, and an attack on you will be an attack on Rome."

"Some may say that you are no longer free," Claudius spoke up. "But then were you before? Tell me, is the fear of starvation from a bad crop season, or the constant infighting and fear of being conquered by a neighboring kingdom that may not be as magnanimous as we are, is that really living free?"

There was an uncomfortable pause, as none of the elders dared reply.

"In time you will see the doles of being Roman subjects," Plautius added. "In the very least, know that your children and grandchildren will live a better life with greater opportunities than they had before."



In one of the Roman camps outside the town, Magnus was having a celebration of his own with Achillia. As a centurion primus ordo, his tent was one of the largest in the camp and, as such, he'd had no qualms about having Achillia essentially move in with him. Each had their armor, weapons, and kit laid out on sturdy racks with all of their personal belongings stored in packs. The Syrian-Roman woman kept little in the way of personal effects, as she preferred to travel light.

"By Odin, I am relieved that the major fighting is done," Magnus said with a sigh as he took a cup of wine and fell back onto his large camp bed.

Achillia curled up next to him, trying not to spill her own chalice on him. "There will always be fighting to do," she said. "But for now, I agree that this is a time for celebration."

"In more ways than one," the Norseman said with a broad smile, placing his hand on her stomach. Achillia blushed for a moment, but then saw that Magnus had become serious. "I don't want you going into battle anymore, at least not for the time being."

"Well, like you said, my love," Achillia replied, "the fighting appears to be over."

Chapter Endnotes:
1 – River Thames
2 – Colchester, England

Chapter XXI: Triumph Interrupted

Camulodunum, Britannia
August, 43 A.D.
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After just sixteen days in Britannia, Emperor Claudius began his journey back to Rome, where he would inform the senate of the army's triumph. Though while Caratacus and his followers had gone into hiding in the west, there was still trouble stirring. Barely two days after the emperor's departure, a messenger from one of the cavalry regiments patrolling the southwest arrived. Plautius was holding a meeting with his senior commanders to decide the dispersing of the legions and auxiliary regiments throughout the newly-won lands when the trooper arrived.

"Noble Plautius," the cavalryman said with a salute.

"What word do you bring?" the new governor asked.

"It's the Durotriges," the messenger replied. "They refused our parlay for peace and instead had the audacity to goad us into attacking them. We also heard word from several sources that they will try and defend against us at their fortress called *Mai Dun*[1]."

"Mai Dun," Plautius repeated, looking over at Tristan.

"It means *Great Hill*, excellency," he explained.

"Do you know much about it?" Vespasian asked.

"I've been there once, when I was a small boy," the young man replied. "The people of these lands believe it is impenetrable. It is a large hill with massive ramparts carved out of its very face; each rising up more than thirty feet. It was formed nearly two thousand years ago, and tall grasses now cover it. It is relatively flat on top and more than large enough for an entire town to occupy it."

"The Twentieth Legion fought the Durotriges," Plautius noted, turning to Artorius.

"Yes, sir," the master centurion replied. "Though to be honest, we only fought against their reinforcements that had been late to arrive, no more than eight thousand total. Of those, we killed several hundred and captured perhaps another thousand. They've already been shipped off with the slave drivers."

“They are a confederation of small independent villages and farming communities,” Sabinus added. “From that they can still muster large enough of a force to harass our territories to no end. The also border the Atrebates, who will look to us for protection should hostilities increase.”

“All with the perceived notion of safety within their great hill fort,” Plautius grumbled.

Word of the Durotriges’ refusal to capitulate had already spread throughout the camps. The army was mostly scattered by this point, with vexilations from each legion en route to their assigned locations, with only the Second Legion mostly intact still at Camulodunum. Artorius had sent half of the Twentieth to just north of the Tamesis River, where a more permanent camp was being established. He had kept with him his First, Fifth, and Eighth Cohorts.

After receiving the message, Plautius sat brooding for a few moments. The dispatch troubled him greatly. The emperor returning to Rome to prepare for his triumph the following spring complicated things. If the word Plautius received was true, then any celebrations in Rome would be premature should the Durotriges prove able to muster up enough warriors from their confederation of tribal states. And they had yet to hunt down Caratacus nor had they established relations with many of the surrounding kingdoms and tribal states. In short, Rome had a small province that was but a fraction of Britannia, and what they had acquired was by no means secure.

“These impudent bastards must be smashed into oblivion!” Plautius emphasized as he addressed his senior officers. “By refusing our offers of peace and continuing to make war with Rome even after the Catuvellauni were subdued, their king has forfeited his life.” He then turned to Vespasian. “Take the Second Legion plus whatever additional forces you will need and destroy them.”

“I’ll need two regiments of cavalry to screen our advance,” the general said after a moment’s contemplation. “We don’t know the terrain to the southwest or even how far it is to their stronghold at…what was that place called again?”

“Mai Dun, sir,” his chief tribune said.

“Two of my reconnaissance patrols have just returned this morning, along with the messenger,” Tribune Cursor spoke up. “I’ve just barely had a chance to look at their report. The terrain to the southwest is mostly open fields with the occasional hill fort. After their recent defeat, I do not foresee them

attempting to face us in the open."

"In which case I will need siege engines and lots of them," Vespasian remarked. "Plautius, I will need every onager, scorpion, and ballista we have available. We cannot afford any protracted sieges, so I will smash every barbarian fort we cross into extinction."

"You'll have them," the commander-in-chief asserted. "Take those heavy siege ballistae with you, as well. I will detach every spare logistics wagon we have available for your siege train. You will need extra manpower to escort them, as well as the crews themselves."

"Alright," Vespasian said while drawing a line with his finger along the crude map that showed their general axis of advance. "I'm guessing it's about two weeks march to their capitol, though we should triple that pending any small sieges and assaults we have to conduct, plus how much those heavy ballistae and their ammunition wagons slow us down."

"That was our assessment as well," Cursor stated. "We didn't get all the way to the coastal capitol, plus the messenger was turned back well before he could get close enough to have a thorough look. That being said, my men did hear from the locals, confirming there is an ancient fortress that's been cut out of a massive hill. I'm assuming this is the same place as they say it's impenetrable."

"Of course, they would think that," Plautius scoffed.

"The natives also call the place *Dunium*, which we think means *fort*," the tribune added. "We believe that this is the seat of King Donan."

"Send one of your regiments ahead to scout this fortress out," Vespasian ordered Cursor. "Your remaining troops will screen the legion's advance. I'll need two cohorts of auxiliaries to protect the flanks and supply trains. And if we're going to be conducting a number of assaults on fortified positions, I'll need additional archers, so I'll take the Syrian allied detachment with me. They are extremely mobile and very accurate with their longbows."

"They covered us well at both river battles," Plautius observed. "No doubt Achillia will be anxious to get her troops back into the fighting."

"I'll need two cohorts from you, Artorius," Vespasian added. "I'm not concerned about the smaller oppida, but if this ancient fortress is anything that the locals would view as impenetrable, I'll need extra assault troops."

"I'll give you three, including my First Cohort," the master centurion asserted.

Plautius then addressed the assembled leaders. "If that is all, then prepare

your men to start their advance tomorrow. Your orders are simple; find the enemy and break him!”



“You cannot go!” Magnus protested as Achillia packed her gear and threw on her mail shirt.

“Vespasian has asked for my skirmishers, and so I go with them,” she replied as she tightened her belt and slung her arrow quiver.

“Damn it all, I forbid it!” Magnus immediately regretted his choice of words, for Achillia simply glared at him coldly as she reached for her longbow.

“Know this,” she relied calmly, “though I love you, you are neither my husband nor my master.”

“It is not just you that I worry about,” Magnus persisted.

“I am not so far along that I’ll be incapacitated,” Achillia reassured him. She understood the cause for his concern all too well, and was quick to forgive his earlier words.

“Well,” he replied, “at least I’ll be coming with you.”

“We both have our duties. And I promise you, my love, that this will be my last…provided it is yours as well. I have no more desire to see you slain in battle than you do me, so let us end our campaigns here.”

Her words took him aback, yet Magnus did not hesitate to answer. He took her in his arms and kissed her passionately.

“One last campaign,” he promised. “And then a new life together!”



Despite continued pockets of resistance, as well as Vespasian’s pending trek to finish off the Durotriges, Plautius was still pleased with how the conquest was coming together. Fall was coming on, and in just six short months he had established Roman control in southeast Britannia and gained a new province for the empire. Even though the northern lands of the Brigantes had not been occupied by Rome, their queen, Cartimandua, was ready to swear allegiance and, as such, had made herself the most powerful monarch within Britannia. There was still one more kingdom to deal with that held the lands on the east coast of the isle, just north of the established Roman

territories. Plautius was willing to offer them very favorable terms, at least for the time being.

"King Prasutagus of the Iceni!" a tribune announced.

The king was a young man, tall with blondish hair and piercing eyes. He wore a thick plaited cloak, held in place by a bronze broach, over his left shoulder. A tall, young woman, who Plautius surmised was his consort, accompanied him. Her garb was similar to that of her husband, though it failed to obscure her protruding belly that showed she was heavily with child. She remained silent, though her demeanor was one of hostility that contrasted the genial air of her husband.

Plautius sat on his camp chair, which he used for all such engagements. As it was an unusually sunny day, he elected to hold their meeting outside his principia tent. Sabinus and Geta sat on either side of him; Vespasian having left for the southwest, en route to lay siege to Mai Dun. All three legates had donned their best armor with scarlet ceremonial cloaks.

"Noble Plautius," Prasutagus began, bowing deeply, "it is an honor to stand before you, and I hope Rome and the Iceni will enjoy a long lasting friendship in peace. May I present my queen, Boudicca."

The woman gave a curt nod to the Roman legate, clearly not sharing her husband's amicability towards their new overlords. Plautius paid her a quick glance and then returned his focus to the king.

"You fully understand the emperor's terms," he stated.

"Yes," Prasutagus replied. "And you are aware of the concessions we've asked for?"

The king had dictated his response to the imperial messenger who had borne Plautius' proposal to the Iceni. Though worded cordially enough, it was clearly an ultimatum. Prasutagus knew about the alliance's resounding defeat and suspected that the hill fort of Mai Dun would soon fall. Like all tribal monarchs within the newly won Roman Province of Britannia, he knew that he had little choice when it came to accepting Plautius' terms. Despite the loathing his wife felt for the Romans, Prasutagus was determined to spare his people from the same fate as the Catuvellauni and Durotriges. Still, in his response he had hoped to win some concessions.

"Your response was…intriguing," Plautius said slowly, resting his chin on his steepled fingertips. "I am willing to grant your request that no Roman troops be stationed within your lands. You further ask for loans from Rome to help with infrastructure."

“We suffered a bad harvest last year,” Prasutagus explained. “We need to purchase grain and wheat to supplement our food shortages. I also wish to make basic improvements to my people’s lives but cannot with the means we have at this time.”

“This should not be a problem,” Plautius replied with a dismissive wave of his hand.

Prasutagus looked relieved, though Boudicca continued to glare at the Roman legate.

“The emperor’s representative to your people will be an equite magistrate. You can work out the details with him, once he’s assigned. Meantime, I’m sure we can arrange a preemptive installment to ease your people’s hardships.”

Were he not so anxious to secure Roman loans to aid the Iceni, Prasutagus would have paid closer heed to the tone in Plautius’ voice. It was by no means sinister; however, his queen consort rightly suspected that Roman generosity often demanded a heavy toll. It was a price that most paid, due to either desperation to escape whatever their plight may be or out of fear of reprisal wrought by the blades of legionaries.

“As for your final request,” Plautius continued, “you should know that it is customary for client kings to will their kingdoms to the emperor upon their death. This ensures at least a few years of peaceful assimilation before the people become fully immersed within the Roman Empire. You are asking that we allow the Iceni to retain a modicum of autonomy, even after your death.”

“As you can see,” the king replied, looking back at his consort, “my wife is bearing our first child. I ask that both my children and the emperor be my heirs.”

“You make a bold entreaty,” Plautius remarked. He paused for a few moments before replying. “I will grant your request. Your children will be named joint heirs with Caesar after you pass on to the halls of your ancestors.”

Prasutagus looked immensely relieved and somewhat triumphant that he had achieved all he’d hoped for. There was still one last formality to end their meeting.

Plautius then held up his clenched fist with the imperial seal prominently showing on his ring. “Swear your allegiance!” he demanded.

The Iceni king looked back at his wife and despite the look of horror

upon her face, he quickly stepped forward, bowed, and kissed the ring on Plautius' hand. Though he had failed to get on his knees like the other kings, and the act was rather rushed, it was still enough to satisfy Plautius and the other Romans. He nodded to Prasutagus, who replied in kind before leaving with his queen and escorts in tow.

"Do you think I was too generous with them?" Plautius asked, resting his chin on his hand.

"A touch of good will can have far reaching implications," Sabinus replied. "Those who opposed us may come to regret their transgressions, and those who rule the lands not yet conquered by Rome may be more amicable to coming to terms with Caesar. Besides, Prasutagus is a young man. I daresay he has many years of rule left and much can change between now and then. Your term as governor will be long past, and we may not even have the same emperor when the time comes."

"I swear his queen was trying to kill me with her gaze," Plautius noted. "She either has an insufferable temperament or, perhaps, she is more cognizant than her husband when it comes to understanding what obedience to Rome will mean."

"Eh, what's the worst she can do?" Geta scoffed.

Chapter Endnote:
1 – Maiden Castle, Dorset

Chapter XXII: An Arduous Trek

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The first week on the march passed without too much calamity for Vespasian and his task force. August was the driest month of the year for Britannia, and although they were still subjected to scattered rains every few days, the paths were mostly clear. They soon passed through the region around the camp that was under construction just north of the River Tamesis. Artorius was pleased with the work already being done by his legionaries. Their own fort was a temporary wooden structure, though they were working and building up the roads and infrastructure to allow for a much larger settlement to spring up.

"The great river makes this place an ideal location for a city," he observed as he and Vespasian sat astride their horses and watched the construction work. Down by the water, the foundations for a series of docks were being emplaced.

"To think none of the barbarians ever thought of building up here!" Vespasian scoffed.

"Who knows," the master centurion replied, "perhaps one day this humble settlement will rise up to become the seat of a massive empire, one even greater than ours." His words were partially in jest, though Vespasian did not take them that way.

"Well, Rome herself came from equally humble origins," he remarked.

A few days later they passed through the Kingdom of the Atrebates, where they were met by a small contingent of mounted Britons. Amongst them was King Cogidubnus, dressed in a mail shirt, flowing red cloak, and carrying a Roman-style cavalry spatha on his hip.

"King Cogidubnus," Vespasian said as the men approached them. He stopped his horse and extended his hand. "What pleasure is this?"

"We heard Rome was marching to war against the Durotriges," the king explained. "Seeing as their lands border ours, and we are more familiar with them, I think it only right to serve with those who restored me to my people's throne. My only regret is I do not have sufficient warriors to spare, especially during the harvest. We've also been depleted by the troubles we've suffered over the past few years."

"You are indeed welcome to join us," Vespasian replied. "Information on

the enemy is just as vital as the mightiest legion. Tell me, what is your history with the Durotriges?"

The men continued on their journey with Cogidubnus' bodyguard falling in behind the legate's staff.

"As you know, they share our western border," the king said. "Though like all borders in this land, it is always under dispute, particularly when the land is vitally important, either strategically or economically."

"And are the western lands of your kingdom important as such?" Vespasian asked.

"More valuable than any gold mines. Our western lands, as well as all of Durotriges, are among the most fertile in all Britannia."

"And while mines full of precious metals are all well and good," Artorius noted, "in the end, one cannot eat gold."

"Well spoken, master centurion," Vespasian replied. "The key to any conquest is land that is fertile for raising crops. Your people have understood this for millennia."

"That we have," Cogidubnus agreed. "The lands of the Atrebates and Durotriges can grow much in the way of wheat and grain, which in the end are of far greater value than anything else you may take from this isle in terms of valuables and slaves. That is why oppida hill forts dominate so much of the region. They allow a safe place to store food without threat of theft or being overwhelmed by any but the strongest of armies. It's always been a type of bloody stalemate, with the occasional skirmish creating a few more widows and orphaned children. After which, the belligerents go home and nothing is settled."

"Perhaps we can settle some of the border disputes for you," Vespasian said, his mouth cocked in a sinister grin.

The Atrebates were Rome's closest allies, so it made sense to help them annex some of their common enemy's lands.

"We did get you some of the border territories of the Catuvellauni in reparation for their invasion of your kingdom."

"And for that I am grateful," Cogidubnus said. "Right now, I really would like nothing more than to see King Donan brought to his knees. Bastard was almost as much of a bother as Togodumnus was. But since the Catuvellauni have sued for peace and Togodumnus is dead, I suspect we will have no more troubles from them. And with the pacified Cantiaci to the east and nothing but the sea to the south, once the Durotriges are properly subdued, perhaps

for the first time in our known history, my people can at last have peace!”



As Alaric rode towards the enormous hill fort, he thought for a moment about simply turning his horse north and fleeing back to Brigantes. He loathed the thought of being used as an emissary for the Romans, but he knew he had little choice. After all, the queen had tasked him with monitoring the Romans, and he was the only one of the Brigantes who knew about the pending assault on Mai Dun. It would be he who would have to tell Cartimandua whether the fort stood or fell.

Evidently the people of Durotriges knew the Romans were coming, for many had already fled to whatever oppida was nearest their farms. Those who were able, were making their way to Mai Dun. It was about ten miles from the fort that Alaric came across a large caravan of wagons, carts, and hundreds of people making for the fort. They were escorted by a number of King Donan’s warriors. As they spotted the young man approaching, one of the mounted escorts turned his horse about and rode towards him.

“Hold!” he said, raising his hand. “You are not of these lands. What is your business here?”

“My name is Alaric of the Brigantes and guardsman of Queen Cartimandua.” He decided it would be best that he not mention his being sent ahead by the advancing Roman Army for the moment.

“Then you are a long ways from home,” the warrior observed. “And your queen has all but subjugated herself to the Romans, so is your business in Durotriges hers or theirs?”

“My queen dispatched me to observe the Romans,” Alaric replied, deciding that candor was his safest strategy. “She also wishes to avoid further bloodshed in these lands. And as you have guessed, judging by this horde of refugees, there is an enormous Roman Army just a few days’ march up that road.”

“Yes, we know of them,” the warrior said dismissively. “We will arrive at Mai Dun by tomorrow, where we will be safe from that army of thieves and murderers.”

Alaric sighed, closed his eyes and shook his head. “You cannot simply hide from them,” he implored. “I ask of you, take me to King Donan and let me parlay with him. The Catuvellauni have surrendered and have been

treated with clemency. If you surrender now, the Romans will treat your people fairly, but if you compel them to lay siege, there will be no mercy."

"Piss on you, Roman lapdog!" the warrior spat. "You know nothing of the plight of our people or our might to stand against your masters!"

"That is where you're wrong," Alaric said. "I was not always of the Brigantes. My former people in Germania thought like you did. They have been fighting against the Romans for decades. In the end, we were nearly exterminated, the few of us who survived becoming scattered to the winds. I *beg* of you, let me speak with your king and not let your people share the fate of mine!"

His eyes were wet with tears born of frustration and sorrow, for his heart went out to the poor and naïve people who thought they would find sanctuary within their hill fort. Alaric looked upon the faces of men, women, children; all would either be dead or enslaved before the week was done. The warrior's mouth was open. His face betrayed he was moved by the young man's words. In the end, he had his orders, and he simply shook his head.

"Leave now," he said quietly, "and never return to Durotriges."



"That must be the fifth hill fort we've passed," Vespasian noted as he, Artorius, and the officers accompanying them road down the dirt road that led towards the famous hill fort. "They're too small to bother with right now, with not enough warriors to be of any real threat. Once Mai Dun falls, we'll deal with them."

While still chalked full of large forests, most of the region was relatively flat with rolling hills and was mostly open farmland. Artorius slowed his horse a bit and rode beside the Second Legion's master centurion.

"He has a keen grasp of the overall strategic picture," Artorius said.

"That he does," Lyto concurred. "I've been in the ranks for thirty-five years; before he was even born! I served under Tiberius, Severus, and even the great Germanicus. Rarely have I seen a man more fitting to lead the armies of Rome than that man up there. He listens to his centurions, rarely making a major decision without at least consulting our opinion. And whether he followed our advice or not, we knew he was making an educated and sound decision."

"Who knows, perhaps he could become emperor someday," Artorius

chuckled in reply.

"Well, emperors aren't elected," Lyto remarked, "and as long as the Julio-Claudians hold on to the imperial throne, that will never happen. A pity, though. No disrespect intended to our current Caesar, but you know Claudius is achieving military glory on our backs. He may be a good administrator—I wouldn't know as I don't keep up on such things—but he is no soldier. As you saw at the River Medway and the minor sieges we've done, Vespasian had made most of the major tactical decisions, even more so than Plautius. He comes up with the plan and we execute, often with him fighting right alongside us. The lads love him for it. I just hope he doesn't get himself killed!"

"Some of the men call him *the Siege Master*," Artorius said, "both your soldiers and mine have referred to him in such terms. I dare say, he'll get his chance to prove it soon enough. The locals believe that Mai Dun is unconquerable."

"Anything can be conquered," Lyto scoffed. "Still, I suppose we'll put it to the test soon enough." He paused and furrowed his brow as he saw three riders approaching them. "Here, isn't that the messenger you sent forward?"

"I do believe it is," Artorius replied as he spotted Alaric, accompanied by a pair of troopers from the Indus Horse regiment, who had joined him on his way back. "Let us go see if King Donan has any sense or if he's determined to face extermination."

The two men, along with Vespasian and his chief tribune, rode forward to meet the men. The troopers saluted the legate before addressing them.

"The hill fort is barely half a day from here," one of them reported.

"And what of King Donan?" Vespasian asked Alaric. "We smashed him in battle, we're set to ravage his kingdom, surely he has to know he's beaten!"

The saddened expression on the young man's face told of the king's differing disposition. "No," he replied, shaking his head. Clearly Alaric was hoping to save lives, sickened by the slaughter of war. "I was not even allowed to see the king. I told his men that I was sent on behalf of Queen Cartimandua, to plead with him to show reason and spare his people. Donan is convinced that Mai Dun is impenetrable. I was told to tell you that the only way through the gates will be on a ramp made up of slain legionaries."

"So be it," Vespasian acknowledged. "Let his people face annihilation for his folly. You will remain with us and bear witness to those in this land who

would dare face the power of Rome!”

Alaric simply nodded and walked his horse off to the side of the path, where he watched intently as the huge column of legionaries slowly approached.

“Sir, we also bring word from Tribune Cursor,” one of the troopers spoke up. “We’ve found a good location for staging the army. We’re to escort you there.”

“Excellent!” Vespasian said excitedly. He turned back to the two master centurions and his chief tribune. “We have found our enemy, now we must break him!”

Chapter XXIII: The Siege Master Unleashed

Hill Fort of Mai Dun, Southwest Britannia
September, 43 A.D.
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The region around Mai Dun was mostly rolling farmland, though there were sufficient woods for Tribune Cursor to keep to as he guided Vespasian and his senior leaders towards the expanse that led to the eastern gate of the massive hill fort.

"We scouted around the entire hill, and the surrounding areas are all open like you see here," the Tribune reported.

"Good," Vespasian replied. "Let them see us coming!"

The men dismounted and walked to a small clearing, where Cursor and his men had scrawled out a crude depiction of the hill in the dirt.

"The northern and southern slopes are all very steep," Cursor explained. "We could not see any palisades or wooden fortifications at the top. From what we could gather, there are two, perhaps three sloping ramparts encircling the fort."

"An impressive feat of engineering," Lyto observed. "Is the east gate the only feasible way in?"

"There is one to the west," Cursor said, pointing to a spot on his makeshift earthen map. "However, the slope is very steep here as well. Something else, though it's hard to tell from this vantage point, but this hill is huge. We simply do not have the numbers to completely encircle it. To be blunt, I can understand why the locals think this place is impenetrable."

"And from what we've gathered from interrogations," Artorius added, "An entire town sits atop with supplemental farm fields, livestock, and its own wells. No real chance of starving them out in the short term."

"Agreed," Vespasian replied. He was kneeling on the ground, looking back and forth between Cursor's diagram and what he could see of the hill behind him. "And as our cavalry commander has pointed out, we do not have the numbers for a full encirclement anyway; meaning they could still ferry supplies and food in and out. Besides which, time is not something that is on our side. Plautius wants this hill fort broken quickly, lest a lengthy defense give other nefarious rebels an incentive to continue in their futile struggle

against us."

Shouts and a commotion of men crashing through the trees alerted them. Two barbarians stumbled into the glade, being prodded on by several mounted cavalry troopers with their lances.

"We found these two skulking about off the main road," one of the soldiers reported. "No doubt they were spying on our advancing columns."

"Well, of course they were," Vespasian replied calmly. "We would do the same."

He then dismissed the troopers and had a couple of on-hand legionaries drag the two men to their feet. They were grubby and disheveled, looking like they hadn't slept in a couple days. One of them, who appeared to be much older, spoke quickly, in a language the Romans could not understand.

"What is he saying?" Vespasian asked Alaric.

"He's speaking awfully fast," the young man replied. "Something about meeting your doom on the bloody slopes."

"Oh, fuck this!" Master Centurion Lyto snapped before kicking the man hard in the stomach.

"Easy there," Vespasian said, placing a hand on his shoulder. He then turned to Alaric. "Tell the older one that he is to return to Donan and inform him that if he does not surrender immediately, everyone inside Mai Dun will meet this man's fate." He then nodded to Lyto, who drew his gladius and stabbed the younger man in the stomach.

The lad gave a piteous cry through clenched teeth as his bowels were run through. The older man gave a scream of sorrow, which was met by the brutal stomping of several legionary sandals.

"Get him out of my sight," Vespasian ordered. The soldiers drug the screaming man along with the twitching corpse of what they guessed might have been his son.

"This is going to take careful timing," Vespasian observed as he continued to scan the hill as if nothing had happened.

"Sir," Artorius spoke up. "I request that my three cohorts lead the attack on the east gate."

"Very well," Vespasian nodded. He looked out ahead and pointed. "Those rolling mounds by the gate are not very large, and if they have all their warriors massed there, it could turn into a bloody grind even with artillery support. Once your men are committed, I'll give the order for the supplemental assaults on the flanks. However, given the steepness of those

slopes, the main task of taking this hill falls on you. Well, gentlemen, that does it. We'll camp here for tonight, get the men a good, hearty breakfast in the morning, and then send those impudent bastards to oblivion!"



"All units are in position, sir," the chief tribune reported the next morning as he rode up on his horse.

Vespasian simply nodded and made one final mental assessment of the task at hand.

The commanding legate was on foot, electing to advance with the primary assault elements who would attack the east gate. With him was a pair of equite tribunes, his aquilifer, cornicen, and a single squad of legionaries. His master centurion was with his cohort, which Vespasian had placed on the extreme right of the huge formation. Part of Lyto's mission was to reinforce the Batavian auxiliaries who came to support them, as well as to make certain no Durotriges escaped from the western entrance.

Centered on Vespasian were not his own soldiers, but those of the Twentieth Legion's First Cohort. Their Fifth and Eighth Cohorts positioned on their immediate flanks. Artorius stood to Vespasian's left, also eyeing the ground to their front and envisioning what had to happen within the next couple hours. Behind him stood his cohort's signifier, along with another soldier bearing the square red vexilation flag of the Twentieth Legion, something that legionary cohorts carried whenever they were attached out from their parent legion.

Just behind the command group, and standing directly in front of the First Cohort were the skirmishers of Achillia's allied detachment; the archers of the Second Legion dispersed to cover their own soldiers when they moved against the northern and southern ramparts. The Syrian woman looked over her shoulder and saw Magnus staring at her, his face full of worry. She simply smiled and winked at him reassuringly.

"Ready to write the pages of history?" Vespasian asked Artorius, a sinister and determined gleam in his eye.

"Yes, sir," the master centurion replied confidently. The fear and uneasiness that came before every battle he'd fought in over the last twenty-eight years suddenly vanished. The wait was always the worst part for Artorius and, now that it was over, training and discipline took over.

“Then take up your position,” the legate directed.

Artorius saluted sharply and quickly walked to his position at the extreme right of the First Cohort’s front rank. Vespasian then dismissed the legionaries who had been acting as his bodyguards, releasing them back to their respective units. The Siege Master would advance alone at the head of his army with just his cornicen marching behind his right shoulder. It was not a matter of grandstanding or ego, but was, in fact, a practicality, since from there he could observe the advancing of his entire force, while directing maneuver as much as possible before all units converged for the assault.

“Sound the advance!” he ordered.

The loud notes resounded on the cornicen’s horn and the army began its move. Artorius and the cohorts of the Twentieth Legion were in the very center and stepped off slowly, as the cohorts of the Second Legion on either advanced at a much quicker pace. Directly behind them, the artillery crews drove their massive siege engines forward. Each crew supplemented by more than a dozen auxiliaries to drag the heavy machines forward. In the far distance, Cursor’s cavalry regiments rode in front of the north and south face of the hill. Two regiments of Batavian auxiliary infantry blocked the western approach to the hill, having positioned themselves in the middle of the night.

Anxious as the men were for battle, they kept their pace slow and measured; the hill being much further away than it appeared. Despite it being nearly fall, it was an unusually warm morning. The sun was already beating down on them and, remarkably, there was nary a cloud in the sky.



From the top of the great hill, King Donan watched intently as the Roman Army advanced. Even at a distance of a mile, their footfalls echoed across the ground. The armor and shields of the legionaries gleamed in the rising sunlight. While still confident that Mai Dun could withstand the coming assault, Donan was struck with fear. What would happen to his people should his men fail? He had perhaps four thousand warriors, along with about twice as many boys and women who were able to fight and had grabbed whatever they could in the way of weapons.

He had numerous bows, slings, and short throwing spears in his arsenal, which had always proven more than enough whenever neighboring tribes had been brazen enough to attack Mai Dun during the incessant disputes over the

region's fertile lands. And yet, having witnessed firsthand what these Romans were capable of once they closed the distance, he knew that if they breached the ramparts and a close-combat battle ensued, his people were finished. What Donan was not prepared for were the large wooden mechanisms that were being wheeled, almost inconspicuously, behind the advancing wave of legionaries.



"Cohorts…halt!" Vespasian shouted.

The Twentieth Legion's men took one final step then stopped. The units of the Second Legion continued their advance towards their supplemental assault positions.

The rolling mounds where the road had to wind its way through were now clearly visible, as were the wooden barricades where numerous warriors clustered with slings and bows. Vespasian knew how to break them up.

"Onagers and ballistae make ready!" he ordered. *"Scorpions…post!"*

Having taken every piece of siege equipment available, Vespasian was able to mass twenty scorpions between each of the gaps of the assaulting cohorts. The rest were dispersed to cover the Second Legion and provide harassment fire to the defenders on the other ramparts. In addition to the onagers, he had acquired the ten heavy ballistae the emperor had brought to Britannia. Given their cumbersome weight and lack of mobility, they were almost never used in open battle, and were, instead, employed strictly for sieges against large strongholds. Vespasian reckoned there was no better place to finally put his heaviest weapons to use.

The enormous machines were unloaded off their carts and arrayed in a long line, facing towards Mai Dun. All the while, the Second Legion's cohorts continued their methodical advance in the distance. And while any type of heavy boulder would suffice, the engineers had been carving and smoothing down those that would be shot from the heavy siege engines, thereby ensuring greater accuracy. Two wagons of shot were placed behind each onager and ballista.

"Load!" the centurion primus ordo in charge of the catapults shouted.

A similar command was echoed by the section leaders of the scorpions, who were arrayed just in front of and in between the three cohorts of the Twentieth Legion. While a single man could carry the stones used by the

onagers, it took two men using a pair of carrying poles to lift the heavy shot into the siege ballistae. And while three or four men could readily man an onager, the largest of the ballistae took a minimum of eight. The throwing arms of the onagers were pulled back with heavy cranks, and several men on each ballista turned the large wheels that pulled back the double arms.

"Siege engines set!" the centurion called out to his commanding legate.

"Scorpions ready!" another officer shouted back.

Vespasian took a deep breath as the taunts and war cries from the ramparts grew louder.

"Time to bring the hammer down," he said quietly before shouting his next order. *"Siege engines…fire!"*

The loud slap of more than forty onager throwing arms slamming home, along with the loud screech of the heavy ballistae as they unleashed their heavy payloads jolted the legionaries positioned in front of them. It was both awe-inspiring and terrifying for Artorius and his men as they watched the storm of death fly over their heads and towards their enemy.



The warriors on the wooden ramparts had never so much as seen a catapult before. So when the storm of several dozen large boulders was hurled at them, they stared, first in disbelief; this turned to abject terror at the last moment as both man and barricade were smashed to pieces. One warrior had his head smashed clean off his body, which stood momentarily with torrents of blood spewing from the stump his neck before tumbling unceremoniously over the ruptured ramparts. Another took an onager shot directly to the chest, sending him flying back and landing with a sickening crunch amongst his companions behind the barricades. His eyes were wide, tongue protruding between his bloodied teeth. Many of the catapult stones flew over the ramparts and landed amongst the warriors who were massed on the other side.

"What unholy magic is this?" one of them screamed as he looked upon his friend's shattered body that twitched violently after having been brutally crushed.

"The Romans have summoned the beasts of the underworld!" another snarled as he climbed up one of the rolling mounds near the gate. In an instant a scorpion bolt slammed into his throat and burst out the back in a

spray of blood and bone. A volley of similar missiles fell amongst the defenders with several more falling, either killed or badly injured.



"That woke them up a bit," Vespasian chuckled darkly. "*Siege engines, fire at will; scorpions, fire by volley! Keep those bastards behind the ramparts suppressed!"*

"Sir!" his centurion primus ordo acknowledged.

Vespasian turned back to Artorius. "We'll beat them down for a while and then conduct the assault."

"Understood," the master centurion acknowledged.

His men were talking quietly amongst themselves, though they would jump with a start whenever an onager or ballistae close to them fired. Artorius then spoke over his shoulder to Magnus, "It's almost unnerving for us, let alone what it must be doing to those poor bastards."

Magnus snorted in reply. "I imagine the breach will be saturated with mutilated corpses before we even get there."

"The paths will run red with blood," a nearby legionary said quietly to himself.

After a few minutes of relentless bombardment, Vespasian calmly turned to Artorius. "Master Centurion Artorius, you may conduct your assault."

"Yes, sir!" Artorius drew his gladius and shouted an order that could be heard throughout the plain. *"Twentieth Legion! Forward…march!"*

Without cheer or fanfare, the soldiers of his three cohorts silently stepped off and began their advance towards the ramparts. Shots from the ballistae and onagers continued to sail over their heads and smash into the palisade and earthworks. Advancing just ahead of his detachment was Achillia and her skirmishers. They moved at a quick jog and would provide continued covering support for the legionaries after the siege engines and scorpions ceased in their bombardment.

"She should not be here," Magnus muttered to himself.

Artorius heard his words of concern. "Take it easy, old friend," he consoled. "Achillia is one of the best skirmishers we've ever had. Don't forget what she did to those pirates in the Judean arena all those years ago."

His words were of little comfort, for Artorius did not know of Achillia's condition and why Magnus was especially worried about her safety. The

Norseman knew there was nothing he could do. Either she would survive the day or she wouldn't, The same could be said for all of them. And at that moment, Magnus had his double-strength century of a hundred and sixty legionaries to concern himself with.

Ahead of the advancing formation, with catapult stones still sailing over their heads, Achillia and her warriors were soon within less than fifty meters of the ramparts when suddenly enemy skirmishers rose up and started unleashing with their bows and slings.

"Zastavit!" she shouted.

Her men instinctively dropped to a knee and started to shoot back at their assailants. Though their hamata armor gave them some degree of protection, it did little good when one of the Syrians took an arrow to the neck. As he fell to the ground, clutching at the arrow that had snapped off in his bloodied neck, another was shot through the eye socket. He gave a quick shout of surprise and pain before death mercifully took him.

Achillia was taking her time, marking each target as it exposed itself before unleashing an arrow. Her movements were fluid and extremely fast, despite how fast her heart was pounding. She managed to keep her breathing slow and controlled, even as an enemy arrow shot past her head. She tried not to dwell on the fact that had it been just a couple inches to the right, she would be dead. The Durotriges had been battered severely by the storm of catapult shot and their barricade was a splintered ruin. However, they were far from beaten, and with cover still available, they were holding their own against Achillia's skirmishers who, though quick on their feet, were also exposed in the open. It seemed that for every enemy she or her men shot, one of them would, in turn, fall dead or wounded. Her mission had been to suppress the defenders until the legionaries closed the distance, and while successful, it was coming at a terrible price. Six of her fighters already lay dead with about three times as many badly injured, mostly to the arms and legs which were unprotected by armor.

The rapid footfalls of the advancing legionaries behind her were growing louder, and she knew it was time to move. She released one last arrow, which caught an enemy warrior in the shoulder as he swung his sling to throw.

"Rozptyl vlavo a vpravo!" she ordered.

Her skirmishers fanning out in either direction in order to make room for the Romans. She ran to the right of the advancing formation, where she saw

Vespasian walking off to the right of the First Cohort, his cornicen beside him.

"The cohorts on the immediate left and right have a much steeper climb to make," the legate said, pointing with his sword. "Once they reach the top rampart, they will have to descend into a deep defilade before they can climb up the far side. I need your skirmishers to occupy the first rampart once they take it and cover them as they move up to the second."

"Understood," she replied. She then waved to her deputy on the far side of the field. A few quick signals and he was leading his men off to the left rampart. She raced over to the Fifth Cohort and quickly found Centurion Tyranus. "I'm to cover your advance once you take the first rampart."

"Very good," the pilus prior replied. "Fall in behind us."



"Advance!"

At Artorius' command, the soldiers of the First Cohort gave a loud battle cry and sprinted the last few meters to the smashed palisades. Legionaries in the first rank instinctively unleashed their javelins as Durotriges warriors gave a shout of their own and leapt over the barricades and earthworks. One man was impaled through the stomach as he jumped in the air, the shock of the weapon's impact knocking him to the ground, where he writhed in unspeakable agony. Without need for subsequent orders, the men drew their gladii and a savage brawl commenced.

On the extreme right of the formation, Artorius scaled the earthen rampart where he was met by a crazed Briton with a large axe. The man caught the master centurion by surprise, and Artorius quickly raised his shield, the first heavy blow reverberating down his arm and shoulder. A second blow came down too high, and Artorius managed to hook the curved axe blade with the top of his shield. He pulled hard while stepping forward and to the side, thrusting with his gladius simultaneously. As the warrior still held the higher ground, Artorius only managed to catch him in the thigh, the point of his weapon driving deep. The man shrieked and tumbled forward down the mound. Artorius let him go, knowing Magnus or one of his soldiers would finish the retch and continued his assault.

The mounds near the east gate were far shorter than the high, steep ramparts on the north and south faces, yet there were many more of them, all

overlapping each other as the main path crisscrossed between them. This rolling mass extended back more than a hundred meters before gradually sloping up towards the top of the hill fort. The mounds also served to break up the Roman formations, and Artorius saw that his century was divided into at least three or four groups, all engaged with massed hordes of barbarian warriors. The Romans did now hold the high ground. However, this first wave was badly outnumbered.

Artorius was further dismayed when he saw a second group of barricades no more than fifty feet behind the first. This had not been visible to the Roman reconnaissance, and it was to here the enemy skirmishers had pulled back, and with the legionaries exposed on top of the first set of ramparts, they unleashed a torrent of arrows, sling stones, and short spears. And as the Romans were heavily engaged with the Durotriges warriors, they were unable to duck down behind their shield wall. While many enemy missiles inadvertently struck shields or bounced the soldiers' helmets and armor, a few did find their marks on the exposed appendages. One legionary was grazed in the side of the neck by an arrow. At first he paid it no mind, but then the wound started gushing dark crimson, the artery having been severed. He collapsed to the ground, gritting his teeth as he clasped his hand over the flowing gash, trying in vain to stem the flow of blood as his life left him. Several legionaries were struck in the legs and lost their footing. They were pulled down into the mass of warriors and hacked to pieces.

"Magnus, get up here!" Artorius shouted over his shoulder as he fought off another assailant. It was exasperating trying to give orders while also fighting against a maddened berserker who wanted to spill his guts. "Unleash your javelins; throw them over the heads of my men!"

"Sir!" the Norseman acknowledged.

The centuries of the First Cohort had kept a much deeper interval between each other to allow for greater mobility, but now those of Magnus' century quickly closed the distance, javelins passing over and sometimes between their companions in the front rank. A hundred and sixty pilum falling amongst the Durotriges temporarily broke their resolve as many were killed or badly maimed by the heavy javelins. Artorius' century gave a renewed shout and as one they charged down the short embankment, smashing into their foe. Magnus' century mounted the first rampart, quickly dropping behind their shield wall as the Durotriges skirmishers hurled another volley at them. A couple of his men were not quick enough. One

taking a sling stone to the face, sending him tumbling back down the mound, his hands clutching his face. Another took an arrow to the foot, and while not fatal, it was extremely painful and the soldier was now out of commission.

Artorius jumped down into the fray, bringing the bottom edge of his shield into the chest of an enemy warrior, sending him sprawling back. The master centurion instinctively brought his shield back up as another man took his place, stabbing at him with a short spear. The man was strong and admiringly brave, but he was no soldier. Artorius quickly side-stepped the warrior's attack before driving his gladius clean through the side of his neck. Gouts of blood erupted from both the entrance and exit wounds as Artorius wrenched his weapon free.

"The rolling terrain is working against them as much as it is against us," Artorius noted as Magnus stumbled down into the short defilade. "They can't seem to mass their numbers as effectively here."

"True, but then how the fuck do we conduct passages-of-lines in this shit?" Magnus remarked.

"Bound by squads," Artorius directed. "Let your decanii handle that. Once you're through, advance on that second rampart. Praxus' men, as well as the other centuries, still have their javelins. I'll have his men cover you as you advance."

"Understood," the Nordic centurion replied. He then shouted down the line, *"By squads…execute passage of lines!"*

As most legionaries were used to conducting line passages as an entire century, this more unorthodox maneuver would normally prove unwieldy. Yet for the highly experienced veterans of the First Cohort, each squad conducting its own movement under the direction of their decanii proved seamless. Groups of legionaries bounded forward, driving into the wavering enemy warriors with shield and gladius. With a rapid flashing of swords, a number of their foes were quickly cut down, causing their surviving friends to panic and flee towards the next line of defenses.

As he scrambled back up the first mound to find Praxus, Artorius noted that their taking of the first line had not been without cost. A handful of his legionaries lay dead, with still many more with various injuries trying to extract themselves from the fray. As he bounded to the top, the master centurion was surprised to find Vespasian up there, down on one knee, apparently in deep thought. The legate carried no shield, though his gladius was drawn and bloodied. Next to him lay the still-twitching corpse of a

Durotriges warrior; a deep cut just beneath the ribcage was soaked in blood from where Vespasian had executed a perfect thrust below the ribs and up into the heart.

"Silly bastard tried smashing me with his large sword," he said casually while pointing to the crude long sword that lay in the grass. "He easily had a foot or two of reach on me and could just have easily stabbed me in the face…poor dumb amateurs."

Artorius meant to ask what in hades Vespasian was doing there on the rampart, but then he quickly saw that his commanding general had knelt down, with one forearm resting on his knee, and was surveying the enemy fortifications to their front and adjusting his tactics accordingly.

"Look up there," Vespasian said, pointing with his still-bloodied gladius. "There's a third, albeit much smaller set of barricades beyond the one your men now advance upon."

"I see it," Artorius replied. He held up his hand as he saw Praxus and the rest of the cohort climbing the mound. "Praxus, fall in behind Magnus, use your javelins to cover him as he assaults the second line of fortifications."

"Understood," the primus ordo replied.

"Hold in place once you do take them," Vespasian added. "The third line is too close to that large gatehouse, and you'll be well within range of their missile weapons."

"Yes, sir," Praxus acknowledged before signaling for his men to continue.

"Damn it all, we could not see any of this from our vantage points before now!" Vespasian spat in frustration.

"Even the lowest mounds and the gradual slope kept us blind as to their true disposition," Artorius added.

"No matter," the legate said as he rose to his feet. "As I told your centurion, keep the First Cohort in position once you take the second line of defenses. I'm going to bring up the siege engines and scorpions. No sense losing any more soldiers than we have to when we can simply smash apart their fortifications. Also, look on the ridge that leads into the town proper. You'll see there are no palisades up there. Given how steep the slopes are of the overlapping ramparts, it is clear that the Durotriges do not view that as the real threat. Their numbers and resources are limited, and so they are staking everything on holding this gate."

"Give us another artillery barrage, sir, and we'll end this," Artorius replied with a voice full of determination.

“You’ll have it,” the legate replied. “It’ll take some time to get the heavy weapons up, but at least the scorpions can keep the heads of those on the gatehouse pinned down. They’re also light enough that they can be placed on top of these rolling mounds. I’m going to order the Second Legion to advance on the northern and southern heights as well. The Durotriges may view them as unassailable, but if they see legionaries advancing on them, they’ll have no choice but to commit warriors to their defense.”

Without further discussion, Vespasian bounded down the first rampart and gave a quick series of orders to his cornicen. A series of trumpet blasts alerted the artillery crews to advance. Scorpions were rapidly broken down and carried by their loaders and gunners with additional soldiers tasked with carrying the baskets full of bolts. As he watched the onager and heavy ballistae crewmen start wheeling their engines forward, along with the oxcarts full of shot, Artorius reckoned it would be at least twenty to thirty minutes before they were set and back in action.

“Magnus and Praxus are engaging the second barricade,” Optio Parthicus said as he walked over to his master centurion. “As it will be a while before we’re back in the fight, I’ve got some of the lads patching up the wounded as best they can. Others I’ve told to finish off the enemy wounded, since we’re not exactly feeling merciful today.”

“Very good,” Artorius nodded, thankful that his optio was a man of initiative and common sense. “We’ll leave the dead for now. Once the artillery smashes the main gatehouse, the Fourth and Fifth Centuries will conduct the assault. Once through, it looks like the terrain will work to our advantage of fighting on a battle line. And let’s hope the Fifth and Eighth Cohorts can achieve a breakthrough of the ramparts. It’ll allow us to hit them in the flanks, as well as the front.”

“Yes, sir.”



The advance up the steep slope in testudo formation had been slow, arduous, and particularly tedious for Metellus and the men of the Fifth Cohort. Given the large frontage they had to cover, as well as how compact the testudo formation was, Tyranus had ordered his centuries to advance individually, rather than trying to form a cumbersome single formation with his entire cohort. Further along the north face of the hill several cohorts of the

Second Legion were also making their trek up the slope while being harried by enemy skirmishers.

Men in the front rank stood shoulder-to-shoulder with their shields linked together. Men in the subsequent ranks held their shields overhead, providing protection for both themselves and those in front of them. A small handful of skirmishers looked to be their only immediate threat, though if their diversion was successful, they would draw away more warriors from the east gate, where Artorius and his men were locked in brutal combat with the defenders. Behind Metellus' century, Achillia and half a dozen of her archers advanced, ready to provide support to the legionaries. Groups of her skirmishers walked just behind the other centuries of the cohort.

A throwing spear smacked into Metellus' shield, causing him to jolt. Rocks and similar missiles pelted their formation; most of their foes' archers being committed to defending the east gate. Achillia walked beside Metellus, hunkered down so as to use the legionary testudo for protection. She quickly leaned to the side and loosed an arrow, which caught the warrior who'd thrown the spear at Metellus in the chest.

As they came within twenty meters of the top, the Durotriges defenders abandoned the rampart and sprinted away. Achillia's archers rushed forward and unleashed several volleys of arrows on them as they sprinted up the steep incline of the second rampart. Several cried out as they were mortally stricken or badly injured, tumbling down the hill into the defilade below.

"To hell with this," Metellus grunted as he reached the top.

His men in the subsequent ranks lowered their shields and stretched out their arms. The centurion surveyed the defilade and the next rampart. He shouted to his cohort commander, whose century had also just reached the top, *"Sir, the next climb is too steep to scale in testudo formation!"*

Centurion Tyranus gave a nod of agreement. *"Battle formation!"* he shouted. Instinctively, the men of the Fifth Cohort spread out into four ranks. Tyranus had been smart enough to leave enough space between each century testudo so that they could readily shift into battle lines. Only a handful of paces separated Metellus from Tyranus' optio, who positioned himself on the far left of their formation.

Metellus looked over his shoulder at Achillia. "You have us covered?"

It was a rhetorical question, but one that reassured him as she nodded in reply and nocked another arrow, her face in a devious grin that echoed from a time when she fought as a volunteer gladiator in the east.

“Move out!” Tyranus shouted.

Metellus waved his men forward with his gladius and they quickly descended into the low ground where a handful of dead and wounded warriors lay. The next incline was incredibly steep, with legionaries using their shields to help pull them up the grass-covered slope.

Achillia’s detachment formed a long skirmish line along the first rampart, waiting for enemy combatants to show themselves once more. They did not have long to wait. The supplemental assault was having its intended effect, and the far rampart was now swarming with Durotriges warriors. Along with archers and skirmishers there were large numbers of fighting men with spears, swords, and axes. Achillia’s archers started shooting rapidly, and though they were inflicting casualties, their numbers were too few to drive the defenders to ground. Their archers and missile troops, knowing they were useless against the armored legionaries and their shield wall, instead focused their attention on the archers who harassed them from the outer ridge.

Achillia had just let loose an arrow that struck an enemy axman in the neck, when a heavy thrown spear sailed in a high arc and slammed into her abdomen, bursting through her mail shirt and plunging deep into her stomach. Her bow dropped from her hands, and she fell to her knees, clutching the spear in agony. She rolled to her back, unable to cry out despite the immeasurable pain. Her body was twitching and going into shock, and as gouts of blood spewed from her mouth, she knew her life was rapidly coming to an end. Her last thoughts were on that which she carried within her. Lost amongst the blood and sweat that covered her face, several tears fell from Achillia’s eyes.



From his vantage looking down upon the battle that raged near the east gate, King Donan was not as concerned about the assaults on the north and south ramparts. He’d kept a number of his warriors in reserve, and these men would drive the Romans back. What worried him were the machines that his enemy used to hurl waves of large stones that smashed men and barricade alike. The tall gatehouse lay in ruins, and warriors were now fleeing back towards the town in an attempt to escape the hammering storm of death.

“If the Romans want to fight us in the open, then a fight we shall give them!” he growled as he drew his great sword.

Along with his warriors were a number of women, the elderly, and young boys who were still big enough to carry a weapon. They were determined to fight the Romans to the very last and would not simply lie down and let them destroy the seat of their kingdom.



“They’re reforming at the top of the rise,” Praxus observed as Artorius and his First Century made their way to the front of the cohort.

His Fourth and Fifth Centuries had conducted their assault of the main gatehouse valiantly, though to their credit, the Durotriges had not given ground without a fight.

Artorius scanned the top of the hill that led into the town. He recognized the enemy king by his flowing robes and the metal circlet upon his head that gleamed in the midafternoon sun. The Durotriges who massed behind him numbered several thousand. And with his other two cohorts held up on the flanks, along with the entire Second Legion, it would fall upon the First Cohort alone to break their enemy into submission.

“Javelins and scorpion bolts are expended, and we cannot bring the siege engines any closer,” Artorius noted, shaking his head. “Looks like cold steel will have to finish this job.”

“The plain at the top of this hill is enormous,” Magnus noted. “The frontage is too large for us to fight as a cohort.”

Artorius signaled for all of his centurions to join him, figuring the Durotriges would wait for them to attack, lest they fall pretty to the storm of boulders the siege engines had been unmercifully hammering them with. For all Artorius knew, the onagers and ballistae could very well have expended their ammunition stores.

“We’ll attack by centuries,” Artorius said. “Place your men into three ranks, this will allow us to maintain a larger front against the enemy, hopefully without spreading ourselves too thin. Unless our other cohorts and the Second Legion can take the heights, it falls upon us to finish this thing. Should we fail, then the entire assault will be undone, and Mai Dun will have proven impenetrable.”

“As you said, nothing is impenetrable!” The voice of their commanding legate surprised the assembled centurions.

“General, sir,” Artorius said. He noted the legionary shield Vespasian

now carried. “Intending to join us in the final assault?”

“I am indeed,” the legate said with a nod. “I’ll be on your immediate left. And don’t worry, I’ll not interfere in the running of your cohort just think of me as another legionary.”

“With respect, sir,” Artorius said, “this attack runs a high risk of failure, and if it does the army cannot afford to lose you.”

“It wasn’t a request, *Master Centurion*,” Vespasian replied sharply. “I am not asking you if I can fight on your battle line, I am *telling* you where I will be. With all units committed, there is nothing left for me to do except provide an additional blade, and it is plain to me that you need every one you can get!”

“Yes, sir.” Despite Vespasian’s rebuke, Artorius found himself grinning.

Clearly the man who’d orchestrated this assault was a different type of leader. Though he’d proven himself to be a military genius throughout the campaign, at the end of the day, Flavius Vespasian viewed his own life as no more valuable than that of even the lowest legionary from the ranks.

“Once I take my place on the line, you will then give the orders,” the legate stated.

Artorius simply nodded and addressed his centurions once more. “Any questions?”

When there were none he dismissed the men who, with a quick series of orders, formed their men into three ranks. They allowed a small gap of a few meters between each century, in order to allow for easier maneuvering over the uneven ground.

“As of now, I’m just another legionary,” Vespasian said as he took his place next to Artorius on the line.

“A legionary wearing a rather distinctive crest on his head,” Artorius noted with a dark laugh.

“Eh, so I am.” The legate then shrugged. “Fuck it.”

This last rare profanity caused Artorius to raise an eyebrow. Their brief moment of levity ended as he took a deep breath and steeled himself for the final assault. On the top of the hill, the Durotriges were all shouting war chants and battle cries as they beat their weapons against their shields and whatever else they managed to find to defend themselves with. There was no doubting their bravery, especially in the face of annihilation. The next hour or so would be a bloody spectacle of death.

“Cohort!” Artorius shouted.

"Century!" his centurions sounded off in unison.

"Advance!"

Shields braced against their bodies, gladii protruding forward in a wall of bloodied blades, the legionaries stepped off as one. They advanced at a fluid, yet measured pace, as they did not want to expend what was left of their energy before they closed with their enemy. Secretly, Artorius hoped that progress was being made on the attacks on the flanks.



As he struggled to make his way to the top, Metellus slammed the bottom edge of his shield into the shin of an enemy attacker, snapping the bone and sending the man sprawling backwards down the other side of the embankment. He and his men were pressing forward on sheer determination alone. A number had been killed or injured, with others struggling to maintain their footing on the steep face while battling their resolute enemy. Metellus' body ached all over, particularly the chest and shoulders from where he'd been struck by numerous enemy weapons. He wore a centurion's hamata chainmail, which simply did not provide nearly the amount of blunt-force trauma protection that a legionary's segmentata plate did. His only surprise was that none of his enemies' weapons had penetrated. As he pulled himself upright, he turned and plunged his gladius deep into the side of another warrior, allowing the legionary next to him to finish scaling the heights.

A quick glance down the line revealed that Tyranus and his century were similarly able to brawl their way to the top, though Metellus lamented to the sight of dead and wounded legionaries that lay strewn about the slope. Regardless of their superior training and equipment, no armor could be all-encompassing, and even legionaries had weaknesses that could be exploited, particularly around the neck and lower abdomen. Still, they fared far better than their adversaries, who had no armor and little training to speak of. As more and more legionaries successfully made it to the top, the Durotriges began to panic and flee towards the third rampart, which was mercifully lower and less steep than the one they had just assaulted up. The centurion surmised that the will of their foe was breaking, and that there would not be nearly as much resistance on the final rampart.

"Metellus!" Tyranus shouted, alerting the young centurion as his cohort

commander walked over to him. “I’m sending three centuries to the right to clear the rampart and allow the Second Legion to advance. The rest of us will assault the final embankment and move to assist Artorius and the First Cohort. No doubt they’ve been up to their knees in shit this whole time.”

It was then Metellus was first concerned for his adoptive father. Despite the harsh difficulties he and his men had just surmounted, he knew the First Cohort was bearing the brunt of the enemies’ resistance. His mouth parched and face covered in sweat, the centurion removed his helmet and took a long drink off his water bladder, splashing some more on his face.

“Get some water,” he ordered his soldiers. Despite the sense of urgency, he knew his soldiers needed a minute to rest and rehydrate before they continued in their assault. As his own breathing slowed, he donned his helmet once more.



Rage and adrenaline consumed Artorius as they closed within a few meters of the massed horde of Durotriges. Though not all were warriors, their numbers were so vast that he feared his men would simply wear out in the pending bloody grind. Though the Roman Army outnumbered the defenders, if they could not get over the ramparts, this counted for little. With nothing else to do but fight, the soldiers of the First Cohort instinctively increased their stride to almost a jog.

Blood rushed through the master centurion’s veins, and he gritted his teeth and gave a howl of rage. *“Charge!”*

His men, to include General Vespasian, gave a unified cry of wrath as they sprinted headlong into their enemy with a loud crash of shields and bristling swords. The poor man who happened to be in the master centurion’s path was a lad who looked like he was scarcely into his teens. Artorius bowled him over with a shoulder tackle from his shield. He thrust his gladius at an angle to his right in order to fend off a potential assailant, his face grimacing when he saw it was a young woman who he had just gutted with his blade.

The Durotriges were brave, but they were not being reckless with their lives. While they hammered the legionary shield wall with their weapons, they slowly moved backwards, giving ground. As Artorius feared, they were

simply trying to wear the legionaries down until exhaustion overtook them. Given that Mai Dun was large enough to house an entire town, it was a viable strategy. And as they moved into the mass of huts and other structures, this would break up the legionary formations, forcing them to fight in smaller groups where the Durotriges could mass their numbers against them. Artorius knew he was out of options and had no choice but to try and grind the defenders down before his already tired soldiers wore out.

"Set for passage-of-lines!" he shouted, the command being echoed down the line.

His men in the front rank bore expressions of relief at getting even a few moments of reprieve.

"Execute passage-of-lines!"

In a fluid movement that took but a second or two, the soldiers of the second rank lunged forward, slamming hard into the defenders as the front rank withdrew to the rear. It was during this interlude that Artorius stepped to the side of the formation, trying to assess how the battle progressed. Casualties had been mercifully low, at least amongst his century. As they were on the extreme right, he was not in any position to observe how the rest of the cohort was faring. He was filled with dread as they approached the scattered huts on the outskirts of the town. Who knew what foes lay hidden within, waiting for the legionaries to pass by them before they struck? And as he had no torches, they could not simply ignite the buildings as they passed. Even as he made ready to issue his next order, he noted a definite slowing of their advance. The initial assault, the series of bloody brawls at the east gate that had taken the better part of several hours to conclude was now taking its toll.

"Set for passage-of-lines!"



King Donan's plan was working! Though the Romans had gotten much further into Mai Dun than he'd anticipated, the end would still be the same. Despite the fierce bombardment from their unholy weapons that had killed scores, if not hundreds of his warriors, the legions were simply being worn down by the inevitable grind of trying to take the heights. The king grinned as he saw an enemy centurion fall, having taken a sword blow to the leg.

"Now we can show Caratacus how to defeat these invaders!" he scoffed,

as he beat his sword against a legionary's shield. He then turned about to see how far they were into the town when his eyes suddenly grew wide. "No! It cannot be!"

Before he could say anymore, a legionary gladius plunged into his back, driving into his lung as he fell to his knees. Whatever happened to the rest of his people, King Donan's reign over the Durotriges confederation ended on the blade of a Roman soldier.



As Metellus and his soldiers advanced into the town, they saw that they were at an angle behind the Durotriges, who were heavily engaged with the First Cohort. As he looked to his right, he saw not just the remainder of his cohort, but numerous soldiers from the Second Legion who were running forward to join the fray. What Metellus did not know was that Master Centurion Lyto, upon reaching the top, had dispatched one of his cohorts to the far side in order to clear the southern rampart and allow the rest of the legion to assault the town. The young centurion was filled with relief, as well as a brief sense of déjà vu when he recalled the first time he and Artorius had fought together at Braduhenna, fifteen years before.

A cornicen's horn sounded, announcing the charge both to the Twentieth Legion's First Cohort, as well as their enemy. As the Durotriges turned and faced them, their eyes grew wide in fear and despair.



"Cohort…halt!" Artorius shouted as the ranks of the Second Legion swarmed in from both flanks and fell upon the hapless defenders. He knew their adversaries were finished, and he did not wish to risk the lives of any more of his exhausted legionaries.

"I told you my men would take the heights," Vespasian said with a friendly smack to the shoulder. His cheerful demeanor contrasted sharply with the brutal scene playing out as the air was filled with a symphony of screaming terror and pain as legionaries from the Second unleashed a fury of steel and death. He set down the shield he'd used, wiped off his gladius before returning it to its scabbard, and then made his way over to find Master Centurion Lyto. Though a number of Durotriges had been killed during the

initial attack by Vespasian's soldiers, most of those who remained were quickly trying to surrender. The men of the Twentieth Legion took it all in as they leaned against their shields and caught their breath. Sweat and grime covered all of them, and they reeked of blood and death.

"What do you bet the Second Legion takes all the credit for this?" Optio Parthicus asked as he joined his master centurion.

"It doesn't matter," Artorius replied. "*Rome* won a victory today, and that is enough."

"Sir!" a legionary said as he ran over to them. "Centurion Magnus is down."

Chapter XXIV: Is this Glory?

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The battle won, Vespasian allowed himself a moment's reprieve. He looked down from the highest rampart at the corpse of the enemy king that had been unceremoniously dragged forward as he surveyed the carnage wrought by his men upon the fortress. Bodies lay strewn about, many of which had been smashed by catapult and ballistae shot; faces and bodies mangled as a result. One poor bastard was leaned over the rampart, his head split open with brains bursting through the shattered skull. There were still cries from within, as well as on the earthworks below, as legionaries finished off those among the enemy wounded who they deemed were too gravely wounded to try and save. In a morbid sense, this was an act of mercy, for all who had defied Rome from the heights of this great hill fort and survived would live out the remainder of their lives in slavery.

In truth, Vespasian respected the Durotriges for their stalwart tenacity. How could he not? They had fought to the last for what they believed in, and despite the losses inflicted upon his legionaries, the legate of Rome could not fault them for that.

"If the roles were reversed, we would have done the same," he said quietly to himself. He looked back over the outside of the rampart, down the large hill with its earthworks and battlements where his men had battered their way up.

Onagers, scorpions, and ballistae were scattered about, their crews assisting with the recovery of the Roman wounded. Near the last line of fortifications they carried away a pair of badly injured Syrian archers from the allied detachment. They had received their fearful wounds while protecting their stricken leader, over whose body they openly mourned. The crewmen who assisted them did not realize that the men's tears came not from the pain of their wounds, but from seeing she, who had led them so valiantly, lying brutally slain. Achillia's eyes were now closed, her face smeared in blood that had spewed from her mouth. The large spearhead had cleaved through her mail shirt, plunging deep into her stomach where it embedded against her spine. That it severed a major artery was the only mercy, as it expedited what was an agonizing death.

It was past this scene of sorrow that an imperial messenger rode along the

path that led into the fort. Vespasian spotted the rider and climbed down from the timber wall in order to meet the man near the smashed gates.



"By Thor's fucking hammer, this hurts!" Magnus said through gritted teeth as he tried to stifle the pain.

Artorius clutched his hand as a legionary wrapped a loose rag around the Nordic centurion's bleeding leg.

"I feel your pain, old friend," Artorius replied, wincing as he recalled a similarly painful injury he had sustained during a raid on a captured estate. Though this had happened more than twenty years prior, his leg still throbbed at the memory.

"Damn it all, I'm bleeding like a stuck boar," Magnus grunted as the legionary tied the rags tight.

The soldier then took the centurion's helmet and propped his injured leg on top of it. "It's pretty serious, sir, but at least it's not dark crimson; meaning the artery's not severed."

"That's a relief," Magnus said, swallowing hard as his forehead broke out in a cold sweat. "Now if we can just stop a bloody infection from setting in. I'd rather like to keep my leg."

"You're too much of an ornery bastard to let something as undignified as an infected wound kill you," Artorius said while trying to force a smile. It was difficult, especially given the scene of death and suffering that went on around them.

All of the prisoners were being corralled at the far side of the fort, many of them crying out in rage and sorrow as they watched Roman soldiers murder their more badly wounded friends and loved ones. As the Durotriges had attempted to safeguard as many of their people as possible within the fort, women and children were also found amongst the dead and wounded; many were struck down by errant catapult stones or cut down by rampaging legionaries during the assault.

"Achillia," Magnus said anxiously, "where is she? Why is she not here?"

He looked to Artorius who, not knowing what else to do looked to the legionary that had bandaged up Magnus. The young soldier could only shrug. It was then that the master centurion feared the worst.

"We'll find her for you," Artorius stated, unsure what else to say.

“Damn it all,” Magnus replied, sadly shaking his head and fearing the worst. He turned his head to the side and stared at the mud-stained walls of the fort, not wanting to see any more signs of death.

“Master Centurion Artorius!” Vespasian’s words drew his attention, and Artorius pulled himself to his feet stiffly. The few minutes he had spent kneeling at Magnus’ side had caused his already battered and exhausted body to seize up.

“Sir?” he said, noting the messenger that accompanied the legate.

“Governor Plautius’ compliments, sir,” the man said, handing him a short note. “He says to let you know that you are relieved of command of the Twentieth Legion.”

“Relieved?” Artorius asked, his brow furrowed in puzzlement.

“Yes, sir,” the messenger replied. “Before his arrival, the emperor had sent word to Rome, demanding a replacement legate for the legion. Of course, the directive took several weeks to reach Rome, and the new commander almost a month by sea to arrive. He has assembled the rest of the legion at their camp north of the River Tamesis.”

“Understood,” Artorius nodded. “Who is it?”

“Ostorius Scapula, sir.”

“He’s a good man,” Vespasian acknowledged. “A pity we did not have him with us during the invasion.”

“Very well,” Artorius said. “I’ll ready my cohorts to begin the march as soon as they’ve rested and eaten.”

“Take an extra day to rest your men and get refitted with rations,” Vespasian directed. “Gods know they’ve earned it! And don’t worry, I will see to your wounded.”

“Yes, sir,” the master centurion replied. He then asked the messenger, “Was there anything else?”

“There was; Governor Plautius wished me to convey to you that he personally exalted your leadership, valor, and distinguished conduct to the emperor.”

It was still midafternoon, yet to Vespasian it felt much later. Every minute of the assault had felt like an hour, and he was completely spent. However, there was still much that required his attention. He made his way on foot once more down the main hill road, where at the bottom he was greeted by Tribune Cursor.

“A hard-fought but total victory,” he said to the commander of his cavalry.

“If I may say so, that was one of the most disciplined and well-coordinated assaults I have ever witnessed,” Cursor replied respectfully.

“It certainly did not feel that way at the time,” the legate noted. “I wasn’t sure how any of us got up that damn hill!”

“Discipline, tenacity, and leaders who know how to adjust to an ever-changing situation will overcome any defense,” the tribune replied. “I’ve also never seen anyone attempt to advance siege engines with their infantry, especially when attacking uphill. I don’t doubt that the efforts of your artillery crews saved the lives of numerous legionaries.”

“I needed this place to fall quickly,” Vespasian shrugged. “I couldn’t let it stand definitely against us nor could I risk suffering unnecessary losses trying to take it.”

“Well, take this for what it’s worth,” Cursor said, choosing his words carefully as he continued. “I have seen many campaigns in my lifetime, to include a number of sieges. I have also served under some of the greatest military leaders Rome has ever borne. And yet, not even Germanicus Caesar could have accomplished what you did today.”

“Your words mean a great deal to me,” Vespasian emphasized, “for Germanicus was one of my heroes when I was a young lad. I’ll never forget my father holding me up on his shoulders so I could watch the returning hero and his legions during the Triumphal parade.”

“And now perhaps you’ll be the triumphant general,” the tribune noted.

“Perhaps,” Vespasian grinned. “But of course I am but one amongst many. The victory belongs to them more than it does me.” He gave the cavalry officer his next orders. “I need you to scout to the north. The Dobunni kingdom is not far from here, and we do not yet know their disposition. They have trade relations with the continent, however, they are also bordered by several tribes who we know are extremely hostile towards us. Take one regiment and see if you can ascertain their motives. In the very least, make certain no enemy forces are on the move to attack us while we reconsolidate.”

“Yes, sir.”



As Magnus was carried by several of his men to where the field hospital was being staged, he saw her. He clutched the shoulder of one of the soldiers hard, and the man saw what had so vexed his centurion.

“Give me a few moments,” the Norseman said as he hobbled over to where Achillia lay, ignoring the shooting pain in his leg as the split muscle twitched violently. Two of Achillia’s archers stood watch over her body, but they stepped away, their heads bowed in respect. Magnus then collapsed onto his side and lay propped up on his elbow next to her. The spear had been removed from her belly, though the ghastly wound was now attracting flies. Her hands lay folded on her stomach, just above the gash. Her head was turned to the side, eyes closed. If not for her ruptured guts, one would assume she was sleeping. That she’d been stabbed in the stomach was an even greater symbolic loss for Magnus. The news she’d shared that had once brought him so much joy now magnified his sorrow. He cursed himself that he was unable to cry. The fact that the tears he longed for refused to fall added to his torment.

“The gods mock me in allowing me to live,” he said bitterly through clenched teeth. Unable to bear any longer the sight of the woman he loved so brutally slain, he signaled for his soldiers, who helped carry him the rest of the way down the hill to where a field hospital was being hastily set up.



Along the slopes, and particularly towards the very top, exhausted legionaries set about their grisly task of separating the wounded from the dead. Though losses were comparatively light when viewing the carnage they had inflicted, every man lost was both friend and brother to his mates. For the survivors, they were awash in conflicting emotions; jubilation and triumph at their victory, relief that they were still alive, sorrow for the loss of their friends, and repugnance at the sights and sounds of brutally killed and badly maimed. Several mass graves were being dug into the hard earth, where the corpses of the enemy dead would be unceremoniously tossed. Their wounded were being treated, if possible, though if their injuries were too great legionaries would simply finish them with a slash across the jugular.

As Artorius wiped down the blade of his gladius, he wondered if this was his last battle. He certainly hoped so! After decades of serving in the legions, he had grown tired of the suffering and death they had inflicted. He thought

when he was younger he would grow accustomed to it, but this had been a foolish notion.

He was reminded of war's abject horror as he happened upon a young girl, whose leg had been smashed by catapult stone. The leg was completely mangled with splintered bones protruding grotesquely. Though her face was covered in sweat and her breath was coming in rapid gasps, she bravely made not a single cry. Her mother held her head in her lap, tears running down her cheeks. Artorius watched as a legionary removed his helmet and knelt down next to them. His eyes were full of pity as he drew his gladius and rested the blade against the girl's neck. She looked up at her mother and nodded pleadingly, hoping to end her pain. The woman then met the soldier's gaze. Though they could not communicate verbally, she gave an almost imperceptible nod before closing her eyes and turning away as the legionary quickly slashed his blade across the girl's throat. Torrents of warm blood gushed into her mother's lap, who broke down in wails of a broken heart. The young girl's eyes betrayed a sense of relief as her life left her, in a sense thanking the soldier for ending her pain.

Tears streamed down the legionary's face as he hung his head for a brief moment. Though he understood the reality that women and children also perished in war, he found no honor in slaying the weak. As Artorius continued to gaze at the sad spectacle, he wondered if perhaps the soldier also had a daughter around the same age. The man turned his head and looked up at him, though he was unashamed by his tears.

"Is this glory, sir?" he asked.

The question caused Artorius to instinctively think back to a siege he'd taken part in, many years before this soldier was even born. The words reminded him of a brief conversation between him and Magnus as they'd watched the survivors of that siege being mercilessly executed by their commanding general's order. What was the question he'd asked his friend who now, twenty-eight years later, lay badly wounded? Oh yes, it was, *'Is this victory?'* Different words, but almost identical meaning.

"There is no glory in what we've done," the master centurion replied with surprising candor. It was true, however, and it was best that his men learned that sooner rather than later. He believed in Rome, and that there was honor in fighting for the empire. That being said, war was anything but glorious. It was savage, inhuman, and wrought with pain, terror, and sorrow. Whatever came next for the Roman conquest of Britannia, Titus Artorius Justus decided

then that his fighting days were over.



With Vespasian's Second Legion occupying and seeking to quell any dissidents within the Durotriges kingdom, Artorius and his three cohorts made their long journey back towards the growing camp along the Tamesis River. Legionary and auxilia vexilations were already scattered throughout the recently conquered lands. The Ninth Legion was temporarily holding at Camulodunum, where Sabinus had been tasked with ensuring that the Catuvellauni abided by the accords of the peace treaty they had negotiated with the emperor. Geta had the Fourteenth Legion at Durovernum Cantiacorum, near the site where the invasion force had landed. That left the Twentieth holding the area just north of the Tamesis River, where engineers were building and improving upon existing bridges.

Artorius had been compelled to leave his most seriously wounded soldiers, those too badly injured to be moved, with Vespasian. Some of the others, including Magnus, were loaded onto the now-depleted ammunition wagons of the siege train. As Mai Dun was the last formidable obstacle in the region, Vespasian was sending all siege engines that did not belong to the Second Legion back with Artorius.

On the second day of the march the skies were cloudy with an occasional pelting of rain. Even by midafternoon it was still foggy, with a perpetual mist clinging to the air. As he rode his horse over to the wagon where his Nordic friend lay, Artorius heard grumblings amongst the legionaries about how their cloaks never got a chance to dry out with the unpredictable weather. Magnus said as much as his friend rode up beside him. The Norseman was sitting upright with his back against the front wall of the cart, his leg propped up on a soldier's pack and heavily bandaged.

"The gods gave us a beautiful day with which to attack," he said glumly, "and now Thor calls upon the rains to wash the blood away."

Artorius said nothing, but simply watched his friend, who shivered beneath his cloak. Magnus' Nordic blood gave him a substantial tolerance to the cold, and yet his face was pale, and he trembled badly. His eyes soon closed, and he seemed to drift off to sleep.

"He's lost a lot of blood," Valens observed as he rode up behind Artorius. The usually jovial centurion appeared very sober and as gloomy as the skies,

for he was deeply concerned about his friend and brother-in-law. “Magnus’ wound would have killed lesser men already.”

“I recommended he stay with the others,” Artorius remarked, “but he would have none of it.”

“He’s always been the stubborn one,” Valens replied. “He may look like shit right now, but that stubbornness will be what keeps him alive.”

The two centurions said little more as they continued onward. From the worn expression on Valens’ face, Artorius sensed that the years of hard campaigning, along with the loss of so many friends over the years, was taking its toll. Both men, along with Magnus, had served in the same squad together during their early days in the legions. Two of their former mates, Decimus and Carbo, had been killed at Braduhenna, along with Artorius’ close friend and mentor, Vitruvius. Another lifelong friend, Camillus, was now dead, and Magnus was very much in danger of infection and possibly succumbing to his injuries. If he did survive, they knew his road to recovery would be a long and arduous one. And since coming up from the ranks, Artorius took the loss of every soldier under his command very hard; it was impossible for him not to, despite the harsh reality that in battle soldiers died. He blamed himself in part for Sempronius’ ghastly death, and with every soldier slain on this campaign, he felt as if his soul was slowly breaking.

“I pray,” he said quietly, “that I have fought my last battle.”



The day was overcast, but still holding the warmth of the end of summer as Artorius rode into the legion’s encampment a few days later. Near the entrance stood two men who, given their ornate breastplates and plumed helmets, the master centurion could only surmise were his new legate and chief tribune. He abruptly dismounted his horse, which he handed to one of the men at the gate, walked over to the two officers, and rendered a salute.

“General Scapula?” he asked. When the man nodded, Artorius extended his hand. “Master Centurion Artorius, a pleasure to have you here, sir.”

“My only regret is I did not arrive sooner,” the legate replied. He then introduced the younger officer with him. “This is Marcus Trebellius Maximus, our new chief tribune.”

“Honored to meet you, master centurion,” the tribune replied, also taking Artorius’ hand, who nodded in reply.

Artorius looked around at the plethora of activity that was happening. In addition to the daily chaos of a Roman marching camp, he noted a number of engineers working on a large bridge, as well as surveyors scraping away the ground with the help of legionaries, making ready to lay a road.

"Rome wastes no time in establishing herself," he noted. He motioned with his head back up the road he'd come from. "We have a number of wounded that require attention."

"Understood," Scapula replied. "There is already a field hospital established, and the doctors are anticipating the arrival of your men."

"Well, they're your men now, sir," Artorius said as the three walked slowly through the camp towards the Principia tent.

"Technically speaking, perhaps," the legate conceded. "However, it was you who led them throughout this campaign. And I have no doubt it is you who they will look to as we continue in our work here."

"About that, sir," Artorius replied, causing the legate to halt abruptly. "I don't mean to abandon you as soon as you've arrived, but I am intending to leave the legions."

Chapter XXV: A New Province

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Sixty miles to the north of where Vespasian had conducted the brutal Siege of Mai Dun, Tribune Cursor halted his advance guard on top of a hill that overlooked a large valley. They had picked up a local cobbler, who had been all too anxious to take the Romans to their leaders. On the far side of the valley, it sloped up to a long ridge that was covered in groves of trees. Like much of the land, the valley was a mix of both open farm fields, as well as copses of trees.

"Fertile lands, an established settlement," Centurion Taurus noted as he rode up next the tribune.

"The river[1] runs all the way to the sea in the west," their Dobunni guide stated as he nodded towards the flowing waters that dissected the valley. He then addressed the tribune, "Our leaders have anticipated your arrival and await your pleasure."

As Cursor rode into the settlement, a large contingent of locals stood waiting for him. Their leader stepped forward and bowed deeply. He was an older man, clean shaven with close cropped hair. "Hail, emissary of Rome!" he said. "I am King Eisu, and I welcome you to our lands."

Cursor dismounted his horse and gave a short nod of respect to the man before removing his helmet. "It is good to see we have friends this deep into Britannia," he observed.

Cursor noticed that both the king and his nobles dressed in a manner very similar to Roman senators, albeit their togas were earthier in color, rather than the white and purple seen in Rome. He conjectured that perhaps the Dobunni had purchased the very fabric their garments were made of from Roman traders. He was further surprised at the man's ability with the Roman tongue and glad that he would not require an interpreter.

"Given our proximity to the sea, we have been able to enjoy trade relations with Rome since the time of Caesar," the king replied. "But come, a great feast awaits you!"

The troopers of Indus' Horse made camp just outside the town, while Cursor and the senior officers joined King Eisu and his nobles in a great hall that was surprisingly decorated with Roman columns, with familiar frescos adorning the walls.

“You have, indeed, enjoyed much in the way of trade relations with Rome,” Cursor observed as he marveled at the décor within the hall.

A long table was laid out with a variety of delicacies, both Britannic and Roman.

“It is because of this that we have been ostracized by many of our neighbors,” Eisu observed as he took his place in the great oaken chair at the head of the table. “When we refused to join the Durotriges confederation in their battle against you, King Donan swore he would exterminate my people in retribution. I am glad to see that he can no longer try and make good on his promise.”

“We have fought them many times before,” a noble spoke up. “They lust after our iron mines; the ore from which we have long traded with your provinces in Gaul and Hispania. But with his alliance with the Catuvellauni, Donan could very well have overwhelmed us had he defeated Rome.”

“I am happy to tell you that the Durotriges are no longer a concern,” Cursor said.

“We heard Mai Dun had fallen,” the noble stated, to which the tribune nodded in reply.

“King Donan is dead,” Cursor continued, “and those who fought beside him are being sold into slavery, along with their families. Those who remain understand their fate, should they resist the will of Rome.”

“And what of our neighbors to the north?” King Eisu asked. “They are extremely warlike, and their lands consist of arduous mountain ranges.”

“Those who fought with the Catuvellauni, we gave them a taste of Roman steel,” Cursor asserted. “But I agree, they will be a thorn in our side for a long time to come. For now, we will look into establishing garrisons here and in your capitol. Most likely we will eventually have to post a legion on the border of the Silures lands until they can be conquered.” The tribune then produced a scroll, which he handed to the king. “These are the terms the emperor is offering to all kingdoms within these lands who embrace the friendship of Rome. You will retain your status as ruler of your people, albeit as a client king under Caesar. A Roman magistrate will be assigned to act as the emperor’s intermediary and to enforce tax collection.”

The king, who was literate and fluent in Latin, read through the terms slowly, his expression unconcerned. “It says here that client kings are allowed to maintain their own armies and are not required to garrison Roman soldiers,” he noted. “However, I am surmising, given our proximity to the

Silures, an exception will be made here."

Cursor nodded in reply.

"The taxation levels may seem high," the tribune said, "but know that this is to help pay for the infrastructure that comes from becoming part of a Roman province. "Roads, schools, markets, sanitation, and baths are costly to build and maintain. Increase your efforts within the iron mines, and I promise you will enjoy some of the greatest prosperity in the region."

"You speak of baths," the king replied, seeming to ignore Cursor's explanations, though it could be concluded that he was already well aware of what would be expected of him and his people. "I think it is time I show you the heart of the valley."



Since the defeat of the Catuvellauni and their allies, eleven tribal kingdoms had submitted to Roman rule without so much as drawing a single weapon in resistance. Granted, some of these were little more than a lone oppida with perhaps a hundred acres of total land. However, Plautius was glad to spare bloodshed as much as he was able. The word of Vespasian's savage trek through Durotriges, culminating with the bloody siege at Mai Dun, was spreading quickly throughout the land. And yet, not every tribal kingdom required abject fear to bring them to bear. The Brigantes were amongst the larger kingdoms, and they had thus far remained neutral throughout the conflict. That was about to change.

"Noble Plautius," an equite tribune announced, "I present Queen Cartimandua of the Brigantes."

Plautius stood and gave a short nod of respect. Cartimandua did the same. Her demeanor was pleasant enough, though Plautius noted the signs of strain in her face. She was alone, her entourage being directed into another large tent, where they would be entertained by the legate's officers and staff. For now, he wanted his meeting with the queen in private.

"Thank you for receiving me," the queen said, her voice showing only the slightest traces of a foreign accent.

Plautius knew she was well-educated, the rumor being that her father had even gone as far as hiring a Roman tutor when she was very young.

"Please, the honor is mine," Plautius replied, motioning for her to be seated. The only other persons present were servants who brought the two

wines and what delicacies the Romans had been able to acquire since arriving in Britannia.

“I am aware of the terms you’ve made with the other tribal kingdoms,” Cartimandua said. “I want you to know that I accept them without hesitation.”

“Very well,” Plautius replied. “That will keep our meeting short, then. Know that we have been anxious to meet you for some time, as Brigantes has intrigued us. We have had one of your royal guardsmen acting as a guide and interpreter for us these last couple months.”

“Alaric,” the queen noted. “I will be glad to have him back in my employ.”

“Of course,” the governor nodded. “I understand he means a lot to you.”

“All my people are important to me,” Cartimandua emphasized. “You must also know that my kingdom is anything but stable. My own consort conspires with our enemies, so while some of the kingdoms have requested to maintain their own security, I am asking you to garrison Roman soldiers within Brigantes.”

“It will be done,” Plautius assured her. “Rome values her friends and I assure you that the legions will never be far away should enemies threaten you, both from hostile neighbors as well as any who may lurk within your kingdom.”

The queen was at first startled to think that Plautius was speaking of her husband, Venutius, but then she realized that he likely had been building quite the network of informants within the province. The Romans understood that knowledge was the most powerful weapon there was, and doubtless they knew about the inner turmoil that existed between Cartimandua and her consort. This actually came as a relief to her, and she would make certain that Venutius understood as well that while he may have commanded the loyalty of a large number of Brigantes warriors, the queen was now under the direct protection of the legions. The defeat of Togodumnus, along with the rapid fall of Mai Dun, would ensure that whatever his feelings towards the occupiers, Venutius would keep his hostile tongue in check.



A few tents down, the Romans and their new allies were feasting and enjoying a bevy of mind-altering drinks of both Britannic and Roman origins.

Artorius left the revelry after a single cup of wine and decided to take a long walk in the brisk evening air. Earlier in the day he had felt the need to decompress, especially with the relief of a cessation in immediate hostilities, and also having a qualified legate and chief tribune to take over command of the legion. And while he was always up for a bit of low-brow debauchery, once evening came he simply did not feel up for it.

Scapula had taken his resignation well enough. He was an experienced officer and understood that nearly three decades in the ranks could take its toll on even the strongest of men. His only request was that Artorius stay on through the winter and only return to Rome when those who would take part in the emperor's triumph departed. Apparently Plautius had recommended Scapula to the emperor, and in just the few meetings he'd had with him, Artorius was lamenting that the general had not been with them during the campaign. It still felt surreal to him that he had commanded an entire legion during the conquest of a province. Of course, the strict and unbending class rules of Roman society would never allow him to hold the actual rank of senatorial legate, so his assumption of command was always going to be a temporary one. But no matter. While Artorius mourned for the men he lost, foremost being his longtime friend Camillus, he was thankful that most of his men survived the campaign to great glory, and that in the end he could know in his very soul that he'd done right by them.

As he leaned against a support post of one of the tents, the master centurion drew his gladius and turned the weapon over in his hand, watching the torch light dance off the blade.

"You have served me well all these years," he said quietly. "I hope that I will never have to call upon you again."



"What is this place?" Cursor asked, marveling at the steaming waters that bubbled up into a large pond.

"The sacred springs of my people," King Eisu explained. "The heated waters have healing properties and are an eternal gift from Sulis."

"Who is Sulis?" Centurion Taurus asked.

"She is the goddess of the springs," a nobleman explained. "She brings nourishment to us and also gives the power of cursing the enemies of her votaries."

“Indeed,” Cursor replied, folding his arms across his chest, deep in thought. “You know, we worship the same goddess in our culture, as well.”

Taurus shot him a confused look, but Cursor quickly winked at him and the centurion cracked a half smile while giving an imperceptible nod.

“You worship the goddess Sulis?” Eisu asked, raising an eyebrow as the tribune turned to face him.

“Oh, yes,” Cursor replied. “Only we know her as Minerva.”

Later that evening, long after the sun had gone down in the west, the two Roman officers lounged in the pool of thermae mineral water, a cloud of steam rising up into the starlit night.

“By Minerva,” Taurus said, “this feels better than any bath in Rome! That’s it; we need to build a bathhouse on this spot!”

“Natural hot springs are a rarity in the known world,” Cursor replied before submerging his head beneath the rippling waters. He splashed up quickly, relishing the contrast of the heat compared to the cool night, and he quickly scrubbed his fingers over his bald head. “And yes, imagine what we could do if we built a bathhouse on this site. I daresay it would become one of the greatest wonders of this isle, if not the entire empire!” He then noticed his centurion was chuckling quietly to himself. “What is it?”

“Nice little ploy with the king,” Taurus replied, “telling him that their Sulis and our Minerva are both the same goddess.”

“Deity amalgamations are nothing new,” Cursor explained. “We’ve been doing it since Rome first started its expansion beyond the Seven Hills. Do you think it is mere coincidence that our pantheon and the Greek’s are identical, aside from the names? One often hears Jupiter referred to as Zeus and Juno as Hera.”

“So we merge one of our goddesses with theirs.”

“It solves the issue of them being required to pay homage to the Roman gods, while at the same time showing that we respect their culture and religion,” Cursor added. He then leaned back and laughed aloud. “Taurus, my friend, you realize we have just created a new deity!”

“And since the locals appear to have no images of her,” Taurus reasoned, “it’ll be simple enough for us to commission a bronze statue of Minerva and declare her to be the same entity as their goddess of the springs.”

“All in due time, my friend,” the tribune replied. “We have a lot of work to do first. It’ll be years before this area is completely civilized and ready for

expensive statues of amalgamated deities."

"Ah well," Taurus shrugged. The centurion then reached back to the ledge of the pool and grabbed his wine cup, which he held high. "To the goddess, Minerva-Sulis!"

"And to the soon-to-be proclaimed Roman township of *Aquae Sulis*," Cursor added, raising his own goblet.



While Artorius understood why vexilations from his legion were needed throughout the new province, it was frustrating for him to see to the needs of all his cohorts that were dispersed throughout the region while Scapula assimilated to his role as legate. He received word that the Second Legion was moving north and had left a detachment that had begun establishing a temporary garrison near a small village not far from the great hill they'd assaulted. Upon Artorius' return, he found a number of his cohorts had been detached on either temporary garrison or logistical details. He found it particularly maddening that his Ninth Cohort had been tasked with escorting supply trains coming up from the coast, and no one could tell him exactly where they were. Indeed, only half of the Twentieth Legion remained in its main camp near the banks of the great river. The area they posted their eagle was where the river was narrow enough to accommodate bridges, but also deep enough that large seafaring vessels could navigate its waters.

Scapula had taken the initiative in procuring a number of surveyors and engineers to begin building more permanent fortifications near the northern bank. Those legionaries that remained in the camp had put away their swords and now performed labor under the supervision of the engineers.

"A large city will one day spring up in the wake of our humble camp," Praxus said as he joined Artorius in observing the work being done by his men to improve fortifications around the large camp.

Artorius snorted in reply. "Yes, well even Rome started from the humblest of origins," the master centurion replied, echoing a conversation he'd had with Vespasian. "Who knows, perhaps these open fields will one day house a great city that will be the capitol of an even greater empire than our own."

The two centurions shared a chuckle at the absurd notion.

"Well," Praxus remarked, "if a great empire ever does find root here, it

will be after it's had a thousand years of Roman influence. But for now, I'll be happy with some paved roads, sewage systems, and a place to have a good wash. Not that either of us will see what becomes of this place." Artorius raised an eyebrow at the remark, which his friend was quick to explain. "I'm done, Artorius. I've served in the ranks even longer than you have, and I'm tired. I should have retired after my son joined the legions, but I just was not ready to let go. Now, I realize that if I don't, sooner rather than later one of those barbarian bastards will get the best of me."

"Well whatever becomes of us," Artorius said, "at least we know we've laid the foundations for the start of a new province. It will be the work of others that will determine whether Britannia remains a land of squalid poverty and never-ending warfare; or if perhaps she is destined for greater things."

Chapter Endnotes:
1 – River Avon
2 – Norfolk, England

Chapter XXVI: Departure of Friends

Roman Town of Aquae Sulis
February, 44 A.D.
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With the emperor anxious to celebrate his Triumph the coming spring, Plautius knew he needed to tour the territories of his new province well before then. Aside from administrative details and appointments, it helped ease his mind to see for himself that the entire region would not fall into disarray while he was in Rome for the Triumph. One place he felt he needed to visit was on the very western frontier of Roman Britannia, which had been assimilated under very unusual circumstances.

"Welcome, governor, to Aquae Sulis!" Tribune Cursor said as he saluted.

"*The Waters of Sulis*," Plautius translated. "A good name."

"It's not much right now," Cursor said, looking at the humble settlement behind him, "but it has enormous potential!"

"Yes, I saw your report about the thermae springs," the legate replied as he walked beside the tribune.

"Seriously, sir, you need to take a plunge in them. It will change you!"

Plautius chuckled in reply to Cursor's enthusiasm. Since he had known him, the tribune had always come across as a man with a stoic sense of duty, so it somewhat surprised Plautius to see this much exuberance and excitement emanating from him. "You know, Vespasian sent you ahead with a single cavalry regiment on a reconnaissance mission, only to find out you acquired us an entire tribal kingdom without so much as shedding a drop of blood."

"These people were ready to be 'Romanized'," Cursor explained. "They were practically begging us to come in and civilize them. Still, if we're going to protect them, I'll need more than just a single regiment of cavalry on their border."

"Agreed," Plautius replied. "There are a number of issues, both operational and logistical to see to, but I am tentatively planning on providing a substantial garrison for the border of our province and especially the Silures territories, where we think Caratacus has been in hiding. In due time, we can deal with them permanently. I also saw the agreement you reached with the

Dobunni. Well done, my friend, well done indeed!”

That evening the two men had a private dinner to discuss Plautius’ plans for the region. Cursor’s cavalry had established the rudimentary fortifications of a wooden fort, though the troopers themselves still slept in their tents at night. The large tent that served as Cursor’s principia sat in the very center. It was a stormy night, and the rain beat down against the canvas as servants brought courses for the two men. It was a humble meal of soldier rations consisting to wheat cakes and porridge, supplemented with some fish that Cursor’s men had bartered for from local fishermen.

“I apologize for that lack of better subsistence,” the tribune said as they ate while listening to the wind and rain battering the canvas. “A mobile cavalry force does not have the logistics capabilities to provide a more fitting meal to a governor-general. Though we managed to procure some fish from the locals, they apparently have never heard of garum; a pity because it’s great for dipping bread into. I suppose the making of quality fish sauce is something else we’ll have to teach these people.” The governor gave a short laugh at Cursor’s mentioning of one of Rome’s most popular condiments.

“I’m not above eating the same fare as the men in the ranks,” Plautius said. He then grinned. “I’m just glad your tent doesn’t leak. The rain seems to be a constant companion in this land. Still, like you said, this land does have potential.”

“It will be better once we start establishing a more enduring presence here,” Cursor replied. “Get some real roads put in, sewage lines, and more permanent structures with modern facilities.”

“About that,” Plautius said, taking a long drink of wine and pausing for a minute in contemplation. He turned his cup around in his hand as he spoke once more. “I heard rumor that you have no intention of returning to Rome.”

“There may be some truth in that,” the tribune replied. “I also intend to resign my post as commander of the army’s cavalry corps.”

Plautius took another pull off his cup, though he did not seem surprised at Cursor’s last statement.

The tribune continued, “I’m fifty-two years old, and while I don’t look it, it is time I put away my sword for good. And before you ask; I have no desire to go back into politics.”

“I cannot blame you there,” the legate remarked. “You spent ten years as a tribune of the plebs. Personally, I dread the day I have to leave behind the

army and the provinces for the politics of Rome. As you know too well, at least out here our enemies have the courtesy of looking us in the eye and making it known they mean to kill us." He took another drink and the two ate in silence for a minute or so before the governor explained the real reason for his visit. "There is a way that you can still serve Rome in an important capacity. We have established a new province, but it is rather frail, and our borders are fraught with enemies. Strengthening our hold will require sound diplomacy even more than the swords of the legions."

"What do you propose?" Cursor asked, taking another wheat cake from a passing servant's tray.

"The Dobunni king sent a messenger, who we intercepted on our journey here," Plautius explained. "He spoke very highly of you and the respect you have shown their people. Hell, you've even given this settlement a name already."

"Just something that sounded obvious," Cursor shrugged. "A Latin name merged with their goddess of the springs. I hoped you wouldn't disapprove."

"It is a name that will last through the ages, no doubt," Plautius emphasized, showing that he approved of Cursor's choice. He continued, "Given their strategic position on the western edge of the province, plus their eagerness to become Romans, makes this an important position. What would you say if I appointed you the imperial magistrate and mayor of Aquae Sulis?"



With Scapula installed as commander of the Twentieth Legion and assimilating well, Artorius at last allowed himself a bit of reprieve. He had assisted both the legate and chief tribune in familiarizing themselves with the intricacies particular to the Valeria Legion. Scapula was an efficient administrator, and he had managed rather quickly to get a handle on the dispersed vexilations throughout the province, ensuring that all detached cohorts still maintained regular contact with the legion headquarters and were still held accountable to the commanding legate.

It was now February, and he had just turned forty-six the previous month. With his pending return to Rome and final retirement from the legions, one of his last acts was to go through the tedious task of selecting those soldiers who would accompany him for the emperor's Triumph. His final duty would be to

lead his men in the victory parade through the streets of the Eternal City, after which he would accept his discharge papers and leave the army forever.

As for the soldiers who were fortunate enough to win a lengthy leave in Rome, Artorius had selected two cohort commanders and a dozen other centurions who had distinguished themselves throughout the campaign. He left it up to the commanders of each century to submit the names of those who they felt had fought valiantly and shown exemplary conduct. Essentially, anyone awarded the *Silver Torque for Valor* was selected, provided they had no subsequent disciplinary issues. Also, any soldiers who had reached their service obligation date and were electing to take their discharge would be part of the imperial triumph. But while the men in the ranks busied themselves with establishing and fortifying the new province, or else making ready for their leave in Rome, the master centurion had some unfinished business to attend to.

Artorius dismounted his horse just outside the camp hospital that sat on the outskirts of Durovernum Cantiacorum. Though still consisting mostly of tents, the foundations, as well as sewage and water channels, had been laid in preparation for a more permanent hospital complex. The proximity to the River Stour allowed for rapid transport of logistical shipments, to include much-needed supplies for the growing hospital. Part of the massive preparations, that had taken two years to accomplish, involved staging stockpiles of equipment at depots along the northern coast of Gaul and Belgica. These were now being ferried across the channel as quickly as the turbulent seas would allow.

As the master centurion walked through the camp, his heart broke at the sight of wounded and maimed legionaries who had somehow survived their fearful injuries. Some were missing limbs; others bore fearful scars, while even more were emaciated by the effects of disease and various illnesses. Those who had succumbed to their afflictions were hastily taken to a clearing outside the camp, where a blackened pyre was erected to send the poor souls to whatever gods there may be.

“Such is the glory of conquest,” Artorius muttered darkly. He then reminded himself that as tragic as their losses were, they could have been much worse. The two most significant battles they had fought had been decisive and overwhelmingly one-sided in terms of casualties.

As Artorius continued his walk, he smiled for the first time since his

arrival upon spotting Magnus standing near the riverbank with a handful of other convalescing soldiers. The Nordic centurion had lost a tremendous amount of weight and was still very pale, but at least he was now moving about, albeit with the use of a walking stick.

"Still among the living," Artorius said as he strolled through the ankle-high grass that lined the bank.

"Odin has no use for me, since I couldn't get myself killed properly in battle," Magnus replied with a tired laugh. He continued to stare out onto the water for a few moments before turning to face his friend. "I'm sorry you have to see me like this. I feel some days that I'm never going to heal and regain my former strength."

"Still, you're much better than when I left you," Artorius retorted. "You were bleeding out, and I had to leave you here, not knowing whether you or any of the other lads would live or die."

"After all these years in the ranks, they had to get me sooner or later," the Norseman mused. "Pity for them that they couldn't finish me properly." There was just a trace of the old defiance in the Norseman that Artorius found reassuring.

The two started to walk along the edge of the river; Magnus stating that it was good for him to keep his legs limber.

"I'll be returning to Rome soon," Artorius said after a minute's silence.

"Will you be coming back after the Triumph?" Magnus asked, suspecting his friend's answer. "Or was this the last campaign of Master Centurion Titus Artorius Justus?"

"I've had enough," Artorius replied bluntly. He felt uneasy about the Norseman's perpetually dark demeanor, and he knew it came not just from his painfully slow recovery. "And I am sorry about Achillia."

His words stopped Magnus in his tracks, and the Norseman looked down momentarily and took a deep breath.

"I know you loved her," Artorius added.

"She is the only woman I have ever loved," Magnus remarked before looking up once more. As he met Artorius' gaze, his eyes were wet with tears, despite it being five months since her death. "Did you know she was with child?"

"No," Artorius replied, his eyes growing wide in sad realization. "I am doubly sorry, old friend. I grieve with you."

"She wasn't far along," Magnus noted. "In fact, she had only confirmed it

about a week before we made the assault on Mai Dun. I *begged* her not to risk taking part in the attack, yet she assured me that her condition was not so far along that it would be an encumbrance."

"There was no denying her bravery," Artorius observed. "No doubt the actions of her skirmishers saved the lives of a number of our men. She earned her place in Elysium."

Magnus continued, "She wasn't even a soldier, yet she was still bound by duty, just as we were. It's been five, almost six months; one would think I'd be able to put it behind me."

"We never do," Artorius stated bluntly, "at least not completely. Those I have loved and lost will always be with me, as Achillia will remain with you. But moving on does not mean you disrespect her memory."

"I confess I've envied you for many years," Magnus said, his words startling Artorius. He was quick to explain. "You're my best friend, and I've always wished for you nothing but happiness in life. I see what you have with Diana, and I wanted that. After I became a centurion, I was eligible to marry and should have found a viable wife to bear me sons; but I wanted more than just a breeding partner. I wanted that same bond you share with Diana. Roman society says that I'm a fool, and they're probably right. After all, one simply does not marry for love."

There was a deep sense of bitterness in Magnus' demeanor, and Artorius surmised it was compounded by his wounds that were taking far too long to heal. He made mention of this to his friend.

"Well, I'm not exactly the lad of seventeen that I was when we joined the ranks," the Norseman said with a sardonic chuckle. "I keep telling myself I'm not an old man, but the body does not heal like it once did. Still, I am making progress, albeit far more slowly than I can stand most days. The doctors don't know if I'll ever be fully fit to fight again; hell, most of them said I should have died of my wounds already so they're left perplexed as it is!"

"It is a strange paradox in that the legions keep us young in many ways, while at the same time aging us in others," Artorius observed, thankful for the change of subject. "They keep us fit, well-fed, and even the lowest rankers are able to make a viable living on their wages."

"Provided they don't blow it all on getting shit-housed while fucking every whore in the province," Magnus noted. "Which many of them do."

"Well, of course I can only speak for myself," Artorius persisted. "I am forty-six, yet some tell me I scarcely look a day over thirty. I still have all my

hair with nary a trace of grey. And yet, while my face may be mostly devoid of wrinkles, it has its share of scars."

"Which Roman society frowns upon," Magnus added. He then shook his head. "Rome expected us to fight her battles, keep the frontiers safe, and even conquer new lands. We did all of that, and now what? You and I are the fortunate ones, but what about the lads in the ranks, especially the more gravely wounded who can no longer continue to serve with the legions?"

"They are discarded like a broken piece of equipment that is no longer needed," Artorius said with a trace of bitterness in his voice. "I have served Rome all these years without question, yet I will not shy away from the dark side of the legions and pretend it does not exist. I am still haunted by the beggar I saw on the streets of Ostia who had served with us at Braduhenna. How many others end up like him? Crippled in battle, in service of the empire, yet unable to find work due to their injuries? Once we're no longer of use to spill our enemies' blood, we simply don't matter anymore."

There was a rather uncomfortable silence between the two for a few minutes. This was not the conversation he was hoping to have with his closest friend of the past three decades, but then what did he expect? He was quietly grateful when Magnus addressed this.

"I am sorry that we must speak of such bitter things," the Norseman said slowly. "With your pending return to Rome and my remaining in Britannia for the foreseeable future, this could very well be the last time we ever see each other."

His words bit deep into Artorius, though he was compelled to admit the possibility. It created a paradox of feelings within him; the relief and joy at leaving the army and seeing his wife again, contrasting with the loss of his friends and the possibility of saying goodbye forever to the one who had been closest to him and carried him through so much over the years.

"Then perhaps it is good that we get out in the open that which has remained unsaid all these years," he sighed. "You said earlier that you're not the same person you were when we first joined the ranks. I've had little else to do but contemplate lately, and I know that I little resemble what I was then."

"That's not a bad thing," Magnus conjectured. "To be brutally honest, you were a hateful prick back then."

"Well, I was young and naïve," Artorius chuckled. He was then serious for a moment. "I joined so that I could avenge my brother's killing in

Teutoburger Wald. Vengeance was what I lived for and I cared about nothing else. My father warned me that my lust for revenge could destroy me, and he was right; it damn near did. I'll tell you something that I've never said to anyone. During our first campaign against Arminius and the Germanic alliance, I went there to die. I saw no future for me, especially with my brother dead and the love of my life abandoning me. Every time we went into battle I kept thinking to myself, *'This is it, time to die'*. After we stormed the ramparts of Angrivarii, burned the place to the ground, and I was still left standing, I didn't know what to do. It was as if God, the Fates, whatever you want to call it, was giving me another chance."

"Well, you did start to become more likeable after that," Magnus said with a laugh. It was the first time they both were able to relax and genuinely smile since Artorius' arrival. "That is quite a confession. I can't say I'm surprised, though to be honest I had no idea during those early years."

Artorius thought to perhaps finally tell Magnus about his vision, when he saw his deceased brother after the Triumph of Germanicus. That had been the turning point when the blackness finally started to leave his soul, and yet he could not bring himself to tell even his closest friend. Artorius had been all but an atheist when his brother, Metellus, appeared before him. Though he still did not know exactly what he believed regarding deities and divine powers, he did know in his heart that there was something beyond his mortal life. The years he and Magnus had spent in Judea had added more questions than they answered and had given them both as much of the surreal as either of them ever wanted to see for the rest of their lives. And while he had once proclaimed a crucified Nazarene teacher as *'the Son of God'*, he was uncertain as to what that even meant. But then, perhaps he wasn't meant to. He had reasoned that there was much that was unknown, and he would never understand fully.

"Hey, you still with me?" Magnus' words startled him out of his reminiscing.

"Sorry about that," Artorius replied, shaking his head. "Got lost in thought is all."

"Yes, well you'll have plenty of time for that now."

"I can't help but feel we've talked about so much, yet not really anything at all," Artorius thought aloud. "Does that make any sense?"

"Not even a little bit," his Nordic friend replied with a chuckle. "And perhaps it's not meant to. Still, it has been good to see you again. I know I

much needed the company of my best friend again."

"I think we both did," Artorius emphasized.

"Yes, well I think I should be able to return to the legion, at least on light duty, within another month at the most. My optio no doubt is losing his mind trying to run the century by himself! I wonder what will happen then."

"The names will change, but the faces will remain the same," Artorius philosophized. "And though I made it a point of not endorsing any potential candidate, I think you should stand for election as centurion primus pilus."

"Oh, I will jump into the foray there, don't you worry about that," Magnus said eagerly. "Of course we'll see how well I am able to return to the ranks. And I also know that nothing is guaranteed, especially since I'm guessing Tyranus will make another attempt at becoming master centurion of the legion."

"Of that I have no doubt. He does have two Civic Crowns and a formidable service record…"

"And he did acquit himself rather well at Mai Dun without getting himself tore up," Magnus interrupted. "But no matter. If I don't get the position, he'd better! Tyranus is probably the only centurion who I would not object to being a subordinate to. And if someone else gains the posting… well, then perhaps you will see me back in Rome after all!"



Towards the end of April, before being allowed to depart for Rome, Plautius had ordered all soldiers encamped near the River Tamesis, in a settlement that now bore the name of *Londinium*, to hold a final formation honoring one of their own. In addition to the governor and Scapula, Vespasian, Sabinus, and Geta were also in attendance, as was Tribune Cursor, who had arrived from Aquae Sulis specifically for this occasion.

All present wore their armor highly polished, and the legates were in their finest regalia. Plautius stood on a raised platform, holding a gold crown adorned with jewels.

"Soldiers of the Twentieth Legion and honored guests," he began. "Rome has three *Coronae Triumphales* / *the Crowns of Triumph*. These are reserved for the commanders of legions, almost always senatorial legates. Today we honor one, who though not being of patrician birth, distinguished himself as Commander of the Twentieth Legion during the Conquest of Britannia.

Master Centurion Titus Artorius Justus…post!"

It was a humbling experience, and one that helped bring the end of the campaign, as well as marking the culmination of Artorius' active career. He stepped onto the dais in full armor and removed his helmet. In Roman tradition, the gold and jeweled crown was never actually worn by the recipient. Instead, a simple laurel crown, like that worn by triumphant generals and even the emperor himself, was placed upon his head by Vespasian. Plautius presented the gold crown to Artorius with his left hand while clasping his right hand firmly. As the master centurion clutched the crown to his chest, Vespasian then read the order:

"By order of Emperor Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, and for exceptional leadership, valor, and selfless tenacity that resulted in the Twentieth Legion achieving victory in no less than three major battles during the Conquest of Britannia, the Corona Triumphalis is hereby awarded to Centurion Primus Pilus Titus Artorius Justus!"

The legion, as well as the assembled guests, broke into a loud ovation. Whether or not the *Corona Triumphalis* had ever been awarded to a soldier who had come up from the ranks, he could not say. Regardless, it felt rather surreal to Artorius that he had been given such an esteemed honor, one normally reserved only for commanding generals of triumphant legions. Indeed it was quite irregular, despite his having been in command of a legion throughout the majority of the campaign. He would later learn that it was Vespasian who pressed Plautius to approve the endorsement, knowing that Claudius would not go against the recommendation of his commander-in-chief.

As the host of soldiers continued to shout accolades towards him, Artorius drew his gladius and hung the gold crown off the blade, which he then held high in salute to his brothers-in-arms. He knew that for most of these men, this would be the last time he ever saw them. Soon he would depart for Rome, closing out this lengthy chapter of his life.

Chapter XXVII: Glory of Rome

Rome
May, 44 A.D.
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"The ships bearing your triumphant legions should be arriving within the next week or so," the emperor's freedman, Narcissus, said as Claudius rose from his bath. Preparations had been taking place ever since his return the previous fall, and with word of Vespasian's decisive conquest of the supposedly impenetrable barbarian hill fort of Mai Dun, the emperor had no qualms about proceeding with Rome's first triumph in twenty-seven years.

"Triumphant," Claudius replied, unable to suppress a smile.

Slaves dried him off and wrapped him in his robes as he continued to speak with the freedman, who was one of his closest advisors. "I w…wonder if I would have made my brother proud."

"Undoubtedly, Caesar," Narcissus asserted. Those two words meant much to Claudius, for Narcissus was not prone to false flattery and always spoke his mind to the emperor. "I have no doubt that the noble Germanicus is looking down upon you now from Elysium and feeling great pride in his younger brother."

"He was the great soldier," Claudius remembered. He always felt invigorated after a plunge in the baths, and for a short time his limp was barely noticeable as he walked down the long corridor towards his private study. "And y…yet he never gave me cause for jealousy or resentment."

"Your brother loved you very much," Narcissus replied earnestly, for it was true. Claudius and Germanicus had always shared a very close bond, one that he'd never had with any other members of his family. "I think he would acknowledge that your leadership style was understandably different than his, though no less important."

"From the official reports, as well as my o…own observations, I daresay we found my brother's best qualities in our General Vespasian. Your recommendation that he be given a legion command has proven to be some of your soundest advice to me."

"My loyalties have always been to Rome and to you," the freedman stated.

Claudius noted the emphasis on the empire before him, something he actually appreciated.

"Though relatively young, I knew he had unlimited potential," Narcissus added. "It just had to be unleashed in the proper environment."

"Conquering a province certainly proved that," Claudius remarked. "From the way Plautius and Sabinus talk, you would think Vespasian defeated our enemies single-handedly."

"In some ways he did," Narcissus said. "He captured more than twenty enemy strongholds with minimal losses amongst his legionaries. I suggest we keep him close to us. His humble birth may have slowed his early advancement, yet he proved himself a master of warfare in Britannia. He is also extremely loyal. I believe great things await him."

"Yes," Claudius confirmed, "great things indeed."



Adela marveled at the construction that was already underway in the new Roman city that her husband was now mayor and magistrate of. Though the roads were still little more than hard-packed dirt with drainage on either side, she knew that in time they would be paved over. The center of the town had already been covered with cobblestones, with more permanent structures in the Roman style springing up at random.

It had been almost a year since Cursor left with the invasion force, though with the preparations that had to be made, Adela scarcely saw him during the two years of buildup following his appointment as commander of the army's cavalry corps. She had struggled immensely with her husband's decision to return for one last campaign, even after he swore to never draw his weapon in anger again. That he had been compelled by the emperor to take the posting had helped Adela to forgive Cursor, though it did nothing to stop the bitter tears she shed on many a night.

Though she hated that he had been compelled to serve in battle once again, her feelings over time merged into a paradox of both sorrow and pride. She deeply admired her husband's devotion to duty and extreme personal bravery. After the initial landings, most of the news that reached Rome concerned the legions, though occasionally skirmishes fought by the cavalry would also be noted. As long as they continued to win battles, and she never had to see her husband's name on the casualty lists, that was enough for

Adela.

Upon hearing that the emperor's triumph was set for that spring, she had decided that it was time to join her husband and start their new life together. He had written to her, telling her about his appointment as magisterial mayor of the new township of Aquae Sulis. She had noted a change in the demeanor of his letters. Like Plautius, Adela noted a far more exuberant manner in which Cursor now spoke. While their household goods would take a couple months to arrive, she had booked passage as far as Juliobona[1] in northern Gaul.

By chance, there happened to be a small shipping vessel bound for Aquae Sulis with a cargo full of salt, apparently to be used in the making of fish sauce. Since the only other way was to take a larger vessel to the main Roman settlements in the east and then risk a rather lengthy trip by land, Adela had elected to seek passage on the small ship. Though there was little to no room, and she was confined to sleeping amongst the salt casks, it mattered little to her. It took the vessel two days to round the southwest corner of Britannia, and then another day along the lengthy river that led to Aquae Sulis.

There was no port to be seen, only a handful of docks used by fishermen and the occasional merchant vessel. The climate was definitely cooler than what she was used to, and she wrapped her traveling cloak around her close as the ship dropped its small boarding ramp. Unsure where she was supposed to go, Adela stepped onto the dock, taking a moment to regain her balance before walking onto the grassy embankment with its dirt path that led into the settlement.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" The voice of the soldier startled her, but Adela was glad to see a Roman face. The man was in his plain red tunic, though his metal embossed belt and vine stick told her that he was a centurion.

"I'm looking for my husband, Tribune Cursor," she said, causing the man to laugh.

"Of course, I know him well!" he said excitedly. "You must be Adela. The name's Lucius Taurus, I'm one of your husband's centurions. He sent me down to check on the salt shipment that just arrived. Come, I'll take you to him."

Adela let out a sigh of relief, glad that she had not been dropped in some foreign territory with no one who spoke Latin, much less knew who her

husband was. Taurus' name seemed familiar, probably from one of Cursor's letters over the past three years.

They found him talking with a surveyor next to a large stone building that appeared to be about halfway complete. He still wore his military tunic, as he had not brought any civilian togas with him during the campaign. Cursor was reviewing with the surveyor where they intended to run the sewer lines through the town when he looked up and saw his wife. His face broke into a broad smile and forgot all else in the world. Without a word, he took his wife into his arms and kissed her deeply, paying no mind to the fact that she was disheveled from the ride across the channel and along the river over the past few days.

"I…I wasn't expecting to see you!" he said.

"My place is with you," Adela replied, running her fingers along the side of his bald head. They kissed again and Cursor excused himself to the surveyor, taking his wife to his private quarters within the building.

"My dear," Adela said, taking her husband's hand as they walked the streets of the growing town later that afternoon, "I have not seen you looking this happy and content in many years, if ever."

"Perhaps the waters from the thermae springs do have healing properties after all," Cursor said with a short laugh. He then let out an audible sigh, though his smile still remained. "I think I have finally found that which I sought all these years. I had to wade through the fires of hell, forced to break a sacred oath, and wield my sword once again. And yet, here I am, able to create instead of destroy. This is what I want; to bring civilization and a better life to very end of the empire. It doesn't look like much now, but I hope to lay the foundations of a great city here, one that will rival even the imperial metropolises in Italia."

Cursor then took his wife by the arm and proceeded to guide her over to the thermae springs. In a sense, the flowing waters signaled a rebirth for them. And rather than being consigned to oblivion, Aulus Nautius Cursor had at last found that which he had sought for years; peace.



The cool sea breeze refreshed Artorius as he leaned against the prow of the ship. Surprisingly enough, he had not gotten seasick at all during the

three-week voyage from Britannia to Rome. The fleet that bore those fortunate soldiers who would take part in the emperor's triumph had stopped over briefly at Carthago Nova in southern Hispania to resupply. Other than Centurion Valens ending up in a sordid affair with the magistrate's daughter during their brief stay, the task force got back underway without incident. Early on the third day out from this last port call they had passed between Sardinia and Corsica. All were rapt with anticipation, for this marked the last stretch before they arrived in Rome. Soldiers had spent most of the day on the upper deck, watching the horizon for the first signs of the mainland as the ships lurched through the rolling waves. With the sun glowing red behind them in the west, legionaries anxiously gathered on the rail, hoping that they would reach Ostia before nightfall.

"The lads are anxious," Vespasian observed as he joined Artorius, who stood with his back against the rail on the upper deck.

"And you're not?" Artorius chuckled, his arms folded across his chest.

"I think we all are," the legate confessed. "My son is now four, and I have not seen him in over two years. Since we were not nobility by birth, I only hope that I've given him a worthy name by my actions in Britannia."

"Nobility that is earned is far greater than nobility that one is simply born with," Artorius noted. "I suspect that the conquest is only the beginning for you."

"And yet for you it is the end," Vespasian added.

The master centurion could only nod in reply.

For Artorius it was the ending of an age. Twenty-nine years had passed since he first enlisted into the legions. He was now forty-six years old; and like he told Magnus, he did not look or often feel the effects of his age, yet he knew he was a far cry from the vengeful seventeen-year old who joined the ranks of the Roman Army all those years ago. And while he felt a certain amount of trepidation about his future, there was also an immense sense of relief that he'd drawn a weapon in anger for the last time. There was life beyond the legions, and he was ever grateful to have his beloved Diana with which to share in the next chapter of his life.

The ship increased its speed; the sailors trying to get into port before darkness fell. The other ships in the flotilla also increased their speed, and it became a sort of race between the crews to see who could arrive in port first. The Ostia docks slowly came into view as the sky grew red, deceptively

further away than they appeared. In that moment, Artorius' thoughts were consumed by his wife, who he longed to see more than anything in this world. Knowing Diana, she had sent one of her servants to watch the seas every day since they received word that the triumphant legions were sailing for Rome. As he envisioned time and again taking her into his arms, Artorius reminded himself that the end was really just another beginning. The poets and storytellers would have it that the conquering heroes sailed gloriously into the sunset, yet never asking what happened when the sun rose again.

Chapter Endnote:
1 – Lillebonne, France

Historical Appendices

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The Britons

Caratacus continued to be the face of resistance in Britannia. He succeeded in uniting the divided tribes, compelling them to continue to fight against the Roman occupiers and raiding those villages and tribal kingdoms that had become Romanized. Though initially successful in the use of guerilla warfare, the Roman retaliation of burning all rebel villages they encountered compelled Caratacus and his Silures allies to face them in battle. In 50 A.D., he rallied his allies from all over Britannia, to include the highly warlike tribes in Wales, and built a series of stone and wooden ramparts on high ground with which to defend against the Roman onslaught. Despite being dug in, with distinct terrain advantage afforded by the high ground as well as a protective river, and likely holding numerical superiority, Caratacus suffered a decisive defeat by the Romans under Ostorius Scapula at the Battle of Caer Caradoc. It was to be his last major stand against Rome.

The rebels were shattered, and Caratacus fled to Brigantes, perhaps to seek aid from Cartimandua's then-husband, Venutius, who was by this time an outspoken opponent of the Roman occupation. Instead, Cartimandua herself ordered Caratacus arrested and handed over to the Romans in chains. In 51 A.D., he and his family were paraded through Rome, where traditionally the leaders of such rebellions were summarily executed by strangulation. Instead, he made the unusual request of being allowed to speak directly to the senate and emperor, which was granted. Tacitus gives the following version of his speech:

"If the degree of my nobility and fortune had been matched by moderation in success, I would have come to this City as a friend rather than a captive, nor would you have disdained to receive with a treaty of peace one sprung from

brilliant ancestors and commanding a great many nations. But my present lot, disfiguring as it is for me, is magnificent for you. I had horses, men, arms, and wealth: what wonder if I was unwilling to lose them? If you wish to command everyone, does it really follow that everyone should accept your slavery? If I were now being handed over as one who had surrendered immediately, neither my fortune nor your glory would have achieved brilliance. It is also true that in my case any reprisal will be followed by oblivion. On the other hand, if you preserve me safe and sound, I shall be an eternal example of your clemency."

The senate, as well as Emperor Claudius, were so moved by his words that he received a standing ovation. Viewing him as a worthy adversary, and knowing that to show clemency was to show strength, Caratacus was pardoned. Though never allowed to return to Britannia, or to even leave Rome, he was allowed to live out the remainder of his days with his family in peace. He was further so awestruck by the grandeur of Rome that Cassius Dio quotes him as saying to Claudius, *"And can you, then, who have got such possessions and so many of them, covet our poor tents?"*

Cartimandua remained a loyal Roman ally, despite the vehement protestations of her husband and numerous warriors of the Brigantes nobility. She later divorced Venutius and married his armorer, Vellocatus. Her kingdom split into a civil war in the 50s A.D., with rebels under her former husband seeking her overthrow. She petitioned the Roman governor, Scapula, for aid, who responded by crushing the rebels and asserting Cartimandua's rule over her people. She continued to show her loyalty to Rome during the crisis brought on by the rebellion of Queen Boudicca of the Iceni in 61 A.D.

In 69 A.D., with Rome embroiled in civil war in what would be known as *'The Year of the Four Emperors'*, Venutius raised another rebellion against his former wife. Though Cartimandua was evacuated by Roman soldiers, insufficient troops were available to save her kingdom. Venutius became king of the Brigantes, and Cartimandua disappears from the historical texts. The ultimate fate of both remains unknown.

Cogidubnus built up the Atrebates and surrounding areas as part of the *civitas* or states / magistracies of the Roman Empire. He later became a

Roman citizen, sometime during either the later reign of Claudius or possibly Nero, adopting the name Tiberius Claudius Cogidubnus. Such amalgamations of indigenous and Roman names were common when a member of foreign nobility was awarded citizenship. An extensive *Romanization* of his kingdom took place during his reign, with the public baths, forum, and amphitheater near Silchester, England being built. A magnificent palace was erected for him near what is now Chichester and Fishbourne in southern England around 65 to 70 A.D. The size of the complex and level of detail, particularly the ornate floor mosaics that are remarkably still intact, denotes the status he enjoyed as both a Britannic king and Roman citizen. Several marble slabs excavated in recent years bear tributes to him in Latin, referring to him as *'Great King of the Britons'*. His exact date of death is unknown, although Tacitus states that he remained a loyal client king until late in the 1st century, suggesting that his rule lasted a span of between thirty-five and fifty years.

The Romans



Claudius returned to Rome, celebrating his triumph in 44 A.D., where the senate awarded him the agnomen, *Britannicus*. Though the Triumph was perhaps a bit premature, given the volatility of the isle, he had acquired Rome a new province and secured his military credentials. His reign proved to be highly successful, aided by his treating members of the senate as equals, rather than subjects. He embarked on a series of public works, in particular focusing on transportation infrastructure by expanding the empire's network of roads and canals. Besides Britannia, Claudius further expanded the empire

by annexing Thrace, Noricum, Pamphylia, Lycia, and Judea. While Judea had been granted nominal autonomy under the rule of Herod Agrippa, who was a close personal friend of Claudius, upon his death in 44 A.D. the province reverted back to Roman control.

As successful as his public life was as emperor, Claudius' personal life was an unmitigated disaster. His third wife, Empress Valeria Messalina, attempted to have him overthrown in 48 A.D. and replaced by a lover. The plot was uncovered and Messalina executed soon after. In January, 49 A.D., he married for the fourth time, this time to his own niece, Agrippina the Younger. He died in 54 A.D., with most ancient historians agreeing that he was murdered, possibly by Agrippina. Though he had named both his stepson, Nero, as well as his own son, Britannicus, as his joint heirs, the despondent Nero soon had Britannicus killed and became one of Rome's most controversial and hated emperors. Both of Claudius' daughters, Claudia Antonia and Claudia Octavia, perished during Nero's reign. The Julio-Claudian Dynasty came to an ignominious end in 68 A.D. with Nero's suicide; ushering in a period of civil war.

Aulus Plautius remained in Britannia, where he was named the first Roman governor of the province. He served a standard four-year term from 43 to 47 A.D., after which he returned to Rome and was given a public *Ovation* by Emperor Claudius. Little is known about the remainder of his life.

Ostorius Scapula served as suffect Consul in 46 A.D., the following year succeeding Plautius as Governor of Britannia. Rebellious and unconquered tribes continued to resist, testing the new governor's mettle. He made a strategic error by ordering all tribes within the province to disarm, which provoked rebellion amongst the Iceni and others. These were quickly put down, though as a result, Scapula recanted his directive for disarmament. His decisive victory over Caratacus at Caer Caradoc in 50 A.D. proved to be his crowning achievement. He died unexpectedly a year later; in the words of Tacitus, "worn out with care".

Flavius Sabinus continued to serve as a legate under Plautius until 45 A.D. He then served seven years as governor of Moesia, in what is now the Balkans. When Rome fell into civil war during *The Year of the Four*

Emperors, Sabinus supported his younger brother, Vespasian's bid for the throne. After the armies of the third emperor, Vitellius, were defeated by Vespasian's forces, he tried to surrender the empire to Sabinus, who would act as regent until his brother arrived. Vitellius' German guards and surviving forces refused to honor the surrender, and instead laid siege to Rome. Sabinus was killed, despite Vitellius' protestations. Upon Vespasian's triumphant arrival in Rome, his remains were interred with dignity and he was given a censor's funeral.



Vespasian returned from Britannia as one of Rome's most celebrated generals. His numerous victories earned him *triumphal regalia*, and he was regarded as the greatest military leader of the age. He was made Consul in 51 A.D., after which he retired from public life, possibly due to having fallen out with Claudius' fourth wife, Agrippina. In 63 A.D., during the reign of Nero, he was appointed Governor of North Africa. Rumors from the time say he fell out of favor once more after falling asleep during one of the emperor's infamous musical or poetic recitals. Whether truth or embellishment, Vespasian was forced into retirement once more.

In 66 A.D. the province of Judea exploded in open rebellion, during which the Syrian legate was killed while attempting to restore order. Vespasian was immediately recalled to active service once again and dispatched with a huge army to destroy the rebels. His son, Titus, who was already an accomplished military leader in his own right, commanded one of his legions.

Two years later, while Vespasian was still in Judea, Nero committed suicide in the face of rebellion in Rome. And while Vespasian swore his allegiance to the new emperor, Galba, upon his murder, Rome fell into civil war. During the chaos, Vespasian was proclaimed emperor and his armies emerged victorious. He returned to Rome, quickly restoring order and leaving the completing of the Jewish War to Titus, who succeeded in capturing and sacking Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

Vespasian's ten-year reign was highly successful, and he is universally regarded as one of the greatest men to become Emperor of Rome. He had Claudius deified, rebuilt Rome following the civil war, and quickly established himself as both a strong and benevolent ruler. His vast military credentials gave him an aura of strength, and he expanded the Empire further into northern Britannia. He ordered numerous public works, the most famous of which was the *Flavian Amphitheatre*, now known as *The Colosseum*. He died of a fever on 23 June 79 A.D. at the age of sixty-nine. His last words were purported to be '*Vae, puto deus fio'*, "Oh, I think I'm becoming a god!"

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