
Soldier of Rome
Reign of the Tyrants
The Year of the Four Emperors
Part I
James Mace

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If this day should be your last, may you die with honour.

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

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Prolog: Rome's Bloody Artist

Rome
25 July 64 A.D.



Emperor Nero

"The gods have struck Rome down with fire, so that we may rebuild her to even greater glory." These were the words of passion, uttered time and again by Emperor Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus. For it was the only possible explanation anyone could give for the unthinkable calamity that had befallen Immortal Rome.

Rome, the eternal city that ruled over a vast empire, which extended from the forest of Britannia to the barren sands of Arabia, was in ashes. For six days the city was engulfed in flames, as if the pits of Hades had been opened, with demon-fire threatening to destroy civilization itself. Thousands had either suffocated in the black clouds of acrid smoke, or been incinerated by the firestorm. Blackened ruins and charred corpses covered much of the city.

No one even knew how it all started. In his frustration, the emperor would later name several groups as possible instigators, such as drunken charioteers, as well as several sects of Jews, to include a rather small and obscure sect called *Christians*. In truth, with most of the city's housing consisting of wooden structures several stories tall, built practically on top of each other, it was a wonder the city had avoided disaster for so long. The pragmatics knew

that the Great Fire of Rome had little to do with the gods, Roman or Jewish, and more to do with the haphazard construction of the city's poorer districts.

Emperor Nero, who was returning from a visit to the coastal district of Antium, hastened back with all possible speed once he saw the red glow over the Eternal City. By then, the inferno had spread well beyond the ability of Rome's firefighting cohorts, known as the vigiles, to contain. The young emperor was known mostly for his eccentricities and often volatile temper, yet on that night, he transformed for a time into what he should have been, a true leader of the people. As chaos and death consumed the vast majority of Rome's residential districts, the emperor organized firefighting efforts and ordered the gates of his private gardens to be opened, giving refuge to many who would otherwise have not been able to outrun the firestorm. Of the fourteen districts within the city, three had been completely destroyed, with seven more badly damaged. Even much of the emperor's own palace, the *Domus Transitoria*, had been devastated by the flames. Rome, the city which stood for over eight hundred years and was capital of the largest empire the world had yet to see, was in ruins.

Two days after the last of the fires burned out, the despondent emperor walked through the wreckage of one of the residential districts. Where once stood scores of flats, known as 'insula', along with various shops, bakeries, food stalls, and places of business and leisure, there was now nothing left but scorched timbers, billowing piles of ash, and the mournful cries of hundreds of filthy and shattered survivors.

"My poor children," Nero whispered, a tear running down his face. The emperor was often one for the dramatic, both with his poetry and stage performances, as well as in his personal life. And yet, those three words and a simple tear showed far greater genuine sorrow than the most voracious and piteous poems he could conceive.

Only his praetorian prefect, Ofonius Tigellinus, and his aged advisor, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, accompanied him this day. Tigellinus' peer and fellow prefect, Faenius Rufus, was left at the imperial palace, whose grounds the emperor ordered to be used to shelter as many of the homeless as possible. Much of the guard remained on the grounds to keep order, as well as prevent any violence or attempted looting. Empress Poppaea had also remained at the palace, where she offered as much aid and comfort as she was able.

“There are many within the senate who think we should abandon the capital,” Seneca said, as the praetorian prefect helped the old man over a fallen timber.

“And what would you have us do, old friend?” Nero asked, his gaze fixed on a young woman. Her face was covered in soot and streaked with tears. She sat against the blackened ruins of what had once been her house, sobbing quietly while holding the charred remains of what appeared to be a pair of young children. The emperor turned to face the senator, who had served as his mentor since well before he came to the imperial throne. “Would you tell her, while she cradles the remains of her children, that the fathers of Rome would abandon her?”

“Only four of the city’s fourteen districts remain habitable,” Seneca noted, as the three men continued on their melancholy walk.

“At least half a million people are now homeless,” Tigellinus added, “probably more. And the dead number in the tens-of-thousands. The survivors dig through the ruins, searching for their loved ones, yet given the magnitude of the destruction, many will never be found.”

“All the more reason for us not to abandon those who remain,” the emperor persisted. “Am I to tell them that their emperor, their divine father, can do nothing? Will I leave the city of marble, as once proclaimed by Augustus, a city of rubble?”

“Sire, given the circumstances, it is not for us to decide what action you should take,” Seneca spoke up. “In the aftermath of such unprecedented disaster, the people need strong leadership; an emperor who can make them believe he wields the power of a god.”

This last remark caused Nero to turn about rather quickly. It caught him off guard, yet the grin that grew upon his face told his mentor he had said exactly what the emperor needed to hear.

“You are right,” he replied calmly. “The senate cannot decide the fate of Rome. This decision is mine alone, and I say we will not abandon the people. For what right have we to rule over the greatest empire the world has ever known, if we are to forsake the very city the gods themselves gave to us over eight hundred years ago? No, my friends, we will not run like beaten cowards. We *will* rebuild! The gods have struck Rome down with fire, so that we may rebuild her to even greater glory.”



Nero’s decisiveness gave much reassurance to the people, as well as the senate, who were only too glad to defer to him on this matter. Two weeks after the fire, the emperor called for a meeting of the senate, where he would unveil his plans for a new Rome. Two of the senators, who walked apart from their peers, discussed with speculation and much interest the emperor’s plans. Their names were Titus Flavius Sabinus and Gaius Suetonius Paulinus.

“You, of all people, should be most intrigued by what our emperor intends to propose,” Paulinus observed.

“I admit, I was impressed by his level-headed leadership during the fire,” Sabinus replied. “It was he who organized the firefighting efforts, as well as opening the palace grounds for people to escape to. Perhaps our young emperor is finally learning what it means to be a leader.”

Sabinus, who was now in his mid-fifties, was also a former consul. And while most famous for commanding the Ninth Legion during the Invasion of Britannia, he currently served as the urban prefect and, essentially, governor of the city of Rome. This placed him in overall command of the urban fire and police force known as the vigiles. The city’s grain ration also fell under the charge of his office, and Sabinus understood all-too-well that peace or strife were dictated by whether the populace ate well or went hungry. Of even greater significance was the legal authority exercised by the urban prefect. It was he who published any new laws or decrees proposed by the emperor, and in both civil and criminal court cases, he was the ultimate appeals authority within Rome. Only the emperor could overturn a judgment passed by the urban prefect. In short, Flavius Sabinus was one of the most important and powerful people within the imperial capital.

Gaius Suetonius Paulinus was a few years younger than Sabinus, though his career had been equally eventful. During the last year of Gaius Caligula’s rather capricious reign, he’d served as praetor, one of the sixteen administrators who directly advised the emperor. A year later, after his appointment as Governor of Mauretania in North Africa, he suppressed the revolt of a local chieftain, while also being the first Roman officer to successfully lead soldiers over the treacherous Atlas Mountains. His most renowned achievements, however, came years later during his tenure as Governor-General of Britannia. He successfully expanded the empire’s borders further into the isle, though had to recall his troops after an abusive and incompetent magistrate provoked a rebellion amongst the Iceni tribe. The

rebels, under Queen Boudicca, ravaged southeast Britannia, killing thousands while burning the city of Camulodunum along with the capital of Londinium. Emperor Nero had contemplated abandoning the province until he received reports that Paulinus, despite being horribly outnumbered and cornered, had won such a decisive victory that Boudicca committed suicide, and the surviving rebels were crushed. Three years later, Paulinus' victory was still openly celebrated, in no small part to help overshadow the economic and political upheavals that still troubled the province.

"I think the emperor had potential even when he was very young," Paulinus remarked. "He was just a boy of sixteen when the divine Claudius ascended to the gods, and named him his successor. Although, his bitch of a mother, Agrippina, became even more insufferable after her husband died."

"So I recall," Sabinus replied. "The news surrounding her death was rather vague. I can't say anyone shed any tears for her. There were many within the senate, equites, and even the legions, who sent letters of congratulations to Nero, because he was finally free of her vile clutches."

"While I am the last person who would mourn the death of Agrippina, her passing left Nero lost and completely unhinged for some time. Aside from Seneca, he has lacked good advisors and mentors. Plus, he is only twenty-six, and has rather carelessly lorded over the known world for a decade. But I will say, he does seem to be at his best during a crisis. He recognized the financial crisis the empire was in early on, what with so much coin going out of Rome's borders and not enough resources coming in. The only reason he sent me to Britannia in the first place was to expand our borders and gain control over the mines and other resources."

"He is indeed a strange paradox of potential greatness and dangerous eccentricities," Sabinus continued. "Prior to the fire, the emperor spent most of his time writing awful poetry, while sneaking about the city, sicking his attack dog, Tigellinus, on any street entertainers he accused of plagiarizing his work. He had little time for the daily running of the empire. Seneca has been the only one able to keep him in line at all."

"It is a pity that it's taken the destruction of Rome, with so many thousands dead or displaced, for him to finally become the leader he was meant to be. Better late than never, I suppose."

Paulinus' feelings for the emperor were rather conflicted. He did owe much to Nero, including his consulships and appointment as Governor of Britannia, for which he was very grateful. However, he had also witnessed

traces of the emperor's dark side. In just one example, which he and Sabinus alluded to, it was the worst-kept secret in the entire empire that Nero had his mother murdered. And while Paulinus personally benefited from this—for he had fallen out of imperial favor due to a heated dispute with Agrippina—he still found the matter unsettling. Nero had contradicted himself numerous times, when asked about it. Some stories had it she was killed by his orders, others that she had threatened to have him murdered, only to commit suicide when found out.

Paulinus and Sabinus sat together not far from the main entrance to the senate chamber. A large table covered with a tarp stood in the center of the expansive floor. The emperor stood at the head, with both of his praetorian prefects on either side of him.

"My friends, welcome!" Nero said with enthusiasm, as the chamber gradually filled. His demeanor was one of near giddiness, and a complete contradiction to the utter desolation he'd felt just a couple of weeks prior. "We have been through much, and our beloved city was near the brink of extinction. Some say this was the punishment of the gods, but I dismiss such notions as the ravings of lunatics and madmen. No, fathers of Rome, this was not divine punishment. It was the gods' way of ending the old world and ushering in the new; a new age for Rome. The gods tested us, like they did during the terrors of Hannibal, to see if we will allow ourselves to be beaten into submission, forfeiting our destiny of greatness. We can rise up and let both the gods and the people of Rome know that their sacrifices, wrought in fire, were not in vain. I give you now, my image of new Rome!"

He nodded to Nymphidius and Tigellinus, who pulled the tarp off the large table. Beneath was an elaborate scale model of the city. The Seven Hills, along with the Forum, the Circus Maximus, Imperial Palace, and all the temples were easily identifiable. Senators started to talk quietly amongst each other, many nodding their heads in approval. While Nero had treated most of the members with either indifference or spite over the last ten years, many hoped that Rome's greatest crisis in a generation would finally bring out the long dormant greatness of the Julio-Claudian dynasty.

"My divine ancestor, the great Augustus Caesar, claimed he found Rome a city of brick and left it a city of marble," Nero stated. "This was, regrettably, only partially true. For while the temples and government buildings were indeed rebuilt in marble, the vast majority of our citizens lived

in tiny flats made of wood. Such housing is only worthy of barbarians, and the gods have now shown us the folly of civilized peoples living in such squalor. Therefore, we will rebuild Rome, and all of it will be in marble. Its beauty will be the envy of the world!"

This drew a number of gasps and surprised mutterings from the senators, which only caused Nero's grin to grow broader. A few of the more flattering members applauded loudly. The skeptics, including Sabinus and Paulinus, sat with their chins in their hands, in silent contemplation.

"But there is more!" the emperor continued, holding his hands up high. "For what is it that defines Roman greatness? Is it the power of our armies? Hardly! The legions may defend civilization, but they do not define it. The Greeks gave us our first taste of what civilization could achieve with their art, sculpture, architecture, philosophy, poetry, and thespianism. Greece laid the foundations of culture, and it is Rome's divinely ordained destiny to see it through to its true potential. And that will be realized here, in the Eternal City, where out of the ashes a new Rome shall arise. And there will be more. For every street, every building, will be adorned with paintings and frescoes designed by the greatest artists from all over the world. Rome will become the very definition of beauty, and through such beauty we'll finally realize our true greatness!"

The emperor's speech ended, the senate rose to its feet and broke into voracious applause. Its members showered Nero with shouts of adulation. While few bore any sort of genuine love for their emperor, all knew that the public would view this grand vision as their salvation. Nero was obsessed with his personal popularity among the masses, and many within the senate did not wish to alienate themselves any further from the people than they already were. What few noticed, however, was the rather large complex that was marked out on the slopes of Palatine, Esquiline, and Caelian Hills. While Nero promised to rebuild Rome for the people, he intended to have the greatest architectural marvels for himself.

"The city will be rebuilt in marble?" Sabinus asked incredulously, as he and Paulinus left the senate chambers. "I doubt there is enough marble in the entire world to build housing for a million people."

"It is a grand, and perhaps even noble, undertaking," Paulinus replied. "But even if there is enough marble to be mined and transported to Rome, how does he intend to pay for it all? Rebuild in stone and stucco, yes. What

he's proposing will bankrupt the empire before half the districts are rebuilt, let alone all of the statuary and artwork he's envisioning. Beauty is worth nothing if people are starving."

"Money can always be found, if one knows where to look," a voice behind them said. They turned to see a younger senator named Marcus Salvius Otho walking over to join them. In his early thirties, the fair-haired man bore a smooth complexion that never required a shave and was somewhat effete in appearance and demeanor. He was also a favorite of Nero, who had noted on numerous occasions the rather coincidental resemblance between them. Rumors also abounded regarding their relationship, given that Empress Poppaea was Otho's former wife.

"Senator Otho," Paulinus said with a curt nod. "I did not realize you were still in Rome."

"Just for a short time longer," Otho replied. "I would have already departed, though the unfortunate tragedy to befall the capital compelled me to remain in Rome a few weeks longer than I intended. I figured the citizens of my new province will understand."

"Lusitania is it?" Sabinus asked, referring to the province that covered the western third of Hispania.

"It is," Otho said with a nod. "Rumor has it that my former wife, our dear empress, compelled the emperor to send me there as a means of getting me away from the imperial court. However, being named governor of a rich province does not exactly constitute exile or a falling out of favor. In fact, Nero promised me a magnificent sendoff banquet. Given the present circumstances, that might be viewed in poor taste."

Otho's ex-wife, Poppaea Sabina, had married Nero two years prior and was now Empress Consort of the Roman Empire. Otho had introduced the two at a lavish banquet six years before. Poppaea became enamored with the emperor and, with her husband's overt consent, the two became lovers. Otho soon granted her a divorce, while at the same time compelling the emperor to be rid of his barren wife, Octavia, and to make Poppaea his wife and consort…or at least that is what the rumormongers said. There appeared to be some veracity to this, as Otho was treated as more than just a courtier, but rather as a personal friend of the emperor.

"To this day, Poppaea thinks she outwitted me by becoming Nero's empress," Otho reminisced. "What she refuses to accept is that it was I who has gained most by their love. By enabling his acquisition of a beautiful, not

to mention fertile wife, I have found myself deep within Nero's inner circle. This governorship is just the latest opportunity I've been given to expand both wealth and influence. If Poppaea wishes to view it as a form of exile, so be it. Still, I hope I have greater luck than your brother, dear Sabinus."

This caused the urban prefect's mouth to twitch slightly. His brother, Flavius Vespasian, was a brilliant general, with many of his former soldiers claiming that he was the greatest strategist and tactician since Julius Caesar. And yet, his military genius had not been enough to thwart the near constant strain of political disasters. All three men were aware of this, and with Otho, it was difficult to tell if he was being deliberately provocative or just clumsy in his speech.

"To be fair, North Africa is a difficult province to manage," Paulinus said quickly, hoping to defuse an argument between the two men, both of whom he considered friends. And though he also considered Vespasian to be a personal friend, he was very much aware of the fact that the two Flavian brothers were anything but close. Many times, when Sabinus did come to Vespasian's defense, it was speculated that it was done more to save the family name, rather than out of familial love.

"Yes, well you seemed to manage alright," Otho observed.

"I had to deal with its various tribes and barbaric peoples," Paulinus added. "It is difficult to get them to coexist, even in the best of times. Many of them know nothing but making war upon each other. And if Vespasian was dealt a financial and political blow, it was only because he tried to be fair to the people, rather than impoverish them in order to increase his own wealth."

"A lot of good it did him," Otho scoffed. "He tried playing nice with barbarians, and they still pelted him with garbage and shit when he departed." He noted the stern expression on Sabinus' face. "Apologies, my friend, for I meant no offense. I have long been an admirer of you and your brother's military achievements. Emperor Claudius credited you both with almost single-handedly conquering Britannia. All I meant to say is, I hope I have better luck in Lusitania than Vespasian did in North Africa."

"Do well in Lusitania," Sabinus said slowly. "And pray you do not suffer the same misfortunes my brother did."

The rather awkward conversation was soon dismissed, as Sabinus and Paulinus had the matters of rebuilding Rome to oversee, while Otho had a province to run, nearly fourteen hundred miles to the west. He departed

within a few days, and was soon forgotten by most of the senators who remained in Rome.



Empress Poppaea Sabina

During his journey, the young governor paid a visit to the city of Tarraco, capital of Hispania Tarraconensis. The largest of the three Spanish provinces, it was governed by an old senator named Servius Sulpicius Galba. Galba had served as Consul of Rome thirty-one years before, along with Otho's father. And while Otho found his father's former colleague to be a rather bitter, cantankerous old man, he was ever in the habit of making new friends and political alliances wherever he could. And since Galba came from one of Rome's oldest and most distinguished noble families, it was a potential alliance that Otho was willing to go great lengths to maintain. He also knew that whatever difficulties he encountered, whether in his own province or when trying to forge political alliances, at least he was insulated from the turmoil that would soon engulf the imperial capital. The Great Fire of Rome was just the first step in what would soon become an even greater calamity.



Four months passed since Nero's visionary speech to the senate, and winter was now approaching. The empire was on the brink of an unprecedented financial crisis. In addition to all of the new housing, the emperor had ordered the clearing of over a hundred acres of land at the very

heart of Rome near Palatine Hill. It was here the most audacious work began. Called the *'Domus Aurea'*, or *'Golden House'*, it was a massive complex of banquet halls, entertainment rooms, gardens, and bathhouses. It even included its own private lake. The structure was given its name after the emperor demanded its walls be covered in gold leaf. He constantly referred to it as the center of beauty, from which all other monuments would be judged.

"The Domus Aurea is costing more than most of the remaining construction projects combined," a quaestor complained during a meeting between the emperor and senate. An official posting within the patrician *Cursus Honorum*, the twenty quaestors were young men tasked with being the empire's chief financial advisors.

One of the man's associates added, "And now you are asking that a bronze statue of yourself, standing over a hundred feet high, be erected on its grounds as well."

"I am not *asking* you for anything," Nero corrected in a rather cold demeanor. "I am *telling* you what will be erected within the grounds of the Golden House." As the months advanced, with building projects progressing far slower than he wished and the expenses already overwhelming the imperial coffers, his previously optimistic and cheerful demeanor was soon replaced by one of sullen anger. "Rome holds greater wealth than any nation in the history of mankind, so don't you dare tell me that there isn't any money!"

"Perhaps," one of the quaestors said, trying to quell the emperor's rising anger, "but there is not enough in the treasury. We've already raised taxes, while cutting public expenditures to the barest they've been in a hundred years. Rome will be bankrupt within six months if this continues…"

"Enough!" Nero snapped, slamming his fist down on the arm of his chair. He stood and took a deep breath. His eyes wide, he shook his head and waved his hand at the assembled quaestors. "You're sacked, all of you. I will appoint new financial ministers who know how to manage the imperial coffers better."

"Caesar, please…"

"I said, *fuck off!*" The emperor was now screaming in rage. He then signaled to the praetorian guardsmen who lined the walls of the chamber. "Get these piles of excrement out of my sight! They should consider themselves lucky I don't banish them to some rock in the middle of the sea or cut their throats for their insolence!"

Though rumors of Nero's cruelty had persisted since the time he became emperor, these had mostly been fabrications wrought by political rivals. But now, with his rebuilding of Rome into a true city of marble and gold, which he viewed as his divine destiny, being threatened, some wondered if he might follow through with his violent threats. A few of the older senators, whose sons were among the quaestors, found this outburst particularly unnerving. Their sons' political careers were now ruined, and no one would dare appoint someone to any sort of magisterial posting who had been sacked by the emperor.

The rest of the assembled patricians maintained their silence as Nero paced frantically along the chamber floor, his hands clasped behind his back. None wished to volunteer their services to take over as the new quaestors. Those who had anxiously awaited such openings for the opportunities it would present their sons or nephews were suddenly silenced. The emperor had been growing ever more unstable over the past few months, with whatever aura of brilliant leadership he'd exhibited in the wake of the Great Fire all but evaporated. What complicated matters further was the plebs never saw this side of him. To them, Emperor Nero was the loving father and savior who would rebuild Rome and bring about a new age of wealth and prosperity. They detested the wealthy members of the senate, yet they adored their emperor.

"I will not allow a handful of old women to deny Rome the will of the gods," Nero continued to rant. He stopped and held his hand up, his face breaking into an unnerving grin, overcome by a sense of awareness. "Of course, the gods! By Venus, why was I so blind?"

"Explain, if you would be so kind, sire," Seneca finally spoke up. Even he, who was closer to the emperor than any, had been reluctant to say anything. His influence had been unnervingly waning over the past few months.

"Well, can't you see it?" Nero asked, in disbelief. "Why, it is so obvious! This great undertaking, the rebirth of glorious Rome, was decreed by the gods. And as it is they who have commanded it, so, too, shall they empower us to fulfill their vision."

"But surely, Caesar, we have offered prayers and sacrifices daily," a senator said.

"No, you ignorant old fools!" the emperor snapped, shaking his head frantically in frustration. "Neither Jupiter, nor Juno, nor Saturn, nor Venus

will give us any divine intervention, not while their gifts to us already adorn their temples."

The senate was suddenly quiet once more, as the horrific realization came over its members.

"Caesar, you cannot mean taking the wealth from the temples!" an emboldened and outraged senator said, rising to his feet. "Such actions would be sacrilege!"

"Sacrilege?" Nero asked, his eyes still wide. "You dare to talk to me about sacrilege? Me, who by the will of the gods is your emperor, and who you even said should lead like a god? You are all blind, if you cannot see that this is exactly what the divines wish. The centuries of gifts that were bestowed to the temples were not so that they could simply remain in dark vaults, gathering dust. They have been gathered so that, on this day of Rome's rebirth, we may use them to build the civilization which is our divine destiny." He then called over his shoulder to his praetorian prefect, "Tigellinus!"

"Sire?" the man said, immediately coming to the emperor's side.

"Take three cohorts and gather everything of value from the temples," Nero ordered. His gaze was now fixed on the appalled senators as the prefect saluted and quickly strode out of the chamber.

"It will not be just in Rome," the emperor continued. "Send messages to every province within the empire. I want every scrap of gold, silver, and bronze taken from every temple within the Roman world. With such wealth, the almighties' dream of civilization will be realized."

The senate stood aghast, yet powerless to counter Nero's obscene decree. Within hours, over a thousand praetorians were storming into every holy place within the city from the Temple of Jupiter Best to the Temple of the Divine Claudius, confiscating every piece of gold, silver, or jewels from within. The priests protested vehemently, while the people who witnessed the plunder were stupefied. Unwittingly, Nero had allowed the façade he'd maintained for so long amongst the plebeians to crack, as they watched in horror while their temples were desecrated.



"He's gone completely mad," Senator Piso said, in exacerbation, while hosting a dinner party a week later.

Gaius Calpurnius Piso was a middle-aged Roman statesman of great power and influence. He fell upon hard times during the reign of Gaius Caligula, when the emperor became infatuated with his wife and subsequently had him banished. He later rose to prominence, following Caligula's assassination, and had the distinction of serving as co-consul to Emperor Claudius during the first year of his rule.

"I would caution against such talk," one of his friends said.

"Why?" Piso retorted. "By looting all of the temples, Nero has risked inciting rebellion within every province of the empire. And do not forget, I served a term as quaestor just five years ago, so I know how much wealth there is within the whole of the empire, to include the temples. Is it substantial? Yes. Will it pay for Nero's golden house, as well as his city of marble and frescos? No. The wealth stolen—and let us not fool ourselves, for it was stolen—from the temples in Rome will pay for the erecting of that monstrosity of a bronze statue but nothing more. And, I do not think the provincials will take kindly to having their treasures taken to rebuild a grandiose city that most of them have never even laid eyes on."

Piso's friends advised him against taking any extreme measures against the emperor. After all, Nero was childless, with no living relatives readily available to assume the role of Caesar.

"He has no Uncle Claudius to replace him," one of the men cautioned, referring to the murder of Gaius Caligula, who was then replaced by his own uncle.

"I will wait a year," Piso conceded, "but no longer."

The following year, with the plundered temple funds beginning to run out and the building projects still not completed, a group of senators and disgruntled praetorians, led by Piso, decided it was time to act. While the prefect, Tigellinus, was unswerving in his loyalty to Nero, his co-prefect, Faenius Rufus, was more easily swayed. A tribune named Subrius, along with one of his senior ranking centurions, helped Piso hatch the plot. All told, nineteen senators, seven equites, eleven praetorians, and even four women became part of the scheme. Motives varied widely, which led to many internal disputes between conspirators.

While a few of the senators stated that Nero's death would usher in a return to the republic, the rest dismissed this as outright insanity. No matter how beastly or unpopular an emperor may have been, the plebeians, equites,

and even most of the senate would never accept leaving Rome without an emperor. Even after the assassination of the despotic Caligula, it was never a question of *if* Rome should have an emperor, but *who*. That Nero had no heir made this complicated, for the thought of having a Caesar come from somewhere outside the Julio-Claudian family was almost as absurd as attempting to restore the republic. It was eventually decided that Piso would be named regent of the empire, until the senate could decide upon a successor.

Unfortunately for all involved, the plot had grown so large it proved impossible to remain a secret. When a freedman named Milichus inadvertently got word of the plan to assassinate Nero, he betrayed the conspirators to Tigellinus. One of the women, a former slave named Epicharis, was quickly captured and tortured by the praetorian's interrogators. Though she refused to give any names, even after all of her limbs were broken on the rack, the fact that she managed to hang herself the next day was taken as a sign of guilt.

Among the conspirators who immediately confessed and begged for mercy, was the empress' first husband, Rufrius Crispinus. Nero ordered him banished and a year later would have him executed. A member of the equites named Antonius Natalis struck a deal with the emperor. He would name every conspirator in return for an acquittal.

The emperor's paranoia grew as the list of traitors became ever larger. By the time Tigellinus presented him with all of the names, his nerves were deeply frayed.

"Why do they hate me so?" the emperor asked, while continuously rubbing his reddened eyes. "All I wanted was to follow the will of the gods, to become a god and give the people the divine vision of beauty. Why do they hate me?"

"Perhaps it is envy, sire," Tigellinus said with a shrug. He then asked, "Does it really matter?"

"Faenius Rufus, one of my own guard commanders," Nero said, with a sigh of resignation that quickly turned to anger. He continued to read, "Sulpicius Asper, Cornelius Martialis, Flavius Nepos, Subrius Flavius..." His voice trailed off as he read the next name on the list. Anger returned to sorrow once more as he looked up at his praetorian prefect.

"No," Nero said, shaking his head. "Not Seneca! He has been my mentor since I was a boy. He became the father I lost when the divine Claudius

ascended to the gods. He was my friend, I loved him." Unable to control his tears, they now streamed down the emperor's face.

"I am truly sorry, Caesar," Tigellinus replied.

In the coming days, every conspirator was arrested and tried. In addition to Natalis, four were acquitted and released. Seventeen were found guilty and sent into exile, including Crispinus. The remaining were convicted and sentenced to death. That these included his beloved Seneca broke Nero's heart.

The elderly Seneca, who was nearly seventy years of age, neither confessed nor denied his involvement in the conspiracy, even when Nero begged him to speak up in his own defense. It was later speculated that he may not have taken a direct role in the plot, but as he knew about it and failed to act, he felt he had betrayed his young protégé, whom he loved like a son. Seneca was allowed to take his own life, which he did by cutting open his wrists while lying in his private bath. In accordance with his will, he was cremated without any of the usual funerary rites.

And though Nero long brooded over Seneca's betrayal, his wife, Poppaea, and remaining prefect, Tigellinus, soon brought him news that changed his temperament. Poppaea was with child, much to the emperor's joy and the people's relief. At last, there would be an heir to the imperial throne! However, the prefect's news, which brought Nero equal glee, was far more sinister.

"What is this?" the emperor asked, when the prefect brought him a pile of documents.

"Think of it as the gods' reward for your stalwart fortitude in the face of treachery," Tigellinus answered. "These are the detailed inventories of the estates of all the executed Pisonian conspirators. Since they died as traitors their wills are forfeit, with fortunes and estates passing on to the state, meaning *you*."

"This is incredible," Nero breathed. "Piso's total wealth alone is in excess of twenty-five million denarii."

"Yes, he was the richest of the lot," the prefect noted calmly. "We thought it best to spare Seneca's family, out of sentiment for all his years of service." While Nero gave a somber nod of consent, Tigellinus gave a wicked grin and said, "From the ashes of treason, comes Rome's salvation."

"What do you mean?" Nero asked, though he was slowly starting to see what the praetorian was referencing.

“You don’t think that Piso and his band of halfwits are your only enemies, do you?” Tigellinus stated. “The people love you, Caesar, and for that you have gained many enemies within the senate.”

“Then we must find my enemies,” Nero said coldly. “For they are also enemies of the people and of Rome. The people are my children, and I must protect them. These conspirators must be cut out like an infectious mass. Their fortunes will be used to complete my vision of Rome’s beauty!”



The executed traitorous praetorian prefect, Faenius Rufus, was soon replaced by a man named Nymphidius Sabinus. Possessing even less moral scruples than Tigellinus, he soon aided his colleague in the rooting out of treachery, whether real or imagined, within Rome’s ruling class. The last time such a reign of terror had been unleashed was under the praetorian prefect, Lucius Aelius Sejanus, during the rule of Tiberius. Because of this, along with Sejanus’ later betrayal of the emperor, Tiberius decreed that two prefects would command the Praetorian Guard instead of just one. The intent, that one would keep the ambitions of the other in check, had worked as intended for the last twenty-four years. And in time, Nymphidius’ ambitions would cause him to treat Tigellinus as a hated rival. But for the time being, their efforts were coordinated in cowing the senate into bloody submission while fattening their coffers, as well as Emperor Nero’s.

Personal tragedy would soon strike the imperial house with the death of Empress Poppaea. As Nero was growing more and more prone to physical outbursts, particularly when his poetry or orations were mocked, rumor had it that he’d kicked his pregnant wife to death, after she criticized one of his performances. Equally plausible was that she had miscarried their child and bled to death. As her pregnancy with their only other child, two years prior, had been fraught with complications, and their daughter had been sickly and died after just four months, added weight to this theory. Whatever the truth, the only eyewitness, besides the emperor, was the ever loyal Tigellinus, who refused to confirm or deny any rumors he was asked about. Instead of the usual cremation, Poppaea’s body was stuffed with spices and embalmed, then placed in the Mausoleum of Augustus. Nero spoke passionately and with many tears while giving her eulogy. He declared her divine, and it was said

that he burned ten years' worth of Arabian incense at her funeral.

His of public mourning was brief. Soon after, Nero began an affair with a woman named Statilia Messalina. Her husband, Marcus Vestinus Atticus, was among the Pisonian conspirators who had been sent into exile. With her husband's disgrace, Statilia looked for her own survival, and so convinced Nero to marry her and make her his consort. Rather than demanding a divorce from Vestinus, Nero simply had him put to death in exile. And so, while Statilia Messalina became Empress Consort of the Roman Empire, her marriage to Nero was simply one of political survival. The two rarely shared the same bed, and as often as not, she would be excluded from public ceremonies. So while Nero remarried within a year of Poppaea's death, he never stopped grieving for her. With her passing, the last shackle which held Nero's frail sanity in place was broken.

What had begun as a noble and compassionate effort to rebuild Rome, following the Great Fire, had morphed into one man's blind obsession with wealth and beauty. Nero's intended 'gift' to the people of Rome had led the empire to near financial ruin, the looting of the sacred temples, and now the deaths of numerous senators and wealthy patricians. And with neither his wife nor his mentor, Seneca, there to keep him in check, the onslaught of his unbridled ambition was unleashed. The repercussions, which many viewed as Nero's descent into madness, would bring the entire Roman Empire to its breaking point in the coming years.



The Roman Empire, 68 A.D.

End of an Era

Chapter I: The Last Saturnalia

Rome
23 December 67 A.D.
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“Io, Saturnalia!”

The sun was casting the last of its reddish glow as it set in the west, its dying light shining through the pillars of the Temple of Jupiter. Torches and lamps lit up the streets, which were crammed with revelers and entertainers. Jugglers tossed flaming torches and musicians played, while exotic dancers brought in from all corners of the empire performed lascivious acts upon each other, much to the delight of the crowds. Actors performed atop small stages, oftentimes wearing masks and little else. The noise of the raucous crowds was such that their form of entertainment relied on the visual, far more than the spoken word. And if a theatrical performance devolved into a display of public fornication, the crowds only relished it more.

“Io, Saturnalia!”

Those two words, a short salutation which could literally mean anything, were shouted repeatedly in a chorus of celebration by the citizens of Rome. Saturnalia, the weeklong celebration referred to by the poet Catullus as “the best of days”, was into its final night. Though officially a holiday honoring the god, Saturn, who was associated with agriculture as well as the city itself, the festivities were more associated with Bacchus, the god of wine and the harvest. Indeed, the term ‘Io Saturnalia’ had come to be more associated with the triumph of Bacchus, and as a punctuation of both jokes and revelry, rather than the deity whose name it bore. Laws were suspended during this time, with mischief and bad behavior greeted with cheers, rather than scorn. Slaves became masters, and their masters served them. At the heart of civilization, the world was turned upside down in a strange and debauched celebration whose traditions went back hundreds of years.

Even the most prudish of the city’s moralist citizens were willing to put aside modesty during the week of Saturnalia. As a means of at least giving a semblance of protecting ones dignity, most of the revelers wore masks, using the sense of anonymity as a means of taking part in erotic displays that would be unthinkable for decent persons any other time of the year. But then, during

Saturnalia, the rules of decency were cast aside. It was the one time of year when social norms were struck down. When men and women, commoner and patrician, slave and free alike were treated almost as equals. Togas were discarded in favor of Greek tunics, which would normally be considered in poor taste. And while hats were almost never worn by citizens, during this time many donned the conical pilleus, which was a hat normally worn by freedmen. Even slaves, who would not be allowed to don the pilleus unless granted their freedom, wore these. It was a symbolic means of showing all Romans as equals. In perhaps the greatest display of the casting down of class separation, slaves dressed in exotic furs gambled and played games with members of the senate. Slaves were also granted a measure of free speech and were exempted from any punishments. Normally harsh masters who would flog any servant who dared call them an 'insufferable twat', would instead laugh at their own expense, while lavishing gifts upon whichever slave could insult him the best. Indeed, many of Rome's patricians took a certain amount of pleasure in having their servants insult them during this time, unofficially called *'December liberty'*.

Saturnalia was not all about debauchery, however, for there had been many formal ceremonies over the course of the week. The feet of the statue of Saturn were covered in wool which was later removed in another ceremony. The final night of 23 December was also a time of gift-giving, known as the *Sigillaria*. Children received toys. Patricians often purchasing many en mass to be handed out to the poorest children, in a show of generosity that would not be seen again in any capacity for another year. Husbands and wives also exchanged gifts, and even slaves received presents during the feasts they were allowed to share with their masters. It was, indeed, the happiest of days in the imperial city, and the one time of year where there truly was something for everyone.

Three years had passed since the Great Fire, and with much of the city rebuilt, perhaps no one in the whole of the empire celebrated Saturnalia more than Emperor Nero. At the *Domus Aurea*, which was still under construction, he had entertained a vast number of guests over the course of the month. As the emperor had just celebrated his thirtieth birthday on 15 December, two days before the Saturnalia commenced, he had seen fit to make the entire month one massive festival. He had spared no expense, importing the best wines, while bringing in gladiators and wild beasts to battle in the arena.

Not all were in a celebratory mood, and two senators in particular kept

their distance from the drunkenness and debauchery. This was not out of any moral objections, but rather because such a public spectacle was the perfect place to allow them to speak with a measure anonymity. One was the current consul, Julius Rufus, whose yearlong term was set to end in a few days. The other, the venerable former general and Governor of Britannia, Suetonius Paulinus.

"Another month-long orgy like this and there won't be a single copper sesterce left in the imperial coffers," Rufus observed as the men watched Nero, his face painted red, in a drunken dance with a bevy of semi-naked Numidian dancers.

"Not that our beloved emperor ever wishes to hear of anything as boring as finances," Paulinus added with a trace of disdain in his voice. "He plundered the temples, which many of the people in the provinces have yet to forgive, stole the estates from supposed traitors, and still his vision of rebuilding a grandiose new Rome has yet to be fulfilled."

"I cannot tell you how many times I've had to listen to him scream about how he doesn't want to hear there is no money," Rufus added. He shook his head in disgust. "His attack dogs, Tigellinus and Nymphidius, have the entire senate cowering in terror, lest they be next to be brought up on false charges of treason. And how convenient, whenever there is a shortage in the treasury, some wealthy senator's name comes up as having betrayed the emperor and people of Rome. I'll tell you this, I am glad my term as consul ends in another week. Let Nero's puppet, Italicus, dare tell him the empire is risking bankruptcy."

"Funny thing, that the only reason he even gained the consulship for next year was to appease Nero," Paulinus observed.

The man they referred to, Tiberius Silius Italicus, was a member of Nero's inner circle. Though not a murderous despot like the two praetorian prefects, he was still firmly within the emperor's entourage and held great influence over him. This was, in part, due to Nero's admiration for him as a poet. Indeed, Italicus had once written a seventeen volume epic poem on the Second Punic War, which many agreed was one of the greatest modern pieces of literature and prose. And on this night, he sat at the emperor's head table.

At the back of the large hall, Emperor Nero had collapsed on a couch in a state of intoxication from both wine and various opiates. And while nubile dancers surrounded him, he found himself continuously distracted by events

transpiring behind him. He forcibly shoved the dancers off and rolled onto his stomach, eyes fixed on the back of the hall. At first glance, it appeared to be nothing more than a score of servants going to and coming from the kitchens and wine cellars. However, a young man, who stood against the wall bearing a tray of goblets, suddenly had him enraptured.

"Poppaea," Nero whispered, his eyes growing wide. He peered over his shoulder at Italicus, a grin spreading across his face.

"Caesar?" Senator Italicus asked, lounging on the couch nearest the emperor.

"Can't you see?" Nero persisted, shoving off a practically naked Greek woman. He pointed frantically towards the young man. "Just look at that face, it's Poppaea. My love has returned to me!"

"That would be Sporus, the son of one of your freedmen," Italicus gently corrected. He could see the gleam of lust growing behind the emperor's eyes, and it unnerved him.

Nero fell backwards off his couch and quickly leapt to his feet, his gaze ever fixed on the young man. "Tigellinus!" he shouted, summoning his praetorian prefect.

The guards' commander was among Nero's distinguished guests, who lounged on the other couch next to the emperor. Many viewed this as a slight against Nero's current wife, Empress Statilia Messalina, yet she herself did her best to remain inconspicuous. Anything that kept Nero distracted was a welcome reprieve to her.

As the emperor walked slowly towards the object of his fascination, Tigellinus quickly joined him. Even when he was an honored guest at one of Nero's numerous banquets, the prefect always maintained a certain level of sobriety, in case his services were needed. He snapped his fingers and pointed to four of his men, who quietly lined the walls of the hall. They walked over to their commander inconspicuously, lest they alarm the emperor's guests. Italicus also joined the men, hoping to avoid any potential unpleasantness, for he recognized that unhinged look in Nero's eye.

The music had grown louder and faster, a dozen acrobats joining the bevy of dancers. The hundred or so guests and nearly twice as many servants were, therefore, oblivious to the emperor's sudden departure from his couch. Only Empress Statilia was aware of what was transpiring, and her gaze was fixed upon her husband, as she calmly ate from a plate of figs.

The young man known as Sporus was suddenly aware he was the subject

of the emperor's attention, and his gaze immediately fell to the floor. Eighteen years of age, he had been granted his freedom along with his father, when he was a young boy. He had spent the last six years working as an aid to the overseer of one of the imperial vineyards outside of Aricia, a few miles southeast of Rome. He had been dispatched to the capital, along with a score of other freedmen and slaves, to assist in the emperor's Saturnalia celebrations. The young man had seen this as a great honor, especially since it had been Nero who'd granted both he and his father their freedom. And yet, as the emperor walked towards him, eyes wide and tongue licking his lips in lust, he appeared to be a completely different person than Sporus remembered from his youth, the streaked red face paint notwithstanding. Suddenly he was afraid.

"Such beauty," Nero said, placing his hand under the young man's chin. This startled Sporus, and he felt himself trembling as he stared into the emperor's eyes. "Do not fear me, my love, for I am gladdened by your return."

"I…I am honored that you remember me, Caesar," Sporus stammered, trying to mask his growing terror. "I have not seen you since I was a boy."

"Dear Poppaea," Nero sighed, taking a step back and assessing the young man. Even Tigellinus and Italicus could see where the unfortunate lad bore some resemblance to the emperor's dead wife. Nero then shook his head. "Do the gods mock me so, that they would return you to me as a boy?"

"Caesar," the praetorian said, "that is not your wife, but a mere freedman servant. Your wife is with your guests in the main hall."

"No," Nero replied, shaking his head, his eyes never leaving Sporus. "That vile creature who dares to call herself my consort is nothing more than a harlot who crawled into my bed as soon as her disgrace of a husband was sent into exile. My true love, the empress of my heart, stands now before me. But what to do about the unfortunate affliction the gods have bestowed upon my dear Poppaea?"

Sporus was now shaking to the point that the empty cups on his tray were rattling. Italicus was ashen-faced, yet said nothing. Tigellinus gritted his teeth, knowing he would likely be ordered to do something distasteful. Given that he had personally overseen the deaths of Nero's many enemies, both real and imagined, it mattered little to the prefect what the emperor would have him do to this young freedman.

"Tigellinus," Nero said, running the back of his fingers gently over the

side of Sporus' face, streaked with tears of abject fear.

"Caesar?"

"We must correct the gods' most grievous error," he replied. "Take this 'man' and make him into a woman."

"No!" Sporus' scream was mostly drowned out by the loud music.

Empress Statilia managed to hear it, her attention fixed upon what the other guests could not see. She had just bit into a fig, and paused as she watched a pair of guardsmen grab the unfortunate lad by each arm, the tray of goblets clattering to the floor.

Italicus quickly walked back to his couch where he immediately gulped down an entire goblet of wine and demanded more. The empress stood from her couch and walked over to the senator, his face sweaty and eyes staring blankly.

"Italicus," Statilia said, maintaining a sense of calm.

The senator was startled and quickly looked up at the empress. "Your highness," he said. "My apologies, I did not see you there."

"What has that boy done to offend my husband?" the empress asked. She was still watching the back of the hall, where behind the pillars she could see Nero staring serenely towards the doorway to one of the back rooms. As if to accentuate her question, a shrieking scream echoed over the noise of the musicians.

"Nothing," the senator replied, "except being cursed with an uncanny resemblance to the emperor's dead wife."

"I see," Statilia said, standing upright as an even louder shriek came from the back room. Her mouth twitched, though she showed no other emotion. "Tragic for him, though fortunate for me, for I shall no longer be the subject of Nero's…*affections*. Let's see him try and put an heir into that belly."

The music suddenly ceased as further sobs and cries echoed throughout the palace. Most of the guests, and in particular the slaves, appeared both shocked and horrified, not knowing what abominations were taking place in one of the back rooms. Only Nero was smiling as he rejoined the party.

"Why do you stop?" he asked, giving a short laugh. "My friends, this is Saturnalia, the best of days!" He then raised an overflowing cup as the shrieks in the back turned to whimpering sobs. Understanding the source of his guests' distress, the emperor forcibly shouted, *"Musicians, play on!"*

From their couches, Consul Rufus and Senator Paulinus scowled as they tried to comprehend what torments Nero had subjected the poor young

freedman to.

"That man," Paulinus said, glowering at Nero, "is no longer the emperor I once served."



Five years have passed since I first came to Rome. While most of my friends have long since married and had children, Father had other plans for me. He said I was not some political pawn, and that my life was my own. While he and Mother love Britannia, they felt I needed to see Rome for myself, and that if I was to find what was best in life, I foremost needed to be educated.

The Flavians have been wonderful hosts and have treated me like one of their own. Flavius and Clemens have become like brothers to me. Though their cousin, Domitian, has always been rather awkward to say the least. I think he means well, but feels he is living in the shadow of his father and brother. A pity.

While the entire city is alive, I confess I feel much safer within the walls of the Flavian manor. Both the family, as well as the household servants, look forward to tonight's feast, when either the King or Queen of Saturnalia will be crowned.

"Come, my lady, they are waiting for you."

The words of a freedwoman caused Aula to look up from her writings. She had been keeping a journal of sorts since her arrival in Rome, under the pretense that she would eventually send it to her father, an imperial magistrate in Britannia, who had not returned to the imperial capital since before Aula was born.

"Thank you, Antonia," Aula said, with a warm smile. "Tell Sabinus I'll be right down."

The home of Senator Titus Flavius Sabinus, like that of most households within Rome, was alive with festivities. And in keeping with tradition, Sabinus, along with his sons, was relegated to serving his guests, while slaves and freedmen lounged upon the plush couches, demanding more wine and delicacies. His wife had died several years before, and was conspicuous by

her absence.

A former consul and renowned general, Sabinus was one of Rome's most respected statesmen. His position as city prefect, which was essentially governor of Rome herself, made him one of the most powerful and influential persons within the city. Fortunately for him, this was also tempered greatly by his family's humble origins and only modest wealth. In fact, the Flavians, while certainly far richer than any within the plebeians or equites, scarcely had enough in their coffers to cover the minimum amount of personal fortune necessary to maintain membership with Rome's senatorial class. As such, he was in the enviable position to where he could effectively govern, without being viewed by the emperor as a potential rival or threat. He was also privately spurned by many of the senate's older families, and his lack of presence was neither missed nor even noticed at the emperor's feast.

A total of twenty guests, mostly non-senatorial patricians and equites, were crammed into Sabinus' dining hall. Most were already in various states of intoxication and taking turns in serving both the slaves, as well as each other. Fifteen prostitutes of the highest quality and expense had been procured. Guests of both sexes, less-than-discreetly, made their way to and from the rooms designated for the courtesans use.

In addition to his sons, Sabinus' youngest nephew was in attendance. Sabinus' brother, Vespasian, was embroiled in putting down what had been a surprisingly stalwart rebellion in Judea, over the past year. Vespasian's eldest son, Titus, commanded one of his legions. And while they were away, fighting in the east, Vespasian's youngest son, fifteen year old Domitian, had been placed under Sabinus' charge. Domitian loved his brother and practically worshipped his father, yet he was bitter in that he was so much younger than Titus, and unable to take part in the campaigns with them. The sullen young man therefore often kept to himself, and was only present at the feast because his uncle had compelled him to come.

"My friends!" Sabinus shouted, standing on top of one of the tables. His best toga with its distinctive purple and gold trim was splattered with wine. His face was red, and he was grinning broadly as his friends and servants gave a voracious cheer of *'Io, Saturnalia'* for their host. In his hands, he held aloft a large crown made of olive branches. *"It is time to crown what will either be our King or Queen of Saturnalia!"*

This elicited further cheers, as well as the sloshing of wine vessels. Sabinus picked up a small bag which rattled with wooden strips, each bore a

person's name.

"I have here, within this humble sack, the names of every member of this household; noble and common, slave and free alike. And by Saturn, Bacchus, and all of the gods who smile upon this happy occasion, shall our monarch for this night be chosen." He then nodded to the young woman who sat with his sons and nephew. "Lady Vale, as our honored guest these past five years, you shall be the hand of the gods this night!"

Another cheer was exclaimed as Sabinus' sons, Flavius and Clemens, helped their friend to her feet. Her full name was Aula Cursia Vale, and she was the daughter of a renowned former cavalry officer, who Sabinus had served with in Britannia. She was taller than most women, her long, curled hair pulled back this evening, with a crown of laurels upon her head.

Aula stepped onto the table and placed her hand in the bag. She deliberately fumbled through the tags, taking her time and building the anticipation of the guests with ever a mischievous smile adorning her pretty face. An impatient silence fell upon the room as she pulled one of the wooden strips from the bag. Those closest tried to peer up and see it.

Aula's grin broadened as she read the name, holding the tag up high. "We have a Queen of Saturnalia, and her name is…Antonia Caenis!"

Numerous revelers, at least those closest to the astonished woman, broke into a randy song while hoisting her onto their shoulders. A freedwoman, who had many years before served as clerk to Antonia Minor, the mother of Emperor Claudius, Antonia Caenis had since been in the service of the Flavians. She had been a mistress of Vespasian, prior to his marriage to Flavia Domitilla. The two resumed their relations after Flavia's death a few years back, much to the approval of Titus, though to the chagrin of Domitian. At fifty-two years of age, Antonia still possessed a large measure of the handsome and dignified beauty left over from her youth.

As she was carried around the room, Antonia leaned over and allowed Sabinus to place the olive crown upon her head. She then embraced and kissed Aula upon the cheek, before the singing mass carried her out into the large gardens, which were lit with numerous torches and lamps.

All of Sabinus' guests soon followed, Aula stepping down from the table and walking arm-in-arm with Sabinus' sons. Sabinus himself took in a deep breath and surveyed the complete mess that had been made of his hall. He simply laughed. As he made ready to follow the crowd, he noticed that one person had not left the hall. Still sitting on his couch, nursing a cup of wine

while appearing to be sulking, was his nephew.

"The Queen of Saturnalia has been crowned, Domitian," Sabinus said, maintaining his good humor. "We should go attend her 'court' in the gardens at once."

"That woman is nothing more than my father's live-in whore," Domitian said. "He should have carted her off to Judea with him, instead of letting her cast a stain upon the family here in Rome."

Sabinus sighed as he stepped down from the table and over to his nephew. It was no secret that Domitian held no fond feelings for his father's mistress, though this was reckoned to be out of the fierce loyalty he had for the memory of his mother.

"It has been five years since your mother crossed over to the Fields of Asphodel," he said, in reference to the place where most souls went after death. "I will tell you this, Antonia was your father's first love, long before he ever met your mother. But as she was a freedwoman, they knew that theirs was a love that could never be. And if you must know, like you, I did not approve of Vespasian keeping such a mistress. When the time came for him to wed Flavia Domitilla, he did what was expected of him, put Antonia aside, and married your mother."

"She is a former *slave*," Domitian protested. "Such women are fine for fucking, or other meaningless work, but not for being welcomed into the household as if they are our equals."

"Antonia is a kind, thoughtful, and extremely intelligent woman," Sabinus replied, maintaining a surprising level of calm. Perhaps it was because he once thought the same as his nephew and was empathetic to his feelings. "I think your father loves her more for her mind than anything else. And need I remind you that our own family came from very humble origins?"

"Yes, but not slaves."

"True," his uncle conceded. Sabinus then began to remind his nephew about how his great-grandfather had been a centurion under Pompey Magnus, and was among the majority of Pompey's army who received full pardon from Julius Caesar after the civil war. His rank and acquired wealth had allowed the family to move up into the equites.

In the years that followed, Sabinus and Vespasian's father, Sabinus the Elder, had served as a customs official in Asia Minor. In Ephesus, a statue was dedicated to the elder Sabinus, calling him *'The Honest Tax-Gatherer'*. Despite being known for his honesty, and for never attempting to 'shake

down' the provincials, Sabinus the Elder still managed to accumulate enough wealth to essentially purchase his family's membership into the patrician class. He had also managed to secure both his sons postings as laticlavian tribunes within the legions at a young age, despite their father only being a first-generation senator.

The Flavian brothers were natural soldiers. Sadly, their father did not live to see them achieve their greatest victories. Sabinus had commanded Legio IX, Hispania, during the Invasion of Britannia, while Vespasian was legate of Legio II, Augusta. Both held the distinction of never suffering a defeat in battle and, in fact, had been given *Triumphal Ornaments* by Emperor Claudius, following their victorious return to Rome. Vespasian was especially well-known for his aggressive, yet pragmatic, style and achieved great distinction for his ability to break enemy strongholds.

"Of course, that was more than twenty years ago," Sabinus reminisced.

"Twenty-four, uncle," Domitian corrected. "And it was nine years before I was even born."

"Thank you, nephew, for making me feel like an old man," Sabinus laughed, giving the lad a friendly pat on the shoulder. He stood. "I must return to our guests. If you choose not to accept Antonia Caenis that is your right. You are, after all, almost a man and can make your own decisions. I cannot help but wonder if perhaps this resentment you feel is, in some way, a product of jealousy towards your father, and by extension your brother."

Sabinus expected no response. Instead, he hoped his nephew would simply reflect upon his words. Over the last twenty years, Sabinus' relationship with his brother had become terribly strained, with Vespasian proving to be a political liability on multiple occasions. Despite this, Sabinus would never speak ill of him in public, and especially not to his children. For all Domitian knew, his father and uncle were still as close as they were when they first led their legions into Britannia.

Domitian admitted quietly to himself that he did harbor at least some measure of envy towards his father and elder brother. Because he was so much younger than his brother, it felt as if their father had had little time for him growing up. Titus had been groomed since he was a boy to be both a statesman and a soldier. He was scarcely any older than Domitian was now, when he was sent off to the legions for his first tour of duty as a laticlavian tribune. And despite the embarrassment, not to mention very real danger, that arose from his wife's family being implicated in the Piso conspiracy, Titus

had walked away unscathed. He'd simply divorced his wife and taken their young daughter with him, with no political repercussions. In fact, he had since been given command of the Fifteenth Apollonius Legion, all by the time he was twenty-six.

As he watched his uncle depart for the gardens, the sounds of music and laughing echoed into the now vacant dining hall. Domitian gave a melancholy sigh, poured himself another cup of wine, and brooded for a few minutes longer before deciding to make the best of things and join the celebrations. What no one knew was that these 'best of days' would mark the end of an era for Rome.

Chapter II: A Whisper of Treason

Vienne, Gaul
27 December 67 A.D.
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The seemingly endless torrent of rain was deafening, as it beat down on the tiled roof of the mayor's house in the city of Vienne, Gaul. A section of four auxilia infantrymen guarded the main entrance, huddled beneath their cloaks, as the incessant rain echoed off their helmets.

Located just twenty miles south of the capital of Lugdunum, along the River Rhodanus, it had once been home of a Gallic people known as the Allobroges, before becoming a Roman colony during the conquest of Julius Caesar. Tribal infighting later led to many people being expelled from Vienne. Ironically, it was they who founded the city of Lugdunum. Even a hundred and fourteen years later, there was still little love lost between the residents of the nearby cities.

The province of Gallia Lugdunensis was the largest of the three created, following Julius Caesar's conquest of the region more than a century before. Beginning at the base of the Alpes Mountains and stretching northwest all the way to the sea, it bisected the remaining two provinces in Gaul and incorporated many Gallic and Germanic peoples. Rather than completely supplanting the local tribal chiefs with 'foreign' Roman magistrates, Caesar was wise enough to incorporate them into the provincial government. This allowed the common people to feel a sense of normalcy, even as Roman towns gradually replaced their more humble villages. As the promise of wealth and prestige was great, these Gallic leaders were more willing to allow themselves to become 'Romanized'. The cutting of their hair, shaving of their beards and mustaches, and dressing in Roman garb was a small price to pay for the power and infrastructure Caesar brought to the province. And given that those who had defied such change had met a grisly end, such as Caesar's nemesis, Vercingetorix, the Gallic nobles had little choice in the matter.

Gaul also proved to be extremely wealthy, both in natural resources and farmable land. And while the cultural changes had come slowly, as generations passed the Gauls became more like their Roman overlords and

less like the tribes that had stood against the invaders. During the one hundred and twenty years since Caesar's final victory over Vercingetorix at the Siege of Alesia, only once had some of the old tribes attempted rebellion and secession from Rome. And now, forty-eight years after what was known as *The Rebellion of Sacrovir and Florus,* a whisper of treason was heard once more. This time, however, the Romanized Gauls' enemy was a single man rather than Rome herself.

The current governor, Gaius Julius Vindex, was a powerful Gallic nobleman whose size and stature made him fearsome to behold. He was only a third generation Roman citizen, though his status as a member of the indigenous nobility had prompted the Emperor Claudius to grant his family senatorial membership twenty years prior. Legally, this made him a peer of the old families that made up the Roman Senate; however, the origins of his birth caused many of his fellow patricians to view him with disdain and contempt. Such was the treatment of all non-Latin members of the patrician class.

"There was a time," he observed, as he sat over supper that evening with Vienne's mayor, "when any man not born in Italia could not even stand for membership in the senate, regardless of his personal wealth or noble status."

"Our people rebelled against Rome almost fifty years ago over that very matter," the mayor, Marcus Bradan, replied. Like Vindex, he was a Romanized Gaul, and their names were an amalgam of both Gallic and Roman.

"Forty-eight, actually," Vindex corrected. "The noble Julius Sacrovir and Julius Florus rose up in rebellion out of frustration over the way our people were treated. They were subjected to the same taxation and responsibilities as the Roman senators, yet they were denied membership and treated as little more than barbarians in togas. Their uprising, in which they fought to claim the rights of our people, happened exactly five years before I was born." He gave a soft chuckle. "My father was a great warrior then and could ride a horse better than any. He served with the Roman auxilia under the command of Julius Indus, who himself feigned loyalty to Sacrovir, only to turn his cavalry regiment against him."

"Yes, I remember the stories," Bradan replied. "Indus' regiment was renamed in his honor by Emperor Tiberius. They have been stationed in Britannia these past twenty years."

"And as one of Indus' officers, my father was rewarded immensely in

land and slaves," Vindex added. "He also managed to make himself very rich in the aftermath, in no small part by plundering the estates of the slain Florus. Ironic, that decades later Emperor Claudius granted our nobles what his Uncle Tiberius had fought a war to deny them."

"I sense a similar level of disdain from you towards the Roman patrician class, yet it is not senatorial membership that vexes you now," Bradan noted.

"Tell me," Vindex replied, evading this last remark, "what are your thoughts on the latest tariffs imposed on export of goods?"

"A bloody tyrannical act," the mayor immediately responded. "Nero bankrupts the empire with his lavish and wasteful spending, and so to make up for it, he adds an extra tax on goods that we are sending to Italia! His customs people have also fixed the prices on our wares, so that it is the merchants, and not the noble Latins, who are required to make up the difference. We are being forced to pay to send our goods to Rome which they, in turn, benefit from. It is outright robbery."

"I have it on good authority that he intends to impose an added import tax as well," Vindex added. "I've never complained about tariffs on goods coming in from outside of the empire; however, to levy these extra taxes on any trade coming from within the provinces will stifle commerce. Merchants will not be able to afford to transport their goods, and in the places where they are needed, great shortages will lead to mass inflation."

"It will cripple many of the small merchant houses," Bradan concurred. "But what can we do about it?"

"We can make a stand for the people," the governor said plainly, causing his host to choke on his wine. "The senate is impotent and utterly worthless, having been beaten into submission by Nero's damned praetorians. And our envoys to the emperor are sent away empty handed. In such circumstances, there is only one message that Nero will understand."

"Are you suggesting another uprising?" Bradan asked incredulously. "You must be mad. We were only just talking about the last time Gauls took up arms against Rome, and we know what happened there. Many sons of the nobility were slaughtered as part of Sacrovir's vanguard. Damn it all, but your father fought for the empire!"

"You mistake me," Vindex said defensively. "I denounce neither the position of the emperor, nor the Roman imperialist state. Gaul is Roman, and has been for over a hundred years. *I* am Roman, though I was born in Gaul. Few, if any, would even think about trying to gain independence. No, my

friend, it is one man and one man alone who holds my contempt. Nero's selfishness and vice threaten to destroy all that Rome has built over the last eight hundred years. He must be compelled to see reason or replaced by an emperor who will not neglect his people."

"Would you attempt to overthrow Nero and claim the imperial throne for yourself?" Bradan asked.

"I would have Nero deposed, yes, but I have no claims to the empire." At the mayor's confused expression, Vindex explained his rationale. "I am only a first generation member of the Roman patrician class. Despite my birth as both a Gallic noble and Roman citizen, the senate will never accept one they still view as both common and foreign to rule over them. No, my friend, my motives have nothing to do with personal gain."

"Who, then? Nero has pretty much exterminated every last branch of the imperial family, and he has no heir."

"I am not sure yet," Vindex admitted. "However, I have sent letters to some of our neighboring provincial governors. If they are even half as despondent as we are, then surely some of them will join our cause."

"Whatever cause that may be," Bradan replied. When the governor of Gallia Lugdunensis decided to pay a visit to Vienne, the city's mayor would never expect Vindex would be taking him deep into dangerous waters. But as they were of one mind, all Bradan could do was hope the surrounding provinces were as ready as they to be done with Nero's oppression.



One of Vindex's letters arrived in Hispania Tarraconensis, the largest of the three Spanish provinces. Its governor was a very old senator named Servius Sulpicius Galba. A man lacking in energy, yet with a mind still full of resolve, as well as admitted excessive stubbornness. Galba came from one of the oldest families of the Roman nobility. His father had attained the consulship during his decades in the senate and was one of the most renowned practitioners of Roman law during his lifetime. As for his own career path through the *Cursus Honorum*, Galba served as one of the sixteen praetors who oversaw financial administration within the empire, at the young age of twenty-three. This had been during the early years of the reign of Tiberius who, as a well-known financial conservative, had appreciated Galba's almost miserly hoarding of imperial coin.

Thirteen years later he rose to prominence, following in the footsteps of his father when he won the consulship. This had been one of his proudest moments. Adding to his good fortune was that his colleague, who attained the other consul's chair for the year, was another renowned senator and close friend, Lucius Salvias Otho. This had come during Tiberius' self-imposed exile on the isle of Capri, and two years after the overthrow of the traitorous Praetorian Prefect Sejanus. With the emperor involving himself less and less during the remaining years of his life, the consuls Servius Galba and Lucius Otho enjoyed power that had been unheard of since the end of the republic. Almost thirty-five years later, and now well past the age when most senators succumbed to retirement, Galba had spent the last seven years governing one of Rome's larger provinces.

As successful as Galba's political career had been, his personal life was wrought with tragedy. His wife, Aemilia Lepida, was the great-granddaughter of the triumvir, Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, who briefly ruled alongside Antony and Octavian during the final years of the republic. She had born Galba two fine sons, but died after just ten years of marriage. Of their sons, the eldest perished following a horse-riding accident when he was fourteen. The younger, Servius, survived to adulthood and, in fact, had served as quaestor when he was twenty-eight. He died two years later of a severe bowel infection. A year after his passing, Galba was recalled from retirement by Emperor Nero and given the province of Hispania Tarraconensis. With his wife and sons long since departed from this life and with no grandchildren, Galba was the last of his family's long and illustrious line. He was also very much alone, and he sometimes cursed the gods that he had lived so long. He carried on for the good of his family name, which he knew would die with him. He also had a subtle inclination that perhaps the fates were not finished with him yet, and the family name of Sulpicius, through Galba himself, was destined for greater things.

It was now 31 December, the week following the winter solstice celebrations. The feast of Saturnalia had, coincidentally, also been Galba's seventieth birthday. On this eve of the New Year, in contrast to the pouring rains and dark skies over Gaul, Galba had awoken to a warm, sunny, Spanish day, where his rather large and muscular black Numidian slave had just left his bedchamber. While others who preferred the male of their species often took young boys and adolescents as their sexual partners, Galba's preference

had always been inclined towards well-muscled, fully grown men. Galba had most certainly loved his wife, and while she lived he had been a doting and affectionate husband. His carnal preference towards men he always viewed as a mere matter of taste, as one may prefer oysters to snails. He further asserted that by keeping the intimate company of virile and strong men, he had extended his own longevity and vitality.

"After all, how many even make it to my age?" he said to himself, rising from his bed. It was all a façade, though. While he had outlived most of his contemporaries, his advanced age, combined with the personal tragedies he'd suffered over the years, had sapped most of his good humor and spirits. Whenever colleagues suggested he remarry, lest he end up a bitter and dejected miser like Tiberius, Galba would immediately retort that women had been the downfall of Claudius.

As he stood naked near the open window, a pair of servants brought forth his robes and helped dress him. There was a quick knock at the door, which was promptly opened by Galba's freedman clerk, a Greek named Icelus Marcianus.

"A most glorious and happy birthday to you, Excellency, even if I am a few days late in wishing it to you," Icelus said with much enthusiasm, as he gave a short bow. "May you live another seventy years!"

"You flatter me," Galba replied. "You know I hate that." Clapping his hands he dismissed his servants. He then turned to his freedman. "I trust you enjoyed your holiday over the Saturnalia?"

"A week to remember, if not for the strong drink and strange substances which I consumed," Icelus chuckled. "But, yes, a joyous time it was. And now I return once more to do your bidding…oh, and here is a message that came only just this morning."

Galba took the letter and noted the seal of the Governor of Gallia Lugdunensis. He placed the letter, unopened, within the folds of his robes. His freedman knew better than to become overly curious as to the contents of the message.

"Now, as for my bidding," Galba began, "I need you in Rome."

"Of course," Icelus said. He let out a playful sigh. "A pity you did not send me a month ago to witness the Saturnalia in Rome herself, to say nothing of the emperor's birthday festivities!" The freedman was grinning inanely, though his master did not match it. In the years that he'd been in Galba's service, Icelus sometimes wondered if his master ever smiled.

“You are to conduct a thorough inventory of all assets pertaining to my family’s vineyards, as well as the olive groves we own.” Galba’s expression was unchanged. And so, Icelus simply bowed and took his leave. He had ridden day and night following his brief coastal holiday to Valentia, and within five minutes he was being sent away once more.

As Galba sat outside on his covered veranda, he ate his breakfast alone. After a light course of fruit and a boiled peacock’s egg, he finally broke the seal on Vindex’s letter. His expression remained unchanged as the governor of Gaul emphasized the outrageous tariffs and new taxes levied by the emperor. Of course, Galba was well aware of these, as they had caused him to receive many angry letters, especially from Spanish wine and wool merchants. It was the last paragraph where Vindex called for a ‘permanent solution’, to what he feared was a never-ending financial crisis for the empire.

“Vindex has made a bold, though possibly foolish, gesture,” Galba muttered to himself. The way the letter was written, referencing the recipients as ‘my fellow governors’ or ‘brother Romans’ told Galba that Vindex had likely sent copies to every province in the western empire. How the recipients reacted would be telling. Some would send direct replies to Vindex, while most would likely turn the letters over to Nero, in hopes of some sort of reward. As for Galba, he decided that silence was his best option at this time.



Two weeks after Galba read Vindex’s letter of treason, the people of Rome awoke to an overcast and gloomy day. And yet, Emperor Nero was in a cheerful mood. He had his face painted white with garlands of flowers in his hair. Nero laughed wistfully as an entourage of young men and women followed him through one of the many gardens of the imperial palace. The Domus Aurea’s enormous complex was simply used for entertainment, with the emperor still residing at the old palace.

The new consuls, Silius Italicus and Galerius Trachalus, had been sworn in for their yearlong term. A number of suffect consulships were also designated for the year, consisting of anywhere from two to six month terms. The suffects’ primary purpose was to serve as consul whenever one of the two elected was unavailable, though in some years the senate had been run by a rotating series of suffect consuls. Of the previous year’s full-term consuls,

Fonteius Capito was soon departing for the Rhine, and on this day he accompanied Nero in his gardens.

"Ah, isn't she beautiful?" Nero said, pointing to a cluster of women gathered near one of the fountains. However, it was not they to whom he referred, but rather the sight of what was, in his mind at least, his late wife reborn. The unfortunate young man, Sporus, had thus far survived the horrific mutilation he'd suffered at the Saturnalia feast, when Nero's praetorians had castrated him. He now wore a woman's stola with a blonde wig atop his head. Empress Statilia was with him, along with six of her best maidservants. She took great pity on him, and her hope was that they might help what was left of the poor creature to assimilate into his new life.

"You're very kind," Sporus said to Statilia, careful to avoid eye contact with the emperor. He swallowed hard and looked the empress in the eye. "Forgive me for asking, your highness, but is all this to help me, or is it to help yourself?"

For such impudence, he expected a severe berating from Statilia.

She simply smiled. "For one who is so young, born a slave, and has now had his manhood ripped from him, you are surprisingly astute," she admitted. "I pity what happened to you, as much as any decent person would. But, I would be playing you false if I did not confess that this is as much, likely more, about me than it is about you." She paused briefly, glancing towards her husband before continuing.

The emperor was now walking along the far side of the garden, deep in conversation with the consuls and his other advisors.

"Nero is barely thirty years of age," Statilia said. "And yet, two empress consorts have already come and gone before me, with each meeting a terrible end. I do not intend to allow the same to happen to me. If he believes you are his beloved Poppaea, then so be it. Keep him happy, play the part, and both of our lives may still be worth living."

"Yes, lady," Sporus said with a bow.

Confusion and depression had consumed the poor lad since that terrible night. The humiliation at no longer being a man now hurt him as deeply as the terrible wound that had been left behind. Nero had told the guards to make Sporus into a woman, but he wasn't really. His genitals may have been cleaved away, but it is not as if they were able to replace them with a woman's. The only way Nero could have sexual relations with his new

‘Poppaea’ was no different than with a homosexual man. In which case, there had been no call for Sporus to be so horribly mutilated! There was no way for him to be truly made into a woman, but then neither was he a man anymore. His spirit had broken over the past few weeks, and Sporus had no idea what he was anymore. He had contemplated suicide many times, but simply could not bring himself to open a vein or drink a concoction that would make him sleep forever. All he could do was play the part, take to Nero’s bed, and allow himself to be cared for by the empress’ handmaidens.

The emperor’s entourage soon made its way out of the gardens. Joining them was the new consul, Silius Italicus, along with the outgoing consul, Fonteius Capito. Capito had served as commanding legate of one of the legions in Lower Germania, returning to Rome to serve his elected term as consul. As a reward for his service, he was being returned to the province, this time as governor. It was these two men who broke away from the group and stopped the imperial courier, who had just arrived at the palace.

“An urgent message for the emperor, from Lucius Verginius,” the messenger said.

“Verginius?” Capito scoffed. “Has that incompetent twat lost control over his legions already?”

“No love lost between the Germanic provinces, I see,” Italicus laughed as he took the satchel from the courier. It contained not just a personal message from the governor of Upper Germania, but a scroll with a broken seal, from Governor Julius Vindex in Gaul.

“That will be all,” Italicus said to the courier, who saluted sharply and left.

“My dear consuls!” Nero said, as he sauntered over to the men. His face was flushed despite being covered in white powder. “Why do you not join us?”

“A message from Verginius,” Italicus answered, as he quickly read the scroll. “It would seem there is trouble in Gaul.”

“Yes, well we’ve had troubles before,” the emperor said with a dismissive wave. “I’m sure Verginius, and our good friend Capito, can sort it out.” He then gave the outgoing consul a playful tap on the shoulder with his baton. “Well, you two do what you must, but be sure you are at the banquet this evening, where we will honor your incoming consulship, Italicus, along with your colleague, Galerius. And Capito, you can tell me then about the

‘troubles’ in Gaul and how you intend to fix them.”

Nero and the rest of his entourage soon left them, the emperor calling for his lyre.

“It would seem Vindex is sending subversive messages to all governors in the western provinces,” Italicus said, once Nero had left them. “I suspect we will see similar messages forwarded to us from the other governors soon enough.”

“A bold, if utterly stupid, move on his part,” Capito said, as he read the message from Vindex. He cared not what Verginius had to say about the matter. “He says that Nero is a direct threat to the empire’s well-being, and that one of them must *‘save Rome from the tyrant’*.”

“And yet he does not say who among them must save Rome,” Italicus noted. “Perhaps he is waiting to see who, if anyone, actually answers his call to insurrection before deciding who should lead them in his proposed coup against the emperor.”

“He’s completely daft if he thinks he can raise a rebellion against Nero,” Capito replied, although his voice betrayed his lack of assertion.

“Don’t be so certain,” Italicus said. “The plebs in Rome may love the emperor, as do most of the legions. However, that is not to say that there aren’t seditious feelings brewing throughout the provinces. We both know that Nero’s increased taxation and tariffs have not been taken well, especially when it is known that the money is being used for his extravagant building projects in Rome. And you should know, even better than I, the horrified reactions from the people when he ordered the temples plundered.”

“And if he had not, then the empire would have bankrupted itself long before the city was even half rebuilt,” Capito retorted. He was still a Nero loyalist, for he owed the emperor his consulship, as well as his governorship. “I leave for my post in three days. It’s almost nine hundred miles from here to Cologne, a distance which will take me a month to travel; longer if the roads through the Alpes are impassible due to the snow.”

“By which time, Vindex will have either committed suicide or found enough support with which to launch a full-scale rebellion,” Italicus observed.

“Well, Mogontiacum is on the road to Cologne,” Capito said. “I’ll be able to see if that idiot, Verginius, hasn’t panicked and lost his head before then.”

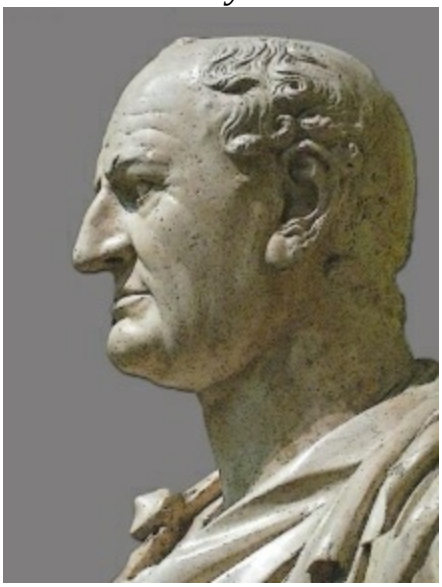
His insulting tone towards the governor of Upper Germania had more to do with the inherent rivalry that existed between the two provinces, rather

than any personal animosity he had towards Verginius. The Rhine frontier was by far the most volatile within the whole of the empire. It had the largest number of permanently garrisoned forces, with seven legions posted throughout the two Germanias. And though a little over a hundred miles separated the provincial capitals, soldiers from the various legions almost never interacting with each other, there had always been an intensely competitive spirit between them. The governors encouraged this, in part because they knew that in a crisis their legionaries would fight even harder, so as not to appear weak in front of their rivals.

As for the incoming consul, he secretly hoped that Vindex's seditious talk would fall on deaf ears. Should unrest spread throughout Gaul and Germania, it would risk unsettling the rest of the empire. Part of the reason less ambitious and unimaginative governors were sent to the Germanic provinces was because Rome would face disaster, should a rival emerge who could bring the force of the fearsome Army of the Rhine to bear. That Verginius had chosen to inform the emperor of Vindex's intentions meant that their loyalty was secure, for the time being.

Chapter III: War Master in the East

Caesarea, Coast of Judea
20 January 68 A.D.



Flavius Vespasian

The political upheaval in Rome, as well as the growing unrest in the western provinces were a world apart from the war-torn Judea, more than three thousand miles from imperial capital. Two years prior, the province had erupted in open rebellion, the Romans driven from Jerusalem. The first attempts at restoring order had proven disastrous, with over six thousand imperial soldiers killed during a hellish ambush at a mountain passed called Beth Horon. The Roman governor, Cestius Gallus, was immediately sacked and later died of an apparent suicide.

So desperate was Nero to quell the rebellion, he reinstated the previously disgraced Flavius Vespasian to active service. The emperor detested the general, despite his exemplary record of military service. Unlike most patricians with a common ancestry, Vespasian had done little to mask his humble origins. He was prone to vulgar language and crude humor, and he found the emperor's lyrics utterly insufferable. For reasons few understood, Vespasian had been part of Nero's entourage during a tour of Greece and Asia Minor, having fallen afoul of the emperor's wrath after he fell asleep during one of Nero's poetry recitals. Nero subsequently banished Vespasian

from the imperial court, ordering him to remain in Achaea where he could spend his days tending to bee hives.

When the emperor received word of the magnitude of the disaster, he had little choice but to recall Vespasian, who was readily available to be dispatched to the province. It still took some convincing, namely from Suetonius Paulinus. He reminded Nero that Vespasian was one of Rome's fiercest generals, who had fought in over sixty battles and sieges, never once tasting defeat. Veterans of the Britannia conquest still referred to him as *'The War Master'*. Another name he had earned was *'Siege Breaker'*, after he shattered the defenses of a supposedly impenetrable barbarian stronghold in a single day.

Vespasian's army was massive. In Judea alone he had three legions; Legio V, *Macedonia*, Legio X, *Fretensis*, and Legio XV, *Apollinaris*. These elite soldiers were the bulwark of his fighting force. In addition, he also commanded an entire corps of auxilia infantry cohorts and cavalry regiments, whose total numbers were almost twice that of his legionaries. Furthermore, he had thousands of allied troops dispatched by the client king of Arabia, as well as the loyalist Jewish king, Marcus Julius Agrippa II. A substantial number of these were archers, both on foot as well as mounted, and their service had proven invaluable to the imperial army. All told, the commander-in-chief had over sixty-thousand fighting men under his command in Judea and Galilee. In addition to these assets, there were two additional legions in Egypt he could call upon, with three more located in Syria, plus an equal or greater number of additional auxilia forces. Vespasian had at his disposal over one-third of the entire Roman army, a far greater force than any one man in the rest of the empire.

Wielding such enormous power would usually label one as a threat to Emperor Nero, who seemed to regard both great success and failure with equal amounts of disdain. Vespasian's one saving grace was his lack of wealth, as well as his family's plebeian ancestry. Paulinus had further reassured the emperor that Vespasian was a political nonentity. The increasingly paranoid Nero was always watchful of potential rivals, lest they be given too much power. However, he also knew that bloodline, prestige, and family wealth were what mattered most in the Roman political world, and the Flavians possessed scarcely any of these. More importantly, he needed someone in Judea who could fight. He needed the War Master. Nero, therefore, felt comfortable with dispatching Vespasian to Judea with such a

huge army. And unless he wished to risk losing the province and the possibility of rebellion spreading throughout the east, he had little choice but to give the Flavian general every asset he required.

Since becoming commander-in-chief of all Roman forces in the eastern empire, Vespasian had unleashed a hell storm of fury upon the rebellious Judeans. Wherever there was resistance, his soldiers killed every man and boy of fighting age, and sold the surviving woman and children into slavery. Long caravans of slave merchants followed his army wherever it went, with the tens-of-thousands of captives sold to them glutting the slave market. Both Vespasian and his soldiers profited immensely. The general, who had once resorted to selling mules in order to pay his debts, was quickly becoming immensely wealthy, albeit through much human suffering.

After the extremely violent yet productive campaign season of the previous year, a lull came over the war-torn province. The northern region of Galilee was now firmly under the control of the Romans. Loyalist cities, such as Sepphoris, were rewarded for their fealty with favorable trade agreements, additional soldiers to protect their citizens from marauding bandits, as well as first selection of some of the freshly procured slaves. Those cities that rebelled, such as Jotapata and Gamala, were utterly destroyed. Less than two thousand of Jotapata's forty thousand citizens and refugees had survived to be sold as slaves, while the populace of Gamala was completely exterminated.

The present lull in the fighting had as much to do with logistics as it did the pacification of so much of the region. As the roads in Judea were little more than unpaved dirt tracks, the winter rains had rendered them impassible quagmires for the imperial army's siege trains and logistics wagons. Legionaries could, conceivably, still march along these muddy stretches, albeit at a much slower pace and in far greater discomfort than they were accustomed. And while pack mules could be used to transport rations and tents, the rebellious Jews were fighting a strictly defensive war now, refusing to leave their cities and strongholds. Without their siege engines and engineer assets, there was no practical way for the Romans to breach the walls of the remaining major cities still under zealot control. Because of this, General Vespasian had cantoned his army in various encampments all throughout the pacified regions of Judea and northern Galilee.

Many of Vespasian's senior officers were spending part of the winter

with him at the coastal capital of Caesarea. It was midday, yet the sky was black, with sea winds howling against the governor's palace. Torrents of rain hammered the tiled roof. The commander-in-chief was joined this day by his son, General Titus of the Fifteenth Legion, as well as the commanding legate of the Tenth Legion, General Marcus Ulpius Trajan.

"I pity our soldiers who have only their tents to shelter them from this shit," Titus remarked.

"Getting pissed on by the Jewish winter rains will only harden them and make them even angrier," Trajan laughed. "And besides, if it wasn't the weather, then the rankers would find something else to complain about; either not enough whores to keep their cocks wet, or too few profits from the selling of slaves, or that the war is progressing too fast or too slow for their liking."

"It's true," Titus concurred with a grin. "I suppose they're happy as long as they have something to complain about."

Vespasian sat across from the two legates at the long table. He was clearly bored and spinning a pugio dagger by its point on the table, while staring at a rather haggard looking map.

"As soon as this little war is at an end," he said, "I think the safest thing would be for me to send Nero my resignation, along with my intent to retire to some remote island far away from Rome."

It was said in jest, with more than a trace of dark humor.

"It is quite the dilemma," Trajan remarked. "Should you fail, Nero would send you back into exile or worse."

"And yet with each victory, he may eventually see you as a potential threat," Titus added. "Or at least his damned praetorian prefects might name you one, once they find out just how much money we've amassed during this war. Tigellinus is more diabolical than Sejanus ever was, and Nymphidius is even worse. They could easily fabricate some fanciful charges against us, have Nero demand our suicide or execution, and then steal all our assets to pay for another fucking marble palace!"

"Yes," Vespasian nodded. "A pity we no longer live in an age where the emperor trusts his legates, rewarding triumph rather than punishing it. I cannot help but wonder what the divine Augustus would make of this, the latest ruler to come from his line. Nero wasn't always like this; eccentric, most certainly, and a bit unhinged to say the least. But ever since the Great Fire, he has slowly plummeted down into the abyss of madness. I've never loved him, and I thought his mother was a royal cunt, but damn me to Hades

if he hasn't become downright evil."

"I think even Emperor Claudius knew Agrippina was a royal cunt," Titus remarked dryly. "Though after what he'd been through with his first three wives, he probably figured she was the safest. At least she never tried to hide what she was. And she certainly bore you no good feelings, general." Out of respect, Titus always addressed his father by his rank, at least in the presence of others.

"Not that any of us remember the time of Augustus," Trajan observed, ignoring the crude remarks about Nero's mother. "After all, I wasn't even born until midway through the reign of Tiberius. And correct me if I'm wrong, Titus, but you were still a babe, shitting yourself, when Caligula was assassinated."

"It's true, I could do little but eat and shit then," the younger legate laughed. "I was only two when 'Little Brat' met his end."

The revelation suddenly reminded Vespasian of the profound difference in years between himself and his subordinate legates. At fifty-eight years of age, the commander-in-chief was the only one among all of his senior officers who was even alive during the reign of Augustus, even though he was just a boy of five when Rome's first emperor passed into the afterlife. Though Trajan was one of the older legates in the eastern armies, at forty-one he was still young enough to be Vespasian's son. As for his actual son, Titus, at twenty-eight he was quite possibly the youngest legion commander in the whole of the empire. All of the other legates, as well as auxilia commanders, were in their early to mid-thirties. Vespasian had demanded senior officers who were old enough to have a good amount of practical experience, while young enough that they still possessed sufficient fortitude to set a proper example to their legionaries.

And yet, Vespasian never felt 'old' amongst his peers. Though the twenty-five years that had passed since the Invasion of Britannia had slowed him a bit, his energy knew no bounds. Just a few months prior, Vespasian had personally led one of the assaults that broke the rebel stronghold of Gamala, much like he had during the Britannic conquest.

"You know," Titus said, his brow furrowed in contemplation as he suddenly thought about his father's words regarding the emperor. "I've used plenty of words to describe Nero over the years, both good and bad. And yet, 'evil' was never among them. But with the terrible things he's done in recent years, what else can we call it?"

“Dangerous and erratic,” Trajan replied. “Much like our present conversation.”

“Still,” Titus continued, speaking to his father, “if it’s that great a cause for concern—and given your history with the emperor it might be—perhaps you should send your resignation as soon as we defeat what’s left of the zealots. Retire to an island or remote estate somewhere; gods know you’ve made enough money off this campaign to afford to build a palace on a hundred acres. And if Nero asks you to return to Rome to celebrate a Triumph, graciously tell him that war injuries and ill health prevent you from traveling.”

“Just don’t tell him where you’ve gone,” Trajan added.

Vespasian chuckled at this last remark but shook his head.

“Ill health,” he grumbled. “I’m nearly twice Nero’s age, yet I could beat the living piss out of any man at the imperial court. And to tell a deliberate falsehood just to avoid returning to Rome does not become me. I’d rather celebrate a Triumph by whipping my cock out in the middle of Nero’s court.”

“And I’m sure many would find it impressive,” his son remarked. He then added in a more serious tone, “but one must toy with the truth, if one is to survive.”

“Is it really that bad in Rome?” Trajan asked. He quickly explained himself, as both of the Flavians looked at him in disbelief. “I mean, I hear all the rumors, like anyone else. But remember, I’ve been away from Rome for almost ten years.”

Trajan, who was a native of Hispania, had spent much of his career away from the imperial capital. Though he had served as governor of his home province, he found that, like Vespasian, he most excelled at leading men into battle.

“Politics in Rome is a dangerous, and sometimes bloody, business,” Vespasian observed. “And it gets worse, the closer one is to the very top.”

“Since I am the first of my family to attain membership in the senate, I suppose I am relatively safe,” Trajan stated. “And being that this is my third tour as a legate, I am little more than a dog soldier in the eyes of the emperor and senate.”

“And that, my friend, is why I hold you in the highest regard,” Vespasian said with an approving grin. He then nodded to his son. “Titus, you understand the political game far better than either of us. I’ve twice been expelled from the imperial court, and were it my wife’s family that had been

implicated in a conspiracy against the emperor, my rotting corpse would be at the bottom of the Tiber."

"Believe me, I thought that was a very real possibility," Titus remarked. He gave a somewhat embarrassed glance over to Trajan, whose wife was the sister of Titus' former spouse. "Trajan, you showed true bravery, standing by your wife, whereas I could not cut my marital bonds with Furnilla soon enough."

"I was also nowhere near the capital when the conspiracy broke," Trajan noted. "No one even gave my wife a second thought. You, on the other hand, were in Rome and at the heart of it all. Marcia may have never forgiven you for divorcing her sister and taking her daughter away, but I understood. And though I will never tell this to my wife, were our roles reversed, you and I, I would have done the same."

"To be honest," Titus replied, "as dangerous as it has become, I rather enjoy the game of imperial political intrigue. I know that may sound strange. I also have greater respect for our enemies here in Judea, than our rivals in Rome, for at least the Jews make their ill intentions known. And yet, there is a certain amount of satisfaction to be had when one can outwit political foes who would profess their friendship openly, all the while waiting to stab us in the back."

"Both literally and figuratively," his father chuckled.

"I admit, I was rather impressed with how you handled Mucianus," Trajan said, referring to the Governor of Syria, whose political power Vespasian was only able to match due to his temporary status as commander-in-chief. He then nodded to Vespasian. "The animosity that existed between you two was no secret. Strangely enough, I would hazard to guess that Mucianus is now one of our strongest allies, both militarily and politically."

"The Governor of Syria may be an arrogant despot and boy-lover," Vespasian remarked. "But he was wise enough to recognize, though he and I loathed each other personally, it was no reason for us not to align ourselves. Titus was able to make him see that."

"I hope you didn't have to go to bed with him first," Trajan said to Titus with a chuckle, as he sipped his wine.

"There are many who have used sex as a weapon," the young legate replied, turning a fig over in his hand. "But for those that do, the power is fleeting, and one is left extremely vulnerable in its aftermath. Don't believe me? Just look at Queen Cleopatra, the last of the pharaohs, who was once

absolute ruler of Egypt. She seduced Julius Caesar, and she later blinded Marc Antony with her charms, turning him into a traitor. Yet her vision was shortsighted, and she displayed little strategic savvy. In the end, her vacuous twat failed to serve her. Instead, it brought about the end of the Ptolemaic Dynasty and led to Egypt's conquest by Rome."

With their army static until the early spring, when the roads dried, there was little else for the senior officers in Vespasian's army to do, except discuss the political intrigues within the imperial capital. Though many of their remarks were light-hearted, the commander-in-chief was often leery of any talk, no matter how humorous, that could potentially lead to yet another falling out with the imperial house. Unbeknownst to any of them, events thousands of miles to the west would soon take the emperor's attention away from Judea completely.



It was mid-February when Fonteius Capito arrived in Mogontiacum to meet with Governor Verginius, prior to completing his journey to his own capital at Cologne. As the roads through the Alpes were often treacherous and impassible during the winter months, Capito had taken a lengthy detour east, skirting along the edge of Pannonia. This had doubled the length of his already tedious journey. It had also rained almost every day since he passed the remote military outpost known as Castra Regina, more than two hundred miles southeast of Mogontiacum. As such, the governor for Lower Germania was in a foul temper when he was greeted by his peer on the Rhine.

"Ah, Governor Capito, welcome!" Verginius said, as the drenched legate was escorted into his principia with the Fourth Legion.

"A ghastly time to be on the roads," Capito grumbled.

"Yes, well you can stay in my quarters for the night, though I know you must be anxious to be on your way." While the governor's palace was far larger and more comfortable, Capito could not help but wonder if Verginius' meeting him at the more austere legion fortress was a deliberate ploy to irritate him.

"I'll come straight to the point," he said, as a slave took his drenched cloak, and two more helped him out of his armor. "I came with all haste once we received your message. Or rather, the message you forwarded from our misguided peer in Gaul. What more have you learned over the past six weeks

since you sent your dispatch?"

"Nothing," Verginius shrugged. "My assets are delegated to keeping those damned barbarians across the Rhine from invading our borders. At this time, I can only wait for a response from Vindex. I sent him a reply, asking that he clarify, in detail, his intentions."

"So you have no eyes at all in Gaul?" Capito asked, exacerbated. "Damn it, man, Vindex could have raised the entire province in rebellion by now!"

"Oh, calm yourself already," Verginius replied, offering him a cup of wine from a servant's tray. "It's been eight weeks since Vindex first sent his messages out. Unless he has the charisma of either Caesar or Vercingetorix, I doubt that he's managed to raise up more than a handful of fanatics. And besides, I sent one of my staff tribunes with my reply to him. I was evasive in my answer so Vindex does not panic and fail to respond to me."

Capito's eyes narrowed as he downed his wine. "You should have damned him outright for his treason," he said.

What he did not say, was that he wondered if perhaps his colleague was waiting to see just how much support Vindex was able to muster, before deciding which side he would choose. Just a few years prior, this would have been unthinkable. Since the rise of Augustus, Rome's generals had always been selected from the best and most loyal members of the patrician class. Sadly, during the last thirteen years of Nero's reign, the current emperor's paranoia had compelled the most promising members of Rome's ruling class to avoid the very postings they once fought hardest to attain. Men who were unimaginative, as well as lacking in ambition, were selected for the prestigious governorships, simply because Nero viewed them as nonthreatening. Ability, wealth, and influence were all viewed contemptuously, especially after the Piso affair.

With an alarming number of senators, and even a few wealthier equites forced to commit suicide during Nero's recent reign of terror, that same paranoia now gripped every governor and legate within the provinces. Capito suspected that Verginius' dismissive tone towards him had less to do with the rivalry between their provinces, and more to do with neither man knowing where the other's loyalties truly lay.

Capito had only been away from the Rhine for a little over a year, yet he knew the men who commanded the imperial legions on the frontier. There was one in particular, Fabius Valens, who as far as Capito knew, still commanded Legio I, *Germanica*. He held immense sway with his peers, as

well as the men in the ranks. Capito could not help but wonder if perhaps it was Valens, and not Verginius, he needed to concern himself with most.

Chapter IV: No Turning Back

Vienne, Gaul
Late February 68 A.D.
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In the weeks since sending his dispatches throughout the western empire, with a number of governors and legates now questioning the loyalties of their peers, Julius Vindex had had time to mull over the responses, or rather the lack thereof, received from the neighboring provinces. Word of his proposed rebellion had spread quickly, and he was certain the news had already traveled as far as Rome. Vindex further assumed that every provincial governor had forwarded the treasonous letters to Rome, as a means to protect themselves politically, should the rebellion fail. The only exception, of which Vindex was oblivious, was Servius Galba in Hispania. The immediate question was how much popular support the uprising could attain, particularly in the Gallic provinces?

Whatever came next, Vindex knew well the risks, and understood that at this point there was no turning back. He had, therefore, summoned from within Gallia Lugdunensis tribal leaders, city governors and magistrates, military commanders, any and all who were willing to stand against tyranny. The last group were especially crucial. The province had no legions, and Vindex knew he needed support from either legionary detachments or auxilia units garrisoned in his cities, in order to give his uprising a sense of legitimacy. Thus far, only a few of the city governors, along with some of the elders from the old tribal nobilities, had heeded his call.

“More will come,” Vindex asserted to his war council. “Once they see that we mean to dispose of the tyranny of Nero, they will see the people rise.”

They were assembled in what had once been an old meeting hall for the ancient war chiefs, which had long since fallen into disuse. With the cold and rain making for a miserable climate, this was the only indoor venue that was large enough to suit Vindex’s purposes. And while most of those present were from the old tribal factions, their appearance was a far cry from when their ancestors fought and died beside Vercingetorix. Most of these men had their hair cropped short and were clean-shaven. Their dress was a mix of Roman togas and more climate friendly tunics and breeches.

“The very real issue, should we be successful, is who do we replace Nero with?” Bradan asked. Having been one of Vindex’s earliest confidants, he was the first to declare for the cause. “He has no sons, and there are no other members left within the imperial family. The Julian line ended when all three of Augustus’ grandsons died childless. And if we look to the Claudian line, Tiberius’ only grandson was executed by Gaius Caligula. Rubellius Plautus was the son of Tiberius’ granddaughter, Julia, yet neither he nor any of his children survived Nero’s purges over the last few years. That leaves the descendants of Emperor Claudius, who have all been eradicated by our current emperor. Nero murdered his stepbrother, Britannicus…and yes, it was murder. He executed his own wife and Claudius’ daughter, Octavia, for treason. And when Claudius’ final daughter, Antonia, refused Nero’s advances, he accused her of treachery and had her disposed of.”

“When not battling the rest of the world, the Julio-Claudians excelled at fighting each other,” a Sequani nobleman added with disdain. “They’ve driven themselves to extinction, and I say good riddance!”

“That may be,” Vindex concurred. “However, many of the people still have a sentimental attachment to the imperial family. Deciding upon a replacement for Nero is tricky. It cannot be me, let us make that quite clear. I am not risking my life in the hopes that I should seize the imperial throne. Given my non-Latin origins, and the fact that I am only a first generation senator, the people would view me as a foreign usurper. What we need is someone from among our allies, or potential allies, who is of the old families.”

“Then who?”

Vindex produced a scroll.

“This was given to me only just this morning from our long-anticipated potential ally, Servius Sulpicius Galba. He states that we should proceed however we see fit, and when the time is right, the armies in Tarraconensis will act accordingly.”

“Does that mean he wishes to join us or is it a threat?”

“If it were a threat, he would have said his forces were on the march, and that if we continued down this path, he would smash us into oblivion,” Vindex conjectured. “No, Galba is not threatening us. I interpret his response as his implicit sanctioning of our endeavor. And of course he speaks cryptically, lest the message fall into the wrong hands. I also have received word that Marcus Salvius Otho, the governor of Lusitania, intends to follow

whatever course Galba chooses."

"That is hopeful news," Bradan said. "There are no legionary detachments within this province, and we have heard nothing from the handful of auxilia regiments scattered across the region. Galba has no legions, but he has plenty of auxiliary infantry and cavalry and, I daresay, he has the resources to raise his own legion, should he wish."

"And if we gather enough support, what then?" another old chieftain asked skeptically. "I look around, and I only see a few city magistrates and old warlords. Galba's cryptic letter is meaningless, especially when the most powerful force within the entire imperial army is but two weeks' march from here."

"Seven legions are posted all along the Rhine," another man added. "They are highly trained, heavily armed, and all experienced fighters. I think we need not concern ourselves with that old man, Galba, and instead worry about what those thirty-five thousand legionaries will do."

Vindex nodded in agreement, for he had contemplated the dilemma of the Rhine army ever since he first considered taking a stand against Emperor Nero. They were not only a fearsome fighting force, but they were also in the immediate neighborhood of the Gallic provinces. It was they who had rolled right over the armies of Sacrovir and Florus within a matter of weeks.

"Germania, as you know, is divided into two provinces," Vindex said. "But it is the governor of Upper Germania, Verginius Rufus, who commands the real power in the region. Fonteius Capito has only recently been given the governorship of Lower Germania. He is one of Nero's courtiers, but he will be powerless to act without Verginius. I also have it on good authority that the two Germanic governors are not exactly on friendly terms. And while the legions have an amicable enough rapport with Capito, they love Verginius. I have met him on a few occasions, and he is rather unassuming, but a capable general whose soldiers are extremely loyal to him."

"Then we may want to forget about Galba, and instead offer the throne to Verginius," Bradan reasoned.

"If he'll accept it," Vindex stated. "I met with one of his tribunes yesterday morning. He was asking a lot of questions from the governor. There was no malice or threat, and I believe that if Verginius were completely committed to Nero, he would have threatened us, rather than asked questions. But we must be firm in our resolve, and let all bear witness that it was here, in Gaul, that the freedom from Nero's tyranny was born."



The province of Upper Germania was located to the northeast of Gallia Lugdunensis. Its capital of Mogontiacum lay approximately four hundred miles from Vienne, a distance that marching legionaries could cover in roughly two weeks. The governor-general, Lucius Verginius Rufus, was now fifty-two years of age and had been elected consul four years prior. After an uneventful term, Emperor Nero had granted him the governorship. Like most provincial governors during this time, he was of humbler origins and a political nobody. He was competent enough that the emperor and senate felt confident he could keep the rampaging mobs of barbarians contained east of the River Rhine. At the same time, he lacked the nobility of birth, as well as any sort of ambition, to ever be perceived as a threat to Nero.

Because the Germanic frontier along the Rhine was among the more volatile within the empire, both provinces wielded substantial military power. Within his province, Verginius commanded three legions. Legio XXII, *Primigenia Fortuna*, also known as *'Fortuna's Legion'*, along with his own Legio IV, *Macedonia*, were both posted to the fortress near the capital city of Mogontiacum. Approximately two hundred and fifty miles to the south, at the city Vindonissa near the base of the Alpes, was stationed Legio XXI, *Rapax*, also called *'The Predator Legion'*.

The recent unrest in neighboring Gaul was unsettling to him. As his army was by far the largest, as well as the closest to the troubled province, he knew that responsibility for putting down any uprising would fall upon him. He was also very pragmatic and knew he needed more actionable intelligence, before he uprooted the Rhine legions from their fortresses and sent them rampaging into Gaul. But rather than sending just scouts into the neighboring province, he dispatched one of his military tribunes as an emissary to Julius Vindex. If Vindex wished to court him as a possible ally, then he would most likely be very open with his strategic intent.

Fonteius Capito had left Mogontiacum within a day of his arrival, all the while urging Verginius to make ready to march at once. As Capito was one of Nero's favorites, as well as just coming off a full term as consul, it vexed him to no end that he could not simply order Verginius and his legions to follow him into battle. That his colleague was even keeled and level-headed in his speech only aggravated him even more so. But what Capito failed to

understand was that Verginius was being neither lazy nor careless in his strategy. Rather, he was gathering as much information as possible, while gauging Vindex's intentions, as well as his potential military strength, before acting. That intelligence he needed would be arriving soon, with a lone tribune who rode through the wind and rain from Gaul.



There was a definite chill in the air, even at midday, as the young tribune approached the city of Mogontiacum. The four hundred mile journey from Lugdunum had taken him a little over a week. The rains during the first four days had been hellish. The young man had been hardly able to see, being constantly pelted in the face as he rode through the downpour. And though the sun came out afterwards, the early spring afternoon warming the air, it seemed as if it took another five days for his cloak and tunic to dry. He feared his armor might end up with rust pits. His nose, now constantly dripping, was accompanied by a persistent cough. And yet, he could not have been more content.

His name was Lucius Artorius Magnus. Twenty-seven years of age, he came from a line of distinguished soldiers, though before him, all had come from the plebian ranks. His father and grandfather had both retired as senior-ranking centurions, earning the family membership into the equites. Following his father, Metellus' retirement from the legions, the family had just enough fortune and political clout to secure Lucius on the career path of Rome's lesser-noble class. His younger brother, Gaius, had been compelled to make his own way, and he joined the legions as a common soldier.

"And some days I think he was the lucky one," Lucius reminisced aloud, as he pulled his cloak around him.

During the six weeks he'd been away from the fortress, all he'd had time to do was ruminate. He preferred it that way. General Verginius had offered to send a section of cavalrymen with him. The tribune declined, stating that for his mission it was best to be as inconspicuous as possible. This had been an absurd argument, however, as there had been nothing remotely covert about his tasking. He was simply to ascertain what he could about the motives of Julius Vindex, while being noncommittal regarding the position of the Rhine Army. Knowing that Lucius preferred solitude, Verginius allowed him to travel to Lugdunum alone.

Lucius' motivation behind volunteering for this particular mission revolved around his desire to remain with the legion. While a command tour for legates and chief tribunes was normally three years, the staff tribunes from the equites served for only six months. This suited most of them, as their ambitions collectively lay more along the lines of becoming magistrates and mayors of the imperial cities. A very select few with the right family names and political connections could, perhaps one day, become governor of either Egypt or Judea, the only provinces that were managed by equites rather than senators. Lucius Artorius, however, despised politics and bureaucracy. All his life he had longed to be a soldier, like his father and grandfather before him. He oftentimes cursed the fates for making him the elder Artorian brother.

The sun broke through the clouds, adding a bit of reprieve from the chill, as he dismounted outside the gate of the fortress, handing his horse over to one of the guards. When he reached the large principia building, the legionaries on either side of the door came to attention and saluted. Lucius returned the courtesy before entering the legion's headquarters.

The outer foyer served as an office to the aquilifer. An older soldier, of much experience and education, he held the esteemed honor of carrying the sacred imperial eagle into battle. He was also the senior paymaster for the entire legion, and his rank was equivalent to that of a centurion primus ordo from the elite First Cohort. Despite his status and the immense respect his position warranted, he was still subordinate in rank to the staff tribunes. As such, he stood respectfully when Lucius entered the large foyer, his helmet tucked under his arm.

"Tribune, sir," the aquilifer said, with a respectful nod.

"I have my report to make to the commander," Lucius replied.

"Of course. He is out conducting an inspection of the Eighth Cohort at the moment, but will return within the hour."

"Very good," the tribune nodded. "I will be in my quarters freshening up. Please inform him that I will see him once I've made myself presentable."

While Lucius was anxious to meet with Verginius, as much for his personal goals as the contents of his findings, he was glad for the brief reprieve. Unlike the soldiers in the ranks, who lived in cramped barracks with up to eight men sharing a pair of rooms, tribunes were each given their own house within the fortress. Though smaller than the abodes of most men of their social status, they were large enough to house three or four servants and

to give the legion's staff officers a sense of privacy and personal space.

Another privilege of his rank was the use of a far more private bath than what legionaries were required to share. Though the hot plunge pool was only modestly warm on this afternoon, Lucius decided it would take too long for the slaves to reignite the fires and heat the waters. The stages of a typical Roman bath, from the cold frigidarium to the warm tepidarium, the scalding plunge in the caldarium, to finally the scraping of the skin and an oil massage by slaves, could take an hour or longer. Lucius Artorius settled for a simple warm water plunge, followed by a shave and a quick rubbing of oil on his tired muscles.

A pair of servants then helped him dress. His deep crimson tunic with gold trim may not have been as formal as wearing a toga, but it was still a lot more fashionable than the plain red or white tunics worn by the men in the ranks. He buckled his brass plated leather belt around the waist and donned his caligae sandals. These were the most well-worn part of his attire, yet they were also the most comfortable. He ran his fingers through his still damp hair, grabbed his stack of reports, and made the short walk back to the principia. A simple affirmative nod from the aquilifer told him the legate was in. With a deep breath, Lucius marched over to the commanding general's door and knocked.

"Enter."

"Tribune Artorius reporting, sir!" he said, with a sharp salute.

"At ease," Verginius said. He held out a hand, accepting the rather thick packet of notes and observations that Lucius had made during his short time in Gaul.

"Very good," the legate said, glancing quickly through the reports. "A lot of attention to detail, I see."

"Yes, sir," Lucius replied. "Vindex intends to go through with his rebellion. He is, essentially, devoid of any other option now. His support is limited to just a few of the old tribes who still harbor resentment against the empire dating back to the time of Caesar. He is hopeful this discord will spread throughout the region."

"Hmm," Verginius said, still looking through the parchments. "That will be all, tribune. Dismissed."

"If I may, sir," Lucius said hesitantly. "I did have one request, which I wish to address with you."

"Indeed?" Verginius asked, setting down the reports.

“As you know, my time with the legion expires in two weeks…”

“Yes, and as I understand it, you will be taking a short leave in Ostia before returning to Ariminum,” the legate interrupted.

“About that, sir,” Lucius replied. “I have no desire to return to the world of city and regional politics, at least not yet. I did file a request for an extension with the legion before I left for Gaul.”

Having accepted the mission to Gaul as a means of proving his value to the legion, Lucius hoped it would sway his commanding legate’s decision to grant his extension. The expression of dismissiveness on Verginius’ face put an end to any such notions.

“We have six staff tribune positions,” he said patiently, his hands resting atop his desk. “It is compulsory for each young man within the equites to perform six months of service in the legions. Half those who come here want nothing to do with the army, the other half wish to become career soldiers. Perhaps one in every five requests for extension gets approved, and that is for those with critical skills that the legion needs. You have been a good officer, Lucius, but unfortunately there is little you can offer that your peers cannot. I know your family’s reputation for service, and I admire your willingness to go beyond what is expected of a tribune. Your intelligence gathering in Gaul was excellent, and I will write a personal commendation for you.”

The young tribune looked completely devastated. Verginius could sympathize. After all, many of the more adventurist young equites hoped to find glory and fortune during their service with a legion. Yet during the six months of Lucius Artorius’ tenure, little of interest had occurred along the Rhine. He had come to Mogontiacum towards the end of the normal campaign season, and the barbarians across the frontier had been surprisingly docile this spring. And now he was slated to leave the legion before what appeared to be a very likely campaign to suppress a rebellion in Gaul.

“Even if I approved you remaining with the legion for another six months,” the legate explained, pulling out a scroll from under his desk, “it would matter little. The Governor of Ariminum has personally requested that you return to the city. I may be a senatorial legate, however, I cannot countermand orders regarding magisterial appointments. Like those of us in the senatorial class, you equites have your own political obligations. Make a name for yourself in Ariminum, become friends with the right people, and in time you may be fortunate enough to serve as a deputy commander of auxilia infantry or cavalry with the possibility of a future regimental command. And,

if you are especially ambitious, make friends with anyone who might be associated with the Praetorian Guard. Just remember the reality of the world we live in; name recognition and having the right political connections will get you further than any number of consecutive tours as a military staff tribune. Dismissed."

Lucius saluted and left his commanding legate's office feeling dejected and, in a sense, betrayed. He knew such thoughts were unbecoming, as was his incessant envy towards his younger brother. While Gaius had done well with the legions and had risen in rank to optio, life for all plebian soldiers was harsh. The training was brutal, discipline fierce, and even an optio's wage was but a fraction of what the tribunes were paid.

"Still, at least Gaius was able to make his own choices in life," Lucius grumbled, as he returned to his quarters.

He later chastised himself for his selfishness. After all, Verginius had offered to write him a favorable recommendation, which would carry at least some weight, whenever the time came to apply for another military posting. And though he knew he was being granted a substantial opportunity in Ariminum, while living in the governor's palace along with his adoring wife who he'd not seen in almost six months, he found himself yearning for the savage and austere life of a soldier on the frontier.



It was late afternoon when Verginius summoned the commanding legate of Legio XXII, Claudius Zeno, to a meeting at his principia. Tribune Lucius Artorius' report gave a very thorough analysis of the overall strategic situation.

"So what do you think?" Claudius asked. "Is Vindex simply another Sacrovir looking to 'liberate' the Gauls?"

"Vindex may be of Gallic blood, but he is still a Roman," Verginius noted.

"So was Sacrovir," his fellow legate countered.

"This rebellion is different," Verginius emphasized. "This is not simply tribal barbarians who seek independence from Rome. These are Roman citizens who mean to overthrow the emperor, and replace him with one of their choosing. Vindex does not want Gaul to be free from Rome. He wants the whole of the empire to be free from Nero."

“And what of Galba?” Claudius asked. “Rumor has it he is supporting this little rebellion implicitly. For all we know, he could have been declared its leader.”

“Apparently, Otho stated that Lusitania will follow whatever course Galba decides,” the governor added. “Though he has no legions, Galba is from one of the oldest families in Rome. His roots are deeper within the ancient aristocracy than any. This could generate sympathy for the rebellion within Rome. However, whether or not he supports Vindex, as far as we know, he has not budged from his province. Any threats Galba may or may not present will be diplomatic and political, rather than military.”

“What do we know about Vindex’s strength?” Claudius asked. “We can’t worry about some old sod in Hispania when we have an actual rebellion to quash on our doorstep.”

“Of the sixty-four tribal peoples within Gaul, only three have answered his call, the Aedui, Arverni, and Sequani.”

“Those are three of the larger tribes,” Claudius noted. “They could likely muster a rather sizeable force, which could cause us much trouble.”

“They are larger, I’ll grant you that,” Verginius remarked. “However, Vindex has no legions nor any trained auxiliaries. What cohorts there are in Gaul have remained silent and have fortified themselves within their camps. His army will likely consist of little more than untrained and lightly armed militia.”

“We can rally both legions from Mogontiacum,” his legate said. “The Twenty-First Legion can detach a vexilation to watch the border in case the barbarians across the Rhine get a little adventurous.”

“Yes, but our two legions will not be sufficient even with auxilia attachments. I am going to use the emperor’s prerogative, which I have the right to in the event of such a crisis, and have detachments from Legio, V Alaudae, XV, and XVI, as well as the First Germanica Legion.”

“Capito won’t like that,” Claudius replied, thinking back to his recent interaction with Fonteius Capito. “He did not outright say it, but he left the impression it should be he who leads any expeditions to put down a rebellion.”

“Piss on Capito!” Verginius scoffed. “That worthless old twat couldn’t fight his way out of a brothel full of aged whores, let alone lead legions into battle. He will either send me at least four cohorts from each of his legions or he can explain to the emperor why, in the empire’s moment of need, he chose

to sit on his ass and let rebellious provincials run amok."

Claudius grinned in acknowledgement. He then added, "It's just as well that we are heading into Gaul. We conduct punitive raids across the Rhine nearly every summer, and it nets little if any plunder for the lads. Most of the time, the barbarians don't even bother to stick around and fight. And with Gaul being by far the richest province in the western empire, no doubt our soldiers will be anxious to enrich themselves off the spoils of rebellious traitors."

Chapter V: The Rebellion Grows

Vienne, Gaul
March 68 A.D.



Servius Sulpicius Galba

It was early March when Julius Vindex rebelled openly, stating that he had an army that was ready to depose Nero and *'replace him with one worthy of his once noble ancestry'*. Despite having no professional soldiers and only three of the Gallic tribes joining him, their strength was still an impressive one hundred thousand volunteers. This was a vast, but also unwieldy number of men to provide for. And as this was nothing even close to resembling a professional army, there were no supply lines, or even supply bases for that matter. Each man brought whatever food he could carry, many using their own draught animals to transport supplies. At most, his men would have enough rations to last a month. And while Verginius' silence likely portended that the Army of the Rhine would not be supporting the uprising, Vindex had a more immediate crisis to contend with.

"Lugdunum has declared for Emperor Nero," a returning scout reported, as Vindex and Bradan were conducting an inspection of one of the newly-formed regiments of volunteers. Most of these men carried spears and hastily made shields, though few had anything resembling armor. Vindex and his deputy quickly excused themselves and turned the men back over to their

captain.

“Your own damned capital and they slam the gates on you,” Bradan grumbled.

“The nobility of the city are staunch in their loyalty to Nero,” Vindex explained. “I feared this might happen. Lugdunum is both the capital, as well as the most viable potential supply depot in the region. The River Rhodanus is also the perfect natural logistics line.”

“If we cannot gain the support of Lugdunum, our army will run out of food long before we can even engage any of Nero’s forces.”

“Something I had hoped to avoid, but may prove necessary,” Vindex conceded. “There is nothing for it. If we lose Lugdunum, then we lose all control of Gaul. The Rhine army is still in its garrisons as far as we know, so there is time. We’ll lay siege to Lugdunum and hope the nobles and people have the good sense not to risk their lives for that reckless tyrant in Rome.”

Vindex and his senior leaders soon devised their plan to surround the capital, sending dispatches to every regiment and company within his army. It was impossible to encamp such a large force in one area. They were spread out in a series of camps over a fifty square mile region. He decided to take the largest of these forces, numbering approximately twenty-five thousand men, and march for Lugdunum. They were lightly armed, mostly with oval shields and either spears or hand axes. What was troubling to both Vindex and his leading generals was while many of these people were Roman citizens, their dress and appearance, along with their rudimentary weaponry, gave the appearance of a rebellious barbarian mob rather than an army set to free the empire from a tyrannical despot. However, he steeled himself to the task at hand. He knew overthrowing Nero would be a monumental undertaking. And it would all begin with the taking the capital of Gaul.



Nero sat in the consul’s chair as the senate convened, a bored expression dominating his countenance, while he turned his gold plated baton over in his hands. He had agreed to a six-month suffect consulship, even though he found meetings within the senate to be utterly insufferable. The constant squabbling and petty debates were tedious even on the best of days. But with the ongoing crisis in Gaul, both Italicus and Galerius had compelled the emperor to accept the consul’s chair, that he may be seen as the one leading

his people in crushing the traitors.

Something else he was being forced to make compromises on was his continued use of accusing members of the senate of treason, in order to procure their family fortunes. While Nymphidius insisted the work of rooting out any and all who would dare betray their emperor must go on, Tigellinus urged a measure of temperance in light of the current rebellion. A recent letter to the senate confirmed fears that patricians falling out of favor might become emboldened and defiant.

"Caesar," Consul Galerius said awkwardly, holding up a parchment. "We received this response from Marcus Vorenius Arius in Greece."

"What of him?" Nero asked. "He was convicted of treasonous slander and was ordered to take his own life."

"It's the reply he sent us," Galerius stated. He shifted from one foot to the other, not sure what he should say.

"Well, out with it, man!" the emperor snapped impatiently. "What does the letter say?"

"It says, *'If that insufferable twat wants me dead, he can try and kill me himself. I piss on Lucius Domitius, who is unworthy of the name Nero and a disgrace to the Julio-Claudian Dynasty'*."

Nero's face turned almost purple with rage, his eyes bulging. Not only had this pitiful excuse of a man defied him, but he'd dared call him by his birth name, a name which Nero immeasurably despised.

"Filthy, defiant traitor!" he screamed, his voice echoing off the walls of the chamber. *"I'll sail to Greece at once, cut off his head, shit on his corpse, and then fuck his wife in the ass while his children are forced to watch! And then I'll execute the lot of them as well…"*

His breath was suddenly short and his brow sweaty. As he had taken to wearing theatrical makeup constantly, this was starting to streak. His rage turned to embarrassment.

"Senators, forgive me, I am not well. I have not slept in days, and this rebellion in Gaul has upset me greatly. There are so many in the provinces who would seek to wound me."

"The rebellion now has a leader," Senator Nerva said, rising from his seat. "Servius Sulpicius Galba has apparently accepted Vindex's offer to stand as their leader. They intend to depose you and name him emperor."

"And for that they all must die," Nero hissed through his teeth. "I must beg your pardon and recuse myself from the senate for the day. I trust our

good consuls, Italicus and Galerius, will join me later at the palace. But for now, I must rest."

The members of the senate all stood as Nero quickly left the chamber, Tigellinus following close behind. The emperor was truly embarrassed by his outburst, as well as the harsh realization that he was starting to lose control of his empire.



It was not just Nero who noted this loss of control. Empress Statilia was once more concerned about her own safety and well-being. If the rebellion in Gaul was indeed spreading to other provinces, who knew what drastic measures Nero might take? As he was becoming less and less predictable, Statilia knew she had to deflect any and all attention away from herself. She remembered an old ring collecting dust within her wardrobe. After digging around for a few minutes, she found what she was looking for, and with a broad smile of triumph, she sought out young Sporus.

The unfortunate lad was lying on a lounge chair in one of the studies, reading some of Nero's poetry. It had been recommended he garner additional favor with the emperor by reciting some of his own verses back to him. A pair of maidservants sat on the floor nearby, listening to the young man read. All the while, he worked on maintaining what could pass for an effeminate voice.

"That sounds just wonderful," Statilia said, as she walked into the room. The maidservants immediately leapt to their feet, heads bowed. Young Sporus did the same.

"Your highness," he said meekly.

"Please," the empress said with a friendly smile, taking both of his hands. "There is no need for such formalities between us." Her smile faded for a moment as she curtly ordered the maidservants, "Leave us."

As soon as the door closed, Statilia sat beside Sporus.

"You are doing well in your readings," the empress said approvingly.

"Thank you, my lady," Sporus replied. "It was very kind of you to advise me. I think it will please the emperor greatly."

"Yes, I am certain it will. You know he has been under great stress lately, what with that beastly rebellion in Gaul. I think the dear man has forgotten about the Calends of April."

“Calends of April?” Sporus asked.

“Yes, we celebrate it every year,” Statilia replied. “It has always been our way of welcoming the spring, although I think he should celebrate with you this year.”

“But you are his wife.” Sporus tried to protest.

“Only in name, my dear,” the empress said. “It is you who he truly loves, and only a gift from you would have any meaning for him.”

“My poetry readings, you mean?”

“Yes,” Statilia nodded. “But I was also thinking of something else. Something that he can cast his eyes upon each day, and it will remind him of your love.”

“But my lady, I have nothing to give him,” the young man remarked with more than a little embarrassment. His eyes widened when Statilia handed him the ring. “My lady, it’s beautiful!”

“Do you recognize the design carved on the stone?”

“I do indeed! Thank you…” Sporus’ voice then trailed off for a moment. His next words betrayed his doubts. “Are you sure I should give this to him?”

“Absolutely,” the empress replied. “But under no circumstances are you to tell him where you got it. If my name is mentioned in any way it will lose all meaning, which will hurt both of us. It will also greatly hinder any chances I may have of helping you in the future.” There was a cold emphasis on the last sentence.

He had no way of knowing the empress’ motives behind her kindness towards him, but since his terrible mutilation, Statilia Messalina had been the only true friend poor Sporus had.

“Of course, my lady,” he said with a slow nod. “Let this be a symbol of my love for the emperor.”



Nero promptly returned to the palace, after which he drank a full pitcher of wine, while inhaling an unknown substance that caused him to gasp and the veins on his neck to pop out. He then collapsed on his bed, where he soundly slept for half an hour. But as quickly as he collapsed, he was awake and alert once more. His calm and contented demeanor had returned, and it seemed as if the entire embarrassing episode at the senate had never taken place.

The sun shone brightly in the western windows, and the emperor knew it had to be late afternoon. He remembered he had invited Consuls Italicus and Galerius to dine with him, which meant they would arrive at the palace shortly.

"Servants!" Nero shouted. "Ready my bath!"

After a full hour of being renewed by the rigors of the Roman bath, the emperor spent another hour being made ready by a score of slaves. His hair had to look perfect, makeup covering any sign of blemish upon his face. And at least twenty different formal togas were brought to him before he found one he liked. As it was a warm spring day, he decided to take a stroll near the Temple of Apollo on the palace grounds.

It was there Sporus found him. "My love," the young man said, walking quickly to him. He had taken great pains to make his voice sound believable, as a woman. In fact, with his effeminate appearance and dress, an outsider would never guess he had been born a man.

"What is it, my sweet?" Nero asked, placing a hand on his cheek, then kissing him gently on the lips.

"It is the Calends of April, and I wanted to present you with this gift." He held up an ornate ring of gold set with a carved gemstone.

"My dearest, it is wonderful!" the emperor said with enthusiasm, as Sporus placed it upon his finger. "I cannot quite make out the image engraved on the stone. What is it?"

"It is the god Hades, during the kidnapping of Proserpina," Sporus replied. "Do you like it?"

Nero jolted. While he kept his smile, his face tensed and his eyes showed abject fear.

Sporus smiled innocently at him, kissed him on the cheek, and promptly left.

As soon as his 'Poppaea' was gone, Nero let out a gasp of horror. "It cannot be," he whispered. "This can only portend disaster!"

His entourage of servants backed away, fearing another outburst.

Tigellinus, who had just been inspecting the praetorians on duty at the palace, saw his demeanor and quickly rushed over. "All you alright, sire?"

"Look at this," Nero said, his hand trembling. "It's Hades kidnapping Proserpina. My dear, sweet Poppaea gave this to me, innocent love that she is. Poor thing, little does she know that this foretells of my downfall."

The praetorian prefect raised an eyebrow in disbelief.

“Forgive me, Caesar,” Tigellinus said. “But do you mean to tell me, after showing such resolve in the face of growing rebellion in the west to say nothing of the betrayal by Senator Galba, a simple ring unnerves you so?”

“It is symbolic,” Nero said, holding out his hand, as if it were on fire. “A sign of the gods. I have failed them…somehow I lost their love and blessings. They intend to abandon me!”

“But I thought you were a god?” the prefect responded smoothly.

This caught Nero’s attention, and he quickly turned to face Tigellinus, a broad grin creasing his face.

“Of course,” the emperor replied, suddenly calm and showing great relief. “How could I be so stupid? Why, the greatest statue in all of Rome is not of Jupiter, Saturn, Juno, Diana, or Mars, but of me! I am the only god the people of Rome need.”

“And the armies of the divine Nero will soon put an end to this so-called revolution,” Tigellinus replied. “Even as we speak, General Verginius is on the march with a force of twenty thousand legionaries, and a similar number of auxiliaries. After you left the senate, a dispatch arrived from the Rhine. This little crisis will be over soon enough.”

“And as one legionary is worth any ten barbarians, the fact that Vindex has a hundred thousand traitors in his ranks is of little concern,” Italicus added, as he and Galerius joined them.

“Consuls, I welcome you,” Nero said, with a bow. He quickly slipped the ring on one of his fingers and pretended as if nothing had happened.

“Once a few of their comrades take gladii to the guts, the rest will disperse,” Galerius remarked. “By the Calends of June, we will no doubt be celebrating yet another great victory, Caesar.”

Having been reassured by both Tigellinus and the consuls, Nero was brimming with confidence once more. Their dinner turned into a five-hour banquet, with the emperor finally falling into a drunken slumber around midnight. Nearly eight hundred miles to the north, the imperial army made ready to march on the rebels.



The rallying of Verginius’ army had transpired surprisingly quickly. It took nearly two weeks for all of the vexilations from the legions of Lower Germania to rally with the two legions from Mogontiacum. As he predicted,

Fonteius Capito was enraged by his fellow governor's demand that half his legionaries be detached from the Rhine and placed under Verginius' command. Though, as expected, Capito knew he had little choice and he begrudgingly consented.

Marching at a rather rapid pace on the paved roads that ran north to south along the River Rhine, Verginius' sizeable force of twenty thousand legionaries, with an added fifteen to twenty thousand auxiliaries, advanced into Gaul. When they were about fifty miles northeast of Vindonissa they turned southwest to the road that ran through the Belfort Gap, which would lead them to Vesontio, the first major city in Roman Gaul. It was now late April, and while the spring rains left a chill in the air during the early mornings, the afternoons were mildly warm and pleasant.

"Vindex has laid siege to Lugdunum," a scout reported, as the vast column continued its long trek. "They appear to have plenty of ladders, but we could not see any siege engines. Nor were any towers being built."

Verginius, along with Claudius and their senior staff officers, rode at the head of their massive army, just behind the vanguard of a single cohort of legionaries. The still afternoon air was accented by the chirping of birds and the rhythmic cadence of thousands of hobnailed sandals marching on the stone road.

"His 'army' is nothing but a barbaric mob," General Claudius mocked. "I highly doubt they intend to launch a direct assault upon the city."

"I agree," Verginius nodded. "The ladders are likely there only to be used as a last resort. He has few, if any, professional soldiers in his ranks. And I doubt they have the necessary engineers to build siege towers or catapults in the first place. Clearly, Galba's support for this rebellion is only nominal, as he has committed no troops of his own."

"Yes," Claudius agreed. "He appears to be little more than a figurehead to rally behind. So what say you, sir? Shall we advance on Lugdunum and scatter this mob?"

"We'll reach Vesontio long before Lugdunum," Verginius mused. "It is the ancestral capital of the Sequani, who have declared for Vindex."

"Over a hundred years ago, they were Julius Caesar's allies," Claudius added. "But then they betrayed him and sided with that rogue, Vercingetorix."

"And we all know how that worked out for them!" one of the staff tribunes laughed.

“I think we shall counter Vindex’s siege with one of our own,” Verginius remarked, “and, thereby, make him come to us.”

Though he maintained a confident and self-assured demeanor, Verginius was beginning to have doubts about their pending conflict against Julius Vindex. It all began when the rumors regarding Galba’s support for the rebels was confirmed. Galba’s noble lineage stretched back further than most of the senate, and far surpassed that of Nero. If a man of such deep-seeded nobility was supporting a revolt against the emperor, perhaps blind allegiance to Nero was not necessarily allegiance to Rome.

Verginius kept such thoughts private for the time being. However, he decided he would do everything possible to try and come to a diplomatic agreement with Vindex, thereby avoiding any unnecessary bloodshed. Only after meeting Vindex could he determine which faction was truly on the side of Rome.



As the city of Lugdunum came into view, Julius Vindex let out a sigh of frustration. It was, after all, the capital of his own province, and the governor’s palace was his home. The city gates were now shut, and he could only imagine what may have become of his household staff and servants. He had wisely taken his wife and children to Vienne, so at least if the nobles of Lugdunum turned against him, his family could not be used as hostages.

The force personally led by Vindex had left Vienne just a day prior. There were two roads that led to Lugdunum, one to the east of the River Rhodanus, the other to the west. Vindex had elected to take the eastern road, as the surrounding region was flatter and easier to traverse. Just two miles south of the city, the Rhodanus wound its way gradually to the northeast. Here it forked into another river, the Arar, which continued northward. To the east, near a pair of crossroads, was a large open plain.

“We’ll make camp here,” he ordered Bradan. “Once the rest of the army arrives, they can occupy the west and the north. Let us hope the citizens of Lugdunum recognize their folly and open the doors of the city to their governor.”

Chapter VI: First Blood

Vesontio, Gaul
April 68 A.D.



Legionaries unleashing a javelin volley
(Photo © Cezary Wyszynski)

Vesontio was a Gallic city of approximately twenty thousand inhabitants. Julius Caesar had noted its strategic positioning, as it was surrounded on three sides by the Dubis River. The remaining landlocked approach was a narrow isthmus, consisting of a large hill with lengthy ridges branching out along the river. The entire region was a patchwork of farm fields, broken up by large stands of forest. The Alpes Mountains were to the immediate south. Their steep faces creating yet another natural barrier.

It was also in an extremely wet portion of Gaul, with rains expected every third day throughout most of the year. A near-continuous, light shower sprinkled off the helmets and packs of the vast column of marching legionaries. The large groves of trees lining the main road to the city offered some additional protection from the elements; though for the most part, soldiers kept their cloaks wrapped tight around them as they tried in vain to keep dry.

Because the main road was on the north side of the river, and the only landlocked approach was to the south, Verginius' army had to march around

the northern districts of the city, in full view of citizens and defenders manning the wall just across the river. About half a mile west were the main crossroads and the bridge that allowed access south of the river. Verginius sent the indigenous cavalry from Legio IV and Legio XXII ahead to scout the city and terrain. Engineers and surveyors followed immediately behind them to lay out the proposed camps for the army. The general himself soon followed with his entourage, knowing it would take the better part of a day for all to cross along the narrow bridge.

"The gates are closed, sir," a scout reported, as Verginius rode the ridge, eyes scanning the city below. "The walls are also manned with archers."

"They are fools if they think they can hold against us," Claudius scoffed. "We'll send a battering ram against the gates, assail the walls with siege ladders, and overwhelm them in a matter of hours. The walls aren't even that high, twenty feet at most."

"We will avoid a direct assault," Verginius corrected.

His officers stared at him in disbelief.

"This place is nearly impossible to lay an effective siege to," Claudius protested. "We don't have the resources to blockade the river, so it won't be possible to starve them out."

"There is only one feasible way into Vesontio," Verginius replied. "Their garrison may be small and only modestly equipped, but they can mass every fighting man they have against the ramparts. Any assault will prove costly, which will make our soldiers that much harder to control. It will prove difficult to tell the legions not to burn the city to the ground, while raping and murdering everyone within. If they have to watch their friends be killed or maimed, that is exactly what they will do."

It was a difficult thing for the governor-general to admit that he feared losing control of his own army. Legionaries were without a doubt the best drilled and disciplined soldiers in the entire world; however, even the greatest of generals had trouble containing their wrath once it was fully unleashed.

"Piss on them," his chief tribune retorted. "Let the army burn this damned place. It will strike the appropriate chord of fear with anyone else who wishes to rebel."

"Were we battling a barbarian mob, I would agree," Verginius said. "But regardless of their less-than-civilized ancestry, these people have been Roman citizens for a hundred years. The instigators will be executed, fear not, but we will not slaughter the entire populace unless we have to."

“If I didn’t know better, I would surmise that you are trying to win this war bloodlessly,” Claudius stated.

“I would rather we cowed our enemies back into submission,” Verginius confessed. “Let us not forget, Vindex is who we are after. Laying siege to Vesontio is nothing more than a means of drawing him out. That we cannot seal off the entire city will work to our advantage. In fact, I would say that the citizens of Vesontio declaring for the rebellion is actually a stroke of luck.”

“How so?” his chief tribune asked.

“Vindex is currently laying siege to his own capital of Lugdunum,” the commanding legate explained. “Once he knows we are here, he will have no choice but to send the majority of his army to face us. I don’t doubt he’ll leave a residual force to continue the blockade of Lugdunum, but it won’t matter.”

“What makes you think he’ll come to us?” Claudius asked.

“Because Vesontio is the capital of his Sequani allies,” Verginius explained. “If he does not send them aid, they will likely abandon his cause. We will also make certain their lookouts know our strength. Vindex knows the imperial army and what it is capable of. He understands that the defensive ramparts of Vesontio won’t last a day, should we elect to mount an assault. He has no choice but to face us in open battle which, honestly, I think is what he wants.” He then asked one of his staff officers, “How far is Lugdunum from here?”

“About a hundred and forty miles, give or take,” the tribune replied.

Verginius nodded. “On paved roads, even with the rain, Vindex can make it here within a week to ten days. There are two possible roads he can take from Lugdunum, though both converge about ten miles to the west of here. I want the detachments from Legio V and Legio XVI to screen that area. We’ll also send cavalry patrols down each road to let us know when Vindex is within fifty miles.”



Word of the siege of Vesontio reached Vindex in just a few days, by a frantic messenger arriving at Lugdunum by river barge. The large size of the imperial army became quickly known within the rebel camp, unnerving many of Vindex’s soldiers.

“Has Verginius lost his mind?” Vindex swore, after he listened to the

messenger's feverish pleas. "If these reports are correct, that damned fool left a substantial portion of the Rhine frontier unmanned."

"Most likely his army is made up of vexilations from each legion," Bradan conjectured. "Verginius may be a simple man, and not very imaginative, but he's no fool. If he allowed so much as a single barbarian raid upon Roman lands due to his overzealousness, Nero would have his head."

Vindex nodded. "If we march up to meet him, it will mean leaving a sizeable force here to contain Lugdunum," he remarked. "Which means, at most, I can send about eighty thousand to Vesontio."

"An imposing number," Bradan observed. "And yet, that will only give us a two-to-one numerical advantage at best. Poor odds when one is sending lightly-equipped militia against fully armored legionaries."

Though he would not say so openly, Vindex knew he'd underestimated what the imperial army would send into Gaul. He had anticipated perhaps two legions' worth of soldiers. Instead, Verginius had uprooted forty thousand men from the frontier. Even if Nero did not take the rebellion seriously, the governor-general of Upper Germania certainly did. Vindex now feared he may have underestimated Verginius' loyalty to Nero, as well as his military pragmatism.

"No," he corrected himself, shaking his head, finding his resolve once more. "This is not lost. Verginius may be marching towards us with the better part of the Rhine army, but I refuse to believe his fealty to that despot in Rome is that strong. I will take our army and head north to meet him. But I will only fight him if I have no other option. I still believe that Verginius can be reasoned with. Take heart, my friend. It may seem like I am leading our men towards disaster. But if all goes well, we will add forty thousand imperial soldiers to our ranks!"



Another week passed, and still the gates to Vesontio remained shut. Legionaries bickered amongst each other, speculating as to why they had not yet assaulted the walls. Sharp words, along with a few select blows from the vine sticks of their centurions, reminded them it was not the place of legionaries to speculate as to the 'why' of anything. Soon, however, General Verginius' patience paid off.

"Vindex's army approaches from the southwest," a scout reported. "They

have made camp near the village of Grozon."

"As I expected," the general said, slapping his hand down on the table. "We'll bring in our vexilations at the crossroads and make ready to face them south of the bridge."

"How large would you say his army is?" General Claudius asked the scout.

"It's hard to say, sir," the man replied. "We only caught sight of them at night, after they established their camp. But if the enemy really do have a hundred thousand men under arms, then he's only brought a section of that with him."

"Think he would have left most of his army at Lugdunum?" Claudius asked Verginius.

"I doubt it," the general replied. "He's probably left a residual force, but he will have brought most of his army with him. This tells me the size of his force was greatly exaggerated, or many of them deserted once they saw there would be real fighting ahead."

It would be another two days before Vindex reached the main crossroads ten miles east of Vesontio. All the while, imperial scouts rode just out of reach of his column, gathering intelligence for General Verginius. By the time the rebels encamped just west of the city, it had been ascertained that Vindex had no more than thirty thousand men with him. He was not only ill-equipped and at a tactical terrain disadvantage, he was outnumbered as well.

That evening the commanding legates, along with their chief tribunes and master centurions, stood atop the ridge from which they could see the whole of the rebel forces.

"There is no way Vindex means to fight," Verginius emphasized. "Not with *that* for an army."

"I'm curious to know what his negotiating terms will be," Claudius said, with a scoffing grin.

"It looks like you'll get to find out soon enough, sir," a tribune said, nodding his head towards the road below, where a line rider was seen crossing the bridge.

Within minutes, the rider reached the Rhine army's encampment, carrying a flag of truce.

"General Vindex requests parlay," the messenger explained. "He does not wish to see his people's blood spilled any more than you do."

“There is nothing to negotiate,” Claudius retorted. “Julius Vindex has committed treason, and he will answer for it. His army is to disperse at once, but not before they hand him over to us for trial.”

“Hold, friend,” Verginius said, placing a hand on the legate’s shoulder. He then spoke to the messenger. “Tell Vindex I will meet with him, alone, in the glade just east of the city. He has my word as a fellow Roman officer, he will be allowed to pass by my army’s camp unharmed.”

The messenger nodded and remounted his horse.

Claudius looked aghast. “You mean to parlay with the damned traitor after all,” he said, his voice rising.

“If I can compel him to willingly surrender, we can save a lot of lives,” Verginius retorted. “I’ll promise to recommend he and his family go into exile, if he surrenders unconditionally. He has to know his life is forfeit otherwise. These are Roman citizens and provincials, general. They have grievances, many of them legitimate.”

“That may be so, but it is not our place to act as legislators in this matter, any more than it was for them to take up arms in rebellion!”

Though he was arguing against him, Verginius noted this was Claudius’ first acknowledgement of any legitimacy regarding the cause of the rebellion.

“Agreed,” Verginius acknowledged. “And while they have taken up arms, no cities have been sacked, no innocent lives lost. I’ll not attack these people unless they give me no other option.”

Claudius’ face was red with anger, but he said no more and simply nodded. Though a fellow senator and legate, he was still subordinate to Verginius, who bore both the authority and the responsibility for what would transpire.

“You’ve been right so far, sir,” the legate acknowledged. “I hope with whatever transpires between you and Vindex, tonight we put this rebellion to an end.”



It was late in the day when Julius Vindex crossed over the bridge and rode just beneath the ridge, paralleling the Roman army’s encampment. True to his word, Verginius had withdrawn all pickets, and the only imperial soldiers Vindex could see were the occasional sentries atop the palisades. Just beyond the boundaries of the camp and to his left, with the city of Vesontio

behind him, he spotted the open glade. On the far side, alone, was General Verginius Rufus.

There was an awkward silence, as the opposing commanders rode slowly towards each other. Vindex, though leading an army of Gallic militia, was dressed as a Roman general. His crested helmet, polished muscle cuirass, and deep red cloak matched the style worn by Verginius. Approximately twenty paces apart, each man brought his horse to a halt and slowly dismounted.

"I think," Vindex said slowly, "that we should each lay down our weapons, before we parlay."

"We are both here under a flag of truce," Verginius replied. "Our honor as Roman patricians should alleviate any fears of treachery. However, if it will put your mind at ease, I will disarm." He then unstrapped his sword baldric and hung his weapon off the pommel on his horse's saddle

Vindex followed suit, and the two men stepped towards each other, both removing their helmets.

"You know why I have come," Vindex said. "And you also know why I have raised the banner of revolution."

"I understand that you have raised the banner of treason against the empire," Verginius calmly replied.

"No," Vindex said, with a shake of his head. "I do not rebel against Rome but against the emperor."

"The emperor *is* Rome," the Rhine commander retorted. "All of us swore an oath to serve Emperor Nero. You, sir, have broken that oath, and thereby forfeited your life. However, I may be able to save it, if you will surrender immediately and without conditions."

"I am aware of what I may have forfeited in the eyes of the monster," Vindex quickly stated. "I also know that you are sympathetic, or at least intrigued, by my motives. Otherwise, you never would have agreed to this meeting. You have me outnumbered and out-armed. You could have easily unleashed your legions upon me and been done with it, but you didn't."

"Perhaps I do not wish to see so many of our countrymen bleed for no reason," Verginius countered.

"Perhaps," the rebel commander admitted. He smiled. "I do not think that is the case, though. You and I both know that Nero will never agree to allow me and my family to live in exile. His predecessor, the divine Claudius, may have been willing to show clemency to his enemies, but Nero is devoid of any sense of mercy."

“Then what do you hope to gain from this meeting?” Verginius asked. “You know you are finished. You cannot win, and you know the emperor will not spare your life. So what is it you want from me?”

“An ally,” Vindex said plainly. “Surely your province has felt the financial burdens of Nero’s latest round of oppressive taxation, to say nothing of his looting from the temples during the past year. The emperor is losing his grip over the provinces. They are bitter about paying for Rome’s rebuilding and Nero’s ostentatious vanity projects. And resentment aside, it is bankrupting the empire. You *know* this, and you understand the people have grievances that must be addressed. Otherwise, you never would have agreed to meet with me.”

“You presume much,” Verginius said, though his voice lacked conviction. He thought for a moment before adding, “What is it you propose? That we unite our forces and march on Rome?”

“That is exactly what I am proposing,” Vindex stated with emphasis. “And once we are rid of Nero, we must decide who is worthiest of taking the throne. Unlike the praetorians, who were able to murder Caligula and name his uncle, Claudius, emperor, Nero has no family left. If we do not present Rome with an heir, there will be anarchy and civil war. We need a candidate from one of the old families, one the people will unite behind.”

“You speak of Servius Galba,” Verginius noted. “After all, he is supporting your little venture.”

“He is one possibility,” Vindex acknowledged. “The people will soon know, if they don’t already, that Nero has lost the support of one of our oldest and noblest families.” He then shrugged and gave his adversary another scenario. “But if Galba will not offer to become Caesar, then perhaps you can.”

Verginius swallowed hard while contemplating his answer. He had quietly suspected what Vindex would propose, though the very idea was overwhelming. He knew what the rebel leader said was true, and he was wise enough to realize that the status quo could not continue for much longer. Verginius’ army could easily crush Vindex’s, but the cracks within the pillars of support for Nero would only continue to grow. And if open rebellion had already spread from Gaul to Hispania, Germania was most likely next.

“I’m no traitor,” he said at last. “My loyalty is to *Rome*.” His emphasis on this last word told Vindex that his presumptions were at least partially correct.

“As is mine,” Vindex said earnestly. “Let us not spill the blood of our brother Romans, but let us march together on the right side of history and usher in a new age for the empire!”

“Bring your army to Vesontio,” Verginius said, his composure much calmer than Vindex’s. “Have them march into the city and reassure the populace we mean them no harm. From there, we will decide the fate of our empire.”

Vindex gave a broad grin and donned his helmet once more. He mounted his horse, gave a salute to Verginius, and rode with all haste back towards the bridge.

It would prove to be Vindex’s misfortune that he returned to his army much faster than Verginius. The commanding general of the Rhine army had much to ponder. He stopped in a small stand of trees to sit and think about how he should proceed. He had just implicitly given his support to the very people he had been sent to destroy. His soldiers would, of course, be livid, for they had been craving battle ever since they left Mogontiacum. Fortunately, the legionaries were still fiercely loyal to Verginius, and though there would be many vocal complaints, and perhaps a few disciplinary lashings, the legions as a whole would respect his decision.

Lucius Verginius Rufus realized unless he tread very cautiously, he, too, would be implicated for treason. Diplomacy and careful negotiations would be even more important than the might of his army…or so it would have been, had his brief delay not unraveled everything.



“The enemy are advancing, sir!” a cavalry trooper shouted as he rode up to General Claudius.

“Then we shall meet them,” the legate replied. Verginius had yet to return, and Claudius knew he had to act soon, lest the rebel army gain the initiative. He turned to his cornicen. “Sound the call to arms! Make ready the legions!”

As Verginius had decided to tell no one about his intentions until after he met with Vindex, Claudius and the other officers could only assume the talks had failed.

“They’re not coming at us,” a centurion noted. “It looks as if they intend to occupy the city.”

“We’ll slaughter the lot of them, before they even reach the gates,” the legate growled.

With the possibility of battle imminent, both legionary and auxiliary trooper alike had remained in their armor with their weapons close by, even as they sat down for supper. The unmistakable sound of the call to arms from the cornicens sent forty thousand men into a frenzy of activity. Most of the auxiliaries rushed out of the western gate of the camp with the intent of cutting off the enemy’s avenue of escape via the bridge. Legionaries hurried through either the eastern or northern entrances, from which they would attack the rebels from both the front and flank. The woods, as well as the ridgeline, gave them much concealment. The only thing that could have betrayed their intentions to the enemy was the sounding of the cornicens’ horns.

Verginius heard the rapid blasts from the trumpeters in the distance. He recognized the urgent call for the legions to make ready for battle, and he immediately panicked. He suddenly realized the folly of his delay. Vindex was bringing his men forward. With no orders to tell them otherwise, the Rhine army would perceive this as a threat and act accordingly. The commanding general spurred his horse into a full gallop, clods of mud kicking up in his wake as he raced back to his army. By the time he rode through the eastern entrance to the camp, General Claudius had committed the army to battle. His own Legio IV, Macedonia, was already down the hill, looking to cut off Vindex’s army on the right.



While Verginius knew the meaning of the trumpet calls, neither Julius Vindex nor anyone in his army understood what it meant. It could have been anything from an officers’ call to an order to change the guard. Still, the frenzy of the blasts had been a little unnerving, as his army hurriedly crossed the bridge and made for the Vesontio gates, Vindex knew the only way out was straight ahead.

He rode at the head of his force, though what he could not see were the thousands of legionaries who were now rushing through the woods off to his right, thereby flanking his army. As they reached the open plain with the gates less than a half mile away, he spotted the painted shields and gleaming

armor of the imperial legions. A series of trumpet blasts followed, and the rebel leader could see cohorts of soldiers, who had once been in column, quickly reforming into battle lines.

Panicked shouts were echoed down his enormous march column, as swarms of auxilia infantry cohorts charged into their rear flank. The Gallic militias were caught completely unawares, and had little to no time to react before many of their friends were savagely cut down by auxilia stabbing spears and gladii. A handful of those still closest to the bridge managed to flee back across before an entire cohort of auxiliaries barred the passage with a wall of shields and spears. Screams were heard from the city of Vesontio, as onlookers on the walls witnessed what was quickly turning into a slaughter.

Vindex gritted his teeth as the legionaries to his front, now in battle lines of four to six ranks, advanced quickly towards the head of his column. His own men, without waiting for orders, made ready to defend themselves, all the while shouting a host of curses and lamentations for being betrayed. Knowing that they were now completely cut off, they frantically tried to form into battle lines of their own.

“Get behind us, sir!” one of his subordinate captains shouted.

Vindex was transfixed on the onrushing wall of armored legionaries, and could only shake his head in dismay. Whether Verginius had betrayed him or simply lost control of his legions, it mattered not.

Salvos of javelins cut large swaths through the ranks of the rebel army. The surviving fighters, unskilled and inexperienced in actual combat, were broken even before the wall of legionaries smashed into them. Shields smashed, while gladii stabbed without mercy. Bloodied corpses and mangled wounded soon littered the field.

As the melee unfolded, an even larger force of legionaries appeared from the mass of trees on their right. A further unleashing of thousands of javelins wrought even greater destruction upon Vindex’s wavering army. Men screamed in terror and agony, as both javelin and gladius bit into them like the teeth of a wild beast. Those who could flee did so. The remainder simply stood their ground, hoping they could take some of the perfidious imperial soldiers with them before they perished.



“Gods damn it, Claudius!” Verginius shouted, as he raced up to his subordinate.

“Ah, general,” the legate said with a casual nod, ignoring his commander’s outburst. “The rebels thought they’d be clever and make a run for the city, while you were meeting with their leader. We feared they might have played you false and taken you prisoner. As you can see, their treachery has undone them.”

Verginius said nothing. It was his own fault for not at least including Claudius in his plans. With the enemy army making a run for the city, and having been left with no subsequent orders, the legate had rightly acted on his own. And as he watched his forces massacre those of Julius Vindex, any private thoughts Verginius may have had about sympathizing with the rebellion were quickly dashed.

“Sir, the enemy army is on the run,” one of the staff tribunes said, as he rode up to his commanding general. “We were unable to completely close the gap to the west, and most of the rebels are fleeing.

“Dispatch two wings of legionary cavalry and three regiments of auxilia horse to conduct the pursuit,” Verginius said, knowing there were no other options now. He had to be the loyal destroyer of the traitorous rebellion.

“And what of the city itself?” the tribune asked. “Many of the rebels are fleeing for its perceived safety with our soldiers in pursuit. Are they to spare Vesontio?”

Verginius hated himself for the next orders he gave, but he knew there was nothing for it. His legionaries had bloodied their blades in anger and would now wish to unleash their hatred upon the rebellious city. Were he to deny them, he risked upsetting the good order and discipline of the thousands of soldiers who not only felt the rebellious populace needed to be punished, but that they should reap the rewards of plundering the wealthy city.

“No,” the commanding general said, fighting hard against the tears of sorrow and remorse that threatened to expose him. “The legions will sack the city, taking what they will in plunder and spoils.”



Vindex practically fell from his horse, his rage and distress overcoming him as he dropped to his knees and cried out in anguish. Whether it was

treachery or simply carelessness, all he had fought for was now lost. Months of preparations, the cultivating of allies, formation of an army and, finally, what had seemed to be the diplomatic victory of bringing the Rhine legions into the fold, were now undone.

He tried to slow his breathing, while unbuckling the straps of his armor. He gave a short, mirthless laugh. In the distance, he could still hear the din of battle, as well as the additional screams of terror from within Vesontio.

“This is not over,” he said quietly, his eyes staring into the moonlight that glared off the river. The peaceful and rather serene view contrasted sharply with the scene of death from which he had just fled. He shuddered to think of the fate that awaited the poor citizens of Vesontio. They had heeded the call to revolution and were now paying the price in brutality, rape, and pillage.

“But we all had to pay the ultimate price for liberty,” Vindex spoke, as he slowly got to his feet. He picked up his scabbarded spatha and looked towards the moonlight reflecting off the water. “Nero’s reign of terror grows short, and from the ashes of this great calamity will arise a new beginning. But for you, Julius Vindex, your role in this great tragedy is over.”

He unsheathed his weapon, tossing the scabbard away. Gazing up at the full moon, he closed his eyes, and drove the spatha into his chest. The point slipped easily between two of his ribs, as he thrust with the last of his determined strength. With a final gasp, he fell onto his back. His view of the moon fading, as peaceful darkness overtook him.



For Verginius, his victory filled him with mournful regret rather than triumph. The morning following the battle, he somberly walked the field littered with corpses. The pathetic groans of agony from thousands of badly wounded combatants reverberated in a chorus of pain. The commanding general did not enter the city itself, for he did not wish to see the destruction his forces had wrought. They had been ordered not to burn the city; however, the citizens had been shown little mercy. Most of the women had been raped, with many beaten or killed, regardless of age or sex. Legionaries were seen leaving the city, their packs filled with plundered valuables. A number of slaves from within Vesontio had been stolen from their masters by the rampaging soldiers.

Claudius Zeno soon joined his commander. Even the general who had

ordered the legions into battle, and had been rather nonchalant as they slaughtered the rebels and sacked Vesontio, was moved by the scene of death.

"What have we done?" Verginius asked, refusing to hide his sadness any longer.

"You have won a great victory, general," the legate replied.

Verginius turned to face him and immediately understood what was meant.

"The rebellion has been crushed, and for all we know, Julius Vindex is probably dead. Rome is safe once more, and it is because of you."

Claudius' words rang true to the commanding general, for whether he had given the order for the legions to attack or not, he had to bear full responsibility for his army's actions. It was all strangely perverse to him, though what transpired next went beyond the realm of the surreal.

"Victory is yours, general!" a soldier shouted.

Verginius turned to see a host of his legionaries walking towards him. Many still had their blood-soaked weapons drawn. All were filthy, exhausted, and covered in the sweat and blood of their brutal exertions.

"Rome has found her true protector!" another man shouted, raising his gladius in the air.

"The men will follow you anywhere, sir," one of the legates from the Lower Germania detachments emphasized. "They know it is you who protects the empire, not Nero!"

"Let us follow you, sir, *as emperor!*" a legionary shouted.

This was met with a series of boisterous affirmations from the growing assembly of his soldiers.

"Give us the word, sir, and we will march on Rome and proclaim you Caesar!"

"No!" the general snapped, shaking his head quickly. "We did not crush one rebellion only to become traitors ourselves. We serve Rome, not our own selfish desires. Cease in this madness at once!" While Verginius knew he was well-respected by the men of his legions, he never once suspected they would view him as a more worthy emperor than the man whom they swore their oaths to. Throughout the entire army, soldiers in the ranks were speaking openly about how they would follow Verginius, and that it was he who should rule Rome.

“The empire could have been yours, sir,” Claudius said, later that evening.

“I’m no usurper,” Verginius emphasized. “Strange, that our men were eager to put down the rebellion with the sword, yet before they’d even sheathed their bloody weapons, they began to chant of insurrection themselves. I take it you also suspect Nero’s hold on the empire is slipping.”

“The Gauls will keep quiet now,” his legate speculated. “Only a very small number of them rebelled in the first place. It all depends on what Galba does. Of course, once he hears about how we crushed Vindex, he may despair and end his own life.”

“Even so, it won’t be long before another potential usurper rises up,” Verginius reasoned. “Not much we can do about it for now, though.”

“With this rebellion crushed, shall we make the army ready to march back to the Rhine?” Claudius asked. “I think we’ve worn out our welcome with the people of Vesontio.”

“No,” Verginius said. “We’ll relocate to the crossroads, ten miles east. Have the army begin fortifications and plan for an extended stay in Gaul.”

“What do you intend to do, sir?” a legate asked.

“To serve Rome,” Verginius responded evasively. Knowing this would not suffice, he added, “We need to remain here, so that we might know the intentions of the other provinces within the western empire.”

“And what of Galba?” Claudius asked.

“We will wait and see what he does,” the governor-general replied.

Claudius subtly nodded in understanding, as he took a long pull off his wine. The rebellion of Julius Vindex may have been over, but both legates suspected that the great game itself had only just begun.

Chapter VII: The Artorian Legacy

Ariminum, Northeast Italia
1 May 68 A.D.
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While all of Rome was in a state of turmoil waiting for news from the war in Gaul, for Lucius Artorius Magnus the days were filled with administrative tedium. He had reluctantly travelled to Ariminum after a very short leave in Ostia where, unsurprisingly, he won the seat as governor of the city. The outgoing governor, who held the position for over ten years, had personally recommended Lucius, as he had been close friends with Lucius' father, Metellus.

Word had not yet reached Ariminum, nor Rome for that matter, about Vindex's defeat and suicide. As such, Lucius found himself lamenting his being compelled to leave the legions on the Rhine.

"It has long been the duty of the Artorians to serve Rome in battle," he explained to his wife, Laura, who joined him in his study one evening. "My father served in the ranks, as did his father, and his father before him. By hades, my little brother has been given the chance to fight for Rome!"

Laura noticed the crumpled parchment upon his desk and realized it was the source of his frustration. She walked over to her husband and placed an arm around his shoulders.

"I should be grateful," Lucius said, more so to convince himself than his wife. "To be governor of such a prosperous city as Ariminum at my age is certainly uncommon, especially as I am only a second generation equestrian. I wasn't even born into the equites, but was a boy of nine when my father retired from the legions. It was his rank and exceptional service that won our family its place among the equites."

"Your father is an honorable man, and a brave one," Laura remarked.

Lucius could only nod. He had feared greatly for both his parents, when word of the rebellion in Britannia, seven years prior, reached him. Though he had been raised in Aqua Sulis, his parents later settled in Colchester, which had served as a community for veterans. When Boudicca's army sacked the city, the old soldiers had made a brave stand, yet, in the end they were

overwhelmed. The barbarians killed everyone, sparing neither sex nor age. Lucius would never know just how many family friends perished during that hellish time. His parents, Metellus and Marcia, had had the foresight to flee the settlement well ahead of Boudicca's army of rampaging barbarians. After a harrowing three-week trek through the dense woods and untamed lands, they had found the imperial army under Suetonius Paulinus. Metellus had offered his sword to the governor-general, and was later praised once more for his extreme valor when Paulinus' army finally crushed the barbarian horde.

Laura knew the stories well, for her father had been both friend and admirer of Metellus Artorius Posthumous, and had offered his only daughter to the old soldier's unwed eldest son. It was Metellus' reputation that further aided Lucius in his run for councilman in Ariminum, and once again when he stood for mayor, following his return from compulsory service as a military tribune.

"You are also an honorable man, my love," Laura said, as she kissed him on top of his head and rubbed his tense shoulders. "There is much to be said for what you have already accomplished."

Lucius reached up and clutched her hand, stroking it gently with his thumb. "Death or Glory seems to be the unofficial dictum of the Artorians," he observed. "One of my grandfathers was killed in Teutoburger Wald when he was only nineteen. Several of the survivors praised him for saving their lives, and so his spirit lived on through them. That was his legacy. But what of me? Will any remember the name Lucius Artorius Magnus, or will the legacy that I leave for our children be settling petty land disputes and vetoing frivolous lawsuits?"

"You expect too much of yourself," Laura said, consolingly. "This is a great opportunity for you and for the family." She paused and smiled. "And besides, you cannot exactly father any children when you're running off with the legions…at least not with me."

This got a much-needed laugh from Lucius. He turned and stood, wrapping his arms around his wife, and kissed her passionately. "You know you are the only woman I will ever have children with," he sighed. "I just realized it's been almost ten years since I last saw my little brother. I often wonder how he's doing, if he's even still alive. I hear many terrible stories about the war in Judea. Gaius' legion, the Tenth Fretensis, suffered some terrible losses at the sieges of Jotapata and Gamala. But since I am not there

to protect him, I can only offer my prayers to the gods that he will be kept safe."

As Lucius lay his head on his wife's shoulder, Laura kissed him gently once more. She had never met her brother-in-law, though with as much as her husband talked about him, it was as if she'd known him all his life. And while Lucius may have harbored certain feelings of envy towards Gaius, these were far surpassed by the love he had for him. Though only a year separated the two in age, from the time they were little Lucius had always felt responsible for protecting Gaius. Some of the ill feelings he'd had over the years, since Gaius departed for the legions, stemmed from the constant reminder that he was no longer there to watch over his younger brother.



Thousands of miles to the east, the rhythmic pounding of legionary sandals thumped along the dirt road that led towards the bridge crossing of the River Jordan. They approached from the east, having recently been sent by Vespasian into the neighboring Kingdom of Idumea. It had amounted to little more than a minor incursion, as the Idumeans quickly sued for terms with Rome, rather than face the terrifying onslaught that had devastated much of Judea and Galilee over the past two years.

These particular soldiers were from the Fifth Cohort of General Trajan's Legio X, *Fretensis*. Among them was an optio named Gaius Artorius Armiger. The younger brother of Lucius Artorius Magnus, Gaius had remained entangled in the savage war that had engulfed Judea for the past two years. Twenty-six years of age, he was a veteran of both the Jewish and Armenian wars, and a highly experienced soldier and leader. As optio, he was second-in-command of an eighty man century of legionaries, under the command of his friend and longtime mentor, Centurion Claudius Nicanor.

Their latest encounter had been less of a battle and more of an unholy slaughter of nearly twenty thousand rebel sympathizers. These people had fled the nearby towns and villages, becoming trapped between Trajan's division and the swollen river. Many drowned in the deceptively strong currents. Those unwilling to chance the river were mercilessly cut to pieces. Theirs had thus far been the only military actions for the eastern armies since the ending of the winter rains and the coming of spring.

With the Idumeans cowed into submission, and the pockets of resistance

now brutally crushed, this ended any possible trade routes the rebels could hope to use to the east of Jerusalem. And with northern Galilee and the western coastline all under imperial control, while rival zealots controlled the south, the noose was beginning to tighten around the stalwart holdouts in the Jewish Holy City.

"Cohort!"

"Century!"

"Halt!"

An imperial courier had just come over the bridge with a message to the cohort's commander, a centurion pilus prior named Galeo.

"We're to link up with the rest of the legion near Jericho," Galeo told his assembled centurions, after reading the dispatch.

"Does Vespasian intend to attack Jerusalem?" Centurion Nicanor asked.

"No," Galeo replied. "It would appear the various rebel factions are now embroiled in an extremely bitter civil war. General Vespasian has ordered a pause in all military operations, with the exception of putting down any resistance in otherwise pacified districts."

"Let the stupid fuckers kill each other off," another centurion chuckled. "We lay waste to their land, burn their cities, rape their women, enslave their children, and yet they still insist on fighting each other. Poor dumb bastards."

"Makes our job that much easier," Galeo shrugged. He then added with a trace of gloom, "Not that any of this has been easy."

The prior campaign season had been a severe test of his mettle, as well as that of all his fellow soldiers in the Tenth Legion. Indeed, the entire imperial army in the east had suffered greatly, as every significant victory seemed to come at a terrible cost. Brutal sieges of rebel strongholds, such as Jotapata and Gamala, had been severe, claiming a brutal toll in dead and wounded. Every unit was now well under strength, with Nicanor and Gaius' own century consisting of perhaps fifty men in the ranks.

It was now late afternoon, and the Fifth Cohort was making ready to camp for the night. Centurion Galeo felt, since it would be well after dark by the time they could join up with the rest of the legion, it was best if they made a fresh start in the morning.

Roman auxiliary forts had been established on either side of the bridge a few months prior, patrols constantly roaming the area. Even though this added a sense of safety and stability, the cohort still went about its usual task

of entrenching around their camp, while fortifying earthen ramparts topped with palisade stakes.

The century's tesserarius, an old soldier named Julius, supervised most of the work details, while Nicanor and Gaius walked the perimeter.

"Looks like we'll be getting a bit of a reprieve this campaign season," Nicanor said.

"It took us so long just to conquer northern Galilee," Gaius replied. "It's surprising just how quickly most of the cities in lower Judea have fallen."

"We now have thousands of troops within less than twenty miles of their holiest city, yet those factions now battling each other seem oblivious to our presence."

"A renegade named John of Giscala controls Jerusalem," Gaius recalled. "From what our spies in the south have told us, his main nemesis is a man named Simon bar Giora."

"Who I believe was aligned with those despicable bastards the Sicarii," Nicanor remarked. "However, the Sicarii are nihilistic savages loyal to no one, be they Roman or Jew. The entire region south of Jerusalem is a lawless wasteland. I honestly don't think that any of the factions have real control over it."

"Still, you know it could be a year or more before a victor emerges, or they decide to cease in their struggle and turn their attention towards us once more."

"True," Nicanor conceded.

"If that's the case," his optio said, "then I think now would be the time for me to renew my leave request."

"You've been wanting to take leave for some time," Nicanor replied, knowingly.

The entire army had been so consumed by the horrors and savagery of the war in Judea that most, in particular those in leadership positions, had been forced to put their personal issues aside. But now it seemed like the perfect time for the optio to resolve a rather distressing matter that had troubled him for some time.

"I'll likely be gone a month," Gaius noted. "Even by horse, it will take me three or four days to reach Caesarea. And then it will be a matter of finding transport to Cyprus."

"There's plenty of merchant vessels sailing between Cyprus and Caesarea," Nicanor stated. "However, since you will not be on any official

orders, it will likely cost a small fortune for both you and your horse."

"I don't care," Gaius replied, his voice determined.

"I know," the centurion acknowledged. "Still, you do understand this is likely to be a fool's errand."

"That doesn't matter. The longer I delay, the greater the chances that I will never see him again."

"And even if you do find your son, what then?" Nicanor asked.

Gaius turned to face him, his expression hard.

His friend and commanding officer shook his head. "Look, you must know that I do sympathize with you. But let us not kid ourselves. How many years has it been?"

"Four," Gaius replied.

"Four years since the woman you considered to be the love of your life, ran off with your newborn son to Salamis on the isle of Cyprus. Or at least that's what her father told you. And you remember just how ecstatic he was to hear that his daughter, who he hoped to marry off to one of his friends, was pregnant with the child of a Roman soldier. Face up to it, Gaius; she could be anywhere within the empire by now."

"Are you denying my request?"

"No. Damn it, man, you know me better than that! I'm just making certain you know exactly what you're in for. You know, given the length of absence, Galeo is going to make me get permission from General Trajan. And both of them are going to want to know why my optio needs a month's leave to go running off to Cyprus. Not only that, but this whole endeavor is likely going to end up costing you a year's wages. You know how those damn merchantmen are when it comes to ferrying passengers around the seas. They see a Roman soldier and immediately think Fortuna, herself, is smiling on them."

"I understand," Gaius said. "It's a good thing, then, that we've all acquired much in the way of plunder and profits from the slavers since this war began. And let me ask you this; were it your son, what would you do?"

Nicanor took a deep breath and sighed. "Exactly what you are doing, and that is why I know Centurion Galeo and General Trajan will understand as well."

A flood of memories came over Gaius that evening. Unable to sleep, he relieved a legionary of his post and took over his two-hour guard shift along the perimeter. He had thought often about his son, though he never spoke of

him. As far as he knew, Nicanor was the only one of his friends and fellow soldiers that even knew of his existence.

In the aftermath of the war in Armenia, five years prior, his cohort had been detached as a vexilation to garrison the port city of Laodicea, in Syria. He was a newly-promoted decanus then, having earned his rank during the Siege of Tigranocerta. Garrison duty was tedious, and the centurions instituted a rigorous training regime, lest their legionaries' boredom led to outbreaks of violence against the populace. It was after a morning of individual weapons drill on the training stakes that Gaius first saw her.

Verinia, he soon discovered her name, was the daughter of a local spice merchant. She was also not a provincial, but a Roman citizen of the affluent merchant class, whose family had come from Ariminum two generations before. Gaius often saw her as she helped her mother when they went to market. He made it a point of making certain his squad was always on patrol in that area during these times, and eventually he worked up the nerve to talk with the young woman.

Over time, the two had grown rather fond of each other, with Gaius spending most of his off-duty time with Verinia. She was her parents' only child, and because daughters were often used as pawns to be married off in order to strengthen bonds and alliances, her father had worked diligently to find her a suitable match. It was only when her father decided to marry her to a longtime friend and business partner, that her affair with the young soldier was discovered. Her family was filled with both anger and shame, for she was also found to be with child. Verinia was kept locked away in her parents' manor house for the entire nine months of her pregnancy. It was only when the child was born, that she compelled one of her maidservants to seek out the babe's father.

Gaius had only a very brief glimpse of his son, whom he had no chance to name, before Verinia's father chased him from their house, screaming a plethora of curses towards him and the entire Roman army. That he was below the rank of centurion made marrying Verinia an impossibility, nor could he stake any sort of claim to the child. And though her father was enraged, there was little recourse he could take against an imperial soldier. It was only weeks later, through a mutual acquaintance, that Gaius heard the family had relocated to Cyprus, where Verinia's father had another estate. There had been no opportunities for him to take leave during the few months the Fifth Cohort had remaining on their posting, before they were rotated

back to the legion. The war in Judea had wrecked any chance of him finding his son up until this moment.

“What have I gotten myself into?” he asked aloud.

His thoughts turned to home and his family, whom he had not seen in nine years. Britannia was a world away from Judea, both in terms of climate and culture. He had been raised in the rapidly growing town of Aqua Sulis, renowned for its natural hot springs. The indigenous tribes in that region had been among Rome’s most valuable allies during the initial conquest and were handsomely rewarded as a result.

A close friend of his family had been the mayor of Aqua Sulis, a rather famous cavalry officer and former Tribune of the Plebs, named Aulus Nautius Cursor. Cursor led the flanking cavalry charge that saved an entire legion at the Battle of Braduhenna in Frisia, forty years ago. Gaius’ father and grandfather had both taken part in that battle, and both were wounded. Though they came from different social classes, Cursor had always thought of Gaius’ grandfather, Artorius, as a friend. Gaius was scarcely two years old when his mother took him and his older brother on the long journey from Ostia, to join their father in Britannia. It was of little surprise that Metellus Artorius settled in Britannia after his retirement from the legions.

After Gaius departed for the legions, his parents relocated to the veteran colony of Camulodunum. Thankfully, they escaped before it was sacked by the Iceni rebels. The last he knew his parents had resettled in Londinium, which was still being rebuilt after it was destroyed by Boudicca. Of course they could very well have returned to Aqua Sulis. Gaius seemed to recall Cursor promising Metellus a posting within the city council, should he ever return.

Gaius then remembered something his brother had often spoken of, regarding a family’s legacy. Every Roman was prideful of his family’s name and the accomplishments of their ancestors. It was the duty of each generation, Lucius had emphasized, to add to that legacy.

“Will my own legacy be the bastard son who never knew me?” Gaius asked aloud.

Chapter VIII: Undeclared Loyalties

Near Lugdunum, Gaul
May 68 A.D.
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The aftermath of Julius Vindex's death, and the sacking of Vesontio, had left the province of Gallia Lugdunensis in a state of numbing shock. Though the majority of the Gallic citizens remained loyal to Rome, many were now questioning their loyalty, in no small part due to the excessive loss of life and the destruction of an entire city. The rationale behind Vindex's revolt had an even greater impact on the psyche of the people. To many it seemed like little more than a rebellion of disgruntled subjects, much like Sacrovir's revolt two generations past. Now that it was over, many people from the peasants to the noble magistrates began to wonder if, perhaps, Vindex's cause wasn't just after all. And these feelings of doubt were not just confined to the indigenous populace. Within the very imperial army that destroyed the rebellion in the first place, there was now an air of doubt and consternation.

Verginius had called a meeting of every senior officer within his army. Several of the legates who sent detachments from Lower Germania were also present. That no one was calling for an immediate pursuit of Galba was telling. After all, he had committed treason by supporting Vindex and was rumored to be the rebels' ultimate choice to replace Nero as emperor. He also had few soldiers of his own. A single regiment of cavalry could have ridden to Hispania and delivered his head to the emperor within a month. Instead, there was awkward uncertainty as to whether the empire might be better off under Nero or Galba. And while none of the legates expressed any sort of personal loyalty towards Emperor Nero, each understood the potential chaos that could engulf Rome should he be forcibly deposed.

"We now tread in dangerous waters," General Claudius stated. "Galba is a risky choice. Some of the senior centurions in the Rhine army were young legionaries when he was governor there. His severity and abject meanness made him hated by the legions. It is unlikely they have forgiven or forgotten this."

"And no doubt this will influence the younger men in the ranks," the commander of Legio XVI added. "My own primus pilus was a ranker back

then, and I honestly cannot say whether or not he would be willing to swear allegiance to Galba. If he refuses, you can bet my legionaries will, as well."

"We are not declaring for either side at this time," Verginius asserted. He decided the time had come to lay out his intentions in full to his peers. "This is not merely a civil war between loyalists and revolutionaries. There are other players in this dangerous game, and their playing field is Rome herself. If Nero were declared unfit to rule, by the senate, then a suitable heir would have to be found."

"There is no one else," General Fabius Valens of Legio I, *Germanica*, said. "If he is killed, the line of the Julio-Claudians will become extinct."

Valens had only recently arrived in Lugdunum, ostensibly on behalf of Governor Capito, though Verginius privately wondered if he had simply come of his own volition.

"No one is saying we should kill the emperor," Verginius stated forcefully. "It is the senate and people of Rome who will decide who holds legitimate claim to the throne, not the legions. That is, unless you want to risk the empire falling under military dictatorship."

There was a long pause while the assembled legates and magistrates pondered the governor's words.

After a few moments, Valens spoke up. "Though we have not heard from Governor Capito, I can speak for the armies in Lower Germania."

"And what do the lower Rhine legions say?" Verginius asked.

Valens cracked a smile. "They say we are loyal to the senate and people of Rome. They will watch and wait. In the end, they will honor whatever decision the senate and people come to. That there have been no orders from the senate for us to attack Galba means their resolve is weak. We need men of decisive action ruling in Rome. Yet, sadly, we seem to be getting little in the way of conclusive leadership from either the emperor or the senate."

Something about Valens unnerved Verginius. While the Rhine armies had shifted their loyalties from being firmly in the camp of Nero, to evasively declaring for 'The People of Rome', the governor of Upper Germania suspected Valens had ambitions beyond that of legion commander. Verginius further doubted whether his loyalties lay with either Nero or Galba.

"The Rhine armies will remain in Gaul for the time being," Verginius stated. "General Valens, I will need you to ensure that proper supply channels are maintained with Upper Germania, to provide rations for your men. I will see to the food supplies for those troops from Lower Germania."

“It will be done,” the legate agreed.

“It’s strange,” Claudius said, after Verginius had dismissed the other officers. “We smash one rebellion, yet in the aftermath we have suddenly become neutral.”

“I had no intention of attacking Vindex,” Verginius confessed. “Unfortunately, I did not make my return to our army quickly enough.”

“You should have told me,” Claudius replied. “Had I known what your intentions were, I never would have ordered the legions into battle.” It was a partial rebuke of his commanding general, for not including him in his strategic planning.

“At the time, I wasn’t certain exactly where your loyalties lay,” Verginius countered. “But then, I wasn’t exactly sure where mine were either.”



Galba was in a state of despair. His usually stoic demeanor was now one of dejected defeat. Though he had anticipated he might have to sacrifice Vindex for the greater good, he did not anticipate such a decisive defeat. What remained of his militias were now scattered to the winds. Galba had since fled to the town of Clunia, in Hispania, where he was only stayed from ending his life by the pleadings of friends and colleagues.

Among these was a fifty-six year old former legate and governor of Gallia Narbonensis named Titus Vinius. A senator of extensive experience, his past was also checkered by a series of scandals. As a laticlavian tribune, he had been stripped of his rank and briefly imprisoned by Emperor Caligula for having carried on a rather torrid affair with his commanding legate’s wife. A few years later, during the reign of Claudius, he had been accused of stealing a gold chalice during a dinner party at which he had been a guest of the emperor’s. He further had a reputation for being willing to do anything to anyone, if the price was right. Granted, it was no secret that almost everyone within the senate could readily be bought; however, Vinius practically advertised it. Despite this unsavory reputation, he had actually managed to govern the province of Gallia Narbonensis with great efficiency and fiscal temperance. It was these traits that endeared him to Galba, who had requested Vinius as a military advisor a few years back.

“Verginius has not advanced any further west than Lugdunum,” Vinius

noted. “If he were a threat to us, he would either have sent soldiers for your head or a threatening response demanding you take your own life.”

“I am the last of my line,” Galba contemplated aloud. “The gods took my sons from me and denied me grandchildren, so it will be by my actions alone that posterity remembers my family name.”

“And what does our friend, Otho, have to say?” Vinius asked, looking over at the governor of Lusitania. Otho had left the province in the hands of his deputy, soon after he received word of Vindex’s revolt. But instead of returning to Rome, he attached himself to Galba’s entourage.

“Emperor Nero is my friend,” he replied. “I’ve never made that a secret. And as my friend, I do love him dearly. Whatever hurts him, wounds me as well. However, my allegiance lies with Rome rather than any one man, no matter how close to my heart he may be. And let us not forget, the Rhine army tried to name Verginius emperor. That the soldiery would crush one rebellion only to launch another, speaks volumes. If Nero is losing the love of the legions, then he is losing the love of Rome. But we must be patient and see what Verginius says.”

“I sent him an urgent message as soon as we heard about Vesontio,” Galba remarked. “I pledged to work with him to preserve the liberty and welfare of the people and the empire.”

“Beg your pardon, sir,” a minor nobleman named Cornelius Laco said, as he joined them. “A courier just delivered this to me.”

It was with great bemusement Galba saw the dispatch was from none other than the victorious Verginius himself.

“Here,” he said, handing the scroll to Vinius. “My old eyes can scarcely read a damn thing anymore. Does the triumphant general write to gloat about the destruction of our allies?”

Vinius paused, quickly skimming the message before shaking his head.

“No,” he replied. “His response if very odd, to say the least.”

“Well, read it to us,” Otho said impatiently. The Governor of Lusitania had been secretly looking for a way in which he could covertly sneak back to his province, ever since they heard about Vindex’s defeat and subsequent suicide. Otho was the ultimate political survivalist, and he was determined to not be undone by the rash misjudgment of one careless rebel general. As Vinius read the message, he was suddenly glad he had not abandoned Galba’s cause just yet.

To Servius Sulpicius Galba, I bid you greetings.

I feel it is impertinent that I tell you personally how I am filled with much regret regarding the death of the noble Gaius Julius Vindex, along with so many of our Gallic peoples. I did not wish for either, nor for my soldiers to sack the city of Vesontio. Such has been an unfortunate turn of events.

Even more unfortunate, and truly disgraceful if I am being candid, was the attempt by the armies of the Rhine to declare me emperor. Such conduct is unbecoming of imperial soldiers, and I have put an immediate end to such talk. Only the senate and people of Rome can decide who is right to be emperor. I'll not pass judgment, one way or the other, upon your claim to the imperial throne. Should the senate decide Nero is no longer fit to rule as emperor, it is they who, constitutionally, can ratify a potential successor. And any such successor must come from the old families of the patrician class, not a first generation senator such as I. Yours is among the oldest of Rome's ruling families. You have the noble pedigree, along with a lifelong record of service to the empire.

My army remains in Gaul, awaiting the will of the senate. Should they continue in their declaration that you are an enemy of the state, it is with great regret that I will be compelled to do their bidding. It would also be with equal remorse, should I be obliged to break my oath of allegiance to Emperor Nero, who I have served diligently these thirteen years of his reign. Know that I personally mean you no harm, and am but a servant of the people of Rome.

Yours respectfully,

Lucius Verginius Rufus

Galba sat with his chin resting in his hand, deep in contemplation.

"Think it's a trap?" Laco asked.

"If it were, he would not be so indecisive in his language," Otho spoke up, when Galba remained silent.

"That Verginius does not simply march on us reaffirms our suspicions

that Nero's support grows thin," Galba said. He turned to Vinius. "Thank you, my friend, for staying my hand. It is plain that the fates do not intend for Nero to sit on the throne for much longer, and had I taken my own life, his successor would have been most unworthy indeed."

While this last remark was certainly quite arrogant, it was hardly surprising. After all, one had to possess a rather substantial ego in order to believe that he, alone, was most fit to rule over an empire of seventy million persons. What Galba did not know, was he was not the only man present who possessed such an ego.

For Marcus Salvius Otho, the rebellion was simply a step along the way to his much grander ambitions. As a former courtier of Nero, as well as one who the emperor viewed as a personal friend, Otho was perhaps the most confident of all who now courted the potential usurper, Galba. Should the rebellion fail, Otho had already formulated a plan with which to inform Nero that he had deliberately misled Galba, while pretending to side with him. If need be, he would kill the old bastard himself, which would doubtless earn him Nero's eternal gratitude. If, on the other hand, the rebellion succeeded and Nero was overthrown, then he was already in an enviable position, having established himself as one of Galba's chief advisors.

He was also an outsider to Galba, even though his father had been the old man's colleague during their consulship, thirty-four years prior. Otho was still an infant then, and Galba was not a man to view one favorably simply because of who his father was. So while he welcomed the governor of Lusitania's assistance, it would take more than the fond memories of his father for Otho to truly ingratiate himself within Galba's inner circle. For this, he would need to align himself with one closest to the usurper.

The first of these was his freedman, Icelus, who was unfortunate enough to have been in Rome when the rebellion first broke out, and now a prisoner of Nero. The second was the old soldier named Cornelius Laco, who Galba had promised command of the Praetorian Guard. His demeanor towards Otho had been aloof thus far, and so the governor did not feel comfortable attempting to align with him. The third, and easily most suitable of Galba's closest advisors, was Titus Vinius. *The Three Pedagogues* is what many quietly called them. And of these three, it was Vinius who Otho chose to approach later that evening.

An informal gathering of the regional magistrates had taken place at the

governor's palace, with many voicing their implicit support should Galba decide to continue in his pursuit of the imperial throne. The old man himself had long since retired for the evening, and it was alone on a balcony where Otho found Vinius.

"General," he said, deferring with respect to Vinius' status as an old soldier.

"Governor Otho," Vinius replied, a knowing grin creasing his face. "I thought you might seek me out eventually."

"Indeed?"

"You're an ambitious man," Vinius stated bluntly. "Why else would you be here? True, your province of Lusitania neighbors ours; however, you would have little stake in the outcome of this uprising, unless you willingly decided to crawl your way into Galba's confidence. And, of course, as long as you play it cautious your friendship with Nero will protect you, should things take a turn for the worse."

Otho could only grin at this. A normal man would have balked at the assessment, yet it only confirmed his intuition regarding Vinius.

"And that is why I have come to you," he said. "You and I are of a like mind and both willing to bend our scruples in order to achieve our ambitions."

"In a manner of speaking," Vinius remarked. "In my younger years, I slept with my commanding general's wife; whereas you were willing to whore out your own wife, in order to win favor from the emperor."

"Poppaea fell for Nero on her own," Otho replied, though both men knew he had deliberately arranged for his wife to have her affair with the emperor. "Granted, I did manage to profit from their marriage. Still, what of it? I think you and I are like-minded enough that we could become good friends."

"Given that you consider Nero a friend, I would be leery of any such relationship."

Surprisingly, Otho actually smirked at Vinius' rebuking words. "How about, *allies of necessity*, then?"

"That is more to my liking. And what do you propose should be our first arrangement, to forge this alliance?"

"Firstly," Otho said, pulling out a small pouch of coins. "Our alliance must be kept a secret."

"Of course," Vinius acknowledged. "Except, we have never been friends, and we scarcely know each other. In fact, I think we have met maybe twice

during your tenure in Lusitania, when you paid a visit to Galba in Hispania over certain holidays. And a man of your influence is certainly not lacking in friends. However, I also know that what you are in need of, is one who is close to the man who would be emperor."

"A judicious observation," Otho said. Both men proceeded to take a drink off their wine, while servants brought them trays of dormice and dates. "I'll speak plainly. I do need a friend who is close to the presumptive emperor, and you are one of the three men who hold absolute control over him."

"Oh, I wouldn't go *that* far," Vinius laughed.

"I would," Otho replied quickly. "And so would the rest of the senate, as well as all of the equites within this province. Even the common plebs on the street believe that you, Laco, and Icelus are the ones who truly rule Hispania."

"I scarcely believe that cobblers, artisans, and carpenters say such things," Vinius countered. "The common peasant cares only when his next meal is, if he is going to be paid for his labors, and whether his wife is fucking the neighbor."

"This is normally true. However, those within the capital see the intrigues of the patrician class as a source of both entertainment, and distraction from the tedium that is their daily lives." Otho took another sip of wine before adding, "I have eyes everywhere, not just amongst the nobility. Julius Caesar understood that it was popularity among the masses where one could gain true power."

"And do you hold such sway over the plebs?" Vinius' question sounded almost condescending, though this was not his intent.

"No," Otho replied, his expression showing he was not insulted by his guest's inquiry. "I am simply observant, is all. And what I have observed is that Galba has already mentioned his intention, should his little venture to the imperial throne prove successful, to name you his colleague as consul for the next year, rather than leaving it up senatorial election. That tells me, along with the rest of the populace, that you are the most influential of his handlers."

"You flatter me," Vinius nodded, though he did not deny the observation.

Otho tossed him the pouch.

His eyes widened slightly, once he saw the contents. "This is five hundred denarii. What are you intending to purchase with this?"

"Influence," Otho replied. "You have Galba's ear, and he needs to be

reassured that I am not only a viable ally, but one whom he can trust completely. And as you so aptly said, we have never been friends, we scarcely know each other. So it is natural that I would have to earn your trust. And since time is not a commodity I have at the moment, a few gold coins should persuade you."

"I think," Vinius said slowly, his devious smile growing, "we shall both profit immensely from our little arrangement."

"You have a daughter," Otho observed.

"Yes," Vinius replied, his smile fading slightly. "She is here with me. And as you probably already know, she is of age and unmarried."

"With your permission, I would like the honor of making her acquaintance."

Otho left Vinius, feeling rather pleased with himself. There was now one more person he had to see this evening, and it was she who made the old general an even more important ally. For while Cornelius Laco had a pair of sons, Vinius was the only one among the Pedagogues who had a daughter.

Otho found Vinia later that evening, well after most of the guests were inebriated or had dispersed back to their homes. She was relatively short with a nice, curvaceous figure. Her hair, which was flowing past her shoulders, was sandy-blonde. Otho surmised it was likely dyed, as was often the fashion among noblewomen. He did not know her exact age, though he guessed she was in her early twenties. That she was neither married nor betrothed, told him her father was still waiting to forge the right political match for his family.

"My lady," he said, taking her hand and kissing the back of it gently. "May I escort you on a walk in the garden?"

"Why, Governor Otho, I would be delighted," she said, with an innocent smile.

Otho took Vinia by the arm and escorted her into the gardens lit by flickering torchlight. Though they talked for some time, it was difficult for Otho to learn much about the young woman. He then realized both of his previous wives had been the same age as he, whereas she was at least twelve to fifteen years younger. Her lack of years also meant a lack of worldly experience. To her credit, Vinia appeared to be anything but shrewish, and she did take quite an interest in chariot racing.

"I've always been a supporter of the Blues myself," Otho remarked.

“As have I,” the young woman replied, with a warm smile. “Terrible thing about that last race I saw in Rome, during the Tiberinus Pater festival. The Blues’ champion charioteer had a terrible crash.”

“Ah, yes, I did hear about that,” Otho replied. “Of course, I’ve been in Lusitania for a few years now and have missed the best races in the world. Do you like gladiator matches?”

Vinia scowled slightly at this. “To be honest, I find them rather boorish.”

“They’re not for everyone, I admit,” Otho said, taking a seat on a stone bench beneath a fig tree.

Vinia sat next to him, her arm intertwined with his. “Will you be coming to Rome with us?”

“That is my intent,” Otho answered. “Of course, a lot can happen over the next few months. Should Verginius have a sudden change of heart, we could all be facing the strangler’s noose, as traitors.” He thought this last remark might unnerve the young woman.

Vinia did not so much as flinch. “I overheard you speaking about how Nero is your friend, whom you love dearly. But I admire your sense of duty to the empire, that you would put the good of the people of Rome ahead of any personal friendship.”

“Everything I do, from now until the end of my days, will be for the good of Rome,” Otho asserted. It may have sounded a bit cliché; however, Vinia now clutched his hand in response. He then took his leave, kissing the young woman gently on the cheek.

Of all those who were in the entourage of Servius Sulpicius Galba, Otho was perhaps the only one devoid of fear. He alone had a means of escape should Galba’s efforts come to naught. But should Galba succeed in deposing Nero, Otho had taken the first crucial steps into making himself an indispensable member of the new imperial court. And that would take him closer to his ultimate goal of becoming the emperor’s rightful heir and successor.

Chapter IX: Turning of the Guard

The Praetorian Barracks, Rome
20 May 68 A.D.



Praetorian Guardsmen

An opportunity soon arose for a new voice of power in the chaotic struggle that was being waged in both Rome, as well as on the battlefields in Gaul. While the senate fretted about what they should do, given the elusive and cryptic messages coming from the Rhine army occupying Gaul, the Praetorian Guard once more became influential players in Rome's imperial dynasty. Ever since the betrayal of Sejanus during the reign of Tiberius, when the prefecture was divided among two men instead of one, this had tempered the Guard's influence substantially. But now, a power struggle was being waged subtly within the Praetorian Guard itself.

Ofonius Tigellinus, who had served as prefect for the last six years, was extremely loyal to Nero both personally and professionally. At fifty-eight years of age, he was seasoned, highly experienced, and utterly ruthless. Furthermore, he was one of the few men who the emperor regarded as a close friend, with Tigellinus demonstrating his loyalty and friendship in the most brutal fashion in recent months. The people hated him, both plebian and noble alike, for his behavior was often brutish, and he wielded his guardsmen like an iron fist. Yet, stronger than their hatred of Tigellinus was their fear of

him.

His colleague, Nymphidius Sabinus, had served as his co-commander for the past three years, ever since the execution of the traitor, Faenius Rufus. At just thirty-three years of age, he was substantially younger than Tigellinus, yet he was equally ruthless and, perhaps, even more politically savvy. His only previous command had been over a regiment of auxilia infantry, and he was quite possibly the youngest man to rise up to become praetorian prefect. While he may not have had Nero's ear the way Tigellinus did, Nymphidius already had far more substantial control over the Guard itself. That he was so much younger than his peer, and at least appeared to take a far greater interest in the welfare of individual guardsmen, made him a favorite among the men in the ranks. Even the centurions and tribunes were greatly influenced by his charisma and charm.

Nymphidius had been watching the events in the senate closely and had his own informants keeping him abreast of what was transpiring in Gaul. He could see clearly that the fates were beginning to abandon Nero and the house of the Julio-Claudians. As such, he was resolute to assert himself, not only into a greater position of power, but as one who would determine who would become the next emperor of Rome.

There was a knock at the door to his office, and a centurion was ushered in.

"Ah, Centurion Densus," the prefect said, waving the man to a chair.

"You sent for me sir?" the officer asked. Densus was a fit and well-muscled soldier who had spent fifteen years in the ranks of the legions, before being given a meritorious promotion into the Praetorian Guard. He bore a pair of nasty visible scars, one on his right cheek, and the other across the left side of his neck. This second hideous mark was jagged and deep, and anyone observing it wondered how it was he had not been killed by such a grievous wound.

"I did, I did," Nymphidius said, as he sat across from the centurion. He then apprised the officer before explaining the reason for their meeting. "You have the ear of the men in the ranks."

"I like to think so, sir," the centurion replied. "I have only been with the praetorians for a couple of years, but I can say that my men are well-drilled and know how to follow orders."

"That is good," the prefect said with a nod, though his mind was clearly on a different matter. "It pains me to have to ask this of a subordinate,

especially since it involves my fellow prefect. But do tell me, have you seen a change in Commander Tigellinus of late?"

"To be honest I have, sir," Densus replied. "He seems almost listless, and his face looks like it never sees the sun anymore. Is he not well?"

"The rebellion has caused him great strain, I'm afraid," Nymphidius said, feigning concern. What he did not mention was that, due to his abject fear regarding Nero's possible overthrow, Tigellinus had taken to drinking excessively. He was rarely ever sober and, besides wine, he was now experimenting with various mind altering substances that had come from eastern merchants.

"The rebellion is a great strain on us all," the centurion observed. "Is there anything the lads or I can do?"

"This isn't easy," the prefect remarked. "But I think I will have to assume most of my dear colleague's duties from now on. I will be speaking with all of the tribunes in due time. But for now, I think it best the centurions and other officers come to me, directly, for their orders. Since Tigellinus is most comfortable when guarding the emperor personally, I am going to see to it that he remains with the duty cohort at the palace. We can only hope that once this crisis passes, his health will improve and he can assume his duties once more."

"I understand, sir," Densus replied.

The prefect then dismissed the centurion, before drafting a set of orders to the duty cohort at the palace. He also had a private letter ready to be sent to Galba. With Tigellinus essentially out of the picture, and with Nero's downfall imminent, Nymphidius reckoned he could compel Galba to name him sole prefect of the Praetorian Guard.

"And if that old bastard even survives the journey to Rome, I will be in control of the city and the empire." He then gave a wicked chuckle. "Sejanus, you were such an amateur."



The Tenth Legion had been encamped northwest of Jericho for several weeks. Located just twenty-five miles from Jerusalem, Vespasian was reluctant to move any of his forces closer to the Jewish holy city, lest the warring factions become distracted by the presence of imperial soldiers and decide to put their differences aside. His intent was to allow them to kill as

many of each other off as possible, before committing his legions to the final siege. The people within the conquered cities attempted to go about their lives, though all lived in fear of the imperial soldiers, as well as the zealots who now controlled Jerusalem. As for the legionaries themselves, there was little for them to do except drill, improve their camps, and patrol the streets of the cities. It was following one such patrol, which Gaius had personally led four of their squads on, that he received the news he'd been waiting for.

"Your leave was approved," Nicanor said, handing the optio a small, folded parchment. "Here are your orders. You are to report back to Caesarea no later than the first of July. The Tenth may not still be in Jericho then, but the clerks will no doubt be able to tell you where to find us."

"Thank you," Gaius said, his palms sweating as he accepted the orders. "I cannot tell you how much this means to me."

"Do what you need to, old friend," Nicanor said. He chuckled and added, "I'll make certain we don't take Jerusalem without you. Give your optio's staff to Julius. He'll assume your duties while you're away."

Gaius hurried back to his tent and began to cram his personal belongings into his pack. He took three extra tunics, socks, his traveling cloak, his shaving kit, and a few personal belongings, including a faded medallion his mother had given him years ago. He had recently sold a number of chalices and other items that he'd plundered during many of the sieges the legion had conducted, so he had much in the way of extra coin. He left his armor, helmet, and shield, though he carried his gladius. He delivered his optio's staff to Tesserarius Julius and, after a few words of instruction, mounted his horse and began the trek to Caesarea.

The roads had long since dried and become dusty once more, and it took Gaius just two days to reach the port city. As Centurion Nicanor had warned, a local merchant vessel demanded a shameful fifty denarii for the optio and his horse to take the short, two day journey to Salamis. The ship was transporting wine casks to the island, and as these took up all of the hold space below decks, Gaius was compelled to remain on the top deck for the duration of their journey.

Though the voyage was relatively short, it was also extremely tedious for the optio. He also had a tendency to become violently seasick, whenever land was out of view. Originally an independent kingdom, and later one of the Greek city-states, Salamis was located on the eastern edge of Cyprus. The relatively flat terrain outside the city was mostly farm fields, while its port

boasted a vigorous fishing industry. Gaius walked his horse down the long plank, and set about the task of finding his son.

He had no idea where to begin looking. Since Verinia's father had been a spice merchant, he reckoned he would start there. It was late afternoon when he arrived at the city forum which was crammed with vendor stalls. As he started to ask questions, a few told him to 'piss off', if he wasn't there to buy anything. It took some time, but eventually he met someone who knew Verinia's name and description.

"There's a spice plantation about four miles west of the city," a middle-aged woman told Gaius. "She rarely comes to the markets anymore, but that is where you will find her."

Gaius did not ask any further questions. He simply mounted his horse and began to make his way out of the large market complex. He assumed the plantation was owned by Verinia's father who, doubtless, would be enraged to see the soldier again. Gaius did not care. There would be no driving him away this time, not until he saw his son.

The plantation stood out against the backdrop of steep mountain faces to the west. The fields were vast and numerous, with hundreds of slaves and overseers toiling in the late afternoon sun. The manor house itself was set just off the main road. A large open gate led into the outer courtyard. Gaius dismounted his horse and walked through the stucco arches. It was here he found her.

"Hello, Verinia."

His voice startled the young woman, and she jumped in surprise. She squinted for a moment, as she apprised the soldier who stood before her.

"Dear gods," she whispered, her eyes growing wide. *"Gaius?"*

He gave a broad smile and started walking towards her.

Verinia looked nervously over her shoulder as a loud fit of boyish laughter came from the house behind her. Gaius stopped and stared at the side door, where a little boy came stumbling down the short steps. He tripped and fell hard, though instead of breaking into tears, he laughed even harder as he pulled himself to his feet.

"Is that…" Gaius started to say.

"Please, Gaius!" Verinia quickly interrupted. "You should not be here!"

"I should not be here to see my own son?" he asked, indignantly. Whatever Verinia thought of him now, all he cared about was the little boy who ran up to his mother and wrapped his arms around her leg.

“Wow!” the boy said, looking up excitedly at the soldier. “Who is he, mama?”

Before Verinia could answer, a man’s voice called from within the house. “Verinia! I finished early, and…”

The voice of the well-dressed man, in his early thirties, stopped as he stepped into the small courtyard. “Can we help you, soldier?” he asked. He saw the horrified expression on Verinia’s face. “I hope my wife or my son have not caused any trouble.”

“No,” Gaius replied, quickly shaking his head. “I am not here on military matters.”

“That’s a relief,” the man said, with a sigh. “We don’t see many imperial soldiers in these parts, least of all legionaries. Is there something I can do for you?”

“This boy,” Gaius said, nodding towards the child who still clung to his mother’s leg. “He is your son?”

“Adopted…but yes.” The man shook his head, puzzled by the question. “I’m sorry, but if you are not here in any official capacity, then why, may I ask, are you here? Who are you?”

Verinia stood transfixed, absolutely aghast at seeing her past laid bare before her husband. While Gaius wished to spare her any indignity or embarrassment, there was no backing down for him.

“An old friend,” he answered. “One who wishes to see his son.”

Verinia’s eyes closed hard, and she gritted her teeth, as she failed to fight back the tear that ran down her cheek. Her husband did not notice. Instead, he gave a sad smile of understanding.

“I see,” he said. “As I understood it, you are supposed to be dead.”

“Wishful thinking by some,” Gaius replied.

In a move that surprised everyone, the man held open the door to the house. “Won’t you please come in?”

Verinia picked up her son, who was sucking on his fingers, while smiling at Gaius. The optio found he could not take his eyes off the child. This was the reason he had taken leave, and why he had spent a month’s wages to take a miserable journey by merchant ship to the isle.

The master of the house offered him a cup of wine which Gaius accepted, as they sat in the modest dining hall.

“Verinia’s father told me you were a tribune,” the man, whose name was Marcus, said. “And that you were killed in a horse riding accident.”

“I’m afraid not,” Gaius replied. “My father is a member of the equites, but I was merely a young decanus then. And as you can see, I am very much alive.”

“Verinia’s family had just come to Cyprus,” Marcus continued, ignoring the remark. Clearly he was wrought by a sense of betrayal, hearing that his father-in-law had deceived him. “I had just recently inherited my father’s rather large spice farm, and so it was natural that we should become business acquaintances. I was also recently widowed, having lost my wife when she miscarried our child. That Verinia was apparently also recently widowed, with a child of her own, made it a natural match.”

He was now staring at his wife, whose face was pale, her eyes red.

“My love,” she said. “I never meant to deceive you.”

“So what this soldier says is true, then,” Marcus said, nodding towards Gaius.

“Please,” Verinia pleaded. “Father felt that no one respectable would have me...”

“You could have told me,” Marcus said sternly, his gaze boring into her. He then looked to Gaius. “What is it that you want? Regardless of who sired him, young Marcus is my son now.”

“I’m not here to try and take him away,” Gaius reassured him. “That was never my intent. He was but a few days old the last I saw him. I had to know what became of him.”

“And now you know,” Marcus replied. Though sympathetic to the optio’s plight, he was clearly angered by all he had just learned. “Know this, Marcus is well-loved, and he wants for nothing. I cannot fault you for coming here, but now that you know he has a future, there is nothing more for you.”

“And I will take my leave,” Gaius said, standing and making his way towards the door. “Thank you for taking the time to see me.” He then gave a curt nod towards Verinia and left the house.

As he rode away from the plantation, he not once looked back. Over the past four years he had been tormented over the thoughts of what might have happened. He supposed he should have been happy, knowing that his son was loved and well taken care of, but instead he felt empty inside, a hollow sense of indifference.



It was now early June, and support for Galba was growing within the western provinces. The Army of the Rhine still remained in Gaul, yet they obstinately remained outside of the fray. Titus Vinius had assumed command of Legio VI, *Victrix*, in eastern Hispania, on Galba's orders. And while Vinius, Laco, and the now imprisoned Icelus in Rome, were those with the most profound influence over the presumptive emperor, there were two others who were having an ever larger impact on the game that was now being played for the imperial throne.

The first was Otho, who had taken the liberty of handing over all the gold and silver he could scrounge from his province of Lusitania. He was certain Nero could not survive this next phase of the rebellion, and had finally committed all of his resources to securing Galba's rise to become Caesar. He took things a step further, by providing Galba with the tools and specialist smiths necessary to take the raw gold, silver, and copper, and begin minting his own coins. And as a last token of support, though one which Galba took as more of an insult than a gift, Otho presented him with a number of slaves. These were fit and elegant young men and women, who Otho said were those worthy of serving an emperor. The reason the presumptive emperor deplored the gesture, was because these were slaves who were chosen for their beauty, rather than their ability to work. Still, Galba did at one point express his gratitude towards Otho, for helping him acquire the financial resources necessary to secure the throne.

The other man who became a predominant player in the game was a patrician named Aulus Caecina Alienus. Quaestor for the small province Baetica, on the southern tip of Hispania, he was responsible for all financial matters within the region. In his early thirties, he had a respectable record of military service, yet it was in matters of coin where he excelled. And while Otho gave Galba much of the necessary means to produce coin, Caecina was able to simply divert already existing funds into the usurper's coffers.

"This will fund my soldiers for some time to come," Galba noted, when Caecina showed him a detailed report of all the funds he had transferred into Galba's war chest.

"The men will doubtless be expecting some sort of donative, once all of this is over," the quaestor said. "It has been customary following the rise of every new emperor."

Galba, who was never one for smiling in the first place, scowled at this last remark. "I do not buy the loyalty of my soldiers," he retorted. "They

should think themselves fortunate to serve under me, and they will be happy with the coin they are allotted. Otherwise, I will go very hard on them."

"There is other news," Otho interrupted, sensing a growing tension between the two men. "General Rubrius Gallus has abandoned Nero. And Petronius' legions in Pannonia and the Danube have refused to move from their barracks."

"And what of Verginius?" Galba asked.

"Still in Lugdunum," Otho answered. "He hasn't moved a foot."

"I'll not fault him for his indecisiveness, but neither shall I reward him," Galba remarked. He then looked to Caecina. "Once Nero is dealt with, you will relieve Verginius of his command of Legio IV, Macedonia."

"Thank you, sire," Caecina replied, with a bow.

Galba waved for him to leave, and the quaestor excused himself.

As Caecina left, Cornelius Laco stepped into the chamber.

"Sire," he said, with a bow.

"Any news from Rome?" Galba asked.

"Only that your freedman, Icelus, remains imprisoned on Nero's orders. I take it you already heard about Gallus?"

"I did," Galba replied. "He's a venerable military leader, and I will be glad of his services. Was there anything else?"

"Yes," Laco said, handing Galba a letter. "This came only an hour ago."

"It's from Commander Nymphidius of the Praetorian Guard," Galba read, squinting hard before handing the message back to Laco, who read it for him.

"He states that Nero's grip on reality grows ever more erratic," Laco said. "And that Tigellinus has been weakened by stress and other ailments."

"Probably guilt, from all those whose lives he ended while lining Nero's coffers," Otho scoffed.

Galba said nothing, though he shot Otho a look that told him he should keep quiet. He then nodded for Laco to continue. There was a pause, while Laco broke into a broad grin.

"He says the Guard is yours."

Chapter X: Dynasty's End

Rome
8 June 68 A.D.



The Julio-Claudian Dynasty

Nero's grip on power was slipping rapidly, and he was now contemplating fleeing the capital. Despite Verginius' victory over the rebellious upstart, Julius Vindex, the rebellion now forming under Servius Galba had only grown in strength. Members of the senate now met openly, discussing the possibility of removing Nero from power. The emperor had finally realized the severity of the situation, and valiantly offered to ride forth and meet the enemy in person. His gallant attempt at rallying the senate and people quickly dissipated when he talked, not of defeating the rebels in battle but of winning their hearts with his music and poetry. In a single speech, he transcended from noble leader of the people, to one afflicted by utter insanity. There was now only one obstacle that stood in the way of openly declaring their emperor an enemy of Rome.

Nymphidius had called for every member of the Praetorian Guard, not on duty, to parade before their headquarters building. Only the current duty cohort at the palace, along with a century of guardsmen who were patrolling the streets, were absent. The prefect stood atop a dais with the praetorian tribunes behind him.

"Soldiers of the Praetorian Guard," he said, *"the time is upon us, when we must rise up and make a stand for our beloved Rome."*

These opening remarks drew a number of confused stares and mutterings amongst the ranks. All were very much aware of the growing rebellion under Galba, as well as the senate's paralyzed sense of inaction. Yet, none of them had so much as heard a whisper as to what role the Guard would take in the coming crisis.

“All of us have sworn to protect the emperor at all costs, with our lives, if necessary,” Nymphidius continued. “Our oath is our sacred bond, that we can never abandon our emperor. It therefore saddens me, my brothers, to tell you that we have not abandoned the emperor, but that he intends to abandon us! I have it on good authority that Emperor Nero plans on fleeing to Alexandria, without so much as a single guardsman in his entourage. I ask you, brothers, how do we serve an emperor who deserts his post and forsakes us?”

Centurion Densus stepped forward in an attempt to speak for the assembled mass of guardsmen. “Sir, we serve the emperor and are loyal to him, even unto death. Should he desert the capital, he will be abandoning his people. And if he is deposed, what then becomes of us?”

“The Praetorian Guard exists to protect the emperor,” Nymphidius replied. “But it is the senate who ratifies a man’s right to become emperor. I have spoken with the consuls of Rome, and they have told me they intend to declare Nero an enemy of the state. Furthermore, they wish to ratify Servius Sulpicius Galba as Rome’s rightful ruler. The only thing stopping them is their fear of us, that we would oppose them with violence in order to protect the man who has abandoned them.”

Everything Nymphidius said was a complete fabrication, for he had met with no one from the senate but was, instead, taking matters into his own hands. Neither of the consuls, nor any of their colleagues, knew that one of the praetorian prefects was suggesting to his men that they abandon Nero. It was by seizing the initiative that Nymphidius hoped to secure his place within the new order, once Nero was deposed and Galba installed as emperor. There were still many doubtful grumblings amongst the guardsmen, so the prefect decided to use the one means of persuasion that would not fail.

“I can speak on behalf of Galba, regarding the donative that is due to the imperial guard upon the assumption of a new emperor.”

These words immediately silenced any grumblings from the guardsmen, and all now listened intently.

“Should Nero desert his post as Emperor of Rome and should the senate legally sanction Galba’s right to become Caesar, I promise you, on his behalf, a donative of seven thousand five hundred denarii each.”

Several thousand voices gasped at the promise of such a substantial sum. Praetorian guardsmen were the highest paid of any professional soldiers within the imperial army. Their annual wages of seven hundred and fifty

denarii were triple that of a legionary. And now, Nymphidius was promising them an additional donative of ten-fold this number. No one bothered to ask where this money would be raised, though it was widely known that Galba was by far the single wealthiest member of the Roman senate. Perhaps he intended to pay them this donative out of his own coffers? Such generosity could purchase the loyalties of even the most stalwart of Nero's supporters.



In another part of the city, the senate was taking its own actions in an attempt to remove Nero from power. The consuls had taken it upon themselves to meet with the one man who kept the emperor upon the throne. Italicus knew he was taking a huge risk, especially since he was meeting with Tigellinus on the palace grounds. But he also understood that as consul, the responsibility was his. He also realized that, should he prove successful, the potential rewards surpassed even his substantial ambitions.

"What is it you wish, consul?" Tigellinus asked impatiently. "I am a busy man."

"Yes, busy with trying to hold onto power within your own guard, while the emperor struggles equally with maintaining his now feeble grip upon the empire."

"There was a time when such an insult would be met with the harshest of retributions," Tigellinus growled, his teeth clenched.

"And such a time was not long ago," the consul admitted. "But your time as acting like Sejanus reborn is over. I know about the power struggle that exists within the Praetorian Guard. Nymphidius has the support of most of the officers, as well as a large number of the guardsmen. He sees what is coming, and he is looking to his own survival, as you should be."

"What is it you want?" the guards' commander asked. He wished to plunge his blade into the impudent man's throat, especially for insulting him in reference to the disgraced Sejanus.

"I know Nero is your friend," Italicus said, consolingly. "He is mine, too. But I also know you see, like the rest of us, that this rebellion will not simply go away. It spread after the defeat of Vindex, rather than dissipated. Germania, Gaul, Hispania, North Africa have all rebelled. And I suspect Britannia will soon follow. The emperor's proposition to sing to his enemies on the field of battle is nothing short of madness."

“Would you have me betray him?” Tigellinus asked. “If you had said such words to me six months ago, I would have cut your throat and had your entire family tortured and put to death.”

“That I still breathe tells me you know I speak the truth,” the consul countered. “Rebellion breeds further unrest. The cities within the mutinous provinces have seen a drastic increase in crime and disorder, as has Rome herself. And if the senate does nothing, but simply lets the rebellion overtake us, it will rip the entire empire to shreds.”

“Then why doesn’t the senate act?” the praetorian asked, knowing the answer.

“They are afraid…of *you*,” Italicus emphasized. “You have seen many of their colleagues put to death, having delivered the final sword-stroke yourself on more than one occasion. They fear the rumors Nero intends, as a last resort, to put the entire senate to the sword or poison the lot of us at an elaborate banquet. His loss of the empire has broken him, and no one knows what he intends, not even you. Yet, how can the senate act with your blade resting on their throats?”

Tigellinus clutched his helmet beneath his arm, contemplating his response. He knew all that Italicus said was true, for he had known for some time that Nero’s fall was imminent. The further the emperor slipped down into the abyss, the more Tigellinus had taken to drink and opiates, which had caused great strains upon his health. While he had, for many years, carried a forceful and energetic presence that defied his age, he now looked tired and haggard.

“He has no heir,” he said. “If we allow an emperor to be named from outside of the imperial family, it will set a dangerous precedent, far more ominous than the whole of the western empire being in a state of rebellion. And if the senate chooses Galba, who is old and childless, who then will follow him? Your shortsightedness could be very costly to Rome in the long term.”

“I am not saying the senate wishes for Nero’s death,” Italicus corrected. “That he does not have a successor may be the best chance he has at living. A negotiated settlement could involve him either adopting or siring a rightful heir, in whose name a regent can be appointed until such time as he is ready to assume power. What I am saying, is that this cannot continue any longer. The senate must be allowed to meet publicly, that we may decide the fate of both the emperor, as well as Rome. But, we cannot meet as long as the senate

fears you."

The corner of Tigellinus' mouth turned up slightly. It caused him no small degree of satisfaction to know that he held such control over what were supposed to be the most powerful men in the world. His decision could arguably affect the whole of the empire.

"The senate," he said, slowly, "need not fear me. Tonight, I will personally oversee the changing of the guard at the imperial palace. But while the outgoing guards will return to the barracks, there will not be an incoming guard to replace them. The senate can then deal with the emperor as it sees fit. And gods help us all, if they do not make the right decision."



Nero slept soundly that night with his 'Poppaea' next to him. Both were completely unaware of the pall of uncertainty that hung over the imperial capital. The senate was set to deliberate his fate on the morrow while, unbeknownst to them, Prefect Nymphidius was guiding their actions. And as the moon rose to its apex, Nero's last remaining friend, Tigellinus, set into motion the events that would change the imperial dynasty forever.

The centurion in command of the palace guard was growing impatient. He had paraded his guardsmen in the main courtyard and knew their replacements were overdue. As the outer gates opened, and he heard the hobnail sandals echoing on the paving stones, he briskly walked over to where a single shape could be seen in the shadows.

"About fucking time you lot showed up…bloody hell, Commander Tigellinus!" Even in the dark, the prefect's crested helmet gave him away. "Apologies, sir. What are you doing here this night?"

"Are your men paraded and ready to depart for the barracks?" his commanding officer asked, as he stepped into the torchlight.

"They are, sir. We're just waiting for our damned replacements, so we can do the changing of the guard."

"There won't be any replacements," Tigellinus said calmly. "March your men back to barracks. Everything will be explained tomorrow."

"Yes, sir," the centurion acknowledged. Like most of the officers within the praetorians, he knew the inevitable was coming. He just didn't think his men would be the very last to guard the Julio-Claudian emperors.

“Imperial Palace Guard…attention!”

The shouted order of the centurion alerted one of the freedman servants who oversaw the night shift in the kitchens. He always enjoyed watching the changing of the palace guard, and he quickly ran up the short steps that led from the cellar and stood beneath one of the overhangs in the main courtyard. He was puzzled when he only saw the one century of guardsmen. Normally, the incoming and outgoing guards would face each other in parade formation, while the commanding centurions went through the ritual of relieving and accepting responsibility for safeguarding the imperial palace.

“Right face!” the centurion bellowed. His men were arranged into four ranks, and they now faced directly towards where the servant stood in the shadows. *“Column left, quick time…march!”*

There was no mistaking it; the praetorians were abandoning the palace. Suddenly fearful, the freedman fled towards one of the side doors, which led to one of the many servants’ passages that would take him to the emperor’s bedchamber. It was unnerving to have the palace feel so empty. The Praetorian Guard were like a permanent fixture within its walls, and their departure made the marble halls feel like a tomb.

The servant burst into Nero’s bedchamber where the castrated lad, Sporus, lay asleep next to him.

“Sire!” the freedman said loudly, breaking any sense of decorum. As the emperor’s eyes opened wide, the servant quickly shouted, “The guards are leaving the palace! They’ve abandoned you!”

Nero flew from his bed, quickly turning and shaking the sleeping young man.

“Poppaea!” he said frantically. “Come, Poppaea! Get dressed at once!”

The sound of the praetorian centurion calling cadence to his marching guardsmen could still be heard as Nero rushed down the long flight of stairs that led into the entrance hall of the palace. Along with Sporus, three of his most loyal freedmen accompanied him.

“Tigellinus!” he called, seeing the prefect slowly walking towards the outer gate which had been left open.

Tigellinus turned to face him, his expression one of both resignation and sorrow.

“What is happening?”

“The winds of change are upon us, Caesar,” the prefect said, having

rehearsed his response to the emperor a hundred times over in his head beforehand. “In a few hours, the senate will convene to decide the fate of Rome. If you wish to continue to be a part of the empire’s future, you should meet with them there.”

“They mean to kill me!” Nero snapped, his expression full of disbelief. “Why else would you be marching away with my guard?”

Tigellinus did not answer, though his unchanged expression told Nero all he needed to know.

“Why?” he asked quietly, as tears welled up in his eyes. He then screamed, “*Why?* You were my friend, Tigellinus. I loved you!”

“It’s not enough,” the prefect said, with a sad shake of his head. “I am sorry.”

“Abandoned,” Nero said, tears rolling down his cheeks. “I am abandoned.”

He rushed back into the palace, hoping to find at least one of his friends who could aid him. There were always numerous guests staying at the imperial palace. Yet, when Nero burst into each room it was deserted.

“A gladiator!” he shouted, from atop one of the landings that looked down into the foyer. “I need a gladiator or anyone adept with a sword!” His pleas were met with unnerving silence as he held his hands out and looked around. He then cried, *“Have I neither friend nor foe?”*

He seemed oblivious to his freedmen, who still stood in the courtyard, their own sense of fear and uncertainty evident. Crying in anguish and stating he intended to throw himself into the Tiber, Nero fled the palace grounds, only to return less than an hour later. He found the freedmen sitting upon the steps. Sporus sat with his arms wrapped around his knees, silently weeping.

“There, there, dear Poppaea,” Nero said soothingly, placing a hand on the lad’s face. His own face was red, as were his eyes. He then asked his chief freedman, Phaon, “What can I do?”

“You cannot go before the senate.” A man named Epaphroditos spoke up. “They will cut you down on the chamber floor, like they did Julius Caesar.”

“What, then? I could always travel to Greece. The people love me there. Or perhaps Egypt. Tiberius Alexander is still loyal, I am certain of it.”

“If you flee the capital, the people will view you as a coward,” Phaon said at last. “My villa is but four miles from Rome. You will be safe there. We should wait for the senate to convene, and then decide on how we should face them.”

“Ah, dear Phaon,” Nero said. “You are ever the fountain of wisdom. Come, we need horses!”

The praetorians had left their horses within the imperial stables, so Nero and his small entourage had no issue with finding suitable mounts. The streets were crammed with the nighttime wheeled traffic, for by Roman law it was only at night that carts and wagons were permitted. Nero kept his cloak held close over his face, ever fearful that the senate had assassins lurking among the scores of merchants, restocking their stalls before the morning came. It took them over an hour to travel to Phaon’s villa, a short distance from the city.

It was now well after sunrise, and the small group was surprised to see an imperial courier waiting for them in the villa courtyard. What none of them knew was that the man had not been dispatched by the senate, but rather the praetorian prefect, Nymphidius. He had given the messenger a verbal dispatch to pass on to the emperor, while reassuring him that it came directly from the senate. None knew it was a lie perpetuated by the prefect himself.

“This cannot be a dispatch from the senate already!” Phaon protested.

“I’m afraid it is,” the courier replied. “The senate convened around midnight, and they have reached their verdict.”

“And what sentence has the senate passed upon me?” Nero asked. “Shameful as it is that I have been put on trial and condemned in absentia.”

The messenger swallowed and struggled to say the words that he had been ordered to relay. He was fearful of repercussions from Nero, despite the fact that no one within the emperor’s group was armed. However, it was an overwhelming burden for a humble imperial servant to have to tell his emperor he was condemned.

“The senate,” he said, “has named you a…an enemy of the people of Rome.”

Nero’s face turned white, though privately he could not say he was surprised.

“And what do they propose to do with their emperor?” Epaphroditos asked incredulously.

The courier found his resolve to continue, for the emperor remained silent. “You have been sentenced to death,” he said quickly. “I have been told by the praetorian prefect, Commander Nymphidius, that an armed force is being dispatched to bring you to the Forum.”

“And then?” Nero asked, his voice surprisingly calm.

“You are to be bludgeoned to death in full view of the people of Rome.” Not wishing to bear witness to how Nero would take such devastating news, the courier saluted—out of force of habit—and quickly mounted his horse.

“Thus does the greatest dynasty the world has ever seen come to an end,” Nero said quietly. “It ends like it began, with treasonous butchers from the senate striking like cowards.”

His reference was to the murder of Julius Caesar. And while Caesar was technically never emperor, it was his slaying by the senate which set the stage for the eventual fall of the republic and the rise of the empire.

“I am the last of that prestigious line,” Nero continued. “Not even the greatest poets could have penned such a tragedy as this.”

He despondently walked into the entrance hall of Phaon’s villa before slumping against one of the walls. His freedmen were full of vexation and fear. Sporus sat across from him quietly weeping. It was not for the emperor that he cried, but rather out of abject fear over what would now happen to him. As the castrated plaything of a deposed mad emperor, what use did Rome have for him?

“There, there, sweat Poppaea,” Nero said consolingly. A fearful and sudden realization came to him, and he shook his head quickly. “No, you are not she. You are a phantom, a phantom sent by the gods to mock me for killing her. Oh, yes, I killed her!”

With fresh cries, this time brought on by the sorrow of remorse, he called for a pen and parchment. He sat at his freedman’s desk, and in his own hand wrote a pleading letter to the senate. As he finished he stopped and let out a sigh. He then shook his head, knowing that any such entreaties were both futile and unbecoming of the last emperor of the Julio-Claudians. As he stood, he saw his secretary, Epaphroditos, standing in the doorway.

“I require a sharpened knife,” Nero said. “And I shall need your help, dear friend.” He looked up for a moment and took a deep breath. As he sighed, he said quietly, “Qualis artifex pereo…what an artist dies in me.”



In fact, the senate had yet to declare Nero an enemy of the imperial state and was, at that moment, deliberating his fate. Consul Italicus was now desperate to save face with his peers and was fearful for his own life. A number of senators had lost friends to his conspiracies and informants of

treason, whether real or fictitious.

“Noble senators,” he said, as he stood on the senate floor, his hand raised. “A crisis unlike any seen in generations has befallen us. Not since before the rise of the Julio-Claudians has the dynastic rule of Rome been threatened. Indeed, one must look back to the dark days of the republic, to see the last time our noble fathers slew each other over control of the state.”

“The emperor has fallen ever deeper in madness.” Suetonius Paulinus spoke up. “And in his despair has fled the capital. And yet, despite his numerous crimes against members of this august body, as well as Rome herself, I cannot find it in me to condemn him just yet. All of us have served the dynasty founded by Emperor Augustus Caesar, and it is that lineage we are loyal to.”

“What would you propose, then?” Senator Nerva asked. “If we do not act with some form of resolve, then we risk our own legions marching on Rome. Is that what we want, to have Roman soldiers sacking their own capital?”

While Paulinus agreed with Nerva’s assessment, for reasons even he could not explain, he still felt at least some pangs of what had once been loyalty to Emperor Nero. He remembered the young man who had come to the throne at far too young an age, and yet he had shown such promise. Paulinus had thought well of him, even considering him a friend when Nero first sent him to Britannia.

“I do not think anyone in this assembly wishes to see the house of the divine Augustus fall so ignominiously,” he said, carefully selecting his words. “But I agree, we must take action if we are to save Rome from chaos and ruin. The emperor has fled in terror, this is true. But he is a mere four miles from the city. He must be brought before the senate and compelled to see reason. If we can negotiate a peace with the rebellious governors, we can save Rome as well as the imperial dynasty. I recommend Nero continue to serve as emperor, but only so he might produce an heir. Those legates who march their legions towards our gates are our colleagues and peers. They hold just as much love for the Julio-Claudians as the rest of us. Nero may not be fit to rule, but he can still produce sons for the empire. For may the gods help us, should we suffer a usurper upon the throne!”



Paulinus’ words swayed his colleagues, even those most anxious to

pronounce the death sentence upon Nero. It was agreed that he should be allowed to live. And so a second courier, this one actually sent by the senate, rode with all possible speed to Phaon's villa. The rider quickly dismounted and forced his way past a pair of slaves into the main foyer.

"Damn it all," he hissed, as he saw Nero, his back against the wall, a bloody knife in his lap.

With the help of Epaphroditos, he had forced the point of the blade into his neck. Dark crimson gushed from the hideous wound and, despite the pain, Nero had a content smile upon his face.

"It wasn't supposed to end this way!" the courier said, as he ripped a section of Nero's tunic and compressed it against the wound. It was immediately saturated in blood.

"Is it…is it, then, so dreadful a thing to die?" Nero rasped in a famous quote from Vergil's *The Aeneid*. Blood and spittle dribbled from his lip. With his strength almost gone, he slapped away the messenger's hand. His skin was pale, his eyes slowly clouding over. With his last words, he whispered, "Too late. This is fidelity."

As his vision faded, Nero recalled the bitter irony. This date marked the anniversary of the execution of his first wife and step-sister, Claudia Octavia. Would her vengeful spirit torment him in the next life?

Thus ended the reign of Emperor Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, the last of the Julio-Claudians. The dynasty that had ruled the Roman Empire for a hundred years, ended with a broken man's knife thrust into his own neck.

Chapter XI: An Uncertain Beginning

Hispania Tarraconensis
16 June 68 A.D.
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On the morning of 9 June, before the city criers read the news of Nero's suicide to the public, Galba's freedman, Icelus, was immediately released from his prison cell by a member of Nymphidius' guard. His orders were simple, to ride with all possible speed to Galba, and inform his master that he was now master of Rome. Though the senate had yet to make any sort of formal declaration, there was no doubt in anyone's mind that Servius Sulpicius Galba would be declared Rome's new emperor. Icelus rode day and night, and in a feat that few would have believed, traveled a thousand miles in just seven days.

It was on the 16th of June that the ever loyal freedman arrived in the city of Caesar Augusta in northeast Hispania. Outside the city gates was a vast military encampment. And though it was easy enough to spot the eagle and standards of Legio VI, Victrix, there were twice as many men conducting drill and other duties.

"Who are these men?" Icelus asked a legionary, who was on sentry duty at the camp.

"Galba has ordered the raising of a new legion," the soldier explained. "They will march with us when we seize the throne from Emperor Nero. That is, if we can ever find enough weapons, armor, and equipment for the lot of them!"

Icelus simply nodded, saying nothing. He wanted no one to hear the news of Nero's death until after Galba did. He found his master at the governor's palace. It was midmorning, and the old man had just finished his breakfast. He was joined by a number of his entourage, including Vinius, Laco, Otho, and Caecina.

"Master, I have returned!" Icelus said, with a deep bow. He was a frightful sight, having not shaved in weeks, his hair unkempt, and his clothes torn and filthy.

"By Hades," Galba said, standing from his chair. "Is it really you, dear Icelus? I thought for certain Nero would send me your head in a box."

“I feared the same,” the freedman replied.

“How is it you’ve escaped?”

“I didn’t,” Icelus answered. “I was set free by the praetorian prefect, Nymphidius.”

“So he has betrayed Nero, then?” Vinius asked.

“One could call it that,” Icelus shrugged. “But it does not matter. Nero is dead, my friends.”

He spent the next few minutes telling what little he knew; that the senate had convicted Nero, declaring him an enemy of the state, and that the emperor had taken his own life. He did not know the senate only condemned Nero after he was already dead.

“Your words fill me with joy,” Galba said, though he was not smiling. He placed his hands on his freedman’s shoulders.

“The senate had not convened when I left Rome, but I think it is safe to presume you are now emperor, *Caesar*.”

“And by my first action, I declare you are no longer a mere former slave,” Galba responded. “From this day forth, you are hereby a member of the equites, Rome’s most noble order of knights. And I appoint you a member of the new imperial council.”

“Thank you, sire,” Icelus replied, with another bow.

Galba dismissed him, ordering slaves to bathe and shave Icelus while finding him a proper toga with the narrow purple stripe of the equites. It was completely unlawful, for not even an emperor could promote a former slave into one of the ruling classes of Rome. No one protested, however, and all were still in a state of disbelief over what they had just heard. Galba was wasting no time in assuming the powers of emperor, and he had a few matters that needed to be settled before departing for Rome.

“Caecina,” he said, after taking his chair once more.

“Sire?”

“You came to me from our small southern province of Hispania Baetica, and yet your governor did not.”

“It is true,” Caecina confessed. “I took a great risk in diverting funds to your cause out from under the nose of Governor Obultronius.”

“For which I thanked you by giving you command of a legion,” Galba noted. “Am I to understand that Obultronius will not approve of my assuming the role of Caesar?”

“I’m afraid not. He is staunchly loyal to the Julio-Claudians, and I doubt

even Nero's death will change that."

"And for that, he must pay with his life," Galba asserted. He then turned to Laco. "There is another senatorial magistrate who has caused me much grief, Lucius Cornelius Marcellus. See to it that he is dealt with in the same manner as Obultronius."

"But Caesar," Vinius protested. "The killing of two senators, without trial or any sense of due process, is not how most of the senate will think you should begin your reign."

"The senate will think what I tell them to think," Galba replied coldly. "I have been away from the senate for sixteen years, ten in retirement, and the last six as governor of this damned province. Not one of those simpering fools achieved his position by merit, but rather as cowering lapdogs, begging for whatever scraps Nero gave them. Such men are not even worthy of my contempt."

That his first acts as emperor, before the senate had even confirmed him, was to make a former slave a member of the equites, while ordering the immediate deaths of a pair of patricians was a bit unnerving. As Laco was being promised one of the prefectures of the Praetorian Guard, he knew that he would have to be the instrument of Galba's brutal justice, just as Tigellinus was for Nero.

While Galba continued to meet with his inner circle, Otho took his leave. There was a man he needed to see, one who had accompanied him to Lusitania and had been a member of his personal entourage. He was an older astrologer from Egypt, aptly named Ptolemy. A native Alexandrian, Ptolemy had been a practitioner of the controversial art his entire life. Otho had first met him when he was still married to Poppaea. She had been enamored with astrologers, and through her, Otho had become fascinated by the art. After their divorce, he had gone to see Ptolemy, who told him that he would outlive Nero. Otho had paid the man handsomely to keep this prediction private. Now that it had come to pass, the governor of Lusitania reckoned it was time for another of Ptolemy's famous predictions.

"Nero is dead," the Egyptian said, as soon as Otho had opened the door to his quarters.

"He is," Otho confirmed. "And you know why I am here."

"Of course," Ptolemy confirmed. "Although, one does not need to be able to read the stars in order to know your endless ambition."

“No great man has ever lacked in ambition,” Otho said, as a gentle way of countering what may have been a rebuke from the astrologer.

“Quite,” Ptolemy replied. “Give me some time to draw up your star charts, and the heavens will give me the answers you seek.”

“I can pay you your usual fee, both for the readings, and for your silence,” Otho stated.

“I require no fee for my silence, at least not directly,” the astrologer replied.

“Explain.”

“Should the stars foretell the rise of Otho, the price of my silence will be a position within the imperial court.”

“Of course,” Otho assured him. “If the gods will it, then you shall be the emperor’s personal astrologer, with your own suite at the imperial palace.”



Despite the high volume of maritime vessels coming through Salamis, it still took another week for Gaius to obtain passage back to Caesarea. He remained near the port, though during the day, he would ride his horse along the coastline. Eastern Cyprus was beautiful country. The high mountains to the west gave way to the fertile plain of grassland, which led down to the beaches.

He was thankful, in a way, that he no longer harbored any sort of affections for Verinia. He was, however, conflicted about how he should feel regarding his son. He supposed there should have been the unconditional love that a parent was naturally inclined to feel towards their child. And yet, he was disappointed to find those feelings were very faint, if they existed at all.

“It’s all for the best,” he reasoned one evening, as he stared out at the sea while the sun set slowly behind him.

The following morning, he was finally able to book passage back to the mainland. As he boarded the ship, he was unaware of another vessel which had just docked, bearing an imperial courier. The news the man carried would soon change the fortunes of all. As for Optio Gaius Artorius Armiger, the brief and disappointing reunion with the son, who was now no longer his, would abruptly dissipate in the turmoil that would soon shake the whole of the empire.



That most of the Roman world knew within a month about Nero's death, as well as the rapid ratification which the senate gave to Emperor Galba, was a testament to how efficiently the imperial messenger service worked. Roman naval vessels had departed to North Africa, Egypt, Greece, and Asia Minor, as well as Syria and war-torn Judea. Given the extremely powerful army which the commander-in-chief, Vespasian, wielded, it was crucial that the new emperor assert his authority, while gaining assurances as to the Flavian general's loyalty.

It was Vespasian's son, Titus, who had taken the dispatch from the imperial messenger. He found his father having his midday meal with General Trajan, who had just returned from the short expedition to Idumea.

"And so ends the Julio-Claudian Dynasty," Trajan noted. He shrugged. "Well, I can't say I'll miss Nero. And neither will you, sir."

"I always had a feeling this day would come," the commander-in-chief replied. "I suppose I should feel a sense of relief, but in truth, I feel great uncertainty. At least with Nero, I knew where I stood, and that I had to watch my back. I've never even met Galba. You're from Hispania, Trajan. What do you know about him?"

"He's been a very efficient governor," his legate replied. "Though he can be rather mean-spirited. I also know that when he was governor of Upper Germania twenty-five years ago, the legions thought he was a twat."

"Why is that?" Titus asked.

"Apparently he was a little too strict and by-the-book, as it were. There was no grey area with him, everything was either right or wrong. A lot of soldiers got flogged, or worse, for what would normally be considered minor infractions. That he stuck his nose in the legions' business upset the officers greatly, especially the centurions. Still, that was a long time ago. Very few, if any, from that time are still serving in the ranks."

"Well, the next question is, will Galba view me as a possible threat?" Vespasian thought aloud. "He's already executed the governor of Hispania Baetica, on a whim it seems. I wonder if he will be another Nero, punishing those who do well, or executing random noblemen because he feels threatened by them. An old man's paranoia can be a dangerous thing, when he is ruler of the known world."

"The Roman Empire has a total of twenty-four legions," Trajan observed.

“Twenty-five, if you count the new one that Galba just raised. You command three legions within Judea, plus at least five more that you could readily call upon between Syria and Egypt. That’s nearly one third of all legionaries within the empire. Combine that with an equal number of auxiliaries, as well as allied troops from neighboring kingdoms, and you conceivably have over a hundred thousand professional soldiers at your disposal.”

“That’s far more than any single person within the Roman world,” Titus noted. “I would say that Galba is quite anxious, and rightly so, to know whether or not he can count on the loyalty of the Flavians.”

“Who would have thought we’d be so damned important,” Vespasian chuckled. He then looked at his son. “Three years ago, you were in fear for your life following your former wife’s association with the Piso family. A year later, I was an outcast forced into exile because I fell asleep at one of Nero’s damned recitals. Now, everyone thinks we’re so bloody important.”

“And dangerous,” Titus added. “If the senate has given legitimacy to Galba’s claim to the imperial throne, then it would be prudent for us to accept its decision. That is, unless we want to risk civil war.”

“Galba’s a frail old man,” Trajan observed. “It will be a miracle if he survives the journey to Rome. And even then, I cannot foresee his reign lasting for very long. As he has no heir, I think we should be more concerned about who he names as his successor.”

“Nero’s time grows short, and his heirs will not sit upon the throne for long,” Titus quoted aloud, in reference to a supposed prophetic vision that the captured Jewish general, Josephus, had made.

“Do we need to start with that again?” Vespasian sighed.

“It’s been a year since we destroyed Jotapata and captured Josephus,” Titus noted. “He was right about how long the siege would last, and I would say he was correct in stating Nero’s reign was growing short. Let’s see how long Galba sits upon the throne.” The broad grin he bore made it difficult to tell if he was being serious or sarcastic. Trajan decide upon the later.

“Galba’s a frail old man, so it doesn’t count if he falls over from old age,” he said.

“Fair enough,” Titus conceded. “But if his reign is short due to other influences…well, we should just wait and see. And let us not forget, general, it was on the first of July a year ago that that Jewish holy man, Yohanan ben Zakki, added his little prediction to that of Josephus. We have another year to see if it comes true.”

“If I am declared emperor on the first of next July,” Vespasian said, allowing himself a chuckle, “I’ll take that damned Josephus back to Rome and adopt him into the family!”



Rumors regarding the circumstances surrounding Emperor Nero’s death spread throughout the eastern legions. In coming weeks, conspiracy theories would abound, with many soldiers decrying the senate as a band of murders and usurpers who butchered their dear emperor in cold blood. And, while Vespasian most certainly had no love for the departed Nero, he made no attempts to quell the anger that was rising from the ranks of his legions. Such simmering rage would only endear the soldiers to him more. Doubtless this would unsettle Galba who, like Nero, viewed anyone of competence in command of a huge army as a threat to his regime. This would also create a very awkward situation for the new emperor. If he simply tried to sack Vespasian, there was the very real chance the commander-in-chief would simply ignore him, and such an attempt could conceivably drive the eastern armies to rebellion.

It was nothing personal against Galba, for unlike the Rhine legions, the armies in Syria, Egypt, and Judea had no prior history with the new emperor. The vast majority of legionaries and auxilia troopers had no idea who he was, what he looked like, his age, or anything about him for that matter. The soldiery was simply enraged with the senate and would feel little more than contempt for the new Caesar, regardless of who it was.

The aftermath of Nero’s death created a rather chaotic atmosphere within the imperial capital itself. The senate and equites rejoiced at his passing, damning him as a despotic tyrant fit to be cast into the Tiber. The plebian classes, on the other hand, were terribly despondent to hear of their beloved emperor’s passing. Few understood that Nero’s fiscal ineptitude had led the empire to the brink of ruin. He may have rebuilt much of the city as a beautiful piece of art, but the cost had driven the empire to its breaking point. Still, to them he was the one who refused to abandon them, when the senate had said Rome should be left in ruins. Many openly mourned his death, though this was tempered by fear of reprisal from the new emperor, whom the people had little to no knowledge of.

Within the legions, the attitude was definitely one of somber mourning.

The army had loved Nero, and the legions of the Rhine were now filled with regret that they had failed to finish the rebels under Galba. The Germanic soldiers were further incensed by their own governor, Verginius, for refusing the mantle of Caesar when it was offered to him. Instead, they were begrudgingly forced to accept the rule of a man whom their hatred for extended back more than twenty years.

As for Nero's mortal remains, these were cremated in a very quiet ceremony. Instead of being interred at the Mausoleum of Augustus along with his imperial forbearers, Nero's ashes were placed in the Mausoleum of his biological father's family, the Domitii Ahenobarbi.

Chapter XII: Galba's Trail of Blood

Hispania
Late July 68 A.D.
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It was late in July when Servius Sulpicius Galba, Rome's new emperor, finally began his long journey back to the capital. At the head marched his newly formed legion, which was known as Legio VII, *Gemina*. Though officially a legion of the empire, its soldiers bore only a scant resemblance to their brother legionaries. Each wore a red tunic, many of which were borrowed from the Sixth Victrix Legion. Sufficient gladii had also been procured, the armories of the urban cohorts being pilfered of any excess weapons available. There had been no time to obtain armor, helmets, or shields, and there were only enough tents for less than a third of the legion. Still, they marched with great pride at the head of the new emperor's column with their freshly minted eagle standard held high.

As for Galba himself, he insisted on riding his horse, rather than in a litter. He wore a polished breastplate with a purple cloak over his left shoulder. He also wore an ornate cavalry officer's sword on his hip. As frail as Galba was, for it took several men to help him on and off his horse, his being dressed as a general armed for battle was rather comical to many of his soldiers. Still, he was their emperor, ratified by the senate, by the grace of the gods.

Most of his entourage also accompanied him, with the exception of Caecina Alienus, who had departed for Lugdunum. He was to relieve Verginius of his command of Legio IV while ordering the Rhine legions back to their billets. An old senator named Hordeonius Flaccus, who was even older than Galba and stricken by gout, was named the new governor of Upper Germania. Verginius was not being sacked for any sort of misconduct or wrongdoing, and Galba was fully aware of the reality that he owed his position to the general, who stayed the hand of his legions. However, Verginius' extreme popularity with the legions, despite their anger at his refusal to accept the crown, made him potentially dangerous.

Vinius rode next to the emperor, wearing his old general's armor and cloak. Laco had donned a simple riding tunic, for though Galba had promised

him command of the Praetorian Guard, it would only be after they arrived in Rome that he could outfit himself properly. As he had yet to be invited into Galba's inner circle, despite the monetary donatives made and support from neighboring Lusitania, Otho resigned himself to riding with the growing entourage of patricians and equites, who seemed to materialize from out of nowhere following news of Nero's death. He still continued to meet privately with Vinius, so at least he had an inside voice within the emperor's council.

It was a week later, around the first of August, when a deputation from the senate arrived to greet their new emperor. It was at the large crossroads city of Nemausus, in the province of Gallia Narbonensis, that the consuls and senators got their first glimpse of Emperor Galba.

"Hail, Caesar!" Consul Italicus said with a deep bow, as Galba was helped from his horse.

"The senate welcomes you, sire," Consul Galerius added, "and urges you to return to the capital with all haste. Rome longs to meet her new emperor."

"And for that, the senate has my gratitude," Galba said, with a modest bow. He then extended his hand towards his large principia tent. "Come, join me for refreshments. There are some serious matters to discuss."

"Of course, sire," Galerius said, as the entourage of senators accompanied their new emperor into the vast tent.

Inside, the furniture consisted of modest wooden chairs and simple couches. Prefect Nymphidius, in an attempt to win favor with Galba, had sent a small caravan of wagons laden with various pieces of furniture from the imperial palace. Galba, who was always of more stoic and simplistic tastes, returned the furniture with a firm rebuke to Nymphidius about wasteful spending, further demanding that he pay for the costs of returning the shipment out of his own coffers. Even the ornate chair, which served as the emperor's imperial throne while on campaign, was returned.

"You'll be happy to know, Caesar, that the senate has ratified your ascension," Italicus said, once the men were all settled.

"I am simply returning to Rome to assume my duties," Galba replied, somewhat curtly. "There is no joy to be had in my becoming emperor."

"And it is a heavy burden you bear," Italicus noted. His face twitched as he saw Galba scowling, at what he perceived was a bit of forced flattery. The consul decided to simply continue. "There is some concern among the senate, regarding the two nobles you had put to death in Hispania…"

“They were guilty of treason. There is nothing to discuss,” Galba interrupted. He clapped his hands, and a bevy of slaves entered, bearing trays of figs, nuts, and cups of wine. “Please, enjoy some of the humble delicacies brought from Hispania.”

It was a baffling paradox for the senators and magistrates. The emperor was certainly treating them kindly enough, while proving to be an affable host. However, when it came time to discuss any sort of imperial business, he came across as very much the autocrat. His word was law, and the senate was expected to do his bidding without question.

“And when can the people expect you in Rome, sire?” Galerius asked.

“In due time,” Galba replied. “By the Augustan Games, at the latest.”

“Caesar, that isn’t until mid-October, more than three months from now,” Galerius noted.

“Is the senate incapable of ruling in my absence?” the emperor asked, his words biting into the consuls. “There are matters that I must attend to in Gaul before I travel to Rome. Betuus Cilo, the governor of Aquitania, had the audacity to ask that I send him auxilia cohorts with which to fight against my own martyred ally, Julius Vindex. He will pay for his impudence with his life, though I will grant him the option of suicide as opposed to execution.”

“And what do you propose doing with me?” a voiced asked, from the back of the assembled mass of senators.

Galba was quite surprised to see that it was none other than General Verginius, still in his armor.

“Am I to meet the same fate as Governor Cilo?” the general persisted. There was a trace of defiance in his voice. Yet, he would accept whatever fate came to him.

“You would do well to watch your tone with me,” Galba retorted, though his voice carried a distinct sense of indifference. “As you are no longer legate of Legio IV, you will remove that uniform at once and return to the senate. After that, I don’t give a damn what you do, as long as you stay out of my sight.”

Verginius gave a curt nod and left the tent. Most of the senators were shocked Galba had let him go after demanding Governor Cilo be put to death. That Cilo had requested troops long before Galba decided to support Vindex’s revolt was immaterial. He had acted like any other governor would have in the face of rebellion. And now, it was costing him his life. And while Verginius had committed the far greater ‘crime’ in Galba’s eyes, his

popularity with the legions made him essentially untouchable. All the emperor could do was sack him and send him back to the senate. Further retribution would risk enraging forty thousand legionaries, who had already demonstrated the wanton destruction they were capable of when unleashed. Italicus and Galerius both reckoned this irritated the emperor immensely, as it was a limit to his power over the senate.



In Rome, Nymphidius was growing impatient with Galba's delays in returning to the capital. He had effectively relieved Tigellinus from his duties and was now in sole command of the Praetorian Guard. His onetime colleague had left the city and fallen into a perpetual drunken stupor since the death of Nero. The sooner Galba returned to Rome, the sooner Nymphidius could assert his control over him.

The prefect had risen early this morning and was intending to pay a visit to the senate chambers later that day. He had sent several letters to Galba, along with the various pieces of furniture from the imperial palace, and yet he had heard nothing. He knew of the senatorial delegation, which had departed the capital nearly a month prior, and was anxious to hear some word from them. Many within the senate assumed that Nymphidius would become the most powerful member of the emperor's circle, much like his praetorian predecessors. Instead, a single message changed everything.

"Excuse me, sir," a voice said behind him.

The prefect turned to see one of his praetorians marching quickly over to him, a scroll clutched in his hands.

"Guardsman Statius, is it?" Nymphidius asked, questioning the man as to his name.

"Yes, sir," the praetorian replied. "I served in your cohort before you assumed command of the Guard."

"Ah, yes, I do remember you. You're the guardsman who has shown a knack and willingness for more…*unorthodox* missions the emperor requires."

"Meaning I'm willing to put my sword in whomever he deems necessary," Statius replied bluntly.

Guardsman Tiberius Statius Doro was among the increasingly rare praetorians who had been promoted from the legions. He was also willing to take on any tasking, no matter how unpleasant. Of course, this had always

come with additional compensation, which Nero had been more than happy to pay. It had been Statius' blade that procured the previous emperor a number of estates from convicted senators, who balked at the thought of taking their own lives. A man of such cold and utterly merciless scruples unnerved Nymphidius slightly, for from what he had witnessed, Tiberius Statius simply did not care who his blade struck, as long as the orders came with the emperor's authority and the compensation was adequate. On this day, however, he was simply performing his daily duties as a praetorian, and one of those involved bringing messages to his commanding officer.

"You'll want to read this, sir," Statius said, handing the scroll to the prefect. The seal was broken, as it had initially been addressed to the senate and had been read to the assembly by Flavius Sabinus. The prefect quickly read the message, his face growing red with anger. For not only did it entail Galba's biting rebuke, regarding the shipment of imperial furniture, but an additional directive that threatened to undermine all of Nymphidius' plans.

"That filthy fucking bastard," he growled under his breath. "He means to replace Tigellinus with one of his own lapdogs!"

"A pity, sir," Statius replied, his voice unchanging. "I know you had hoped to assume sole command of the Guard."

"Thank you, guardsman, that will be all," Nymphidius said, brusquely dismissing the praetorian.

Guardsman Statius was a very private person, keeping mostly to himself. Many of his fellow praetorians maintained their distance from him when not on duty together. No one knew anything about his past, except that he had spent ten years in the legions. He was literate in both Latin and Greek, yet it was unknown where he had been raised or how he acquired his education. Stranger still, he had been offered promotion numerous times, yet he always declined, although whenever he spoke his fellow praetorians listened. He seemed to prefer a sense of anonymity, but his reputation as a hired blade for the emperor had grown in the years since the Great Fire. He was relatively tall and powerfully built, maintaining a rather cold and distant demeanor. He made his superiors nervous, yet he always followed orders and had never once been subject to any disciplinary issues in more than a decade with the Guard. About the only person within the praetorians he considered a friend was another guardsman named Atticus. Atticus was a few years younger, in his mid-thirties, with an affable and good natured humor. Popular with the

other guardsmen, it seemed strange to them that he and Statius were practically inseparable.

Statius found Atticus soon after delivering the message to the now irate Commander Nymphidius. His fellow guardsman had just come off duty and was enjoying a pitcher of wine at a small tavern, located within the walls of the praetorian barracks. It was one of many perks the Guard enjoyed, having a private watering hole for only themselves and select female companions who suited their fancy on any given day.

"And how did our esteemed prefect handle the news that he now has a colleague?" Atticus asked, as Statius took a seat across from him.

"About the same as a spoiled patrician's brat who gets his favorite toy taken from him," Statius replied, causing his friend to laugh appreciatively.

"A less inspiring wretch has yet to command the Praetorian Guard," Atticus said, shaking his head. "I don't know who he bribed, blackmailed, or fucked to get the position, but ever since he assumed command, he's done nothing except plot to improve his own political standing. He seeks to control the emperor, like Sejanus did to Tiberius, while using us as his weapon for keeping the senate and plebs in line."

"He's treading in dangerous waters," Statius remarked. "He's already sent Galba a number of damned near hysterical reports, which make it seem like the empire is falling apart. It is true that Clodius Macer, in North Africa, has refused to fully accept the new emperor, but that does not mean he is planning a rebellion. Nymphidius further asserts that the situation in Judea is precarious when, in fact, General Vespasian has cornered those Jewish pigs to Jerusalem."

"Perhaps he is hoping that all these alarmist dispatches will somehow make him indispensable to the new regime," Atticus replied. "These are uncertain times for Rome. Whether or not the coming days will be of stability or crisis depends on what kind of ruler Galba proves to be. Will he be another strong and benevolent emperor, like Augustus, or will he be a vicious tyrant, like Caligula?"

The two men finished their wine and made their way out into the courtyard, taking in the morning sun.

"I'll be glad when I rotate off the night watch," Atticus remarked. "I find it damn near impossible to sleep properly during the day."

"Find some of last night's leftovers from the brothel, and I'm sure they'll help you sleep just fine," Statius offered.

“Guardsman Atticus! Guardsman Statius!”

It was their tesserarius, Proculus, calling to them, walking very briskly in their direction, While Statius found most praetorian officers to be worthless and self-serving, Proculus was one of the few he had at least a modicum of respect for.

“Please tell me this isn’t another meeting of the entire century,” Atticus grumbled. “I haven’t gotten shit for sleep in over a week since you transferred me to night patrol.”

“Not just the century,” the tesserarius replied, “but the entire damned cohort. Tribune Vergilio seemed pretty rattled when I heard him ordering Densus and the other centurions to summon everyone.”

This alarmed the two guardsmen. Vergilio was the type of patrician officer known for his lackadaisical ‘come what may’ attitude, who never so much as raised an eyebrow, even during the gravest of crises. That something had rattled him to the point he felt he needed to hold an emergency formation with the cohort meant grave news indeed.

Centurions were still getting accountability of their soldiers when Proculus, Statius, and Atticus returned to the parade field. Many of the night patrol guardsmen, who had only just gone to sleep, were now stumbling onto the field in various states of undress, with many curses being muttered.

“This better be good,” one guardsman grumbled. “The services of that Achaean acrobat I left in my bed cost a fortune.”

Vergilio paced back and forth in front of the growing mass of guardsmen. In a structural change from the legions, where cohorts were commanded by senior ranking centurions, within the Praetorian Guard these billets were filled by tribunes from the equites.

“Men, I bring grave news from the senate,” Vergilio said, once satisfied that enough of his praetorians were present. “It pains me to say this, but our own commander, Prefect Nymphidius, appears to have gone completely mad. Even as we speak, he is addressing the senate, having proclaimed himself the rightful heir to Emperor Nero.”

This assertion brought a number of baffled gazes and utterances of disbelief from the assembled ranks. Even the centurions were aghast at what they had just heard. All knew that Nymphidius was a power-hungry and greedy despot, yet no one could have predicted this maddening, and likely suicidal, display of arrogance.

“Beg your pardon, sir,” Centurion Densus spoke up. “But how, exactly, is Nymphidius justifying his right to be Nero’s heir?”

“He claims to be the illegitimate son of Gaius Caligula,” Vergilio explained. “He has even taken the castrated boy, Sporus, and paraded him as his wife, calling him ‘Poppaea’, like Emperor Nero did.”

“They should just leave that poor creature alone,” Proculus muttered in disgust.

“Whatever his claim,” the tribune continued, “The senate has already proclaimed Servius Galba as our new emperor. It would be to our deepest shame should the Guard change allegiances yet again, especially since Galba has not committed the same crime of abandonment that was used to justify forsaking Nero. However, if we strike down our commander it will not only reaffirm our loyalties to Emperor Galba, but in our own way, we will avenge the death of Emperor Nero.”

It was an impassioned plea, one that was very much out of character for Vergilio. It also caused a flurry of curses towards Nymphidius, whom the praetorians had little love for anyway. It was a bit surreal, that while the other cohorts at the barracks went about their daily duties as if nothing unusual were transpiring, the men of Vergilio’s cohort armed themselves for battle.



Nymphidius claim to the imperial throne was both bizarre, as well as completely ludicrous. While it was actually true that his mother, an imperial freedwoman named Nymphidia, had had an affair with Emperor Gaius Caligula, it was common knowledge that this began well after her son was born. Still, there were enough who either believed the claim or, in the very least, were enemies of Galba and therefore willing to take their chances with the praetorian prefect. Galba’s refusal to grant Nymphidius sole command of the Guard, coupled with his rebuke of the prefect’s attempts at gaining favor, had given rise to the fear that Nymphidius would simply be cast aside, once the emperor returned to Rome. Convinced that he could simply seize the imperial throne by force, he headed toward the barracks, certain his guardsmen were ready to march on the senate with him at their head.

A large mob followed the prefect. A few of these were senatorial patricians, along with a handful of equites, and a large number who were simply curious onlookers. As the band approached the barracks, Nymphidius

was shocked and angered to see the gates were closed.

"Who dares to shut my own gates on me?" he shouted up to a sentry on the wall.

"Guardsmen who are loyal to Rome's lawful emperor, Servius Galba!" came the reply.

"By Victoria's twat!" Nymphidius snarled. He then composed himself and called up, "I, too, am loyal to Rome's true emperor. Now let your commander pass through these gates!"

A few unintelligible words were spoken by the sentry to his officers. After a few impatient moments, the cross brace was slid back, and the gates opened. The prefect was mildly surprised to see hundreds of his guardsmen, in full armor, waiting for him on the other side.

As he strolled confidently through the entrance to the large barracks, he was certain these men were ready to march with him to the senate. However, no sooner had he and a very small number of companions crossed onto the parade field, the gate was slammed shut behind them. Startled shouts resounded from the other side.

"Why in Hades have you…" Nymphidius' words were cut short, as a spear was flung at him. It sailed over the heads of the guardsmen in the first few ranks, slamming into the gate a few feet from the prefect.

While Tribune Vergilio had not intended to simply slay Nymphidius in cold blood, the flung spear caused a chain reaction of events, as guardsmen quickly drew their blades. The prefect's demeanor changed abruptly from supreme confidence to abject terror. He gave a cry of fear as he ran along the wall, hoping to find a means of escape. Dozens of guardsmen pursued him, although it was Tiberius Statius who intercepted him. The praetorian tackled him into the wall, knocking the wind from Nymphidius' lungs. His gladius flashed from its scabbard as Statius plunged the blade into the prefect's side. Nymphidius gasped and convulsed, as he tried to grab onto the guardsman's armor.

Blood spurted onto Statius' hand, and he twisted his weapon deep into his victim's side. He growled into Nymphidius' ear, "You were a shitty commander and an even more pathetic presumptive usurper."



It was late August, when Caecina Alienus arrived in Mogontiacum to

assume command of Legio IV, Macedonia. While he was glad to be given a legion command, he was even happier to be away from that nefarious fossil who now ruled the Roman world. When he reached the fortress, he found his legionaries were still in a foul state of mind regarding their new emperor. Caecina dined with his chief tribune that night, and the young man was rather direct in his assessment of their legion's disposition.

"The lads *hate* Galba," he stated. "And they hate him because our centurions despise him. The primus pilus, and at least one of the centurions primus ordo, served under Galba back when they were young legionaries. I know this must be difficult for you to hear, given you came from our new emperor's entourage."

"Only nominally," Caecina replied. It surprised the chief tribune that his legate appeared indifferent as he asked, "And have you made any efforts to quell this seditious talk?"

"With no disrespect intended towards the emperor, I honestly see no reason to. We can tell them not to speak disrespectfully towards Galba, but that does not change how they actually feel. If I were you, I would speak with the master centurion about it. I'm certain he would tell you all sorts of stories about Galba's tenure as governor."

The chief tribune's tone was contentious and almost insubordinate. Caecina knew the young man had hoped command of the legion would fall to him after Verginius was removed, and there was little doubt that he resented being passed over for the legate's position. Still, what concerned him more was not the young man's resentment, but rather what the resentment of the entire legion against Galba could lead to. He dismissed the chief tribune and decided he should visit some of the other legions, and ascertain the deportment of their soldiers.

It would be another week before Caecina made the journey from Mogontiacum to the fortress at Bonna, approximately one hundred miles to the north. He needed to make certain his own legion was in order before visiting any of his fellow legates. Surprisingly, the day-to-day duties of the Fourth Legion appeared to be rather routine. Legionaries conducted weapons drill and battle formations, paraded for their centurions daily, while conducting all the endless maintenance and upkeep of the fortress and the surrounding roads. Caecina heard no real grumblings from the ranks, and even the centurions acted as if all was normal.

On the day he left for Bonna, Legate Caecina took a small entourage of fifty horsemen from the legion's cavalry, along with two of the staff tribunes, and his centurion primus pilus.

Master Centurion Titus Claudius Bulla was a lifelong career soldier with over thirty years in the ranks. His hair was still thick, though completely gray. His face was weathered from the years on campaign, and his rugged forearms bore numerous scars from adversaries who'd been dispatched to Hades decades before.

"I wanted to talk with you, master centurion," Caecina said. "That is why I had you accompany me on this journey."

"I thought as much, sir," Bulla replied. He had been waiting for his legate to approach him, especially in light of the near mutiny that occurred between the death of Nero and the rise of Galba. Still he maintained his silence, offering nothing that Caecina did not specifically ask for. After all, he did not know where his legate's loyalties lay, and as he did come from Galba's entourage, Bulla regarded him with some suspicion.

"You have a history with our new emperor," the legate stated.

"That's putting it mildly, sir." Bulla's expression was unchanged, yet there was an air of tension in his voice.

"I know he had a reputation for being a harsh disciplinarian, though that should not trouble a battle-hardened centurion such as yourself."

"There is a difference between being harsh and being cruel," the master centurion countered. "I have ordered many floggings and have personally administered more than I can count. Three times in my career, I have had to oversee the carrying out of a death sentence against deserters. However, not once have I ever punished a soldier for offences they did not commit."

Caecina suspected there was a story behind this assertion, and that it had to do with the time when Bulla was a young legionary. "Tell me everything," he directed.

"As you well know, sir, a legate's duties do not include the administration of most punishments. That is the charge of centurions and their subordinate officers. Only when a soldier commits a capital offense, such as theft, murder, desertion, or cowardice in battle, does it become the legate's concern. Galba must not have been kept busy enough with his duties as governor-general, for he often meddled in the daily operations of the legions, in particular the dolling out of disciplinary actions, which he seemed to relish. His sentences went beyond that which was humane and acceptable.

Soldiers feared and hated him, thinking he would have them beaten, demoted, or fined a month's wages, simply for looking at him wrong."

"And what did he do to you?" Caecina asked. "Don't tell me you simply observed his cruelties. Hatred does not simmer for decades unless one has personally been grievously wronged."

Bulla took a deep breath through his nose. Clearly the memories upset him greatly. Caecina could see his façade of impenetrable stoicism cracking.

"I was accused of insubordination and failure to follow orders," he finally said. "The original charge of not following orders was when I was accused of failing to turn up for sewage maintenance duty. The thing is, I wasn't even on the roster. It was another soldier, one whose name was very similar to mine. What's more, he actually showed up to do his detail. There was no one absent. My tesserarius knew this, as he had filled out the duty roster. Galba happened to be conducting a random inspection of the century, and rather than asking for clarification, indicted me for shirking my duties. When I explained that he had read the roster incorrectly, he became enraged, berating me for calling him a liar. My centurion tried to intervene, stating that I was on *immune* status and, therefore, was exempt from fatigue duties. During the time in question, I was performing my immune duties as an armorer's apprentice."

"Let me guess," Caecina said, knowing where the story was going. "Galba was embarrassed that he'd made an ass of himself, and so he charged you with insubordination."

"His reputation precedes him, I see," the master centurion remarked. "Yes, I was found guilty of insubordination to the governor-general. My centurion protested, stating I had done nothing wrong. Unfortunately, his attempts to protect me led me to an even harsher sentence. Galba threatened him with reduction in rank and stated that I was to be given fifty lashes, in full view of the legion. And since Galba insisted on personally overseeing the punishment, there was no way the lashers could go easy on me. I spent three weeks in the infirmary after that. And if you think I'm the only one he treated so contemptuously, you should speak to all of the retired veterans who remember those dark days. I was just one among many."

They continued to ride in silence for some time, while Caecina pondered the words of his master centurion. What was most telling, was that the legate was in no way surprised by what he heard. When he finally spoke, his words came as a sort of vindication for Bulla, and those who had been subjected to

Galba's cruelties.

"It would be difficult," he said, "for me to demand my soldiers to swear allegiance to such a man and keep a clear conscience."



Upon their arrival at the fortress of Legio I, Germanica, in Bonna, Caecina quickly realized they had a far more urgent matter to contend with in the province. There appeared to me much commotion from within the fortress, and there were sentries surrounding the principia, keeping away the scores of curious soldiers.

"What is going on here?" Caecina asked a decanus, who stood by the door.

"A terrible tragedy, sir," the sergeant replied. He then nodded his head towards the door. "You can go in, but your men must remain outside."

As Caecina entered the principia, he noted a large number of senior officers, many of whom were gathered by the door to the legate's office. Caecina forced his way past them, and was shocked to see the body of Fonteius Capito laid out on a wooden stretcher. General Valens was present, as was the legate of Legio XV, Cornelius Aquinus. A handful of tribunes and other staff officers stood along the back wall, aghast at the sight of their governor's broken corpse.

"Ah, General Caecina," Valens said, "you've chosen to pay us a visit on a most tragic day."

The first thing Caecina noted was the complete lack of any emotion in Valens' voice. He walked over and inspected the body. The back of Capito's head was completely crushed, a bloodied rag feebly tied in place to hold in the mangled brains and shattered bone. The side of his neck had a hideous puncture wound, which was covered in coagulated blood and dirt. The rest of the body was filthy and battered.

"What in hades happened to him?" Caecina asked, exacerbated. He had only left Galba's entourage a few weeks prior, and already he had a damn-near mutinous legion to contend with. And now, upon his arrival in Bonna, he was greeted with the broken corpse of the governor-general of neighboring Lower Germania.

"Terrible accident, I'm afraid," Cornelius said, his voice showing the same complete lack of concern that Valens' did.

“It looks like his head’s been bashed in with a rock,” Caecina observed.

“Yes, nasty fall that was,” Valens explained. “The governor invited us to go hunting with him, and near a ravine, a damned boar spooked his horse.”

“Has anyone told his family?” Caecina asked.

“He was widowed four years ago, and his only son died as a child,” Valens replied. “We’ll give him the usual funerary rites and all that. The question now is, who will our illustrious new emperor replace him with?”

Caecina looked at the older legate and gave a knowing grin. He suspected there was more to Capito’s gruesome death than a simple riding accident, yet he honestly found he really did not care.

“Let us hope,” he said, “that it is someone as equally useless and easily manipulated as the new governor in Upper Germania.”

“We can only hope,” Cornelius concurred. Caecina ignored him, for it was General Fabius Valens whose attention he had.

He knew the older legate’s reputation well. He was a competent enough commander, when it came to battling hordes of barbarians. And while, like Caecina, he publicly expressed little desire above command of a legion, the younger legate suspected that they each shared similar ambitions.

Caecina then excused himself and took his leave, while accepting Valens’ invitation to join him for dinner that evening. He decided then to remain in Bonna for the time being. Caecina not only wished to learn of the demeanor of the other Rhine legions, but to see if, perhaps, Valens might prove to be a viable ally, in what he suspected would be a rather tumultuous reign from Emperor Galba. The young legate had his own ambitions; not for power of personal glory per se, but rather to increase the size of his fortunes by whatever means his position gave him. If Valens was of a similar mind, then the two would be of great use to each other.

Chapter XIII: The Bloody Gates of Rome

City of Arretium, one hundred and forty miles north of Rome
October 68 A.D.
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The letter from Fabius Valens reached Galba when he was but a few days from entering the Eternal City. He now rode in his litter, only mounting his horse when they were a few miles from each city. Vinius lounged beside him this day, discussing a few matters before taking to his horse once more.

"Excuse me, sire," Laco said, holding open the curtain while he walked beside the litter. "A message has just come from Lower Germania, but it does not come from Governor Capito. Rather, it is from General Valens of First Germanica."

Galba raised an eyebrow, but simply held out his hand and accepted the scroll. Complaining about his vision, he handed it to Vinius and told him to read it to him. His expression remained unchanged as Vinius read the report from Valens, detailing the unfortunate death of Fonteius Capito, and the request that Galba dispatch a new governor as soon as possible.

"Poor Capito," Vinius said, re-reading the message. "To have met his end so gruesomely, and after having just served out his consulship."

"Yes, most unfortunate," Galba replied, though his tone was indifferent.

The emperor and his ever-growing entourage soon arrived in Arretium, where the city governor planned a splendid banquet to commemorate the beginning of a new dynasty. Galba, given his simple tastes, found this to be absurd. Not only was his distaste for anything grandiose, but also he found it insulting that the governor would mention a dynasty, since both his sons were dead. It was Vinius who convinced him to accept the governor's hospitality.

"A dynasty does not always infer bloodline," he reminded the emperor. Furthermore, the man Galba had now promised the next year's consulship to, was compelling him to accept some of the finery that came with becoming Caesar. And so, Galba dressed in his finest purple robes, donning the laurel crown that had become the emblem of Rome's emperors, ever since the time of Augustus.

The hall was crammed with tables and dining couches. The guests

numbered in the hundreds, including senators, lower-level magistrates, their wives, and numerous other dignitaries, both imperial and foreign. At Vinius and Laco's urging, the emperor allowed the trumpets to sound in his honor as he entered the hall. Every guest stood and bowed, with Galba holding his hand up in salute.

"You honor us with your presence, Caesar," the governor said, with an additional bow. "Know that all of Arretium celebrates your ascension on this auspicious day."

Galba simply nodded and took his place at the head table. It was late in the day, and he was extremely tired. He wished for nothing more than to retire to his bedchamber; however, his closest advisors insisted that he needed as many strong allies as possible, especially as they got closer to Rome. Many senators, equites, and other magistrates had come up from the imperial capital, swelling the ranks of the emperor's entourage, and it would not be insulting for him to forego the feast. Two cohorts of the Praetorian Guard had also arrived and taken up their duties of guarding the emperor. A large number of these men lined the walls of the large hall, while the patricians ate and drank. The governor had elected to keep the entertainment low-key, using only a handful of musicians, who played softly in the background.

Among the guests at the banquet was a senator named Aulus Vitellius. The son of a prominent Roman statesman, his father, Lucius Vitellius, had held the consulship three times. The first of these came the year after Galba's term, and the emperor remembered him fondly as a man who held to rigorous standards of discipline, much like himself. Among the first actions the elder Vitellius took as Governor of Syria, thirty-one years prior, was the sacking of the troublesome Prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate.

Aulus Vitellius bore little resemblance to his revered father, who had crossed over to the afterlife eighteen years before. Now fifty-three years of age, he had served as consul during the reign of Claudius, and acquitted himself well as Proconsul of North Africa. While he did not lack in ability, and possessed a noble pedigree that Galba respected, his sloth and apathy led to an uninspiring political career after his term in North Africa. He was also known for his ravenous appetite and was extremely fat. And yet, it was his complete lack of ambition coupled with his family name that made him an immediate favorite of Galba.

"It has been many years since we last spoke," the emperor said to

Vitellius, whose couch butted up next to his.

Cornelius Laco stood close by, and it wounded him that Vitellius sat where he should. Galba had reminded him before the feast that, as he was now sole commanding prefect of the Praetorian Guard, he had duties to perform. Vinius sat on the other side of the emperor, engrossed in conversation with Marcus Otho, as well as a couple of other senators.

"I believe the last we saw of each other was at my father's funeral," Vitellius replied.

"He was a good man," Galba asserted. "A three-time consul from a noble family, who died far too young."

"Indeed. He was but three years older than I am now. Poor fellow died of acute paralysis. My dear mother, the gods bless her, has never been the same. She maintains her stoicism, but I know she still mourns for him, even after all these years." As he spoke, he continued to stuff himself with everything within reach, while quaffing copious amounts of wine.

Galba raised an eyebrow as he gazed at the senator, who was gulping down another cup of wine and immediately demanding another. It was only the first course, and Vitellius had likely consumed more than most of the guests would all night. His complexion was red, and he was sweating as if he had run a great distance. The emperor, while fond of Vitellius, could not help but wonder how the man's heart had not given out already.

"You know," Galba said, gently swirling the wine in his chalice, "I am in need of a new governor-general for Lower Germania."

Vitellius let out a belch before answering, "Really? I thought our last consul, Fonteius Capito, held the post."

"He did," Galba replied. "But he appears to have met with an unfortunate accident."

His tone made clear he doubted Valens' report that it had been a mishap, though Vitellius was oblivious to this. Were Capito someone Galba gave a damn about, he would have ordered an investigation. As it was, he needed no more troubles from the Rhine, and Capito was someone he was considering replacing anyway. That he had died leaving no viable heir meant that his estate reverted to the imperial treasury, which was an added windfall.

"And you would like me to assume the governorship," Vitellius stated. "I am honored that you would consider me, especially in light of the recent strife in Germania and Gaul."

"The death of Nero put an end to that," Galba assured him. "And as the

former Proconsul of North Africa, I fail to see any difficulties which you cannot readily manage."

It sickened Galba to use flattery, yet he understood it was one of the many methods he would have to employ as emperor. Some men could be coerced, others threatened, yet most would respond well to flattery. Galba knew Vitellius bore little, if any, resemblance to his father, and he preferred it that way. And while he had considered Lucius Vitellius a friend, Galba would have been reluctant to appoint such a powerful and charismatic statesman as governor of what was arguably the strongest military force in the empire. The emperor would privately, albeit begrudgingly, admit the only reason he was now Caesar was because Verginius lacked ambition, as well as imagination. But now that the matter of Germania was sorted, he decided to change the topic of conversation.

"Your dear mother," he said to Vitellius. "You say she is still with us, yes?"

"She is, Caesar," Vitellius acknowledged. "And she is in surprisingly good health. I have offered her rooms within my estate, yet she refuses to leave the house where she lived with my father. She does spend many days visiting with my wife, so it is almost as if she lives with us."

Galba had known Vitellius' mother, Sextilia, rather well, though he had not seen her since the death of her husband. He reckoned she was probably three or four years older than he, and so it was quite remarkable that she was still alive and in good health. Her eldest son would be hard pressed to reach such an august age, if he did not cease in gorging himself so. It was quite the contrast for anyone watching, as Galba took small bites from modest portions, Vitellius continued to practically inhale entire plates of fruit, nuts, and various meat courses. Still, as uninspired as he may have appeared, Galba knew Vitellius possessed just enough competence to govern well. And his lack of command presence made him the last person who the emperor would ever view as a potential threat. Such a man was ideal for governing the same province which Galba had been compelled to lord over with an iron fist, all those years ago.



Galba's rather lengthy journey to Rome left an unexpected trail of bodies in its wake. Many of the people, patrician and commoner alike, were troubled

by the almost random nature of executions ordered by the new emperor. Soon after hearing of Nymphidius' death, Galba ordered the execution of his associates, which included one of the consul-elects for the next year, Cingonius Varro. Mithridates of Pontus, the one-time client king, now living in Rome, was also put to death. Rumor had it this was little more than a petty outburst by Galba, who took offense to Mithridates mocking him for his nearly bald head. Less publicly, though, were his orders for the violent removal of two men who he simply felt wielded far too much power, and whose loyalties he had many reasons to doubt. For this, he sent a single praetorian to North Africa and another to Judea.

The killing of rivals was certainly not unprecedented, so while troubling, they did not cause outright alarm. After all, Augustus had ordered the death of Julius Caesar's son, Caesarian, soon after his victory over the boy's mother, Cleopatra. Rome's first emperor had justified the killing, saying, 'There can be only one Caesar'. If there was a method to Galba's purges, it amounted to little more than executing those who offended him. And he only struck down those whose deaths would not spark large-scale outrage. Hence, the still popular Verginius had been spared from any sort of punishment at all, despite the abject fear his army had instilled in Galba.

But it wasn't just the removal of potential threats that delayed the emperor's return. Lugdunum was not only the largest city in Gaul, it was also home of one of the imperial mints. Galba not only needed to secure the monetary assets, but he also desired to begin having his own coins cast immediately. With a great deal of assistance from Marcus Otho, coins from the Lugdunum mint began to pour into circulation, bearing the image of Rome's newest emperor.



Brass Sestertius of Galba

By the second week of October, the imperial entourage was at last within view of the Eternal City. The procession was vast, with thousands of

legionaries marching in column, with the emperor and his dignitaries behind them. At their head was the newly-raised Legio VII, Gemina. Several regiments of cavalry rode in file on either side of the road, keeping the curious crowds at bay.

Tens-of-thousands of spectators lined the road, with a vast assembly gathered near the Milvian Bridge on the north bank of the River Tiber. Among these were around four thousand men, paraded in cohorts like a legion. Many were armed, and while they at least tried to show the order and discipline of soldiers, they wore little more than old tunics.

"And who are they?" Galba asked, leaning over to Vinius. The emperor was astride his horse once more, wearing his armor and purple cloak, the laurel crown covering up much of his balding head.

"I believe that is the 'legion' which Nero tried to raise from the fleets," Vinius replied.

"Ah, yes, I heard about them." Galba gave a scoffing laugh. "What? Do they expect me to now confer upon them the status of legionaries?"

Their question was soon answered as a senator, accompanied by two of the plebian tribunes, rode over to the emperor's entourage. In his late thirties, with a thick head of black hair, strong jaw, and athletic build, he had the bearing of a soldier. Though Galba did not know the man, both Vinius and Laco recognized him as Drusus Benignus, a former legate who had served with distinction in both Germania and North Africa.

"Hail, Caesar!" Benignus said, raising his hand in salute.

"Senator Benignus," Laco said, by way of introducing him to the emperor. "What pleasure is this?"

"The pleasure is mine, to welcome our new emperor to the imperial capital," the senator replied. He then held his hand open and waved it towards the mass of men behind him. "I have also been asked to speak on behalf of the former mariners assembled here."

"The same men who my predecessor had hoped to send against me?" Galba asked coldly.

"They may have been raised by Nero," Benignus explained, "but they are ready to fight for you, Caesar. They have not be formally constituted, and they wish to do so now, before you."

"This is ridiculous!" the emperor scoffed. "These men would have drawn swords against me, and now they think I owe it to them to make them legionaries? Get this rabble out of my sight at once!"

“We were promised, damn you!” a man from the crowd shouted.

“A real emperor would keep the word of his predecessor!” another snapped.

A chorus of protests, along with shouts of outrage and betrayal spewed forth from the gathering of former mariners. A number of men had drawn their blades and were waving them high in frustration. This last move proved catastrophic, for with the rapid blowing of trumpets, the emperor’s cavalry escorts formed into a large battle line and charged. Within two minutes of their first protests, the mariners were being assailed by a wave of imperial horsemen who rode through their ranks, trampling many while spearing others with their lances. Though armed, the protestors were devoid of shields, armor, or helmets making them completely vulnerable. A panic ensued amongst the mariners, as well as the on-looking crowds. And as the trumpets sounded a cease to the killing, several hundred bloodied and broken bodies were left on the field. A large number of bystanders had inadvertently been caught up in the killing as well, with their families screeching in anguish. The numerous wounded cried out for an end to their suffering, as the cavalrymen slowly rode back towards the column, over the field now slick with blood and littered with bodies.

“Establish a camp here for the night,” Galba ordered. “We will finish the matter with this lot before we enter the city.”



Flavius Sabinus was among the numerous senators and magistrates who left the city to join the emperor’s camp. He was accompanied by his nephew, Domitian, along with his ward, Aula Vale. Despite the horrific eruption of violence near the Milvian Bridge, there was a festival atmosphere at the various camps that extended for miles. People of the city spontaneously provided food, drink, and entertainment for the new emperor’s entourage, as well as the large military force that accompanied him. None knew this was not a celebration at all, but simply a pause in Galba’s march into the capital, so he might finish meting out his harsh brand of justice.

Sabinus found Galba within his large principia tent. His closest advisors were the only ones within, as guards were keeping most of the populace away. Sabinus’ status as Prefect of Rome was the only reason they allowed him entrance.

“Hail, Caesar,” he said with a respectful bow, Domitian and Aula following his example.

“Ah, Sabinus,” Galba said, sitting upright in his chair. He was seated at a long table along with Vinius, Laco, Icelus, and the consuls, Italicus and Galerius.

Marcus Otho sat at a side table with a group of praetors and quaestors, not yet deemed worthy to sit at the emperor’s table.

“As Prefect of the City of Rome, it is my esteemed duty to welcome you,” Sabinus added. “You know my nephew, Domitian.”

“Honored, Caesar,” the young man said.

Galba’s jaw twitched, as he fought to suppress his discomfort at seeing both the brother and son of Vespasian. Would these two be so flattering towards him, once they heard of the emperor’s intended disposing of their kinsman?

“And this is Aula Cursia Vale,” Sabinus continued.

“Caesar,” she said, with an added bow.

“Her father, as you may know…” Sabinus started to add.

“Yes, I know his reputation well,” Galba interrupted. “A hero of the empire, and one who I regret I never had the honor of meeting in person. You’ll have to forgive me, Sabinus, but we are in haste to finish a rather unpleasant matter that transpired this afternoon.”

“So I heard,” the city prefect replied.

“You and your guests may sit,” the emperor said, offering empty seats at the table where Otho sat. “I do need to speak with you, once we are finished here.”

Sabinus took the seat closest to Otho. He noticed Senator Benignus seated on the far side. His face was ashen, and he simply stared at the emperor.

“Now then,” Galba said, addressing his advisors. “As I was saying, this was a gross insult, to say nothing of insubordination, that I was subjected to this afternoon. If order and discipline are to be maintained, then we must make an example of any who would disrupt it. I want the harshest of punishments exacted against these filthy renegades. But to do so, I must follow the letter of the law exactly. I propose we subject them to decimation.”

This led to a number of uncomfortable mutterings among those gathered, and a stifled gasp from Aula. Decimation was an ancient punishment, where one in every ten soldiers was selected at random, and then put to death by his companions. The severest of punishments, usually for gross cowardice or

insubordination, it was almost never used, even in the face of near-mutiny.

"Sire," Galerius said. "The long term effects on the morale of any unit punished in such a way would be devastating. It has been over a hundred years since it was last used for a unit charged with disobedience. Augustus abhorred the practice, and even the harsh disciplinarian, Tiberius, refused to consider it when the Rhine legions mutinied at the start of his reign."

"There is another matter, Caesar," Laco added, before Galba could berate the consul for questioning him. "If you are to follow the letter of the law, you cannot sentence a unit to decimation that does not exist."

"Explain," Galba said, an eyebrow raised.

Galerius spoke up. "What he means, Caesar, is the only way for you to legally sentence the former mariners to decimation, is if you grant them their original request. For your actions to be lawful, they must first be constituted into a legion."

"We killed a couple hundred of them today," Vinius said, with venom in his voice. "Submitting the rest to decimation will beat the survivors into supplication. I say we do it at once. We quash a mutiny, while gaining another legion."

Sabinus closed his eyes, horrified at what he was hearing. Though he knew about the unfortunate riot that had been brutally suppressed that afternoon, he thought the matter concluded. Little did he realize when he brought his nephew and young charge to see the emperor, that they were about to witness one of the greatest acts of cruelty seen in over a century.

"Caesar, I must protest," Benignus said, coming to his feet. He had sat in silence, listening to the deliberations for some time. As the man who the mariners asked to speak on their behalf, he felt he could remain silent no longer.

"You have had your say, senator," Vinius said.

"Then at least do right by the innocent," Benignus persisted. "Galerius, you mentioned that it has been over a hundred years since decimation was inflicted on a unit for insubordination. I will remind you all that this was during Julius Caesar's conquest of Gaul, and was done only under the most desperate and regrettable of circumstances. Yet, like the generals before him who had to administer such an unfortunate sentence, he fixed the lots so only the guilty would die. I beg you, Caesar, to spare those who have done you no wrong this day."

"I am a man who follows the letter of the law," Galba replied. "The *exact*

letter of the law. That the divine Julius chose to break the law by fixing the lots is of little importance to me. What matters is that I follow the law, which states that the fate of these men will be left to the gods. I will grant this rabble that which they desire, they shall become a legion of the empire. Once they have been cowed into obedience, they will remain in Rome as the emperor's legion. And Benignus, since you appear to have such a love for these men, you can lead the survivors."

The senator said nothing, but simply sighed and nodded in resignation. Galba then adjourned the meeting, with all standing and saluting. Sabinus made ready to leave when the emperor stopped him.

"Prefect Sabinus!" he called.

Sabinus walked over to Galba, who was being fitted with his formal robes by a pair of slaves.

"I had thought to address this with you during a more formal meeting," the emperor said. "But since you are here, I may as well inform you now. Your services as Prefect of the City of Rome will no longer be needed."

"Have I done something to offend you, Caesar?" Sabinus asked. His voice was hard, and he fought to suppress his bitter feelings, especially after what he had just witnessed.

"You have already held the post for the better part of eleven years, and we thank you for your service. You are by no means being exiled from public service. I have noted that you were selected to hold a two-month suffect consulship next year, and I intend to honor that. But for now, you are relieved of your duties to the city. Aulus Ducenius Geminus will be your successor. But come, you and your nephew will be my guests as we watch what happens to mutineers."

Aula maintained her distance as Galba placed a hand on Domitian's shoulder, and the entire assembly left the large tent. She was horrified by what she had heard, and her stomach turned at the thought of witnessing what the emperor had ordered. She also had her suspicions that Galba was not having Sabinus and Domitian watch as his guests, but rather use the decimation of the new legion as a means of intimidating potential rivals.

The mutineers were paraded outside the tent. There were still roughly thirty-five hundred of them, and they were surrounded by an encircling wall of legionaries. Pressing in behind the soldiers were thousands of curious citizens, many of whom had heard about the brutal savaging these men had

been subjected to earlier that afternoon.

The early evening sun cast its glow ominously behind the assembled mass of mariners, all appeared dejected and humiliated. They had witnessed numerous friends cut down by Galba's rampaging cavalry, who murdered the badly wounded in cold blood, after the slaughter had ended. They were surprised to see Drusus Benignus taking the legate's position in front of them, his hands clasped behind his back, his gaze fixed on the emperor. Galba assumed his chair on the center of the dais, hastily erected that afternoon. As one of the consuls, Italicus took it upon himself to address the men.

"Former mariners of the imperial navy," he said, "you came forth today to demand our emperor make good on a promise made to you by his predecessor, a man who was named an outlaw by the Senate of Rome. You then caused a riot, for which some of your companions paid the ultimate price. But Emperor Galba is a reasonable man, and he has seen fit to accede to your request. From this day forth, you will be known as Legio I, *Adiutrix*; the First Auxiliary Legion."

The men looked to each other with expressions of bewilderment and hope. After all they had been through, the emperor was granting them the right to be legionaries. As they would quickly learn, this had nothing to do with honoring promises or out of any sense of compassion for the men.

"As legionaries," Italicus continued, "you are subject to the fiercest forms of discipline within the known world. Insubordination and mutiny will not be tolerated. Therefore, while our most noble Caesar has granted you the status of legionaries, so too must he dispense with the harshest of punishments for your actions this day. The Adiutrix Legion is therefore sentenced to decimation."

"No!" a voice protested from the ranks.

All were aghast, where just a moment before they had been filled with feelings of relief. They stood in stunned resignation, unable to do anything except take the lots as they were given to them. That night, with tears in her eyes, Aula Cursia Vale wrote of what she had witnessed:

> *The poor unfortunate souls of Legio I, Adiutrix, who had no sooner been named legionaries, and before any had even been given the dignity of swearing the oath of allegiance, were subjected to the most abominable punishment of decimation. One in every ten was segregated from the rest, and placed into a long line, over three hundred and fifty in all. The rest of*

the legion was given clubs, and with many a wailing of sorrow and anguish, set about the terrible task of bludgeoning their brethren to death. The only mercy the condemned received, was that their grieving executioners tried to expedite their passing. The sound of the clubs breaking skulls will never leave me, nor will the cries of horror from the horrified host of Roman citizens. The bloodied bodies were left where they fell. And with nothing more than a simple wave from the emperor, the new legate, Drusus Benignus, bravely stifled his grief, called his men to attention, and marched them away from the scene of tragedy.

Galba's reputation for cruelty has likely spread through the city, and will most certainly make its way into the provinces. In a single afternoon, he has shattered what goodwill there may have been regarding his assumption of power. The people already mutter that they wish for Nero's return. Such hideous actions have in one instant made Galba universally hated by soldier and citizen alike. And he has yet to even enter the gates of Rome.

Chapter XIV: Suffering the Usurper

Bonna, Germania
Early November 68 A.D.
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It was nearing the end of October, when the province of Lower Germania received word about their new governor-general. Despite being legate of Legio IV, in neighboring Upper Germania, Caecina Alienus was spending much of his time in Bonna with General Valens. His previous visits confirmed his suspicions, regarding the army's disposition towards Galba. The legions along the Rhine frontier were growing ever more indignant about having to renew the oath of allegiance to Galba, something which all imperial forces were expected to do every New Year's Day. The two legates were engaged in a fall boar hunt when this topic inevitably arose.

"Is Galba so blind he does not realize what he's done?" Caecina asked, in reference to the merciless decimation of the new Legio I, Adiutrix.

"If the soldiers didn't hate him already, they most certainly do now," Valens added, as they rode beneath several low hanging branches. Most of the trees had lost their foliage by this time, and the landscape appeared gloomy and ever damp from the fall rains.

"And yet, he expects the entire army to swear allegiance to him, as if nothing happened." Caecina was flabbergasted by what he could only perceive as Galba's extreme arrogance.

"Don't you feel at least some loyalty towards him?" Valens asked. "After all, he is the one who appointed you to command Fourth Macedonia."

Their conversation was interrupted by the mad crashing through a nearby thicket, as a large boar sprinted towards them. The two legates had sent a couple of native scouts ahead to try and flush out any potential game. Their shouts were heard not far from where the beast emerged. Caecina, being the younger and much quicker of the two, managed to bring his spear down between the shoulder blades of the enraged boar. The animal gave a loud shriek as the spear blade pierced its heart. After a few moments of thrashing, it lay still.

"Loyalty?" Caecina asked, as he dismounted his horse and jerked his spear free. "Not even a little bit. But what can we do?"

“I happen to personally know the new governor-general that the emperor so unwittingly assigned,” the older legate replied.

Their servants had just appeared. With a few words in their native tongue, Valens ordered them to dress and clean the boar, and have it brought back to the fortress. He and Caecina then made the long ride back to Bonna alone.

“So where exactly did Capito meet his unfortunate accident?” Caecina asked, curiosity getting the best of him. When Valens did not reply immediately, he added, “It wasn’t an accident was it?”

“Fonteius Capito was little more than a politician,” Valens replied. “He cared only for himself and how best to advance his career. His indecisiveness during Vindex’s rebellion showed him to be a useless military leader. Unfortunately, the former governor of your province has this twisted sense of nobility about him. Otherwise we would likely have him as our emperor, instead of the cantankerous old tyrant who now sits upon the throne.”

“Verginius was loved by the men,” Caecina noted. He realized Valens was not about to answer his question regarding Capito’s death, and so he let the matter drop. “But they now resent him for refusing their offer to make him Caesar.”

“Which will become even worse, once the legions hear just how despicable a despot Rome now has ruling over her.”

“You mentioned the new governor, Vitellius,” Caecina said, bringing them back to their original discussion. “How well do you know him?”

“He’s only a couple of years older than me,” Valens replied. “Yet he gorged himself into old age a long time ago. Gout is the greatest nemesis he faces these days.”

“So he’s about as useless as our new governor, Flaccus?” Caecina remarked.

“I wouldn’t say that,” the older legate stated. “Flaccus is a worthless old man who has no control, whatsoever, over his province. Given his age and ill health, I’ll be surprised if he lives to see the end of his term. You’ve been in Upper Germania for what, three months now? And already you wield far greater control than he ever will.”

“And will we be able to control Vitellius?” Caecina asked.

Valens raised an eyebrow at the younger legate’s emphasis on ‘we’. “To the ends of the earth,” he asserted. “Just know he is of no use to us if we simply cast him aside, as you did Flaccus. We must mold him, both in mind and spirit, for there is little we can do about his body. I have known Vitellius

for many years, and he is not stupid. In fact, he had a lot of potential in his youth. If he puts his mind to it, he can govern quite well. Apathy is his biggest drawback, and that apathy is something we must conceal from the legions. We must make them believe Aulus Vitellius is the most capable governor-general the provinces have ever seen; a rebirth of the divine Julius or Germanicus Caesar!"

"By your description, he scarcely looks the part," Caecina said, his brow furrowed in doubt. "Can we really make this work?"

"Of course we can. And we shall turn the men in the ranks into believers, because we shall make Vitellius a believer."

"A believer in what, exactly?" Caecina broke into a grin, as he internally answered his own question. "Of course…let us hope we can make Vitellius believe well before the New Year. Might be a bit awkward, if the legions have no one to swear theirs oaths to."



Galba arrived in Rome to much fanfare and celebration, although the mood of the people was darkened considerably by his actions during his trek to the capital. Both Vinius and Laco were well aware of this. They also knew the *Ludi Prebeii,* or *'Plebian Games',* was set to commence from 4 to 17 November. A tradition of theatrical spectacle, as well as athletic competition, they had been held at the Circus Flaminius for over two hundred years. With such distractions, the masses would soon forget the turbulence that greeted their new emperor's arrival.

It was the day before the games were set to begin that Galba met with his senior advisors and select members of the senate. Though he would meet with the entire senate on occasion, especially as he was set to occupy one of the consul's chairs during the coming year, most of his governing involved a much smaller circle.

Ever the strict financier, the emperor's first order of business was repairing all the damage done by Nero's excesses and gross overspending of imperial coin.

"My predecessor spent millions lavishing his personal favorites," Galba asserted. "While the people went hungry, he held expensive orgies, traipsed about the Greek provinces, and heaped gifts of gold and silver upon any who placated his thirst for pretentious art, spectacle, and flattery. It is time we

recoup what was stolen from Rome."

"Per your instructions, Caesar," Icelus said, standing and holding a long scroll in his hands. Since returning to his master the former slave, and now member of the equites, had resumed duties as Galba's trusted scribe. "We have comprised a list of names, fifty men from the noble order of knights, who will serve as the commission to reclaim the lost treasury. By our best estimates, six hundred million denarii was unlawfully doled out by your predecessor."

It was an interesting that no one ever referred to Emperor Nero by his name, but simply as Galba's predecessor. The senate had stopped short of issuing the fearful *damnatio memoriae*, which would have purged Nero's name from official public record, only because of the growing sentimental feelings of the populace towards him. By making him a nameless entity, they minimized the reminders of the man, who though condemned by the senate, had been loved by the plebs.

And while six hundred million denarii was a gigantic sum, no one in the meeting was surprised. What they were, however, was deeply skeptical that even a fraction of this would ever be recovered. Much of it had, undoubtedly, already been spent. The commission would be hard pressed to prove many of the cases as to whether such gifts were unlawful, or if they had even occurred at all. Still, the emperor had spoken, and now fifty equites would try to act upon his orders.

"The next issue we have," Consul Italicus spoke up, "Is what should be done about the former praetorian prefect, Ofonius Tigellinus."

"Tigellinus was a monster who personally oversaw the deaths of many of our colleagues," Galerius added. "If any man has earned the death sentence, it is him."

There were numerous mutterings of agreement from almost everyone at the table. Tigellinus was a murderer and martinet who had only abandoned Nero once all hope was lost and, even then, simply to save his own skin. It was he, above all others, who the senate universally wished to exact their vengeance upon. They were, therefore, shocked and in the very least outraged, when Vinius spoke up against this. That he had been selected as Galba's co-consul for the upcoming year only added to their feelings of indignation.

"Caesar," Vinius said. "It is true that Prefect Tigellinus committed a number of questionable tasks for the former emperor. However, he did

eventually abandon his charge, and thereby joined you in opposition to him. In fact, I would dare to say that had Tigellinus not marched the duty cohort of the Praetorian Guard away from the palace, there could have been a siege of Rome herself with many more lives lost. He has since removed himself from Rome, and as I understand, spends his days in drunken remorse for his previous actions. I say we should leave him where he belongs, in self-imposed exile."

The senators present were deeply angered by this, and even more so that Galba would consider it. After all, he had ordered the death of a former client king and guest of Rome simply for mocking his balding head! Would he really spare such a vile creature as Ofonius Tigellinus? In that moment, the senate came to see just how much power the three pedagogues held over the Emperor of Rome.

"Since Tigellinus is of no threat anymore, and has sufficiently repented for his crimes, let him stay where he is and rot," Galba said. "I, too, have heard plenty regarding his drinking and inhaling of mind-numbing substances. All the while, he never leaves his private bath springs and lives in the company of whores. We shall leave him be, though he is prohibited from ever stepping foot in Rome. He's disgraced himself, and will likely drink himself to death within a year."

Though the gathered senators were outraged, Vinius was quick to progress the meeting before any protests could be made. Many rightly suspected that Tigellinus had paid the consul-elect a rather handsome bribe, if he could compel Galba to spare his life. It was Cornelius Laco who brought the next matter forward.

"Our next item, Caesar, is the disposition of military forces in and around Rome. Between Seventh Gemina and First Adiutrix, we now have two legions within the imperial capital. Normally we don't have so much as a single legion within the city, as their place is on the frontiers. However, I recommend we leave one here for the time being, while sending the other to Carnuntum in Pannonia."

"The Danube is the most volatile of our frontiers, outside of the Rhine," Galerius added. "We have plenty of legions guarding against Germanic barbarians, but another legion in Pannonia would be well-placed."

"Seventh Gemina is made up of new recruits," Galba remarked. "I feel they could more easily be corrupted by living within the confines of Rome. Therefore they shall be dispatched to Pannonia. They will need a new

commanding legate, preferably someone already in the east, who is of no threat or concern to us."

Vinius whispered into his ear, bringing an extremely rare chuckle from the emperor.

"Of course," Galba said, with a nod of appreciation. "He's been exiled from Rome these past six years. I think it will be rather enjoyable to recall him back to the city, so I may grant him this appointment personally."

No one besides Vinius, and perhaps Laco, knew to whom the emperor was referring. None dared to ask. It may have seemed strange, sending the Seventh to the Danube where they would have to fend for themselves in regards to acquiring arms and equipment. First Adiutrix, on the other hand, was to remain in Rome, where there were plenty of armorers to properly equip them. Galba's logic at leaving them in the imperial capital was two-fold. Firstly, he felt he had sufficiently cowed them into docile obedience, and there would be levies more readily available to fill their numerous vacancies. The second reason was, as former mariners who had already been in the imperial service, they were naturally better disciplined and less susceptible to the various sins of the capital. It was also becoming readily apparent that Drusus Benignus had been the most suitable candidate to lead this new legion. A strict disciplinarian and accomplished drillmaster in his own right, within just a few short weeks, he had his newly organized cohorts conducting complex drill and battle formations.

There were a few other changes and appointments made, which included the replacing of the legate of Legio I, Italica, in Lugdunum with one Manlius Valens. Another political nobody, he was in fact the cousin of Fabius Valens. Unknown to Galba, his private contempt for the emperor rivaled that of his kinsman. There was also the discussion of Aulus Vitellius, whom Galba had ordered to Lower Germania before his arrival in Rome.

"You've made some interesting choices, Caesar," Icelus noted. "I cannot help but wonder as to why you chose Vitellius to govern Lower Germania?"

"He is an interesting choice, sire," Vinius concurred. "As I understand it, he is so badly in debt, his creditors were hounding him all the way out of the city. And, if rumor is to be believed, he's been forced to lease his estate, while placing his wife and son in a small apartment, just to finance his journey."

"Vitellius is capable enough not to lose Germania to the barbarians," Galba explained. He then showed a very rare smile. "And besides, there is no

one to be less afraid of, than a man whose sole thought is on the consumption of food. Germania is a rich province, and he can feast on its resources."

This brought some appreciative chuckles from the assembled magistrates and senators. Galba may not have been stricken by the same level of paranoia as Nero; however, he was certainly being extremely cautious in regards to who he would trust. He was leery towards those with too much power and charisma, and after he dismissed his council, his face turned into a deep scowl. There was one man, who possessed both charisma and power, he needed to deal with that day.



Aulus Vitellius was, indeed, a baffling choice for governor-general of Lower Germania. The rather rotund old senator was more surprised than any at his selection. His father, Lucius Vitellius, had been a powerful member of the senate, having served as governor of Syria during the reigns of Tiberius and Caligula. Three times he had served as consul, and he was acting regent in Rome for the short time in which Emperor Claudius was away, during the Invasion of Britannia. Upon his death, following a bout of paralysis, Claudius had a statue erected in his honor inscribed with the phrase, *'Steadfast loyal to the Emperor'*.

Such a legacy left his sons with much to live up to. And while the younger Vitellius had been awarded the consulship three years before the death of his father, and later served as Proconsul of North Africa during the early part of Nero's reign, he could not help but feel he had somehow been a disappointment to his father. His younger brother, Lucius Vitellius, had had only a marginally more successful career, yet his rapport with their parents was far more amicable. Perhaps it was because Aulus was known for his ravenous appetites, prone to obesity, and plagued by lifestyle-induced ailments such as gout at an early age. While Lucius was still relatively fit, at least as much as any man in his early fifties, Aulus walked with a cane and could only ride a horse if he had several assistants helping him mount and dismount. It was this particular ailment that his mother, Sextilia, called attention to, when her son came to visit her prior to his departure for Germania.

"I would have thought your brother would be selected for this posting," the old woman said. "At least he can ride a horse and knows a few things

about leading men into battle."

"Are you displeased with me yet again, mother?" Vitellius asked. "Or are you still the slave of astrologers, even after all these years?"

Like her husband, Sextilia had few kind words for their eldest son, and advanced age only made her more irritable and crass. There was little doubt that she loved both of her sons, yet the horrific astrological readings from Aulus' birth still plagued the superstitious old woman.

"Galba fears the strength of the Rhine legions," Sextilia replied. "And, in his paranoia, he has appointed a man who he feels is least likely to threaten his position."

"So I am to be insulted by the emperor's trust in me?" Vitellius replied, his expression betraying his exasperation. He hated fighting with his mother. Yet, after decades of being treated as a failure, his patience was wearing thin. "I may not have held three consulships like Father, but I have held the position, and I was Proconsul of North Africa for six years. And now that I am being given the honor of leading the armies on the Rhine, my own mother thinks it an insult? What will it take for me to ever earn your love and respect?"

"You have always had my love," Sextilia asserted. "That is something that only a complete monster would ever deny her child. But respect? No, my son. As much as it has pained me to admit these past fifty years, you have proven yourself to be all that your father and I had feared; well-meaning, yes, but easily controlled and manipulated. To say nothing of lazy and slothful."

Though it stung his heart to hear his mother speak so candidly, Vitellius could not deny the truth behind at least some of what she was saying. His physical appearance, coupled with the fact that he banqueted at least four times a day, confirmed much of this. Yet, it was her statement about his being easily controlled that wounded him most.

"I know the reputation of the legates commanding the Rhine legions," Sextilia continued, not allowing her son a moment's respite to defend himself. "Fabius Valens, whom you know well, is among the most despicable of men to ever infest the patrician class of Rome. I have little doubt that he and his cronies will court and flatter you to no end. All the while they will be molding and manipulating you into doing their bidding. You may be their governor, but when all is said and done, you will be their servant and they the masters."



Suetonius Paulinus immediately suspected why Galba had summoned him. And as the new emperor had insisted upon the old general coming before him at the imperial court, he knew this was no friendly meeting.

Galba sat rigid upon the throne, on a short dais. The consuls, Italicus and Galerius, stood on either side. Resolved to accept whatever the fates had decided, Paulinus strode forward, his shoulders back and head high, stopping a few feet before the throne and saluting. It baffled the consuls that he said nothing, for 'Hail Caesar' was customary.

"Senator Paulinus," Galba said, once he realized the former general was not going to speak first. "I have summoned you here to answer a rather disturbing rumor that, if proven true, would be tantamount to treason."

"If I am to be accused of treason, then I demand to know on what grounds and who my accusers are."

Paulinus' bold words startled most of those assembled in the chamber.

The emperor glowered at him. "Your accusers are sources loyal to our person."

A glance to Italicus told Paulinus all he needed to know. He did not care. Since being proclaimed Caesar, Galba's brief reign thus far had been one tainted with violence. His march to Rome had been strewn with corpses, and if Paulinus was damned to join them, he was not about to lower himself to undignified groveling.

"As for the rumor," Galba continued, "it involves a rather bold statement that you are supposed to have said while your emperor was marching towards Rome…"

"May the gods help us if we should suffer a usurper on the throne," Paulinus interrupted. "Yes, I said those exact words, and under the same circumstances I would say them again. For when spoken, it was Nero who sat upon the throne, not Galba. But as the senate has proclaimed Nero an enemy of Rome and legitimized your assumption of the imperial mantle, then that does not make you a usurper, does it? And should another pretender lay claim to the empire, you can expect me to utter those same words again on your behalf."

The two consuls noted that not once did Paulinus address Galba as 'Caesar', and they were certain the emperor had as well. Only Otho, who stood deliberately in front of the gathered handful of senators, was smiling.

“Your candor, as well as your previous exemplary service to the empire, is why you will be allowed to keep your head,” Galba said, his expression unchanged. “I called you before me to let you know, in no uncertain terms, that such slanderous talk will not be tolerated, even by the Hero of Britannia.”

“So we are returning to the days of treason trials, is it?” Paulinus asked. His voice dripped with contempt, and he knew he was playing a very dangerous game at this point. However, he did have one last thing to say, consequences be damned. “Before he was corrupted by the traitor, Sejanus, Emperor Tiberius once said, *‘In a free state there should be freedom of speech and thought.’*. I have spent many years in the imperial armies so that Rome might be such a free state. I hope my service has not been in vain.”

Galba’s face turned red in anger. Before he could speak, Galerius attempted to mollify the situation. He held Paulinus in the highest regard, and did not wish to see him succumb to the same fate as Varro, Cilo, Mithridates, and the poor lot the emperor had massacred at Milvian Bridge.

“As a former general, you should know well when to be aggressive and when to be prudent. The emperor is showing clemency for your former speak, but he will not be so merciful in the future.” There was a tone of desperation in his voice, and his eyes pleaded with Paulinus not to aggravate Galba any further.

“Are we done here?” Paulinus asked. “Very well.” Without waiting for an answer, he came to attention, saluted, and briskly left the hall.

Galba was incensed. He had called him in to berate him for his seditious talk, and instead, the old soldier had humiliated him in front of both consuls, as well as most of the imperial council. Were he to strike Paulinus down, it would be perceived as a tyrannical outburst for what amounted to little more than a petty rebuke. Otho, who had to fight to contain a fit of laughter, discreetly made his way towards the exit, while a hundred other voices grumbled aloud about Paulinus’ insolence and how the emperor should make an example of him. This was all nothing more than grandstanding by those who hoped to show the most loyalty, and would thereby be rewarded for it. All it did was irritate the emperor more so, and Galba simply rose from his chair and left.

“General Paulinus!” Otho’s words stopped him, and he turned to face the young senator.

“Please,” Paulinus said. “You do not have to address me as such. I have not commanded troops in over seven years.”

“True,” Otho conceded. “However, your victory over Boudicca and those Iceni barbarians is still the greatest triumph of our time. Any man born of the patrician class can be a senator. It takes a special kind of leader to be a general.”

“You did not follow me to shower me with flattery, especially after I just insulted the emperor in front of the council.”

Otho chuckled and held up his hands in resignation. “Guilty!” When Paulinus sighed in irritation, he quickly explained himself. “Look, general, I know you loathe false flattery, so please understand that I meant every word I said. But if you will give me a few moments, there is something I need to speak with you about.”

“Go ahead.”

“The senate may fawn over him now, mostly out of fear or hope of reward, but we both know Galba’s reign as Caesar will not be for long. I mean, look at him, you saw how frail he is. The gods also cursed him, by allowing him to outlive his sons. And it’s not as if he is likely to produce more, even if he were to inexplicably remarry.”

“Yes, the matter of the succession has been an issue much-discussed since the senate first legitimized his seizure of the throne,” Paulinus noted.

“Galba has no sons, and only very distant living relations,” Otho observed. “Therefore, he can literally adopt anyone he wishes to be his heir without fear of reprisal.”

“And you think you might know who it will be.”

There was an accusing tone in the old general’s voice, though Otho decided it best not to hide his intentions.

“Without a doubt,” he asserted. “My father served as Galba’s colleague during their respective consulships, plus I was practically his neighbor when I was governor of Lusitania. We spent numerous festivals in each other’s company, and I understand him better than most. And without sounding like a braggart, my record as governor speaks for itself. I have also made myself an indispensable member of the imperial court since coming to Rome.”

Otho paused for a moment. He was clearly exaggerating when he said he was an indispensable member of the court. In truth, he was little more than a hanger-on that Galba had yet to find a use for, aside from occasional advisor. However, as he had become very close to one of the pedagogues, that

counted for far more than being a member of the council. And so, Otho decided it was time to let Paulinus know his full intentions.

"I have recently come to an agreement with Consul-elect Vinius," he said. "I will marry his daughter, in exchange for his supporting my claim to the throne. Galba listens to him more than anyone else in court. I am also young enough to sire plenty of grown sons by the time the gods come for me. By naming me his heir, Galba not only ensures someone worthy succeeds him, he also founds a stable dynasty. Stability is what Rome needs…you *know* this."

"Since you already have the empire all but handed to you, what do you need of me, an old general who our current emperor despises?"

"I'm no fool," Otho emphasized. "I can handle bureaucracy, financial troubles, matters of law, what have you. But for all that, I am no soldier. I have never so much as donned the uniform of a laticlavian tribune. What I will need, more than anything, is strong military leaders. I also need men who not only know how to lead men into battle, but understand the strategic and logistical needs of an empire. Unfortunately, Nero, dear friend that he was to me, damned near crippled Rome with his appointing only weak and unimaginative patricians to govern most of the provinces where our legions are posted. Just look at Germania, and you'll know what I mean. That fat, corpulent twat, Vitellius, couldn't lead his way out of a canvas sack, and yet he arguably wields the most substantial military power in the whole of the empire. You, my friend, were one of the few exceptions, as was Vespasian."

"Well, to be fair, he only received his command because the Jewish rebellion was threatening to envelope the entire eastern empire," Paulinus conjectured. He had allowed himself to crack a half smile, which was reassuring to Otho.

"Quite," Otho stated. "Nero despised Vespasian. But in an emergency he needed someone who could fight, and wasn't clear on the other edge of the empire. And trust me, I intend to enlist Vespasian's assistance. Once I become Caesar, the days of appointing the weak and unimaginative to governorships and legion commands will be over. I don't need anything from you now, only your promise to serve me when the time comes."

Paulinus folded his arms across his chest in contemplation and apprised the younger man. There was a lot of merit and truth to what Otho said. Sure, he was an egotistical and self-serving man, but these were not exactly uncommon traits among the Roman patrician class. Humility did not get one

very far in the world of imperial politics.

"*If* you should become Caesar," Paulinus said, slowly and with much emphasis on the 'if', "my sword will be yours."

Chapter XV: Stalwart Allies

Caesarea
November 68 A.D.
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Since his return from Cyprus, Optio Gaius Artorius had remained in Caesarea. It had been his own legate, General Trajan, who assigned him temporarily to the army's headquarters staff. The legate reassured him he would inform Gaius' centurion and cohort commander that this posting was only temporary, and he would be returned to his unit well before any campaigns in Judea recommenced. Though he longed to return to his century and his friends, Gaius found the billets in Caesarea far preferable to living in a soldier's campaign tent. For a start, he had an actual room to stay in. Granted, it was little more than a servant's quarters, but it had a real bed, the food was plentiful, and there was a private bath. He was also given ample off-duty time, and Caesarea was a fantastic city for a young, unmarried soldier.

On this particular day, Gaius was in command of a guard detail assigned directly to Vespasian. He had only met the commander-in-chief once before. That had been during the Siege of Jotapata, when Centurion Nicanor, who had been a childhood friend of the rebel commander, Josephus, offered to help Vespasian convince their adversary to surrender. Gaius had nothing to offer to that particular conversation or plan of action, he had simply used his position as Nicanor's optio as an excuse to accompany him. Surprisingly, Vespasian not only remembered the meeting, he even recalled Gaius' name, likely because his grandfather served with Vespasian in Britannia.

Gaius was making his rounds of the guard posts, when one of his men approached and told him there was a messenger to see the commander-in-chief.

"Very well," the optio said. "I'll escort him back."

The sight of the messenger puzzled Gaius, for he did not look like a normal imperial courier. His tunic was deep crimson and lined with gold trim. The pommel and scabbard of his gladius were also rather ornate, with brass designs of laurel leaves, as well as a lion's head on the scabbard. Neither of these necessarily meant anything. One would naturally wish to don

their best tunic when meeting the commanding general of all imperial forces in the east. Plus, it was not unheard of for soldiers to decorate the scabbards of their gladii. However, it was the ring on the man's right hand that stood out to Gaius. It was a simple brass ring, the wide face inlaid with amber. And though he could not actually see the faintly etched design, he knew it was the silhouette of a praetorian guardsman. Without a word, he signaled for the man to follow him down the long corridor. His mind was filled with questions, as to why a praetorian guardsman had come to Caesarea, under the guise of being an imperial courier.

"Wait here," he said, before knocking.

"Come!" a voice shouted from inside.

"Sir, there's a messenger here to see you," the optio said, quickly shutting the door behind him. His brow furrowed in confusion.

"Well, what is it?" he asked.

"He's not an imperial courier, sir," Gaius replied. "He's a praetorian."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes, sir. I saw his ring and everything."

"Well, then," Vespasian replied, suddenly curious. "It must be frightfully important. Send him in."

The optio saluted and went back into the hall. He decided to remain, along with the pair of legionaries who stood on either side of the door.

As the guardsman entered the room, Vespasian stood and assessed him. He looked to be in his mid-forties, with hair that was a mix of black and grey, and a face that was quite weathered. He was a bigger man, and even with his cloak wrapped close, it was plain he possessed a powerful chest and shoulders.

"I bring a message from Rome," the man said, as he saluted.

"And what message could the Praetorian Guard possibly have for me?" Vespasian asked.

The man lowered his head and chuckled. He then held up his right hand with its distinctive ring. "I've worn this for so long, I forget to take it off," he replied. His demeanor became deadly serious. "I bring a message, not from the praetorians but from the emperor."

"And that is?" Vespasian placed both hands on the table, his gaze fixed on the guardsman, whose brow was sweating as he swallowed uncomfortably. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his spatha leaned up

against the far end of the table and wondered how quickly he could reach it.

The guardsman took a step forward, threw back his cloak, and drew his gladius. His palms were sweating, his hand shaking. Vespasian knew this was a hardened soldier who faced him, and yet he was clearly afraid. Surmising that the man would not strike, he remained where he stood.

"So this is Galba's message to me," Vespasian said, his gaze boring into the man.

"I…" the praetorian started to say. He then shook his head and threw his weapon onto the table with a loud clatter. "I can't. Gods damn me, but I can't." He placed his hands over his eyes for a moment, as the door was quickly thrown open.

"Excuse me, sir," Gaius voice said, as he stepped in. "I heard a clatter, and I wanted to…oh, fuck! *Sentries, to the commander!"*

Before another word could be said by anyone, the two legionaries swarmed into the room, gladii drawn. They quickly surrounded the praetorian who did not move, but instead looked at Vespasian with sorrow. Gaius grabbed him from behind by the shoulder, the point of his weapon pressed into the man's lower back.

"Forgive me, sir," the guardsman said, his voice cracking.

"Easy, lads," Vespasian said, holding his hand up. He signaled for his soldiers to back away from the man. "What is your name?"

"Marcus Octavianus," the man answered. "Formerly of Legio II, Augusta, and now a centurion with the Praetorian Guard."

"You were with the Second Legion," Vespasian acknowledged with a nod. "Have we met before?"

"Not directly, sir," the centurion replied. "I did, however, serve under your command in Britannia. My centurion's name was Metellus Artorius Posthumous."

"I remember him well," Vespasian nodded. "His adoptive father, Artorius, was primus pilus of the Twentieth Legion."

"He was an outstanding officer," the praetorian stated. "I still remember when we smashed the barbarians between the Twin Rivers. And I was there when you fought on the battle line with the Twentieth Legion's First Cohort, during the assault on Mai Dun."

"Wait a moment," Gaius interrupted, stepping in front of the praetorian. "You said your centurion's name was Metellus Artorius Posthumous?" When the praetorian nodded, the optio could not help but burst into an absurd fit of

laughter.

"You know him?" asked the centurion.

"I bloody well should," Gaius replied. "He's my father. By Bellona's tit, what are the chances? One of my father's own soldiers, a damned would-be assassin."

The praetorian officer gave a sad nod of understanding, for he knew he was condemned. "When you see your father again, tell him I am sorry."

"Put away your weapons," Vespasian ordered his legionaries. "Leave us."

Though Gaius was still completely shocked by what he had just witnessed, he and his men saluted and left the room. The commander-in-chief then stepped around the table and picked up the praetorian's gladius, which he handed back to him. Confused, Octavianus accepted the weapon and placed it back in its scabbard.

"Stand at ease," Vespasian said. "No harm will come to you. It is unlikely that Galba knew he was sending one of my own to slay me."

Octavianus gave a mirthless laugh. "I was six months away from retirement when our new emperor gave me this despicable tasking."

"Not like you had much of a choice," the commander-in-chief observed.

"No, sir. But it was not just you he was after."

"Oh?"

"He sent another praetorian to North Africa to deal with the governor, Clodius Macer. You and he are viewed as 'unacceptable threats' to the new regime."

"I see," Vespasian replied. He folded his arms across his chest. "What stayed your hand, then? Why did you not follow through with your emperor's orders? If they came from him, then surely no repercussions would have followed. My guess is you would be handsomely rewarded."

"By Galba?" the centurion scoffed. "Any other emperor or general would reward his charges for taking on such a hateful mission, but not him. To Galba, it is nothing more than us doing our damned job. And unless it's some bloody African or Germanic slave fucking him in the ass, he never sees fit to reward anyone for their service."

"Before you continue," Vespasian said, raising a hand, "you look thirsty."

"That I am, sir."

Vespasian nodded and went to the door. He opened it slightly and ordered Gaius to have servants sent with wine and some food. The optio was baffled but simply nodded and sent a legionary to the kitchens. The commander-in-

chief then closed the door and told Octavianus to take a seat.

While slaves brought them wine, water, and some cheeses and dates, the praetorian officer went on to explain what had transpired with the Adiutrix Legion, as well as all of Galba's brutal tactics and purging that took place during his journey to Rome.

"I always knew Galba was stern, but this is madness," Vespasian remarked. "It would seem he was fit to become emperor, up until the moment he was proclaimed 'Caesar'."

"I understand 'stern'," the praetorian stated. "I've spent enough years in the ranks to become quite familiar with brutal discipline. Galba, however, has quickly shown himself to be nothing more than a bloody tyrant. The senate tolerates him because Nero only terrorized the patrician class. Galba is brutal to noble and pleb in equal measure."

"Please, know that I was not aware of any of this," Vespasian said. "Being so far from Rome, how could I be? He denies men what they are due, then kills them in cold blood using an archaic and outdated form of punishment. And afterwards, he expects the survivors to fight loyally for him?"

"Precisely, sir," Octavianus said. "How could he expect me to strike down the very man who led us to victory in Britannia, when I was but a young legionary? We may never have met, but you did endorse Centurion Metellus' recommendation that I be reassigned to the Praetorian Guard. You were one of my heroes, sir. Jupiter himself could not have made me kill you."

"I'm no hero," the commander-in-chief asserted. "I am simply a soldier, like you, trying to do his duty to the empire."

"And what would you have of me?" Octavianus asked, standing and coming to attention. "What duty would you ask of me? I cannot return to Rome, not now. As soon as Galba hears that you're still alive, I'll be cut down as a traitor."

"Are you married?" Vespasian asked.

"I am, sir," the praetorian replied. "I also have a son and daughter. Both are coming of age soon."

"You will write to your wife at once," Vespasian ordered. "My brother has his own personal couriers within the imperial post. One of them is scheduled to depart for Rome in two days. The letter to your wife will be included in my own dispatch to my brother. He will see to it that she receives it."

“Yes, sir.”

“She is to take your children and acquire transport to Ephesus. From there she is to meet with the wife of General Marcus Antonius Primus. I will personally write the letter of introduction, stating that your family is to be kept at their estate as my personal guests.”

“Thank you, sir,” the centurion replied. “I don’t know what else to say.”

“All of us are sworn to serve the emperor, senate, and people of Rome,” Vespasian replied. “If Galba wished to dispose of me, he could have easily recalled me to Rome and faced me like a man. But then he would have had to fabricate some kind of charge against me, should he wish to send me to the gods. Any such actions, no matter how well corroborated, would have been made public. Instead, he has chosen the coward’s way out. He sees threats where there are none, and he is no better than the man whose death brought him to the throne. If he’s not careful, he will not sit upon it for long.”

Vespasian soon dismissed the praetorian and gave Optio Gaius Artorius orders to find suitable quarters for him. The commander-in-chief decided to keep him as a member of his personal guard, though his pay would be substantially less than what he’d earned as a praetorian centurion. There wasn’t much he could do about the man’s pension, which would surely be forfeit; however, it was still preferable to the alternative.

Later that evening, Vespasian held a private dinner with his son. The actions of their new emperor were alarming, to say the least. There was nothing to stop him from recalling the Flavian general to Rome, something which could lead to war should Vespasian refuse.

“I never thought Galba to be so damned paranoid,” Titus said, as he read the short scroll Octavianus had given his father. “This states you are deemed an enemy of the emperor, but not of the empire.”

“A technical oversight, perhaps,” Vespasian noted. “Then again, it would seem Galba’s arrogance is only overshadowed by his cruelty. And it is likely poor Macer was not fortunate enough that his would-be killer was also one of his former soldiers.”

“According to Uncle Sabinus, Galba’s march to Rome was a bloody path paved with skulls,” Titus added with poetic emphasis. “Rome deposed one tyrant, only to suffer another.”

Vespasian was never one for paranoia though, in light of recent events, he was glad of the political and military alliances his campaigns in Judea had

allowed him to forge. Whatever Galba's halfhearted attempts at having him assassinated, Vespasian's brother was still a member in good standing within the senate, despite being removed as Urban Prefect of Rome. Sabinus had told him the emperor was still honoring all previous suffect consul appointments, including his own. Whatever his fearful vendetta against Vespasian, at least it did not extend to other members of the Flavian family.



Over the next couple weeks, Galba's attempts at recouping the wasteful spending of his predecessor were proving to be mostly futile. Only fifty of the six hundred million had been recovered, with the courts now crammed by lawsuits of those who accused the government of wrongly coming after their assets. There were also several letters of outrage coming from Greece, after Galba's collectors had taken back a gift of ten thousand denarii Nero had made to the priestesses of Apollo on Delphi. But it was the response to the emperor's attempt to recover the millions of denarii Nero had gifted to the judges of the last Olympic Games that caused the most disruption.

"They simply refused, sire," the embarrassed tribune said, his head bowed in shame.

"How, exactly, did they refuse?" Galba asked. He could tell by the man's expression there was more to what had transpired.

When the tribune could not speak, the emperor held out his hand. The young man had no choice but to hand over the scroll he had been given. Galba then handed to Vinius, whose eyes grew wide as he read,

"To the committee that seeks to impose nothing more than tyrannical thievery upon us, we state unequivocally that, should Emperor Galba seek to take back from us those gifts granted to us by Emperor Nero, then he is no more than a brigand and a despot. If the money granted to the Olympic Games committee is so important to him, then he can come claim it from us himself."

"Bloody insolence, that is," Otho said. With Vinius' help, he had been appointed as part of the oversight on the recovery of the lost funds.

"Is that all you can say, that it is insolence?" Galba asked quietly. He waved for the tribune to leave.

The young man was only too glad to exit the chamber.

"To be fair, Caesar," Vinius spoke up, "we all knew that recovering these

funds was going to prove very difficult, if not impossible. The gold and silver we took back from Delphi no doubt enraged the rest of the Greeks."

"The return of ten thousand denarii has likely cost us millions," Otho added candidly.

Both men held their breath, waiting for Galba to erupt into a tirade of abuse. Instead, he was surprisingly calm and reserved. He stood and simply paced, maintaining a hand on the table for support.

"And what would Otho have us do?" he finally asked.

"To be honest, Caesar," Otho replied, surprised to have his opinion requested, "I think we should let matters lie. Believe me, I like the squandering of imperial treasure even less than you. I may have been the previous emperor's friend, as everyone is keen to remind me; however, my record of fiscal responsibility within Lusitania speaks for itself. What we cannot do is continue to waste even more resources, if it means recouping even less than we now expend. The courts are already chockfull with legal cases disputing our claims, and it will take a year or better to sort those out. We should take back whatever we can manage from those cases, and then leave things be. It will suffice to make the point known, that the empire will no longer waste its resources."

"It is not always easy, listening to advice that I do not wish to hear," Galba said, with an affirmative nod. "But, in this case, it would seem your words hold great merit. Very well, we will press for resolution of the legal matters in the courts, and then look to the future rather than our shameful past."

As the emperor left the two men alone, both Otho and Vinius were wide-eyed in surprise.

"I thought for a moment he might send me to the Gemonian Stairs," Otho said dryly, in reference to the place of execution within the city.

"This could mean a couple of things," Vinius replied thoughtfully. "The emperor could, of course, be tired and overwhelmed by the volume of work, which for him is never-ending. Or, he could be taking your advice more to heart, and thereby respecting you more as an advisor and asset."

"I do hope that one coincides with the other," Otho remarked. "If I cannot at least give him good council, where he'll appreciate my merits, then our plans will come to nothing."

"This was, I think, your first real step towards the imperial throne," Vinius stated. "And don't forget who has the emperor's co-consul for next

year, who has his ear better than any."



While Vespasian's foremost priority of the past two years had been the suppression of the Jewish Revolt, he was uncertain if there would even be a campaign season against the rebels this next year. The zealot factions were now all confined to Jerusalem and the southern regions, near the fortress of Masada, with no attempts being made to cause disruptions within those regions re-conquered by Rome. From what Vespasian's loyal Jewish spies had told him, the imperial army was all but ignored by the warring factions, as they engaged in a bitter and bloody struggle for dominance of the Jewish State. Since the death of the moderate Judean leader, Hanan ben Hanan, there was no order to be had within Jerusalem or the southern districts. The extremely violent Sicarii faction, who now controlled Masada, refused to acknowledge any governing body in Jerusalem, be they Jewish or Roman. Their feud with John of Giscala, who had slain Hanan and taken control of the Jewish holy city, had turned into an all-out bloody civil war.

As far as Vespasian was concerned, the rebels were free to kill each other off without any need for intervention from Rome. Jerusalem was a fearsome fortress, with three lines of sixty-foot walls, and a populace that was armed to the teeth. The more the zealots killed each other, the more Roman lives it would save in the long term. In a previous conversation with the former enemy general-turned Roman accomplice, Josephus, his former adversary had gone so far as to tell him it was the God of the Jews who delivered his own people into the hands of the empire. Josephus had further stated that one of the reasons for his defection was that Rome ruled the world by the grace of God, and to defy Rome was to disobey the will of God. Whether these feelings were genuine, or simply flattery meant to keep the Romans placated mattered little.

But with the war in Judea now in a state of perpetual pause, Vespasian decided it was time to take stock of his closest allies. After all, Galba had already made one attempt on his life, while also proving to be so unpopular that it would be a wonder if he survived a year as Caesar. Vespasian decided to sit in his private study, making a few notations about his generals and political allies.

Over the last two years, Marcus Ulpius Trajan had proven himself to be

one of the most skillful generals Vespasian had ever known. Pragmatic and methodical, in contrast to Vespasian's son, Titus' more aggressive and unorthodox style, the two had actually worked very well together. The previous year, each had taken detachments from their respective legions to assault the double-walled rebel stronghold of Jaffa. The siege lasted just two days, before Titus and Trajan's legionaries took the ramparts and razed the entire city to the ground.

But more than just a brilliant general, Trajan was also a powerful political connection. Having spent much of his career in the provinces, rather than in the Roman senate, he wielded a great deal of influence throughout the empire. He was beloved in his native Hispania, as well as North Africa, and his exemplary performance during the wars in Armenia had gained him much renown. That he was of the newer patrician class, born outside of Italia, had made him a nonentity to Nero. Were he to possess imperial ambitions, he could pose a far more legitimate and immediate threat to Galba than Vespasian. The Flavian general wondered if perhaps Galba had hoped that, by quietly disposing of him, one benefit would be reining in the venerable Trajan. It was all absurd, though, as both Vespasian and Trajan were loyal soldiers of the empire, and of no threat to any man who the senate had confirmed as their rightful emperor.

Perhaps the most unexpected of Vespasian's political allies was the Syrian governor, Gaius Licinius Mucianus. Mucianus was a political and diplomatic genius, though his influence was tempered by the fact that he had almost no military experience. What made his alliance with Vespasian so unusual was that the two men practically despised each other. Vespasian viewed Mucianus as effeminate and unmanly, more for his appearance and the way he conducted himself rather than his well-known homosexuality.

When the previous Governor of Syria, Cestius Gallus, had abysmally failed to put down the Jewish rebellion, losing over six thousand soldiers during a hellish ambush during his ignominious retreat from Jerusalem, Mucianus had been sent to replace him as governor. Grudgingly accepting the fact that he was no military leader, Mucianus had been somewhat grateful when Vespasian was named commander-in-chief of all imperial forces in the east. Still, the two men did not get on well in the beginning, and Vespasian had sent Titus to Antioch whenever he needed to deal directly with the Syrian governor. Under most circumstances two extremely powerful men, collocated in the same region, would be rife with conflict. And yet, each was able to

acknowledge, while they were most certainly not friends, they could work amicably together for the good of the empire. And while he could not exactly explain why, Vespasian actually trusted Mucianus even more than most of his generals.

The commander-in-chief's own son, Titus, had been a rock of support, both militarily and politically. Though very young for his rank—having been given command of Legio XV, Apollinaris, at the age of twenty-six—over the next two years, his aggression, tactical and strategic savvy, as well as his willingness to learn from his experienced centurions, had made him one of the most popular and successful legates in the east. There was also little, if any, talk of nepotism, for he had received his appointment from Emperor Nero well before his father was recalled to active service.

Of equal or even greater importance were Titus' political skills. While Vespasian was loved by the plebs, particularly the rank-and-file soldiery, his blunt and often crass demeanor, coupled with a soldier's twisted sense of humor, did not translate well when dealing with other members of the imperial patrician class. Titus, conversely, was a very smooth and accomplished orator. And though he could be direct and forceful, like his father, his skills of persuasion often made this unnecessary.

As he sat making his notes, Vespasian laughed as he mused about one of his strongest supporters, Marcus Antonius Primus. A political firebrand with a dismal record in the senate, he was one who most patricians would cringe at referring to as a friend and ally. A deceitful opportunist who played loosely with morals and ethics, he was a surprisingly loyal friend to Vespasian. This was puzzling, for the two had little shared history, given Vespasian was twenty years older than the thirty-eight year old Primus.

Like most of the legates in the east, Primus was a veteran of the Armenian wars. A pugnacious, highly intelligent tactician and strategist, he had proven himself to be as brilliant a leader in battle as he was wretched an administrator in peace. Primus was also politically safe, because he had little ambition beyond command of a legion. He had told Vespasian on several occasions that plundering unruly barbarians just beyond Rome's frontiers was a far more direct way of making oneself rich, rather than trying to squeeze the provincials for higher taxes. Vespasian had later told him he would not trust him to properly invest a single sestertius. Yet in battle, he would trust Primus with his life. And while he was a self-professed horrible senator, by the gods he could fight!

Vespasian smiled and nodded in satisfaction as he finished his notes. He knew he had one of the strongest foundations of support, not just in terms of military strength, but highly skilled, dependable, and loyal commanders leading them. He was, therefore, rather disturbed when a week later he received word from Primus. Having been recently given command of Legio VI, Ferrata, in Syria, he was unexpectedly being recalled to Rome.

Chapter XVI: A New Legion

The Imperial Palace, Rome
Mid-November 68 A.D.



Marcus Antonius Primus

It had taken him two weeks by sea to reach Rome, though for Marcus Antonius Primus, his return to the Eternal City felt strange. Six years had passed since the senate exiled him from the city. And while he felt a certain level of resentment, he privately admitted that he could scarcely blame his colleagues. A few of them had lost a great deal of money during one or another of Primus' bad business ventures, while he himself had always walked away unscathed and wealthier. In one instance, a horde of slaves from the east, which the buying senators had paid for in advance, had turned out to be so riddled with disease that the few who did survive the journey to Rome had been of no use to their new masters. And, of course, there had been the incident where Primus had attempted to help a friend forge an aged relative's will for a share of the profits. While this had been the act which got him expelled from the senate and exiled from the city of Rome, many within the senate suspected it was not his only underhanded scheme; but rather the one time he was caught.

About the only business venture that Antonius Primus found he was good at was wine making. His three vineyards near Ephesus, in Asia Minor, had

made him a sizeable fortune during the six years in which he had lived in exile from Rome. Ironically, many of his clients were the same senators who had so voraciously demanded his expulsion. And while it was tempting to make an appearance at the senate to announce his return, he thought better of it. Instead, he made his way to the imperial palace, having donned his legate's armor with his polished breastplate gleaming in the sunlight, and deep crimson cloak over his left shoulder.

He carried his helmet tucked under his left arm, as he ascended the steps leading into the palace proper. He had only been inside the home of the emperors twice before. Once was when he was fourteen, during the early reign of Claudius when he accompanied his father to a formal ceremony honoring the returning conquerors of Britannia. It was then that he first met Vespasian. The second time had been for a raucous banquet and orgy, which Emperor Nero hosted prior to the war in Armenia. Primus had been scarcely able to walk the next day, and felt it was no small miracle that he had not caught any sort of infectious disease from his debauched escapades. His visit to the palace on this day was far more subdued.

"The noble legate, Marcus Antonius Primus!" the porter's voice boomed.

Surprisingly, there was no one else within the audience chamber, except for a handful of slaves who stood with their hands folded. The emperor sat upright on the throne, something which appeared to take great effort. Primus had never seen Galba before, and the first thing he noticed was just how old he appeared. At nearly seventy-two years of age, he was almost thirteen years older than Vespasian. Primus privately mused that Galba appeared old and decrepit enough to be his friend's grandfather.

"General Primus," Galba said, reading a scroll as he leaned against one of the arms of his chair. "Welcome home."

"Thank you, Caesar," Primus replied, his puzzlement showing in his face.

"You wonder why I have summoned you," Galba noted.

The legate replied with his usual candor. "I came as quickly as I could. Thankfully the seas were fair, and I managed to arrive in just two weeks' time. Still, I do not think you would recall me to Rome to simply wish me well. Am I correct to assume that I will not be returning to command of the Sixth Ferrata Legion?"

"You will maintain a command," Galba replied, "but not of the Sixth. I'll speak plainly. Your exile from the city was due to your financial irregularities, as well as your attempts to manipulate both your peers, as well

as their relatives, so that you could expand your fortunes. You are the worst kind of senator; however, your skills as a soldier are exemplary."

"I would have to agree with both of those assessments," Primus replied with a grin which he immediately dropped, once he saw the emperor did not share in his sense of humor.

"As you know, during my march to Rome I felt it necessary to raise a new legion," Galba continued. "But as I am now Caesar, the Seventh Gemina Legion is in need of a new legate. The chief tribune thinks command should naturally fall to him. However, he is just a boy with little to no experience. I need you to take command, and build the Seventh into a legion worthy of our great empire and the emperor who founded it."

"I am honored," Primus said, with a respectful nod. "Where is the legion posted now?"

"They are en route to Pannonia," the emperor answered. "I have tasked them with building their fortress on the Danube, protecting our frontier against the Dacians."

"Does the legion have a master centurion?" the legate asked, after taking a moment to comprehend what was being asked of him.

"No," Galba replied. "Most of the officers were volunteers from the western legions, who only requested transfer because it meant a promotion. If you have a primus pilus you wish to reassign, by all means take him."

"I'll leave at once," Primus said. He gave a quick salute and exited the hall.

While he loved the imperial palace for all of its splendor and art, something about the new emperor unnerved him. Though he knew nothing about Galba's covert attempt at killing off his friend, Vespasian, Primus was very much aware of Galba's bloody march to Rome. Rumors further abounded that he had proven himself to be rather mean-spirited since his arrival. At least Nero had been affable, if somewhat mad and highly unpredictable. After six years away from the imperial capital, Marcus Antonius Primus remained for just two days before departing for the Danube.



While Primus had been unnerved by his audience at the palace, Marcus Salvius Otho found he was right at home. His influence over the emperor was growing, and he had furthermore expanded his circle of political allies

exponentially. Though technically still Governor of Lusitania, he had left his deputy to maintain the province. Meanwhile, he continued to insert himself deeper into the court of Emperor Galba. Foremost among his political allies was the consul-designate, Titus Vinius. It was he who Otho chose to host at a private dinner, in one of the staterooms which he had procured at Nero's Domus Aurea.

"This is a wonderful place for entertaining!" Otho said, with enthusiasm. "A pity it has fallen into disuse since Nero left us."

That Otho had been one of Nero's court favorites was no secret to anyone, hence his less-than-damning language when speaking of the deceased former emperor. Nero's memory had been condemned by the senate. Although, they had stopped short of issuing the formal *damnatio memoriae*, in light of the people's lingering love for him.

"The emperor views this complex to be a lavish waste of imperial resources," Vinius replied. "I expect it will fall into disrepair and, possibly, be demolished in the coming years."

"Of that I have no doubt," Otho concurred. "Hence, I reckon we should enjoy its magnificence now, before it falls apart over our heads."

"Agreed," the prefect said, holding up his wine chalice in salute. "But tell me, now that we are firmly established in Rome, how can I be of further service to you?"

"What makes you think I need something else from you?" Otho asked, feigning insult. "Thanks to you, I am now one of Galba's more trusted advisors, particularly on his sacred topic of finances. Can I not simply ask a friend to dinner?"

"So now we're friends?" Vinius asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "I know what you want, you haven't exactly been secretive about it."

"Galba is an old man," Otho stated. "He is also as frail as he is stubborn and callous. He won no friends among the plebs or patricians during his bloody trek to Rome. And let us not kid ourselves, the people see him and can only speculate on how long it will be before he falls over dead."

"A rather bold choice of words, wouldn't you say?" Vinius asked.

"I'll go a step further and state that my words are reckless," Otho added. "But let us be honest. Galba has no friends, and were he a younger man his actions thus far could have incited rebellion. I still worry they might, which would greatly complicate my plans. As it is, the people are simply watching and waiting for his demise. What is most troubling is that he has no

successor. Both his sons died years ago, and they left him no grandchildren. The empire needs a stable line of succession, otherwise it will invite other pretenders to try and claim the imperial throne. You know what that would do. There will be no Galbian Dynasty unless he adopts a successor, sooner rather than later."

"And you think it should be you," Vinius said, popping a date into his mouth, a knowing grin crossing his face. "You know, I often suspected that your ambitions went as high as the imperial throne. You've hinted at it, less than subtly I might add, with all your talk of 'our plans'. I must say, you do not disappoint."

"Can you think of anyone else more worthy?" Otho replied, with an equally knowing grin. "Perhaps you, too, have aspirations to become Caesar?"

"The Julio-Claudian Dynasty may be dead," Vinius remarked. "However, aristocratic pedigree is still crucial to the senate. That his family is one of the oldest in Rome was chief among the reasons why the senate was so accepting of Galba as their new emperor. That he has no sons, or other living relatives for that matter, is unfortunate. I, however, do not have the necessary nobility within my own ancestry to be considered a viable candidate. And besides, regardless of how old and frail Galba may be, the senate will demand an heir that is far younger than I."

"So, you agree then, that I am as suitable a potential successor as any?" Otho emphasized.

Vinius fixed his stare upon his silver wine chalice which he turned around slowly in his hands, while he formulated his words. He had been expecting this for some time, and he had mentally prepared himself well for his meeting with the man who hoped to inherit the greatest empire the world had ever seen.

"That you were one of Nero's favorites at court will endear you to the masses," he said at last. "No one in the senate will ever admit to it, but Nero was loved by the plebs. And I must admit, your administration of the province of Lusitania was admirable. In fact, I think it surprised practically everyone. You appreciate beauty and extravagance enough to keep the people's minds occupied, while also being prudent enough financially so as to not bankrupt the imperial coffers. You do lack in military experience, but then, so did Augustus. Let me ask you this, how old are you?"

"Thirty-six."

“Hmm,” Vinius continued. “You’re not some young, inexperienced boy; and yet, you’re not a feeble old man, either. If you are named Galba’s heir—and provided the trappings of ultimate power do not drive you completely mad—you could conceivably have a long and glorious reign. However, if I am to support you in your claim to be the emperor’s proposed heir, then I will need something in return.”

“But of course,” Otho agreed, already knowing what the price would be.

“I do not want wealth,” Vinius said, “for I have plenty to spare. What I want is a direct link to the new imperial dynasty. You are quite right to voice concern over the fact that Galba has no living heirs. But then, neither do you.”

“This is true. We all know about my previous wife being unfortunate, in that she became infatuated with Emperor Nero. Personally, I think it was power and the thought of becoming empress that she truly lusted after. A lot of good it did her in the end.”

Otho’s cold words regarding Poppaea may have seemed callous, especially since many speculated that it was he who encouraged her affair with Nero in the first place. That Otho so willingly divorced her, so that she could become his consort, had secured his place as one of the favorites at court. It had also gained him his governorship of Lusitania.

“Well, unlike Galba, you are still young enough to sire an heir,” Vinius emphasized. “And you know my daughter is unmarried and ready to find a suitable husband. I also understand you are quite fond of each other. You’ve told many people that you intend to marry her, though you have yet to ask me for my permission.”

Otho simply shrugged at this observation. “Vinia is a young and attractive woman, and an absolute delight.”

“I am going to be rather presumptuous and state that that was your plan all along; to court my favor with the emperor, and to use marriage with my daughter as a means of securing your position as Galba’s heir.”

“The daughter of the former proconsul of North Africa, as well as the emperor’s colleague during next year’s consulship is more than an ideal match,” Otho replied smoothly. “Help me to secure my rights as Galba’s successor, and you will find yourself as father-in-law to the next emperor. I’ll even name the new dynasty after both our families.”

The two drank and talked well into the night, and by the time Vinius left the Domus Aurea, Otho was brimming with confidence regarding his future.

Vinius had known of his ambitions for some time, and understood his family would reap the ultimate rewards if Otho became Caesar. He would become father of the empress, with his future grandchildren becoming imperial princes and princesses. The Julio-Claudians, after the brief interlude of Galba's reign, would give way to what Vinius hoped would be known as the *Otho-Vinian Dynasty*.



It would be several weeks before Primus arrived at the fortress of his new command. Inexplicably, Master Centurion Vitruvius, who had served as his primus pilus with Legio VI, had arrived just before him.

The principia building was still under construction, much like the rest of the fortress. The offices on the ground floor were still able to be used, since the top floor protected them from inclement weather. Inside the foyer, the centurion primus pilus was holding a meeting with the legion's cohort commanders.

"Men," he said, "We have a number of pressing issues which continue to plague this legion. Firstly, I have recently become aware of the fact that we have at least twenty decani who cannot read or write. While their attempts at stepping forward into leadership positions is admirable, an officer is completely useless if he cannot decipher written instructions or dispatches. These men are to be reduced in rank back to legionary. It is up to you to check your subordinate centuries to make certain this shit doesn't happen again. Are we clear?"

"Yes, sir," the cohort commanders replied in unison.

"Armament," Vitruvius continued, moving on to their next issue. "Getting sufficient armor for our men will be a fucking nightmare. Our new emperor seems to think we can simply shit out fully trained and armed legionaries, yet our soldiers are still completely raw, and they are bloody useless to us if we cannot equip them properly."

There was a single knock on the door, followed by Primus stepping into the room. All of the pilus priors immediately stood.

Master Centurion Vitruvius snapped to attention. "General, sir." "At ease," Primus replied. He then addressed the assembled officers. "Armor… armor is indeed a problem that every new legion is plagued with. We are also well understrength with only thirty-five hundred men on the roles. I managed

to get my hands on the quartermaster's reports before I came to Pannonia. As of six weeks ago, we had less than three hundred sets of segmentata plate armor, with about twice as many sets of hamata chainmail that had been scrounged from various sources. A lot of it is garbage, rusted and pitted, and only good for scrap. I sent word to every legion and auxilia regiment within two hundred miles, as well as called in a few favors from a handful of former legates. It will likely take a few months, but I think we can at least get most of our lads into hamata chain."

"Can we not get more suits of segmentata made?" one of the centurions asked. "And what about helmets?"

"The reality we have to face is that we simply do not have enough smiths and armorers, not to mention the vast amounts of iron necessary to forge sufficient segmentata for all of our legionaries," the legate answered.

"Segmentata is also tedious to construct properly," Vitruvius added. "It's not just the plates, but all the hinges, clasps, and rivets. And every set needs to be custom fit to each soldier. It may provide better protection than hamata, but until we can get more sets of plate produced, we'll simply have to make do."

"As for helmets, that will be easier to resolve," Primus said. "Granted, it will mean our legionaries will be walking around with a dozen different styles upon their heads; however, even an old republic-era coolus helmet will provide adequate protection. Gladii were surprisingly easy to procure. I want what armorers we do have focused on constructing shields and javelins. Also, give me some ideas as to what design should be painted on our shields. Something distinctive but nothing too extravagant. This legion needs to forge its own history and win a few battles before she earns a more distinguishing shield design. For now, we just need something that differentiates our soldiers from all the other legions on the Danube."

"Between wearing hamata scraps for armor and rusted republican helmets, I think they'll stand out," a pilus prior remarked, drawing a chorus of chuckles from his peers.

Primus gave a few additional words of instruction before leaving Vitruvius and the cohort commanders to their business. Daily operations, training, fortress construction and maintenance, rewards and punishment, as well as promotions all fell within the responsibilities of the primus pilus and his subordinate centurions. As legate, Antonius Primus was responsible for the actions of his soldiers, as well as maintaining a strategic and political

rapport with the other legions and the governor-general of the province. Logistics was also a key concern of his, as he needed to make certain the legion had numerous sources for rations, especially if the region they were posted to should undergo a poor harvest season.

He met later with his chief tribune, an agreeable enough young man named Cassius Florus Sellic. Like most laticlavian tribunes, Sellic was in his early twenties, the son of a prominent senator, and hopeful to become a legate someday. Something else the legion was lacking was staff tribunes. Nor did they have an aquilifer, who not only carried the sacred eagle into battle but was also the chief treasurer for the legion. Knowing his own ineptitude with finances, the last thing Primus wanted was to have to oversee the legion's coffers. He, therefore, tasked Sellic with finding an aquilifer, offering the promotion to whichever candidate had the most experience with both coin and mathematics.

"I want you to look outside the legion," Primus told him. "None of our rankers have any experience, and the rank of aquilifer is subordinate only to the centurion primus pilus."

"I understand, sir," Sellic replied. "I will also find out why our military tribunes have not yet arrived. Before we left Rome, I was assured they would join us soon enough."

"Well, I didn't pass any on the way here," the legate remarked. "Do what you can. I'm going to see about finding some more armor for our lads. Bellona help us if we should get into a scrap before we can properly equip and train them."



It had taken little for Caecina and Valens to spread the seeds of rebellion amongst the Rhine army. After all, they had been encouraging discord within the ranks ever since the fall of Nero. Both men hated Galba, and all they needed was someone to lead them; a leader who they alone could control. They also knew it would be relatively easy to stir up long buried feelings of disgust towards the former governor of Lower Germania who now sat upon the imperial throne, even though a large number of the soldiers in the Rhine army had not even been born when Galba governed their province.

As for those men who had been in the legions during Galba's tenure as governor and were now the senior-ranking centurions of the army, the legates

assured them that expressions of discontent towards the new emperor would not be construed as subversive or treasonous.

"…provided you are able to compel your legionaries to accept a more suitable candidate as Emperor of Rome," Caecina said, during a meeting with the tribunes and the centurions primus ordo of the First Cohort. These four men, along with the primus pilus, were the chief strategic and tactical advisors to the commanding legate.

"While I most certainly harbor no love for Galba," a centurion spoke up, "if we intervene by force and place our own emperor upon the throne, what is to stop other provinces from attempting to do the same?"

"You know I have more reason to despise Galba than any man here," Master Centurion Bulla added. "I am certainly not opposed to deposing this wicked tyrant for the good of Rome."

"Please understand that no one is compelling you to do anything," Caecina reassured them. "If the men wish to renew their oaths of allegiance, then by all means let them. However, if there is discontent, or subversive mutterings within the ranks, then we need a strong leader, one who the legions will willingly swear fealty to. But we must be unified in our resolve. The Rhine army must be of one mind and purpose."

Though the men hated Galba, the legate knew it was dangerous asking his men to betray the man who the senate had ratified as emperor. That there were no rebukes from the assembled officers, or calls to throw their legate in chains as a traitor, only made Caecina bolder in his ambition to rid the empire of Galba. He decided to let the subversive feelings fester for a while longer. By the Festival of Saturnalia, the legions of Germania would be ready to save Rome from tyranny. Naturally, the other issue was getting Vitellius to believe that he would be a suitable Caesar.



It was two weeks later when Vespasian received the message from Primus, imploring him to send whatever armor he could spare. The new legate of Legio VII, Gemina, stated that all other entreaties had either been ignored or met with indifference.

"I want a count of all spare sets of segmentata and hamata we have within the entire army," the commander-in-chief ordered. "I also want half of all stocks of spare plates, buckles, rivets, and repair parts brought to Caesarea at

once.”

“It will be slow going,” Trajan observed. “The fall and winter rains have already badly muddied the roads.”

“I understand,” the commander-in-chief replied. “But I also know that a Roman legion has been posted to the heart of the Danube frontier, with little means of protecting themselves against the ever volatile Dacians across the border. And just because the emperor who raised them lacks the foresight to see to their needs, does not mean we should abandon our brother legionaries.”

“It doesn’t hurt that this will also serve as a measure of good faith to our friend, Primus,” Titus added with a grin. “And are we perhaps thinking ahead some?”

Vespasian understood his son’s subtle hint. “It is always good to think a few steps ahead,” he conceded. “Besides, Antonius Primus is a loyal friend. And whatever his personal flaws, on the battlefield he is an ally not to be despised.”

Chapter XVII: Duplicity on the Frontier

Bonna, Lower Germania
December 68 A.D.



Aulus Vitellius

The nine hundred mile journey from Rome to Bonna, in Lower Germania, had taken Vitellius over a month to complete. Though the caps of the Alpes Mountains were white with snow, the passes themselves had yet to be blockaded by the coming winter storms. His arrival at the fortress of Vindonissa, on the north side of the Alpes, surprised the legionaries posted there. Vitellius remained for a night, dining with the commanding legate of Legio XXI, Rapax. His host speculated that if the governor had waited a couple more weeks, he never would have made it over the mountains.

With much effort, Vitellius made the remainder of his journey in good order. Upon his arrival at Bonna, he was greeted by two of his legates, Valens and Aquinus, as well as Caecina from neighboring Upper Germania, who welcomed Vitellius on behalf of Governor Flaccus. In the weeks since his arrival, Vitellius adapted remarkably well into his new command. Both legionaries and auxilia troopers treated him cordially and with great respect. Little did he know, Valens and Caecina had spent the past weeks spreading glowing stories about the new governor. They had even gone so far as to emphasize that the soldiery should not judge Vitellius on his appearance, any

more so than they would have the semi-crippled Emperor Claudius. Granted, most of the legionaries had been young boys when Claudius occupied the imperial throne, yet all knew the tales of how his physical afflictions had masked a brilliant leader and statesman.

Vitellius had taken on his duties with a surprising amount of vigor and, predictably, formed a close bond with both Valens and Caecina, something which he smugly reckoned would grate on his mother. The two men became his favorite legates, and he often entertained the pair at the governor's palace. That Caecina was spending so much time away from his own legion in the neighboring province was of little regard, as he did so under the guise of being Governor Flaccus' liaison to Vitellius. On a cold, early December evening, Vitellius hosted the pair to a private dinner, where he wished to discuss the upcoming Saturnalia celebrations in both Bonna and Mogontiacum. And yet, there was a pall of gloom over the two legates, their faces betraying their deeply troubled thoughts.

"Tell me, my friends," Vitellius said, his face flushed and sweaty as he messily dug into a course of roast peacock. "Why the long faces? The most wonderful celebrations of the year are almost upon us, and I hope to put on such a spectacle they'll be speaking of it in Rome herself!"

"And after the celebrations, we are likely to find our province in turmoil," Caecina said. He looked over at Valens, who gave him a subtle wink of reassurance.

"What do you mean?" Vitellius asked, before quaffing another cup of wine.

"It's the legions, sir," Valens answered.

"What about the legions? From what I have seen, they are as drilled and disciplined as any in the empire. I have seen nothing that would displease me."

"Nor will you," Valens replied. "For the lads are already taken by you. It is the emperor who draws their ire."

Vitellius raised an eyebrow, for he knew only a few scattered rumors regarding Galba's mistreatment of the Rhine army during his tenure. He found it difficult to fathom that there could still be such enmity towards him, after more than twenty years.

"If I may speak plainly, sir," Caecina said. "The men *hate* Galba."

"Yes, well, he has made few friends since being named Caesar," Vitellius conceded. "And I know he has a less than favorable reputation amongst the

older soldiers on the Rhine."

"And therein lies the problem," Caecina remarked, capitalizing on Vitellius' observation. "How can we be certain legionaries will show obedience to an emperor their own officers despise? And as you know, with every New Year every soldier in the service of Rome is required to renew his oath of allegiance to the emperor. What happens then? When the most powerful force within the imperial army refuses to do so?"

"Do you really think the legions will refuse to extend their oaths to Galba?" Vitellius asked, suddenly alarmed.

"When my own master centurion has the audacity to say, *'piss on that sodded old twat'*, I do not foresee much love for the emperor coming from his soldiers," Caecina stated.

"But if the legions refuse to swear their oaths, it will be chaos. There will be anarchy on the Rhine!" Vitellius was now seated upright and was clearly vexed, as he shoved away a servant who offered him a plate of pickled fish.

"Our legionaries are not wild barbarians, regardless of what people in Rome say about their living amongst the savages for so long," Valens said. "But they need someone they can follow, an emperor who inspires them. A cantankerous old man who once treated their centurions cruelly, and whose path to the throne was saturated with the blood of murdered soldiers, is not a man that any self-respecting imperial legionary would swear allegiance to."

"Still," Vitellius replied, his brow furrowed in contemplation, "what you are eluding to amounts to treason."

"Yes," Caecina stated. "Treason against a man who became emperor through treachery.

"Treason against a feeble tyrant who killed without mercy any who offended him," Valens added

"But who?" Vitellius persisted. "If the legions will not obey Galba, then who can inspire them?" As both of his legates stared at him, a knowing smirk, albeit one of disbelief, crossed his face. "No…you cannot mean it. Surely you do not intend to suggest that I become emperor?"

"Who else?" Valens asked. "You may think of yourself as an improbable candidate, but you also had doubts as to your ability to lead the armies of the Rhine."

Vitellius was now helping himself to a plate of nuts and dates, all the while staring down at the floor while contemplating what his generals were suggesting. Certainly, the entire concept of 'treason' was made a mockery of

by Galba's rise to power. And how dare the emperor demand loyalty from the provinces, when he had spurned that expected of him by Nero?

"I need to know the entire Rhine army is behind me," Vitellius said at last. "Every last legionary and auxiliary trooper must be unanimous in their support for Galba's overthrow. If that happens we will march on Rome, not as conquerors but as liberators, to save the people from a wretched tyrant."

Caecina and Valens were nothing short of amazed at how easy it had been. After all, Vitellius had only arrived in the province a few weeks prior, and now he was collaborating open rebellion with his legates. Given the vast size and experience of the Rhine army, it was easy to see why a potential usurper would be brimming with confidence. A year ago, this would have been unthinkable, yet Galba's usurpation of the throne made it clear that an emperor could be made from outside of the old imperial family, and even from outside of Rome herself. The two legates now relished the coming of the New Year, which would usher in a new age for Rome.



A month had passed since Otho's last meeting with Vinius. And while the former proconsul's wife and daughter had yet to arrive from Hispania, he had made good on his attempts to sway Galba's thinking regarding the imperial succession. Otho's presence was required by the emperor more frequently, in particular regarding fiscal and taxation matters. Many members of the senate openly speculated that Galba had, perhaps, found his heir.

Among the emperor's growing entourage was Lucius Calpurnius Licinianus. The fourth son of a former consul named Marcus Licinius Crassus, two of his older brothers had met violent ends. The eldest had been murdered, while the second was executed by Nero. His remaining brother, Crassus, currently commanded a legion on the Danube, while his younger sister was married to a prominent senator. Otho knew him as a passing acquaintance, though he was aware Licinianus was also becoming a closer part of Galba's inner circle. The two shared a similar temperament, with a penchant for stoicism and strict financial accountability. It was sometimes said, in jest, that one would think Licinianus was Galba's son or grandson. And while Otho had finally been admitted into the imperial council, so was Licinianus, who was the only member younger than he. While Otho did not find any of this remotely amusing, he decided he should become friends with

the young man.

Licinianus was surprised when Otho invited him to dine at the Domus Aurea, even though it was slowly falling into disuse. To hold banquets or other events within its walls was perceived as being in poor taste, given Nero's love for the extravagant building. However, for Otho, who had never denied his friendship to the deceased emperor, it was the perfect place for him to entertain friends and potential political allies.

"I must say, I am honored you invited me to the Domus Aurea," Licinianus said, as he took his place on one of the formal couches.

"It is my friends, and potential friends, who I invite here," Otho said, holding up his wine chalice in salute. "Many may think it in poor taste for me to use this palace. I believe we should not let such magnificence go to waste."

"Agreed," Licinianus said, returning the salute. He then made a bold prediction, one that had been echoing among the senate and equites. "As you are one who will most likely succeed our current emperor, I find myself fortunate that you should consider me among your friends."

Otho feigned surprise at this last remark, though he had been less than subtle about his ultimate ambitions than perhaps he should have.

"I am merely a loyal servant of Rome," he asserted. "We can only trust Galba to choose a successor that will best serve the people of the empire, after he is gone. At his age, I confess, I do worry often about his health. The last of the Julio-Claudians has only been dead since June, with Galba only recently arriving in the capital. And should he depart this life too soon, it could mean instability and tumult."

"Yes," Licinianus concurred. "Tragic, then, that his sons were taken from him so many years ago. It is strange how the fates work. Not one of our emperors has ever been succeeded by his own natural son. Tiberius was the stepson of Augustus; Caligula the great-nephew of Tiberius; Claudius the uncle of Caligula; and Nero the stepson of Claudius. I suppose, with no close living relatives, fate is allowing the emperor to choose a worthy successor based on merit rather than bloodline."

"I suppose it is exceedingly arrogant of me to think that I am such a worthy successor," Otho remarked. "But, I am no more vain than Augustus was, when he allowed the senate to grant him the numerous powers and honors that made him a king in all but name. He always preferred the term *'princeps'* or *'first citizen'*, rather than *'emperor'*, but that is what he was."

"Augustus lived in a different time," his guest observed. "He had the

sensibilities of the senate and people to consider. Rome had abolished kings nearly five hundred years before, yet he was made more powerful than any of our ancient monarchs. He told the people he had restored the republic, yet it was all a façade. Strange, the republic died with him and nobody noticed. But now, no one would dare think of bringing back those dark days before the empire, when violence became the rule of law."

"Indeed. With an emperor, Rome's rival factions are kept in check. Or at least they are prevented from making war upon each other. And if we are to prevent a return to the darkness, there *must* be stability within the imperial succession."

"I spoke with Galba in private the other morning," Licinianus said.

This surprised Otho, though he kept it to himself.

"He invited me to breakfast with him, and I broached this very subject. I thought he would take offense, thinking no sooner has he become emperor, and everyone is already looking to be rid of him."

Privately, that was exactly how Otho felt, though it was for more than just his selfish ambitions. Galba's bloody path to becoming Caesar had left him with many enemies and only half-hearted friends. The sooner the cantankerous old bastard died, the sooner Otho could begin the long process of reconciliation within the empire.

Despite his feelings of revulsion towards the man whom he hoped to replace, his response to Licinianus was far more measured.

"And, did Galba make any definitive statements regarding the succession?"

"He did not mention any names," Licinianus answered. "However, he assured me an announcement would be made soon after the New Year."

"Well, then it could be anyone," Otho said, trying to hide his disappointment.

"Perhaps, though I know Galba despises false modesty. And every single senator and patrician who might be a possible candidate has fawned over him, with talks about 'may you reign forever', or 'I am but your humble servant', and other such undignified speak. No one is coming out in favor of any particular candidate, with the exception of Vinius. He has rather pointedly told the emperor that he views you as the most viable potential successor. And, as we both know, Vinius has far greater influence on Galba than any other man alive. Even Laco and his dear Icelus do not hold as much sway as his soon-to-be consular colleague. Which is why many within the

senate believe it will be you. I, too, am fairly certain he will name you as his heir."

While he had hoped for a more definitive word from Galba, Otho was confidently reassured knowing Vinius was doing his part to ensure their succession plans came to fruition.

"I hope this does not place you in an awkward position," he said. "But I have to know, once the time comes, can I count on you to be one of my inner circle of friends and advisors? For that is why I have asked you here. I do not know you well, but I know that Galba would have only appointed one as young as you to the imperial council with good reason."

"You have come to me in the spirit of friendship and service to Rome," Licinianus noted. "And for that, you can count on me to serve you well once you have become Caesar."

The two then drank a series of toasts, while swearing oaths that they would work closely together for the greater good of the people of Rome. By the end of the night, Otho was teeming with confidence, as he felt his influence within the imperial court growing substantially. Licinianus was a few years younger than he, and Otho knew he needed old senators, such as Vinius; revered generals, such as Paulinus; and the younger generation of patricians supporting him. He almost felt that it was coming together all-too-easily. But then, he reasoned that if it was the will of the gods, then everything coming to pass was part of their divine intentions for the empire.



The grain ration, known as the *frumentationes*, dated back to the early empire when Emperor Augustus had delegated a set amount of free grain to all citizens in Rome. Considered to be a personal gift from the emperor, for it was by his authority alone the ration was issued, the frumentationes had been a useful means of maintaining the loyalty of the plebian masses. Nero had suspended the ration following the Great Fire, as the funds that paid for the grain were needed to rebuild the city. Soon after his arrival, the Tribunes of the Plebs petitioned Galba to reinstate the ration, only to be rebuffed. The emperor claimed the grain ration was an expense the empire simply could not afford. Whether truth or simply another example of his miserly nature, it only alienated Galba even further from the people.

In the theaters, he was mocked by the revival of an ancient Atellan farce

derived from Greek playwrights. During one of the musical scores the entire audience began singing along about a stingy old man named Onesimus, who all now compared to Galba. Wise emperors had used the theater to gauge the demeanor of the masses. With the exception of the reigns of Caligula and Nero, thespians mocking the emperors were commonplace. While Tiberius had been indifferent to the farces, both Augustus and Claudius took much amusement at their own expense. Augustus even went so far as to send written critiques to various actors as to how well they mimicked his speech and behavior. However, it was not the actions of the actors, but the reactions of the audiences that told an emperor whether he was loved or loathed. That the Atellan farce, which was more cruel than humorous, had been revived, was telling. Even more so was the enthusiasm with which the crowds sang along to the rather biting lyrics. Galba ignored the warnings that played out almost nightly on the various stages of the imperial capital.

And though the emperor loathed festivals, feeling they were an extravagant waste of resources, even he was looking forward to the weeklong Saturnalia later that month. The people were growing angry, and they needed something to distract them. He had, very briefly, considered withdrawing all public funds for the celebrations. Vinius and Icelus rather bluntly told him if he did, the people would burn down the imperial palace with all of them inside.

It was two weeks prior to Saturnalia when yet another financial matter was brought to Galba's attention. This time it involved not Rome but Germania, and one of the very men he had assigned to the frontier.

"These are the taxation and expenditure reports for Upper Germania during the last six months," Icelus explained, as he stood to the side of the emperor's private desk.

"Most of these numbers do not add up at all," Galba grumbled. "A few thousand denarii from the road building funds, some more from the taxes taken from wheat farmers…did Governor Flaccus offer no explanation?"

"If I may speak plainly, Caesar," the freedman replied. "Flaccus is a half-witted bumbling old man who can barely see and who, some days, forgets where he is. If you will look at these reports, you will see that one of his legates has been performing most of the financial transactions, even though he appears to be spending little, if any, time in the province."

"Caecina." Galba was now seething with disgust. The same man, who just a few months ago he'd sent to replace Verginius as commanding legate

of Legio IV, was now embezzling imperial funds.

"I want him sacked immediately and brought to Rome to face charges of theft and corruption!"

The Year of the Four Emperors

Chapter XVIII: Oath Breakers

The Rhine Frontier
1 January 69 A.D.



Aquilifer and legionaries

New Year's Day dawned grey and cold along the Rhine frontier. It had rained the night before, with a few wisps of snow falling during the early morning hours of darkness. And while there was a semblance of normalcy within the massive fortresses that housed the imperial legions of Germania, both officer and legionary alike felt the nervous tension and apprehension of what was to come.

That everything had been orchestrated by a pair of legates never crossed the minds of individual legionaries. What they did know was that, unable to willingly declare their allegiance for Emperor Galba, all were risking being condemned as traitors. To a legionary, his oath was sacred, and none felt they could swear before the gods that they would live and die in the service of a man they so utterly despised. It was not just the hatred for Galba that stemmed initially from the older centurions, but also the fact that Emperor Nero, though loathed and feared by the senate, had been loved by the army. After all, he had been the grandson of the great Germanicus Caesar, who led the Rhine army to some of its greatest victories against the barbarian alliance formed by the traitor, Arminius, all those years ago. And, Nero was the last

of the Julio-Claudians, whose very name imperial soldiers had been taught to revere. To now swear their oaths to the man who had usurped their beloved Nero was unthinkable. So consumed with hatred for Galba were the Rhine legions, Caecina and Valens would later realize their goading and treasonous talk had been completely unnecessary.

General Fabius Valens stood atop the dais, on the edge of the amphitheater just outside the fortress. The entire Legio I, Germanica, was arrayed in a massive parade formation before him. Each centurion pilus prior stood at the head of his cohort, along with their standard bearer. The chief tribune stood behind Valens just off to his right, the centurion primus pilus on his left. The staff tribunes were arrayed in a line behind them.

"First Germanica Legion!" Valens shouted. *"The New Year is upon us; a time when all soldiers of the empire renew their oaths of allegiance to the emperor, senate, and people of Rome. The senate has seen fit to recognize Servius Sulpicius Galba as Emperor of Rome. Will you, this day, swear the oath of allegiance to him?"*

There was an awkward silence. No one within the ranks dared speak up in either confirmation or defiance. Centurions and options kept quiet, as they did not wish to give the appearance of unduly influencing their legionaries to commit treason. After a minute of complete silence, it became clear that not one of the five thousand soldiers assembled was willing to swear fealty to Emperor Galba.

"I ask you again," Valens persisted. *"Will the First Germanica give its unquestioned loyalty and obedience to Emperor Galba?"* The wording was deliberate, and it cut into the heart of every soldier and officer present. Finally, it became too much. And, as one brave legionary defiantly shouted, *'No!'* the entire legion erupted, like a pot boiling over.

"Piss on Galba, the usurper from hell!"

"Crucify the traitor!"

"Shove a gladius up his ass and toss his corpse into the Tiber!"

There were other, equally obscene, insults hurled by numerous soldiers in the ranks. Valens raised both his hands, which silenced the shouts and profanities being spewed with venom from his soldiers.

"First Germanica, I cannot in good conscience fault you for refusing to give your allegiance to Galba. However, we are legionaries not barbarians, and we will not allow anarchy to threaten our beloved empire. We serve

Rome above all else, and Rome must have an emperor. There is one among us who has shown his love for both Rome, and especially for the legions along the Rhine which keep all our people safe. He is of noble birth, a former consul, and carries on the strong legacy of leadership and service inherited from his father. I speak of your governor-general, Aulus Vitellius who, though his time with us has been short, he has proven himself a friend to all Romans. If you will not give your allegiance to Galba, will you swear it to Vitellius?"

This caught many of the soldiers completely unawares. Their focus had been on antipathy towards Galba, rather than naming their own candidate to become Caesar. They knew what Valens said was true, and all had at least amicable feelings towards their governor-general. Exaggerated feelings of profound loyalty, as if Vitellius were a renowned general such as Julius Caesar, swept over the assembled legion.

"Yes!" a soldier shouted, after a very brief hesitation.

"Let Vitellius be our new Caesar and down with the tyrant!" another voice echoed.

"So be it," Valens said, with a solemn nod. He hoped none of the soldiers in the front ranks could see he was practically beaming. *"Let it be known that the First Germanica Legion will not follow the vile usurper, and instead nominates Aulus Vitellius to be Emperor of Rome. I ask for your patience, and to give me a few days to learn the disposition of our brother legions. May Jupiter, Victoria, and Bellona smile upon our endeavor, that we may bring justice and peace to the empire!"*

This was met with a series of shouts, accolades, and chants of Vitellius' name. Valens then ordered the cohort commanders to dismiss their men and await further orders. And so, the soldiers of Legio I, Germanica, left the field without having sworn allegiance to anyone. However, Valens, Caecina, and their fellow conspirators amongst the other legates and senior officers had already agreed that once the entire army refused to renew the oath to Galba, then all would simultaneously declare Vitellius emperor. By the time the soldiers in the ranks realized the gravity of what they had done, it would be too late to turn back. Rome had suffered one usurper, whom they would now attempt to replace with another.



While the proverbial banner of treason was being unfurled a thousand miles away, Marcus Salvius Otho was basking in the growing assertion that in the coming days he would be named Galba's heir. Vinia had arrived during the week of Saturnalia, and she and her newly-betrothed were already discussing when they should be wed. Her father had all but assured Otho the throne was his for the taking, and the heir-apparent promised Vinia that as soon as Galba named him his successor, they would be married. The Pedagogues supported him, with Laco and Icelus both giving at least nominal consent to Vinius' recommendation, in a show of solidarity. Much of the Praetorian Guard also agreed, at least according to Guardsman Tiberius Statius, whom Otho had taken into his confidence in recent months. Otho had even gone so far as to court the former Prefect of Rome, Flavius Sabinus. Though no longer holding any official capacity within the city, Sabinus was highly respected and a useful ally. On the day after New Year's, Otho paid him a visit and directly asked the senator for his thoughts on the succession.

"I confess, I see few other options than you at the moment," Sabinus said, as he and Otho took a private stroll through his gardens.

"So you will support my claim to be Galba's successor?" Otho asked bluntly.

"To be honest, I see no reason not to," Sabinus replied. "Yes, you are highly ambitious, though that is scarcely a flaw in a potential emperor."

"There are some who state that I was one of Nero's favorites, though this is a bit exaggerated," Otho remarked. "I do hope my friendship with our departed emperor is not something the Flavians would judge me unkindly for. You should know, I opposed your brother's exile and strongly supported his appointment to command the eastern armies, when Paulinus brought his name before Nero. I never knew Vespasian as well as I would have liked; however, I have long admired the pair of you, and I guess in my own way I always liked to think of him as a friend."

Sabinus could not tell if Otho spoke the truth regarding his support for Vespasian with Nero, or if it was simply fabricated to help guarantee the support of the Flavians. Either way, Sabinus felt Otho's ambition to become emperor was so great, that he would not be denied. One way or the other, he would become Caesar. And since Sabinus respected the younger man's achievements as Governor of Lusitania, while finding his flaws to be nothing too significant or out of the ordinary, he thought it prudent to offer his tentative support.

“I think,” he said, “you are right to count the Flavians among your friends. I believe I can also speak for my brother in this matter which, in turn, means I am able to vouch for the armies in the east.”

“Would you be willing to swear that friendship to me?” Otho asked.

Sabinus found it mildly amusing that Otho seemed so anxious to court the favor of the Flavians. No previous emperor or heir apparent had so much as paid any attention to their family at all over the years. He also saw no harm in reassuring the younger man, provided he specifically referenced *when* Otho became emperor.

“Once you are Caesar, you will find no stronger friends and allies than the house of the Flavians.”

Though he was supremely confident in his assured elevation to imperial prince, Otho was not a man to take chances. After he took his leave of Sabinus, he decided to pay a visit to Guardsman Statius, on duty at the palace. The senator took him off to the side, well away from any of his companions. Statius was often pulled away by some senator or magistrate and came as little surprise to his fellow guardsmen.

“Something I can do for you, senator?” he asked.

“You assured me, once I am emperor, that I can depend upon the full and unconditional support of the Praetorian Guard,” Otho said. “What I need to know is, where does the loyalty of the Guard lie at this very moment?”

“Not with Galba,” Statius declared rather bluntly. “At least not the lads in the ranks. There are a few among the officers who are a bit sentimental and are absolutely loyal to the emperor, no matter who it is. Unfortunately, my own centurion is among these. I suppose it is our duty, and all of us should feel this way. However, Galba is a mean-spirited despot who lost whatever loyalty most of us had for him, when he refused to give us the donative that is traditionally handed down when a new emperor assumes the throne. Tiberius was notoriously stingy with imperial coin, yet even he never denied his guardsmen or legionaries their just due.”

Otho appreciated this humble praetorian’s candor. He knew well the animosity that stemmed from the emperor’s refusal to pay the stipend Nymphidius had promised. He may have been correct, in that the loyalty of his soldiers should not have to be purchased. However, to break with a hundred years of tradition, while denying his personal guard even a fraction of what was promised, had alienated Galba from his praetorians.

“You may have to wait a little longer to receive your donative,” he remarked. “But I promise you, if Galba chooses his heir wisely, the Praetorian Guard can expect to receive what is rightly theirs.”

“And if Galba does not choose wisely?” Statius asked.

Otho shrugged nonchalantly. “We will deal with that issue should it arise.”

“And I shall be at your service,” the guardsman asserted.



Though each passing day without a formal declaration from the emperor was maddening for Otho, the proclamation was finally made for all senators, magistrates, and other dignitaries to gather outside the imperial palace. It was now the Tenth of January, the day when Galba would officially name his successor. That morning a cool breeze blew in from the Tiber, and Otho was full of gleeful anticipation.

Galba stood atop the steps along with his co-consul, Titus Vinius. Icelus and Laco stood behind them, with Laco in full armor as Praetorian Prefect. Guardsmen lined the steps with two ranks blockading the steps from the street, which was crammed with thousands of spectators. Many had climbed atop the Circus Maximus, which was just across the street from the palace, in order to catch a glimpse of the emperor on this auspicious day.

Otho, Licinianus, and a score of prominent senators stood off to the right, behind the emperor. Praetorian guardsmen were seen everywhere. Otho made brief eye contact with Guardsman Statius, who stood with his squad not far from the emperor.

“Noble senators and citizens of Rome,” Galba proclaimed, his hands held high.

All were surprised at how well his voice carried. And though it was cracking slightly, he managed to keep from breaking into a coughing fit.

“Since becoming your emperor, the unavoidable question of succession has been asked repeatedly,” he continued. “Today, we bring an end to any further speculation. I have named as my heir, a man of impeccable moral virtues, of great temperance and fortitude, who has already served Rome with much renown. You all have grown to love him. And now, I implore you to embrace him as heir to my name, estates, and the imperial throne. I give you my son, your future emperor, *Lucius Calpurnius Licinianus!*”

"What?" Otho roared, though this was drowned out by the cacophony of cheers and shouted praises to Galba, as well as his designated heir.

Licinianus' eyes were wide in disbelief, his mouth open slightly. He quickly looked over to the incensed Otho and quickly said, "I am so sorry. I swear I did not know…"

He was interrupted by the host of senators practically dragging him to where the emperor stood. Galba embraced the man, who then awkwardly turned and raised his hand in salute to the host of citizens below the steps. Every inch within sight was crammed with cheering onlookers. It seemed the entire city had turned out for the event. Their ovations were so loud when Galba leaned over to say something into his ear, Licinianus could not hear a word said. Only Otho and Vinius were not cheering. The consul was in a state of horrified shock.

After a few minutes, while a number of congratulating senators led the new imperial prince away, the emperor surprisingly made his way over to Otho. "I suppose I owe you an explanation."

The presumptive heir's face was a deep shade of red, contorted in anger. "I would say so," Otho growled, his eyes filled with rage. "Have I not served you well? Haven't I done all that you asked, and then some? Do I not offer you a noble name, as well as a dynasty that can follow you? And did not your most trusted advisor, your co-consul, Titus Vinius, give you his strongest recommendations of my worthiness as your successor?"

"All of that is true," Galba conceded. "And for once, I went against the man whose council I follow almost without question. It is for the good of Rome I chose Licinianus as my heir. You are a man of great energy and talent, yet you lack moral fiber. Hosting banquets within the embarrassment that is the Domus Aurea is but one of many acts that I find unbecoming. To speak plainly, I fear that if you became Rome's next emperor, you would be no better than my predecessor. The empire needs to move on from the time of the Julio-Claudians, not have another Nero upon the throne."

He gave Otho a reassuring pat on the shoulder. This felt awkward to Galba and only further incensed the man who had assumed, up until now, that he was the heir apparent.

"There is much you can do, if you wish to continue to serve Rome," Galba said. "But, you will not be emperor. Now, let us speak no more of this."

As he turned to walk away, Otho grabbed him gruffly by the toga. Laco,

who'd been watching the entire interaction, immediately lunged between the two, forcibly shoving Otho away.

"Unhand the emperor!" he snapped, his hand now on the pommel of his gladius.

The senator completely ignored him. *"Rome is mine!"* he snarled, pointing an accusing finger at Galba.

Galba turned to face him, giving a rare half grin. "Only if you cut it away from me." He then spoke to his guardsmen, who had formed a line between the two. "Senator Otho is tired from strain and clearly not himself today. Escort him to his house and see to it he's well protected." The words were, of course, a polite way of telling the praetorians to place Otho under house arrest, until such time as his temper dissipated.

"I'll escort him, Caesar," Guardsman Statius said, grabbing the senator by the elbow.

"Unhand me, damn you!" Otho shouted.

Statius roughly pulled him aside, his grip on the senator's arm ironclad. *"Shut…up,"* he whispered harshly. "You will be emperor, very soon, but not if you keep making a scene. Another outburst like that and you risk Galba or Laco ordering me to cut your throat, which would not fit with either of our plans."

Otho took a deep breath and gave a short nod of understanding, before allowing himself to be guided away. Once away from the palace, he quickly climbed into his litter with the guardsman next to him. The rain had started coming down, and there was a clap of thunder. Statius pulled the silk curtains closed, though they were continuously whipped about by the winds.

"There is a reason I volunteered to escort you home," the guardsman explained, removing his helmet.

People were rushing about, trying to find shelter from the downpour, with some decrying the emperor's announcement as offending the gods. As if to emphasize this, there was another flash of lightening and a loud clap of thunder.

"Jupiter himself is clearly not pleased," Statius added with a mocking chuckle.

"I thought you said I have the support of the praetorians?" Otho asked indignantly.

"Laco is one of Galba's pedagogues, he does not speak for us."

"And you do?" Otho asked incredulously. "You are a guardsman of no

rank."

"Rank does not necessarily equal influence," Statius countered. "And if I do exert an undue amount of influence, it is because, unlike many of the senior officers, I *listen* to my fellow guardsmen. I know what most of them think and where their loyalties, or potential loyalties, lay." He placed a reassuring hand on Otho's shoulder. "Give me four days, that's all I ask. Galba has chosen poorly, and by doing so has brought about his own downfall. In four days, you will be Emperor of Rome."

"See to it," Otho said, "and I will see you handsomely rewarded."



For Consul Vinius, he now had an even greater crisis to face than his attempts at securing the succession for his proposed son-in-law. While Otho sulked in private, and Galba enjoyed the celebrations surrounding his announced adoption of Licinius, an emergency session of the senate was called. The rain was still pouring down in sheets, and every member of the senate was completely drenched as they uncomfortably assumed their places.

"Could this not have waited until the rains ceased?" Italicus asked. "I swear, half of us will catch our deaths from this."

"Noble fathers of Rome," Vinius said, ignoring the grumblings of Italicus and other disgruntled senators. He was now holding a large scroll up high. "I have just received the most grievous of news from the Rhine frontier. The armies of both Germanic provinces have refused to swear their oaths of allegiance to Emperor Galba."

"Madness!" a senator protested. "The legions cannot simply refuse to swear fealty to their rightful emperor."

"They can, and they have," Vinius said, trying to keep his voice calm and measured. "The armies of the Rhine have declared Galba an illegitimate usurper, and have named the governor of Lower Germania, Aulus Vitellius, as rightful Emperor of Rome."

This led to a series of nervous laughs from various senators, though all were soon silent as they realized the gravity of the situation. Vitellius may have been a fat nonentity to them, but if he had the entire Rhine army with its seven legions supporting him, Rome was facing a serious crisis.

"Have we received any word from Vitellius himself?" Suetonius Paulinus asked, rising to his feet.

The consul shook his head. “None,” he answered. “Thus far, Vitellius has not consented to send any sort of formal message to the senate and is likely consolidating his power in Germania, while seeking allies in the neighboring provinces. And, unless a diplomatic solution can be found in the immediate future, I am afraid Rome is on the path to civil war.”

“The scourge of which we have not suffered since the conflict between Octavian and Antony,” Italicus replied glumly, his rain-soaked discomfort forgotten.

There was little else to discuss for the moment, at least not until after the emperor was informed. Vinius dismissed the senators to return to their homes. Many had planned to attend the afternoon celebrations at the imperial palace, though the news from the Rhine, coupled with the incessant rains, darkened their moods considerably.

As consul, it was Vinius’ responsibility to inform the emperor, who was lounging within the vast dining hall while guests drank toasts and congratulated their new prince. Galba was rather irritated when Vinius insisted they speak in private, though they were quickly joined by Cornelius Laco. And when his co-consul showed him the dispatch, Galba was rather dismissive of it. He was more annoyed than anything, for he did not wish to have any interruptions to the celebrations regarding his new heir and successor. Having an adopted son, who would in due time succeed him as Emperor of Rome, had given him his only cause for joy in many years.

“If the Rhine army wanted me dead, they would never have allowed me to march on Rome,” he reasoned.

“Vitellius was not in command then,” Vinius observed. “Verginius has been in self-imposed retirement since you assumed the throne, and his former legions have refused to swear the oath of allegiance to you. Their respect for him was all that stayed their blades at the time.”

“You worry too much,” Laco said, with a casual shrug. “No doubt they are sore over not receiving their assumed donative…beg your pardon, Caesar, for it was a prudent fiscal decision.”

“As I have said before,” Galba said, his voice full of irritation. “I do not buy my soldiers. They are loyal to me or they will be decimated, as I did to the Adiutrix Legion.”

“If seven legions march on Rome, who do you propose will exact this decimation?” Vinius asked, his eyes narrowing slightly.

Galba stood and glared at Vinius. “Leave us, consul. If I have need of your advice again, I will summon you.”

Titus Vinius was filled with a flood of ill feelings as he left the imperial palace. Foremost of these was the realization that he was slowly losing control over the emperor. Of the three Pedagogues, Laco maintained his influence via the Praetorian Guard, and Icelus had been elevated by Galba into the equites. The promotion of a former slave into Rome’s lesser nobility was unlawful and had caused quite a scandal, yet Icelus wore the toga with narrow purple stripe, as well as several rings given to members of the equites. And yet, for Vinius, despite being Galba’s colleague as consul for the year, his influence had waned considerably. He had been so certain Otho would be named his successor. When Galba went against his advice on this matter, it seemed Vinius had in that moment lost his grip completely on the emperor. And his attempt at informing Galba of a serious crisis in Germania, had been met with a disbelieving rebuke.

He began to wonder if Licinianus had seduced Galba, using his charm and whatever favors necessary, to secure his place as the imperial heir. It was boorish for him to think such things. Licinianus was a noble young man who had no enemies, and served his posts in the *cursus honorum* with great dignity. Still, Vinius knew he had to speak to Otho at once to decide how they were going to proceed.

He went to see his despondent friend later that evening. Though Otho had given his servants strict instructions to not allow anyone into his house, they could not very well deny entry to the Consul of Rome. There was a praetorian guardsman with him. Evidently he was there to make certain Otho did not leave his house for the time being.

“Our attempts to secure the throne through adoption and the rightful succession have failed,” Otho said. He was surprisingly calm, given his earlier outburst.

“Yes,” Vinius acknowledged, as Otho handed him a cup of wine. The three of them were the only ones in the room. Not even a single slave stood in a corner. He then said, “I fear I am losing control over the emperor.”

“Oh, you think so, do you?” Otho’s tone was bitterly sarcastic. “And what clued you in to that?”

“Look, I am sorry things have not gone according to plan,” Vinius retorted. He pointed to the praetorian and asked, “Who is this?”

“One of us,” Otho assured him. “That is, if you still wish to be a part of

the new order.”

Vinius took a long drink off his wine and gave a nervous chuckle. “Three of us are all that makes up the new order?”

“I asked Senator Otho to give me four days,” the praetorian replied. “After which, we will strike.”

Chapter XIX: Heirs of Betrayal

The House of Otho, Rome
14 January 69 A.D.



Marcus Salvius Otho

Whether Galba wished to acknowledge it or not, Rome was facing a serious calamity following the inexplicable mutinies of both Upper and Lower Germania. Most of the senate was desperate to avoid civil war and hoped to find a diplomatic solution to the pending crisis. Even Marcus Salvius Otho, the man still determined to become emperor by any means necessary was, for the moment, dismissive of the situation in Germania.

"One crisis at a time," he said to his supporters, who secretly met at his house on the fourth night after Galba's announcement on the succession. "Let me deal with Galba first, and then we can turn our attention to Vitellius."

There were a number of praetorians present, as well as a handful of soldiers from Legio I, Adiutrix. The legion was garrisoned just outside the city, north of Milvian Bridge, but they would be ready to move into action at a moment's notice.

"I hope to cut his fucking balls off," a legionary snarled. Their hatred for Galba had only intensified following their punishment by decimation.

"So how do we do it, then?" Guardsman Statius asked. "We cannot simply storm the palace. The last thing the praetorians want is a nasty brawl

with each other."

"The people are ready for a change," Otho reassured them. "And all of you know this is not what I wanted. It was always my belief that Galba would do what was right, and we could simply wait for him to pass on from old age. But his cruelty and unwillingness to address the needs of the people has alienated much of the populace. The people grow hungry, and yet still he denies them the grain ration. That he has ignored his own consul's advice, while dismissing the treachery on the frontier, shows recklessness that puts Rome herself at risk. We have no choice now but to rip him from the throne via the sword. Understand, I do this not for me, but for the good of the empire." His words sounded a bit self-serving, but they had the intended effect.

"I have personally spoken with Tribune Vergilio," Tesserarius Proculus of the Praetorian Guard told the group. "He is in command of Galba's personal guard this week, and he has assured me the cohort on duty is among the most tepid in their support for the emperor. And I should know, seeing as it is my cohort, as well as Statius'."

"Will any of them stand with Galba?" Otho asked. "While I want to avoid bloodshed, it may not be entirely feasible."

"There are a few among the officers, including my own centurion," the praetorian replied with frustration. "Densus is a good man and a strong leader. He is just so damned headstrong when it comes to sentimental loyalties. I can only hope he will see reason and realize that protecting Galba does poor service to Rome."

"If nothing else our numbers should compel them," Otho reasoned. "The key is getting Galba out of the imperial palace. He is a pompous and self-righteous old fool. And since he thinks he can simply stare down seven legions from the Rhine, he'll surely believe he can merely wave his hand and bring the Guard and local legionaries into obedient supplication."

"Well, we should probably escort you to the praetorian barracks," a praetorian optio, named Veturius, reasoned. "There you will be safe, until we've sorted this little matter out."

"No, I will not hide like a coward," Otho said, shaking his head. He beamed as a thought came to him. "Tomorrow, Galba will go to the temple where he will observe the morning sacrifice and auspices. I will attend to him under the notion of paying my respects. Let him believe I have been cowed into being the dutiful little servant he thinks I am."

There were a few other details to sort out. In particular, Otho stated that Titus Vinius was not to be harmed in any way. While the praetorians were familiar enough with the consul, many of the legionaries, as well as the cavalry troopers garrisoned within the city, had no idea what he looked like. Otho could only hope that his friend, and presumptive father-in-law, did not play careless with his own life on the morrow.



The morning of the Fifteenth of January dawned grim and cloudy. Galba, along with his usual entourage, made their way to the Temple of Apollo attached to the imperial palace. Conducting the auspices was a renowned priest named Umbricius. Otho soon joined the small throng. When Galba turned his gaze towards him, the younger man bowed his head, as if to acknowledge that he accepted the emperor's decision and was here to pay his respects. Galba returned the nod before turning his attention to the priest.

Otho stood close to Umbricius, whose face bore a look of grave concern as he observed a flight of crows.

He stood there for some time, far longer than a normal auger reading, before turning to Galba, shaking his head. "The auspices are grave, Caesar. The music of the birds tells us the gods are angry. And as you can see, black clouds in the west harken a return of Jupiter's thunder. The omens tell me there is an enemy within your midst."

While Otho had to stifle a gasp, Galba appeared to be unaffected and, in fact, looked as if he were bored by the proceedings. The truth was the emperor cared little for omens and portents. But, as he was Pontifex Maximus, the chief priest of the Roman state religion, he had to at least feign interest.

"Then you must search for favorable omens," Galba remarked plainly. He knew if he allowed such ill portends to be made public with no good tidings to counter them, it would cause needless unrest among Rome's all-too-superstitious populace. He then added, "I will stay as long as I must, until the gods choose to look upon us with favor."

Umbricius simply bowed and called upon a servant to bring him a sacrificial bird, that they may study its entrails and divine the gods' will in this manner.

"Forgive me if I must leave you, Caesar," Otho said, in a low voice. "I

came to pay my respects, but I have urgent business with my housing contractors."

Galba simply nodded, likely glad to be rid of the insufferable hanger-on, for that is how he now viewed Otho. The younger man's tirade over the emperor's choice for successor had only verified Galba's suspicions about him. That Vinius had given such flattering recommendations of the former Governor of Lusitania, now caused the emperor to doubt the council of his consular colleague.

As Otho left the Temple of Apollo, he was both eager and confident. Being more prone to superstitions than Galba, he felt that Umbricius' auspices, as well as Galba's total disregard for them, only ensured his success. His freedman, Onomastus, was waiting for him just outside the palace gates.

"The master-builder and the contractors are ready," he said. "They have all their necessary tools and have agreed to meet at the Temple of Saturn."

To allay any suspicions, Otho and his freedman took the long route to the Roman Forum, following along the Circus Maximus, then taking a side street through a residential area. At Capitoline Hill they turned north, entering the Forum on the southwest corner by the Temple of Saturn.

As usual, the Forum was crammed with citizens conducting their midmorning affairs. People crowded around the various vendor stalls, while others gathered to hear the latest news from the city crier, who himself was waiting to hear the omens from Galba's augurs. Amidst the great masses of humanity, Otho and Onomastus spotted a group of men in red tunics and cloaks waiting for them. Otho had expected a much larger gathering of his 'contractors' and was taken aback to see only twenty-three present. He then recognized Optio Veturius and Guardsman Statius amongst the small assembly.

"Veturius!" Otho shouted, now full of apprehension. "Where the fuck is everyone else?"

"They will come," the optio said confidently. "But now we must get you to the praetorian barracks."

"You have to trust us, sire," Statius added, noting Otho's anxiety at the paltry number of guardsmen with them. "The pieces are in place. Galba will fall before the day is done."

"And speed is now key," Veturius emphasized. "Remember, Proculus,

myself, and several of the lads are supposed to be on duty at the palace right now. The absence of guardsmen like Statius and Atticus can be concealed for a short time. An optio and tesserarius, however…" His voice trailed off, and he shook his head.

Otho immediately understood. Prefect Laco had likely already been informed that a number of guardsmen, including a pair of officers, were absent from duty. And, unless Statius and his conspirators completely misjudged the lack of loyalty to Galba amongst the praetorians, their barracks was now the safest place for Otho to establish his temporary stronghold.

"Alright," he said. "Let's go."

"Not sulking like a criminal, sire," Veturius said. He pointed to an ornate chair which four slaves stood around. The optio then shouted to his guardsmen, *"Praetorians…gladius, draw! Protect the emperor!"*

The commotion caught the attention of numerous bystanders, who were puzzled to see not Galba, but a much younger man being hoisted up in a chair and surrounded by the emperor's personal guard. Even when not wearing their armor, praetorian guardsmen were always readily noticeable by their deep crimson cloaks and distinctive signet rings, as well as being one of the only bodies of men who were legally allowed to be armed within the city.

"Make way for the emperor!" Veturius shouted at the crowds, who quickly parted before the column of armed soldiers briskly walked through them.

Thousands of faces gazed up at Otho, as he was rapidly paraded through the Forum and onto the Via Sacra with confusion running rampant. While many knew of Otho, as he was the former governor of Lusitania and a member of the emperor's court, very few even knew what he looked like. The now 'would be usurper' was only recognized when the entourage passed within a few feet of Senator Italicus, the consul from the previous year. The two men shared a glance. While Italicus remained stoic, as soon as the praetorians had marched past him, he hastened to the imperial palace.



Less than an hour had passed since Otho's hasty departure from the Temple of Apollo, and Galba still patiently waited for some favorable omens from his chief augur. Prefect Laco watched from a respectful distance, quickly growing both bored and anxious. He noticed one of his centurions

walking hurriedly towards him from the direction of the palace.

"Centurion Densus reporting to the commander, sir," the officer said, with a sharp salute.

"Yes, what is it?" Laco said with irritation. All reports usually came to him from the tribune of the guard, not one of the subordinate centurions.

"I regret to report that several of my men are absent from the ranks," Densus replied. "They include both my optio and tesserarius."

"And did you report this to Tribune Vergilio?"

"I did, sir," the centurion responded. "He instructed me to find you, while he gets a count of the rest of the duty cohort. I fear, sir, a number of our men are missing."

"I see," the prefect replied. He was now alarmed, especially since two of those absent were officers. Usurpation and treachery never even crossed his mind. He feared some unforeseen disaster must have befallen his men. Either that or they were still drunk from a previous night's debauchery. He ordered the centurion, "Return to your men. Have Tribune Vergilio find me as soon as he knows how many men from the duty cohort are missing."

Densus saluted and left his commander to ponder over what was transpiring. Laco's thoughts were interrupted a few minutes later by a group of four city officials, who were walking with all haste to where Galba still waited for the gods to deliver better portends to him.

"Hold!" the prefect snapped at the men. He stepped in front of them and refused to let them pass. "Do you not see that the emperor is engaged in his sacred duties to the gods? Would you dare interrupt him?"

"We would not," one of the men replied, "except that we must inform him the empire is no longer his; it belongs to another."

"What was that?" Galba said, turning quickly to face them.

"You have been betrayed, Caesar," another magistrate said. "A number of your own praetorian guardsmen have proclaimed another man emperor. They did so right in the middle of the Forum, before hoisting him up on a chair and spiriting him away. Most likely, they are headed for the praetorian barracks."

"Did you see who it was?" Licinianus spoke up. He was clearly far more vexed than Galba, whose expression alone told of his doubts regarding the veracity of their story.

"We did not," the first man replied. "The Forum was crammed with people, and we did not get a good look at his face. He appeared to be fair-haired with a lighter complexion."

“I saw him!” a voice shouted, from across the courtyard.

“Senator Italicus,” Galba acknowledged. “And what news do you bring? Who is this wanton wretch who would dare betray me?”

“It was Otho, Caesar,” the senator answered, bowing his head for a moment. “There were not many guardsmen with him, perhaps twenty, but I suspect more are involved. They would not have made such a bold display otherwise.”

Laco knew he could not conceal the embarrassing absence of a number of his guardsmen now that he recognized it was treachery, rather than misfortune, causing their absenteeism.

“I’ve just been informed that a handful of praetorians from the palace duty cohort were absent from formation, Caesar,” he said, gritting his teeth at the awkwardness of the admission.

“If that is the case, then we must quickly confirm the fealty of those that remain,” Vinius said, speaking for the first time since their arrival at the temple.

“Are you daring to question the loyalty of the Praetorian Guard?” Laco snarled, taking the remark as a personal insult. His relationship with the consul had grown strained since they arrived in Rome. “You were always so fond of Otho. I doubt you are in any position to question loyalties!”

“By your own admission, some of your guardsmen have declared Otho emperor,” Vinius snapped back. “And if you cannot control them, then perhaps we need a prefect who can!”

“Enough!” Galba barked. He took a deep breath and composed himself. “A handful of renegade praetorians is no reason to raise panic within a city of one million people. Yes, we will make certain the cohort on duty is loyal, and then we will deal with the conspirators.”

“Forgive me, Caesar,” Vinius said. “But I recommend you not address the duty cohort directly. If they are, in fact, part of the plot, then they could simply cut you down in the courtyard.”

“I will go,” Licinianus said emphatically. He looked to Galba. “If I am to be your heir, and one day emperor, then I need to be seen as one.”

“Very well,” Galba agreed, though his motives had little to do with the perceived threat which he still viewed as negligible. “Get the guardsmen to swear their fealty, and then we can deal with our former friend, Otho.”

Licinianus then spoke to Laco. “Prefect, have your men assembled on the parade field. I will address them in ten minutes.”



It had taken the better part of an hour to reach the praetorian barracks. Just outside of the Domus Aurea, where the unfinished colossal statue of Nero stood, another thirty guardsmen joined their procession. As they wound through the streets of Rome, they spotted a handful of praetorian patrols. These men, while they did not join Otho's entourage, made no effort to stop them or ask what in Jupiter's name they thought they were doing.

At the praetorian barracks, the officer on duty was Tribune Julius Martialis. He was conducting a check of the southern watch towers when a squad of guardsmen, who had been on patrol in a nearby neighborhood, burst through the half-opened gate.

"Tribune, sir," the decanus leading the men said, saluting sloppily while trying to catch his breath. "One of our companies approaches carrying a man who they claim is the emperor."

"What do you mean 'who they claim' is the emperor?" the tribune asked. "I was not expecting Galba to be paying us a visit this day, let alone this early in the morning."

"It's not Galba, sir," the decanus replied. "I'm not sure who it is, but I did recognize Optio Veturius among those proclaiming this man as 'Caesar'."

"Company approaching!" a guardsman on the nearest tower shouted down.

"Shall we bar the gate?" another man asked.

Martialis, though a competent officer, was keenly aware of the fact that neither Galba nor Laco appreciated any form of initiative from their subordinates. He was also in such a state of disbelief he simply shook his head. And before any of the praetorians could have even attempted to close the gate, the large procession stormed through with the men in the entourage giving shouts of, *"Hail, Caesar!"* The slaves, who were red-faced and completely out of breath, set the chair down. Martialis did not know Otho, but he recognized him as a member of the senate, given the broad purple stripe on his toga.

"Senator," he said.

"Not 'senator', sir," Optio Veturius corrected. "*Emperor*."

Otho raised his hand, signaling for all to be silent.

"My name is Marcus Salvius Otho," he explained. "I need you to gather

all tribunes and centurions in the principia. All will be explained then."

"Yes, sir," the tribune said, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"I wouldn't worry too much about them," Guardsman Statius said, as soon as the tribune was out of earshot. "Given how badly Laco keeps his thumb on the praetorians, no one above the rank of decanus will so much as issue an order to take a shit without permission from the prefect or emperor." He glanced over at Optio Veturius. "Beg your pardon, sir."

The optio snorted and shrugged. "I only hope that whoever you choose as new prefect will not stifle initiative among his subordinates, Caesar."

"We'll sort that out when the time comes," Otho replied. "But right now, I need to see as many of the guardsmen as possible. Have them paraded on the drill field at once."



The attitude of the duty cohort at the imperial palace was a mix of confusion with traces of hostility. Many knew the reasons why Optio Veturius and a number of his men were absent. And even if the rest of the cohort had not flocked to Otho's banner, there was little enthusiasm among them for Galba. The centurions were either indifferent or contemptuous of the man they had been forced to acknowledge as 'Caesar'. Only Densus, a man whose oath was a sacred bond of more value than his life, remained steadfast. What he failed to take into account was that not all of his guardsmen placed the same value on their oaths. That his optio, whom he had personally chosen as his second-in-command, was now a traitor, was a crushing blow to the centurion.

Densus was not naïve, and he understood why so many people, especially among the soldiery, hated Galba. His actions, particularly those at Milvian Bridge, gave credence to his reputation as a bloodthirsty tyrant who placed no value on the lives of others. His mean-spiritedness had only further alienated him from much of the Roman public. And yet, for all that, he was still the emperor. Densus reasoned it was not for him, or any soldier—be they praetorian, legionary, or auxiliary—to decide who did and did not have the right to be emperor. Galba had been proclaimed 'Caesar' by the Senate of Rome. And therefore, as a praetorian guardsman, Densus was duty bound to protect the emperor with his life.

The centurion, along with the rest of the cohort, paraded in front of the

reviewing platform where Licinianus now stood. Few knew the young man, though all had hoped he would be a more benevolent, not to mention generous, emperor than his predecessor. And as word quickly spread of Otho's usurpation and the defection of an unknown number of their fellow guardsmen, all knew why the imperial prince stood before them.

"Members of the Praetorian Guard," Licinianus began. "My friends and comrades." He paused for a moment after this brief introduction, the use of the word 'comrades' confusing the men slightly. It was normally only used to address the guard during times of war. Despite the lack of support for Galba, many of the guardsmen thought the defection was a small number of conspirators and nothing more. Was the heir to the throne now insinuating that a state of war existed within Rome herself?

"I speak to you now, regarding matters of both honor and shame," Licinianus continued. "The very honor of the imperial house rests in your hands, as it has since the days of Augustus. And while legionaries have been known to mutiny, the Praetorian Guard has always stood steadfast behind the emperor. In the dark days that preceded the rise of Emperor Galba, it was Nero who deserted you; the Guard did not desert him. But know this, honor will be blackened and a great shame cast upon the Guard, should you allow an effeminate despot such as Otho to seize power from your rightful emperor. Will we allow a handful of lower enlisted guardsmen, whose renegade leadership is comprised of a couple of junior officers, to determine the fate of the Roman world? If you choose to follow Otho, the result will be civil war with much needless strife and loss of Roman lives. Galba came to the throne by rights of merit rather than bloodshed. Should the guard side with Otho, then Rome will be cursed with another Nero!"

While his speech had been received thus far with respectful silence, this last remark brought a handful of grumblings from the ranks. Everyone present knew it was all a farce, and thousands had been brutally slain along Galba's bloody journey from Hispania to Rome. It was also unwise for Licinianus to invoke the name of Nero in such a disrespectful manner. The guardsmen had been devoted to the Julio-Claudian emperor, and many revered his name still.

"Oh, piss on this!" a voice snapped, from the crowd.

A couple of guardsmen were seen breaking formation and sulking away towards the gatehouse. Such a gross breach of discipline would normally warrant swift disciplinary action, in the form of either a serious fine or

flogging. Yet, none of the centurions or options lifted a finger or raised their voices to stop the men. Licinianus decided there was nothing he could do, except continue to implore those who still stood on the field to remain steadfast in their loyalties.

"My friends," he continued. "Many of you are disgruntled, because the donative promised you by Nymphidius has not been paid. I understand your disappointment, but know that your emperor intends to reward you fully and to make good on all promises. Once the finances of the empire, which have been left in disarray for some time, are secure, you shall have all that you asked for."

His speech, while earnest and full of sound reasoning, felt rather flat and uninspired when it was over. There was no formal call to dismiss the praetorians, and as Licinianus waited, they simply milled about, confused and insipid.

"At least they are not calling for your head," the young prince said, as he returned to Galba a short time later.

"You have done well, my son," the emperor replied. "I have dispatched three military tribunes to the praetorian barracks, though I think we should follow this up by sending my heir to them. The urban cohorts have been cantoned within their camp as well, and while I have taken direct control of these men from their prefect, we must verify their allegiance."

"We've sent dispatches to the Germanic auxiliaries posted near the Atrium Libertatis," Laco added. "There are cohorts from the Illyrian legions that are camped in Vipsanian Portico, as well as First Adiutrix Legion, that we've sent word to."

"And before the treacherous Otho can compel any more guardsmen to take the path of suicidal insanity," Galba remarked casually, "we will have several thousand troops standing firm in front of the imperial palace, ready to crush any traitors who dare defy me."



Otho made certain that those praetorians who had escorted him from the Forum replaced the men on sentry duty at the barracks gate. The military tribunes had ridden on horseback had arrived in short order, only to be firmly rebuked by the guardsmen on the gate.

And while the tribunes were being told, in rather curt and unflattering

language, to be about their business, the presumptive emperor addressed the mass numbers of praetorians encamped at the barracks. Of their own initiative, the guardsmen had brought all of their various cohort and century standards to be displayed in the massive parade formation. The speaker's platform had a bust of Galba atop a six-foot pillar. Before Otho took to the stage, Guardsman Statius walked over to the column and kicked it over. The stone bust of the emperor crashed onto the wooden platform, many praetorians cheering the display.

"The stage is yours, sire," Statius said quietly to Otho, as he ascended the platform. "Now convince these men as to why they should proclaim you 'Caesar'."

Otho nodded and turned to face the huge formation. He raised both his hands high and began.

"Men of the Praetorian Guard," he said. "I stand before you, not as a man who seeks to bring down an emperor, but as one who, like you, was grievously wronged. That miserly old bastard has more than enough in his personal coffers to pay your promised donative ten times over! And if you hoped to have your miseries put to an end once he departs this world, his successor will only ensure that your sorrows continue. Licinianus was chosen not for his virtue, but for his meanness; his gloomy countenance makes him the emperor's perfect counterpart. And, as you witnessed, the gods themselves have damned this succession, the storms and tempests announcing their extreme displeasure. But we must advance quickly, for we cannot afford to delay. The senate and people are of one mind, that Galba is little more than a petty and opportunistic tyrant who stole the throne at the first opportunity and bullied the senate into crowning him Caesar."

Though he hated quoting anything previously spoken by Galba, his next words came straight from the man whom he now looked to depose. "But know this, my friends, I do not come here to simply purchase your loyalty. You are soldiers of the empire, and the personal guard of the Emperor of Rome. I only offer you that which is yours by right. All I ask in return, is will you grant me that which this noble body has given the emperors since the time of Augustus? Will you follow me and help us to rid Rome of the despicable oppressor?"

"Yes!" a chorus of voices shouted. Otho had no way of knowing the reception he received thus far was substantially more enthusiastic than the tepid acclaim Licinianus had been given by the duty cohort at the palace.

What he did know was that all of the tribunes and centurions of the Praetorian Guard, being as the principia was very close to the drill field, were well within hearing of their soldiers' ovations. Knowing that they would rather risk disgrace at the hands of Galba, rather than the swords of their own guardsmen, the leadership of the praetorians was now completely paralyzed.

"Then know this," Otho said, raising a clenched fist up near his face. "The path for us is clear. If we falter now, all of you will face unholy retribution from the hateful bastard who dares to defile the imperial throne. All of us know what wickedness he is capable of. He has put to death many a great man, over the mildest of infractions and insults to his sullied ego. And while Galba prattles on about economic responsibility, his pedagogues have amassed greater fortunes in six months than all of Nero's favorite courtiers combined in thirteen years! He's even had the audacity to name Icelus, a former *slave*, as a member of the equites!"

These last revelations caused a chorus of boos and disparaging insults directed towards Galba and his favorites. Many were now calling for the heads of Laco, their own prefect, as well as Icelus and Vinius. Otho quietly hoped he could spare the consul, for even though Vinius had failed to convince Galba to name Otho his successor, he had acted in good faith and been one of the few who Otho could consider his friend.

"I can see that all of you know the situation will not improve, even after Galba mercifully departs this life," he continued. "He has chosen a young man, not based on any sense of merit, but because they share the same level of miserly cruelty. Licinianus may be a charismatic man, but he is of the same bitter temperament as his benefactor. If you desire me as your emperor, know that I cannot serve you as Caesar while Galba still lives."

"I will execute Licinianus, personally," Guardsman Statius said, from the front of the crowd. The man's eyes were steely and fierce.

Otho had met few with Statius' sense of determination, and he knew the praetorian would be of much greater use to him than a simple guardsman.

"Just remember," Otho added. "We are here to free the people of Rome, not to terrorize them. You are still soldiers of the Praetorian Guard not a rampaging horde. The people despise Galba; the senate despises Galba; and the soldiers despise Galba. But of those, only soldiers hold the capacity to act. Make ready, then, and before the day is done, we will usher in a new age for Rome, an age of freedom and prosperity. And while our enemies may call us traitors, I say this; if treason brings prosperity, then it is not treason at all!"

The throng of praetorians greeted this with another loud ovation while chanting Otho's name repeatedly. As he descended from the dais, he was surprised to see one of the praetorian tribunes waiting for him. The officer drew his gladius, which he then held up in salute.

"Marcus Salvius Otho," the tribune said. "The leaders of the Praetorian Guard will not oppose you. However, I will do something more. I hereby offer you my sword and pledge my fealty to you as Emperor of Rome."

"What is your name, tribune?" Otho asked.

"Plotius Firmus, sire."

"And you shall be one of my prefects of the Praetorian Guard," Otho asserted. "Unlike the usurper, I will reward initiative not stifle it. And by your initiative and bravery, you have proven yourself worthy to lead the Guard."

He then gathered some of his chief conspirators to him, while dismissing the rest of the guardsmen to await further orders.

"Tribunes from Galba's loyalists came to the barracks," a guardsman reported.

"No doubt he will send messages to all military forces within ten miles of Rome," Firmus observed.

"Well, we must see how they react before we proceed," Otho remarked. "I doubt that Galba holds the love of even a single legionary, yet we must not act foolishly." He looked to two of his praetorians. "Guardsman Statius, Guardsman Atticus."

"Sir," both men said, instinctively coming to attention.

"I need you to scout the Forum and around the imperial palace. We need to draw Galba out into the open if we are to strike him down this day. Atticus, you will go to the palace under the pretense that I have been killed. Galba will have no choice but to come to the Forum and address the mob, who will be a confused mass."

Onomastus spoke up. "Sire, I have received word from the Germanic cavalry regiments. They stated they received emissaries from Galba, and they drove them away with the points of their lances. They will be at the barracks within the hour, awaiting your orders. The same has happened with the Adiutrix Legion. Three of their cohorts are also headed this way."

"Excellent," Otho said, beating a fist into the palm of his other hand. "A wall of horsemen will clear a path through any crowd, with our praetorians and legionaries to follow. Alright then, Guardsman Statius, Guardsman

Atticus, you have your orders."

As the two men left, Otho ordered the armory opened. Praetorians rushed to kit themselves in their armor, arming themselves with both gladii and stabbing spear alike. Although Tribune Firmus had proclaimed for Otho, the individual guardsmen seemed to take pleasure in the pained expressions upon the faces of those centurions and tribunes who were either loyal to Galba, or simply powerless to stop the tide of rebellion. Otho was glad for the ease with which this made the arming of his force and secretly decided then and there to sack the tribunes, while cashiering the centurions for their inability to maintain control over their soldiers.

Chapter XX: Strike, if best for Rome

The Forum, Rome
15 January 69 A.D.



Praetorian Optio

It was another hour before Statius and Atticus reached their destinations. The streets were crowded with citizens, many of whom were in a curious frenzy from the rumors they'd heard earlier, regarding an attempt to seize the throne. And when approached by a squad of their fellow praetorians, they stated that Otho was slain, before quickly moving on. They spotted Licinianus mounted on a great black mare, trying to force his way through the crowds en route to the praetorian barracks. The two soldiers avoided any contact with the imperial prince. At the Forum they split up, with Atticus making his way to the imperial palace. Passing by a butcher's stall, he plunged his gladius into the carcass of a goat, covering the blade in blood. Crowds gathered, blocking the street that ran between the palace and the Circus Maximus.

Rumors of Otho's supposed killing reached the palace even before Guardsman Atticus. Galba was meeting with his councilors, as well as several officers from the praetorians. Taking every precaution, despite his dismissive air, the emperor wore a breastplate over his toga. Among the praetorians present was Atticus' commander, Centurion Densus, who scowled in anger when saw his errant guardsman burst into the throne room,

a bloodied gladius in his hand. Crowds of citizens; senators, equites, and plebeians alike swarmed past him and surrounded Galba.

"The traitor is dead!" one voice called.

"Hail, Galba, Emperor of Rome and lord of the world!" another shouted.

"So you see, my friends," Galba said, looking to his colleagues. "The crisis has passed before it even began." He looked sternly at Atticus. "And who are you, who comes into the august hall wielding a bloody sword?"

"Guardsman Julius Atticus at your service, Caesar," he replied, saluting with his weapon and bowing low. "It was I who killed Otho, and my blade is stained with his blood."

"Indeed?" Galba asked, the corner of his mouth twisting into a partial frown. "And who gave you orders to slay the pretender?"

"I…I did so of my own initiative, sire," Atticus replied, stunned. "Out of loyalty to my emperor!"

"A man, even a praetorian, who kills without orders from his commanding officer, is guilty of murder," the emperor retorted, once more showing his complete lack of faith in his subordinates or their sense of ingenuity. He signaled to Centurion Densus, who walked over to his soldier.

"Guardsman Atticus," he said. "You are under arrest for murder, as well as being absent from the ranks without permission."

If he expected Atticus to comply, he was sadly mistaken.

Instead, the guardsman kneed him hard in the groin. "Go fuck your mother, *sir*," he retorted, spitting on his centurion. Before any of the guards within the chamber could react, Atticus disappeared into the mass of people that continued to swarm the palace. Few even noticed the praetorian centurion down on one knee, gasping for breath as he struggled back to his feet. Neither the emperor nor his guards could control the mob, who were crying out prayers of thanks to the gods for their emperor's deliverance.

Praetorians desperately tried to form a cordon between the mob and Galba, while others fanned out in order to prevent any would be looters from robbing the palace.

As Vinius watched the chaotic scene, he found it extremely undignified. Like Otho, he knew most of the people despised Galba and were only fawning about him because they thought Otho was dead, and they might win the emperor's favor with their supplications. But as Guardsman Atticus could now attest, Galba showed favors to none, except for his pedagogues and now his heir.

What surprised all, was when Galba was suddenly lifted onto the shoulders of several men and placed into one of his traveling chairs. They were shocked that he made no protest, or any other attempts to stop the mob from carrying him out of the palace and onto the street. Tribune Vergilio reformed most of the duty cohort of the Praetorian Guard who surrounded the emperor, clearing a path through the throng.

"To the Forum!" he shouted, pointing forward with his gladius.

Out on the street, Atticus violently shoved his way through the mass of people, taking a mere ten minutes to reach the Forum. He found Statius standing outside the Temple of the Vestal Virgins on the eastern outskirts of the Forum.

"The crowds here are mostly quiet," he said, to his fellow praetorian. "I think they are more inquisitive than anything at the moment."

"Well, there is a rather voracious following headed this way carrying the emperor in his chair," Atticus remarked, deciding not to waste time with the story of his near arrest by their own centurion.

"Alright," Statius nodded. "I'll head back to the barracks. You keep an eye on things here and wait for us to return. If, for some reason, Galba panics and barricades himself in the palace, return to barracks at once. I only hope our cavalry and legionary allies are ready to advance." That he would give orders to one who was the same rank as he may have seemed strange to some, but Guardsman Tiberius Statius wielded far more power than any outside of the Praetorian Guard realized.

Atticus climbed the steps of the Vestals' temple, lurking in the shadows near one of the columns. The last thing he wanted was for Centurion Densus to spot him, lest he send a host of their fellow guardsmen to apprehend him.



Statius knew the back streets of Rome better than most, and was able to avoid most of the crowds as he wound his way back to the praetorian barracks. He arrived half an hour after leaving Atticus to provide over-watch at the Forum. A full regiment of auxilia cavalrymen paraded in front of the barracks, with troopers standing next to their horses awaiting orders. Behind them were hundreds of legionaries, their freshly-painted, red shields bearing the winged horse, Pegasus, across the top.

The gate was quickly opened as men on the ramparts recognized their fellow conspirator. Statius found Otho at the principia, along with the cavalry commander and a handful of other officers from the legionary detachments.

"Crowds gather in the Forum," Statius informed him. "They are silent spectators at the moment, but we fear they may have recourse to take up arms, should we hesitate. Their numbers, along with the horde that now bears Galba to the Forum, is in the tens-of-thousands. Our numbers are too few should the people side with the tyrant."

"And I will not have my first day as emperor be stained with the blood of our citizens," Otho asserted. He looked to the cavalry commander. "Deploy the vanguard forward and have them disperse the crowds posthaste."

"Yes, Caesar," the commander said, before saluting and departing.

Otho turned to Tribune Firmus and the legionary centurions. "Ready your men," he ordered. "We march on the Forum to depose the tyrant. Onomastus, once Galba is dead you will take this message to the senate." He handed his freedman a scroll, before steeling himself to join his soldiers and meet his destiny. Since his century was with Galba's escort, Statius positioned himself at the back of one of the praetorian cohorts. He did not bother with his shield, as his duties this day did not involve fighting on a battle line.

Both guardsman and legionary alike left their javelins at the barracks, for they would be difficult to employ in confined spaces. They could also, potentially, inflict hundreds of unnecessary casualties. At the commands of their officers, the Germanic auxiliary cavalrymen mounted their horses, spears shouldered. As they cantered down the street with citizens lurching out of their way, the legionary and praetorian cohorts hefted their shields, formed into a large column twelve soldiers wide, and began to march at the quick step. All depended now on the resolve of the people, as well as the duplicity of Tribune Vergilio and the praetorian's duty cohort from the palace.



At the Forum, the remaining loyal cohort of praetorians stood in battle formation with the emperor's litter carried between two of their centuries. Standing to their front was their commanding tribune, Attilius Vergilio. Thousands crowded along the shops that lined the Forum. Many more thronged the Gemonian Stairs, in hopes of catching a glimpse of what may come. The thought of a pitched battle in the Forum between rival cohorts of

the Praetorian Guard was both horrifying and exciting, in equal measure.

Those who flocked to the palace and carried the emperor on their shoulders, now melded in with the hordes of spectators who came from every corner of the city. They expected Galba to step onto the city criers' platform and give a speech; but instead, he remained in his chair behind a wall of praetorians whose blades were drawn, ready for battle.

"Cavalry approaching, Caesar," a rider said, "lots of them. There appear to be cohorts of legionaries behind them."

"Come to pay homage to their emperor, now that the usurper is dead," Laco scoffed. "No doubt the rest of my praetorians will be flocking in next, anxious to prostrate themselves before us."

Much to the surprise of everyone, the cavalry regiment sped into the Forum with the crowds fleeing in their wake. They split off in both directions, forming a cordon around Galba's praetorians. As the troopers lowered their spears, the guardsmen closed ranks with gladii ready to strike. The cohorts of legionaries rushed in behind the cavalry. As they filed into the massive square, they kicked over stalls to form their own battle lines. Galba and his entourage could just make out the standards of the praetorian cohorts behind them.

"If they've come prepared for battle, then Otho is most certainly not dead," Vinius said. He gritted his teeth, fearful of the pending clash.

On the praetorian line, guardsmen looked anxiously at one another. The cavalry and legionaries alone had them outnumbered almost three-to-one, and the praetorian cohorts behind them could only be thought of as hostile.

"What the fuck do we do now, sir?" one guardsman nearest to Tribune Vergilio said, in a low voice.

"I don't want to die for that belligerent old bastard," another muttered.

The officer did not reply, but held his hand out towards the standard bearer who carried the staff with Galba's image atop. The two men stepped in front of their formation, ready to parlay with the mutinous soldiers.

"Hold!" a legionary centurion shouted, stepping in front of his men and raising his fist. He addressed the tribune. "What now, friends? There is only one man among you who is an enemy of the people of Rome. We approach the rest of you in friendship, as fellow soldiers of the empire. You can stand with your rightful emperor, Marcus Salvius Otho, or you can die protecting that cruel and feeble old bastard. What say you?"

To the thousands of spectators, it was quite the impassioned, albeit very

short and direct, speech. However, Tribune Vergilio's next actions almost made one wonder if it had all been rehearsed beforehand.

He snatched the emperor's standard from its bearer and smashed it repeatedly onto the ground. He then drew his gladius and faced his cohort. *"Hail Caesar, hail Otho!"* Weapons flashed high in salute, and this same ovation was shouted by the last remaining cohort that appeared loyal to Galba.

Vergilio then shouted, *"About face!"*

In a sharp turn, accented by the slamming of their hobnailed sandals onto the paving stones, the last remnants of Galba's guard now turned their blades on him. The slaves, who bore the now-deposed emperor, panicked and dropped his chair roughly to the ground. It spilled onto its side, sending him tumbling to the ground.

"No!" screamed Licinianus, as he stared in disbelief.

A fist from one of his escorts smashed him across the face, sending him sprawling to the ground. Centurion Densus, the only man not to turn on the emperor and his heir, kicked this man hard in the stomach before drawing his weapon.

"Vile traitors!" he shouted, swiping his gladius towards the mob, trying to keep them at bay.

Legionaries now formed ranks on either side of the praetorian cohort, with a wall of guardsmen creating a second battle line. While most of the crowd focused on the deposed Galba, Densus knew he had to act quickly. He reached down and gruffly grabbed Licinianus by the toga and pulled him to his feet. The side of the young man's face was already starting to swell, and he appeared to be dazed.

"We have to get you out of here," the centurion said, placing himself between the heir and about twenty of his own soldiers. "Make for the Temple of Vesta. You'll be safe there."

Licinianus fled towards the far side of the vast Forum.

As Densus faced the hostile crowd of soldiers, it filled him with revulsion to see his own men had turned on him. Whether they had been part of the conspiracy or only now joined the usurpers out of fear, he did not know. All he knew was he had one last duty to perform. He had to give his charge a few moments to escape, and he backed up slowly, keeping his weapon ready to strike. As seven of his guardsmen stalked towards him, he felt the stabbing pain of a gladius plunged into the small of his back. The centurion gave a yell

of pain and fell to his knees, as the rest of the conspirators rushed him. With a last bit of strength and fury, Densus thrust his gladius deep into the stomach of one of his attackers, before the rest fell upon him with vicious stabs and bloody slashes. As his eyes clouded over, Densus gained one last bit of satisfaction. He saw Guardsman Atticus, who lay convulsing on the ground with the centurion's gladius protruding from his guts. Atticus failed to don his armor this day, and it cost him his life. Densus gave a final expression of defiance, as a sword plunged deep into his heart.

With his escorts dead or run off, soldiers now swarmed around the emperor, their eyes filled with hate, weapons ready to strike. Galba's face bled from where his forehead had smashed against the cobblestones. Unable to rise to his feet, he got onto his hands and knees and gazed up into the faces of his assailants. Some thought he would beg for his life, offering the long promised donative if they would spare him. Instead, his expression was one of cold acceptance.

"Strike," he said, "if this be what is best for Rome." The last words of a vicious tyrant, whom these soldiers despised beyond measure, added a sense of dignity to what had been a short and terrible reign as Emperor of Rome.

As to who actually struck the killing blow, none could say for certain. More than a hundred men would later try and take credit for the slaying. Regardless of who it came from, a gladius was plunged into the side of Galba's neck, bursting the jugular and tearing clean through his throat. As his eyes squeezed shut, his teeth gritted in horrific pain, he wished for death to hurry itself along. Deep crimson gushed from the hideous wounds, and as the convulsing body slumped forward, a pair of hands grabbed onto the sparse strands of hair on the sides of his head. Gouts of blood were erupting from Galba's mouth. Another blade then swung down in a hard chop against the back of the neck. Within three blows, the usurped emperor's head was cleaved from his shoulders. The corpse lay twitching. Blood flowing and pooling between the paving stones.

"The tyrant is dead!" one of the men shouted, hoisting the head up high for all to see.

Soldiers cheered and brandished their swords and cavalry lances in the air.

During the few seconds it took for Galba to be slain, dozens of renegade

soldiers fell upon the rest of his entourage. Laco and Icelus' courage failed them, and as soon as they saw the emperor's litter toppled over, they fled for their lives. Vinius' eyes were wide with abject terror, and he paused for a moment to watch the killing of Galba unfold. His brief delay would cost him dearly. As he attempted to flee towards the Gemonian Stairs, he cried out, *"Not me, I am to be spared! It was promised!"*

A cavalryman rode up behind him and, either oblivious to his pleas or uncaring, plunged his lance deep into the consul's back. The weapon punctured through his lung, ripping out of his chest as he cried out in agony. The man who once commanded legions, and with his undue influence had arguably been the most powerful man in Rome, now lay in a twisted heap at the base of the Gemonian Stairs, gasping for breath over the next few minutes it would take him to expire.

As Laco escaped through the crowd of horrified onlookers, Icelus was tackled to the ground and beaten by a squad of praetorians. He was gruffly pulled to his feet, his hands bound behind his back. Despite the horror, as well as sadness at the brutal death of his master, the former slave tried to console himself with the thought that it had been the praetorians who captured him. He assumed that, had it been legionaries who fell upon him, they would have simply killed him right then and there. As he would later discover, such a fate would have been mercy.

Without looking back to see his adoptive father's slaying, or the death of the brave centurion who'd protected him with his own life, Licinianus sprinted as hard as his legs could manage. His breath was coming in short gasps. He expected, at any moment, to feel the agonizing pain of a legionary gladius or cavalryman's lance in his back. Instead, he reached the steps to the Temple of the Vestal Virgins unharmed.

"Sanctuary, please!" he cried out, as he burst through the large double doors that led into the outer sanctum.

A pair of vestals rushed to his aid as he fell to the ground, gasping and sobbing. They placed their hands on his shoulders and gently helped him into a nearby chair, where he sat covering his tearstained eyes with the palm of his hand.

"What is the meaning of this commotion?" an older priestess said, as she strolled quickly into the chamber. She then recognized Licinianus and was immediately consoling. "By Vesta, it's the imperial prince! My child, what

has happened to you?" She knelt next to him, placing a maternal hand on his shoulder.

"The emperor is dead," Licinianus answered, fighting back his tears and regaining his composure. "Senator Otho has usurped the throne. He wants me dead."

"Rest easy," the priestess assured him. "They will not touch you here. You are safe with us. Even the most despicable of tyrants would not dare violate the sanctity of these walls."

The priestess then sent two of her acolytes to ascertain what had transpired within the Forum. It would take some time for them to find a suitable position away from the carnage that had unfolded. An hour later they reported to the priestess, who by this time had escorted the prince to a guest room.

"We saw the emperor's body," one horrified, young woman said. "The soldiers were parading his head on a spear, as if it were some sort of trophy. And there were others, scores of others, who lay dead around him. It was awful…"

The priestess dismissed the acolytes, as she tried to contemplate how she could help the deposed prince. Granted, there was very little she could do besides try and give protection to Licinianus, lest he fall victim to the new emperor's reign of murder.

Chapter XXI: The Sanction of Regicide

The Praetorian Barracks, Rome
15 January 69 A.D.
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Tribune Vergilio, having assumed control of all military forces that converged upon the Forum, dispatched Guardsman Statius back to their barracks soon after Galba was slain. An auxiliary trooper named Faelan who, ironically, had only the week prior been granted Roman citizenship by Galba, offered the guardsman use of his horse.

"Take the tyrant's head with you!" a centurion shouted, holding aloft the blood-soaked head of the slain emperor.

The eyes were shut, and the tongue protruded between his teeth. Steady trickles of blood streamed from the stump that remained of the neck. The entire head was slick with blood. The centurion holding it up had to grasp it by the ears, as Galba's hair had been so sparse it was impossible to hold on to.

"With honor, sir," Trooper Faelan said, jamming his lance up into the gaping hole that had once been Galba's neck.

As he and Statius mounted his horse, the cavalryman held the lance high, shouting with vengeful glee at the sight of the slain emperor's bloodied head.

The two rode together back to the barracks, though the once congested streets had cleared out considerably as citizens fled in the wake of the violence. Faelan held his lance upright, though tucked it into his arm, leaving Galba's head just a couple feet above theirs. They rode quickly, splatters of blood splashing the praetorian's armor and face. As they approached the gates of the barracks, they loudly proclaimed *'The tyrant is dead'* to those soldiers who remained on sentry duty. This was met by voracious cheers from the men on the ramparts. Whether their motives were from genuine hatred for Galba, or because they reckoned they would at last be paid the donative promised by Otho, was anyone's guess.

Otho could hear the shouts of exaltation coming from the courtyard, as he sat in a large chair the principia's foyer. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath of relief. The doors were then thrown open.

Trooper Faelan presented Galba's head on his lance, while dropping down to one knee before their new master. "The tyrant is dead!" he proclaimed. "Hail, Caesar!"

Guardsman Statius was more measured in his response, and given the amount of blood he was covered in, Otho wondered if it was he who struck the killing blow. In truth, Statius had been at the back of the praetorian formation and not even in a position to witness the killing.

"It is done, sire," he said, with a salute of his weapon. "*Now* you are emperor!"

"While it fills me with joy to see Rome freed from a monster," Otho said slowly, "it is the head of Licinianus I want."

"Give us the order, Caesar, and we will bring it to you," Statius declared. "He may have escaped the initial purging, but he cannot have gone far."

"As Augustus once said, '*there can be only one Caesar*'," the new emperor said. "Licinianus was named as Galba's heir, and he could easily raise a rebellion on these grounds. He is, therefore, a threat to the state. Bring me his head so no more Romans need die. But what of the others?"

"Laco has escaped, for the moment," Statius replied. "Icelus was captured by members of the Guard."

"And Vinius?"

"He was brought down by one of our lancers, sire," Faelan answered, still holding Galba's head on his spear. "His body lies at the foot of the Gemonian Stairs."

Otho waved for the men to leave him. He sat in his chair in the main antechamber of the praetorian barracks, his chin resting in his hand. It was all so surreal. Galba was dead, and for all intents and purposes, he was now Emperor of Rome. He was filled with pangs of doubt, and perhaps some remorse, especially over the death of the faithful Vinius. However, he understood that sacrifices would have to be made in order for the despicable tyrant to be overthrown. But for now, he needed to convene the senate at once.

The new emperor stepped out into the midday sun which had broken through the dark clouds of that morning. Ever seeking the sanction of the gods, Otho took this to mean that they viewed his usurpation of the imperial throne with favor. The outer gates of the camp were opened, and the large column of soldiers entered, all singing and chanting Otho's name. They were a mix of praetorians, legionaries, and auxiliary cavalrymen. At their head,

marched Tribune Vergilio and the newly designated praetorian commander, Prefect Firmus.

"Hail, Caesar!" Firmus said, with a sharp salute.

This was echoed by the assembly of soldiers.

Otho returned the courtesy and addressed the men. "Soldiers of the empire, you have done your duty, as painful and ghastly as it may have been. By your actions, you alone have saved Rome from the plight of tyrannical despotism. But now, with the oppressor executed, I will not have any more Roman lives lost on my account. The only man whose life remains forfeit is the pretender prince, Lucius Calpurnius Licinianus." He then nodded to the two soldiers who brought him Galba's head. "Guardsman Statius and Trooper Faelan will carry out the imperial warrant. After which, no more freeborn followers of Galba will be put to death. And now, my right and honorable companions, I must convene the Senate of Rome."

"Your freedman, Onomastus, is at the senate now," Firmus replied. "The entire body is, no doubt, awaiting their new emperor. Come, Caesar, two centuries of your Praetorian Guard will escort you to the senate."



While many senators had yet to come to the senate chambers out of fear of reprisals from Otho, at least three hundred of its members filled the great hall. Dozens of conversations were ongoing, with no one attempting to control the assembly. Both consuls' chairs remained vacant, as their respective occupants, Galba and Vinius, were now dead. No suffect consuls were named for this time period either, leaving the senate leaderless.

Among those present was the former general, Suetonius Paulinus, who sat with the previous year's consul, Italicus. The two could scarcely be called friends, yet there was a measure of professional respect between them, and each knew the other would be a valuable ally should the crisis deteriorate further. Also seated with them was the affable Senator Marcus Cocceius Nerva, as well as Lucius Verginius, the very man whose armies had smashed those of the rebel, Julius Vindex.

Verginius was in a somewhat awkward position. While he had destroyed one rebel army, his subsequent passivity had allowed Nero to be overthrown and the now-hated Galba to be installed on the throne. And yet, having refused to allow himself to be named emperor, despite the backing of the

fearsome Army of the Rhine, had endeared him to both plebian and patrician alike. His subsequent resignation of his command had been a noble gesture, one which placated any who suspected him of grand ambitions. However, it inadvertently flung the empire into an even graver crisis. For while the emphasis for the moment was on the death of Galba, Verginius was consumed by thoughts of Vitellius, who was leading the Rhine legions in a rebellion, while proclaiming himself emperor.

"Vitellius has become the latest player to enter into this dangerous game," he said. "The slaying of Galba was just the latest move, not the end."

In another part of the large chamber sat Otho's brother, Titianus, who was, unsurprisingly, being courted by a large number of Galba's former supporters. Though as fearful as their absent colleagues, they felt perhaps they could find safety by ingratiating themselves with the usurper's brother.

The sound of marching feet and shouted orders of praetorian officers came from outside, bringing a hush upon the senate floor. Porters opened the doors, and Otho slowly walked into the chamber. He took a brief moment to look upon the hundreds of faces. All eyes were fixed on him. He wore his senator's toga; no formal robes, no laurel crown, nothing which would denote him as anything other than a member of the imperial senate.

Otho said nothing as he walked the marble floor, and up the short steps that led to the consuls' chairs. He remained standing as he addressed his peers.

"Noble senators of Rome," he said, his voice calm and composed despite the extreme violence which had overthrown his predecessor just hours before. "I come before you not as a conqueror, but as your peer, as well as your humble and obedient servant. I cannot ask you to condone what has transpired this day, for no good comes through violence, least of all usurpation. Galba did not die so that Otho could become emperor, but rather that Rome might be freed from a merciless and cruel tyrant."

He gave a measured pause, allowing his words to sink in. Most of the senators held expressions of neither support nor accusation, but merely profound inquisitiveness as to what Otho's intentions were.

"The praetorians have seen fit to declare me emperor," he continued. "However, it is not within their powers to do so. The man who succeeds Emperor Galba must be lawfully endorsed with the full support of the senate. We are an empire of laws, and the respect for those laws, as well as the Roman constitution, are what separate us from filthy barbarians and eastern

despots. I have, therefore, ordered the Praetorian Guard to honor whatever decision the Senate of Rome makes, whether you support my right to become emperor, or another candidate is found more worthy of becoming Caesar."

It was all a political ploy, one which the Julio-Claudian emperors had long used. Tiberius had overplayed this tactic, attempting to outright refuse the imperial mantle following the death of Augustus, which alienated him from much of the senate. Claudius, following Gaius Caligula's murder, had been more prudent, accepting the powers of emperor, while making genuine attempts to act as their colleague, rather than their overlord. It was this more reasonable course which Otho hoped to follow.

His latest pause had been a subtle attempt to engage the senate in a meaningful dialog, rather than simply dictating to them. After a few moments, it was Suetonius Paulinus who finally took the initiative.

"Senator Otho," he said, refusing to try and flatter Otho by calling him 'Caesar', before the senate approved his assumption of the throne. "While I doubt that a single person within this chamber truly laments the death of Galba, we cannot condone the use of violence to overthrow an Emperor of Rome simply because he is unpopular. With that being said, our options are severely limited, not least because we have a potential usurper in the north, who at this very moment is rallying the armies of the Rhine to march upon Rome."

"I am well aware of the pretender, Vitellius," Otho replied. "And that is why I am asking for unity within the senate, whether it be in support of me or a stronger potential candidate. We must let Vitellius know the wicked oppressor is dead and his reasons for rebellion no longer exist. Should he persist, he will have declared himself an enemy of the state who seeks the throne for himself, rather than the liberator of the Roman people that he professes to be. Vitellius must be compelled to step down. Whether this is done through diplomacy or force, the senate and people *must* be united. General Paulinus, you have won some of Rome's greatest victories, and you are one who is respected from every corner of the empire. Will you stand with me this day?"

Otho would have said the same words to whomever had taken the initiative to address him during his speech; however, he was glad that it had been a renowned general like Paulinus, rather than one of the slimy political sycophants who infested the Roman senate.

"As I have said," Paulinus replied, measuring his words carefully, "we

must show unanimity in the face of the growing crisis to the north. I also stand firm in my belief that we cannot outright condone the manner in which Galba was unseated, lest it set a dangerous precedent for others to think they can simply wrest power from the senate by force. Know then, that we appreciate your show of humility and your willingness to forgo the honor of becoming Caesar, if the senate felt it was in the best interests of the Roman people. It is for that very reason, I will support you in your claim to the imperial throne. And if my peers will join me in this, then I will offer you my sword, that I may lead the armies of Rome against our enemies."

"I second the motion," Senator Nerva said, rising to his feet. "For the good of Rome, we must stand together as one. Senator Otho, I will speak candidly and state that you hold a distinct advantage, in that your appearance and demeanor remind the people very much of the late Emperor Nero. Whatever the ill feelings of this body towards the last of the Julio-Claudians, we must swallow our pride and allow ourselves to accept that Nero was much loved by the plebs, as well as the army. It is a love which they will readily pass on to you. That is why I further propose that, once sanctioned as Emperor of Rome, you be given the name 'Nero' to append to your own, so the people may be reminded of their affections and view you as a stronger and even greater Nero."

While most of the senators felt a strong sense of revulsion at the idea, which Otho noted in their pained expressions, all understood it was a politically expedient way to ensure the fealty of the masses. Such personally reviling measures were often taken within the political realm, and allowing the people to think of Otho as a 'Nero reborn' was a small price to pay for stability and peace.

Senator Paulinus then called for an immediate vote, with every senator present granting his consent that Otho be recognized as Rome's rightful emperor. The 'aye' votes were universal, with even the northern usurper's brother, Lucius Vitellius, voting in Otho's favor. It was all a formality, as well as a foregone conclusion. Since the rise of the emperors more than a century before, no designee had been denied his inherent right by so much as a single vote. There were those who had voraciously protested Claudius' ascension, given he was viewed as an incompetent by many and was only put in place by the praetorians after the murder of Caligula. Yet, when it came time to confirm or deny his position, all had voted to proclaim Claudius emperor. Now, twenty-nine years later, almost to the exact day, the senate

had done the same to confirm another unlikely Caesar, whose rise came via bloody revolt.

After the votes were cast, it was Paulinus who took the floor once more.

"By authority of the Senate and People of Rome, we hereby confer upon you the name of *Marcus Salvius Otho Caesar Augustus*, and name you *Emperor of Rome*."

Otho gave a bow of respect and replied, "In the name of the Senate and People of Rome, I accept this esteemed honor and all the responsibilities therein. I pledge myself, from this moment until my final day, to be the unwavering servant of the people of our great empire."

"It is only fitting, then," Senator Italicus said, "that as you are Galba's…*successor*, you should assume his consulship. I further propose that your brother, the noble Salvius Otho Titianus, be named your colleague."

This was met with murmurs of approval from the assembly.

"Senators, you honor me once more," Otho said. "I am happy to accept the position as head of this august chamber. But know that my brother and I will only accept a suffect consulship, from this day until the end of February. At which time, I nominate the noble Lucius Verginius Rufus to assume my position, with his colleague to be selected by you. Furthermore, in the spirit of reconciliation, let it be known that no freeborn supporters of Galba will be put to death. The only exception to this is Lucius Calpurnius Licinianus, whose warrant has been dispatched. It is time for us to come together, not as Galbians or Othonians, but as Romans."

After a few more motions were made, with various titles and honors bestowed upon the new emperor, Otho excused himself. He informed the senate he would meet with them in the morning, to begin the daily business of ruling over the empire. He knew if he were to have any sort of success as ruler of the known world, his life would, from this day forth, be dedicated to toil and service to his people.

As he started to make his way from the chamber, he singled out a lone senator who now sat by himself. "Senator Lucius Vitellius," Otho said, waving the man over to him.

"Caesar," the senator replied with a bow.

"I am in need of talented men to join my circle of advisors, and I would be honored to have you as a member of the imperial council."

"I am flattered," Lucius replied. "Though if I may be candid, sire, would I be right to assume this appointment is partially motivated by who my brother

is?”

“That would be an accurate assessment,” Otho confessed. “But know that I will never fault a man for the treason of another, not even when it involves one’s own brother.” Otho gave the senator a reassuring pat on the shoulder which may have seemed strange, even condescending, given that Lucius Vitellius was substantially older. The emperor then sought out Suetonius Paulinus, who was standing off to the side talking with Senator Italicus.

“Caesar,” Paulinus said, coming to attention rather than bowing.

“Always the old soldier,” Otho noted, with a smile.

“Force of habit, sir,” the former general said.

“I will be needing my old soldiers very soon,” the emperor stated. “While I hope to placate Vitellius with mediation, I fear the road to war is almost a certainty.”

“Caesar, I would be honored to command your legions,” Paulinus asserted proudly.

“And so you shall,” the emperor replied. “Of course, there will be much work to do, but I can confidently give you command of a division of at least two legions. My brother, Titianus, will be commander-in-chief of the task force, and I think you will be a good choice for second-in-command.”

Paulinus winced at Otho’s response. As arguably the most experienced military leader in the entire Roman senate, it only seemed logical that he, not the emperor’s daft brother, would be given the post of commander-in-chief. Being named Titianus’ second was almost an insult to the proud general. Still, he kept his feelings to himself and simply responded with, “Honored, Caesar.”

Paulinus abruptly left the senate chambers with Italicus close behind him. A large crowd of brave souls had gathered to hear the news, and while one of the city criers announced the senate’s ratification and full endorsement of Marcus Salvius Otho as Emperor of Rome, the former consul was clearly vexed.

“It could have been worse, I suppose,” Italicus said.

“How do you mean?”

“While I certainly don’t condone Otho’s methods, I could give a damn about Galba or his precious heir,” Italicus stressed. “Though Otho hopes to reconcile the rival factions, and will no doubt extend the overtures of peace to Vitellius, this game has become far more dangerous.”

“And how many times was it played by our ancestors?” Paulinus

remarked curtly, still smarting from the perceived demotion he had just been given. “Caesar against Pompey, Octavian against Antony, and now Otho against Vitellius.”

“And do you really think Otho or Vitellius are worthy of comparison to Antony, Octavian, Pompey, or Caesar?” Italicus said incredulously. “Or do you think someone else will rise up from the ashes of the empire’s burning?”

“What do you mean?” Paulinus replied.

“Three men have already claimed the imperial throne within the last couple months,” he remarked. “Galba was a weak and callous old man. Otho has some potential, but he is untested. And let’s face it, neither you nor I know whether or not he will survive once he and Vitellius bring this game on the battlefield.” He then held up a hand, as Paulinus made ready to deliver a blistering rebuke. “I do not mean to insult you, my friend. Otho has given you a division. He’d be a fool not to. But he is a fool, in that he has not given you, or at least someone with comparable experience, the commander-in-chief’s role. And if Vitellius wields the power of the entire Rhine army, you are going to need every fighting man within a thousand miles of Rome.”

“I intend to do my duty like every other soldier,” Paulinus stressed. His mindset had already reverted back to that of a professional soldier and, as such, he would not question the emperor’s decisions publicly.

“Every soldier on both sides will be doing his duty,” Italicus observed, dismissing Paulinus’ assertions. “What I am getting at is, there are other powerful men within this great empire, men who are in command of vast armies.”

“You speak of Vespasian,” Paulinus said.

Italicus nodded.

The general gave his own nod of acknowledgment. “Few have even a shred of his charisma amongst the lower ranks, and aside from Vitellius, no one else has such a mighty host under his direct command.”

“I shall speak with Otho about this,” the former consul said. “Vespasian may be three thousand miles from here, but if he can bring even a third of his army back to Italia, he can help us overwhelm Vitellius. Mars and Victoria help us if he does not.”

It was a difficult conundrum that Italicus found himself in. Foremost because Vitellius was a dear personal friend of his. He was one of the few who did not view the rebellious governor as simply fat and apathetic. Had Otho’s usurpation failed, Italicus would have been hard-pressed to support

Galba against his friend. However, his first loyalties were to the empire, and he knew civil war must be avoided if at all possible. The former consul wanted to avoid bloodshed, and he knew the best way to ensure this was to enlist the aid of the Flavians. If confronted by both Otho and Vespasian, Vitellius would have no choice but to stand down. Otherwise, Italicus feared for the safety of both Rome and for his friend.

Chapter XXII: Only One Caesar

The Imperial Palace, Rome
15 January 69 A.D.



The Roman Forum

While Otho awaited word about the fate of Licinianus, he had a number of other matters to attend to. He had hoped to spend the rest of the day recuperating. The events of this day seemed surreal to him; to say nothing of the fact that just that morning, it had been Galba who ruled Rome. However, as Onomastus was quick to remind him, an emperor's work began the very moment he was proclaimed Caesar. He, therefore, allowed himself only a quick meal and a short nap before readying himself to conduct the evening's business at the palace.

Three men received an imperial summons that evening. The first was Plotius Firmus, the tribune who had declared for Otho at the praetorian barracks. The second was Licinius Proculus, a close confidant of the emperor who served as his quaestor in Lusitania. And the third was Flavius Sabinus.

"My friends," Otho said. "This has been a harrowing and tumultuous day. Blood still runs through the Forum, and we must secure the peace and stability of the city. Foremost, we must show the people of Rome that her government still functions. Plotius Firmus, You demonstrated extreme loyalty and valor in the face of great adversity this day. I said that you would

be one of my praetorian prefects, and I am now honoring that promise."

He rose and presented the tribune with the prefect's baton and signet ring. The emperor then looked to Proculus.

"Licinius Proculus, you have long been both a friend and worthy advisor to me. As a reward for your service, I name you as the remaining Prefect of the Praetorian Guard."

Proculus accepted his signet ring and baton. Both men saluted the emperor before taking their places behind him, on either side of the imperial throne. That only left Sabinus.

"Flavius Sabinus," Otho said, addressing the old senator. "You have long been one of Rome's foremost generals and statesmen. You served as Prefect of the City of Rome for a number of years. You were unjustly relieved of command of the urban cohorts by the tyrant, Galba; an injustice I now intend to rectify. I, hereby, restore you to full command of the urban cohorts and invite you to serve a fourth term as urban prefect."

"An honor I readily accept, Caesar," Sabinus said, with a bow.

Otho dismissed the men and set about reading through a pile of Galba's private correspondence brought by Onomastus. The sun had set, yet he knew his day was not yet finished.

"Grim reports, Caesar?" his freedman asked.

"If the senate hopes my quick ratification as emperor will bring about peace and quell the unrest in the north, they are mistaken. Clearly, Galba never shared the private reports he received from spies in the north. It would seem Vitellius, rather than simply seeking the overthrow of the cruel despot, is standing firm in his resolve that he be named Caesar. The thing is, I do not think it is entirely his doing, but rather he is being manipulated by his generals and advisors."

"A terrible thing that we must now endure more suffering and bloodshed," a woman's voice said, momentarily startling the emperor.

"Lady Vinia," he said, with a sad smile. He ordered Onomastus to leave them, before addressing his betrothed. "My dear, I am truly sorry for the death of your father. He was a loyal friend and did not deserve to meet his end the way he did. Know that I mourn with you."

"I came to pay my respects to you, Caesar," Vinia said. "And to let you know…I understand our marriage cannot be allowed to go forward."

Otho grimaced, though he was grateful that she understood their now untenable betrothal. "I do not view your father as a traitor. But many within

the senate, as well as the equites, do. I am sorry there isn't more I can do for you, but there is a limit to even an emperor's powers."

"There is only one thing that I would ask of you," Vinia stated. "Call off your soldiers and let me retrieve his body from the Forum, that he may be given a decent burial."

"Of course," he replied gently.

He had not seen Vinia in over a week, when he had shared his bed with her. They still thought, then, that Galba would name him his successor, and that by marrying Vinius' daughter, they would found a new dynasty. But now that Galba had been violently deposed, and her father's memory was tainted by his close association with the hated despot. Though he still had affections for the young woman, Otho would have to find another consort with which to found his new dynasty.



Licinianus was still in a state of shock after the harrowing ordeal he had narrowly survived that day. The portents had been there since the rise of the sun, as the morning's auspices had been poor. The high priest even warned Galba that there was a traitor within the walls of the imperial palace.

"Oh, father," the young man sighed, "why didn't you listen?"

The Vestals had been kind, albeit distant, towards him. They were unsure what they were supposed to do with the ousted imperial prince. One of the elder priestesses had promised that no harm would come to him within the temple's walls. However, the harsh reality was, unlike the Greeks, Roman law had no concept of 'sanctuary'. If Otho ordered Licinianus' death, then there was no power on earth that could stop it.

The booming of a fist beating on the main doors echoed throughout the temple. As a slave went to open the doors, both the Vestals and Licinianus felt the ominous doom which approached. The former prince heard the sound of arguing voices, and he shut his eyes as fear overcame him. The door to the small room he occupied was suddenly kicked open. A praetorian and auxiliary trooper stood in the doorway.

"Lucius Calpurnius Licinianus," the guardsman said, holding up a small scroll. "I have a warrant for your execution signed by the emperor."

"Signed by a vile traitor, more like!" Licinianus spat.

“Come along,” the praetorian said calmly. “Be a good fellow and make a decent end of it. Don’t make a scene in front of the vestals. The gods would not like that.”

The prince stood, slowly making his way out of the room. Once past the doorway, he threw his right elbow back catching the praetorian in the jaw and knocking him to the floor. Licinianus spun around and swung his clenched fist at the auxiliary trooper, who ducked his head slightly. The punch caught the man in the center of his forehead, and while it caused him to stumble backwards, the prince felt as if he’d just broken every bone in his hand. He yelped in pain as he turned and sprinted towards the doors.

As the guardsman stumbled to his feet, the auxiliary trooper hurled his lance at their fleeing quarry. The long stabbing spear was not designed for throwing, and it wobbled awkwardly in a low arc, skipping across the marble flooring before entangling itself between Licinianus’ legs. As the young man tripped and sprawled onto the floor, he tried to pull himself up to his feet only to feel the crushing weight of the armored praetorian slam into the small of his back.

The prince was tackled to the ground, with Guardsman Statius grabbing him by the hair and smashing his face into the stone floor. The commotion got the attention of both servants and priestesses within the temple. They converged on the foyer appalled at what they were witnessing.

“To hell with this,” Statius said. With unnerving speed, he drew his gladius and jammed it into Licinianus’ neck.

The young man tried to cry out but could only sputter, as dark torrents of blood gushed onto the floor. One of the Vestal acolytes screamed. Others gasped in horror.

“Come on, Faelan,” Statius said. “Help me drag this pile of shit out of here.”

They each grabbed an arm and dragged the body through the doors to the temple; a wide streak of blood trailing behind them. The stricken prince was still thrashing as he desperately tried to cling to life. Once outside, his killers slung his body down the stone steps. He lay struggling for a few moments, before a final gurgling escaped his ruptured windpipe. Then he was finally still.

“Oy!” Statius called to a patrol of praetorians walking the Forum. “Take this and toss it over with the others. We have to go make our report to the emperor.”

“Bugger me,” one the praetorians said, holding his torch over the body of Licinianus. “That will certainly make Otho happy!”

“Wait a moment,” Faelan said. “The emperor specifically said he wanted his head.”

“So he did,” Statius replied, with a bored sigh. He descended the steps and proceeded to hack through the slain man’s neck. Once the head was severed from the shoulders, he grabbed it by the hair, now slick with blood. “Here, let’s use your lance again.”



Hours later, after Otho had finally gone to bed, the long and brutal day drawn to a close, the Roman Forum was left quiet as a tomb. Blood-soaked corpses of the slain were littered throughout. The only living persons in the large Forum were a handful of praetorians, and a few members of the urban cohort patrolling the area, keeping an eye out for any who would dare to retrieve the bodies. From a legal standpoint, these were viewed as executed criminals, and would be left to rot over the next few days. Eventually, they would be taken by the city watchmen to be tossed unceremoniously into the Tiber.

Following the pleas of Lady Vinia, Otho wished to show some restraint and at least a modicum of mercy. And so, around midnight, one of the city criers was escorted into the Forum by a squad of Praetorian Guardsmen. Among the escorts was Guardsman Statius who, much to the new emperor’s bemusement, refused any sort of promotion as a means of reward. Otho had given him and Trooper Faelan a bounty of nearly a thousand denarii for ‘great service to the empire’, upon presenting the head of Licinianus. Statius had been granted an additional five hundred denarii, for aiding Otho in the lead-up to the overthrow of Galba. In addition to feeling a measure of pity for the slain, Rome’s newest emperor understood that leaving corpses within the Forum would be rather disruptive for business, not to mention rather unnerving to the people.

The crier stepped up to the speaker’s platform, and as was the case whenever an official bulletin was posted, he first read it aloud, regardless of whether or not anyone was within earshot to hear it. Copies were then posted throughout the forum on notice boards.

By order of his imperial highness, Imperator Otho Caesar Augustus, the bodies of those criminals, slain during the execution of the traitor, Servius Sulpicius Galba, are not to be disposed of in the River Tiber. In his mercy, the emperor is giving all families leave to retrieve the bodies of their loved ones, without fear of reprisal or punishment.

Furthermore, in the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation, all freeborn citizens who may have been deceived by the cast-down usurper will be shown clemency. Only those within the tyrant's inner circle will face the punishment of banishment, with all death sentences commuted. Let us, then, look with hope towards a new age for Rome, that we might go forward together, as Romans.

Signed on this night, the 15th of January, in the 822nd year after the Founding,

Marcus Salvius Otho Nero Caesar Augustus
Emperor of Rome

Vinia did not wait for the crier to finish reading the edict. She, along with a pair of servants bearing a wheeled cart and torch, walked towards the Gemonian Stairs. Atop one stone monument, they saw the mutilated head of Galba covered in flaking blood, and already attracting swarms of flies. Unlike the unfortunate citizens who had been slain that savage day, the usurped former emperor's head and corpse would be left where they lay for the time being.

Most of the bodies of the slain lay near where the deposed emperor had fallen. Yet Vinius was by himself, lying contorted at the base of the stairs where countless criminals had been thrown following execution. Though Vinia had never been close to her father, she still wept at the sight of his bloody, twisted body. His head was turned unnaturally over his right shoulder, eyes wide, and mouth partially open.

Vinia turned and nodded to her servants. She then pulled the hood of her cloak over her head, as her father's body was carried to the waiting cart. Slaves tried to contort the stiffened corpse into something more dignified before covering it with a canvas tarp. The only other sound heard was the hammering of nails, as copies of the edict were hung on the various notice

boards throughout the Forum.



Roman Noblewoman

The following morning would be met with trepidation, though the few brave souls who ventured into the Forum would soon spread the word that families could come and retrieve their slain loved ones. Only Galba's and Licinianus' decapitated corpses were left where they lay, as none dared to claim either. In the coming days, the scene of carnage would be swept away and the blood washed from the paving stones. The Roman Forum would be crammed with vendors and shoppers once more. Within a week, none would ever guess that an Emperor of Rome had met his ghastly end within the empire's very center of commerce.



Otho was surprised at how deeply he slept the night after his rise to power. Though he had not gone to bed until well after midnight, he rose just after sunrise feeling surprisingly well-rested. The ever-present Onomastus was there, ready to help his master into a bath before he breakfasted. As Otho ate his meal of boiled eggs and fruit, the porter beat his staff onto the floor three times.

"The noble consul, Lucius Salvius Otho Titianus!" he announced.

Otho sat upright as his brother entered the dining hall, grinning broadly and holding his hand up in salute.

“Hail, Caesar!” he shouted, before walking over and embracing Otho.

“And to you, Consul of Rome,” the emperor replied.

“I am glad to see you up and rested, for we have much to do this day. The senate will wish to know your intentions, as well as what your personal priorities are.”

Otho sat in contemplation for some time. He had a few issues in mind, though the sheer magnitude of policies and daily protocols that required his attention would soon become overwhelming. In the coming days, he would find himself deferring to his co-consul and inner circle of advisors more often than not. But on this morning, his first since becoming Caesar, Otho was ready to plunge headlong into the lifelong task of ruling an empire.

“I will need to see a review of the imperial finances,” he said.

“But, of course,” Titianus replied. “I took that as a given, so I brought some of the latest reports with me.” He snapped his fingers and pair of slaves brought in a large wicker basket piled with parchments and scrolls. “To put it simply, Nero was a spendthrift and Galba a miser. If we are to maintain a level of stability, we will need to be somewhere in between.”

“Yes, well, not all of Nero’s spending was bad,” Otho said, defensive of his former benefactor. “The Domus Aurea is a thing of beauty, and I think it needs to be completed. It will serve as a fitting memorial to a ruler that the people loved.”

Later that morning, Otho and Titianus sat in the consuls’ chairs within the senate chambers. They had arrived early, and watched with interest as their colleagues filled into the large hall. The assembled senators were mostly quiet as they took their seats. They waited for their new emperor to speak, before they began the business of the day. Unlike his initial meeting with the senate, Otho now wore the flowing purple and gold robes over his toga, with the crown of laurel leaves atop his head. The fathers of Rome had named him emperor, and he needed to look the part.

The chamber was much fuller than the day prior, many of Galba’s former favorites showing themselves once more. Their enemies were already plotting to see if Otho would exact retribution against them. His first decrees of the day surprised them all.

“Call forth Senator Aulus Marius Celsus,” the emperor ordered.

This was echoed by porters and clerks, and soon the former Galbian supporter was escorted into the chamber. His hands were chained, four urban

cohort troopers surrounded him. His face was bruised, and his hair disheveled. He had been treated cruelly by the soldiers who had captured him and only Otho's orders, which put an end to the killing of freeborn Galba supporters, had saved his life. He now stood before the new Caesar, ever defiant and ready to face whatever justice his past loyalties brought down upon him.

"Aulus Marius Celsus," the emperor said, rising from his chair, holding his consul's baton in both hands. "You were a member of the tyrant Galba's inner circle; one of the closest, I might add, aside from this three pedagogues."

"Yes, I was," he announced proudly. A rebellious smirk crossed his face. "As were you."

This brought an immediate gasp from several senators. A series of low conversations erupted, as many were shocked by this blatant display of insolence. Otho simply smiled and held up his baton, silencing the senators.

"As I recall, there was a distinct difference between your sense of loyalty and that of the other members of the usurper's council. Even those closest to Galba; Vinius, Laco, and the former slave, Icelus were loyal out of purely selfish motives. Their fealty was just enough that they could control the pretender, using him to fatten their coffers, cast down their enemies, and increase their own power and influence. The wretch, Icelus, even managed to get himself illegally elevated into the equites. And Galba's choice for imperial prince, Licinianus, was nothing more than a despicable lackey, whom they also felt they could control."

Otho felt a trace of remorse at naming Vinius among Galba's faithless followers. Though the old consul had earnestly tried to help him legitimately claim the throne, he had been among the most hated of Galba's inner circle. Any posthumous defense of him would be politically detrimental to Otho.

"The loyalty you held for Galba was different," the emperor remarked. "There was no personal, selfish motive. Nor did you flee when all of his most adamant followers lost their courage. Yours was the type of loyalty that even an enemy can respect. The soldiers who captured you may have mistreated you in their fits of passion, and for that you have my deepest apologies. And yet, even they have expressed their admiration for you." He then ordered the guards, "unchain him."

Celsus was in a state of complete surprise as his guards removed the shackles from his wrists.

“What are you saying?” he asked in disbelief.

Otho waved to one of the clerks who read from a scroll, which the emperor had written personally.

“Aulus Marius Celsus, you are hereby granted a full and unconditional pardon, for any and all associations with the regime of the usurper, Servius Sulpicius Galba.”

“I am free to go?” he asked, hesitantly.

“You are free to go,” Otho said reassuringly. “However, I would like to offer you a choice. You are an experienced general, and we will soon have need of good military leaders. Your loyalty and honesty is a rare commodity, and it would be a shame for us to lose it. If you wish to leave Rome that is your choice, and may the gods go with you. If you wish to stay, I offer you a place within my inner council at the imperial court. I have need of men like you…*Rome* has need of your services. What say you? Are you willing to serve me with the same level of fealty that you did Galba?”

Celsus did not even hesitate, but stood tall and stated, “I am Aulus Marius Celsus, senator of Rome, general in the imperial army and your obedient servant, *Caesar*.”

This was met with an ovation, one that appeared to be directed at Otho, for his pragmatic clemency, but really it was in respect and awe of Celsus’ candor and staunch courage. As Celsus was escorted from the chamber, it was Senator Nerva who next addressed the emperor.

“Caesar,” he said, “you have dealt with Marius Celsus both justly and humanely. Cornelius Laco has not yet been found, but there is still the matter of Galba’s freedman, Icelus. He was captured in the Forum and awaits your judgment.”

“On the night of the tyrant’s overthrow, I made a promise,” Otho responded. “I swore, after Licinianus, no freeborn supporters of the usurper would face the death sentence. Icelus is not freeborn, but a vile former slave who, in his arrogance, dared to assume the mantle of Rome’s lesser nobility. He is not worthy of the justice that a plebeian could expect, let alone one of the rank which he declares for himself, yet has no right to hold. Crucify him.”

Since every senator present felt the same level of loathing for Icelus and his presumptive arrogance, not one word of reproach was uttered when the emperor sentenced him to the excruciating and ignoble death by crucifixion.

The remainder of the day was spent reviewing the lists of suffect consulships for the coming year. While two consuls were elected for each

year, there were usually a series of suffect consulships lasting two to six months doled out to worthy senators, particularly those in line for a governorship or military high command. As Galba and Vinius had been the elected consuls for the year and were now dead, there would only be suffect consuls occupying the chairs for the remainder of the year. Though the former general, Verginius, was mildly surprised Otho had inserted him into the list, which shortened the terms of the other designees, he understood that the emperor hoped this would help placate the mutinous Germanic legions. Despite their anger and frustration at his refusal of the imperial laurel crown, the Rhine army still held much love and respect for their former governor-general.

As part of his reconciliation attempt, Otho ordered the senate to respect those appointments made by both Nero and Galba. Among these involved the very man the emperor had pardoned earlier that day, Marius Celsus. He was one of the designees for the July and August suffect consulships. Flavius Sabinus, and the unrelated Caelius Sabinus, were selected for the two months prior.

And though he had been unable to address any of the numerous financial and administrative issues which would soon overwhelm him, Otho left the senate later that day rather pleased with himself. He rode in a litter as he was escorted back to the palace by a company of praetorians. He would have time for a thorough massage from one of his slaves, and a light supper before his meeting with his inner council. It was they with whom he would discuss some of the more sinister issues that did not need to be heard in the light of day upon the senate floor.



A little over a mile to the east of the palace, where the Aqueduct of Claudius turned north along the intersecting roads, a century of guardsmen were undertaking the distasteful task of carrying out the emperor’s latest death sentence. Veturius, who had replaced the slain Densus as centurion of his unit, was overseeing the crucifixion of Galba’s freedman, Icelus.

Crucifixion was among the cruelest punishments within the Roman Empire. It was considered so vulgar that it was an unlawful sentence for a freeborn citizen. Those convicted of capital crimes were often strangled instead. Only slaves and non-citizens could be given this horrific punishment. It was rarely used anywhere near Rome, though fairly common on the fringes

of the empire, particularly in the east.

Soldiers had dug a deep, cylindrical hole which the main post would be dropped into. Icelus, whose robes were tattered and bloody from the brutal flogging he'd been subjected to beforehand, was unceremoniously laid upon the cross. His arms were stretched to the point that his shoulders felt they were coming out of their sockets, before they were tied to the cross brace.

"Consider yourself lucky we don't nail you up," a praetorian said, before spitting in his face.

After his legs were tied to the pole, he was hoisted up in the air, the long pole dropped into the hole with a hard jolt that threatened to break his arms. The former slave, his breathing labored, was in a terrible state of discomfort.

"At least we let you wear your rings," Centurion Veturius said, with a wicked laugh. These had been given to Icelus by Galba, as a sign of his new status as a member of the equites. The praetorian officer then added, "Should you survive three days up there, your sentence will be considered complete and we'll cut you down."

"You will?" Icelus said, his voice already a whisper.

"It's Roman law," Veturius stated. "Of course, there have been ten, maybe twenty people over the last eight hundred years to survive being crucified. Most likely, you'll be begging us to come break your legs by tomorrow afternoon, so that you can hurry up and die."

"Three days," Icelus whispered to himself, shaking his head weakly. Three days without food or water, his lungs slowly being deprived of air.

He could only hope that death came quickly. That was the cruelty behind crucifixion. While almost no one ever survived three days on the cross, neither did they perish quickly, most lasting a little over a day. The other harsh aspect of being crucified was the utter humiliation they were subjected to during their final hours of life. Being hung up along one of the busiest thoroughfares leading in and out of the city, Icelus' suffering would be compounded by the abject scorn of thousands before he finally expired.

All he could do now was ruminate upon just how far his fortunes had risen, only to meet such an ignominious end. Born a slave, and having served Galba his whole life, he had been granted his freedom as a young man. After which, he had become his master's most loyal servant. He even held greater influence over him than his wife or closest friends. Compelling the old emperor to elevate him into the equites following the deposing of Nero had

been his crowning achievement. All of that now came to a disreputable end, as he met his death upon the cross.



Otho's rather violent usurpation of the imperial mantle had unnerved many. Oddly enough, Flavius Sabinus was not among these. While he certainly could not condone the manner with which Otho seized power, he at least understood why. The new emperor had been magnanimous thus far, having deferred to the senate as to the legitimacy of his actions. He had also restored Sabinus as Prefect of the City of Rome and gave him back his urban cohorts.

Vitellius, the pretender from the north, had shown no inclination towards even trying to justify his claim to the throne. His soldiers refused to swear the oath of allegiance to Galba, yet what would happen once they knew the tyrant was slain? There was the very real fear that even with Galba dead they would march on Rome and install their own puppet on the throne. As an old soldier who knew many of the legates, Sabinus rightly suspected that Vitellius was little more than a marionette controlled by his inner circle of generals. They would fawn over him, shower him with flattery, and make him think he controlled Rome, while it would be they who ruled the empire. It had been similar with Galba and his pedagogues.

And while Otho had yet to publicly state how he intended to deal with this latest pretender, Sabinus knew it was only a matter of time before the two emperors collided on the battlefield. Thankfully, it was winter, and the rebellious legions of the Rhine army would not be able to advance until spring.

Sabinus was pacing in his study, contemplating these and other issues, when there was an anticipated knock at the door.

"Come!" he said, turning to face the door, his hands clasped behind his back.

A servant opened the door for Aula Cursia Vale, whose expression was one of both curiosity and deep concern.

"You sent for me?" she asked.

"Yes," the old senator replied. He waited until the slave closed the door before explaining himself. "No doubt you have heard about the mutiny on the Rhine."

“Of course,” Aula replied. “The city criers announced the treachery of Vitellius the day before Galba was overthrown, although the latest intrigues at the imperial court have drowned out most of the concerned talk about the Rhine.”

“This rebellion is not confined just to the Rhine,” Sabinus observed. “Fortunately, the emperor still has control of the seas. And he has the loyalty of most of the legions. However, they are spread throughout the empire, while Vitellius’ forces are concentrated. His army is both vast and formidable. He has the loyalist forces, at least those readily available in and around Italia, badly outnumbered. The legions he commands are also some of the fiercest fighters in the whole of the imperial army.”

“What can I do?” Aula asked, uncertain as to what Sabinus wished but knowing he did not summon her simply to scare her with tales of the pretender’s oncoming army.

Sabinus held up one finger, signaling for her to wait a moment while he opened a large chest and pulled out a dark crimson tunic, leather belt, and matching cloak.

“This is the garb of an imperial messenger,” he said, producing a small signet ring. “This ring signifies you are in service of the empire as an official courier.”

“I did not know women could be imperial couriers,” Aula said, taking the items.

“Women can often get in and out of dangerous places a lot more stealthily than a man,” Sabinus remarked. “During the dark days of the republic, powerful men would employ women to act as their messengers, simply because they could move about freely without drawing suspicion. None of the emperors have added a prohibition of this. Whether an oversight or because they think the fairer sex can serve them well, I cannot say. As Prefect of the City of Rome and a former consul, I can legally employ you to serve the empire in this dark time.”

“I am at your service,” Aula said eagerly, with a short bow, for she had longed to serve the empire like her father before her. With a half grin, she made a rather bold prediction. “It is Judea where you need me.”

“Indeed,” the senator acknowledged. “Through you, I will be my brother’s eyes and ears in Rome. Vespasian must be kept apprised of all that transpires within the capital and the war in the north. Whether or not Otho can hold against the Vitellian onslaught…well, let us just say my brother will

decide his course of action in due time."

"I'll have my horse made ready to ride at once," Aula asserted.

"You won't need your horse for this mission," Sabinus nodded. "I shall arrange transport for you to Caesarea by ship. As the seas are extremely rough this time of year, this will no doubt be a hazardous journey. Now, do you have a weapon?"

Aula just smiled.

Later that evening, she opened her personal trunk and retrieved the scabbarded spatha that had served her father for many years. A cavalry officer's sword, it was similar in appearance to the infantry gladius, with a much longer blade. The scabbard was well-worn and a deep crimson color, adorned with brass accents, including laurel crests and a lion's head near the top. The handle of the weapon itself was highly polished bone with a deep red wooden pommel and hand guard, both of which had brass accents.

She drew the blade and let it rest upon her hand. Her father always kept it razor sharp. As the lamplight reflected off the metal, Aula could only guess where this weapon had been and what it had seen. Most of her father's time as a cavalry officer was decades before she was born. And while he had taught her how to fight, both mounted and dismounted, she had never seen this particular sword until the day he presented it to her, just prior to her journey to Rome.

"I hope you never have need to draw it," Cursor told his daughter. His hands were trembling slightly when he gave it to her, and Aula thought she could see a trace of a tear in his eye. Clearly, the history of this magnificent weapon also symbolized a very dark chapter in her father's past.



Oil lamps were lit within the emperor's dining hall, as he welcomed the senators and advisors who made up his inner council. His brother was there, as was the city prefect, Flavius Sabinus. Senator Celsus, looking much improved after a bath, shave, and change of clothes, was also present. Also in attendance was Suetonius Paulinus, who Otho had selected as his chief military advisor. This was despite his insulting the old general by stating Titianus, and not he, would be commander-in-chief of imperial forces when the time came to face Vitellius. Marcus Cocceius Nerva, who had no military experience but was more politically astute than any member of the senate,

was also included in the inner circle.

All the councilors were given wine, and it was Senator Nerva who opened the meeting.

“Caesar, there are a few loose ends that need sorting out before we continue. I speak of the former praetorian prefect, Ofonius Tigellinus. I know the last thing you want is to start your reign with a series of executions, but there are many within the senate, and the equites for that matter, who are clamoring for his head.”

“He used his influence with Nero to kill off any he felt were his personal enemies,” Celsus added. “The man is nothing more than a murderer, and he needs to be brought to justice.”

“If we put him on trial,” Paulinus spoke up, “we draw attention to the less noble aspects of Nero’s later reign. It will also look like petty retribution to the plebs.”

“Not only that, but it will stink of the old treason trials,” Sabinus added. “Mind you, Tigellinus must be dealt with, but we should be a little more subtle, persuasive even.”

“He’s been hiding in Sinuessa, living at a bathing spa ever since he abandoned Nero,” Nerva stated. “He paid a hefty bribe to Vinius, in order to be spared from Galba’s wrath. And now he spends his days drunk, with a circle of courtesans living with him.”

“Doesn’t sound like such a bad existence,” Paulinus chuckled.

“What say you, Caesar?” Nerva asked the emperor.

“I think it would be fitting if Tigellinus was given the same sentence he meted out to so many,” Otho replied, after giving the matter a few moments’ thought. “More than likely, he knows he has been living on borrowed time. Hades is calling to him, and I think it is time he faced the justice of the gods.”

The meeting was interrupted by the arrival of Prefect Proculus, who was still in full armor as he entered the hall.

“Forgive the intrusion, Caesar,” he said, as he saluted the emperor.

“Not at all,” Otho replied. “Please, feel free to join us. I take it you have news for me?”

“Yes, Caesar. Cornelius Laco has been captured. Damned fool was found in the house of his sister, not five miles from Rome. And the freedman, Icelus, has been properly disposed of. Feeble bastard likely will not even survive a single night on the cross.”

“Most excellent,” Otho said, clapping his hands together. He then refilled

his wine cup and raised it in salute. “To the capture of the last of the tyrant’s pedagogues.”

“Legally speaking,” Senator Nerva said, “Icelus’ status as a member of the equites should have saved him from the ignominy of crucifixion. However, as he was a former slave and should never have been eligible for membership within the lesser nobility, I don’t think anyone will lament his execution.”

“Cornelius Laco is another matter completely,” the emperor’s brother, Titianus, added. “Caesar, you have already publicly stated your opposition to any further reprisals. However, the public will demand that Laco be punished for his culpability within the former tyrannical regime.”

“Fortunately, Laco does not bear the same level of spite the people felt towards Vinius,” Nerva remarked. “No one, except perhaps his daughter, mourns his loss.”

Otho’s face twitched slightly at the reference. He was surprised to realize he still had some feelings for Vinia, at least enough that he pitied her sorry predicament. The lone child of an executed traitor, there was little for her except shame and ignominy.

“But while Vinius was regarded as the tyrant’s right hand,” Nerva continued, “Laco is nothing more than an incompetent imbecile.”

“Because of his social status, the usual punishment for such offenses is exile,” Otho finally said. He looked into the faces of his advisors. “Am I to understand that this will not appease the people?”

“Members of the army, as well as those whose kinfolk Galba mercilessly slew, will demand his death,” Nerva emphasized. “Although, if you execute him publicly your word and, indeed, your very honor will be called into question.”

“I have a rather simple solution to this,” the emperor said maliciously. “Have Laco brought before me. Due to his rank and status as a member of the Roman senatorial class, he will be exiled to the Isle of Lipari.” He then turned to Proculus. “But first, send Guardsman Statius to me.”



While the emperor and his inner council were making final disposition preparations of their former rivals, the sun cast its reddish glow along the Aurelian Way, where a private burial was taking place. A small cart, drawn

by a single mule, made its slow trek along the cobblestoned road. A long trunk and a small box were covered by a leather tarp in the bed.

Stone tombs were common along either side of the road, and this particular one had been purchased only that morning. The man who'd bought it was a simple freedman steward, one who, until two days prior, had been a member of the imperial household. He'd retrieved his master's body and head, for which he paid a profligate sum to another freedman who purchased it from his master's killers in hopes of selling it for profit.

The steward did not care about politics, war, or any of the myriad of affairs that had consumed his master's life. And, whatever the people now said about Servius Sulpicius Galba, to the steward he had been both master and friend. There was little left to do now, except try and give his master a decent burial.

He slowly drug the trunk from the cart and hefted it into the tomb. The box which contained Galba's mangled head was placed within as well. With great effort, the steward slid the stone slab into place and whispered a few quiet prayers, as the reddish sun cast its last light of the day upon him. He hoped that however tumultuous his life had been, in death Servius Sulpicius Galba, formerly Emperor of Rome, would at last know peace.

Chapter XXIII: The Growing Crisis

Cologne, Germania
18 January 69 A.D.



Legionaries conducting a winter march
(Photo © Cezary Wyszynski)

The army of Vitellius was huge, and continuously growing every day. He was unable to bring the full force of every single legion along the Rhine frontier, as that would leave the Roman provinces vulnerable to raids from the ever-hostile tribes across the river. Still, he mustered the bulk of seven legions, along with a comparable number of auxiliary regiments, both infantry and cavalry. In all, he had between thirty and forty thousand fighting men, ready to march on the Eternal City. Despite the vast numbers of legates, regimental commanders, as well as Vitellius himself, it was really two men who controlled the army and their presumptive emperor.

"And it is not just the Rhine army that supports you, Caesar," Valens said, while Vitellius ate his midday feast. His face was florid, and with the effects of wine it was difficult to say if he was in full control of his faculties.

"Who else has decided to join us?" he asked after a few moments, his voice surprisingly crisp. His tolerance for drink was such that his advisors would soon come to speculate he could quaff an entire cask of vintage, and still be able to speak coherently.

“General Manlius Valens, a distant cousin of mine,” Valens answered. “He is the commanding legate of First Italica, stationed in Lugdunum, Gaul. If we show up on his doorstep, he will surely feel inclined to support our cause.”

“Very good,” Vitellius said approvingly. “Who else?”

“Junius Blaesus, the governor of Gallia Lugdunensis.”

“So most of Gaul and both Germanias have answered my call,” Vitellius said, nodding slowly.

“And Belgica,” Valens added. “Of course, given Governor Asiaticus is your son-in-law, this can hardly be surprising.”

“He’s a good lad,” Vitellius replied. His speech was clear, though his eyes were glazed and distant.

“The Ligones and Treveri tribes in Gaul have pledged both auxiliary troops, as well as coinage to help pay for the war,” Valens noted.

“Ah, yes, ‘the sinews of war’,” Vitellius responded, quoting the famous orator, Marcus Tullius Cicero. “At least no one is expecting me to fund this little venture out of my own coffers.”

It was a light attempt at humor. Valens and Caecina were both well aware of their governor’s money troubles. Complaints from Vitellius’ numerous creditors managed to reach all the way into Germania. But with the Rhine legions declaring him emperor, these had fallen silent. This may have been out of fear, though it was equally likely they reckoned that, should Vitellius emerge victorious, his debts could be settled with the imperial treasury.

One of the most difficult aspects of any large-scale army was feeding and paying its soldiers. Imperial legions and auxilia regiments were funded by the state; however, with the empire now facing civil war, the mutinous armies would have to be paid by other means. According to the aquilifers, each legion had enough coin in their treasuries to pay their legionaries for the next three months. And since it was almost a certainty that the crisis would not be resolved by then, other sources of revenue would have to be found.

“Our army is huge, Caesar,” Caecina spoke up. “Logistically and strategically, it would make sense to divide into two columns and invade northern Italia from both the west and the north.”

Valens decided to add to this by addressing the financing issue. “If we advance through Gaul, we can secure the loyalty of the provinces, as well as the additional soldiers from First Italica. We can further compel the governors to part with some of their coin to pay our soldiers.”

“Gaul is the wealthiest province in the west,” Vitellius noted. “We can simply coerce them to divert some of their taxation that would otherwise be sent to the capital, into our coffers. With their own soldiers now declaring for us, it’s not as if they will have much of a choice but to help finance this little venture.”

“And speaking of which,” Caecina said, producing a battered piece of parchment. He grinned as he held it up. “It would appear Galba has summoned me to Rome to face charges of corruption and embezzlement.”

“I suppose we should answer his summons,” Valens remarked with a chuckle. He was well aware of his colleague’s less-than-honorable acquisition of vast amounts of imperial coin. “But we will do so behind the blades of forty-thousand imperial soldiers.”



Caecina and Valens were soon officially appointed by Vitellius as division commanders, with each given direct control over one of the two wings of the Vitellian army. They alone commanded every aspect of the campaign, and many felt they had complete control over Vitellius himself.

“The fat old sod knows he’s in well over his head,” Caecina said, during a private dinner with Valens a couple days later. The two often supped alone, devoid of the company of even their fellow legates.

“I don’t think he had ambitions to even be Governor of Lower Germania,” Valens surmised, “let alone being proclaimed emperor by the entire Rhine army.”

The two men shared a laugh, albeit a nervous one. Since the decision to have them split their forces and operate independently until they arrived in northern Italia, there was a growing sense of subtle rivalry between the two generals. While they had been strong political allies, they had never quite become friends. Now each was growing mistrustful, suspicious the other was wielding undue influence over their governor and soon-to-be emperor. None of this was lost on their peers. Every legate was concerned as to whether or not the two would even cooperate, or was each more concerned with trying to steal victory and glory for himself?

“I intend to recommend to Vitellius that we depart at once,” Caecina said, causing Valens to choke on his wine.

“Have you gone mad?” his fellow legate asked. “Have you not stepped

outside? We are in the middle of bloody winter!”

“Precisely,” Caecina countered. “The Roman army never campaigns in the winter months, and no one down south will expect us to so much as budge from our camps until at least March. If we begin the advance now, we can be in northern Italia by then. And if the thought of going over the Alpes frightens you, old boy, I will lead my division over them, and you can take the long route through Gaul.”

“You can be an insufferable twat, do you know that?” Valens grumbled and shook his head, feverishly running his fingers through his hair.

Though he was feeling a lot less jovial than he was a few scant minutes before, he did not wish to get into an argument with Caecina. And his fellow general’s reasons for invading so soon did have merit. Each being given overall command of an entire wing of the Vitellian army granted them a vast amount of independence. Neither would have to answer to Vitellius directly, as the presumptive emperor would remain with a rearguard. And since they would be hundreds of miles apart, communication between divisions would be all but impossible. Valens knew the trek through Gaul would likely take three or four months. It would likely involve the suppressing of a large number of tribal peoples who, despite a hundred years under Roman rule, were still little more than barbarians. He would also be responsible for the entire army’s siege train, as catapults, heavy ballistae, and the numerous ammunition wagons would be hard-pressed to make it over the Alpes during even the best of conditions.

“Look at it this way, if I am wrong and my whole damn army freezes to death, then the glory will be yours for the taking,” Caecina conjectured.

This actually got a chuckle out of Valens, who looked at his fellow general and asked, “Do you really think you can get over the Alpes in the middle of winter?”

“The roads have been greatly improved since the time of Julius Caesar,” Caecina replied. “Besides, how much snow do you see on the ground here? It may be winter, but we have yet to see the waters freeze. And there is not a trace of snow to be had, just cold rain. I’ll grant you, it will be a miserable journey, and the Alpes passes may indeed be snowed in. But that is a risk I am willing to take, if it means catching Galba’s army before they’ve had a chance to rally a single legion.”

Caecina spoke of Galba, for no one in Germania knew the old emperor was dead and now replaced by Otho. Interestingly, Otho was a man who

many of them had never even heard of. The bitter feelings towards Galba were still very strong, and had only intensified since the legions refused to swear allegiance to him on New Year's Day. Furthermore, it was difficult for the forces on the Rhine to comprehend that any imperial soldier could feel so much as a shred of loyalty to the despicable tyrant. A man who had treated his own troops with such disdain could hardly expect them to defend him in the face of overwhelming numbers. So while the commanding legates prepared for a bitter fight, the rank and file legionaries were confident that their brothers-in-arms would lay down their arms, or perhaps even assist them in overthrowing the despicable despot. Caecina echoed such sentiments to his colleague.

"Who knows," he said, "Perhaps by the time we reach Italia, the people will have already offered us Galba's head on a spike."

The following morning, Caecina and Valens approached Vitellius with their plan. Though it was really Caecina's, he and Valens attempted to maintain the façade of unity in front of their governor and would-be emperor. Vitellius accepted their assessment and was almost giddy with excitement at the coming campaign.

"The only thing saving Galba at the moment is that massive obstacle known as the Alpes," Caecina observed. "It is no doubt giving him a false sense of security at the moment. Yet, his forces are few in number. He has maybe two legions worth of professional soldiers, and one of those was only raised this last year. Their soldiers are little more than untrained and ill-equipped recruits. However, the longer we delay, the greater the chances of him bringing up more legions from places like Dacia and North Africa. If we want to end this war quickly and decisively, we must strike him down before he has a chance to even the odds."

"Caecina will go over the Alpes," Valens further explained. "I will take my division west and south into Gaul." When Vitellius raised an eyebrow at this, Valens was quick to explain his rationale. "The three Gallic provinces are weak in their loyalties. Some of the regions are still very tribal, and they may need a bit of forcible persuasion in order to secure their loyalties."

"There's also the matter of coin," Caecina stated. "There will be no taxes coming from Rome to pay the legions, and our auxiliaries are really little more than mercenaries to begin with. As you have already stated, sire, we need to secure not just the loyalty of the provinces in Gaul, but enough gold

and silver to maintain the stability and loyalty of our forces."

"Galba is a miserly skinflint, and everyone knows it," Valens added. "If we are generous with our soldiers, without giving the perception of outright bribery, then the usurper's legions may simply abandon him and come over to us."

"A daring and ingenious plan," Vitellius nodded. "And where do you recommend I place myself, while you two are converging on northern Italia?"

"We estimate it will take at least three months, maybe four, for Valens to complete his sweep through eastern Gaul," Caecina told him. "You should maintain your headquarters camp near the base of the Alpes, close to Vindonissa. That way Valens and I can keep in constant communication with you, send our dispatches, and receive any strategic advice you may have."

It was ludicrous, insinuating Vitellius would be in any position to advise his subordinate generals. And yet, it placated his ego perfectly and made him believe he was in command of this vast undertaking.

"Your plan is a bold one," Vitellius said. "It is that type of bravery and audacity that will win us the empire."

"Given the condition of the Alpes roads," Valens remarked, "and how long my pacification of the Gallic tribes will take, we should plan on converging near Cremona around the first week of April. If all goes as intended, by summer the empire will be yours."



As the most experienced general out of the emperor's inner circle, Suetonius Paulinus understood how precarious Otho's hold upon the empire was better than any. Most of the senate had reverted to their previous squabbling and petty politics. To them, the army of Vitellius was too far away to be of concern and obstructed by the Alpes Mountains. It would be spring before they could leave their strongholds, by which time many senators hoped the legions would lose their zeal for rebellion. By which time they suspected the soldiery would send Vitellius to the emperor, either in chains, or with his head on a spike. Only Paulinus and a handful of former legionary officers, including Senator Celsus, were convinced war was inevitable.

The recently pardoned senator stated, "If Vitellius marches with the Rhine army, even while leaving sufficient garrisons along the frontier, he will

have us hopelessly outnumbered."

"We should send word to the east and ask Vespasian for assistance," Paulinus urged. "His army in Judea alone numbers over sixty thousand men. If he could dispatch even a third of these, combined with the legions in Syria and Egypt, he could smash Vitellius in the flank while we hold a defensive line north of Rome."

"The seas are still turbulent," Otho noted. "And even if they weren't, we have not enough ships to transport his army. He'd have to send the vast majority of his forces by land. At best, it will take six months for them to arrive."

"And even if we should hold that long," Titianus remarked, "what's to stop Vespasian from declaring war on whoever wins between us and Vitellius? Once his forces are conveniently positioned on the borders of Italia, he could readily take advantage of the victor in their weakened state and name himself emperor."

"You are too damned paranoid, consul," Paulinus countered. "Vespasian is a loyal soldier of Rome. Unlike the traitors to the north, his men will swear their oath of allegiance to Emperor Otho. The Flavian sense of duty runs deep, he will not betray us."

"Yes, I am certain that Vespasian's loyalty runs *so* deep," Titianus said with disdain. "Let us not pretend we don't know how superstitious he is, and that he's had delusions of becoming Caesar ever since he took that Jewish wretch, Josephus, captive."

"Eastern mystics, and even Roman soothsayers, have foretold his rise," Celsus remarked. "And while we do desperately need reinforcements, I admit I am hesitant to trust Vespasian."

"Enough," Otho interrupted. "Whether Vespasian has aspirations of becoming emperor is of no concern to me right now. Once we've dealt with Vitellius the eastern legions will fall into line. I'll not send for Vespasian and sit on my ass waiting for him. Not because I fear him as a potential usurper, but because of how many months it will take for his legions to arrive. During that time our forces, as well as the Vitellians, will have swelled in number. It will mean a bloodbath, one that could cripple the entire imperial army. The empire will be terribly weakened, if all of our forces are caught in a bloody war against each other. We will look to the east, but not that far. The Danube is still a volatile frontier, even if it does not get the same amount of notoriety as the Rhine. Still, there are ample forces there we can call upon, and they are

much closer to northern Italia than any of us."

Flavius Sabinus sat quietly, listening to the deliberations. And while it may have seemed strange that it was Paulinus and not he, who came to his brother's defense, the old prefect's reasons were two-fold. Firstly, it would be too obvious, as well as patronizing, were he to verbally chastise any who spoke out against Vespasian. The more profound reason was that even he questioned what his brother's motives were. Would Vespasian possibly declare war on the winner of this civil war? If Vitellius emerged victorious, the chances were more probable.

And while Vespasian had tried to keep quiet the predictions offered up by Josephus, as well as another renowned Jewish holy man, the rumors had traveled even quicker than imperial couriers. There were even soothsayers in Rome who foretold the Rise of the Flavians. With such portents, as well as a huge army behind him, it was not unexpected that there were those within the imperial court who feared Vespasian. Three emperors had already been proclaimed since the year began. Could there be a fourth on the horizon?



The morning dawned cold and rainy as Generals Valens and Caecina departed Cologne. Orders had been dispatched to all legates and regimental commanders. They would await their respective division commanders along the route of march. The already vast column stretched back along the road for miles would continue to get even larger, as the army absorbed more units into its fold. Near the base of the Alpes, there was a city called Vindonissa. Approximately two weeks' journey from Cologne, it was the site of a legionary fortress that at one time guarded the Alpine passes against barbarian raiders from the north. Now it was home of Legio XXI, *Rapax*, also known as the *'Predator Legion'*. It was a few miles west of here that the army would split into its two divisions. Caecina's forces, consisting of about one third of the total army, would head southeast into Raetia with the Twenty-First Legion joining their division. Valens, along with the remainder of the army and both divisions' siege trains, would make his long journey southwest towards Gaul.

On the first day of this long trek, the two generals rode together huddled beneath their cloaks, as the freezing rain echoed off their helmets and made the magnificent plumes droop slightly. Vitellius and the detachments left

under his ‘command’, would not be leaving for a couple of weeks. And even then, the emperor-in-waiting would be carried in a covered litter, rather than riding on a horse exposed to the elements. It was not the most dignified way for a supposed conqueror to ride off to war, but neither Valens nor Caecina particularly cared what Vitellius did. He was little more than their puppet, to be controlled by them once he was named emperor. There was now the growing disconnect between Valens and Caecina, each man’s concern as to who would wield the greatest influence over Vitellius.

“You couldn’t have picked a worse day for us to depart!” Valens shouted, trying to be heard over the sounds of rain beating down upon his helmet. “The sky is black, and the gods look upon us with disfavor.”

“On the contrary, General Valens, the gods smile upon us this day,” his colleague retorted. “The rain is cold and unpleasant, but it does not bring the impediments of snowfall. Why, Jupiter himself is washing the roads for us, cleansing our path to Rome!”

Though he was as cold, wet, and miserable as his companion, Caecina refused to let Valens even suspect his discomfort. There was a potentially grave issue which lurked in the back of Caecina’s mind, for it was not just the Othonians who were concerned about Vespasian and his huge army in Judea. He said as much to Valens, though his fellow general’s response was filled with both incredulity and outright hostility.

“Here we are, marching through the cold of Germania in the winter, and your concern is over a damned mule driver three thousand miles away in Judea?”

“Vespasian may have traded mules at one time,” Caecina admitted, “but I think he has the potential to play a very substantial role in this little game of ours. And he does have a lot of experience with commanding soldiers.”

“Oh, yes, the *‘Conqueror of Britannia’*,” Valens scoffed disdainfully. “The hero-worshipping twats of his legions even had the audacity to call him *‘The War Master’*. Sure, he can slap around a few mindless barbarians. And yet, he has utterly failed to retake Jerusalem after almost two years in that sliver of a province.”

“To be fair, those rebellious Jews are excellent fighters,” Caecina countered. “They did slaughter six thousand men, as well as capture the eagle of the Twelfth Legion, before Vespasian took command.”

“Whatever,” Valens grumbled. “Even if he were as great a general as Julius Caesar, which he is *not*, he is a political and bureaucratic disaster. He

was so hated by the people of North Africa, they pelted him with rotten vegetables and stones when he was governor. Selling mules is the only thing that kept him from financial ruin, and he's been exiled twice! Nero only recalled him because no one else was readily available, when he needed someone to take control of that little upheaval in Judea. Forgive me, if I don't give much regard to such a pathetic figure—who is thousands of miles away—regardless of how many soldiers have fallen into his lap."

The two rode on in silence. And while Caecina still had his concerns regarding Vespasian, he had to begrudgingly admit Valens was mostly correct. Whatever the size of his army, Vespasian was on the far end of the empire, and in no position to affect the outcome of the pending war. And while his brother, Sabinus, was an important senator and statesman, Vespasian himself was a political nobody. Caecina reckoned that the only things keeping him from being expelled from the senate altogether were his war record and who his brother was. Once he sorted out the rebellious Jews in Judea, he'd likely be back to selling mules or some equally undignified means of scraping a living.

Chapter XXIV: The Emperor Sends His Regards

Island of Lipari, North of Sicilia
February 69 A.D.



Island of Lipari

Cornelius Laco's audience with the new emperor had been rather underwhelming. Otho had had the audacity to charge him with a variety of petty crimes, many of which were outright fabricated. Though Laco, while serving as praetorian prefect, had certainly killed or overseen the deaths of a number of Galba's enemies, all had been completely within the law. No man who was following the orders of the emperor could be tried for murder. Laco's only crime, as far as he could tell, was being too close to Emperor Galba, although he did hear that Senator Celsus had been given an imperial pardon. And though he was distraught, to say the least, over the deaths of Galba, Licinianus, and most of the dethroned emperor's entourage, Laco counted himself fortunate he was being allowed to live. In fact, he was the last surviving member of Galba's innermost circle. Vinius had taken a cavalryman's spear in the back, and Icelus had lasted less than a day before succumbing to the agonizing death of crucifixion. The former prefect begrudgingly admitted to himself that exile was a far preferable fate.

Lipari was a small island, approximately two miles wide by four miles

long, located just north of Sicilia. Consisting of mostly rolling hills, the small village located on its southeastern coast was predominantly a fishing community. For Cornelius Laco, this was to be his new home.

The small, single-decked ship lurched into the harbor, with mariners tossing ropes over the side, tying the ship to the extremely long dock. No one had spoken a word to the exiled nobleman during the two-day journey by sea from Roman port at Ostia. Even the praetorians—men he had once commanded—said nothing as they escorted him onto the waiting ship. Once aboard, the soldiers promptly left, and the sailors completely ignored him. The winter swells made the journey extremely uncomfortable, and Laco spent most of the first day leaning over the back rail of the ship, the contents of his stomach spewing forth into the colossal waves below. There were a few times he feared the small vessel might capsize, yet the crews had sailed these waters so often they skillfully managed to avoid the worst of the massive swells. Still, he was more than a little relieved to be off the ship once it docked.

As he stepped onto the gently rolling dock, Laco reckoned there were worse fates that could have befallen him. That he could have faced execution should have never crossed his mind, given the nature of his crimes and his status as a patrician. However, it seemed no one in the new regime cared about following law, or any sense of decorum, when it came to the unfortunate Icelus. Despite being born a slave, and his elevation into the equites had come from the overthrown Galba, he still should have been spared from that terrible death by crucifixion. Bearing this in mind, Laco was quite relieved when Otho told him his punishment was exile.

As he walked down the long dock that led to the small fishing village, Laco noticed a man in a red tunic who appeared to be waiting for him. As he got closer, he noticed the gladius strapped to the man’s hip. Upon closer examination, he also wore the signet ring of the praetorians. Since Laco did not recognize him, he figured his new escort was likely not an officer.

“Cornelius Laco,” the man said with a nod of respect.

“Yes, and you are?”

“Guardsman Tiberius Statius,” the praetorian replied. “I was but one of many nameless faces under your command, so I do not take offense if you do not recognize me. The emperor sent me ahead to see about your accommodations, and to welcome you to your new home.”

“That’s very generous of him,” Laco replied, his voice laced with

sarcasm. “Seeing as how I could likely walk the circumference of this island in less than a day, I fail to see why I need an escort.”

“I don’t question the emperor’s motives, I just follow my orders,” Statius replied. He tipped his head towards a small hilltop just beyond the village. “Come. I’ll escort you to your villa.”

“A villa, is it?” Laco asked in disbelief. “I cannot believe our illustrious emperor would be so generous as to grant me a villa.”

“I admit, it is likely not to the standards of comfort you are used to,” Statius replied. “But, at least it’s a roof over your head with a bed to sleep on each night. And, of course, there are a few servants to look after your needs.”

The last thing Laco wanted was for anyone, let alone one of his praetorians who now served the pretender, to escort him anywhere. Yet, if Statius’ orders came directly from Otho, then Laco was pretty much choiceless. After all, the guardsman was the only one present with a weapon.

It was a short, steep trek up the dirt path which wound around the hill leading to the house overlooking the town and the harbor. A stucco structure with a battered tile roof, it was certainly far more austere than Laco was used to. The entire building consisted of only three rooms; a bedroom, a living / dining area, and a small servants’ quarters.

“Far better than any of the poor sods living in the village,” Statius mused. Laco scowled at the remark, but knew there was nothing he could say. It vexed him greatly that this lowly guardsman, who had once been little more than one of his nameless underlings, was now able to openly mock him.

“I don’t suppose there’s a bath in this place?” he asked.

“Of course there is!” Statius replied with a grin. “It’s out back. And though it’s rather small, I think you will enjoy bathing under the stars at night.” He clapped his hands, and a pair of young women came in from the servants’ quarters. Both were rather fetching, which caused Laco to smile broadly for the first time in over a month.

“These are my servants?” he asked.

“They are indeed,” Statius replied. “Compliments of Emperor Marcus Salvius Otho. May the gods grant him long life and reign over the empire!”

“There are worse fates, I suppose,” Laco said, his gaze fixed on the two women.

“We are here to meet your every need, master,” one of them asserted.

“I think what your master needs right now is a hearty meal,” Statius remarked.

It was late in the day, and Laco realized he was very hungry, especially after the long climb up the hill. He had not eaten since boarding the ship, two days prior. The long walk had helped settle his seasickness and helped restore his appetite.

"You don't mind if I join you for supper, I hope," Statius said. "All I've had at the local inn, these past few days, is undercooked fish and boiled cabbage."

While Laco wished to rid himself of this insufferable praetorian, his good humor had been restored, mostly by the presence of his two servants. Having no one to converse with since his farce of an audience with Otho, Laco privately confessed he was glad for some company. Perhaps this guardsman had not been mocking him, and maybe he was an affable fellow, after all.

"By all means," he said, pointing with his open palm towards the table. "As you are the only one here armed, I don't suppose I am in any position to deny you."

"Bah!" Statius said, with a dismissive wave. "I only use my weapon when I'm ordered to do so. Otherwise, it's quite harmless."

His expression was one of almost sinister glee. It unnerved Laco slightly. However, he reassured himself that if Otho wanted him dead, he would have had him killed on the boat and his body tossed into the sea. With his wife and children precluded from traveling with him into exile, who would ever know?

It was now dark, and one of the servants lit a pair of oil lamps. They soon brought out various fruits, nuts, and other appetizers, as the two men lounged on their dining couches. The windows were open, and a warm Mediterranean breeze wafted through the house.

"I need drink!" Laco said emphatically, holding up his empty cup.

One of the women returned carrying a small pitcher, she gave a subtle nod towards Statius who quickly lurched to his feet.

"Not that one!" he said, grabbing the woman by the arm.

She gave him a look of incredulous puzzlement.

"This is piss water. Bring your master a pitcher of the good vintage from the cask out back."

The woman was still in disbelief, but she simply nodded and left the room.

"Something wrong with the wine?" Laco asked.

"There's one batch that has gone off and tastes like vinegar," Statius explained. "I know the cask out back has the good wine. I tried some of it

myself earlier this day. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not. You are my keeper, after all."

"Hardly," the guardsman replied. "I'm just your escort for the next day or so. After which, I will return to Rome, leaving you to the care of your pretty little charges here."

When the woman returned, still looking puzzled and a little irritated, she filled both men's cups.

Statius held his up in salute. "To the emperor, senate, and the people of Rome!" While the emperor was the last person who Laco wished to raise his cup to, his sense of relief briefly overwhelmed his indelible hatred for Otho. It had been a pleasant evening thus far, and he found himself almost enjoying the guardsman's company. Statius may have been in the service of the usurper, but so were all of Laco's praetorians.

"To the emperor, senate, and people of Rome," he said, saluting with his cup.

The two continued to eat and drink well into the night. After several courses, and more than a few cups of wine, Laco's eyes were starting to glaze over slightly.

"I think," Statius said, grabbing one of the servants by her stola, "it is time for you to take your master to bed."

"Yes," Laco acknowledged as he sat upright. He then held up his hand. "Wait! I must bathe first!"

The servants looked at Statius with expressions of impatience that would have alerted Laco, had he been looking their way.

The praetorian simply shrugged. "You heard your master," he said. "Fill his bath at once!" It took some time for the fires to be lit and the bath water heated sufficiently. During which time, Laco sobered up some, although he was still relaxed and in an almost tranquil state.

"I think…I shall rather enjoy this little 'punishment' Otho has sentenced me to."

"Your bath is ready, master," one of the women said.

They helped Laco up from his couch and guided him outside.

It was a rather pleasant night and as he continued to sip on his wine, Statius could hear his former commander laughing and shouting orders to the two women. An hour passed before the three were seen entering from the rear of the house.

"Much smaller than what I'm used to," Laco replied. "Still, the night air

did me much good, and my lovely servants were quite thorough in making certain I am cleansed and ready for bed. Exile may be a dishonorable fate for a Roman patrician, but with the help of these beauties I think I will manage."

He was dripping wet, with a loose-fitting robe draped over his shoulders. His engorged manhood protruded between the folds. He was clearly ready for more than just retiring to bed. He then gave each woman a playful slap on her bottom.

Statius stood from his couch and gave a respectful nod. "I will take my leave," he said, with a short bow. "My task here is almost finished, and I must return to Rome soon."

"I thank you, noble praetorian," Laco replied earnestly. "You have made my first day of exile far more bearable than one would anticipate. You have my utmost gratitude."

Statius smirked at this last remark. He gave an almost imperceptible nod towards the bedroom, which the two servants reluctantly guided their new master into. One of them looked back over her shoulder, glowering at him. He simply grinned and winked at her, before Laco called to her and she disappeared into the bedroom. The praetorian paced around the main room a few times, and even stepped outside to gaze up at the stars and take in the night air. After five minutes or so, he walked back into the house, calmly drew his gladius, and opened the door to the bedroom.

Laco was lying flat on his back, completely naked, as were the two women. Each of them lay on one of his arms, and they were gently caressing his torso. While the exiled nobleman found it extremely erotic, they were simply stalling for time. Laco's eyes grew wide as he caught a glimmer off the praetorian's blade. He opened his mouth to speak, but Statius held up his hand, silencing him.

"One last thing," he said, quickly strolling over to the bed. "The emperor sends his regards."

With rapid precision, he slashed the blade of his weapon across Laco's throat which erupted into a flowing stream of dark crimson. He tried to gasp, his severed windpipe spraying blood everywhere. The two servants yelped in surprise and quickly jumped away from the stricken man, who spastically beat his fists on the bed. Laco convulsed violently, holding a wadded up ball of blanket to his neck in a vain attempt to stem the blood flow. In a few short moments, it was over. His eyes glazed over as his body gave one last spasm.

Statius had left the room as soon as he slashed Laco's throat. He was now

standing over the dining table, running a rag over his gladius and admiring the gleam of the blade in the soft lamplight.

"You fucking twat!" one of the woman said, as she stormed out of the room and smacked him hard on the shoulder. "We were supposed to poison him over dinner, not spend half the night letting him empty our larder and wine cask!"

"My bed is ruined!" the other woman snapped, storming out of the bedroom.

"Oh, come now, ladies," he replied calmly. "I employed your services to help me rid our dear emperor of a rather embarrassing nuisance. You have done a great service to the empire."

"Piss on service," the first woman retorted. "Where's our bloody money?"

"You are as classy as you are beautiful," Statius with sarcasm. He pulled a pair of gold coins out of his pouch, each worth twenty-five denarii. "There you are, as agreed. Two gold aurei; the price for pretending to be slaves for one evening."

"What about me bed, and all the food and wine?" the second woman asked.

Statius let out a bored sigh before digging into his money pouch once more. "Here," he said, placing a handful of silver coins on the table. "Ten denarii. I suspect your blankets can be washed. If they cannot, this will more than compensate you for your loss."

This put the women into a much better humor, and they were now beaming as they sorted the coins. Silver denarii were rare, as the bronze sestertius was the most common coin used within the empire. Neither woman had even seen a gold aureus before.

"So," the first woman said coyly, "is there any other…*service* we could perform, in the emperor's name?"

"Perhaps," the praetorian said, matching her expression. Statius was a well-muscled and ruggedly handsome man, which was a rare commodity on the small island. He took a step towards the bedroom and then stopped himself.

"However, I do not think any of us would have an enjoyable night, what with the bloodied corpse in the next room," he surmised. "Why don't you come with me to the inn down by the water? I've got the best room they have, with a bed large enough for all three of us. And don't worry about the

corpse. I've already arranged for his disposal, first thing in the morning."

"I don't see why not," the second woman replied. Each woman took Statius by the arm, the first one retrieving an oil lamp for them to see by.

"Tell us," the first woman said, "Was all of that really necessary? I mean, did the emperor order you to simply kill Laco, or did he actually tell you to host him over supper, ply him with wine, and then cut his throat?"

Statius gave a short, dark chuckle. His gaze full of malice, he simply shrugged. "Does it matter?"

Chapter XXV: A Question of Loyalties

Caesarea, Judea
Late February 69 A.D.



Titus

It was towards the end of February when Otho's assumption of power and Vitellius' rebellion in Germania finally reached the armies in Judea. Flavius Sabinus had sent his own messenger, Aula Cursia Vale, who arrived on the same ship as the official courier from the senate. The young man who brought the senate's dispatch was more than a little puzzled to see another imperial courier, and a woman at that. He was promptly dismissed as soon as he delivered his message, yet Aula was told to stay.

"The senate's damned message is practically useless," Vespasian grumbled, tossing the short scroll aside. "A few flowering words from the new consul, Titianus, about his brother's supposed legitimate rise to power and how he overthrew Galba."

"Well, it's not as if Galba was exactly a friend of yours," Trajan noted, with a trace of sarcastic candor.

"I don't think Galba had any friends," the commander-in-chief replied. "Hell, the only people he even thought kindly of were well-oiled, muscular slaves, who would fuck him in the ass every morning before breakfast. Quite the wakeup call, I'm certain. He and Mucianus would have gotten on

famously.” Vespasian’s coarse language and crude humor were more in line with that of his rather gruff, and scarcely civilized, legionaries. Titus glanced over at Aula, who was struggling to stifle a laugh.

“That will be all, Lady Vale,” the legate said. “One of the clerks will find you a suitable billet for the night.”

“Thank you,” the young woman replied.

“You will be my guest for the time being,” Vespasian spoke up. “You can return to Rome once I have a response for my brother. Since you probably did not bring any suitable clothing, I’m certain the governor’s wife will have something you can borrow for dinner this evening. I’ll want to hear more about how my brother and son are faring, as well as dear Antonia.”

“I am honored,” Aula said, with a short bow.

“Strange thing, that,” Titus said, once she left. “Uncle Sabinus hiring a noblewoman to act as a common courier.”

“It was bloody brilliant.” Vespasian replied. “We both served with her father in Britannia, and though I have not seen him in nearly twenty years, I still consider him an honorable and noble friend. And it was Sabinus who compelled Emperor Claudius to elevate their family into the senatorial class. A lot can be said for having a messenger who is not just a nameless face, but a loyal friend. Control of and access to information will be crucial in the coming months.”

Titus gave a thoughtful nod, then turned back to re-reading the rather lengthy dispatch from Sabinus. “You know, Otho may have horrified the people by the manner with which he had Galba killed, but at least he did so under the pretense of saving the state for a tyrannical oppressor. From what I can tell, Vitellius has done no such thing; no messages to the senate, no public declarations as to why he is the rightful ruler of Rome, nothing. He is simply marching with most of the Rhine army to claim the imperial throne for himself.”

“Agreed,” Vespasian concurred. “Provided my brother’s information is accurate, which I have no reason to doubt, Vitellius has simply dispensed with any modicum of protocol.”

“I don’t like it, sir,” General Placidus spoke up. The commander of Vespasian’s auxilia corps, he was a brash and extremely aggressive officer. “Galba was a shit who tried to have you killed. Fair enough, we can throw our support behind Otho. But what if Otho loses? The Rhine army is a fearsome force and should Vitellius gain any sort of support from Gaul, he

will be virtually unstoppable."

"Otho has given a division to Suetonius Paulinus," Trajan remarked. "And Paulinus is one of the greatest generals in all of Rome."

"A division, yes, but not command of the army," Placidus countered, taking the letter from Sabinus and re-reading this detail. "Otho seems to think that should go to his damned brother, Titianus, who has only served one time in uniform, and that was as a laticlavian tribune fifteen years ago."

"To be perfectly honest," Titus replied, "do we even care who wins?"

"Well, of course, we bloody well care who wins!" Placidus snapped. "How many damned usurpers are we meant to suffer before the people finally say they've had enough? If this is allowed to continue, any legate or general with a shred of ambition will see himself as a potential Caesar. Loyalty and honor will mean nothing."

"What do you propose we do then, Placidus?" Titus scoffed. "Would you have us march on Rome?"

"If need be."

All eyes turned on him, and even Vespasian raised an eyebrow at the remark.

Placidus, in frustration, explained himself. "Look, we're all about to swear our allegiance to Emperor Otho on the grounds that he was sanctioned by the senate of Rome. Are we then to simply ally ourselves with every pretender who seizes the throne by force?"

"Placidus brings up a valid point," Vespasian said, taking control of the discussion. "Neither the people nor the army will be inclined to keep changing allegiances every time a usurper comes forward. If Otho sends for aid, we will detach a portion of the army to assist him. But for now, we need to keep ourselves above the fray. Let the conflict between Otho and Vitellius run its course, and then we will decide what actions we need to take."

Though he made no mention of it, the prophetic words of Josephus now echoed in his mind.

Nero's heirs will not sit on the throne for long. In time, the strongest-of-the-strong will arise.



As Aula stepped into the foyer, she could still hear the voices coming

from within. During her journey east, all she had time to do was think about the contents of her message from Sabinus, and the possible implications for greater Rome. She had deliberately avoided speaking with the other imperial courier; not an easy task when confined to a ship for almost three weeks.

She then gave some thought to what Sabinus told her before she left about his brother, whom she had never met before this day. Her father had spoken of him periodically, and from what he and Sabinus said, Aula could not imagine Vespasian suffering another Caesar who simply seized Rome by the sword.

As she contemplated this, all the while listening to the ongoing conversation behind the door, she was approached by a soldier who was staring down at a small wax tablet in his hand. Her face broke into a broad smile as she recognized him. His was a face she had not seen in ten years, but there was no mistaking him.

"Right, I was told to get you sorted with accommodations…"

"Hello, Gaius," Aula said, her countenance practically beaming.

The soldier stumbled slightly and looked her in the face for the first time. His eyes narrowed, as he looked back into the deep recesses of his long forgotten memories from another life.

"Aula?" he asked. "You're the messenger from Rome?" When she nodded in reply, he threw up his hands in a show of surprise. "I heard one of the couriers was a woman, but by Diana I never would have guessed it was you. W…what are you doing here?"

"My duty," she replied with a shrug. "Like the rest of you."

"I thought for certain you would be married off to some senator or magistrate by now." Gaius was still in a complete state of disbelief.

Aula Cursia Vale had been a very dear friend of his since childhood. He was in awe at how much she had changed during the years since he departed for the legions. Even in her simple tunic and cloak, he found her very fetching. She had also inherited much of her parents' height and was able to look him in the eye. He stammered, "The last time I saw you, you were just a little girl…"

"Please, I'm only a year younger than you!" she retorted, with a laugh. She looked herself over and thought aloud, "I suppose I have 'grown' a little bit over the last ten years." Gaius' face turned red when he realized she was not simply referring to her height.

"Shall I escort you to your quarters?" he asked, practically stumbling over

the words.

"But, of course."

Aula picked up her leather satchel and followed Gaius out through a side entrance to the great hall. The garden, with its high walls and ornate fountain in the center, made Aula feel like she was back in Rome, and she said as much to Gaius.

"It is only when one gets out into the city that it feels a bit 'foreign'," he replied. "I suppose that is because Caesarea is really a worldly city, with plenty of Greek, Parthian, Syrian, and yes, Jewish citizens."

"It is certainly a world apart from where we grew up in Britannia," Aula said, her thoughts going back many years to another time and place.

"Rome is what brings these worlds together," Gaius conjectured. "The native Britons and Judeans have little if anything in common. And yet, they are part of the same empire; worlds drawn together under one standard."

"Nobly spoken. You should leave the army and write poetic propaganda for the emperor." Aula was laughing to herself at this, though Gaius felt slightly embarrassed. She placed a hand on his shoulder which caused him to shudder slightly. "I'm sorry, that was cruel of me to say."

"It does seem rather silly," he replied. "Only patricians give a damn about such things. The only thing my soldiers care about is staying alive long enough to receive their share of the emperor's coin, which they will immediately spend on drink, gambling, and prostitutes."

He found himself gazing at the ground for a moment. It was baffling to him that he, who was second-in-command of a century of legionaries, who had seen battle and extreme horror numerous times, was suddenly awkward around this young woman he had known since he was a child. The two stopped walking, and Aula now sat on the edge of a large fountain, her head cocked slightly.

"So you're an officer now?" she asked. She had little knowledge of the inner machinations of the imperial army, but she assumed Gaius was no mere ranker anymore.

"An optio," he replied. "It means I'm second-in-command of a century of up to eighty legionaries. Not to boast, but when I was promoted I was the youngest in the entire cohort, quite possibly the entire Tenth Legion."

"You know my father always respected you," Aula remarked. "He said you were a man who would make his own way in the world, and not expect status or favor to be given to him simply because of his name."

“Yes, well, legionaries are required to make their own way in this world,” Gaius observed. “My father may have been elevated into the equites, but my older brother was the only one able to profit from it. Still, I would like to see him again someday.”

“Funny you should mention him, because Lucius has always envied you.”

“Envied me?” Gaius asked. “Why? The life of a legionary is filled with drudgery and toil, years of laborious boredom accented with moments of sheer terror. And if one doesn’t die in battle, there’s an assortment of ways to meet ones end out there. The discipline is harsh, with soldiers routinely beaten for various infractions. Most who join the ranks are very poor, and they only do so, so they won’t starve to death. The greatest incentive the army has, far more than any patriotic piece of propaganda, is that meals come regular, as does the pay. So why in Juno’s name would my brother envy me for choosing this life?”

“Because it was your choice,” Aula answered. “Your path was yours to make, it was not decided for you. My father always felt very strongly about that. He never thought he would have children, and given how late in his and Mother’s lives I came along, I think I was quite the surprise. Daughters are always used as political pawns. It’s the same everywhere not just in Roman society. And yet, he was determined that I would choose my own path, like you did. As a woman my options are rather limited. And I know the longer I wait, the less chance that someone who society thinks is a suitable husband will have me. I may only be twenty-six, but in some circles, that is far too old to be a new wife and mother.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?” Gaius asked.

“Why should it?” Aula questioned back. “You know as well as any, I was not raised like a typical nobleman’s daughter. While others were taught embroidery, I learned to ride a horse. I was taught how to read, and Father showed me how to use this.” She held up her scabbarded spatha to emphasize this last point.

“I do remember him taking you horseback riding,” Gaius remarked. “But I never knew he taught you how to fight. Remind me to never cross you.” He gave her a wink.

She responded to with a warm smile. “Father sent me to live in the House of Flavius Sabinus in Rome so I might be educated,” Aula continued. “From there, he said, I should make my destiny. I do not know what the fates might have in mind for me, but it doesn’t hurt that Sabinus’ tutors taught me to

speak and write in Latin, Greek, and even Aramaic."

"You can probably converse with the people of this land far better than I," Gaius conjectured.

"I can also passably speak Gallic, as well as the rather vulgar tongue of some of the Germanic peoples of the Rhine," Aula added. "Once Sabinus offered me the chance to serve the empire, I didn't hesitate for a second. But tell me, what are you doing here? In Caesarea, I mean."

"I took an extended leave," Gaius said. "I had some personal issues to attend to on the isle of Cyprus."

"We stopped off there," Aula inadvertently interrupted. "Salamis was a lovely city. I wish I had been allowed to take my horse. I think the beach would be perfect for riding." She noticed Gaius' suddenly pained expression. She paused for a moment, then knowingly asked, "Did your 'personal issues' have anything to do with a woman?"

"In a manner of speaking," Gaius admitted. He then told Aula about Verinia and his son.

As he spoke of the little boy who would never know Gaius was his father, Aula's eyes betrayed the inner sadness she felt for him. "Gaius, I am so sorry."

"Nothing I can change now," he replied, as if trying to convince himself. "As soon as I returned to Caesarea, I was told to report to General Trajan. At first, I thought I was in some sort of trouble. Soldiers from the ranks, even options, are almost never told to go see their commanding legate. It turned out that Vespasian's staff was rather short on clerks and, with an extended lull in the fighting in Judea, I was told I would be of better use writing dispatches rather than returning to my century for the time being. General Trajan has promised to send me back to the legion well before we launch our next campaign. Jupiter only knows when that might be. The zealots are fighting some sort of holy war amongst themselves, and Vespasian would rather they kill each other off."

"I knew there was a pause of sorts in the war here," Aula said, eager to help Gaius change the subject. "But the only thing I had heard was the Jewish rebels were squabbling amongst each other."

"Oh, they are doing a lot more than just squabbling," the optio remarked. "There is an all-out civil war going on in Jerusalem, as well as the regions to the south. And with our forces remaining static in various camps, blockading Jerusalem on three sides, General Trajan ordered me to report to the

commander-in-chief's head clerk. It's not so bad. At least I have a room to sleep in, instead of a dusty tent."

They then both stood and continued to the eastern wing of the palace. Gaius found a vacant room not far from the garden. There were numerous guest rooms along the three levels of the wing. The room was modest sized but clean, with blue painted walls adorned with various paintings, both eastern and Roman.

"After three weeks at sea, it will be nice to sleep on a real bed again," Aula said, with a sigh of relief.

"If you wish to bathe, and don't wish to walk all the way over to the public bathhouse, there is a small private bath just down the hall to your right," Gaius remarked. "The slaves who maintain it live on the other side. Just let them know about an hour before you wish to use it, and they will make sure it is properly heated."

"And which room is yours?" Aula asked coyly.

"I don't get a room within the palace," he replied. "The barracks is on the north side of the compound. I have my own room, so that is something." He smiled at her. "It is good to see you again, Aula."

"And you, dear Gaius," she responded, giving him a quick embrace before closing the door behind her.



Numerous messages had been dispatched from Rome with the most important of these sent north. The Vitellian division under Caecina had only recently arrived at the Alpine city of Vindonissa, home of the Twenty-First Legion. Though they had not declared for one side or the other, the fact that the city gates were open, with a delegation from the legion waiting for them, made Caecina hopeful.

"General Caecina," the legate said, as he and his entourage of staff officers approached on horseback. "Welcome to Vindonissa."

"And you know why I have come?" the general asked.

"Of course. You have come to liberate Rome. The Predator Legion stands ready, awaiting your orders. We do have much to discuss, though, including if you still intend to march on the imperial city."

"And why wouldn't I?" Caecina asked. "We have not traveled all this way, through the bitter rains and other undesirable weather, just to stretch our

legs. Why do you ask? Has the situation changed in Rome?”

“A lot more than anyone north of the Alpes can imagine,” the legate answered. “Galba is dead.”

The legate had detained the imperial courier long enough for Caecina to arrive and formulate a response on Vitellius’ behalf. One of his own couriers was sent on to Vitellius with Otho’s message of peace.

“A farcical bit of nonsense, that is,” Caecina remarked. “We declare for Vitellius on the first of January, yet Otho assassinates Galba on the fifteenth. Our claim is two weeks older than his, and therefore it is our emperor who has the right to the throne.”

“A rather apt assessment. And that is why you can count on the loyalty of the Predator Legion.”

“For which your emperor thanks you,” Caecina asserted. “Seeing as how we could not uproot entire legions from their posts on the frontier, my division consists of roughly four to six cohorts from each legion. Yours we can take in its entirety. Therefore, the Twenty-First will be the focal point of our division.”

“And if you intend to march over the Alpes in the winter, you will need my men to act as guides. It won’t be easy, but I know the way to Curia, about three weeks’ march from here, is clear. It is also at the highest point of the mountain passes, so if we can get that far, we should be able to march straight into northern Italia.”





Brass Sestertius of Otho

“We have much to celebrate, Caesar,” the praetor who oversaw the imperial mints told Emperor Otho, during an inspection of his new coins. “As

you know, the Rhoxolani tribesmen who dared to raid south of the Danube two years ago attempted the same again this past fall. The Third Legion set a trap and chopped them to pieces. Therefore, we think it only fitting that we commemorate this victory, as well as your pending triumph over the pretender, on your new coins."

The praetor showed him a new silver denarius. The front bore a profile portrait of the emperor wearing the traditional laurel crown. On the reverse was an eagle with the inscription, VICTORIA OTHONIS, around the edge.

"The Victory of Otho," the emperor translated with an approving nod. "Of course, I was not emperor when the Rhoxolani were defeated."

"A technicality," the praetor conceded. "We know the legion who routed them has remained loyal. And you will be emperor when Vitellius is defeated. But here, since the common plebs rarely get to see our silver, we have minted a sestertius that I think will appeal to the masses."

The brass sestertius was by far the most commonly circulated coin within the empire. Though much larger than the silver denarius, it was worth one quarter the value. Denarii were most often the currency of choice for the patrician class as well as the army, with the vast majority of citizens using the brass sestertius. This particular coin also bore Otho's image on the front, though the back bore the letters PAX ORBIS TERRARVM or 'Peace throughout the World'.

"I like it," the emperor remarked. "I will pray for the gods' blessings upon the overture of peace, that it may usher in an age of prosperity, rather than a charade which preceded violent destruction."

Pleased with his new coinage, Otho soon left the mint and returned to the palace for a meeting with Senator Nerva. At just three years his elder, Nerva was closer in age to Otho than many of his inner circle. He was also one of the more politically astute members of the imperial council and had become an invaluable advisor to the emperor. And, unlike the cantankerous Galba or unstable Nero, Otho appreciated the senator's candor and willingness to tell him what he may not wish to hear.

In addition to minting a series of coins to commemorate the victory on the Danube, Otho ordered *consular ornaments* awarded to the legate of Legio III, Gallica, Titus Aurelius Fulvus, as well as Tettius Julianus of Seventh Claudia, and Numisius Lupus of Eighth Augusta. Furthermore, he ordered a triumphal statue erected of the Governor of Moesia, Marcus Aponius Saturnius, for his role as commander-in-chief during the campaign.

“A bit excessive, don’t you think?” Nerva asked, as he reviewed the scrolls bearing the formal declarations. “After all, the Rhoxolani were on a plundering raid, and when their horses got bogged down in the mud the legions annihilated them. And for that you are granting the legates the same awards that Paulinus received for saving Britannia during the Iceni rebellion? He never got a statue erected in his honor.”

“No disrespect to General Paulinus, but even Nero felt he went too far in his reprisals against the rebellious tribes. Even after their forces were destroyed, he continued to pillage their lands and slay them by the thousands. And yes, I will grant you that the honors I am bestowing upon the Danube army are on the excessive side. That said, I need the loyalty of every soldier within a thousand miles of Rome, from the legates all the way down to the last legionary. Should Vitellius refuse our entreaties for peace, the Danube legions will be the bulwark of our defense forces.”

“Very good, Caesar,” Nerva replied. “And while I am here, there is another, rather delicate, issue of public perception we need to address.”

“And that is?”

“As we all know, many of Nero’s statues were cast down soon after his suicide. Whether to placate Galba or done out of genuine relief at his demise is anyone’s guess. With Galba, who the people despised, now dead, many of Nero’s statues are being restored by the people. No one has done anything to stop them. This is partly because he was your friend, and many of the plebs view you as a return to his reign.”

“Yes, I was hailed as ‘Nero Otho’ the other day in the Forum,” Otho replied, his brow furrowed in thought. “I think it was meant as a compliment, or at least I took it as such.”

“That is all well and good, when a cobbler or baker hails you in such a manner. However, I have received complaints from numerous senators regarding your attempts to return to a Nero-style reign. I now realize it was in poor taste for me to recommend you taking his name, and I have been told as much by many of my peers. That you have allocated twelve million denarii for the completing of the Domus Aurea has the senate worried about the empire’s finances. And since we have yet to restore the free grain ration, this continued grandiose building may be unsettling to the masses.”

Otho contemplated the senator’s remarks for a few moments. He then gave a solemn nod in agreement. “I’ll not use the name of Nero,” he said. “His statues, however, will remain. And while I do wish to complete the

Golden House, we will not risk a financial crisis to do so. We will only continue its construction as funds become available. I do wish to restore the grain ration, but it will take far more than the twelve million denarii I had allocated for the Domus Aurea."

"Very good, Caesar."

"There is one last matter regarding statues," Otho said, somewhat awkwardly. "And I don't mean any of my own, though it has been splendid to see several of these already completed. What I'm referring to are the statues of Empress Poppaea. Seeing as how the people of Rome have taken it upon themselves to restore Nero's statues, shouldn't we return hers as well?"

"As she was your former wife, I can see why this would be a little problematic," Nerva replied. "I'll not mince words, Caesar. It was common knowledge that you introduced Poppaea to Nero, and even encouraged their affair. If you are asking whether it would be viewed as improper for you to order the restoration of the statues of your former wife, who became empress under Nero, then the answer is *yes*. What I can do is speak with your brother, and through him we will put the motion forward in the senate. There is far less chance of unsavory gossips somehow implicating you in the unfortunate Poppaea affair, if we simply take you out of the process."

"Thank you, Nerva," Otho replied. "I admit, there have been many days when I missed my dear Poppaea. By essentially giving her to Nero, I may have earned my place within his circle, yet I lament that I may have brought about her death. Some days I fear the gods will damn me for my culpability."

"No one knows for certain if the hideous rumors about Nero kicking her to death are true, or if she bled to death during a miscarriage. The only actual witness is now in hiding, and may have already acted on your orders that he take his own life."

The disgraced former praetorian prefect, Tigellinus, had, in fact, been the only one present when Poppaea died aside from Nero. He had stalwartly refused to answer any questions regarding whether she had been killed or died of an unfortunate miscarriage. Otho was not about to offer to spare his life, just to hear an answer that may or may not have been true. Whatever regrets he may have regarding his ex-wife, it was in the past and could not be undone.

"Tell me, Nerva," he asked the senator, who was making ready to leave. "Whatever became of that boy, Sporus, who Nero had made into a woman?"

"Galba was disgusted by the poor retch and had him cast out of the

palace," the senator replied. "He could be begging in the gutter for all I know."

"Have him found and returned to the palace. And have him dressed as Poppaea once more."

It was a rather perverse directive, but Nerva simply nodded in reply. He would pass the word on to the guardsmen or other household staff. That the poor lad had been ill-fated enough to remind both Nero, and now Otho, of their dearly departed Poppaea was an unfortunate curse.



It was General Celsus who Otho dispatched to deal with the disgraced former prefect, Tigellinus. He, along with a section of both praetorians and legionaries, arrived at the spa that the former prefect now called his home. They found him splayed out on a couch, half naked, eyes glazed and his face unshaven. His once muscular and fit physique had morphed into flaccid and rotund mass. There was a wafting of smoke coming from the room, with a pungent stench that caused both Celsus and his men to break into a coughing fit. He then noticed nearly a dozen young women, all in various states of nakedness strewn throughout the room. Their eyes were also distant, and they appeared to not even notice the group of armed men.

"Ofonius Tigellinus," Celsus said. The man groaned and sat upright, his eyes squinting.

"By Hades' cock," he mumbled. "Is that my old friend, Senator Celsus?"

The general was unmoved by this. "I have a warrant signed by the emperor, demanding you either take your own life, or face trial and execution for the terrible atrocities committed against citizens of Rome."

"Piss off," Tigellinus said, rolling over onto his side. "I am under the personal protection of Titus Vinius, Consul of Rome."

"Vinius is dead," Celsus replied. "As is Emperor Galba. The orders for your disposal come from the Senate of Rome, by authority of Emperor Marcus Salvius Otho."

"Otho?" Tigellinus asked, snapping upright once more. "That little shit is now emperor? Give me the fucking knife and I'll make this quick."

Celsus drew the prescribed dagger and tossed it over to the wretched man. It landed in the former prefect's lap, but then clattered to the floor. Tigellinus tried reaching for it, but fell from his couch and lay crumpled on the floor.

“Shouldn’t we help him, sir?” a soldier asked. “This shit in the air is making my eyes burn.”

“I rather like it,” one of his mates said with a mischievous grin.

“You can come back and get your mind altered and your cock sucked on your own time,” the general said to the man curtly.

He then knelt beside the disgraced man, who all in the senate had once feared even more than Nero. He was muttering incoherently, his fingers flicking the handle of the dagger. Celsus shook his head in disgust, took the knife and plunged it into the side of Tigellinus’ neck. The stricken man made scarcely a sound, but simply twitched as a low gurgling sound came from his throat. Celsus wrapped the dying man’s fingers around the handle of the dagger and then signaled for his men to leave. The bevy of courtesans in the room did not even seem to notice the growing pool of blood beneath the corpse.

As he stepped out into the cloudy day, the general closed his eyes and took a deep breath of fresh air. Nothing more was said by him or his entourage of soldiers. They would be halfway out of the city before the first screams from Tigellinus’ female companions were heard. It was a vile, yet fitting end for a man who had created so much misery and suffering for the people of Rome.

Chapter XXVI: Defending the Empire

Rome
28 February 69 A.D.
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The imperial messenger from Rome had reached Vitellius in due time, with Otho's letter offering an immediate cessation of any pending hostilities. The emperor offered Vitellius a position at the imperial court, a magnificent estate in the country, and the absolving of his debts. When the courier returned to Rome with Vitellius' reply, he told Otho about the large number of troops massing near Vindonissa, though this was interpreted as them consolidating and making camp for the winter. No one foresaw that those same forces had, in fact, been advancing over the Alpes since early February. What troubled Otho was the contents of the letter of response from his rival to the throne.

He had convened the senate in order to make preparations for what was now the inevitable. In addition to a series of rather curt responses from Vitellius, Fabius Valens had sent his own ultimatums to the praetorian prefects, as well as the urban prefect, Flavius Sabinus. It was also the last day of Otho and his brother's suffect consulships, with Verginius Rufus and Lucius Pompeius slated to take control of the senate the following day. Titianus, therefore, took the opportunity to address the senate on his last day as consul.

"The pretender, Aulus Vitellius, has thoroughly rebuked our entreaties of peace," he stated. "He has dared to insinuate that, as the Rhine declared for him on New Year's Day, his claim to the throne somehow takes precedence. He ignores the reality that Emperor Otho was substantiated in his position by the Senate of Rome, whereas Vitellius threatens to become nothing more than a military dictator."

He then produced the scrolls, given to him by both Firmus and Sabinus. "The pretender's chief general, Fabius Valens, has gone a step further in his treachery. Even as we speak he rampages through Gaul, terrorizing the populace, while demanding both levies and tribute. These letters were sent from him to our own praetorian and urban prefects, threatening them with destruction at the hands of the Rhine army, and at the same time attempting to placate them with promise of riches and political power should they break

their oaths to the emperor."

This latest revelation caused the expected shouts and grumbles of outrage towards the treacherous turncoats. Such measures were little more than political grandstanding, though. These same men would likely prostrate themselves at the feet of Vitellius, should he succeed in usurping the throne from Otho.

"We are with you, Caesar!" Senator Italicus shouted, as he stood and raised his fist.

Otho had sat quietly in the other consul's chair but now stood to address Rome's ruling body. "The situation may seem dire, given the mutiny of both Germanic provinces, as well as the rumors of a number of Gallic forces joining them. Whereas we have only the inexperienced Adiutrix Legion, along with twelve praetorian and five urban cohorts with which to face this threat. But all is not lost. I have received word from Marcus Aponius Saturnius, the governor of Moesia. He states that the Balkan provinces have remained loyal, and four legions from Pannonia and Dalmatia are ready to fight in the defense of the empire." He then addressed the three generals who would command the loyalist divisions. "While my noble brother, Titianus, will act as commander-in-chief of our armed forces, I call upon three of Rome's strongest generals to lead our divisions; Suetonius Paulinus, Marius Celsus, and Appius Gallus. We will take our forces from Rome and march north in two weeks' time. We will then link up with the Balkan legions, head west into Gaul, and smash the impertinent Valens into oblivion."

This was met with a chorus of cheers from the assembly and many shouts of *'Hail, Caesar!'* This recent news, that the Balkan legions had remained loyal, was a much-needed morale boost for Otho, as well as the senate. Valens' total strength was unknown, though it was assumed his army consisted of the majority of Vitellius' forces. They were completely blind to the very existence of the second division under Caecina.



Along the Danube, Marcus Antonius Primus had just received a shipment of armor and weapons from Vespasian when the courier arrived from Governor Aponius. Primus was still feeling the grave insult brought on by the recent defection of his chief tribune; a young patrician who happened to be a distant cousin of the traitor, Fabius Valens.

“Good riddance to him, sir,” Master Centurion Vitruvius stated. “Better we have no laticlavian tribune than one whose oath is meaningless to him.”

“Yes, well, he was an acne-faced little shit anyway,” Primus chortled. “Now, what of these shipments from our good friend Vespasian?”

“Quartermasters are inventorying the lot now,” Vitruvius stated. “We also received word that one of the three ships carrying the supplies got smashed up in a storm. The other captains do not know if they made it to port. Even if they did, it will be months before we see its cargo, if ever.”

“We’ll just have to accept that as a loss,” the legate conjectured. “But what of the arms we did receive?”

“I had a look at them. The armor sets are mostly hamata chain mail, though I did see a few sets of segmented plate. A lot of it is spotted with rust. This is likely due to being subjected to sea spray over a period of weeks.”

“Hopefully nothing some polish and cleaning won’t fix,” Primus noted. “And any that are unserviceable, the armorers can break down into repair parts and scrap. Was there anything else?”

“Yes, sir. The good general has sent a large number of gladii. I didn’t see any helmets, but there were several crates of brass bosses, rivets, and metal strips with which to make shields.”

“We have sufficient helmets,” Primus observed, “even if half of them are outdated coolus and Montefortino designs. They’ll still protect the head from a solid blow. Alright, any soldiers who have yet to be issued armor will be given priority. If there is anything left, then we can look into repairing and replacing those that are in poor condition.”

“Yes, sir. We were hoping to receive some drafts of new recruits; however, with war against the Vitellians imminent, it seems we will have to make do with what we have.”

“Three thousand five hundred and eighty-seven, including the officers,” Primus noted, as he glanced over a summary of the legion’s strength. He shook his head in frustration. “No recruits to be had, yet it is in times of war that our need for new soldiers is at its highest!”

“Beg your pardon, sir,” a legionary sentry said, as he opened the door to the general’s office. “There’s a courier to see you from Governor Aponius.”

Primus waved in the man, who saluted and handed him his message. The dispatch from Aponius ordered Primus to have the Seventh Gemina ready to march in three weeks. They would then be sent with the Eleventh Claudia and Fourteenth Gemina Martia Victrix from Dalmatia to support Emperor

Otho against the pretender Vitellius.

"Well, bugger," the legate grumbled. He looked to Vitruvius. "It would seem we have even less time than we thought to get the legion ready for battle."



As the military forces in Rome made ready for their journey north, Emperor Otho personally devised another phase of his operational defense of Rome and Italia.

"General Gallus will advance north towards the River Padus," the emperor declared, to his council of war. "His division will consist of Legio I, Adiutrix, five praetorian cohorts, four regiments of cavalry, and two thousand volunteer gladiators." He placed his finger on a large map, pointing to the western province of Gallia Narbonensis. "If the intelligence we have received is correct, Fabius Valens not only has the most viable route into Italia, but also the vast majority of the Vitellian armies. There have been rumors of a possible second division. However, if it exists, they are still trapped at Vindonissa and won't be able to travel over the Alpes until spring. We must harry Valens' forces, while undermining any newfound loyalties the people may have towards the usurper."

"Thankfully, the Vitellians have no ships," General Paulinus observed, "so getting our forces into Narbonensis will go unopposed, at least until they land. But who will you send? Most of our legions are in the Balkans."

"This will be a small expeditionary force," Otho replied. "We need the majority of our forces in northern Italia, especially if we anticipate a possible second division coming over the Alpes sometime in the late spring or early summer. We will send, by sea, one urban cohort from Rome, while picking up additional troops from coastal cities along the way. I also want a draft of three centuries from each of the praetorian cohorts remaining in Rome."

"Caesar," Paulinus replied, his face showing concern. "Even if you can get a sizeable draft of urban soldiers from Ostia and the other coastal cities, this is still a force of only two thousand infantrymen, at most. And no cavalry."

"Precisely," Otho said. "It is little more than a diversion, though if successful, they can shore up our western flank while compelling the Gallic provincials from making war in favor of our enemies."

“And who will command this expedition?” the general persisted, his feelings of unease over this mission growing.

“Aemilius Pacensis commanded one of Sabinus’ urban cohorts, before he was cashiered by Galba for petty reasons,” Otho replied.

“Pacensis is a bully and a drunk,” Sabinus spoke up. “Caesar, I must advise you against appointing him to command any expedition. He’s likely to seize the chance to plunder, which will only alienate our own people.”

“And I advise against this expedition altogether,” Paulinus added. “I would have no issue with launching a maritime assault on Valens’ flank, and perhaps drawing him into a decisive battle, if we had the forces to do so. Unfortunately, with the bulwark of our legionaries up north, we simply do not have the numbers with which to launch a viable maritime assault…”

“Thank you, General Paulinus,” Titianus interrupted. He was clearly put out, as was his brother.

Otho was flustered that his plan, which he considered a brilliant piece of strategic maneuver, was being opposed by his senior officers.

“I appreciate your advice,” he said, then nodding to his urban prefect. “And yours, Sabinus. But this decision is mine alone, and I accept full responsibility for its outcome. Tribune Pacensis will command the expedition, with the praetorian centurions Antonius Novellus and Titus Suedius acting as his seconds.”



Preparations for the maritime expedition proceeded very rapidly. Despite the reservations of Sabinus and Paulinus, Emperor Otho was determined to go ahead with the mission. The emperor made certain they had sufficient ships, and after that, left all preparation to the expedition’s leaders. Within three days the centuries from the praetorian cohorts and the full complement from one of the urban cohorts were ready to depart. It was unknown what logistical preparations, if any, Tribune Pacensis made.

On the night before their departure, Guardsman Tiberius Statius visited a small flat located just behind the Temple of the Divine Claudius. The particular domicile he sought was on the third floor of the insula. During the day, the entire complex would be alive with playing children, while their mothers washed clothes, cooked food, and otherwise took care of their

humble homes. But Statius deliberately came at night, just like every other time he visited.

He knocked on the rickety door for almost a minute, before it was finally answered. A bleary-eyed woman, who appeared to be in her late thirties, opened the door. Her name was Lucilla, and she was a widowed seamstress who spent her days making blankets and clothing.

"Where is she?" Statius asked.

"She's sleeping," Lucilla replied. She ushered the praetorian into her flat. "Really, Tiberius, you could come to visit during the day, you know."

"I come when it suits me," he replied coldly. He walked over to a tiny side room, which was really no bigger than a supply closet. Curled up on a wobbly bed was a young girl of eight or nine years.

"She keeps growing," Lucilla replied with a smile. "Thankfully, I am able to make her sufficient new clothes to keep up."

"She needs a new bed," Statius remarked quietly. He reached into his money pouch, while keeping his eyes fixed on the young girl. "Here's fifty denarii, get her a new bed and some fresh blankets that aren't riddled with holes."

"I…I never see silver coinage," Lucilla stammered. "I will be able to buy her the finest bed in all of Rome with this."

"Then do it," the guardsman said sternly. He stepped from the room and produced a single gold aureus; the sight made Lucilla gasp. "Here, this is for your troubles. I know I have never said this to you before, but I am truly grateful for what you are doing."

"Melina was my sister," she replied sadly. "It is only right that I care for her daughter."

"I am leaving Rome soon," Statius said.

Lucilla understood. All of Rome knew about the pending Vitellian invasion, and the emperor's intent to ride north to face the pretender. She had also heard about the seaborne expedition and wondered in which Statius was taking part.

"If I do not return," the guardsman continued, "you are to take this to a lawyer named Titus Vorenus. He is employed by the imperial mint and will be easy to locate. This is to only be opened by him, and only in the event of my death. Are we clear?" He handed Lucilla a rather thick scroll, which was sealed with the emblem of the Praetorian Guard.

"As always," the woman replied, taking the scroll. "You know…you are

more than welcome to stay here tonight, if you wish."

"Thank you, but I have to rise early tomorrow. Take good care of her. You have been the mother she was denied."

Though Statius' voice sounded cold and distant, Lucilla was still flattered by his words. She had known the guardsman for many years and remembered a time when he used to smile, when he actually felt a sense of joy within this life.

"Let us hope when this is over, she still has a father."

Lucilla's words managed to bring a sad smile to Statius' face. He went back into the girl's room and kissed her gently on the forehead. She whimpered but did not wake.

After he left, Lucilla stared at the gold and silver coins he had given her. They were all freshly minted, and each bore the image of Emperor Otho. She knew nothing of the sinister, and rather savage, additional duties Statius had performed in the service of the emperors. What she did know was that the amount of coin he had given her, especially as of late, far exceeded the normal wages of a praetorian guardsman. She placed them in a small leather pouch, her hands trembling slightly. She had decided a long time ago to never question, or even speculate, as to where Tiberius Statius acquired his extra coin. Although, if these newest coins—whose value exceeded what she could earn in half a year—already had the new emperor's image upon them, then his 'additional duties' most certainly came from the highest authority.

Chapter XXVII: Bloody Allegiances

Rome
March 69 A.D.
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While Guardsman Statius was away on his personal visit, a number of his fellow praetorians spotted what they thought was suspicious activity in the vicinity of the urban armory. What none of them knew was that Otho had ordered the Seventeenth Urban Cohort from Ostia to load up their arms and equipment from the armory. Because the cohort's primary duties revolved around firefighting, their weapons were all kept at a central armory in Rome. Under the command of a praetorian tribune named Varius Crispinus, they had elected to wait until nightfall, in order to alleviate any fuss and confusion. Supervising the detail with Crispinus were a pair of centurions. Twenty or so of their men were gathered around four wagons and in the armory.

"What the fuck is the meaning of this?" one of the approaching praetorians asked. There were at least thirty of his mates with him and, as they were off-duty, most were drunk.

"None of your damn concern!" one of the centurions barked.

"Oh excuse us, *sir*, if we question why twenty men are breaking into one of the armories at night!" the praetorian snapped back at him.

Tribune Crispinus angrily walked over to the men, grabbing the insubordinate man by the tunic. "You men are not on duty, you are drunk, and you have just committed gross disrespect towards a superior officer," he growled. "You will report to the prefect tomorrow for punishment. But for now, get the fuck away from here, and do not let me see your drunken asses around here again."

"Hang on," one of the other drunkards said. "They're loading weapons onto these wagons, and it's a lot more than for just twenty men. What do you suppose this is for?"

"Can't you fucking listen?" one of the centurions said, walking over and cuffing the man behind the ear.

"They're bloody traitors!" another man shouted. "They mean to arm the slaves at the palace and murder our emperor!"

"What?" the first man screeched.

In their mind-altered state, none of them realized the absurdity of this accusation. Instead, they all drew their blades and descended upon the men working the detail. Before Tribune Crispinus could say another word, the praetorian whose tunic he still held, plunged his gladius into his guts. The tribune screamed in pain, and his soldiers fled in terror as their centurions were overwhelmed and brutally slain.

"To the palace!" one of the men shouted. "We must find who is behind this plot and defend the emperor!"

The drunken enraged mob grabbed the torches the urban cohort detail had been using and ran through the streets, towards the palace. Carts and vendor stalls were upturned. People fled in terror as the praetorians shouted drunken curses and threatened to kill anyone who impeded them. As they reached the palace, they saw a pair of their fellow guardsmen hurriedly closing the large doors at the top of the stone steps. With renewed cries of *'Defend the emperor!'* the maddened praetorians stormed up the steps and started to kick the doors, while beating on them with the pommels of their gladii.



Within the palace, Otho was hosting a dinner for eighty senators and their wives. Most of these were former Galbian supporters, as well as some who had political connections with Vitellius. His intent was to bring together and win over any potential adversaries who might otherwise oppose him. Among them was Lucius Vitellius, who had been surprisingly amicable in his dealings with the emperor. Otho briefly contemplated inviting Vitellius' wife and mother, who he knew were living in the city. His advisors compelled him to change his mind, thinking the gesture of goodwill could be interpreted as Otho taking his rival's family as hostages.

"A pity that," the emperor said to Lucius, after explaining his original intents. "Your mother, Sextilia, is a noble and virtuous Roman matron, and I have heard many wonderful things about your sister-in-law, Galeria."

"Yes, her cousin is very fond of her," Lucius said, in reference to the previous year's consul, Galerius Trachalus. "He is old enough to be her father and always doted on her, as if she were one of his daughters."

It was still early in the evening as the guests dined on fruits and nuts. It would be at least another hour until the next course. The wine was already flowing, musicians playing their pipes and lyres in the background. One of

the main reasons for this particular banquet was so Otho could reassure the former Galbians, as well as any potential Vitellians, of his good intentions.

"I still have hope that war can be avoided," he said earnestly. "However, thus far your brother has rejected my entreaties for peace. I do not envy you, for I know this must put you in a rather awkward position."

"It is a difficult thing for all Romans," Lucius replied, carefully choosing his words. "Had the senate shown greater courage, unseated Nero, and immediately appointed a worthy Caesar, we would not be facing the catastrophe of civil war. Instead, they allowed Galba to assume the throne by force, which has plunged the empire down into the abyss."

"If Galba had not been so deeply hated, perhaps his means of coming to the throne would have, in time, been forgotten."

"As I'm sure you hope yours will be." Lucius bit the inside of his cheek, knowing he had just deeply insulted the emperor. "Forgive me, Caesar."

"Nothing to forgive when one speaks the truth." Otho replied. "My biggest shortcoming is that the people do not know me. I was not raised within the imperial household like the Julio-Claudians. Nor am I so old that everyone in the empire knows who I am, like Galba."

"And my brother is scarcely more well-known than you are," Lucius observed. "To be brutally honest, Caesar, this is unlike the conflicts between Julius Caesar and Pompey Magnus or Octavian and Marc Antony. In those cases, each rival was both famous and popular, with significant numbers of the populace voraciously supporting them."

"For them, victory was decided as much by who could win favor with the people, as it was on the battlefield," Otho replied.

"And if I may speak plainly, Caesar," Lucius said. "The unfortunate truth is that neither Otho nor Vitellius holds great sway with the masses. The people's indifference is as much your enemy as my brother's army."

Otho found he very much appreciated Lucius Vitellius' blunt and honest assessment. His thoughts were now on how he could win the people over and convince them to stand against the pretender. They were interrupted by the echoing sound of loud banging on the main doors to the palace. The musicians ceased playing, and all of the guests sat upright on their couches.

"Sounds like a damned riot out there," a senator remarked nervously.

Tribune Julius Martialis was the commanding officer of the praetorian's duty cohort that night and, though a guest of the emperor, he had maintained his sobriety while keeping his weapon close. He slowly got to his feet, careful

not to cause alarm among the already nervous guests. Before he or any of the guardsmen in the hall could react further, the sound of the doors breaking had the senators and their wives jumping to their feet.

"Where are they?!"

"Where are those filthy bastards who would threaten our emperor?!"

Martialis drew his blade and briskly walked over to the open archway that led out of the dining hall. Several guardsmen stood on either side of him, while others ran to get help. Another went to fetch Prefect Proculus. Prefect Firmus was in the hall, and he stood close to Otho.

"There they are!"

A mob of at least fifty drunken and enraged men burst into the hall. Two attacked Martialis. One slashing the tribune's upper arm while another kicked him hard in the stomach, sending him sprawling backwards onto the floor. The other guardsmen, who only had their gladii to protect themselves, quickly backed away, knowing their numbers were too few.

"Where is the emperor?" the man who had slain Tribune Crispinus shouted. "And where are his would-be assassins? Kill every slave and any person with a weapon and find the emperor!"

"What in the bleeding fuck is the meaning of this?" Prefect Firmus screamed at the men, forcing his way through the crowd of terrified guests. "My own guardsmen, drunk and causing a riot? I'll have the whole lot of you flogged and castrated for this!"

"Piss on that!" their leader shouted back. "Where is the emperor? We found men looting the urban armory with the intent of arming the slaves, so they could kill our beloved Caesar. What's worse is they were led by one of our own sodded tribunes! *Now where is the emperor?*"

"Gods damn it, I'm here!" Otho shouted from behind the crowd. He climbed up onto a couch, though this was terribly undignified. However, as he was barely of average height, the rioting praetorians could not see him behind the mass of terrified guests.

"Juno be praised!" the leading rioter said, sheathing his weapon. "At least we took care of the conspirators before they could arm the palace slaves."

The sounds of shouted orders came from the side halls. Within moments another twenty guardsmen, fully armored with shields and gladii at the ready, spilled into the dining hall. They quickly formed a battle line between the guests and their drunken brethren. Two of them stepped off to the side to help Tribune Martialis to safety.

“By Bellona’s cunt,” Prefect Proculus swore as he entered the hall from the main arches with another dozen guardsmen.

“What do you mean you took care of the conspirators?” Firmus asked accusingly.

“We slew the treacherous tribune and his centurions,” the man said proudly. “No one will harm the emperor on our watch.”

“You fucking idiots!” Firmus snapped. “That was Tribune Crispinus. He was sent to open the armory so the Ostia urban cohort could retrieve their weapons and equipment for the maritime expedition. You men have all committed murder!”

“Like Hades we have, sir,” the rioter retorted indignantly. “We acted in defense of the emperor, and that is who we serve, not you.”

“Enough of this!” Otho shouted.

He had quietly told several of his guardsmen to escort the senators and their wives away, for there was a great fear the drunken praetorians would attack them all once more. Guests were now fleeing for the side entrances to the palace, terrified there might be more rioters than those who had stormed in.

“As you can see, there is no threat to my person,” Otho said imploringly, as the rioters looked at him unconvinced. “And if this is just some ploy to get paid the promised donative, we’ll sort that out. But this is not how I expect my guardsmen to act. You have disgraced yourselves, as well as the Praetorian Guard. Now back to barracks with you.”

The mutineers were now sulking, their faces full of resentment at what they perceived as Otho’s ingratitude. Their leader spat at the feet of Prefect Firmus, before waving for his companions to follow him. It took at least another ten minutes for the last of them to be escorted off the palace grounds. And while a slave bandaged Martialis’ badly gashed arm, Firmus chastised him thoroughly for not having sufficient guardsmen posted near the palace entrance.

“If that had been a mob that wanted the emperor dead, they would have run right through you and cut him down,” Firmus said with rebuke.

“Apologies, sir,” the tribune said, wincing as the bandage was tightened around his arm. “There have been no seditious grumblings from the people. How could any of us know that our own guardsmen would get drunk and riot this way?”

The emperor stepped down from his couch, his expression one of horror

and bewilderment. “How indeed,” he said quietly.

Otho was filled with a deep sense of shame and embarrassment over what had transpired that evening. Eighty senators, many of whom were possible adversaries that he’d hoped to win over to his cause had, instead, been terrorized by his own drunken praetorians. To make matters worse, these same men had murdered one of their own tribunes, along with two of his centurions. And if the armory was left open, who knew if the weapons and armor inside had been pilfered by thieves?

“Discipline must be restored to the praetorians at once,” Proculus said firmly.

“Yes,” Otho replied with a nod. “But we will not be like my predecessor, who would likely decimate the entire Guard. Over ten thousand men serve in the praetorians, and most are loyal and dependable. They will not be held accountable for the actions of fifty or so drunkards. But they will know that breaches of discipline will not be tolerated.”

Otho walked over to the dining table nearest his couch. He picked up an upturned wine chalice, which had drops of spilled wine still dripping from its rim. He dropped the cup onto the floor with a loud clatter and silently left the room. He found he was suddenly very tired.

Chapter XXVIII: Otho's Maritime Folly

Northwestern Coast of Italia
March 69 A.D.



The route of Otho's maritime expedition

Despite the horrible and embarrassing debacle that had taken place at the palace, two days later the expedition for Maritime Alpes was underway. The initial phase in the active campaign between Otho and Vitellius would not take place in the north, but rather along the western coast of Italia and the south of the Gallic provinces. It was only a four day journey by sea from the port of Ostia, to the coastal city of Forum Julii where the Misene fleet was headquartered. Trouble began before the expeditionary force had even made it out of Italia.

Otho had made no provisions regarding food and logistical resupply, instead trusting in his delegated subordinates. Once they were away from Rome, Tribune Pacensis quickly proved to be every bit the inept renegade Sabinus had warned the emperor about. On the second day of travel, he decided to raid the Port of Delphine, east of Genoa. As the flotilla of a dozen warships anchored in the harbor, the handful of citizens waved at them while giving the occasional friendly ovation. It was only when the taskforce came ashore, that the tribune informed his centurions of his wicked intentions.

"What exactly are we doing here, sir?" Centurion Suedius asked, making no attempt to mask the irritation in his voice.

"Resupply," the tribune replied, without so much as acknowledging the centurion's insubordinate tone. "Novellus, you will take a detachment and

acquire all the fish you can carry. Suedius, your men will come with me. The people are working their fields, and no doubt there is plenty of surplus grain left over from the last harvest."

"And how do we intend to pay for this?" Suedius asked. "We were not given a stipend to purchase rations."

"Who said anything about payment? These people are Roman citizens who owe their continued existence to our protection. They should be grateful we don't take everything and burn their homes, like we would filthy barbarians."

The tribune's rationale surprised even the more nefarious of his soldiers and filled the two centurions with trepidation. Neither man was exactly a strategic genius, nor very imaginative, though both understood that plundering from fellow Romans would not win much support for Emperor Otho in his war against Vitellius. However, as they were still two days from their destination and in need of food, they were left without choice.

The people plowing the fields were appalled at the sight of hundreds of armed soldiers descending upon their homes and shops. Doors were smashed in, as the praetorians and attached troops began to loot whatever food and other plunder they could find.

"What is the meaning of this?" a farm overseer shouted, running towards Tiberius Statius and his century, who were dragging a cart of vegetables away.

"Military rations for the war," Centurion Veturius explained nonchalantly. "Now stand aside. We need food if we're going to crush the Vitellians."

"How dare you!" the man spat. "If the emperor wants food for his petty war then he can damned well pay for it, not send his thugs to steal from their own people!"

Veturius gave a bored sigh and nodded his head towards the farmer. Guardsman Statius drew his gladius and smashed the pommel against the side of the man's head. The overseer's eyes rolled back as he collapsed in a heap.

"Next time I'll use the pointed end," Statius snarled, at the horrified crowd that had gathered. He made a quick stabbing motion with his weapon, causing people to lurch backwards.

"Alright, let's move," the centurion said, concerned the people would soon recover from their shock and fear of the armed soldiers. The number of

outraged citizens substantially outnumbered the praetorians, who were scattered and now encumbered with their stolen goods.

It was only as they boarded their ships that the people found their courage and came rushing towards the beach, shouting profanities while hurling rocks and cursing Otho's name. Some of the guardsmen found the situation amusing. Others were disgusted by what they had just done. For most, it was simply a matter of indifference. Individual citizens meant nothing to them, and if they had to forage for food periodically, then so be it.

Some of the officers understood just how foolish their tribune's actions had been. It was not just the theft from their fellow Romans, but more importantly Pacensis' complete lack of prior planning for the expedition.

Centurion Veturius, whose century was aboard the same vessel as their commanding tribune, rather forcefully addressed the situation. "What the *fuck* is wrong with you?" he shouted, slamming the palm of his hand into Pacensis' chest, knocking the tribune back against the center mast of the ship.

"Easy there, centurion…" the tribune started to say, only to be slapped hard across the face by Veturius.

"Idiot!" he snapped. "Why in fucking Hades did you not make a plan for provisions? Are you trying to cause an uprising within Italia itself? We have enough to worry about without your gods-damned incompetence!"

Soldiers and sailors alike were staring at the enraged centurion. Veturius had only gone along with the sacking of the port because his soldiers did not have sufficient food stores for a lengthy campaign. But now he was horrified at the prospect of them pillaging their way up the coast of Italia, which would severely hamper their efforts in the war. Outraged citizens would turn their rage on Emperor Otho, who may have been oblivious to his soldiers' crimes, but he was ultimately responsible for their behavior.

And while Pacensis may have been appointed commander of the expedition, he was still little more than a disgraced former urban cohort tribune. And since he had never been within the praetorians' chain of command, none of the guardsmen felt any sense of loyalty towards him. Therefore, none came to his defense when Veturius gave his next order.

"Take this piece of shit away and chain him," he directed his men. Optio Proculus and a squad of guardsmen surrounded the tribune, taking his weapon before dragging him away.

"Unhand me, damn you!" he shouted. "This is mutiny! You will all be crucified for this outrage!"

“Unlikely,” Proculus said, before punching the tribune in the stomach. “Once Otho hears about what you ordered us to do, you’ll be lucky if he doesn’t toss your rotting corpse into the Tiber.”

It wasn’t until late the following day when the flotilla docked at the city of Album Ingaunum that Veturius was able to inform the two senior-ranking centurions about what he had done.

“Pacensis is a pompous twat,” Suedius said, with a dismissive shrug, his arms folded across his chest.

“But with no senior officer to lead us, what will become of the expedition?” Novellus remarked nervously.

“You’re kidding, right?” the other centurion asked. “I always knew you were spineless! *I* will assume command, you can feel free sit there and do what I bloody well tell you to.”

It was a rather undignified spectacle. Novellus, surprisingly, took the berating from an officer who was actually his peer rather than his superior. Statius, who watched the entire debacle unfold, was disgusted though in no way surprised. Antonius Novellus was little more than a parade field soldier, who froze up any time he had to make a difficult decision. The only reason he had gotten as far as he had within the praetorians was because his father was a former prefect.

Of course, Titus Suedius was little better. More concerned about doing what was popular among the lads rather than being their leader, he would have burned the entire city to the ground if he thought it would make him more accepted. With such men as their senior leaders, the makeshift taskforce Otho sent to harass the Vitellians was in danger of falling into a complete state of undisciplined anarchy.

“A pity we can’t just throw those two into chains,” Optio Proculus grumbled, as his century made its way back to the ship for the night. The intent was to leave by ship in the morning, landing near Nicaea where they would commence operations against any Vitellian supporters in the region.

“Only one thing we can do under the circumstances,” Statius mused.

“And what’s that?”

“Stuff our packs with loot and make a little money off this farcical mission…oh, and try to not get killed in the process.”

Proculus shook his head in resignation. “Some days I wish Veturius had named you his optio, so you could bear some responsibility for this shit.”

“Who says he didn’t want to?” Statius grinned. “Between my years in the

legions and my subsequent time with the praetorians, I have worn the uniform longer than either of you. But if you think for one moment I want so much as a shred of the responsibility you two have to now deal with, fuck that! Besides, I am more than able to supplement my income, which makes up for the difference in our wages."

"Yes, I hear Otho paid you most handsomely for bringing him the head of Licinianus."

"Better to have a nameless guardsman do his dirty work than ask someone of rank and respectability to do it," Statius reasoned. He chuckled. "Besides, I did have to split the reward with that trooper from Britannia."

"And what a coincidence that Otho later sent for you personally and dispatched you away for a couple of weeks. No sooner do you return, we hear that the body of Cornelius Laco was found smashed against the rocks near the cliffs of Lipari with his throat cut."

"When one is willing to follow orders, especially those that are most unpleasant, the rewards can be substantial." Statius' justification was perverse, though Proculus privately understood it. "Besides," the guardsman continued. "Unless something changes over the next year, Emperor Otho is our supreme commander. I find him to be a rather generous employer, far more so than his predecessor."



Maritime Alpes was a tiny province, one so small that it was often forgotten in the larger strategic picture. A narrow strip of land along the Mediterranean, it was, in Rome's more hostile past, used as a buffer between Italia and Gallia Narbonensis. Its population was a race of people known as the Ligures, who were an ethnic mix of Gallic and Italian ancestry. Mostly fishermen or miners, the Ligures were also known to be rather fleet-footed, and during the days of the Roman Republic they often acted as skirmishers for the old consular armies.

The procurator of this sliver of a province was a lesser-nobleman named Marius Maturus. Having previously served as a military tribune with Legio I, *Germanica,* and once more with Legio XXI, *Rapax,* he required little coercion when it came to supporting Vitellius' claim to the empire. Of course, he had also heard about Fabius Valens' onslaught of terror through eastern Gaul. And while the numbers of noncompliant citizens killed was

likely exaggerated, Marius knew his tiny garrison of a single urban cohort, along with maybe a thousand militia, could be effortlessly wiped out by Valens' massive army of professional soldiers.

But now, he was facing a far more immediate threat from Valens' opponents in this war between Caesars. Marius had just arrived at his headquarters that morning, when a lookout came sprinting up from the beach.

"Fleet approaching, sir," the man reported. "At least a dozen warships."

"The Vitellians don't have any ships," Marius noted. He quickly left his headquarters and followed the lookout to a high point that looked down on the long, sandy beach. There was, indeed, a large group of imperial warships heading straight for them.

"Shall we send word to the garrison at Cemenelum?" the lookout asked.

"No," Marius replied. "They will be needed to defend the city. If I send one cohort against what is likely a force of several thousand, they'll be cut to pieces. Alert the militias and all of our defense volunteers. Hopefully they can hold for at least some time on the beaches. And send our fastest rider to Fabius Valens. His army, I am guessing, is somewhere between here and Lugdunum."

"Lugdunum is five hundred miles from here," the lookout protested.

"Then we'd better hope his army has been marching south rather expediently," the procurator said. "Now go!"



Despite the illusion of being relatively close to the shore, it was still another two hours before the Othonian flotilla was close enough to disgorge their assault troops. The waters became shallower, foaming waves splashing against the sides of each vessel.

"Looks like we've got a reception committee waiting for us," Proculus said to Centurion Veturius, who grinned at the pitiful sight of a few hundred lightly armed militia.

Trumpets sounded from the command vessel of Centurion Suedius. This was followed by scores of praetorians scrambling over the sides of their ships, landing in the waves up to their chests. Shields and javelins were held overhead, to prevent them from dragging through the water. Guardsman Statius gritted his teeth as he jumped over the side.

A soldier's greatest fear during an amphibious assault was that the ships

were either too close to shore or too far away. Too close and the shallow water would be insufficient to break a heavily armored soldier's fall, leading to snapped ankles or other injuries. Too far, and there was the very real chance of plunging into water well over one's head and drowning. Fortunately for Statius and his companions, the water depth proved ideal as they each landed with a hard splash.

"Battle formation, four ranks!" Veturius shouted, as the mass of guardsmen attempted some semblance of order, while slogging their way through the sea.

The praetorian cohorts formed the leading assault elements, with the much smaller number of urban cohorts forming a reserve behind them. It was slow going, and as their adversaries on the beach became more visible, it was clear these were not soldiers from Fabius Valens' army. These were militia from the surrounding villages, who were mostly equipped with round shields and crude stabbing spears. Less than half wore helmets, and only a small number any sort of armor. Much of what they did have were little more than the squared chest plates worn by hastati light infantry, during the old republic days.

"Javelins ready!" centurions ordered. The water was now down to their calves and ankles, and their foes less than fifty meters from them.

Though praetorians were predominantly parade troops, as well as the emperor's personal guard, they were still required to drill the same formations and battle tactics as legionaries. During the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius, the intent was to fill the ranks of the Guard with worthy soldiers from the legions who had proven their merit in battle, as well as by their distinguished conduct. This practice had fallen into disuse over time. Most of the guardsmen were now either the sons of former praetorians, or young men whose families were well-connected either politically or monetarily. Tiberius Statius was among the small number who had actually served in the legions. So even while their status as 'elite' troops had become little more than a weak façade, each guardsman was better trained, equipped, and drilled than any who faced them on the beaches of Nicaea.

"This won't last long," a guardsman near Statius muttered. The praetorian was more correct than he knew, for no sooner had the Othonian contingent stepped out of the surf and onto the beach, panic ensued among the militia fighters.

"After them!" Centurion Suedius shouted, further down the line.

Veturius' command was more measured. *"Century!"* he called. *"At the double-time…march!"*

Clods of wet sand kicked up as the praetorians raced up the beach after their fleeing adversaries. The Ligurians were not only naturally fast runners, but they were also unencumbered by heavy armor. A half mile from the beach, the militiamen fled into the safe haven of the walls of Nicaea. The praetorians and urban cohorts came to an awkward halt a hundred meters from the city gates. They were sweaty and out of breath from running in their armor, while wielding their javelins and shields.

"Bugger me!" one guardsman spat, thrusting the butt spike of his pilum into the ground.

"Those walls are only about ten feet high," another reasoned. "Can't we just scale the damn things and have at them?"

"Do you see any siege ladders lying about?" a third praetorian derided.

"At ease!" Centurion Veturius barked.

"That means shut the fuck up!" Optio Proculus snapped, when grumbles were still heard from the ranks.

Veturius and the other centurions walked over to where their acting commander stood. Suedius had set down his shield and was gazing in frustration at the walls of the town.

"I don't suppose that idiot, Pacensis, thought to have any ladders or other siege equipment loaded onto the transports?" Veturius asked.

"He had about as much foresight there as he did regarding food stores," the other centurion replied grimly.

"So what in Hades do we do now?" an officer from the urban cohorts asked. "This wasn't exactly a mission of conquest in the first place. No one said anything about laying siege to any of the towns in this region."

The scale of the folly of Otho's plan was slowly becoming clear. Their numbers were too few to surround even the smaller towns, they lacked provisions, and had no siege equipment. And even if they were able to get the attention of Fabius Valens, they would be able to do little more than cause a minor delay in his journey east.

"Not that any of us even knows where Valens is," a centurion remarked. "We have no actionable intelligence as to which route he will take into Italia, no reconnaissance, no cavalry. We're completely blind."

"Then we'll have to draw him out," Suedius said. "Maritime Alpes has clearly declared for the Vitellians, and they must be punished for it. And if

none of you have noticed, we are only a few days away from Rome and already on the brink of a disciplinary crisis within the ranks."

Though none of the assembled officers wished to admit it, praetorian guardsmen had a reputation for lapses in discipline, especially when left to their own devices. Though they were all fit soldiers and well-drilled in battle maneuver, there was a reason legionaries looked at them with disdain as pampered upstarts. And the lack of any officers of suitable rank had exacerbated the discipline problem from the start.

"What you're saying is, we need to find a town or city to sack as soon as possible," Veturius stated.

"Precisely. The Ligurians must be punished for their faithlessness, and a little plunder will help placate our soldiers. But we cannot take Nicaea. Even if we did fabricate sufficient siege ladders, any direct assault will be costly and undermine our chances of causing trouble for Fabius Valens, should he decide to grace us with his presence."

"Where then?" a centurion asked. "Cemenelum is the capital of this province and only a couple of miles up the road. However, its walls are likely to be even higher than the ones here. Plus, they have at least one urban cohort in their garrison."

"There is a place we can go that will be rich with plunder," Veturius remarked. "We passed Albium Intimilium early this morning. It is a coastal fishing city much larger than Nicaea. It also lacks protective walls and will be easy to overrun."

"Then that is where we will head," Suedius concurred. "About how far is it from here?"

"I would say twenty miles," Veturius answered. "The Via Julia Augusta would take us there, but then we will risk being exposed to ambuscades within the rocky passes."

"That, and it will take us at least a day to march that far," their commanding centurion added. "No, we will re-board our ships and attack by sea. The journey will likely take three to four hours, depending on wind and currents which means a late afternoon landing."

"That will still give the lads plenty of time to sack the city," an urban cohort officer noted.

"Alright, back to the ships!"



For the first time in his twenty years in the ranks, Guardsman Tiberius Statius felt a trace of regret at never having accepted any of the numerous promotions offered to him. The officers in command of the maritime expedition were grossly incompetent, with their façade of authority over the rankers already cracking after just a few days. Even the leadership of his own century was severely lacking. Of course, his lack of rank was one reason why he had always been given such free reign to do as he pleased, including accepting contracts from both the emperor, as well as prominent senators who could afford his services. But now that they were campaigning on active service against an enemy of professional soldiers who would have them horribly outnumbered, Statius wished for nothing more than some solid leaders; men who would have put him in his place a long time ago.

As he leaned over the rail of the ship, he watched as the rocky coastline rolled by and contemplated the next phase of what had become little more than a fiasco. Their so-called leaders had decided a port city would now be sacked, simply to appease their restless soldiers. How many atrocities would they commit this day, against Roman citizens no less?

It was not as if Statius had anything close to resembling a clean conscience. And yet, when he killed, it was both legal and financially rewarding. True, he was little more than a hired sword in a uniform, but he had accepted this identity years ago. There was nothing lawful about this pending raid, however, nor would it be very profitable. Never mind the harsh reality that their actions would only drive more provincials into the arms of the Vitellians.

Of course, Statius had no knowledge of the terror and atrocities being committed by both Valens and Caecina. The number of various Gallic tribesmen killed by Valens' rampaging division was in the thousands. And Caecina had also terrorized the Helvetii and other Alpine tribes that did not submit outright. But on this day, all the guardsman knew was that he was trapped as part of an ill-managed expedition bent on committing savagery upon Roman citizens, and all without any compensation to be had!



It was a cloudless day. The late afternoon sun beat down upon the armored soldiers, as the sea spray cooled those fortunate enough to be near

the ships' railings. The port of Albium Intimilium, whose name literally meant *'White Cruising'*, was positioned at the end of a long spur that jutted out from the mountains directly north. Three rivers ran into the sea nearby, with the city located between the westernmost two.

"Looks like no one is waiting on the beach to greet us this time," a guardsman chuckled.

Statius could only grunt in reply. He held profound influence over many of his peers, but was still distant and cold towards most of them. He rarely spoke about his additional duties as a hired blade, though many of his kills were known to all. Indeed, much of his influence came from the perception that he was more than a mere guardsman, and that he held great sway at the imperial court. Statius' self-important attitude towards his fellow praetorians only added to the mystique. Atticus had been the only one in recent years who Statius had truly called 'friend'. Now he was gone, having been slain by the dying Centurion Densus during the violent overthrow of Emperor Galba.

"Make ready, lads!" Centurion Veturius ordered his men. Many were already gathered by the prow of the ship. Within minutes, they were once more jumping over the sides of the ships, ready to attack.

The hours that passed since their aborted attempt at taking Nicaea had only caused their collective anger to fester. The citizens of Albium Intimilium were an unfortunate lot. They had no defensive walls, and only a handful of militia that acted as more of a police force than defenders against any outside threat. And as the praetorian and urban cohorts advanced through the surf, the citizens along the bustling docks were confused at the sight of an armed force arrayed in battle ranks.

Centurion Suedius ran in front of the formation with his gladius held high. *"This city is now yours!"* he shouted. *"Take what you will, and kill any who resist!"* The praetorians and urban soldiers gave a shout of sinister rage as they sprinted towards the city, all pretense at maintaining formation forgotten. The previously perplexed citizens were now horrified as guardsmen kicked over stalls, and smashed people with shield bosses and the pommels of their gladii. When one older man tried to protest the looting of his shop, a praetorian plunged his blade into his guts. Shrieks of terror followed, as people fled for the perceived safety of their homes. Volunteer militia and police, who were scattered throughout the city and therefore unable to form any semblance of an organized resistance, either threw down their weapons or were overwhelmed and slain by the rampaging mob of

soldiers.

As the praetorians spilled into the streets leading away from the docks, the people of the city attempted in vain to barricade the doors to their homes. Guardsmen either kicked them in, or in the more stubborn cases, took the beams from smashed vendor stalls and used them as makeshift battering rams. Anything of value was taken, and in a show of utter contempt, any woman unfortunate enough to appear in any way eye-catching was forcibly raped by the mob. Their screams echoed throughout the districts closest to the docks. Any men who tried to protect them were either severely beaten or killed. It was a surreal and horrific thing. Roman soldiers were now committing the very atrocities they perpetuated against barbarians and enemy nations. Only now, it was against their own citizens.

Further into the city, the people were able to form a more organized resistance with homes barricaded from the inside, and every citizen arming themselves with whatever they could find. The praetorians were now scattered and disorganized, with only a handful making their way into the upper districts of the city. There was one group of five or six, who had discarded their helmets and shields and were already drunken with wine, who haphazardly made their way up one of the main thoroughfares.

A young militia policeman climbed onto the stone wall of a nearby house, carrying a bundle of short throwing spears. His eyes were red and wet with tears of sorrow and utter hatred, as he hurled the first long dart towards the group of guardsmen. It wobbled in the air and skipped harmlessly off the armor of one of the men. The man looked around quickly, while his drunken companions found it amusing and began laughing at the militiaman. The young man took a deep breath and calmed himself as he flung his next short spear. This time it plunged down and into the side of his target’s neck, causing the guardsman’s eyes to widen in shock as he tried to cry out. The stricken praetorian fell to his knees, as dark red blood spurted from the gaping wound.

The dying soldier’s companions had ceased in their mirth. One of them screamed as a large rock smashed into the side of his face, sending him sprawling onto the road. A crowd of about fifty people, both men and women, descended upon the praetorians, wielding clubs, axes, and anything else they could find. The remaining soldiers turned about and fled down the road from which they came. Their badly injured companion, the side of whose face was already covered in blood, cried out piteously for them not to

leave him. This was followed by shrieks of pain and abject terror as the crowd fell on him with their clubs, hammering away in vengeful fury. His arms snapped under the onslaught, and within seconds an axe blade was smashed into his skull. The people gave a cheer of defiance, as they screamed profanities towards the fleeing survivors. It was a short-lived sense of triumph, though, as they could still hear and see much of the brutal pillaging the lower districts of the city were being subjected to.



For Guardsman Statius, acquiring plunder from the locals was the only way for him to make good on his compensation for taking part in such vile barbarism. It was a twisted perspective, for his actions only compounded the greater evil. And yet, he reasoned he was essentially a blade-for-hire this day, for the expedition to Maritime Alpes had nothing to do with the Praetorian Guard's duty of protecting the emperor. In fact, with the emperor hundreds of miles away in Rome, having sent his guardsmen on this expedition rendered them as little more than hired mercenaries.

And since the emperor will not pay me for my troubles, I will seek compensation elsewhere, he thought to himself.

He spotted a large house near the offices of the harbor master. It was three stories high and surrounded by a tall stone wall. The outer gate had been smashed in. As Statius entered the courtyard, he saw a squad of praetorians using a stone statue as a ram. The head had been knocked off with the first few blows against the large double doors that were now starting to splinter. Optio Proculus was standing off to the side, shouting orders to his guardsmen.

After several more blows the doors broke open, and the praetorians forced their way into the house. A lone servant stood in the entryway, and he was quickly punched in the stomach, and then grabbed by the back of the head and slammed face-first into a stone pillar.

"Tear this place apart," Proculus ordered. "Take what you wish, but find me the money! The owners of this house must be swimming in it."

Statius followed the men into the house. They all seemed oblivious to him, as they rushed about, taking valuables, tossing furniture about, trying to find where the owners stashed their coin. Statius went up to the third floor, which were servants' quarters. Finding nothing of worth, he wandered down

to the second floor where a pair of guardsmen were ransacking the rooms. There were many pieces of valuable art and sculpture, as well as a box full of jewelry in what he surmised was the master suite. Statius grabbed a handful of rings and earrings, reckoning they were at least worth something. All the rest he left, not wishing to be encumbered by the weight of things he would only attempt to sell later.

He heard a woman's scream from downstairs, and figured the lady of the house was now falling victim to the lusts of his companions. Statius took a deep breath and slowly descended the stairs to the ground floor. In the dining hall, he saw Optio Proculus and several guardsmen surrounding a long table. There was a woman stretched out on the table, though she was not being raped. Instead, praetorians had a grip on each of her four limbs. They held her stretched out, while another took the flat of his gladius and slapped it hard against her legs.

"Where's the money, you filthy bitch?" the man snarled, before slapping her again with his weapon. He took a lit oil lamp and started to pour dribbles of hot oil across the woman's exposed midsection. This caused her to scream, though she gritted her teeth and forcibly regained her composure. Proculus shook his head and reached down and grabbed her gruffly beneath the chin.

"You will tell us what we want to know," he whispered sinisterly. "We can do this all night. And perhaps I will let all of my men have their way with you, should you refuse to cooperate."

"When we breached the house, I thought I heard her say something about hiding the fortune with her son," one of the praetorians said. "If she's protecting her child, then no wonder she hasn't talked yet."

Statius' face twitched as he watched the spectacle unfold. He was certainly no stranger to pillage, or even torture. As a legionary, he had once raped and then mercilessly beaten a priestess of the Germanic goddess, Freya, until she told him where their temple's gold was kept. But that woman had been nothing more than a savage barbarian, protecting gold and silver given in the worship of a profane deity. This was different, and the guardsman found he admired this stricken woman's bitter courage. He earnestly felt such bravery and devotion to protect one's child could not be found among the men in that room.

"Let her go," Statius said, with a surprisingly calm voice.

The other guardsmen only now seemed to notice him, and without waiting for orders from the optio, they did as Statius told them. He walked

over to the woman and leaned down, so his face was close to hers.

"You are exceedingly brave," he said quietly. "Tell us where your son is, and I promise no harm will come to him."

The woman snorted in reply, her face twisted into a defiant sneer. She gulped as pain shot through her, while slowly rolling onto her side. She pointed to her womb. "He is in here," she said with triumph, for in that moment she no longer cared what these wicked men did to her.

"To hell with this!" Proculus snapped. "Statius!"

As the guardsman looked over his shoulder, the optio placed his thumb up by his throat and ran it across. It was the same signal used in the arena when a victorious gladiator was ordered to slay his fallen adversary. Statius scowled in disgust, for he felt compelled to spare the woman out of respect for her courage. And yet, despite his feelings of superiority among most of the Praetorian Guard, as well as his utter contempt for most of the officers, he was still bound to follow orders. His eyes narrowing in anger, he glowered for a moment at his optio, before quickly drawing his gladius and turning to face the woman. She looked up at him, her expression one of near amusement at his predicament. Statius then grabbed her by the hair and sliced open the side of her neck.

As the woman's body thrashed on the table, with deep crimson gushing from the wound, Statius turned and shoved his way past Proculus. He whispered through gritted teeth, "Next time do your own killing, you fucking bastard!"

Chapter XXIX: Mutiny's Punishment

The Praetorian Barracks, Rome
8 March 69 A.D.
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It took some time for Otho to find the internal fortitude to go to the praetorian barracks. If he had known about the outrages being committed by cohorts of this same unit against Roman citizens, and all in his name, he would have had even greater cause for despair. Most likely, he would have sacked the entire Guard and had every officer thrown in chains. But for the moment, the expedition he had dispatched to Maritime Alpes was forgotten. He had a more immediate crisis of discipline to resolve, if he was going to take the vast majority of the Praetorian Guard north with him to fight the Vitellians.

He had sent the two prefects on ahead to ascertain the disposition of the Guard, while the emperor himself waited at the palace. Even the duty cohort at the imperial palace was on edge this day, and Otho had accepted the risk of dismissing them back to their barracks as well, leaving only a small handful of what he considered well-vetted and reliable guardsmen as his protection.

"Sullen, ungrateful bastards!" Plotius Firmus grumbled, as he stormed into the emperor's chambers.

"I take it the Guard has not been pacified?" Otho asked.

"Oh, they're pacified, *now*," Firmus remarked. "I tried speaking to them as men while Proculus berated them sharply. Neither seemed to work, as most of the guardsmen simply sulked, muttering that their loyalty was to the emperor, and not to us."

"Hades damn them," Otho said, in disgust. "How can I have a Praetorian Guard, supposedly loyal to me, when they won't even follow the orders of the officers that I appointed?"

"Maybe you should ask them, Caesar," Firmus stated candidly. "It was only after we promised them the five thousand sesterce donative that they finally calmed down. Forgive me, if we invoked your good name in that assurance."

"No, you did the right thing," Otho replied. "And I did promise them the payment which Galba denied. Still, it is a disgrace to think that only bribery compels their damned loyalty."

“I did manage to find out who the perpetrators from the other night were,” Firmus added. “I’ve taken their names; hell, none of them so much as hid their guilt from me, but rather gloated about it!”

“Then it is time the praetorians were reminded of the importance of obeying orders.”

The emperor was still reeling in embarrassment over the conduct of his guardsmen, and he declined to tell his brother, the consuls, or anyone else for that matter, about his leaving the palace to deal with the ungrateful upstarts. Otho, Firmus, a small entourage of select praetorians, and a number of men from the urban cohorts made their way to the praetorian barracks. The gates had been left open, and there was only one sentry manning the ramparts.

“The emperor approaches!” the man shouted over his shoulder.

As Otho’s litter was carried into the wide open parade field near the camp’s entrance, guardsmen from every corner of the complex flocked to see him. He climbed from his litter, only to be immediately confronted by a slew of officers led by Tribune Julius Martialis, whose arm was now bound in a sling.

“We have come to offer you our resignations, Caesar,” Martialis said.

“All of us volunteered to put our lives on the line for you, but not to be threatened by our own ungrateful subordinates!” a centurion snapped.

“Ill-disciplined trash, the lot of them,” another spoke up.

Otho said nothing at first, but walked past the officers with his hands clasped behind his back. He then paced in front of the assembled mass of guardsmen. Most wore only their belted tunics, and many appeared to have been drinking. And while threats and bribes from the prefects had done little to sway their sulking demeanor, there was now an air of regret about them. That their officers would all resign their commissions over the conduct of their soldiers was a deep blow to the honor of the Guard.

“Soldiers of the Praetorian Guard,” Otho began, as he paced along the line of men. “Rome is on the eve of war. Most of you will be coming north with me to face the pretender, Vitellius. You will be fighting alongside the imperial legions from the Balkans. How will it look to them, if they see their emperor’s supposed elite troops have degraded themselves into nothing more than a rampaging rabble of mindless barbarians?”

“We acted as we did in defense of you, Caesar!” a guardsman protested. “The urban cohort of Ostia was raiding one of the armories, and we thought they were meaning to assassinate you.”

“And for your bravery and devotion, I am ever grateful,” the emperor replied, his tone unchanging. “But did none of you even stop to think that perhaps I had given the orders to the Ostian cohort? That I had given them access to the armory? Or did you simply draw your blades and attack, without as much as a second thought to your actions? If you think for one moment that your emperor, or any of your officers, owes it to you to tell you about every single order, then you are mindless fools who have no place in the imperial service. What do you think will happen, should such wild and reckless behavior be repeated on the battlefield?” He gave a brief pause before answering. “The Vitellian army consists of some of the most battle-hardened legions in the whole of the empire. Any lapse in discipline, let alone the type of drunken fuck-up that led to the murder of one of my tribunes and several of his men, and the Rhine legions will rip you to shreds. And if I cannot rely on you to follow the orders of your officers, without question or complaint, then I may as well open my veins now and give the throne to the pretender!”

“No!” the guardsmen protested, suddenly horrified at the prospect of losing their emperor. The six weeks since he had claimed the mantle of Caesar from the hated Galba had been a welcome respite to the Praetorian Guard. And as most of them had taken part in helping him seize the throne, they loathed the thought of letting another take it from him.

“Forgive us, Caesar!” one man shouted from the ranks. This was followed by even greater pleas from the praetorians.

All the while, Otho continued to pace in front of them. Finally, he held his hands up, silencing them.

“If we are to go on together,” he said, “if we are to put this matter behind us and stand as one against the fat usurper and his band of Germanic savages from the Rhine, then order and discipline must be restored, and absolute. There will be no more threats made to members of the senate, for it is they alone who are intrinsically bound to the very fabric of Rome’s great history. And it is they who legally conferred upon me the title of emperor. If ours is to be the noble cause, with Vitellius the corpulent renegade, then respect for Rome’s most august senate must be maintained.”

The abrupt and rather enthusiastic change in the men’s demeanor told Otho his speech had had its intended effect. Of course, it would take more than a few flowering words and a handful of coins to maintain strict order within the Guard. And those who perpetrated the mutiny would still have to

face the consequences of their actions.

"What I must now do pains me deeply," he continued. "For I know that the violent and misguided actions were done out of love for your emperor. But that does not excuse the shameful conduct, the disobedience of orders, and the murder of Tribune Crispinus and his men. Bring forward all involved in this shameful disorder."

Fifty men were forcibly grabbed by their companions and dragged to the front of the formation. Prefect Firmus stepped up and whispered into the emperor's ear, pointing at two of the men.

"Step forward," Otho said to the guardsmen, who hesitantly did as they were told. "You are accused by your prefect of not only murdering Tribune Crispinus, but of inciting the mutiny against your officers, which has brought shame upon the Praetorian Guard. What say you?"

"Forgive us, Caesar," one of the men said, hanging his head low.

The other praetorian was more defiant in his response. "I answer to my emperor, not to these vulgar retches!"

"Then you are a fool," Otho replied. He addressed the assembled mass. "Disloyalty to the emperor's duly appointed officers is disloyalty to the emperor himself. But know that your emperor is both pragmatic and, above all, just. The vile usurper, Galba, sought to restore discipline through the archaic and ineffective punishment of decimation. But I do not believe in punishing the innocent, while risking allowing the guilty to go free. Therefore, only those responsible for this crime will pay the price." He nodded toward the two ringleaders. "You are both hereby sentenced to death by bludgeoning at the hands of your very comrades, whose lives have inexcusably been placed in danger. As for the rest, you are each sentenced to flogging, with the number of lashes to be determined by your officers. You will also forfeit a month's wages."

Otho turned about and walked back towards the gathered officers. Prefect Firmus quickly stepped forward and addressed the Guard.

"Alright, you lot!" he barked. "Take these bastards away and lock them up until their punishment can be exacted." He glared at the two condemned men, who were shaking in fear. "As for these two, their sentence will be carried out immediately. *Now move!*"

The praetorians, once more eager to demonstrate their professed loyalty to the emperor, set about following their prefect's orders with a frenzy of motivation. Those sentenced to be flogged and docked wages were glumly

escorted to the small prison along the back wall of the barracks, while those given the death penalty were dragged away screaming, towards the parade field. Their shattered corpses would later be disposed of in the Tiber. And while glad to have restored order once more, the meting out of such brutal punishments brought Otho no joy. He only hoped that by doing so, he managed to save face with those members of the senate who had been threatened and harassed by the misguided fools whose screams of pain echoed throughout the complex, as their bodies were broken by the clubs of their comrades.



The suppression of the praetorian mutiny did little to restore calm within either the city or the senate. In fact, many within the senate were now leery of Otho, despite his flattering words to the praetorians about the majesty and unbridled prestige of the Fathers of Rome. Prior to a meeting of the senate, one of the last which Otho would call before his journey north, Senator Italicus sought out General Paulinus to vent his concerns.

“Roaming bands of praetorians may not be preying upon the populace,” he said, “but they are still creating discord and unrest. Individual guardsmen have been forcing their way into people’s homes, equites and senators mostly, and interrogating them while terrorizing the men’s families.”

“There are rumors of Vitellian spies infiltrating the capital,” Paulinus replied. “Otho hasn’t even been Caesar for two months, and yet he is already embroiled in the first real civil war since the rise of Augustus. Subtlety is not a luxury he has at the moment.”

“Easy for you to say, they’re not breaking into your house!” the senator retorted.

“And they’ve been to yours, I take it?”

“They have,” Italicus confirmed. “A rather brutish fellow barged in just the other evening. I was right in the middle of entertaining guests. An embarrassing distraction that was, me being accused of acting as a Vitellian spy!”

“I sympathize with you,” Paulinus said, although his inflexion betrayed his utter indifference to the senator’s plight. “But what would you have me do about it?”

“Compel Otho to call off his attack dogs,” Italicus pleaded. “With the

pending conflict with Vitellius, you are one of the few he will listen to. The incident with their little mutiny, as well as the shameful assailing of the emperor's guests at the palace, has left most of our colleagues a little paranoid. Otho may not have yet turned into the vicious tyrant that Nero and Galba were, but after these incidents involving his guardsmen, I do hope he will take measures to regain the senate's trust."

"The senate is always on edge when we end up in conflict with each other," the general reasoned. "When Otho gives his speech today, everyone will have to be measured and careful in their responses."

"That is true," Italicus concurred. He gave a twisted smirk. "After all, supposing Otho loses this war, what then? We cannot sit here and pretend this isn't a possibility, especially if the rumors prove true regarding the size of the Vitellian army. Few in the senate want another pretender to seize the throne, least of all an uninspired glutton like Vitellius. However, should anyone get too vocal in their disparagement, it could bode ill for them. That is, if Vitellius does emerge victorious."

"Then it will be up to me and the other legates, to ensure he doesn't."

Having to listen to the fearful doubts from so many of his senatorial colleagues had been extremely aggravating for Paulinus. Granted, he could scarcely blame the senate for being rather fearful of Vitellius' army. And while he may have won the greatest victory against overwhelming odds in a generation, even the great General Suetonius Paulinus would need more than a scratch legion of raw recruits and a few praetorian cohorts, if he was going to have any chance of defeating the Army of the Rhine.



Three thousand miles to the east, Aula Cursia Vale made ready for her departure from Caesarea. Gaius Artorius was still assigned as an army staff clerk, though General Trajan had stated he would send him back to his cohort before the renewed campaign against the zealots commenced. Aula had rather enjoyed the past few days as Vespasian's guest, but now she donned the red tunic once more, with her leather pouch carrying a pair of thick scrolls and a few other messages.

"Dispatches for the senate, I take it?" Gaius asked, stepping into her room and leaning against the side table.

"Mostly for Sabinus," Aula corrected. "He has an official report for the

senate, along with assurances of the eastern armies' loyalty to Emperor Otho. And, of course, there's a few pieces of personal correspondence, a letter to Antonia, as well as another to Domitian."

"But why do you look so vexed?" the optio asked. "After all, you're returning to civilization."

Aula set her bag down and sat upon the bed, her gaze fixed on the far wall. Her expression betrayed her thoughts, she wondered whether she should tell Gaius what she foresaw coming.

"Vespasian intends to overthrow Vitellius should he succeed in usurping the throne," she finally said. "He didn't say it in those exact words, but I could tell by the way in which he spoke about Vitellius, and the war in general."

"You really think so?" Gaius, like most of the eastern army, had a huge amount of respect for his commander-in-chief, yet the thought of him becoming emperor bordered on the realms of pure fantasy.

"I also sensed it from each of his generals," Aula explained. "I don't know whether or not they put any credibility in the predictions of eastern mystics who've predicted Vespasian's rise. What I do know is none of them feel the people will stand behind another usurper."

"Something else troubles you?" the optio asked, when Aula's gaze fell upon the floor.

"There is something I want to know," the young woman replied, gazing at him. "Supposing Vespasian should declare war, regardless of who wins this wretched conflict, who would you fight for? Where would your loyalties lie?"

"That is a question I think every soldier within the empire will have to answer for himself," Gaius remarked. "Before, it was always so simple. Our loyalties were to Rome, to the emperor, and the senate. Loyalty to one meant loyalty to the others. But now, we must decide for ourselves who, among the potential claimants to the mantle of Caesar, is best for Rome. Vitellius seeks power for its own sake, not to act as a servant to the empire…at least that is the way I understand it. I am certain the issue is far more complex than that. However, with our forces being thousands of miles from Rome and none of us knowing the first thing about Vitellius, or Otho for that matter, we can only go by what our leaders tell us."

"I personally witnessed Galba's cruelty," Aula said, with a shudder. "Strangely, I don't think it was done out of malice, but rather out of complete

indifference. The lives of individual persons meant nothing to him, and so he could order people to their deaths almost on a whim, like one would send a cow or a goat to be slaughtered."

"So you approved of Otho's overthrowing him?" Gaius asked.

"No, at least not the way he went about it. A lot of people died, horribly, when his soldiers murdered Galba in the Forum."

"Still, better that he be the one to take on the pretender," the optio reasoned.

"True," Aula acknowledged. "I honestly don't think the army would have stayed loyal to Galba had he been the one to face Vitellius. Otho, at least, has a chance. Of the three who've claimed to be 'Caesar' after Nero's downfall, I would venture to say he is probably the most worthy, even if his methods were underhanded."

"They always have been," Gaius observed, with a dark laugh. "Augustus' rise to become Rome's first emperor was not exactly peaceful and bloodless. Roman killed Roman at Actium, even though historians have tried to depict that struggle as a conflict between Rome and Egypt. I only hope when all of this is over, we at last have an emperor worth serving under."

"You know, my father served under both Tiberius and Claudius," Aula recalled. "Though he temporarily went into retirement during the mercifully short reign of Gaius Caligula. I used to ask him all the time about his service to the Julio-Claudian emperors. He was always a soldier first, much to my mother's dismay. Yet, I think his greatest service to the people came during his tenure as Plebian Tribune. It was during that time that he came to know Tiberius quite well. And he considered Claudius a friend long before he ever came to the throne." She scrunched her brow in thought, trying to recall the many things her father had told her, regarding the two emperors.

"An enviable position he was in," Gaius noted. "I remember some of the stories he used to tell as well, although I always gathered that he left out a lot of the sordid details."

"He respected the institution, if not always the man," Aula added. "Before I came to Rome, we used to go horseback riding almost every day. He told me far more than he'd ever let on before. He once loved and respected Tiberius, both as a soldier and as a statesman. But after the death of his son, Tiberius fell into a deep gloom, which he never recovered from."

"Yes, and his retribution towards his son's murderers was quite severe," Gaius recalled. "Of course it did not help that one of the conspirators was his

closest friend and praetorian prefect."

"Father never really knew if Sejanus intended to seize the throne for himself," Aula said. "And what most never talk about, is that my father actually played a role in Sejanus' downfall."

"Those were dark times," Gaius stated. "Thankfully that was another era, long before we were born."

"Watching Tiberius unleash his vengeance became too much for Father," Aula continued. "The rape and execution of Sejanus' young daughter, along with the strangulation of his underage son, shattered the love Father had for Tiberius. It sickened him greatly, and made him feel that the man who he'd served loyally for so many years was not the same who had ordered the public slaying of the innocents. Mother later told me that broke him for a long time. It was only ten years later, during the reign of Claudius, that he finally found Rome worth serving. Yet even Emperor Claudius, who Father was immensely loyal to, was not without blood on his hands."

Gaius simply nodded. While no one would ever consider Claudius a tyrant, it was common knowledge that there were still those who unjustly lost their lives during his thirteen-year reign.

"And all of that simply verifies what I said," Gaius remarked. "Every man who has ever become Caesar has left a trail of death in his wake."

"Which is why I do not fault Otho for usurping Galba. I know almost nothing about Vitellius, other than what Sabinus told me. He's apparently a fat, gormlessly-minded aristocrat, who was given a governorship in Germania simply because he was a political nonentity. It surprised Sabinus greatly that Vitellius decided to declare himself emperor and march on Rome. And because Vitellius is such a weak leader, I suspect that, should he succeed, this war will not be over, but only just begun."

Chapter XXX: A Diversionary Brawl

Albium Intimilium, Maritime Alpes
11 March 69 A.D.
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It took Marius' fastest rider three days to reach the army of Fabius Valens. The Vitellian division was a hundred and fifty miles from Nicaea and currently encamped near the town of Lucus Augusti, which meant *'Grove of Augustus'*. It was less than midway between the coast and Lugdunum, and the rider was relieved Valens had made it this far south. Sentries manning the southern gate stopped the rider and relieved him of his weapon, before having him escorted to Valens.

"General," the messenger said. "I bring grave news from Marius Maturus, governor of Maritime Alpes."

Valens read through the rather brief and hastily scrawled message, letting out a sigh of mild frustration. "A few praetorian and urban cohorts raid a loyalist province, yet they are too few in number to lay an effective siege anywhere," he observed. "What in Hades is Otho playing at?"

"Trying to delay us, most likely," said his auxilia corps commander, a tribune named Julius Classicus. A chieftain among the Treveri peoples in Belgica, Classicus was a master horseman and had, thus far, proven himself to be an impeccable auxiliary officer.

"Well, of course, that's what he's trying to do," Valens said with irritation. "Yet, what does he hope to accomplish with only two thousand infantry, none of whom appear to be legionaries? He has no cavalry and is completely lacking in any sort of siege equipment."

"He hopes to delay, or at least divert, some of our forces away from the main thrust of our advance," a legate spoke up. "He knows we cannot ignore the atrocities being committed, even if it is in a miniscule province like Maritime Alpes."

"It's true, sir," Classicus agreed. "If a pitiful force like this rampages through our territories and we do nothing, it will undermine all we've fought for in the Gallic provinces."

Valens stared at his map and traced a finger along the proposed route

from Lucus Augusti into northern Italia.

"Five hundred miles," he stated. "We still have five hundred miles to cover, almost half of it over mountainous terrain. The winter has been mild, but that does not mean all of the mountain passes are open. I have to get this army to Cremona in a month or risk Caecina's division engaging Otho's forces by themselves."

The general's trepidation was two-fold. Firstly, there was the very real risk that Otho would be able to rally sufficient reinforcements and defeat Caecina. If that happened, it would spell disaster for the entire campaign. Support for Vitellius would wane and more forces, both legionary and auxilia, would flock to support Otho.

Valens' other reason for wishing to make haste, which he privately knew gave him even greater anxiety, was the possibility of Caecina defeating Otho without his help. Should Caecina destroy the Othonian army and secure the throne for Vitellius, it would spell political doom for Valens. All he had achieved by securing the alliances of the Gallic provinces, either by coercion or force, would be meaningless if his rival ended up winning the war by himself.

"Let me deal with these upstarts," Classicus spoke up. "My cavalry can cover ground much quicker, and we could reach Nicaea within a few days."

"The first thing we must do is secure Forum Julii," Valens directed. "That the Othonians have not advanced to within fifty miles of the port is completely baffling."

"Agreed," Classicus said. "It's as if their expedition hasn't any real leadership or sense of purpose at all."

"We have no ships at the moment," Valens continued. "But we will. Whoever controls the Misene fleet can ferry reinforcements from Gaul, Hispania, or North Africa at their leisure and with great speed."

"Very good," the cavalry officer concurred. "I have two cohorts of light infantry I can dispatch in that direction. They should arrive at Forum Julii within a week. I'll take the rest of my cavalry and head for Cemenelum."

"Governor Marius has a cohort of urban soldiers there," the messenger informed the men.

"Tell him we appreciate the reinforcements," Valens said. "Classicus, you will send your light infantry with several companies of cavalry to Forum Julii, and four regiments of horse to Cemenelum. That will give you a total force of two thousand six hundred men, plus whatever additional support

Marius gives you. You have three weeks to destroy these bastards and rally with the rest of the army at Augusta Taurinorum, just east of the Alpine passes. If you have not arrived by then, we will have to continue our advance without you."

The timeline Valens gave the cavalry commander also added a sense of urgency to the rest of his army, for Augusta Taurinorum was situated on a vast open plain in northwestern Italia, east of the Alpes. It was still about a hundred and fifty miles west of their intended rendezvous with Caecina. However, once through the mountains, the last leg of their long trek would be over flat, open ground. Still, crossing the southwestern Alpes in a span of three weeks would require a lot of exhausting forced marches. And Classicus still had the Othonian raiders to deal with first.



Having dispatched his detachments to Forum Julii, Tribune Classicus arrived at Cemenelum with the bulk of his task force in just three days. Governor Marius greeted him at the north gates, outside of which he had the First Ligurum Cohort in parade formation. Most of these men wore either mail shirts or small brass chest plates and older republican-era brass helmets. Officers carried gladii, while the rankers each wielded a long stabbing spear and circular shield. There was a second cohort which paraded on the opposite side of the road. These men also carried stabbing spears and round shields, though these were unpainted. They were also devoid of armor or helmets.

"Compliments of General Valens," Classicus said, as he rode up to Marius. "I have brought two thousand horsemen to help you sweep these vile Othonian raiders from our lands."

"For which the general has my gratitude," Marius replied respectfully. "I am placing First Ligurum Cohort at your disposal, along with these five hundred Pannonian volunteers. All wish to join the ranks, though they are yet to be placed under any of the standards."

"If they perform well, perhaps Emperor Vitellius will elevate them into their own auxilia cohort," Classicus reasoned. He then added, "I have dispatched two cohorts of infantry and three companies of cavalry to secure Forum Julii. Am I right to assume the enemy has not made any attempt to seize the harbor?"

"It is utterly perplexing," Marius replied. "When they withdrew from the

walls of Nicaea, I assumed they would head west to seize the harbor and the ships stationed there. Instead, they went east pillaged the city of Albium Intimilium. That was ten days ago."

"And they've been sitting on their asses ever since?" The Vitellian tribune was astonished by this revelation, for he had reckoned speed would be necessary in order to prevent a loss of the ships at Forum Julii. He then shrugged. "Let us make for Albium Intimilium, and say hello to our guests."



It was not just the Vitellian reinforcements that were completely perplexed as to the lack of action by the Othonian raiders. Guardsman Tiberius Statius was absolutely disgusted by the actions of his supposed leaders. In retrospect, he would not have disagreed with the sacking of the city had it served some purpose. The complete lack of direction or guidance, as well as the oblivious demeanor of Centurion Suedius, made it all seem so pointless.

The guardsman was still angry with Proculus for ordering him to kill that woman. Although in the week since, the optio had proven to be one of the few officers to show any sort of competence. Even Veturius and the other centurions seemed content to simply wait for Vitellius to make a move, all the while pressing the hapless citizens of Albium Intimilium into serving them like slaves.

Statius was now manning a lookout post fourteen miles west of the city, near a fork between two narrow rivers. The Via Julia Augusta curved to the north, then about two miles west veered south into Cemenelum and Nicaea. Optio Proculus had commandeered several horses, and posted two-man lookout teams at various intervals from every conceivable avenue of approach the enemy might take. Statius, who had become even more of a loner since the death of Atticus, insisted on taking a post by himself. It was no surprise, then, when the optio rode out to check on him.

"All quiet, sir," he said, as he shifted on the rock he sat upon. A large Mediterranean pine tree provided shade from the midafternoon sun.

"And no word from our volunteer scouts?" the optio asked, kneeling down next to the guardsman. The men he referred to were Ligurians who, somewhat surprisingly, volunteered to help the Othonian detachment against the Vitellians.

“The First Ligurum Cohort is encamped just outside the city,” Statius replied. “They are supported by another cohort of volunteers, though these are poorly equipped and likely ill-trained. I suspect they are waiting for reinforcements from Fabius Valens.”

“We’ll likely hear from him sooner or later. No doubt every town and city within five hundred miles knows what we’ve done here.” The optio paused awkwardly for a few moments.

Statius knew he had come to do more than just check on their lookouts.

“Listen, Tiberius, I am sorry about what happened. I don’t regret ordering that contemptuous woman’s death, but given the circumstances, I should have dispatched her myself.”

“She was the bravest person I saw that day,” the guardsman replied, his eyes still fixed on the road below. “A mob of armed renegades tortured and threatened both her and her unborn child, yet she defiantly resisted us.” He looked back at the optio. “But I still follow my orders, and I am glad to know there is at least one officer who will admit when the orders he gives are wrong.”

Proculus wasn’t sure how to take this remark, but he had said what he felt he needed to. The two men continued to watch the road for some time, they soon spotted a lone horseman riding towards their position. He wore only a tunic and riding breeches but carried a long spear and oblong shield.

“One of your volunteers?” Proculus asked.

“It looks like it,” Statius replied. He stood and waved to the man, who sprinted his horse up the long slope towards them.

“The Vitellians have arrived,” the man said quickly.

“How many?” Proculus asked.

“I guessed their strength at around two thousand cavalry,” the scout replied. “No infantry spotted yet.”

“Are they on the move yet?” Statius asked.

“No, at least not when I left.”

“It’s already late afternoon,” Proculus noted. “Most likely they will start their advance in the morning.”

“There’s some good ground about eight miles back,” Statius remarked. “It’s a small open plain. We can take the high ground to the east and wait for them there. The waters look fairly deep, so our ships should be able to get in close enough to threaten the enemy with their catapults and scorpions.”

“I’ll ride back and inform Centurion Veturius,” the optio stated. “Suedius

is an idiot, but if we tell him we have a spot of good ground to meet the enemy, he won't argue. Stay here for now, until your shift change. If the enemy does advance, ride back at once."

"Yes, sir," the guardsman nodded.

That he was now addressing the optio with a measure of respect was reassuring to Proculus.

Tiberius Statius was one of the most ruthless and self-serving members of the entire Praetorian Guard, yet he was also one of its most profound thinkers. He was older than Proculus and Veturius, with a substantial amount of actual combat experience earned during his time in the legions. That he possessed a scary intellect made his refusal to accept any sort of promotion even more perplexing to the optio. In that moment, with incompetent officers leading them and a sizeable force of Vitellian cavalry just a few miles away, Proculus wished Statius was his centurion rather than a mere guardsman.



Despite there being at least twenty miles between Cemenelum and Albium Intimilium, Julius Classicus did not rouse his taskforce to make their departure until almost noon the following day. He dispatched two companies of cavalry to screen their advance, and to alert him once they spotted the Othonian forces.

"Given the cruel manner in which they've treated my people, I doubt they will attempt to hold the city," Marius noted, as he rode beside Classicus. Though he had deferred command of his cohorts to the tribune, Marius still felt a responsibility as governor of the small province to take part in the purging of the invaders.

"Once we catch them in the open, my cavalry will make short work of them," Classicus remarked. He was supremely confident, as were all of his troopers, that a band of pampered praetorians who had thrown off all modicum of discipline would be no match for their lancers.

While most of the column kept to the Via Julia Augusta, a company of horsemen rode along the high ground on their left flank. The enemy, as far as they knew, had no cavalry or skirmishers, yet Classicus was an experienced officer who rarely took unnecessary risks.

Halfway to Albium Intimilium, they passed a large mining complex which had been temporarily abandoned due to the war. It was here that a pair

of riders from the advance guard rode quickly back to them.

"We've found the enemy," one of them reported. "Approximately five miles to the east, arrayed for battle."

"Time to teach these errant guardsmen a harsh lesson," Classicus said.

Approximately six or eight miles west of Albium Intimilium, the road veered to the southeast for about a mile ran along a modest plain that bordered the long stretch of beach. Dispersed throughout the sizeable bay were a dozen trireme class warships. The smallest of Rome's imperial naval vessels, their draft was much shallower than the much larger quinquereme five-deck warships. They were arrayed in a long line, their prows angled towards the Vitellian force's avenue of approach.

Across the plain stood the praetorians and their attached urban cohorts. On the left, on a long ridge, was a detachment of the ships' marines, as well as a couple hundred local volunteers.

"First Ligurum will occupy our left, with the Pannonians in reserve," Classicus ordered. "I'll take the bulk of the cavalry and drive these bastards all the way back to Italia."

"Their line extends almost to the sea," Marius noted. "If you attack there, you risk running afoul of whatever armament may be aboard their ships."

"A trifling display," the tribune said dismissively. "Speed will be key to this victory, and I doubt that their onagers or scorpions will be able to engage us for long."

A cornicen's horn sounded, and the four regiments of auxiliary cavalry formed into a massive battle line, six ranks deep. Classicus, who rode at the head of the formation, raised his spatha high. As he brought the weapon down in a sweeping arc, his troopers gave a loud cry and spurred their horses into a fast gallop. The Ligurum cohort advanced at the quick march, making for the high ground that was occupied by the marines and their traitorous fellow countrymen.

As they were predominantly used to fighting aboard ships, imperial marines wore only light armor and carried a small metal buckler and a gladius for their primary weapon. However, they each also carried a sling, with a pouch full of either lead bullets or smooth rocks. And while the sling was a crude and archaic weapon, in the right hands it could cause havoc, as well as fearful injuries. As the Ligurum cohort marched up within fifty feet or so of the top of the long ridge, they were met with a salvo of sling bullets. At that range they were ineffective against the Ligurums' light armor, though

they still smashed into the exposed arms, legs, and faces of their victims. Men screamed in agony as the storm of missiles continued to rain down. Their anguish soon gave way to rage, and with a burst of energy fueled by wrath, they sprinted the remaining distance to the top, and soon became engaged in a frenetic melee with the marines. Though lightly armed, the imperial mariners had the advantage of holding the high ground. And while fighters fell on both sides, the skirmish soon ground to a stalemate.

On the plain below, nearly two thousand horsemen sprinted their mounts towards the line of praetorian guardsmen. Unbeknownst to Tribune Classicus and his men, the naval vessels had pre-sighted their onager catapults and scorpion bolt-throwers. They had even gone so far as to stake out the ideal range at which to engage the Vitellian cavalry.

As Classicus leaned forward in his saddle, eyes fixed on the wall of praetorian shields less than a quarter mile away, the trooper just to his right was smashed in the chest by the large stone flung by a shipborne catapult. As it sent the fatally stricken rider from his mount, the same stone struck the leg of a horse behind them, tripping it up and causing even greater havoc. A volley of catapult shot landed among the densely packed ranks of Classicus' cavalry, with both man and beast screaming in pain as they were crushed. A few seconds later, a handful of horsemen were skewered by a wave of scorpion bolts. The horrific nature of the destruction wrought by these weapons caused the regiment on the right to flounder. Panic ensued, and the force of their charge lost its momentum.



On the praetorian battle line each guardsman held his javelin up on his shoulder, waiting for the order to unleash. Tiberius Statius stood in the second rank of his century, his face hard and grim. Whatever bitter feelings he harbored for the officers of this taskforce and their gross incompetence, the riders charging towards them were still the enemy. As the guardsmen stood ready to do battle, their long-lost discipline and training at last took hold. Each man became like a machine; a machine bred for one purpose.

"Javelins ready!"

To their front, the hammering of the catapults and ballistae had broken up much of the enemy formation, and their charge was starting to founder. Upon

the subsequent orders, the guardsmen unleashed their pila in a storm of death upon their hapless foes. Dead and dying men and horses fell into thrashing heaps, creating obstacles for those behind them.

"Charge!"

The praetorians drew their gladii and brazenly attacked the horsemen head-on. Speed and momentum were the greatest weapons the cavalry had, and now that these were denied them the tide of battle was quickly turning. The guardsmen rushed in close to their adversaries, negating the reach advantage the mounted lancers should have enjoyed. The battle was now a frenzied brawl, praetorians and cavalrymen intermixed amongst each other. The horsemen were attempting to back away so they could utilize the reach of their long spears. Those who were able to do so managed to inflict casualties among the Guard. And yet, as their charge had ground to a halt, with horses now being tripped up and knocked over by their stubborn enemies, the fear and realization that they were losing the battle took hold.

Trumpets frantically sounded the retreat, and within thirty minutes of their bold and confident charge the Vitellian army was in full flight. The Ligurum infantry, upon seeing their cavalry fleeing from the field, immediately abandoned their assault and fled. Neither side had gained any ground during their battle with the marines, but with the cavalry on the run their right flank was completely exposed.

On the praetorian line men shouted in triumph, waving their gladii in the air as their adversaries disappeared over the next low ridgeline. Even Guardsman Statius allowed himself a grin of satisfaction. He had not fought in open battle in many years, since his time in the legions. He had long since forgotten the intoxicating thrill of having faced death and come out standing.

As the emotional surge of their victory subsided, the brutal sight of battle's aftermath brought them back to reality. The field was strewn with hundreds of dead men and horses. An even greater number were badly injured. The most grievously maimed cried out as they sought an end to their horrific suffering. Some were missing arms and legs, and these would most certainly bleed to death in a matter of minutes. Others had their guts split open, either by sword or by lance, and for them death would come far more slowly. These poor souls were still outnumbered by those whose injuries, while not fatal, caused terrible suffering. Broken bones, hideous gashes, the loss of a finger or hand, an eye gouged…all inflicted in that bloody struggle

for victory.

"We'll gather up our dead and wounded," Centurion Suedius said, his face white with the shock of what he had just been through.

Statius then remembered, Suedius had never bloodied his gladius before, nor even taken part in any battle that was not a mockup on the parade field. Still, they had managed to hold the line, while inflicting a far greater toll upon the Vitellians than they suffered, so he must have at least performed adequately as their leader.

"What of the enemy wounded?" Veturius asked. His own helmet had been smashed, and his sword arm was bleeding from a deep gash near the shoulder.

"Leave them," Suedius replied. "They're not my problem. But since they are fellow Romans, we will not kill them. If Valens wants them back, he can come claim them. As for us, I doubt the people of Albium Intimilium will welcome our return, so we will pull back just two miles and camp there. And at least now we have procured enough rations and other essentials to last us a while."

It was a terrible thing leaving the enemy wounded where they fell. For though they had just fought a hellish death struggle against each other, they were still their countrymen. Unless the Vitellians returned to the field, many of those with non-fatal, yet crippling injuries would likely die of thirst within a few days. And while Suedius felt that not going around and finishing them off was mercy, in reality he was condemning them to a slower and far more agonizing demise.



"We cannot accept defeat," Classicus said emphatically, while his wounds were bandaged. There was a deep cut from his shin all the way around to the back of his calf, and another on his right wrist.

"From what our scouts have reported," a centurion replied, "the enemy has withdrawn from the field, leaving our dead and wounded where they fell."

Marius was silent. He sat with his arms wrapped around his knees, his gaze on the campfire. While his Ligurum Cohort had not taken the same amount of savaging the hapless cavalrymen had, he had still lost around twenty dead, with another sixty wounded. And while he was no military

expert, Marius understood that suffering almost twenty percent casualties in a single engagement was tantamount to disaster.

"We'll send back for reinforcements from Forum Julii," Classicus told his assembled officers. "It's my fault, I should not have underestimated our foes. We have three cohorts of Tungrian auxilia infantry and several companies of cavalry at the port. I should have brought them up once we knew there was no threat of it being taken by the enemy. I will not make the same mistake twice."

Chapter XXXI: Heading North

Rome
13 March 69 A.D.
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For Emperor Marcus Salvius Otho, the time had come to begin the journey north and face the pretender. He had heard nothing from the maritime force he dispatched a couple of weeks prior, nor did he expect to for some time. In fact, as he made his final preparations to leave Rome, he had all but forgotten about the expedition, except to curse himself for not having those extra soldiers available to him now.

Knowing he needed to incite the people's loyalty and devotion to him, he met with a renowned statesman and orator named Publius Galerius Trachalus. Having served a full term as consul the year before as colleague of Silius Italicus, Galerius was also the first cousin of Vitellius' wife, Galeria. He met with the emperor in one of the banquet halls at the unfinished Domus Aurea, which Otho had ordered construction to continue on.

"It doesn't trouble you, that I'm asking you to help me rally the people against your cousin's husband?" Otho asked the former consul.

"My dear cousin was just a little girl when I first came to the senate," Galerius replied. "Our fathers may have been brothers, but even they had almost fifteen years between them in age. Given that our family can trace its noble line back to the earliest days of the republic, Galeria was a good match for Vitellius. He has been scarcely an adequate match for her, despite who his father was. I've kept a protective eye on her for years, albeit from a distance. I regretted not speaking up more strenuously when she was betrothed to that worthless, lazy bastard. I asked my uncle if he was sure Vitellius was a good match for his daughter. He was so dismissive in his response, that it seemed he didn't care that Vitellius was a lackluster husband for Galeria. As strange as this may sound, Caesar, I feel if I can help you rally the people, thereby garnering enough of their support to cast down the pretender, then perhaps I will somehow make amends for my failure to better protect my little cousin all those years ago."

It was an earnest and rather intriguing response from Galerius. And though it reassured Otho as to the former consul's personal loyalty, it posed

even more questions.

"It seems as if Vitellius has few, if any, friends," the emperor observed. "I wouldn't say he has any real enemies, yet not once have I heard anyone speaking well of him. He's like that fat, good-natured, simpleton of an uncle that no one wants to talk about. I feel like I must be missing something. After all, he has the entire Rhine army marching against Rome. Our forces in Belgica and Gaul appear to have sided with him. And I fear the Twenty-First Legion will abandon their post of guarding the Alpes and march under his banner. If Vitellius is nothing but a fat, lethargic fool, then how has he managed to turn so many of our finest legions against us?"

"You're not missing anything," Galerius replied. "At least not when it comes to Vitellius himself. He is, in fact, little more than a fat, lethargic fool. He also has a deep longing for glory and renown, yet has never known how to go about getting it. I personally know many of the legates of the Rhine legions, and most are political nobodies with little imagination or ambition. It saddens me to think that in another age, such men would have been cast out of the senate as incompetents. And now we appoint them to the prestigious post of legionary legate because of their mediocrity."

"So, if Vitellius is not really in control of his army, and his legates are nearly as lackluster as he is, then who is leading this revolt?"

"I can't say for certain," Galerius answered. "But I do know of at least two legates who are a measure above their peers. Fabius Valens and Caecina Alienus are two of the most devious and cutthroat men to have ever cursed the senate with their presence. But Caecina has not been with the Rhine army for long, so I suspect Valens is primarily the one leading the rebellion for Vitellius. I've always despised Fabius Valens. The only man who I feel an equal amount of disdain for is that money-grubbing thief, Antonius Primus. To think Galba gave him command of Rome's newest legion!"

"Primus has at least remained loyal," Otho pointed out. He knew a little about Primus' financial schemes, including the one which got him expelled from the senate. He did have a reputation as an aggressive and highly competent general, however, and at that moment, the emperor needed every capable soldier he could find.

"For now," Galerius said, "Antonius Primus is loyal to whomever can buy him off. But I will give him credit, in that he can fight. Honestly, he is little good for anything else, but if he remains true in his loyalty to you, then he will be a viable asset on the battlefield. However, I digress." He took a

drink of wine before continuing. “As for Valens and Caecina, they seek power rather than wealth. Neither of them will risk his neck by attempting to become emperor. Rather, they found themselves the perfect puppet. A few words of flattery, as well as handing over the credit for defeating our armies, and Vitellius will give these men anything they want. They will rule the empire through him. For them, it is simply a matter of gaining all the rewards without assuming any of the risks, political or otherwise.”

“And what of the soldiers themselves?” Otho asked. “How is it so many professional soldiers, legionaries at that, can be goaded into declaring war on the very emperor they swore to serve?”

“Ah, but therein lies your answer,” the senator remarked. “The Rhine army refused to swear allegiance to Galba. Ever since they heard about their beloved Nero’s demise Caecina and Valens, and I’m sure a few others, started creating discord among the ranks. Discipline is fierce in the legions. But when mutinous feelings come from the top, how are common soldiers supposed to react? And let us not kid ourselves, the average legionary is an illiterate peasant who joined the army for a steady wage, the promise of adventure, and above all, so he wouldn’t ever go hungry. I’m not saying they’re all simpletons, though a great many are. Those with a brain, who can read and write, are the ones that become officers and eventually centurions. Centurions are the brutal enforcers of discipline, yet they spoke the loudest against Galba.”

“Of course,” Otho said, remembering something he had heard before. “Galba was once governor in Lower Germania. His supporters always said he was strict, yet fair. I never had reason to think otherwise.”

“Whether he was as cruel as his detractors said, or if it was simply Caecina and Valens purchasing the loyalty of the senior centurions, many of these lifelong officers spoke of Galba’s despicable behavior and abject meanness back when they were young legionaries. And mind you, these were savage, battle-hardened centurions saying this. I think the current issue at hand was simply a matter of timing. The Rhine legions refuse to swear obedience to Galba, and in the meantime you overthrow him. It could simply be a matter of the events already being set in motion, with everyone involved thinking it’s too late to turn back. We must convince the legions otherwise… or rather, *you* must convince the people, and hope the army follows suit once they see the people of Rome will not stand with the pretender.”



Otho could not sleep at all the night before his departure from Rome. His brother had even sent a pair of rather expensive courtesans to relax him. And while an evening of pleasure was certainly appreciated, the emperor could not stop his mind from racing, even after his body was completely spent. Around two hours before dawn, he left his slumbering companions and summoned his personal servants to him, as well as his freedman, Onomastus.

"Couldn't sleep either, sire?" the freedman asked knowingly.

"No," Otho replied. "Our soldiers will be rousing themselves right about now, so they can be ready for my inspection at dawn. Come, help me into my armor."

That he left his hair disheveled and his face unshaven was completely out of character for the emperor. Onomastus suspected he wanted to look the part of a soldier, rather than the pretty nobleman he had strived to be his whole life. Instead of an ornate, muscled cuirass, which was so common for consular generals and emperors to wear, Otho elected to wear a praetorian guardsman's segmentata. He still retained his purple cloak, and instead of a helmet he wore the imperial laurel crown.

The armor was heavy, and as Otho made his way down the marble steps towards the main doors to the palace, he could not help but wonder how his soldiers could march twenty-five miles a day while so encumbered.

He had ordered his forces to assemble at the Circus Maximus, which was, conveniently, just across the street from the imperial palace. Otho decided to take the underground route, one normally used by senators and dignitaries who wished to pass back and forth between events without being assailed by the public. It was in this very passage that Emperor Gaius Caligula had met his end, twenty-eight years prior. He was murdered by disgruntled members of the Praetorian Guard and a couple of senators. Otho mentioned this to Onomastus, as they approached the large double-doors near the spot were Caligula was stabbed to death.

"Fortunately for you, sire, your guardsmen are a little fonder of you than they were of him."

It was a macabre attempt at humor, though Otho still managed a chuckle. His freedman pointed to the paving stones. "If one looks closely, they can almost see the stains from where *'Little Boots'* met his ignoble end."

Otho grunted at Caligula's silly nickname. He had been a boy of nine

when Caligula was savagely slain and replaced by his ill-prepared, albeit benevolent, Uncle Claudius.

"Gaius Caligula ruled for only four years," Otho noted, pausing to stare at the otherwise nondescript paving stones in the torchlight. "Tomorrow marks two months since I became Caesar. I can only hope my reign is not cut short in such a manner."

Onomastus said nothing, but gave a look of understanding. The doors were opened, and as Otho stepped into the imperial box, the crowd which overflowed the stands of the large arena gave a voracious cheer, with many chants of *'Caesar!'* Hundreds of senators were gathered in the seats or private boxes closest to the emperor. His army was in a massive parade formation that encompassed the chariot racing track.

For his army, Otho had Legio I, Adiutrix, seven cohorts of the Praetorian Guard, a force of one thousand marines, and two thousand volunteer gladiators. In all, approximately eight thousand men lined the arena floor. And while they were an impressive sight, the emperor hoped to triple their numbers, or more, with the legions from the Balkans.

"People of Rome," Otho said, his hands held high. "Tomorrow your armies begin their journey north, to rid us of the threat of the pretender. The legions of the Rhine are guilty of gullibly believing any entity outside of the senate can proclaim a man emperor. They must now be shown the error of their thinking, and that the senate and people of Rome stand together as one. I ride north, not just as your emperor but as your humble representative. Your noble generals, Marius Celsus and Suetonius Paulinus, have already departed with our advance guard. By the time we all reach northern Italia, I hope the Germanic legions will display the sanity and sense of duty we all know they possess. And whatever happens in the coming days and weeks, know that we all stand together as Romans!"

With Galerius' advice, Otho had kept his speech short, deliberately not mentioning his adversary by name. He wisely tempered his descriptions of the mutinous legions, proclaiming they were misled rather than rebellious traitors. The ovation he received was deafening, and perhaps a bit overdone, given the emperor knew the people's affection for him was tepid at best. Still, if he could defeat the Vitellians, either by diplomacy or force, while bringing about an end to the crisis, he would return to Rome a hero of the people. As he raised his right hand in salute, he prayed that by summer he would have stability and order restored to the empire.



Hundreds of miles away, and fresh from the string of conflicts that plagued their march, Caecina's army was slowly making its way into northern Italia. Their quashing of the troublesome Helvetii, soon after leaving Vindonissa, had been a blight on their journey, though the commanding general thought it a good way for his troops to bloody their weapons before the real fighting commenced.

It was a little over two hundred miles from Vindonissa to the city of Bergomum on the southern edge of the mountains. A distance that on flat ground with good roads could be covered in a week to ten days. It was now six weeks later, and the division was still negotiating its way through the mountains. Freezing rains had plagued them for much of their trek. Many of his soldiers suffered various ailments from the effects of constantly being soaked, the cold hindering their ability to dry their clothes. Even those soldiers who were originally from Germania were miserable. This and the steepness of the mountains slowed their pace to a crawl.

While traversing the steepest passes, the army sometimes could travel no more than five miles in a day. But for all the difficulties, the roads remained clear of snow. Only the peaks of the mountains were covered in white, and though the cold and incessant damp bit into every man in the army, not once did the rains turn to ice.

Around the third week of March, the Vitellian army encamped at a crossroads near the point where the River Addua flowed into the enormous and forked Lake Como. The area offered about a five mile stretch of flat and fertile land, which was a reprieve for the weary legs of the marching soldiers. The sun was also out this day, and while the army set about erecting its various camps, both legionaries and auxiliaries hung their soaked tunics and cloaks off their javelins and palisade stakes.

Caecina walked down to the bridge over the river where he could gaze out onto the large lake. Like his men, he was cold, wet, and tired. He had to remind himself he was well ahead of schedule and would easily beat Valens to the rendezvous point.

"What do you think, sir?" Master Centurion Bulla asked, as he joined his commanding legate. "Another day, maybe two?"

Since assuming command of the entire division, Caecina had had to

delegate the administration of Legio IV, Macedonia, to his laticlavian tribune and centurion primus pilus.

"I believe the worst is over," the general answered. "I figure we're about forty miles from Bergomum. At which point, we will be completely clear of the Alpes Mountains. This road here skirts along Lake Como. We should have a much easier journey than we have these past six weeks."

"We definitely felt a change in the weather this day," Bulla observed. "The lads may finally be able to get some feeling back into their hands and feet."

Caecina chuckled, while flexing his own fingers in emphasis.

"Tomorrow we should be able to make it as far as Leucerae," he said. "And the day after we will press on to Bergomum. From there, we will take some time to refit and gather what intelligence we can as to the disposition of the region. I just hope the cities welcome us, and don't compel us to launch a series of sieges while waiting for Otho's army to arrive."

"Rider approaching, sir!" a member of the vanguard called back. Caecina sighed and nodded to his master centurion before taking to his horse.

The rider was dressed in the armor of an auxiliary centurion, and he was promptly escorted back to where General Caecina sat astride his horse near the bridge.

"General Caecina?" the man asked.

"I am."

"Centurion Titus Liberius, acting commander of the *ala Siliana* regiment of cavalry, sir." He saluted sharply.

"Acting commander?" Caecina asked. "Should there not be a tribune of the equites in command?"

"There was, sir," Liberius replied. "But he has gone over to the Othonians. My regiment served in North Africa when Vitellius was governor. We know nothing of Otho, but we know Vitellius treated us well. I have come to offer our swords and our lances to him."

"Then you are most welcome," the legate said. "Our ultimate destination is near Cremona. What can you tell me about the towns and cities around the River Padus?"

"That is our district, sir," the centurion explained. "The River Padus flows through most of northern Italia, and I can promise you the northern towns of Eporedia, Vercellae, Novaria, and Mediolanum have all declared for Vitellius."

“And whoever controls the Padus controls northern Italia,” Caecina said. He took a deep breath and smiled. He now had an additional cavalry regiment who was already scouting the region for him. “Thank you, centurion. Return to your regiment and await my orders.”

“Sir!”

Chapter XXXII: The Price of Excess

Praetorian Camp, west of Albium Intimilium
17 March 69 A.D.
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It took several days for Julius Classicus' auxiliary infantry cohorts to make the trek from Forum Julii to the Vitellian encampment fourteen miles east of Cemenelum. The tribune sent details forward to retrieve any of their wounded from the field, once they saw the Othonian ships had departed. The dead were placed onto large pyres, the smoke and flames from which were seen for miles.

And yet for the victorious Othonians, there was a sense of lackadaisical carelessness. The Vitellians had been soundly beaten, and in the absence of any subsequent orders they contended themselves with drink and leisure. Not knowing whether the emperor had departed Rome, or what was happening with the pending Vitellian invasion of northern Italia, Centurion Suedius showed a rare touch of initiative when he decided to send word to Rome.

"It will give us a chance to let them know of our victory," he reasoned. "Plus, we can send that incompetent twat, Pacensis, back to Caesar."

"The towns in Italia that we ransacked will likely have sent deputations to the senate already," his colleague, Centurion Novellus, added. While Novellus was of little use in battle, he was once more attempting to assert himself as deputy commander of the expedition.

"Yet another reason to let Otho deal with Pacensis," Suedius replied. "And once the emperor hears we drew first blood for him, he'll likely forget any of our little indiscretions along the way. I doubt that he, or the senate, will give a damn about our sacking of half a city in a sliver of a province that has declared for the pretender."

"If our mission here is done," an officer from the urban cohorts spoke up, "should we make ready to return to Rome ourselves?"

"All in good time," Suedius said. "Besides, the lads are enjoying the 'fruits of victory', and I say we should indulge them for the time being."



For Tribune Julius Classicus, the only thing he wished to indulge his soldiers in was retribution. The humiliation of defeat weighed as heavily upon him as the cries of the dying. Whatever the greater causes fought between Otho and Vitellius, the tribune did not care. All that mattered to him was making certain the sacrifices of his slain troopers would not be in vain. Having rested and refitted his cavalry regiments and allied cohorts, which were now reinforced by the three cohorts of the Belgic infantry from Forum Julii, Classicus was ready to go on the attack once more.

"This time we will be both calculated and brazen," he explained to Marius, on the eve before battle. The injury to his calf and shin made walking difficult, yet he found he could ride easily enough.

A full moon glowed bright that night, with nary a cloud in the sky. Classicus and Marius, along with their cohort and regimental commanders, followed their scouts to a vantage point that looked down upon the small valley and inlet below.

"Those damned fools," Marius said, as he spied the campfires and torches that illuminated the enemy camp. "They've positioned themselves at the very bottom of the valley. We could almost walk right up to them and not be seen!"

"And that is what we shall do," Classicus stated. "The Belgic infantry are anxious to get into a scrap, seeing as how they missed the last battle. They can also get in a lot closer than our horsemen can."

"Their ships are rather close to land," a cavalry centurion noted. "There's a large outcropping of rocks on their right. If one could remain hidden there, they could swim right out to those ships with little difficulty."

Classicus scanned the row of ships and the rock outcropping, trying to determine just how far apart they were. He looked at Marius. "How good are your men at swimming?"

The governor beamed. "Ligurians are excellent runners, but even better in the water," he proclaimed. "We'll wreak havoc on their ships."

"Good," said the tribune. He then turned to the centurions who commanded the Belgic auxiliaries. "There is a long ravine that runs east to west. It will take you right up to the enemy's camp. They'll likely have a few lookouts posted, but you should be able to overrun them and get at their sentries before they can sound the alarm."

"Where will the cavalry be, sir?" one of the officers asked.

"Off to your left, in reserve," Classicus answered. "These praetorians are

led by simpering fools, but they appear to have fortified their position readily enough. Our horsemen will be ineffective at attacking the camp head-on. They will need to be drawn out into the open.”



As the Othonian camp was sheltered between the hills, it would be late morning before the sun shown directly on the sleepy taskforce of praetorian and urban cohorts. The imperial marines had returned to their ships, while the handful of local volunteers dispersed back to their homes.

The camp stunk of the remnants of excess from the past week. Soldiers consumed copious amounts of wine and local spirits each night, and those who drank beyond their limits filled the camp’s protective trench with vomit and piss. Sutlers and prostitutes came and went as they pleased in vast numbers. Any occupying military force, even one that had been overtly hostile, was still regarded as a prime source of revenue for those willing to trade with ‘the enemy’. To the average citizen, particularly those who struggled to make a living, the war between rival emperors was completely meaningless. They would swear fealty to whoever won, if for no other reason than they could be left alone to live their lives as they saw fit. In the meantime, it was universally known that Roman soldiers, especially praetorians, always had plenty of spare coin to offload.

At the western gate to the camp a wine merchant was making ready to haul away a large number of empty wine amphorae, which he boisterously promised would be returned full by that evening. At least a score of prostitutes were making their bleary-eyed way to the entrance, their hair disheveled and money pouches full. Early morning dawn made for the perfect time to strike.



The centurion commanding the center cohort of Belgic infantry watched as guardsmen worked to help the wine merchant finish loading his wagon. Since it took up most of the path, the wagon was an obstacle that needed to be moved before the attack could be launched. There was one cohort on their right, hidden behind a defilade. The left cohort was skulking near the northwest corner of the camp, where they would assault the north entrance.

“Come on, damn you,” the centurion whispered impatiently, waiting for the wagon to move. He did not wish to commence the assault with that massive obstacle in the way. Yet he knew both the left cohort and the First Ligurum were waiting for them, before initiating their own attacks. After what felt like an eternity, the wine merchant boarded his wagon. And with a fond wave back to the guardsmen, he cracked his short whip, and the pair of draught animals pulled his wagon away from the gate.

The centurion drew his gladius and nodded to the officers behind him, as well as the soldiers from his own century, on his left. There were no trumpets sounded, no shouted orders, simply the appearance of hundreds of armed soldiers within a hundred feet of the Othonian encampment.

The sentries on duty were in disbelief. For a moment, they were uncertain as to who these men actually were. As far as any of them knew, the Vitellians were beaten and had fled all the way back to Lugdunum. That a large force of them had materialized suddenly, and were attacking the camp, was incomprehensible.

“Sound the alarm!” one of the men shouted.

It was too late. Swarms of auxiliary troopers pushed through the entrance, as the sentry was stabbed through the neck by a long spear.

Numerous women, in the process of leaving the camp, screamed in terror, alerting the Othonian force. Vitellian soldiers cut the support ropes of the enemy tents, bringing them down upon their occupants. As startled guardsmen tried to scramble out from underneath the fallen shelters, they were hacked to pieces by the assaulting troopers.



The western half of the Othonian camp, which was now fully engulfed by Belgic auxiliaries, was mostly urban cohorts. The praetorians occupied the eastern half of the camp. And while they were now under attack from their adversaries, who came at them from the north entrance, they had been given just a few moments more to rouse themselves for battle.

Guardsman Tiberius Statius had spent part of the night with a lady of pleasure, before assuming his shift as a sentry along the northern rampart to the right of the entrance. He heard the faint cacophony of cries and shouts from the west, immediately alerting his tired senses.

“Here they come!” another sentry to his left shouted, pointing his pilum

towards a group of enemy soldiers emerging from behind a low ridgeline.

Statius grimaced and raced the short distance to Centurion Veturius' tent. He threw open the flap and found his commander asleep with a naked woman lying on his arm.

"The Vitellians are attacking!" the guardsman shouted, making sure he was loud enough to rouse the semi-drunken officer.

"You have got to be fucking kidding," the centurion stammered, as he fell from his bunk. He then gave himself a couple of quick slaps across the face, attempting to wake up.

"The north rampart is under attack," Statius continued. "And it sounds like the enemy has already breached the west entrance."

Without waiting for his centurion, Statius left and returned to the earthen ramparts. The enemy auxiliaries were rushing the entrance, rather than attempting to navigate through the spikes and trip hazards that lined the ditch beneath the palisade. Approximately twenty praetorians had formed a hasty battle line and unleashed their javelins. A handful of auxiliaries had fallen, killed or wounded. The rest now attacked with fury, smashing into the wall of guardsmen.

Statius hefted his pilum and flung it towards their assailants. It sailed high before slamming through an enemy soldier's shield. While not the killing or crippling strike he wanted, the javelin still had its intended secondary effect of rendering an enemy's shield useless. He drew his gladius and fell in behind the front rank. To his left, more praetorians were joining him, as they braced against the attacking auxiliaries. Gladius and stabbing spear beat against the wall of praetorian shields, as the guardsmen responded with stabs and slashes from their own weapons. The auxiliaries hoped to use the weight of their numbers to break the line, yet the praetorians resolutely held firm. And while each side hammered away on the other's shield wall, it was difficult for anyone to strike a killing blow.

Vitellian auxiliaries in the back of the formation were now breaking off and braving the hazards of the Othonian trench and earthworks. Several were tripped up by tangle-foot obstacles, falling painfully onto the plethora of spikes that lined the deep trench. Despite this, a small number were seen climbing over the palisades, in between the long stakes that lined the top.

Optio Proculus saw this and shouted a series of orders to confused guardsmen still emerging from their tents. Proculus then looked back to his centurion, who was tying the cords of his helmet beneath his chin.

“It looks to be a single enemy cohort attacking the north,” the optio observed. “But we have no way of knowing just how many have breached the west entrance. Our friends from the urban cohorts have been overrun.”

“If the camp is breached, we cannot make a feasible stand here,” the centurion noted, “not with all these damned tents in the way.”

“The east entrance butts right up against the side of this hill,” Proculus said. “There’s no one coming at us from there. We should withdraw from the camp and reform on the high ground.”

“Alright.” Veturius acknowledged. “Pull our men back. If that incompetent bastard, Suedius, has any sense, he’ll withdraw the rest of the cohorts with us.”

“Not much we can do for the urban cohorts,” Proculus stated, as he saw the chaos of their allies and the rampaging enemy soldiers engaged in a savage frenzy. “Those poor bastards are on their own.”

Guardsman Statius was shocked when he heard his optio shouting orders for them to withdraw. He suddenly realized the western half of the camp had been overwhelmed, leaving their left flank completely exposed.

“Withdraw in order!” Proculus called out. “Do not break formation!”

As they stepped slowly back from the camp entrance, they were joined by guardsmen from various parts of the camp. They came from various centuries, and even from different cohorts, yet they found their discipline. By maintaining a strong front, they could withdraw even under the most determined pressure from their enemies.

The Belgic auxiliaries, now unimpeded from entering the camp, teemed through the north entrance. Most ignored the praetorians, instead focusing on plunder or assisting their comrades in the routing of the urban cohorts.

The camp was large enough to house over two thousand men, and it took the guardsmen nearly twenty minutes to back their way to the east entrance. All the while, they had to negotiate their way around the tents, weapons and armor racks, and campfires. The merchants and women who still remained in the camp were fleeing for their lives in every direction. Those who sought safety within the ranks of the praetorians were beaten back with blows from shields. Some were slain by auxiliaries or panic-stricken urban soldiers. Most were simply ignored, left to create an obstacle of chaos and terror.

Centurion Veturius was relieved to see the eastern entrance clear of enemy soldiers. He had yet to see either of their commanding officers, and

the other centurions present seemed only too happy to let him take the initiative.

"Withdraw by ranks," Veturius said, his parade field experience now becoming useful. "Once each rank clears the entrance, the next will follow. Maintain formation and head for the top of the ridge. Now move!"



Much to the dismay of Tribune Classicus, who observed the battle from a hilltop to the west, the praetorian withdrawal went largely unopposed. The ridge the enemy was advancing up was inaccessible by his cavalry, so while they had taken the Othonian camp, the bulk of their best fighters appeared to have escaped.

"Damn it all," he swore under his breath.

"It's not all a loss, sir," one of his staff officers reasoned. "Those foolish bastards had our infantry outnumbered, yet they probably didn't even know it. And look, the Ligurians have brought chaos to the enemy ships!"

Classicus followed the man's excited pointing, as he made out the plumes of smoke coming from the nearest Othonian vessel.

"Good," he said, with a wicked grin. "Let those fuckers burn and leave the praetorians here to rot."



Though an administrative governor with no real military experience, Marius felt obligated to accompany his cohort on their raid of the ships. The low light and the distance between the vessels and the camp made it difficult for anyone on board to know what was happening, even if they had been alert and paying attention.

All was still as the Ligurian auxiliaries swam up to the nearest ship. Marius had told the largest number to concentrate on this vessel, though he'd also dispatched two hundred men to assault the next two ships further down the line.

Armor was left behind, and each man carried either a gladius or short spear with his shield strapped across his back. One of the more nimble fighters had a rope tied around his waist, and he attempted to make his way up the back of the ship. Others grabbed onto a few of the oars, carelessly left

drooping into the water. They attempted to remain as quiet as possible, ever fearful of rousing the sailors before they could get aboard.

One of the Ligurians pulled his way into the side portal, where an oar had been left hanging. They knew that the mariners had been partaking in wine and women, much like the praetorians on shore. Each Ligurian prayed they were still in a drunken slumber as the climbed up the side of the ship.

It was dark beneath the decks, and as the first fighter waited for his eyes to adjust, he soon realized there was no one on the bottom deck of the ship. In addition to his short sword, he also carried a small pickaxe, which he wielded, ready to strike, as he slowly made his way up the steps. He was soon followed by about twenty of his companions. The second deck was also empty, and they figured most of the sailors were asleep atop. It was only when they reached the first of the oar decks that they saw a handful of enemy mariners. These were mostly oarsmen, with the marines most likely on the top deck.

As the fighter with the pickaxe crept along barefoot, he heard the planks creak with almost every step. Near the steps leading to the top deck was an oarsman with an empty wine cask next to him. He had his gladius lying beneath him, making the Ligurian hesitant to step over him. Instead, he took a deep breath, raised his pickaxe high, and smashed it into the man's chest. The spike ripped through bone and lung, becoming imbedded between the broken ribs. The sailor jerked upright trying to cry out, only managing a groan of agony as blood gushed from the hideous wound. The Ligurian drew his sword and raced up the stairs.

The clamor from below deck alerted a number of sailors and marines, crowded together with a handful of their lady companions. Shouts of surprise echoed above and below as mariners scrambled to find their weapons, all the while nearly three hundred assailants attempted to board the vessel.

A brutal struggle soon followed. And with neither side wearing any sort of armor, they were far more susceptible to blows from both sword and spear. An intuitive Ligurian located a barrel of oil used to ignite the catapult's flaming shot. Using his sword, he pried open the lid and kicked the large barrel over, spilling its contents all over the deck. As fighters assailed the captain's quarters, the Ligurian snuck past the battling combatants and found a lit oil lamp on a table. Grabbing it, he raced back onto the open deck. As he did so, an enemy gladius was plunged into his back. He gave a loud cry as his

body jolted, the lamp flying from his hand. The dying man landed face down in the slick oil. The lamp landed on its side, the flames licking at the flammable liquid. The Ligurian's body was twitching. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the flames growing larger, racing towards him. The price of his clever initiative was to be burned alive, before his grievous injuries could claim him.



At the top of the ridge, the assembled praetorians caught their breath, while their officers attempted to assess the situation. Though it appeared one of their ships was on fire, the rest looked to be untouched. Meanwhile, the survivors of the urban cohort had reformed on the large beach, trying to find some semblance of order amongst their ranks.

As for the praetorians, it appeared most of their men had successfully withdrawn from the camp, though only about half managed to don any of their armor. Centurions Suedius and Novellas had also appeared, only showing their faces after the cohorts successfully reformed on the ridge.

"Good work, men," Suedius said. "They thought they got the best of us, but we showed them." It was a rather bizarre attempt to encourage his soldiers, as if they had won another victory rather than narrowly escaped disaster.

"Sir, the enemy is reforming!" a guardsman shouted.

To their right the ridge sloped downward, with a modest open plain below, just north of the now ransacked camp. Here the Vitellian infantry was regrouping and making ready to assail the heights.

"Time for a little reprisal," Suedius said, with a grin. He then shouted to his men, *"Praetorians! Action right, three hundred meters!"*

The guardsmen, all aware of this new threat, quickly turned to their right and advanced at a quick jog along the ridgeline. They then turned to their left, to face the advancing enemy auxiliaries. Centurions formed their guardsmen into four ranks, and while many lacked their armor, all at least had their shields and gladii. Many had also managed to retrieve their pila during the retreat.

"A hell-storm of javelins will sort this lot out," Centurion Novellas said, eager to win the day and finally earn the confidence of his men. Centurion Suedius had always been popular with their soldiers, yet his incompetent

leadership was now severely hampering his standing within the Guard. Both were rather keen to defeat the Vitellians soundly and restore their reputations.

Near the right-hand edge of the formation, Guardsman Statius stood with his second pilum resting on his shoulder. He was sweating and out of breath. Yet he kept his wits about him, while scanning the ranks of their advancing foes. He counted their numbers and quickly assessed how many were in the front line of each formation. He conjectured there were, perhaps, fifteen hundred auxiliary troopers total. That this was only a couple hundred more than the praetorians' strength gave him a boost of confidence. The Vitellians may have caught them completely off-guard, but their lack of discipline and inability to finish them off would now come back to haunt them.

"Javelins ready!"

The Belgic soldiers were now within a hundred feet of the guardsmen, and spotting their raised javelins, their officers were frantically shouting orders to charge. The slope was negotiable, but still steep enough to prevent any except the best of runners from sprinting up it.

Volleys of heavy pila soon rained down upon them, and the auxiliaries dropped down and raised their shields up protectively. Numerous javelins punctured through the hamata chain mail worn by most of the troopers. Others tore the shields from their hands. Scores of men lay dead. At least a hundred more were gravely wounded.

"Gladius…draw!"

The shouts of the guardsmen, as their blades flashed from their scabbards, completely unnerved the already badly bloodied auxiliaries. They attempted to maintain their discipline as the praetorians charged. The momentum of their adversaries rushing downhill proved overwhelming. Troopers were bowled over by ramming shields, as the praetorians continued to scamper down into their now disorganized ranks. The Belgic cohorts were now completely broken. They turned to run, all order completely lost. Guardsmen cheered in triumph, as they smashed and stabbed their way through their ruined foes. Their own formations were now breaking apart, as men began to scatter. It did not matter. All knew they had won a great victory, ripped from the teeth of defeat and despair.



While the routing of the Belgica infantry cohorts should have caused

much consternation for Tribune Julius Classicus, the Vitellian officer was sneering sinisterly as he watched the chaos unfold. The Othonian praetorians failed to anticipate that he still had most of his cavalry regiments, which had been further augmented by those companies which came up from Forum Julii. And while the tribune lamented for the excessive losses his infantry cohorts were suffering, they had inadvertently led their enemy right into Classicus' trap.

"Sound the advance," the tribune ordered.

Most of his troopers remained hidden behind the reverse slope. Only a few scattered officers were aware of the battle taking place less than half a mile in front of them.

The rapid blasts came from the cornicen's horn, and cavalrymen quickly mounted their horses and advanced up to the ridgeline. The enemy praetorians, so engrossed with the thrashing they were giving to the auxiliary infantrymen, were utterly oblivious to this new threat.

"They have allowed their formations to fall apart," a centurion said, as he rode up next to the tribune.

"Time to smash them before they can reform," Classicus said, drawing his spatha. "We should try and save our auxiliary cohorts while we're at it."

With a subsequent blow on his horn, the cornicen signaled for the massed cavalry regiments to advance down the hill at a modest canter. The terrain was rough and uneven. Classicus did not wish to risk unnecessary injuries to his men or horses, nor have their mounts completely spent before engaging. The tribune leveled his sword as their foes grew closer. He gritted his teeth, ready to exact his retribution against the very men who had savaged his regiments barely a week before.



That twelve hundred praetorians were completely oblivious to the wall of enemy cavalry threatening to envelope them, defied any sense of logic or reason. As they caught their breath, the shattered auxiliaries fleeing in their wake, the guardsmen were now scattered and completely exposed to the pending charge of horsemen.

Tiberius Statius was among the first to spot them. He stood with his hands on his knees, breathing deeply. Sweat dripped down his face. He glanced over his shoulder, eyes wide as terror gripped him. A few others then

spotted the charging mass, the thunder of their hooves now heard by all, as an enemy trumpet sounded the charge.

"Oh, fuck," Statius muttered, turning to face the wave of horsemen. It was far too late. Before he could get his balance a charger smashed into him, sending him flying backwards into a narrow ditch. He landed hard on his back and head. Were it not for his helmet, a large, jagged rock would have split his skull open. The force of impact was great. The wind was knocked from his lungs, his eyes rolled back, and darkness enveloped him.

The remaining praetorians, who only moments before were celebrating another triumph, were now gripped with panic as over two thousand cavalry swarmed over them. And unlike their previous engagement, where shipborne missiles and a storm of javelins halted the horsemen's charge, this time there was nothing to slow their momentum. Guardsmen were scattered in loose formations, unable to close ranks into any sort of a defensive line. The attacking cavalrymen, enraged at what had befallen their friends just days before, exacted their vengeance with lance and spatha. So many praetorians had failed to don their armor, it left them fairly easy to cut down.

The slaughter lasted for about half an hour. Only those guardsmen on the far left of the formation were able to reform into battle lines. They stood behind a wall of shields and began to back quickly towards the camp they had vacated a couple of hours prior. None of them had any javelins left. All the while, they were harried by enemy horsemen, who tormented them with their lances. The Vitellian cavalry were now making full use of the superior reach of their weapons, keeping out of reach of the praetorian gladii.

As the Othonian soldiers reached their camp, the Vitellian horsemen were recalled by their trumpets. Numbing shock overwhelmed the guardsmen, as they stepped into their wrecked campsite. Survivors from the urban cohorts were also seen returning, looking equally bedraggled and in total disbelief. The enemy horsemen were shouting in triumph, brandishing their weapons, and daring the Othonians to come at them. They made no attempts to retake the camp, however, and soon contented themselves to withdraw for the time being.



As the midday sun beat down upon the camp and battlefield, the defeated

praetorians were appalled. How had such a disaster befallen them? Centurion Novellas was beside himself with grief and astonishment. Suedius was missing and most likely killed. Several guardsmen had seen him knocked over and trampled by a score of horses. This left the inept Novellas in command of what remained of their taskforce. At least half their number had fallen during the Vitellian cavalry charge, and most of the rest were battered and bloodied.

Officers had been specifically targeted by enemy lancers, with only one third of all centurions accounted for. Optio Proculus, who had numerous gashes about his face and arms, was now acting commander of his century. He had watched helplessly as Centurion Veturius was speared from behind, a lance bursting out through his chest as if the trooper who slew him were hunting wild boar. The reliable, albeit disagreeable Statius was also among the missing.

“We will break down our camp and withdraw to the ships.” Novellas stated.

“Agreed.” Proculus walked over to him. “But we need to send men out to try and retrieve our wounded. The Vitellian cavalry has withdrawn back to their ridge. I don’t suspect they wish to attack us again.”

“There isn’t time,” Novellus replied. He was at his wits end and anxious to leave, before their triumphant foes returned. “Grab whatever provisions you can carry and head for the ships!”

It was a terrible crime they were committing, one that completely destroyed whatever remained of the Othonian taskforce’s morale. The cries from hundreds of their badly injured companions could be heard echoing across the battlefield. Many were within but a few hundred feet of the camp, some of them calling to their friends by name. But sadly, panic gripped them. The survivors gathered up whatever food and supplies they could, ignoring the beckoning pleas of the wounded, and fled for the safety of their ships.



The early evening sun glowed over the mountains to the west as Tiberius Statius slowly regained consciousness. His entire body ached, especially his cramped neck and the back of his head. He pulled himself upright, bolts of pain shooting down his back and legs. The deep gouge in his helmet had cut into the back of his head, and it was with great relief he pulled it off. He

reached back and felt the gash. It covered in clotted blood and tender to the touch. He looked at his smashed helmet, and then down at the large jagged rock that should have killed him.

“I guess the gods aren’t finished with me yet,” he grumbled, as he slowly stood and climbed out of the ditch.

As he looked around he saw hundreds of bodies strewn about the plain. All were praetorians. He supposed the Vitellians, who were nowhere to be seen, had carted off their own dead and wounded. He could see movement among a number of the fallen, which meant his companions had failed to do the same for their brothers.

Statius started to hobble towards the shattered camp, his left knee buckling. His right thigh twitched in a spasm, having been badly bruised in his fall. As painful as it was, none of his injuries were fatal or serious. As far as he could tell he had no broken bones, and the amount of blood lost from the various cuts and gashes was negligible. He purposely avoided walking near any of the fallen praetorians for fear many of them may still be alive. Any who had not managed to extract themselves from the battlefield by this time were certainly in a most sorry state. They whimpered incoherently. And though it shamed the guardsman, he knew there was nothing he could do for any of them, except hasten their journey into the afterlife.

At the camp, there were even more bodies scattered amongst the fallen tents and wrecked equipment. These were a mix of men from the urban cohorts and the Vitellian auxiliaries.

“I guess your friends forgot about you,” Statius said, as he looked down at the corpse of a Belgic infantryman.

The right side of his throat was ripped away. Flies had already gathered in the pool of blood.

Statius knew within a day the bodies would become the feasts of carrion beasts, while looters from the nearest towns would strip the bodies naked of anything that might be of value. To the guardsman, the only things of value at that moment were water and food. There were plenty of water bladders to be found among the slain. And since the Vitellians neglected to plunder the camp, he was confident he’d be able to find sufficient food stores.

He built a small fire amongst the wreckage and cooked up some wheat porridge with pig fat. He took his humble supper and a bladder of water and left the camp out the south entrance. He sat atop a large rock outcropping that jutted out into the water. The ships were long gone. The vessel the Ligurians

set alight had only partially burned, though it lost its main sails and had to be towed by another ship. The guardsman did not know the very place he sat was where their adversaries had launched their attack against the ships.

As he ate his porridge and watched the evening sun dance off the waves, Statius felt surprisingly calm and relaxed. He had been badly bludgeoned and only narrowly escaped death. And like those poor souls left on the field, he had been abandoned by his comrades-in-arms. He supposed he should feel betrayed and abandoned. And yet he felt neither of these emotions. He was a pragmatic man. Given the overwhelming nature of the Vitellian cavalry charge, the surviving praetorians were fortunate to have escaped with their lives.

If his friends escaped by ship, the Vitellians likely did not attempt any form of a pursuit. What he did not know was where they had gone or, for that matter, where he could now go. West was out of the question. Cemenelum was almost twenty miles away and most certainly hostile. East was risky, too. The Othonians had done little to ensure the loyalty of the people of Albium Intimilium. There was a chance the Vitellians occupied that town as well, but Statius knew he had to accept the risk. There simply was nowhere else he could go. The only road in the region was the Via Julia Augusta which ran east to west along the coast. To the north was nothing but mountainous wilderness for at least fifty miles.

“No sense staying here,” he said to himself, as he tossed the empty bowl aside. The port city was only a few miles away, and he felt more secure approaching it at night. He had thought to rid himself of his armor, yet his scarlet tunic and weapon would still readily identify him as a member of the Praetorian Guard. He decided their protection was worth more than the added risk of being spotted by hostiles.

And so ended the ill-fated, tragic, and utterly pointless excursion of the Othonians into Maritime Alpes. Unbeknownst to Guardsman Statius, the survivors of the praetorian and urban cohorts had withdrawn, not to Rome but to the coastal city of Album Ingaunum sixty miles to the east. Populated by Othonian loyalists, they offered their support to the emperor’s guard who regrouped and reestablished their presence from the port.

As for the Vitellians, they were in a battered state despite their final victory. They had suffered terrible losses in both battles. And with so many wounded among their ranks, Tribune Classicus did not feel his men were in

any shape to continue an offensive campaign. Instead, they withdrew to Antipolis, fifteen miles southwest of Cemenelum and halfway to Forum Julii. The tribune knew he would not be rejoining General Valens for the north Italia campaign. Still, he took some solace in that he had prevented Otho's forces from causing even greater destruction within the province.

In the coming week, Governor Marius would negotiate a truce of sorts between the two factions. No written agreement was ever reached nor any messages corresponded directly between the opposing forces, but it was informally agreed upon that the seventy miles between Album Ingaunum and Antipolis would act as a neutral zone between the Othonians and Vitellians. It amounted to nothing, though, as the crux of the war would be fought three hundred miles to the east.

Chapter XXXIII: Into the Heart of Danger

Northern Italia
19 March 69 A.D.



Imperial Legate

While the Othonian and Vitellian forces in Maritime Alpes fought each other to an indecisive and utterly pointless stalemate. The rest of the Vitellian column under General Valens continued its long trek eastward. Having easily crushed a number of rebellious provincials, they now turned their attention towards northern Italia. His forces came mostly from Lower Germania consisting of the full complement of Legio V, *Alaudae*, along with roughly half the cohorts from First Germanica, Fifteenth Primigenia, and Legio XVI. The remainder of those three legions had been left to garrison the frontier against any barbarian incursions. Complimenting his division were roughly ten thousand auxiliaries. Among these were the eight cohorts of Batavian infantry who had prevented Legio XIV from coming to Nero's aid during Galba's insurrection. That they were unruly and had brawled with the legionaries who loathed their arrogance mattered little to Valens. Once they faced Otho's main army in battle, they would at last have a viable enemy to face. After ten weeks of terrorizing the peoples of Gaul, they were at last marching into Italia.

The rather pathetic and haphazard attempt by the Othonians to delay his

forces by raiding Maritime Alpes had ended in a stalemate, and done little to impede Valens' advance. He had dispatched less than three thousand men to deal with the incursion, which amounted to less than one tenth of his total force. And though the detachment under Tribune Classicus failed to drive the Othonians from Maritime Alpes, they had managed to render them combat ineffective. No more raids would come from the shattered remnants of Otho's misguided praetorians.



It was well after nightfall when Guardsman Tiberius Statius entered the port city of Albium Intimilium. Under the cover of darkness, he snuck aboard a docked merchant vessel. The ship's captain had been terrified to see the bedraggled praetorian barge into his quarters, and was even more confused when Statius presented him with coin rather than his sword.

"Ask no questions. Simply allow me the use of your cabin, and I will disembark as soon as you reach Ostia."

"B…but this ship isn't bound for Ostia," the captain protested, his hands still held up in surrender. "We are leaving for Carthago Nova in southern Hispania."

Statius chuckled and pulled out three gold aurei. "Now you're headed for Ostia," he said. "And for Juno's sake, put your hands down! I'm not here to threaten you or anyone aboard this ship. Once we're in Ostia and I am within walking distance of Rome, there will be ten more of those waiting for you."

The captain picked up one of the coins, noted the lack of scouring and the freshly-minted image of Emperor Otho, and simply said, "We will head for Ostia."

Statius was exceedingly wary during the journey, and he kept mostly to the cabin with the door barred. When he did go out onto the main deck, he kept his gladius on him and made certain to never allow anyone behind him, lest the crew hear about the 'wealthy' praetorian and attempt to mug him for the remainder of his coin. His fears were for naught. The captain had not so much as mentioned to anyone on his crew why they were first heading to Ostia. They, in turn, did not seem to have asked any further questions. And when Statius did come out of the cabin to check their progress, he noted the ship was heading southeast, taking the direct route towards Ostia and Rome rather than following the coastline, as was the norm.

A normal coastal trek to Ostia would have taken four or five days. By taking the direct route, skimming close to the northern coast of Corsica, the ship arrived in three. Upon disembarking, the crew were somewhat surprised to see him in the full armor of a praetorian guardsman. Like most peoples, none of them had any stake in the current war. And as long as trade was allowed to continue unabated, they cared not who the populace called ‘Caesar’.

“A promise is a promise, my friend,” Statius said to the captain, handing him a folded cloth.

The captain discretely unfolded the top layer to find ten more gold coins beneath. He gleamed and extended his hand to the guardsman.

“May Neptune guide you wherever your journeys take you, my friend.”

Ostia, being the port city for Rome herself, was much friendlier ground for Statius. He was relieved to be back after the disaster in Maritime Alpes, yet he was not all that certain what he should do now. He supposed the right thing would be to report back to the barracks, and see if anyone had received word from the taskforce’s survivors. This entailed the risk of being labeled as a coward or deserter by those nefarious types who did not care for Caesar’s hired blade. Therefore he decided he should report to the emperor himself.

It was late in the day when he finally made his way into the city. Though the city was bustling, the imperial palace was practically deserted. A pair of guardsmen stood outside the large doors, still partially smashed from the riot of drunken praetorians.

“Looks like someone has returned from the dead,” one of the men said, with a grin of disbelief.

“Bloody hell,” the other man said. “We’d written all of you off as lost.”

“And, as far as I know, that may be true,” Statius replied. He nodded towards the door. “What in Hades happened here?”

“You should ask Tribune Martialis,” the first guardsman replied. “He’s been left in charge of the few of us left here to make certain nobody loots the palace, while the emperor is away.”

“So the emperor has gone north,” Statius said.

“He has,” the second praetorian replied. “Though we’re all taking wagers on whether or not he returns.”



Caecina was filled with feelings of elation and triumph. He accompanied his advance guard into the city of Cremona on the twenty-third of March. Located just north of the River Padus, it was one of the most crucial strategic strongpoints in northern Italia. The other was the city of Placentia, located approximately twenty miles to the west on the southern bank of the Padus, along the Via Postumia. Placentia was important, because it was also the major crossroads between the Via Postumia and the Via Aemilia, which was one of the main arteries leading to Rome herself. And whoever controlled both cities controlled most of northern Italia.

The citizens of Cremona had readily opened their gates to the Vitellian army, though this had little to do with admiration or a desire to see Vitellius on the throne. In truth, most of the citizens in northern Italia had little to no knowledge whatsoever regarding the two rival Caesars. They couldn't care less who ruled from Rome. Besides, these approaching forces were not foreign invaders but imperial soldiers. If they had wanted to take a stand against the pretender, there was very little their small garrison could hope to achieve, even against the couple thousand soldiers of Caecina's advance guard.

While the people had no desire to involve themselves in a civil war whose outcome would not affect them one way or the other, the city's nobility was rather taken aback by Caecina's manner of dress. The magistrates and city councilmen, having been informed of the imperial legate's approach, donned their best formal togas. Yet, the general was seen wearing Gallic trousers, a ratty tunic underneath his tarnished breastplate, and a multicolored cloak. It had been the same during his journey, ever since his forces successfully negotiated the Alpes. They first passed through Bergomum, then Brixia, and finally down into Cremona. And while he treated the people of these cities with far more clemency and respect than he had the troublesome Helvetii, he was in no mood for formalities and niceties. But now that he had arrived at the city where he intended to make his base of operations, he knew he would have to play politician, as well as commanding general.

"Welcome to Cremona, noble Legate of Rome," the mayor said, bowing slightly as Caecina dismounted his horse.

"I thank you most humbly on behalf of our esteemed emperor, Aulus Vitellius Germanicus Augustus," Caecina replied, with a short bow in return. He watched the mayor, gauging his reaction to the general's assertion of Vitellius as emperor. The man seemed completely indifferent. Even calling

Vitellius by the title of *'Augustus'*, something that could only be lawfully bestowed by the senate, caused no reaction from the magistrates.

"I feel I must apologize for my manner of dress," the legate said, deciding now was the time to begin playing diplomatically with the city's leaders. "My army has traversed the fearsome Alpes and during such an arduous trek, we must be practical rather than formal regarding our attire. But if you will allow me to take my leave for the time being and have a bath, a shave, and a change of clothing, I think you will find me a more appropriate representative of the emperor."

"But, of course," the mayor replied. "My freedman will take you to the governor's villa, where my personal baths and all my slaves, will be at your disposal."

He was attempting to appear generous. Both parties knew he had little choice. A thousand cavalrymen and fifteen hundred legionaries now occupied the streets of Cremona, and these were just Caecina's advance guard. The mayor had no idea just how large this army was nor was he aware of an even bigger force, approximately three weeks' march to the west. What he did know was the Vitellians were here, while there had been no sign of Emperor Otho's forces within fifty miles. As such, the mayor and his councilors knew which side they would be obligated to support in the coming conflict.

"You are most kind," Caecina said. He turned back and held out his hand towards his wife. She had accompanied him since Bergomum. "May I present my wife, the Lady Salonina."

A pair of female slaves quickly rushed over to help her from her horse, bedecked in purple trappings as was the noblewoman herself.

"My lady, you are most welcome here," the mayor said. "My wife will be honored to make your acquaintance."

"And I hers," Salonina replied.

It had been a happy coincidence for Caecina that his wife had been staying with family in Bergomum during the winter months. Being a native of Croton, one of the southernmost cities in Italia, the Germanic winters disagreed with Salonina immensely. They would enjoy what time they could together, and Caecina would decide on the safest place for her once the Othonian army was sighted. But for the time being, there was little for his division to do, except wait for Valens or Otho to arrive. The Vitellian general secretly hoped for the later.



Nearly two weeks had passed since Otho departed Rome, at the head of his small band of loyalist soldiers and volunteers. Generals Paulinus and Celsus had arrived well before the emperor, having established the army's camp outside of Brixellum, just south of the River Padus and about fifty miles southeast of Cremona. There, they met with another of their peers, Legate Annius Gallus.

"Gentlemen," Gallus said, riding out to meet the two men at the head of an escort of two cavalry regiments.

"General Gallus," Celsus said, noting the grave concern upon his face. "Why the trepidation? Surely the enemy hasn't crossed into Italia already!" He was chuckling as he made this last remark. Gallus' pale expression immediately sobered him. "No…they can't have!"

"They can, and they have," Gallus said. "I took the liberty of posting scouts as far north as Comum and Bergomum and detaching a company of horsemen to Placentia. There has been no sign of the enemy's main army to the west; however, an entire division has crossed over the Alpes from the north. Legionaries, cavalry, auxiliary infantry, they number at least twenty thousand men, maybe more."

"I was afraid this would happen," Paulinus said with resignation. "The winter was incredibly mild, and there was a lot of speculation about the roads through the Alpes being passable. Still, even I did not think Vitellius would actually attempt it."

"And if twenty thousand have crossed over the Alpes, then there must be at least twice as many coming from the west," Celsus speculated.

"They wouldn't have been able to coordinate with each other, since their departure from Germania," Gallus noted. "For all we know, the larger Vitellian division could be three weeks, or even three months, from here."

"Still, this gives us absolutely no time to forge our jumbled mess of an army into a cohesive force," Celsus grumbled.

The other legates nodded in glum consensus. Two great impediments now faced them. The first was their rapport with their own troops. While the soldiers themselves were fiercely loyal to Otho, the men in the ranks would be prone to question whether or not their commanders felt the same. After all, loyalties among the patrician class were purchased more often than not. And how could individual legionaries and auxiliary troopers ever be certain they

weren't being set up for failure by officers who only just arrived? The best Roman generals were able, over time, to forge a bond between themselves and their soldiers. This was accomplished through mutual trust, strict discipline, and above all, the unwavering belief from the ranks that their commanders had their interests, and those of Rome, at heart. Even the divine Julius Caesar did not win the hearts and souls of his soldiers right away. Yet by the time they conquered Gaul, they were ready to march on Rome for their leader. The dilemma now facing the three senior generals of the Othonian army was that their soldiers simply did not know them.

The other difficulty they now had to contend with was that their enemies were highly experienced and battle-hardened veterans, while their own army was full of raw, scarcely trained recruits. While a few of the former marines who made up Legio I, Adiutrix may have had some experience fighting aboard ship, not one of them ever served in open battle on land. They were essentially legionaries in name only, who had had barely enough time to complete rudimentary recruit training after their foundation. The praetorian guardsmen were far better equipped and trained, though even most of them lacked actual battle experience. The emperor had brought the more experienced officers from the Guard with him, whose discipline and leadership qualities far surpassed those of the incompetent lot who led the expedition to Maritime Alpes.

As the advance guard made camp for the night, south of Brixellum, the three senior officers met in Gallus' tent to discuss the overall strategic situation. Emperor Otho, and indeed the entire army, would soon be horrified to learn a large Vitellian army seemingly appeared out of thin air in northern Italia. It had been unthinkable that any Roman army would leave its barracks and march through the winter. Yet, according to General Gallus, that is exactly what happened.

"At least now we know what we are up against, both internally and externally," Paulinus observed. "If the enemy are advancing on Cremona, then we must immediately secure Placentia."

"We could readily detach three of the praetorian cohorts," Celsus remarked. "And we have two cohorts from First Adiutrix, one of which is their eight hundred man First Cohort. Granted, these men are not experienced elite soldiers, like in most legions, but they are recruits who showed a lot of promise. And their centurions are veterans."

“Alright,” Paulinus nodded. “We’ll send the praetorians and a thousand men from Legio I, a full cohort, plus three of the double-strength centuries from their First Cohort. We can probably spare two regiments of cavalry as well, which will give the total force roughly three thousand men. The only question now is who to place in overall command.”

“There’s a centurion primus ordo from First Adiutrix, Titus Vestricius Spurinna,” Gallus observed. “He has served in the legions for twenty-eight years and has a wealth of experience and tactical savvy. He may be the best candidate we have available. But, he will likely run into substantial difficulties when dealing with the rankers.”

“What do you mean?” Celsus asked.

“The legionaries of First Adiutrix are raw recruits. Their centurions and options came from other legions,” Gallus explained. “Centurion Spurinna came from the Rhine army, First Germanica, in fact.”

“Bugger me,” Paulinus groaned, hanging his head for a moment. He then sat upright and called over his shoulder to a legionary standing guard. “Have him brought here at once!”

“Sir!”

“While we wait for Centurion Spurinna, there is something that’s been troubling me,” Celsus said. He held up his hands. “Now I know we have a very real war to fight against Vitellius, but my mind keeps wandering further east.”

“What are you talking about?” Gallus asked.

“He means Vespasian,” Paulinus answered. “According to his brother, Sabinus, his legions have sworn their allegiance to Otho. Should Otho lose, he is unlikely to take kindly to any demands of fealty from the usurper.”

Gallus shook his head in confusion. “We’ve already had three Caesars declared since the first of the year, are we to now expect a fourth? And why should we concern ourselves with Vespasian? We have a far more immediate threat right in front of us.”

“Because it is good to always be thinking a few moves ahead, especially in this dangerous game we play,” Celsus replied, his face breaking into a knowing grin. “Why do you think I’m still here? I was Galba’s most loyal and vocal supporter outside of his inner circle. And yet, I still live, whereas his closest advisors are all dead. Otho not only granted me full pardon in front of the entire senate, he named me one of his chief commanding generals for the war against Vitellius. How could this happen, you may ask? Because I

know how to play the game and survive, even on those rarest of occasions when I lose. Trust me, I will pour my very soul into defeating Vitellius. But should we fail, I intend to be left standing: not exiled to a remote isle or strangled atop the Gemonian Stairs for the amusement of the mob."

"As do I," Paulinus asserted. "But seeing as how the very idea of serving that lazy, rotund bastard turns my very stomach, let us hope Otho still holds the throne when this is over."

What the old general wanted to say, though wisely refrained from, was he wished it was Vespasian, and not Otho or Vitellius who he was given the choice of serving. But, while that was all irrelevant for the time being, it was still something which remained ever present in the far reaches of his mind.

"Beg your pardon, sir," a legionary said, opening the tent flap. "But Centurion Spurinna is here, as ordered."

"Show him in," Paulinus said with an impatient wave, relieved to be back to the issues at hand.

Titus Vestricius Spurinna was a big man. He stood at least two inches taller than Paulinus, and with his thickly muscled torso, legs, and arms, the general surmised the centurion was at least fifty pounds heavier. His hair was more of a dark sandy blonde, rather than the brown or black normally seen in Latin soldiers. This, coupled with his size and the assumption he had been born along the Rhine to a legionary father, told the generals he likely had Germanic roots on his mother's side.

"You sent for me, sir?" Spurinna asked, snapping off a sharp salute. Not knowing which of the three legates was the senior officer he addressed Paulinus. He was the oldest, as well as the officer the centurion was most familiar with.

"We did, centurion," Paulinus answered. "There is a task of great magnitude which we wish to entrust you with. However, there is a rather delicate issue that must first be addressed."

"However I can be of service," the centurion replied. His face bore several scars, including a nasty pair that formed an 'x' near his left jaw. His right forearm also bore a wide, hideous scar from a past adversary.

"As you are well aware," Celsus spoke up. "Our enemy consists mainly of soldiers from the Rhine army. Your own former legion, First Germanica, is among those."

"That they are, sir," Spurinna acknowledged. He then smirked mirthlessly, realizing why he was called before the three senior generals in

the Othonian army. “You want to know if I will fight against my former comrades or defect and join them. No disrespect intended, sirs, but isn’t that a question that should have been asked long before we marched three hundred and fifty miles from Rome?”

“No disrespect taken,” Paulinus reassured him. “General Gallus tells us you are an officer of much experience and tactical skill. That is why we intend to send you to Placentia with a force of three thousand men under your command. Of course you understand our concern, given you will be responsible for defending one of the most important strategic strongpoints in all of northern Italia.”

“And you want to know if I will stay true to my oath or hand the city back to my former legion,” Spurinna remarked. “I have served in the ranks for twenty-eight years, since my seventeenth birthday. My first oath of allegiance was to Emperor Claudius, and I have since kept my vow to him, Nero…and yes, even Galba, despite the terrible atrocities he committed towards those who now make up my legion. I accepted the transfer from First Germanica in order to serve Rome and my emperor. My allegiance firmly belongs to Otho, and Vitellius can only have it if Otho is dead and the senate confirms him as Caesar. Until then, he is nothing more than a pretender and a usurper, and I’ll shove my gladius up his ass, should our paths cross.”

“I like him,” Celsus said.

“Alright,” Paulinus concurred. He ordered one of his scribes to write a set of orders for the centurions from each cohort, to be sent to Placentia.

“Have your men ready to depart by midmorning,” he told Spurinna.



In Caesarea, the same question which troubled Suetonius Paulinus was now being echoed within the governor’s palace. Ever since word reached the east that Vitellius had declared himself emperor at the start of the New Year, rumors ran rampant that Rome’s most venerable general would refuse to bow before the usurper. The prediction of the Jewish general, Josephus, had also resurfaced in recent months.

“Otho still sits upon the throne,” Vespasian asserted, during a dinner he hosted for his army’s senior officers. Vitellius has not usurped him just yet.”

“And if Otho triumphs, do we overthrow him?” Trajan asked. “Are we then any better than the Vitellians, or are our oaths just as worthless as

theirs?”

“The words of your brother are clear,” Placidus emphasized. “The people in Rome have no love for Otho or Vitellius, finding it unseemly to go to the temples to pray for the safety and triumph of either.”

“No one vying for the throne can claim proper lineage or constitutional rights,” Vespasian said slowly. “And with the Julio-Claudians now extinct, whoever wins in this violent game has to provide some sense of rationale as to *why* the people should accept him as Caesar. The fact that Vitellius continues to march on Rome, even after Galba’s demise, tells me Otho has failed to win the people over.”

Titus thought for a moment, then added, “I think Vitellius would continue to try and stake his claim, regardless of who currently rules in Rome.”

“It’s true,” Trajan said. “Vitellius is little more than a fat patrician who loves banquets more than anything. However, he is no fool. I think he realizes, even if he should renounce his claim, Otho will still view him as a threat and have him disposed of in time. Besides, I doubt his legions will allow him to back down, not after they’ve come this far. True, they rebelled against Galba; however, Otho is simply an added obstacle to them, who happens to be standing in their way.”

“You know,” Vespasian remarked, “I cannot fault Vitellius for his actions, nor could I expect him to simply demand his soldiers lay down their arms and swear fealty to Otho. And given the phrasing of my brother’s latest dispatch, my instincts tell me both factions view us with suspicion.”

“Well, thank the gods we have Uncle Sabinus as our eyes in Rome,” Titus emphasized. “I suspect most of the empire has been left completely blind to what is transpiring in the capital. Hell, it would not surprise me if many of the provinces don’t even know Galba is dead, let alone anything about the civil war now threatening to tear the very fabric of Rome to shreds.”

“So we watch and wait,” Placidus remarked. “Just as we continue to wait for the rebellious Jews to kill each other off in Jerusalem, so must we wait and see which Roman faction is left standing after they’ve finished bleeding each other.”



As a centurion primus ordo, Spurinna had achieved one of the most exalted ranks a plebian soldier could ever hope to attain. He was iron-fisted

when it came to discipline, and never shrank from administering floggings or other punishments to insubordinate legionaries. At the same time, he was quick to praise both valor and initiative. During his years with First Germanica, his tactical skill and situational awareness had led his men to decisive victories when battling the seemingly endless hordes east of the Rhine. He had been decorated for extreme personal bravery no less than six times. But that was a long time ago, in a different legion, and in a region of the empire completely foreign to most of those who now served under his command.

Discipline, command, and overall control of his soldiers was now far trickier than in any other time in his nearly three decades in the ranks. The centurion was keenly aware that he faced the same quandary as their generals. His soldiers had a certain level of inborn misgivings. After all, they knew him scarcely any more than they did their legates. Since his previous legion would be among those opposing them, it was no small wonder they were suspicious about his intentions. Gaining their trust would take time. And thanks to Caecina's unexpected winter advance over the Alpes, time was something they did not have.

Spurinna had ordered his taskforce paraded just after dawn. All officers would conduct final inspections of their men and pack animals and report to him when complete. They had a modest journey of approximately ten miles to complete this day, southwest to the city of Parma. After which, they would head northwest along the Via Aemilia, reaching Placentia in approximately two days.

"All infantry cohorts are ready to advance, sir," a praetorian centurion said, riding up and saluting.

"Very good," Spurinna said, returning the gesture. "Half our cavalry will screen the front as a vanguard, the rest will cover our flanks and rear. First two praetorian cohorts will take the lead, followed by the legionary cohorts, and finally the last of the praetorians."

It was a matter of appeasing the pride of the imperial guardsmen that Spurinna allowed them to march at the head of the column. And though they lacked actual campaign experience, at least they were not completely raw and untrained.

The trek to Parma was without incident, even though there were grumblings from some of the ranks that they were "going the wrong way" and "the enemy was to the north, not the west". Still, the pace of the journey

was brisk. The taskforce arrived at the city gates by midafternoon. Spurinna gave his men leave to partake in refreshments and entertainment with a strict curfew of nightfall. The evening passed with only a few disciplinary issues, and by the following midmorning they were on the move again. On this day, they advanced to the northwest along the Via Aemilia. The road, a high-use thoroughfare between northern and central Italia, was wide and well maintained. This time they took refuge in an old auxilia fort near a road station known as *Ad Florentiola*. The mood of the soldiers was now one of eager anticipation. They knew once they crossed the River Padus, they would at last come face-to-face with the hated traitors.

The third day of their journey involved a twenty-five mile trek to the city of Placentia, where Centurion Spurinna intended to establish a defensive stronghold. The praetorians and legionaries were lustily anticipating closing with their enemy. They set such a brisk pace, their hobnailed sandals clattering on the cobblestones in such a rapid cadence, that they reached their destination in just over six and a half hours. It was barely noon, and though the men were tired, they were driven by their ever-growing bloodlust and thirst for martial glory. As the column stopped for a short rest, a couple miles from the city, such excited talk could be heard in a myriad of conversations amongst the Othonian soldiers.

“Most of these men have never attacked anything with their gladii except training stakes,” Spurinna said to one of his legionary centurions, also a hardened veteran. “They do not yet understand there is no glory to be had in killing other men, especially when they are fellow Romans.”

“They’ll learn soon enough,” the other centurion remarked, “once they see their first man laying screaming on the ground, his guts splayed open.”

A cavalry scout was soon spotted riding from the direction of the city.

“What news?” Spurinna asked.

“The city’s walls are twenty feet high,” the trooper reported, “enough to make a viable defense from.”

“Very good. And no sign of the enemy?”

“No, sir. Though we did hear that a Vitellian division under Caecina Alienus has occupied Cremona.”

“Well, that can’t be helped,” the centurion replied. He turned to several of his subordinate officers. “Placentia is the other most viable strategic point in the region, aside from Cremona. As long as we control it, they cannot utilize the River Padus nor the Aemilia Road.”

“Hang on…hang on!” a praetorian guardsman spoke up, interrupting the officers. “I thought we were taking the fight to the Vitellians, not coming all this way just to sit on our asses!”

Guardsmen and legionaries were soon gathering around, many of them making similar remarks. It irritated Spurinna to no end that such gross insubordination was being accepted and, in some cases, encouraged. In his previous legion, the impudent guardsman would have been beaten with the centurion’s vine stick and docked a week’s pay for such an outburst. But with every last man in the ranks suspicious of their officers’ loyalties, Spurinna was, for the moment, powerless to resort to harsh disciplinary measures.

“How do we know you’re not going to confine us all to the city, so you can defect to the pretender?” a legionary added, albeit with uncertainty.

Spurinna looked to his cohort commanders and gave an almost imperceptible nod. “Alright,” he said. “Do you wish to take the fight to the enemy?”

“Yes!” a chorus of voices shouted back.

“Very well,” the centurion replied. “We will bypass the city and continue along the Via Aemilia, towards the road station of Ad Padum. Once we cross the River Padus, we’ll conduct an armed reconnaissance east towards Cremona.”

This elicited a series of cheers and battle cries, as the men hoisted their packs. Centurion Spurinna looked at his perplexed officers and gave a subtle wink. One of the praetorians understood his meaning and gave a nod of understanding.

The Othonian taskforce continued to march until nightfall. They reached an open plane near a bridge that lead over the River Padus. The soldiers were now utterly spent, and many wished to lie down and sleep.

“What do you think you are doing?” Spurinna shouted to a group of legionaries, who had dropped their packs and were starting to remove their armor.

“Bunking down for the night, sir,” a legionary said, surprised at the question.

“Across that bridge is enemy territory,” the centurion said, pointing over his shoulder. “And there are at least two or three passable fording points within a few miles. We are out in the open with no knowledge as to where the enemy might be, and you’re going to lie down and let him cut your throat in the middle of the night? Get up, all of you! Grab your entrenching tools and

start fortifying this camp!”

The legionaries and praetorians looked at each other in confusion. Another centurion stepped forward and began to berate them. “You stupid shits! Are you all so eager to face the enemy, on open ground, who outnumbers you ten-to-one? And since you dare to question the loyalty of your own officers, you are at risk of being wiped out before we’ve even crossed the fucking river!”

Spurinna continued, “You men of First Adiutrix, if you are going to be legionaries, you’d best learn how to establish a fucking camp! Six foot deep trench all the way around with earthen palisade atop. Latrine trenches will need to be dug, all tents erected, and a sentry list established.”

Both the praetorians, as well as the Adiutrix legionaries had either bivouacked within cities or set up their tents near the walls, during their journey north. None of them had anticipated having to establish a regulation marching camp each night. Men started fumbling for their tools, forlorn that this was going to take half the night.

Their commanding officer held up his hand.

“My colleague here is correct,” he said. “You are all a bunch of stupid shits. Under most circumstances, I’d have the lot of you flogged! And if there are any further breaches of discipline, or any outbursts or seditious talk that questions the loyalty of your officers, I will beat the offenders myself, and they will be docked a month’s wages. Now, we have two options. You can attempt to learn how to set up a proper army camp in the middle of the night, while praying enemy scouts have not reported back to their main body that their adversaries are a bunch of confused little boys, trying to play soldier. Or, we can heft our packs, make the trek back to Placentia, and camp within the safety of its walls. If we leave now, we can make it back by midnight.”

The thought of marching another two hours back to Placentia was hateful, but it was still preferable to trying to establish a marching camp in the middle of the night. By the time the exhausted contingent reached the city, all the while looking for enemy soldiers over their shoulders as their centurions berated them, they had marched a mind and body numbing thirty-five miles since morning. Never again would they doubt Centurion Spurinna or any of their officers.

Chapter XXXIV: Storming the Walls

Placentia, west of Cremona
28 March 69 A.D.
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As his forces marched back into Placentia, Centurion Primus Ordo Spurinna summoned his subordinate commanders to him. Discipline may have been restored, but now there was the matter of making preparations for the coming Vitellian onslaught.

"At least that little stroll will teach those insubordinate bastards to obey orders," a centurion pilus prior muttered.

"We will need those insubordinate bastards if we are to defend Placentia," Spurinna noted. "We'll let them rest tonight, but tomorrow we begin preparations."

The centurion scaled the stone steps to the top of the wall and gazed towards the east. Under the moonlight, he could just make out the Via Postumia, as well as the River Padus which ran just north of the city. Near the intersection was a large wooden amphitheater. Many locals claimed it was the largest of its type in the western empire. It was also located uncomfortably close to the wall, and could make for a viable staging platform for enemy archers.

"We should tear down the amphitheater," he said to one of his centurions. "It's only two hundred feet from the wall. And while it makes for a poor defensive position for us, it would give enemy archers a far greater vantage point from which to engage us."

"That theater is over a hundred years old," the centurion observed. "I grew up in Veleia, about thirty miles to the south of here. We used to come up to watch plays and gladiatorial matches here. It is a great source of pride for the locals. If we attempt to dismantle or destroy it, they'll cast us out and hand the city over to the Vitellians."

It was not the answer Spurinna wanted, but he knew the centurion was right. "Then we'll place two of our scorpions here," he said. "I want them to keep the enemy from making any use of that structure."

The nearby amphitheater aside, Centurion Spurinna was quite pleased with the defensive capabilities of the city. The walls were just high enough to

make assaults with ladders rather difficult, while the defensive ramparts were thick enough to withstand much of the impact from catapult shot. He suspected the enemy would be overconfident and impatient, thereby reducing the probability of them attempting a lengthy siege.



The remainder of Caecina's division had arrived at Cremona, and he now met with his legates and other senior officers to plan the next phase of their campaign. As there had been no contact with General Valens in over three months, they had no way of knowing where exactly he was. For all they knew, he could still be stuck in Gaul. Or, he could have crossed over the western Alpes and be well into Italia.

"I don't plan on waiting for Valens," Caecina asserted. "At least not until after we have taken Placentia. Once that city is in our hands, we will control most of the northern and southern regions around the River Padus. Only Verona, to the east, is still loyal to Otho. And it is from that direction I suspect the Balkan legions to come."

"If we take Placentia, we can have the usurper beaten before they even arrive," a legate stated. Like most of the senatorial officers, they longed for a chance at personal glory, and were in no mood to share any of the honor or spoils with Valens' division.

"As we understand it," Caecina continued, "Otho has only committed a few thousand men to the defense of the city. These are mostly pretty-boy praetorians and former marines from that legion Galba raised a few months ago. Our veterans will roll right over them."

"So you do not intend to lay siege to the city?" another officer asked.

"A siege will take too long," the commanding general answered. "Right now, we need a quick and decisive victory. Placentia is approximately a day's march from here. If we get an early start, those impetuous fools can watch as their doom approaches along the Via Postumia. If they have any sense, they will surrender the city and, perhaps, decide to join us. After all, no one likes fighting for a losing cause."

The following morning, Caecina rode at the head of his massed column; legionaries, auxilia infantry, archers, as well as several regiments of cavalry. First Germanica marched at the head, with none of them knowing one of their

own former centurions now commanded the garrison that opposed them. Drummers beat a quick marching cadence, while trumpeters played their music to announce the army's approach. The entire display was a little grandiose, perhaps, but Caecina wanted there to be no doubt as to which imperial army controlled northern Italia.

Merchant and other civilian traffic was surprisingly heavy, though many were oblivious to the reality of there being a war going on in the first place. While several of Caecina's standard bearers carried long poles with copper images of Vitellius at the top, few if any citizens in the region had any idea what he or Emperor Otho looked like. To them, one Caesar was as good or bad as the next.

The bridge just west of Cremona was crammed with carts, wagons, and pedestrians. All soon made way for the vast column of soldiers, who forced the civilian merchants and pedestrians off the road. After all, the paved thoroughfares throughout the empire were built by the legions, for the legions. That civilians were able to make use of them was simply an added benefit. The region between Cremona and Placentia was predominantly flat, covered with farm fields and vineyards. The army made rapid progress, covering roughly three to four miles every hour before halting for a short rest. Infantrymen marched eight abreast with pack animals bearing tents and other equipment, and the majority of the cavalry riding behind them. The entire column stretched over four miles in length.

Two companies of horsemen had ridden ahead, to scout for any enemy forces in the area. They had reached Cremona a few days prior, with little time to conduct a thorough reconnaissance of the region. The only intelligence Caecina had was given to him by Centurion Liberius from the Siliana Regiment. And even that was limited. What he did know was Otho was on the march, though his total strength was completely unknown. Brixellum was the natural place for the enemy to establish themselves, as it was just south of the Padus and fairly easy to defend. As a precaution, Caecina dispatched a company of horsemen to the town of Vulturina just a few miles northwest of Brixellum, in case the enemy crossed the Padus en masse to threaten Cremona while he was capturing Placentia.

By midafternoon, the lead elements of the division were within a few miles of their destination. Once established within full view of Placentia, it would take a couple of hours for the rest of the column to arrive and emplace themselves. Caecina hoped such a display would discourage any potential

resistance from the garrison. At the crossroads where the Via Aemilia and Via Postumia converged, the general saw a section of his scouts waiting for him.

“The local garrison has been reinforced by Othonian soldiers, sir,” the section leader reported.

“So the usurper intends to play out this little game with us,” Caecina replied, with a macabre chuckle.

“It would seem so, sir,” the scout stated. “They proudly display their standards from the walls. We saw the purple vexilation flags of three praetorian cohorts, and what appear to be those of the Adiutrix Legion.”

“Effeminate praetorians and untrained former marines,” said the master centurion of First Germanica. He was a hardened veteran named Aetius.

“Have the legion make ready to assault the walls,” Caecina ordered.

“Sir, most of our siege equipment is at the rear of the column,” the master centurion stated. “All we have are some ladders.”

“Those will be sufficient,” the legate replied. “A little show of strength while the rest of the army encircles the city, and they will capitulate soon enough.”



Centurion Spurinna had kept his soldiers busy, readying the city’s defenses. Their only archers were a small contingent of around fifty local militia, and so the centurion primus ordo devised a few stratagems to deal with the coming assault.

“We’ll likely be facing legionaries,” Spurinna observed. “Their armor is impervious to archers, of which we have so few. And we only have six scorpions to supplement our wall defenses. What we need is missile weapons with a lot of weight to them. Large stones, chunks of metal, anything heavy enough it will crack their armor when flung from the walls.”

“I’ve got men scouring every smithy, shop, and stone mason in the city,” a praetorian officer reported. “Every piece of scrap iron and heavy rock is being loaded onto wagons and brought to the defenses.”

The blast of trumpets in the distance alerted the officers.

Spurinna was somber. “And not a moment too soon.”

He quickly made his way to the eastern wall. The gate was barred shut and braced with a pair of ox-drawn wagons. A single scorpion was mounted

just above the gate and manned by a pair of legionaries. A trio of archers stood on either side of them, though most of the defenders on this section of the defenses were praetorians. The corner ramparts were manned by legionaries from Spurinna's own First Cohort. The centurion noted the nervous expression on the face of the young soldier standing behind the scorpion.

"Bellona preserve us," he said quietly.

Spurinna followed the man's gaze to where three cohorts of legionaries were already arrayed in battle ranks. They advanced at a slow half-step, allowing the subsequent cohorts time to get off the road and to their places. Long lines of cavalry were seen riding in either direction, encircling the large city. To his right front, the centurion saw what looked like cohorts from a second legion crossing a farm field and making their way towards the southern ramparts. As it was only early spring, crops had yet to spring up, though the farmers lamented that their fields were being trampled by the swarms of thousands of enemy soldiers. The defenders of Placentia had a full view of their adversaries, though their concerns were not of ruined crops, but what should happen, if they Vitellians managed to capture the walls.

"And to think our lads thought they could face them out in the open," a praetorian centurion said, in a low voice.

Spurinna said nothing, but stared hard at the enemy cohorts advancing towards him. Next to their eagle, he saw the bull standard of Legio I, Germanica.

"I'll be damned," he muttered.

Seven cohorts from First Germanica had come on this expedition. The remaining three were left to garrison their fortress on the Rhine under the command of their chief tribune. All were now arrayed in a massive battle line, six ranks deep, continuing to advance slowly and methodically towards the ramparts.



Caecina was mildly surprised to see the walls crammed with defenders. It mattered not. He had ordered the legate of Legio XXI to launch his assault on the southern ramparts as soon as they were in position. Caecina would attempt to parlay with the garrison commander. But if that failed, he was not about to give them any chance to ready themselves for the coming onslaught.

Halting just beyond range of the few archers they spotted on the walls, Caecina rode forward with his aquilifer and Master Centurion Aetius, who was acting commander of First Germanica.

"Defenders of Placentia," he called out. "In the name of your emperor, Aulus Vitellius Germanicus Augustus, I demand you surrender this city at once! Caesar offers you his hand in friendship and will welcome you into the ranks of his triumphant legions!"

"We serve Rome's true emperor, Marcus Salvius Otho, whose rule was lawfully sanctioned by the Senate of Rome," a voice replied from the ramparts. "Your master has no legal authority here. He is but a violent pretender, who would seize the imperial throne through force of arms. I call upon *you* to lay down your arms and repent of your treason!"

This was met by raucous laughter from the ranks of legionaries behind Caecina and Aetius. The general gave a cocked smile and shook his head at the absurdity of their adversary's demands. All the while, Master Centurion Aetius stared with squinted eyes towards the ramparts. The voice sounded familiar to him…

"Look around you!" Caecina retorted. "The greater part of three legions, and just as many auxiliaries, descends upon you. And what do you have to offer in resistance? All I see are a handful of petty guardsmen, used to watching battles in the arena rather than taking part in them. And who accompanies them, but a few sailors pretending to be legionaries?"

"Just a moment, sir," the master centurion said, quickly placing a hand on his shoulder. "I think I know this man. Let me speak with him."

Caecina, already aggravated at the audacity of the enemy commander, agreed.

"Spurinna?" Aetius called up.

"Fancy seeing you here, master centurion," came the reply from the ramparts.

"Well, I'll be buggered," Aetius said, shaking his head. "I knew you accepted a promotion into one of the new legions. But, damn it all, what in Jupiter's name are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question, sir," Spurinna retorted. "The answer is the same for both of us; we are following orders. The difference is mine come from Rome's lawful emperor, yours from a despotic pretender."

"Come off it, man," Aetius remarked. "Spare me your talk about loyalties. I will tell you what loyalty I understand, for you once understood it

as well. You see those shields behind me? Yours once bore the same emblem, for more than twenty years! These are your brothers, and these are the men you should pledge your loyalty to. Will you really give up your life ignominiously in a losing cause? You cannot win this, Spurinna. You are hopelessly outnumbered, and you know better than anyone what these men are capable of. Open the gates, and let us speak no more of this. Return to your brothers, and I will see you properly rewarded."

There was a lengthy pause. It appeared Spurinna was debating Aetius' proposition. Caecina was hopeful he would not be required to storm the city. He looked back to his cornicen, who held his horn ready to sound the notes that would call off the Predator Legion's attack. Centurion Spurinna's next words enraged the general, though Aetius closed his eyes in sorrow.

"Those men will always be my brothers," Spurinna replied. "As are you, sir. You have my love, even though I must spill your guts this day. My oath is more sacred than my life, and it cannot be purchased with a usurper's gold or the threats of his minions."

"Then gods go with you," Aetius said sadly. "If you fall this day, I pray they will welcome you into the gates of Elysium."

"And to you, sir," Spurinna acknowledged. "If this day should be your last, may you die with honor."



Centurion Primus Ordo Spurinna had no time to lament the cursed fates. He was now the enemy of the very legion he had once called his own. A messenger was riding as fast as his horse could run over the cobblestone road within the city below.

"Sir, the enemy is assaulting the south ramparts!" the man shouted.

"Damn them," Spurinna growled, glaring for a moment at General Caecina riding back to his legion. He then caught a quick glace towards Master Centurion Aetius, who gave a slow salute before returning to his men. Spurinna's heart broke at this hateful dilemma. Aetius had been his superior officer, as well as his mentor, back when Spurinna was a centurion pilus prior. Now, the treason of his own former soldiers meant they would have to die should they fail to repent. With battle imminent, Spurinna steeled himself to do his duty.

He quickly climbed down the wall, mounted his own horse, and rode the

half mile to where his own soldiers from the Adiutrix Legion were readying themselves to face the coming attack. Mounds of stones and rusted scrap iron were piled all along the rampart. His men had their javelins. But after two volleys, they would be gone.

“They’re crossing the wheat field to our front, sir,” a legionary said, pointing towards the seemingly endless plowed rows, now being kicked up and stomped over by several thousand soldiers from Legio XXI.

The fields, saturated with irrigation water, slowed them considerably. Yet there was an open stretch of a hundred meters from the bordering road to the walls.

“They’re carrying ladders, sir, but I don’t see any other siege equipment.”

With perhaps twenty ladders in the entire assault force, Spurinna knew their foes could only send a small number of men over the wall at a time. He was shocked at the lack of archers, scorpions, or any other supporting missile troops. Still, facing an entire legion was extremely daunting, especially to his inexperienced soldiers.

“Men of the Adiutrix Legion!” the centurion shouted. “Our enemies come to us full of arrogance and overconfidence. They mock you as not being true soldiers. You have already suffered much. You have endured the wickedness of one tyrant, and now another now seeks to strip you of your honor as men. I say, damn them! Throw back our enemies, and no one will ever think to deny you of your rights as soldiers of the empire. On this day, paid for in blood, you will earn the right to be legionaries of Rome!”

This was met with as loud an ovation as the centurion had ever heard in his lifetime. His men were filled with anger, grit, and determination. What they lacked in experience, they made up for in extreme bravery. No one would doubt them after this day’s fighting was done!



“I will take my place on the battle line, sir,” Master Centurion Aetius said, as he dismounted his horse.

“What are you talking about, man?” Caecina asked, his brow creased. “You’re the acting commander of this legion, I cannot afford to lose you.”

“No one man is irreplaceable,” Aetius countered. “If you send the First Cohort into the attack, I go with them. If my old friend and former protégé is to die, I’d rather it be by my sword.”

Caecina gave what appeared to be a bored sigh. He cared nothing for the sentimental or noble feelings amongst the plebian soldiery. He waved off the master centurion, but said no more. He then rode his horse towards the left end of their line, from which he could watch his legion, as well as the Twenty-First as they stormed over the walls. The men of the Predator Legion had crossed the wheat field and were now bracing their ladders against the wall. The general snorted as he thought about the vanity of legionaries and their own thirst for glory. After all, the first man over the wall of an enemy stronghold, provided he survived, would be awarded with the much coveted gold *Rampart Crown*.



As the tops of the ladders from the Twenty-First Legion smacked against the wall, defenders tried quickly to overturn them. A pair of enemy soldiers at the bottom attempted to hold each one in place. They only had a few moments each time. Once more than a couple of soldiers mounted them, their weight would be too great to overturn. It only took an attacker a matter of seconds to reach the top, with subsequent assailants only a rung or two beneath their feet.

Two of the ladders were successfully tipped over before they could get any of their men over the wall. Each time, the attackers would simply pick them back up and try again. One ladder was pushed back, almost all the way over, before the weight of the soldiers riding it carried it back down against the wall with hard jolt. This caused the man at the top to drop his shield in an attempt to hang on. It cost him dearly. A defending legionary threw his pilum straight into his exposed neck. The soldier’s eyes slammed shut, his mouth agape, as his throat and spine were smashed by the heavy javelin. He was dead before his twitching body hit the ground.

Others who brazenly attempted to win the Rampart Crown met with similarly brutal ends. Some were swarmed by defenders, who hacked and stabbed at anything not covered in armor. A couple were simply grabbed by numerous hands and flung down into the cobblestone courtyard inside the city. One soldier was unceremoniously tossed only to land hard on his back on the stone steps a few feet down, rather than falling all the way to the ground. And though the wind was knocked from his lungs, his armor protected him from more serious injury. He somehow managed to maintain

control of his gladius. After taking a moment to catch his breath, he gave a growl of rage and ascended the steps, plunging his blade deep into the exposed thigh of an Adiutrix legionary. The man screamed in agony. His assailant scampered up to the top, grabbed an unsuspecting defender by the head, and slashed his throat.

The entire rampart was now a display of equally frenzied brawls, with the assault troops attempting to secure a foothold upon the wall. The attack upon the eastern defenses was being met with a similar amount of brutality and violence. The praetorians made a far more stalwart defense than Caecina anticipated. Having employed only ladders to get his men over the walls, his vast numerical superiority was suddenly rendered meaningless. The guardsmen and Adiutrix legionaries were not cowed at all, but driven to great acts of bravery by the Vitellian army's impudence.

Within an hour, it became clear to General Caecina that the walls would not fall this day. He ordered his cornicen to sound the retreat and rode his horse away from the lines. He wished to retire to his principia tent. But with the entire legion engaged, and having thought he would dine and sleep within the mayor's palace by nightfall, there was no camp to retire to.

Both the Germanica and Predator legions withdrew with as much discipline and cohesion as they could muster. Shields were kept close together to repel any enemy arrows or other missile weapons. As many wounded as they could manage were dragged away. The dead were left where they fell.

Beaten and dejected, the survivors set about preparing their camp for the night. Meanwhile, centurions and decani began to assess who among their ranks was missing, presumed killed or taken prisoner. It was quite the tribute to the imperial army's discipline that soldiers were able to efficiently go about their duties, despite the savaging they had just suffered.

While torches on long poles were placed in the ground, near where his headquarters tent was to be placed, Caecina found Master Centurion Aetius. He was seated on a small campstool, his battered helmet beside him, wiping down the blade of his gladius.

"I see you bloodied your weapon in the emperor's service," Caecina said, taking another stool and joining the primus pilus.

"One praetorian," Aetius replied, his eyes still fixed on his weapon. "I managed to stick one praetorian in the guts today. A small bit of recompense

for the losses my legion suffered."

"I was overzealous," Caecina confessed. "The fault for our failure rests with me alone. I assure you, we will not be so careless tomorrow."

"So you still intend to carry those walls by direct assault rather than starving them out a bit," the master centurion remarked.

Caecina could not tell if this was a rebuke, an endorsement, or simply Aetius' observations. "They won't starve anytime soon," he replied. "Besides, it would greatly harm the reputation of our division should General Valens arrive and find us sitting on our asses, having given up after one assault."

The master centurion gave a grim smile at his legate's confession. There was no sense in hiding it. Both men knew that, while Caecina and Valens had once been friends who wished to rule the empire together, rivalry and the lust for personal glory had come between them.

"If it's any consolation, sir," Aetius replied. "The men still prefer you to Valens. You're far younger, and you have a much stronger rapport with the soldiers in the ranks. Regardless of the setbacks we suffered today, our soldiers appreciate your sense of aggression and your willingness to take the fight to the enemy."



Despite the vastness of the army now entrenching itself beyond the city walls, the defenders of Placentia were filled with feelings of triumph and elation. Even Centurion Spurinna felt an overwhelming sense of relief at the repulsing of the enemy from their walls.

"Do you think they'll dig in for a long siege, sir?" one of his men asked, as the centurion walked the ramparts later that evening.

"I cannot speak for the enemy general," he replied. "But I wouldn't think so. Caecina is a bit reckless, but strategically he's no fool. He has to know the emperor is bringing an entire army to bear. If we can just hold for a couple more days they'll have to withdraw, lest the rest of our forces trap them here."

"We didn't see any heavy siege engines," one of his centurions added.

"I suspect they either sent them with Valens' army or failed to bring them at all," Spurinna guessed. "Even without onagers, they most likely will have brought up scorpions and smaller ballistae."

The centurion left his sentries and made his way to a textile warehouse near the east gate, where the enemy prisoners were being housed. Spurinna had also demanded that their wounded be treated with the same amount of care as their own. A squad of legionaries manned each of the four entrances to the building with a full century of praetorians in reserve, should the prisoners attempt to riot or escape. There were several hundred crammed into the warehouse. All looked dejected at having been defeated and captured, and there was little defiance in their demeanor.

"Fancy seeing you here, sir," a voice spoke up, as Spurinna walked along the rows of prisoners.

Having once been a centurion pilus prior in First Germanica, he knew there was a significant chance of seeing some of his former soldiers among the prisoners. "Do I know you?" he asked.

The soldier appeared to be in his early thirties. His arm was bandaged, and his scruffy face bore a couple of fresh gashes. "Not well, I suspect. I served in your cohort for a brief time. I was transferred to the Sixth Cohort after being promoted to tesserarius, just prior to your departure."

"And what of the Fourth Cohort?" the centurion asked. "Are they encamped outside the city with the rest of the legion?"

"Lucky for you, no," the tesserarius replied. "They were among those left to guard the Rhine frontier. Can't say they were too happy about it, being that they will miss out on all the plunder and glory. I imagine they will like it even less, when they hear their own commander fought against the legion."

"I am sorry for every last soldier who died this day, and for those who will fall tomorrow," Spurinna stressed. "But I'll not debate who is right or wrong in this war."

"It matters little to us, sir," the soldier said, shrugging nonchalantly. "Us poor bastards in the ranks have little to fear…once we're all done killing each other, that is. Should Otho win, he'll likely hang our generals as traitors, while sacking or exiling most of the senior centurions and tribunes. But he will need us lowly legionaries. And as long as we swear our oaths like good little soldiers, he'll most likely allow us to return to the Rhine, as if nothing ever happened. If Vitellius should triumph, well, I suspect he'll laude us all as heroes and reward each one of us who was captured in the taking of this city. The senators and politicians can go on about who the rightful emperor is, but frankly sir, most of the lads don't give a shit. We fight for each other, and that is enough."

Chapter XXXV: Theater of Pain

Placentia, Northern Italia
29 March 69 A.D.
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Caecina slept very little that night, distraught over the losses his legions suffered and their utter failure to take the walls of Placentia. He had been somewhat taken aback by his master centurion's assessment that despite their defeat this day, the men in the ranks still preferred him as their commander. Still, if he failed to take the city, his former friend and now rival would most certainly use it as a means of humiliating and undermining him.

Approximately three hours after midnight, once resigned to the reality that sleep would be denied him, Caecina left his tent and took a walk through the camp of the Fourth Macedonia Legion. He was commander of the entire division but made his headquarters with the legion he was still legate over. Legio IV had been kept in reserve during the battle, as they had been towards the back of the vast column. Now their soldiers were anxious to get at the impudent defenders of Placentia.

Sentries carried torches and patrolled the perimeter. Small groups of cavalrymen could be seen in the dim moonlight, riding between the fortified camps of the legions and auxiliary regiments. Near the entrance, facing the city, Caecina noted seven scorpions and a pair of catapults. These were of similar design as the onagers but much smaller.

"We'll be able to haul these into the amphitheater," a decanus whose squad guarded the weapons, stated. "These smaller onagers have a shorter range, but from up there we'll be able to fling some burning surprises onto the heads of our enemies."

Given the vast responsibilities heaped upon him for the command of multiple legions plus thousands of auxiliary troopers, Caecina had forgotten he even had these smaller catapults. Granted, he only possessed two, and they had been packed as an afterthought when the army departed Germania. Most of the heavy siege train had taken the long route with Valens. These and their compliment of scorpions had only been brought as a precaution. Valens likely never suspected Caecina, with his much smaller division and lack of heavy weapons, would dare attack an enemy stronghold alone.

The following day dawned grim. The Vitellian legions were ready to avenge their fallen comrades, many of whose broken bodies lay strewn beneath the city walls. Syrian auxiliary archers, who had also been towards the rear of the column and missed the previous day's fighting, escorted the section of scorpions and smaller onagers towards the amphitheater. Trumpets sounded all around the city, with legionaries and auxiliary infantry wordlessly commencing the attack.

Soldiers from both Germanica and Predator legions carried makeshift battering rams towards the city gates, with the Fourth Macedonia in support. Having no time to properly construct the wheeled sheds which normally housed the heavy rams meant they had to carry the giant logs, cut down just the day before. Surrounded by legionaries with their shields held overhead, the ram crews advanced at the quick step.

It was these groups of soldiers Spurinna and his centurions directed their men to unleash their javelins upon. The heavy pila punctured deep through the shields, and in many instances shattered the hands and forearms of their hapless bearers. For those who managed to avoid serious injury, the pilum still served its main purpose of rendering shields useless. This left many of the soldiers and ram crews exposed to the rain of heavy stones and chunks of iron flung from the walls. The Germanica legion's ram only managed a few halfhearted blows against the gate before the deluge of missiles compelled survivors to flee. The ram from the Twenty-First Legion managed not a single strike before their soldiers were driven off, leaving a number of their companions killed or gravely wounded. While the armor and helmets of the imperial soldiers offered them outstanding protection in close quarters melee, the weight and velocity of the flung iron and stone crushed helmets, snapped necks, and punctured armor.

As the soldiers manning the rams were driven back, the Vitellians renewed their efforts to assault with ladders, this time with the support of archers and skirmishers. The arrow volleys were only marginally effective. They had to shoot over the heads of their own troops, while trying to disrupt the defenders protected by a nearly chest high stone rampart.

From the firing platforms established atop the amphitheater, the attackers were enjoying far greater success. Though not quite as tall as the walls, the large wooden structure allowed the archers and scorpion crews much more accuracy. As defenders were shot down, scorpion bolts puncturing even

segmentata plate armor, they were forced to keep behind the ramparts, all the while attempting to hold back the waves of assault troops. The two onagers were positioned between the groups of scorpions with buckets of oil to soak flammable munitions, which were then set alight flung over the walls. It was a harassment tactic. One which would likely cause few casualties. However, once structures within the city started to burn, the citizens would have little choice but to demand the Othonian defenders surrender, lest all of Placentia burn to the ground.



As garrison commander, Centurion Spurinna found himself trying to be everywhere at once. Three of the four sides of the city were now under attack. The northern rampart appeared to be holding its own against the Predator Legion, and enemy auxiliary infantry cohorts were having little luck trying to capture the western wall. It was the eastern ramparts, where Caecina was concentrating his scorpions and onagers, which was now in trouble. As Spurinna made his way along the base of the wall, he saw that the scorpion he'd positioned in the corner nearest the amphitheater was lying smashed on the street below, both crewmen riddled with arrows. He looked up to see the scorpion just above the east gate still engaging their assailants below.

"Scorpion crew!" the centurion shouted up to them. "Bring your weapon down and come with me!"

"Yes, sir!"

The scorpion, essentially a giant crossbow, was bulky but not particularly heavy. One crewman would carry the weapon over one shoulder, the other the stand, while they carried the large basket of bolts between them. The two men awkwardly made their way down the stone steps and joined their commanding officer.

"We're running short on bolts, sir," the crewman carrying the stand said. "We've got maybe ten left."

"I'm sure there are more over there," the centurion replied, nodding towards the shattered weapon on the far corner.

"Bugger me," the other crewman said. He looked to his officer. "What do you need us to do, sir?"

"Follow me. You're going to take up their position, but you're not going to expose yourselves and get shot like those poor sods did."

They jogged along the wall, while above them the frenzied battle was still ongoing in all its savagery. A screaming praetorian fell from the wall, landing with a hard smash against the cobble stones. The man's armor had prevented an expedient death, though his ribs were broken and had punctured his lungs. The dying guardsman gasped. His convulsing hand reached up piteously towards the centurion and scorpion crew, as they raced past him. Several bodies of both attackers and defenders laid strewn along the road, the falls from the wall leaving bloody pools beneath their shattered corpses.

As they reached the far corner, Spurinna had them leave the stand and only bring the weapon and a handful of bolts with them.

"Keep your heads down," he said, removing his helmet to prevent the protruding crest from making him a target.

They crept up the steps. To their right, the Othonian soldiers were doing their damnedest to keep the attackers from gaining a foothold on the ramparts. Many had already fallen, harangued in no small part by the archers and bolt throwers atop the amphitheater.

"There," Spurinna said, pointing towards the pair of onagers.

Soldiers were dunking bundles into the oil buckets. They were placed in the throwing baskets then ignited by a torch bearer.

"That man with the torch. Think you can hit him from here?"

"Just let us at him, sir," the gunner replied.

The centurion left them to it, donning his helmet and rejoining the fray. The volleys of arrows and scorpion bolts had lessened significantly, as there were now a large number of Vitellian soldiers on the ramparts. Spurinna drew his gladius and joined his soldiers as they fought desperately to drive the assailants back.

In the meantime, the two scorpion crewmen sat behind the rampart, cranking back the throwing arms of their weapon. They carefully placed a bolt in the firing tray and laid the weapon on the wall. They only had a few moments to gauge the distance to their target and lose a bolt towards him. It missed their quarry, instead puncturing the bucket of oil to the man's right.

Given the cramped conditions, trying to rearm and reload the weapon took the men almost a minute each time. They reset and fired again. This time the azimuth was correct, except the bolt landed just short near their target's feet.

"Poor dumb bastard is oblivious to us even being here," the loader said, as they cranked the throwing arm back again.

Their third shot struck their target in the back of his right shoulder, just as he was ready to ignite another onager missile. The man screamed as he clutched his arm, inadvertently dropping the torch. The bolt that caused a small leak in the oil bucket was now paying unintended dividends. The torch ignited the small puddle and, in turn, the bucket. The amphitheater, a purely wooden structure, was a tinderbox waiting to go up in flames. The onager and scorpion crews shouted frantically, as they tried to stomp the fire out. This quickly proved to be in vain. Within minutes, they began to scramble down the rows of seats and flee the burning structure. They did manage to salvage most of the scorpions. The onagers were abandoned, as they were too cumbersome to save.



The assault had been ongoing for at least two hours, and General Caecina was growing steadily more impatient, given his army's lack of progress. Casualties on the first day had far exceeded what he expected, and as the more recent assaults stalled, he feared this day would be even worse. Only the attack along the southeastern corner appeared to be gaining any headway, and this was due to the missile barrages fired from the amphitheater. Now, as he rode his horse along the battle lines, he saw the amphitheater was in flames. His archers and siege crews were seen fleeing from what was quickly becoming a burning inferno. Panic was beginning to take hold of the assault troops. And as he gritted his teeth in frustration, Caecina made an extremely difficult, yet necessary decision.

"Sound the recall," he told his cornicen.

The man looked at him incredulously for a brief second, then followed his orders and sounded the solemn notes on his horn.

Those on the ladders or waiting behind them had the best chance of withdrawing from the fray. Those still battling it out on the ramparts were faced with a much greater predicament. If they couldn't get back to the ladders quickly enough, death or surrender would become their only options. Given the far greater numbers that managed to fight their way onto the walls on the second day, the number of Vitellian prisoners quickly doubled. Defenders were now shouting insults towards their beaten foes, as they fled from the city ramparts.

Caecina had his messengers inform all senior commanders to make ready

to depart at once. “There is no sense in delaying here any longer. The enemy has won this day. If we remain any longer their gloating will devastate morale further.”

“Yes, sir,” the young officer said. His face was filled with dejection.

“Have the primus pilus of First Germanica report to me once his legion is ready to march.”

“Sir, I’m afraid that Master Centurion Aetius is missing,” the tribune replied. He told of how one tribune had been killed attempting to lead an assault on the northeast corner of the city, while two others had been badly injured.

“Then you will have to oversee the legion’s withdrawal,” Caecina noted.

The tribune, in the middle of his six-month compulsory service when the war broke out, was completely surprised, but understood General Caecina had not just First Germanica Legion, but the entire army to command and control. “Sir,” he said with a salute.

It was a somber and bitter defeat for the Vitellians. They quickly took down their tents, tended to their wounded, who numbered in the many hundreds, and made ready for departure. And despite their speed and efficiency, the army still took the better part of three hours to finish breaking down their large encampments. This was, in part, due to the large number of casualties they suffered, as well as numerous missing companions, who were now enemy prisoners.

The city’s defenders were singing martial hymns, chanting Otho’s name, and crying *‘Death to the Pretender!’*

“All legions and auxlia regiments are ready to depart, sir,” the staff tribune reported to him, having taken the reports from each commanding officer as they completed preparations.

Caecina said nothing. He waved his hand forward and kicked his horse into a trot. He refused to even glance at the city that defeated him, or the scores of dead and broken men who lay strewn about the field surrounding the walls. As the long column marched away, people came rushing from the gates, devastated at the sight of their sacred amphitheater, now a towering inferno of fire and smoke.



“Those Cremonan bastards have burned our theater!” Many cried in sorrow. The hundreds of dead and wounded imperial soldiers, who had fallen defending their city, mattered less to them. What mattered was that the very symbol of their noble heritage was now a smoldering inferno.

Centurion Spurinna recalled the mayor telling him that the only reason they sided with the Othonians was because their hated rivals in Cremona had aligned themselves with Vitellius. The scorpion crew that badly injured the enemy torchbearer knew the truth about what happened to their precious theater, though not a word about it was ever spoken.

“Ride at once to Verona and find General Gallus,” a very tired Centurion Spurinna ordered one of his horsemen. “Inform him we’ve defeated the Vitellians and they’ve withdrawn to Cremona. Take the southern road towards Brixellum to make certain you avoid any enemy patrols.”

As soon as the messenger departed, Spurinna set about overseeing the numerous tasks still before him. Arguably more relieved than his soldiers, victory still came at a high cost. Their losses may have been far less than what they inflicted, yet there were many dead to burn and wounded to take care of. And with their rapid withdrawal, the Vitellians had abandoned all of their dead, as well as a substantial number of their injured. At least fifteen hundred enemy soldiers were now their prisoners, and almost half of these were wounded.

As he walked over to where a century of praetorians were disarming and segregating enemy wounded from their uninjured companions, Spurinna’s face broke into an expression that could only be described as relief at the sight of a familiar face. “Glad to see you still among the living, sir,” he said, as he approached Master Centurion Aetius.

The primus pilus had taken a sword thrust beneath the arm. Though he was in great pain, the bleeding had been bright red and a slow flow, rather than the gushing dark crimson of an arterial rupture. His armor lay in a pile nearby, and a medic was tying a bandage with some crushed herbs to the wound.

“And you, Centurion Spurinna,” Aetius replied. “It would seem you have won the battle, and I shall be sitting out the rest of this war.”

“Let us hope for the sake of Rome, as well as our soldiers, that it does not last long. Romans battling Romans is a hateful thing.”

“A sacrilege the gods will likely punish all of us for,” the master centurion conjectured. He gave a tired smile and shook his head at the

absurdity of their situation. “To think, you were once one of my cohort commanders, and now I am your prisoner.”

“A strange turn of events, sir,” Spurinna concurred. “As the senior Vitellian officer present, give me your solemn oath that you will not attempt to escape or coerce disruptions from your soldiers and you can stay in the mayor’s palace as my guest.”

“Well, of course, I will give you my word,” the master centurion replied. “I know you may think of us as oath-breakers since we are now enemies, but remember, we cannot have broken oaths that were never sworn.”

That statement summarized the nature of the war between Vitellius and Otho. The Rhine army refused to swear its allegiance to anyone prior to Vitellius being presented to them. It was, in their eyes, justification for not being labeled as traitors and oath-breakers.

Chapter XXXVI: Ambush at Ad Castores

Brixellum, Northern Italia
4 April 69 A.D.
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Since his arrival in Brixellum, the reports Emperor Otho received seemed to cover the entire spectrum from catastrophic to absolute triumph. That Caecina's division managed to cross over the Alpes in the middle of winter, arriving long before the Othonians could converge their forces, was nothing short of disastrous. And with Caecina now holding Cremona, it was assumed that Valens' much larger army could not be far behind.

Still, not all the news was bad. Both the emperor and his generals were elated to learn about Caecina's terrible defeat at Placentia. Suetonius Paulinus figured his casualties must have been substantial. Otherwise, he would have attempted to press the issue with the remainder of the Othonian legions.

"And we just received this report from General Gallus," Paulinus said, during Otho's council of war. "The entire Thirteenth Legion has arrived at Verona with a detachment of two thousand soldiers from Fourteenth Gemina Martia Victrix. The remainder of their forces, along with Seventh Gemina, should arrive from the Balkans within the next month."

"I had hoped to avoid open war," Otho grumbled, seeming to ignore the report. "And now we have reports of the Vitellian army terrorizing people in the Alpine provinces, as well as Gaul. Vitellius is a gluttonous sluggard, surely he does not have the stomach or strategic savvy for an all-out war!"

"Gluttons and sluggards do not start wars, sire," Paulinus conjectured. "Vitellius is controlled by his generals, Caecina and Valens most likely, as we now know they are the ones commanding their divisions. And given my experiences with both men, I would say that it is they, and not Vitellius, who is leading this insurrection. Even if Vitellius wanted to stand down and avoid civil war, I don't think he is in any position to do so."

"What vexes me more so," Otho continued, "is they have not only disregarded all political decorum but have changed the rules of warfare itself. No Roman army ever campaigns during the winter, least of all in the regions of the Alpes! For Caecina to have sprung up in northern Italia, seemingly out of nowhere, he must have left Germania in mid-January."

“The winter was unusually mild,” Paulinus observed. “And I regret the gods did not grant our enemies a more arduous passage. Few of the passes were snowed in at all, nothing like Julius Caesar had to struggle through over a century ago.”

“There is another issue I must address with both of you,” the emperor said, to Paulinus and Celsus. “I would discuss this with Gallus as well, except he is still in Verona. You know I trust both of you completely, and I know your loyalty is above reproach.”

“Of course, Caesar,” Celsus emphasized.

“The problem is the soldiers in the ranks disagree,” Otho continued. “Rather emphatically, many of them. If it were just one or two troublemakers, I would have them flogged or strangled depending on the severity of their insolence. However, it is not just a small number, but most of the army. No one doubts that the three generals I selected to command my divisions are among the best in the empire. What they do not trust is that you will remain loyal to me. They fear some of you may be holding back and not attacking the Vitellians hard enough.”

“Deplorable, ill-disciplined bastards,” Paulinus snarled.

“That may be,” the emperor replied. “But we need every last one of those bastards, if we are to defeat Vitellius. And they need commanders who are not only competent but who can inspire them. You heard about Martius Macer’s raid across the Padus?”

“He crossed with two thousand gladiators and caught a few auxiliaries with their cocks hanging out,” Celsus replied.

“And promptly withdrew,” Otho added. “And with the Balkan reinforcements that have arrived, Gallus is holding most of the army in place at Bedriacum.”

“As he should,” Paulinus spoke up. “It’s a strong, defensible position with plenty of access to fresh water and forage. Thirteenth Legion is also the only one which has arrived in force, with just the advance cohorts of the Fourteenth. What do the men expect? That we would take our scattered forces and simply fling ourselves at the Vitellians?”

“In a matter of speaking,” Otho said. “I am not doubting the tactical decisions, such as Macer’s to withdraw. He was badly outnumbered with no reinforcements available. I’ll also not question Gallus’ strategic thinking, as Bedriacum is the ideal rally point for our currently scattered legions. However, there is much grumbling from the ranks that my generals are

somehow taking it easy on the Vitellians. That is why my brother, Titianus, and Licinius Proculus will assume overall command. In the meantime, you will consolidate the forces we have and deal with any threats that may arise."

General Paulinus was livid when he and Celsus left the emperor's tent. It was well after dark, and a lone servant with a torch guided them back to their respective quarters.

"It's not as if we don't have enough shit to deal with, without the emperor becoming a pawn to the grumblings of peasant soldiers," he muttered. "At least the Fourteenth is en route with the Balkan legions."

"Ah, yes, the Gemina Martia Victrix," Celsus noted. He was far calmer, though frustrated by the situation. It showed in the tension in his voice. "They were with you in Britannia, weren't they?"

"They were the core of my fighting force when we defeated that filthy bitch, Boudicca," Paulinus said. "I had the entire Fourteenth, along with several cohorts from Twentieth Valeria Victrix…a shame those lads will now most likely side with our enemies. We were outnumbered at least ten-to-one. If not for their splendid discipline and extreme courage, I'd be a disemboweled corpse and Britannia would have been lost."

"It's only been eight years since your triumph over the Iceni," Celsus observed. "I suspect most of the rankers in the Fourteenth still remember you."

"At least *they* know me," Paulinus reckoned. "They did not ask questions when I ordered them to withdraw from Londinium, as hateful of a decision as that was. This lot here would have thrown me in chains for cowardice, attacked Boudicca in the open, and been completely thrashed, leaving ten thousand Roman corpses on the field instead of the four hundred that I lost. So, yes, it will be good to have the Fourteenth with us. Four of their cohorts should arrive soon with the entire Thirteenth. The advance guard of legionary cavalry arrived just yesterday. Their commanding legate, Vedius Aquila, told me the rest are about a month's march behind with the Eleventh Claudia and the newly-raised Seventh Gemina."

"We are slowly evening the odds," Celsus noted. "With such a force, I don't think even Titianus and Licinius could fuck things up."



With the imminent arrival of Valens' division, and despite their disastrous

failure at Placentia, General Caecina was spurred to action once more. Centurion Liberius' cavalry had performed splendidly as a reconnaissance force, giving the Vitellian general detailed amounts of intelligence. He now knew the Othonians were converging on Bedriacum, approximately twenty miles from his own position at Cremona.

"Bedriacum is now the enemy's rallying point," he told his assembled legates and senior officers, while pointing to a large map. "They are coming up piecemeal and currently have no more than twenty thousand men assembled."

"More will be coming," the legate of the Twenty-First said. "A shame we don't have Valens' division here. We'd sweep those bastards from the field in an hour!"

The other officers mumbled words of concurrence.

Caecina grimaced at the remark. The last thing he wished was for his rival general to rush in, with his massive force of nearly forty thousand men, and claim all the glory. He could not resist the opportunity to take a swipe at his former friend. "Valens knew when he was supposed to rendezvous with us. He may have had the longer journey, but he did not have to go over the treacherous northern Alpes. Whether his delay is due to enemy action or by deliberate design, we alone are left with the task of dealing with the Othonians, before they can mass their armies against us."

That he would hint at Valens deliberately stalling his advance was absurd, especially when there had been no communications at all between the two Vitellian divisions since mid-January. It was also in very poor taste to publicly speak ill of his peer in front of subordinates, though by this point Caecina cared little about decorum. He did, however, have to accept the reality of the strategic situation, especially after the losses he'd suffered at Placentia. As many as a thousand of his soldiers were dead. Almost three times as many were either wounded or prisoners of the enemy. And with the chief tribune for First Germanica left with the Rhine garrison and the master centurion missing, the legion was essentially leaderless. One of the staff tribunes now coordinated the legion, though Caecina was considering detaching Master Centurion Bulla from Fourth Macedonia to aid them.

Legio XXI was in far better shape with its command staff intact. Still, their overall losses had been just as severe as First Germanica. Legio IV had acted as their reserve at Placentia and was, therefore, mostly undamaged. Caecina found himself in a quandary. He wanted to dispose of the enemy

army before they could bring up their reinforcements from the Balkans. And yet, the harsh reality was, his depleted legions and auxilia regiments simply did not have the numbers to engage Otho in open battle. He relayed this blunt assessment to his commanders.

"That does not mean we will sit on our asses and wait," he asserted. "I intend to draw them out, using a tactic similar to one the divine Romulus himself once employed. The Via Postumia runs along a boggy plain full of drainage and irrigation ditches. There is a waypoint called *Ad Castores*. It is also the site of an altar to Castor and Pollux. The ground is very broken there, and the road lined with groves of trees."

"The perfect spot for an ambush," an auxilia commander declared.

"Precisely," the commanding general said. "We will bloody Otho's forces, and then destroy them utterly, once we are finally reinforced by Valens."

It was a significant lowering of his expectations, but still, Caecina knew that in order to salvage his honor, he needed a victory of sorts against the Othonians. He had failed to take Placentia, and so would have to settle for an ambush and minor battering of their foe.



Three hundred and fifty miles to the east, a large column of Othonian loyalists was hurrying its way across Pannonia towards northeastern Italia. Marching in the lead were the six cohorts from the venerable Legio XIV, *Gemina Martia Victrix*. They were led by the chief tribune, as their legate had gone ahead with the advance guard. At the rear marched Legio XI, *Claudia Pia Fidelis*, a seasoned force with a rich history dating back to the time of Julius Caesar.

Perhaps most famous of their veterans from ages passed were the legendary centurions, Lucius Vorenus and Titus Pullo, who Caesar singled out for their extreme bravery in his commentaries on the Conquest of Gaul. Numerous cohorts of auxilia infantry and archers were dispersed throughout the column.

In the center of the formation was Marcus Antonius Primus' own Legio VII, *Gemina*. Though the term *Gemina*, which literally meant 'twin', was often given to legions that were merged with other units. It was also frequently used to name a legion in honor of Rome's twin founders, Romulus

and Remus. Such was the case with the Seventh, for though they had done nothing as of yet to warrant such a moniker, it was used semi-officially to distinguish it from another legion with the same number, Legio VII, *Claudia*. Their shields were painted a pale red with blue circle around the center boss. And in honor of their naming, a yellow silhouette of a she-wolf was painted along the top center.

Their shields were about the only thing that was uniform within the legion. Having been raised at a word from Galba, their leadership had spent the last seven months trying to find sufficient armor and weapons for its recruits. The centurions and other volunteers from various legions had brought their own arms and equipment, though Galba had made little provision for equipping the men in the ranks. With the civil war now halting shipments of armor from the various smiths and armories around the empire, the new legionaries had been forced to make due with whatever could be scrounged. Only a third wore the standard lorica segmentata plate armor, and most of the rest were in much older hamata chain mail. The only reason his soldiers had any sort of armor at all was because of General Primus' strong rapport with Vespasian.

"Your men are no doubt anxious to prove themselves," Legate Priscus of Eleventh Claudia said to Primus. "A pity they will have to prove their mettle against fellow Romans."

The legates rode at the head of the long column with Master Centurion Vitruvius leading the Seventh Legion. And though no stipulations had been made regarding seniority, Antonius Primus had assumed overall command through the sheer force of his personality.

"They may not have the history of the Eleventh," Primus conceded. "But neither did the Eleventh when they marched into Gaul with Caesar."

"Point taken," Priscus replied. "Still, it was good of Vespasian to send you what he could, even if most of your men look like artifacts from the republic."

"Vespasian sent what he could, which is far more than I can say for either Galba or Otho. I am willing to somewhat forgive our current emperor, though. After all, no sooner does he become Caesar, he has half the empire trying to rip the throne out from under him. I only wish he had sent for us sooner."

"Agreed," the other legate nodded. "Hard to believe that Caecina crossed over the Alpes in the middle of winter. Had Otho sent us to Verona, or even

Patavium, we could have given Vitellius a nasty surprise in the spring rather than him giving one to us."

"Can't be helped now." Primus shrugged almost nonchalantly. "And don't take my legion's lack of combat experience to mean they aren't properly trained. I would pit my centurions against any of yours, and they have drilled my legionaries extensively over the past seven months."

"I must admit, I placed my legion behind yours for fear your lads might be out of shape and need a little prodding," Priscus remarked. "I would hate for it to take us until fall to reach Italia. I'm happy to see, though their armament is a jumbled mess from ages passed, they are fit enough to do a full day's marching without too much grousing."

"Raw physical conditioning takes far less time than learning the technical intricacies of legionary warfare," Primus observed. "I can only hope my men are proficient and ready when we face the Vitellian legions. Mars be thanked, they are very eager and fit enough."

There was a sense of urgency throughout the entire column, especially after receiving word of Caecina's invasion of northern Italia. Primus reckoned it would be another two weeks before his army could rally with Otho at Bedriacum. He could only hope that whatever forces the emperor did have were enough to keep the Vitellians at bay until he arrived.



Caecina's plan was neither original nor inventive. Another reality of civil war he failed to consider was the possibility of his plans being betrayed to the enemy. It was no surprise there were soldiers on both sides who were discontent with their leaders and contemplated defecting to their enemy. One such man was a cavalry trooper tasked with sending a dispatch to the auxilia regiments screening the Vitellian army. Instead of delivering the original message, the soldier gave the commander a hastily scribbled copy, then rode past his own lines under the cover of darkness. He arrived at the Othonian camp around midnight, where sentries took him to General Paulinus. The trooper gave him the original directive which bore Caecina's personal seal.

"So the Vitellians want to lure us into a trap," the general said, with a derisive grin. He told the turncoat soldier, "You will return to your regiment this night. If Caecina finds one of his messengers is missing, he will likely guess his plan has been compromised."

Paulinus then gave the message to one of his own couriers, whom he sent to Brixellum to inform the emperor. Knowing Otho would want him to engage the Vitellians and thwart their attempts, Paulinus had one of his aids wake General Celsus, Legate Drusus Benignus of First Adiutrix, and Legate Vedius Aquila of Thirteenth Gemina. Though ever cautious and methodical, the veteran general was pragmatic enough to seize the initiative.

"Since you and I are both, essentially, being demoted from our commands, we have everything to gain and little to lose," he told Celsus, after briefing him on the intelligence he'd received.

The two other legionary legates, along with the auxilia regimental commanders, soon arrived. It was still three hours before dawn. All were bleary-eyed, their hair a mess from quickly making their way to Paulinus' principia. As imperial officers, they understood all too well that in war, sleep was a luxury that was often denied them.

"Gentlemen," Paulinus began. "We have received intelligence written in Caecina's own hand. The enemy intends to goad us into an ambush near the waypoint of Ad Castores. I have stressed the need to refrain from taking decisive action until after the Balkan legions arrive in force, but we now have an opportunity to destroy one of Vitellius' divisions."

"Tell us where you need us, sir," Benignus said. "Just be advised, I am short almost two cohorts, as they were detached to Placentia. Of course, once the rest of my lads heard about how they gave the Vitellians a damned good thrashing, they have been anxious to take the fight to the enemy."

A veteran commander who had served two previous tours as a legate, Benignus clearly recognized the folly of replacing the two senior generals with more popular political appointees. He, therefore, relished the opportunity to route the Vitellians while Paulinus still held overall command.

"And I only have four of my cohorts available," Aquila added. "The rest are still at Verona. However, they are more than ready to do their duty."

Paulinus nodded in appreciation of his fellow legates. These were good soldiers and solid leaders. He abhorred the thought of their talents being wasted under the command of someone as lackluster as Lucius Titianus and Licinius Proculus. "In addition to your legionaries," he said, "we have four regiments of cavalry with approximately five hundred troopers apiece. We also have six cohorts of auxilia infantry and three cohorts of praetorian guardsmen." He then laid out a map, running his finger along the road, stopping near the spot scribbled *'Ad Castores'*. "General Benignus, you will

take up position just to the right of the road with First Adiutrix. Two cohorts of auxilia infantry will be to the right of you with one regiment of cavalry anchoring your flank."

"Yes, sir."

"General Aquila, you will be to the left of the road. As you have far fewer legionaries, I'll place four cohorts of auxiliaries on your left and one regiment of cavalry on the extreme flank. Praetorians will be in the center holding the road itself. You'll have to advance in column, as the passable terrain is far too narrow for you to form battle lines."

General Celsus then added, "Our remaining two regiments of cavalry will fall in on me, in reserve. I'll take the praetorian horsemen and one regiment of auxilia lancers. The flanking cavalry units will converge on us, as needed. We will be a mobile force whose mission will be harassing the enemy and fixing them in place, until our infantry can make its way out of the broken terrain."

"Any questions?" Paulinus asked.

After dealing with a few logistical and administrative issues, he dismissed his commanders with orders to have their men ready to march one hour before dawn. As they were coming from the east, the rising sun would be at their backs and in their enemies' faces. Ad Castores lay approximately halfway between Bedriacum and Cremona, which meant Paulinus' army had to cover thirteen miles before midday if they wished to use the sun to their advantage.



Otho's army had dealt with a bevy discipline problems in recent weeks. Now, unbeknownst to him, Caecina was dealing with the same issues that had plagued Otho's generals since the outset of the campaign. Granted, his were on a much smaller scale, as his soldiers knew him well and had no reason to question his loyalty to Vitellius.

Caecina's auxiliary infantry and cavalry had departed the night before the proposed ambush. They had twelve miles to cover, bivouacking near the proposed site of the ambush around midnight. The Vitellian legionaries from First Germanica, Fourth Macedonia, and Twenty-First Rapax were incensed when they discovered that only auxiliaries would be taking part in the ambush. And as the sun rose in the east, many who were finishing their

breakfast expressed their displeasure most vocally.

"Have one cohort from each legion placed in ready reserve," the general told the Twenty-First's legate, as well as Master Centurion Bulla, whom he had temporarily attached to First Germanica.

"It was we who bled at Placentia!" a legionary insolently shouted at his general, as Caecina attempted to meet with his senior commanders near the east gate. "Now you deny us our chance at revenge!"

Other soldiers were forcefully expressing their dismay at being left behind. Caecina ignored them for the moment. It irritated him, though. He had held the legions back to give them a chance to recuperate from the beating they'd taken at Placentia. His attempts at granting his men a reprieve were now being met with blatant insubordination that was embarrassing to the general and unbecoming of imperial soldiers.

As his subordinate leaders dispersed to carry out his orders, Caecina quietly cursed himself for not being a stricter disciplinarian. Since taking command of Legio IV, Macedonia, he had been more embroiled with political intrigue and his acquisition of greater power and wealth, than commanding the legion. And, to his detriment, he was more concerned with his personal popularity amongst the soldiery than whether they would obediently follow orders. Fortunately for Caecina, his veteran centurions managed to partially restore order with a few lashes from their vine sticks and a plethora of shouted profanities. He found himself doubly wishing Master Centurion Aetius had not gone missing, for the primus pilus of First Germanica had little patience for such insubordinate nonsense. What's more, Caecina had no knowledge as to whether Aetius had been killed or was a prisoner of war.



A company of fifty or so light auxiliary skirmishers were lurking within a large crag that looked as if the gods had ripped open the terrain, like a nasty scar. These were mainly light-footed Ligurians. Like their kinsmen in Maritime Alpes, they wore either a crude hardened leather cuirass or a modified shirt of hamata chain mail, shortened and devoid of shoulder protection. Speed and agility were their greatest assets. Their mission was to harass the enemy rather than close and fight with him. Most carried short bows or bundles of throwing spears.

Their position was on the north side of the road, looking east into the rising sun. Another company was positioned on the south side at a large rock outcropping. Despite the glare of the sun, they were still able to see the Othonian force advancing on them about half a mile distant. Thousands of feet marched in step on the wide, paved road. The leading skirmisher grinned sinisterly, keeping low, while shielding his eyes from the sun with his hand.

A single trumpet blast sounded in the distance, and the enemy force suddenly halted. This was hardly surprising, as they could likely see the broken ground to their front. The Vitellian soldiers were certain, after a few minutes of chatter and observation, the Othonians would continue on their way. Another trumpet blast sounded. But instead of the column continuing its march, cohorts suddenly fanned out in either direction forming a massive battle front.

"What are they doing?" a skirmisher asked, in bewilderment.

"I have no idea," the section leader replied, shaking his head.

It was inconceivable that the Othonians had discovered their plan. Why, then, had they suddenly reformed their entire force into battle formation?



Hundreds of legionaries and auxiliary infantry grounded their helmets, shields, and javelins while taking up their pickaxes and other digging tools. Dead trees were being dragged over from the woods on either side. Piles of dirt were being tossed into the muddiest sections of the bog. It was slow work, but General Paulinus was determined to not cross his infantry until they had a crude causeway to pass over.

"How long until you can cross with the infantry?" Celsus asked, riding up next to him.

"A couple of hours, probably," Paulinus answered. "We have no idea just how large Caecina's army is, and it would be unwise for us to cross over this terrible quagmire and break up our formations."

"Alright," his fellow general replied. "With your permission, I'll take all four cavalry regiments towards a crossing off to the extreme left. It's passable enough for horsemen, with little in the way of places for the enemy to ambush us. We'll see if we can't stir them up a little bit!"

Paulinus gave an affirmative nod and began to ride down the line of infantrymen who were providing over-watch for their laboring companions.

Only the praetorians stood fast, as their advance would be along the road itself. The boggy and broken ground extended a quarter mile to their front. With the speed and efficiency of the world's most professional armed force, they made surprisingly quick progress filling in the ground with earth and fallen logs.

The Othonian front extended almost three quarters of a mile in each direction north and south of the road. Approximately another quarter mile south, past the left end of the line, General Celsus and his cavalry contingent found a stretch of dry ground along a short ridge which took them around the boggy terrain obstructing their infantry's advance.

"Over there," a trooper said, pointing with his lance. "You can see the glint off their helmets."

Celsus squinted his eyes and was able to see what appeared to be a row of helmets, barely visible behind a long defilade a few hundred feet distant. Though he wished to create chaos amongst the enemy, he still had to exercise a fair amount of caution. Like Paulinus, he had no way of knowing how large a force Caecina had hidden amongst the broken terrain and copses of trees. It could be just a few cohorts or it could be his entire army, with reinforcements from Valens' division.

"Take your men off to our left. Make sure there are no Vitellian bastards waiting to hit us in the flank," the general ordered the praetorian cavalry commander, a tribune named Antiochus.

"Yes, sir," the officer replied. He then raised his spatha up high. *"Praetorians, on me!"*

Celsus took his remaining regiments, numbering fifteen hundred horsemen total, and advanced in a line of three regimental wedge formations. From the air, the appearance would have looked like the teeth of a saw or wild beast. They advanced at a canter, eyes constantly straining to see where their foes were hidden. Celsus had little doubt there was already a sense of panic among the enemy ambushers. They had to know their plan was discovered, and that their flank was being turned by a sizeable force of Othonian cavalry.

"There they are," the general said, spying what appeared to be a large number of skirmishers and at least two centuries of auxiliary infantry. "Sound the charge!"



Panic gripped the Vitellian skirmishers. There was no longer any doubt their plans were known to the enemy. The proposed ambush had completely failed. While the Othonian infantry were still building their wide pathway across the bog, the skirmishers had a more immediate threat to face.

"Company, up!" the section leader shouted, not waiting for orders from his senior officers.

They were in no way equipped to contend with cavalry, and after a haphazard volley of arrows and throwing darts, they scattered and ran towards the nearby cohort of auxilia infantry.

Othonian lancers gave a loud cry as they spurred their horses into a sprint, smashing into the now panicked Vitellian light troops. As infantry emerged from behind their defilade, a second regiment crashed into them with fury. Spatha and lance cut down numerous infantrymen and skirmishers, as they desperately tried to restore order. Knowing they had no chance of outrunning the horsemen, their only means of survival was to close ranks with shields together and spears brandished towards their adversaries. Fear gripped the Vitellians, as many of their companions were either trampled or slaughtered by spear and sword. Still, the survivors maintained their discipline, and soon formed into battle lines, spears facing the enemy.



General Celsus jerked hard on the reins, pulling away from the wall of enemy spears. Several of his troopers were not quick enough, and were either thrown from their mounts or both they and their horses were stabbed repeatedly by the wall of infantrymen.

"Action left!" Celsus shouted, pointing with his spatha. He knew that speed was critical for his troopers. They needed to maintain the momentum lest the Vitellians regain the upper hand.

Their ambush thwarted, mobs of Vitellian soldiers were appearing from various tree groves, rock formations, crags, and other hiding places. Their officers were shouting frantic orders as their men rushed towards their standards. The Othonian cavalry had little choice but to allow them to reform. They lacked the numbers to crack the rapidly forming lines and overwhelm the infantry cohorts. Instead, Celsus and his regimental commanders ordered

their men to hunt down enemy skirmishers who were completely unequipped to face them.

"Sir, the enemy is reforming just behind that ridgeline!" a centurion shouted, riding up from the praetorian cavalry. "Tribune Antiochus got shot in the arm by an archer. He's still able to ride, but he's tore up pretty badly."

"Take command of the regiment," Celsus ordered. "How many Vitellians would you say are behind that slope?"

"At least five thousand, all auxiliaries. More are converging as we speak."

"Damn it," the general muttered. He quickly made his decision. "We don't have the numbers to deal with the enemy, but we can keep them in place and prevent them from hindering our infantry's crossing. Reform the regiments!"

Just across the boggy terrain, Paulinus watched as his cavalry force continued to harry and skirmish with the advancing force of Vitellian infantry. His soldiers were working as quickly as they could to make the ground passable, while still maintaining their battle lines. Finally, after nearly two hours of toil, the last fallen logs were tossed into place and the sinking bog was now fordable, though the ground was extremely uneven.

"Sound the advance," Paulinus ordered the cornicen.

The horn blasts were echoed by cornicens in his legionary contingents with audible orders shouted by officers, as the laboring soldiers retrieved their weapons and fell in at the backs of their respective cohorts. The distance that had taken two hours to create a passable way over, took the praetorian, legionary, and auxilia cohorts perhaps five minutes to cross.

To their front, Celsus' cavalry was being hard pressed by the enemy auxiliary cohorts now reinforced with some of their own cavalry. In the distance, a cohort of legionaries was spotted marching down the road towards the fray. As the two forces began to converge on each other, Paulinus rode quickly towards Benignus, whose First Adiutrix was just to the right of the praetorian cohorts.

"The Vitellians are reinforcing with legionaries," the commanding general said, pointing down the road. "But they seem to be bringing up only one cohort at a time."

"Once we drive in their auxiliaries, we'll rout them readily enough," the legate remarked.

“Javelins ready!” centurions shouted, down the line.



The Vitellian auxiliaries were in a state of confusion. Their proposed ambush had failed, and now they were being forced to do exactly what General Caecina did not want; fight a pitched battle against the Othonians. It was also becoming readily apparent to the Vitellians that they were badly outnumbered. The enemy battle line extended much wider than theirs and was just as many ranks deep. Storms of javelins rained down upon them from the Othonian legionary and praetorian cohorts, killing and maiming scores of men. As legionaries drew their gladii, Othonian auxiliaries on the wings began to envelop the flanks of the Vitellian force.

Not half a mile up the road, the single legionary cohort from Twenty-First Rapax was being harried by the Othonian cavalry. The centurion pilus prior in command of the cohort ordered his men into a hollow square, three ranks deep. This enabled them to face out in every direction, while keeping the swarming lancers and mounted praetorians at bay. However, it also slowed their advance to a crawl, with three quarters of their legionaries now having to walk either sideways or backwards. They had marched twelve miles already, and with the ongoing battle clearly in their view they were now confined to having to advance at a very slow half-step. Meanwhile, their auxiliary infantry were being staggered by the onslaught of Othonian legionaries.

“Where the fuck is the rest of our army?” an exasperated legionary swore.

“We have nearly three entire legions sitting on their asses at Cremona!” one of his mates spat.

As their own cavalry consisted of only two companies numbering less than two hundred total troopers, these were able to do little, but attempt to relieve some of the pressure on the legionary cohort by drawing away a handful of enemy lancers. One of their decurions sent a rider back to Cremona.

“Inform General Caecina that he needs to get the rest of the army up here now, otherwise this battle will be lost!” As the trooper sped away, his horse’s hooves clattering on the paving stones, the decurion could only hope his commanding general had had the foresight to dispatch more than one cohort

of reinforcements. A twelve-mile trek for fully armored legionaries, even if only carrying shields and weapons, would take at least three hours or more. And even then, they still had to have the energy left in them to fight. As he watched his trooper speed away, he caught a glimpse of what he thought to be another column of legionaries. Across the flat terrain, they appeared to be at least three miles away. The decurion prayed it was more than just another single cohort!



The dispatch rider had halted briefly to let the reinforcements, a lone cohort from Fourth Macedonia, know the battle was going ill for them, and they needed to get to the front as soon as possible. He kept his horse at a canter, only spurring to full gallop when he was about a mile from the Vitellian camp. It had taken him just under an hour to reach Cremona, and he saw what appeared to be another cohort making ready to depart. The rest of the camp was in a frenzy. Legionaries were shouting obscenities at their officers, demanding to know why the entire army was not being sent forward.

"General Caecina!" the rider shouted, interrupting the legate in an argument with several of his centurions.

"Yes, what is it?" he snapped.

"The ambush has failed, sir. The auxiliaries are now engaged in an open battle with the enemy, and they urgently call for reinforcements."

"And what the fuck do you think those bands of legionaries were that you passed on the road? Sightseers?"

The rider did not know Caecina had been informed and sent one cohort, then half an hour later a second.

Exasperated, Caecina turned to his subordinate officers. "*What in the bloody piss is wrong with you?* Don't you see? Without Valens' division—which I need not remind you is twice the size of ours—we do not have the numbers to engage Otho in open battle!" The entire tragedy, like that of the failed assault on Placentia, was ultimately Caecina's fault. As commanding general, he could delegate authority, but not responsibility. Yet he was subtly attempting to deflect criticism from himself and place the blame on Valens, who he implied was leaving them in the lurch. His deployment of only piecemeal elements of his army was done deliberately. They were only to provide support long enough for the auxiliaries to withdraw. Caecina rightly

feared that, should he fight a pitched battle against Paulinus and lose, the entire campaign could readily collapse.



The last cohort of support legionaries from Cremona had just arrived on the field when the entire Vitellian front collapsed. Legionaries fought a delaying action for as long as possible, while the utterly exhausted and beaten auxiliaries fled towards their distant camp. It had been a bloody and frustrating day. This was especially for the final cohort, who realized they must fight a retreating battle while withdrawing all the way back along the twelve miles of road they had just travelled.

For Paulinus and his army, there were feelings of elation and triumph. They shouted and cheered, waving their bloody weapons in the direction of their fleeing adversaries. Twice they had engaged the armies of Vitellius, and twice they had soundly beaten them.

"Sir, the enemy has retreated all along our front," Legate Aquila said, riding up to him. His face was flushed, and he was out of breath. His spatha was drawn and streaked with blood.

"Should we make ready to pursue in force?" Benignus asked. "My lads have bloodied their blades, and they are ready to finish the enemy once and for all."

"The rest of the Vitellian army is encamped at Cremona, twelve miles from here," Paulinus noted. "We traveled light this day, and we lack provisions. We've already marched thirteen miles. We risk much if we march another twelve and have to fight a second battle against an enemy who will likely have us outnumbered, and who will be fresh. No, my friends, we cannot take such a risk this day. Let us return to Bedriacum and celebrate our triumph. Once the rest of the Balkan legions arrive, there will be plenty of time to finish these bastards."

It was not the response that legates, nor their legionaries, wished to hear. However, given their overwhelming sense of elation at having soundly thrashed the enemy, few complained. The men of Legio I, Adiutrix were especially heartened by their first baptism of bloodshed.

Paulinus ordered his men to make camp for the night, so they could properly dispose of and honor their dead. Riders were sent back to Bedriacum

requesting wagons with food and water, which in turn would be used to cart back their numerous wounded. The Vitellian casualties were left where they fell, not out of any particular sense of malice, though there was little pity to be felt amongst the victorious Othonian forces. It was simply a matter of not having enough resources to care for both sides. And though Paulinus made a prudent decision in not pursuing the Vitellians, had he known about the near mutiny that had taken place in the enemy camp this day, he may well have ordered his men to give chase and exploit this glaring weakness. In the coming weeks, he would have plenty of time to ponder whether or not he made the right decision.

Chapter XXXVII: The Emperor's War Council

Cremona, Northern Italia
13 April 69 A.D.



Emperor Otho

Valens' division marched into Cremona scarcely a week after Caecina's defeat at Ad Castores. Upon their arrival at August Taurinorum just east of the Alpes, they received word about the calamity in Maritime Alpes that had seen Julius Classicus' taskforce brutally defeated one day, yet achieving an improbable and decisive victory a week later. Deciding Classicus' force was no longer combat effective, the division commander elected to leave his forces in Maritime Alpes, to keep the remaining Othonians from causing havoc in Vitellian territory.

The pair of defeats suffered by Caecina had filled his rival with mixed feelings. Of course, Valens took a certain amount of personal pleasure in seeing his colleague humiliated, by what amounted to a handful of praetorians and raw recruits with little battle experience between them. Still, it cost the Vitellians many veteran soldiers with morale amongst the survivors plummeting. It further incensed Valens that his own legion, First Germanica, had been the sacrificial beast to suffer most from Caecina's folly.

Much to Valens' incomprehension, it was he, and not the incompetent Caecina, who the men blamed for the disasters. His own army, which had

been approximately a hundred miles away when they received word about Ad Castores, cursed their commanding general for holding them back. In response, and of their own volition, they conducted a series of forced marches in excess of thirty miles per day. Now that the entire Vitellian army was massed together at Cremona, the rivals knew they had to put their differences aside, at least for the time being.

"You pompous, fucking idiot," Valens scoffed, as he entered Caecina's principia at Cremona. "How many thousands did you lose with nothing to show for it?"

"Go stuff your cock in a eunuch, you dirty twat," Caecina retorted. "Had you not advanced through Gaul at the pace and enthusiasm of an old blind man trying to masturbate, you might have made yourself useful in this war."

The two men glared at each other.

Valens chuckled and sighed with a sense of relief. "I think we've both had our rather…*articulate* feelings for each other pent up for some time," he observed. "Now that we've made our 'respect' for one another clear, I think we can set aside our animosity until we have slaughtered Otho and crowned Vitellius emperor."

"Agreed," Caecina nodded. "Whether we admit it to those peasants in the ranks or not, Otho has some of the best generals in the entire imperial army. The wisest thing he has done is give overall command of his armed forces to Suetonius Paulinus and Marius Celsus. And I'm not just blindly singing their praises, because they bloodied my division. You know well the reputations of both men."

As they contemplated their next move in the increasingly violent game that was unfolding, neither of them realized their chief enemy, Otho, was personally giving them a substantial advantage in the next phase of the war.



Titianus and Licinius Proculus had arrived at Brixellum and accompanied the emperor to Bedriacum. The army was still relishing its pair of victories over Vitellius' generals, and their morale was buoyed by the arrival of the remainder of Legio XIII and the lead elements of Paulinus' former soldiers from Legio XIV. But the general who defeated Boudicca, arguably saved the province of Britannia and, most recently, soundly defeated Vitellius, faced the bitter reality that an inexperienced parade-field praetorian was now

replacing him. And though Celsus hid his feelings better, he was angered at being supplanted by the emperor's brother, who also assumed overall command as commander-in-chief of the imperial forces.

Upon his arrival at Bedriacum, the emperor summoned all of his senior officers for a council of war. As the assembled generals, legates, chief tribunes, master centurions, and auxiliary tribunes gathered in the large hall the emperor had procured, Otho made an immediate mistake. A council of war, especially one called by the emperor, was simply a way of gathering all of his senior officers in one place so he could give them their orders and send them off to destroy the enemy. At least, that was how it had been done since Julius Caesar's time. Unfortunately for Otho, he had no military experience at all, and he lacked Caesar's militaristic charisma; that which compelled men to follow his orders without question. The last thing an imperial council of war was supposed to turn into was a debate. Titianus, who had no more quantifiable experience than his brother, opened the council as if he were leading a seminar or lecture forum.

"My fellow Romans and brothers-in-arms," he said, standing with his arms opened wide. "On behalf of the emperor, and as your commander-in-chief, I welcome you all to Bedriacum. We stand on the brink of history. The pretender's army has already suffered a series of defeats, thanks to the competent leadership of our subordinate generals."

That Titianus could so carelessly phrase a compliment and an insult in the very same sentence turned a few heads. Celsus said nothing, but drank his wine in gulps. Paulinus' face turned red with anger, gritting his teeth, and clenching his fists. Some of those nearest him thought he might stand up and punch Titianus in the face.

"The purpose of this council," the commander-in-chief continued, "is to determine whether we should give battle immediately to the Vitellians or wait for reinforcements. It is my opinion that the enemy has already suffered a substantial blow to both their manpower, as well as their morale. If we press forward, we can end this war within the next few days. Far better that we bring peace to Rome immediately, rather than wait months for the rest of the imperial army to come to our aid."

Unsurprisingly, it was Paulinus who spoke up. His face was still red, yet his voice surprisingly calm. "If we attack now, we will most certainly end the war within a few days. However, we very much run the risk of being the vanquished rather than the victors."

“General Paulinus,” Proculus spoke up. “We understand your dismay at having been relieved of overall command, however…”

“I could give a bucket of piss over who has command!” Paulinus snapped. “This is not some political popularity contest where the winner gets a seat at the emperor’s head table. We are playing the most dangerous game ever devised by man. Many Roman lives are at stake!” He then stood and addressed Otho directly. “Caesar, allow me to make my case, and then you can render your decision. After all, yours is the foremost life we now hold in our hands.”

The emperor was rather taken aback by this remark. He sat upright in his chair and waved his hand. “Proceed.”

“Thank you, sire. I make this argument against attacking the enemy based on three main points. Firstly, now that General Valens has arrived with his division at Cremona, Vitellius has brought up all of the troops he has. There are no more reinforcements coming to support him. Conversely, we have many thousands we can call upon, the whole empire if we wish. Even as we speak, three more legions are marching from the Balkans to support us. Their numbers alone will give us more than enough strength to send our enemy scurrying back to Germania bloodied and obedient.”

He paused for a moment and took a drink of wine. His first point was by far the most compelling, though his next was of near equal importance.

“My second point; the Vitellians have committed a grievous error when it comes to large-scale warfare. They have neglected their supply and logistics lines. Those damned fools, Caecina and Valens, have created havoc, plundering and leaving a trail of destruction in their wake. Already they are suffering from a lack of rations and supplies, whereas our logistics lines are sound. We have the support of the senate and people, who keep us well fed and equipped. My third point ties into this and deals with the advent of summer, which comes very early to this region. Most of Vitellius’ army comes from Germania, and they are used to cooler, far more temperate climates. Give us a month, and they will be falling over from the heat, emaciated by starvation, and badly outnumbered by the combined elements of our army and the Balkan reinforcements.”

Paulinus saw Proculus and Titianus rolling their eyes and sighing in boredom. Even Otho, who the general hoped would show enough wisdom to listen to his experienced commanders, seemed to have already made up his mind.

Paulinus decided to make one final plea. “And if you will not allow us to wait until a more pragmatic time to attack the enemy,” he said, “then at least wait until the main body of Fourteenth Gemina Martia Victrix arrives. They have four cohorts already in camp with the remainder not more than a week’s march behind.” It was a stretch of the truth in regards to how far away the main body of Legio XIV was. They were much further back, at least two weeks’ march, with Seventh Gemina and Eleventh Claudia. Still, Paulinus hoped Emperor Otho would show some sense of reason and wait for additional troops to arrive. Paulinus’ guts twisted, his instincts warned him that to do otherwise was to invite disaster.

“If it pleases the emperor and the commander-in-chief,” Celsus spoke up, “I second General Paulinus’ suggestions, on all counts. I have here a letter from General Gallus who, regrettably, cannot be here, due to recuperating from a nasty horse-riding accident. He, too, cautions patience and a more measured, overwhelming show of force.”

“And my recommendation still stands,” Titianus said, without even waiting for anyone else to speak up.

“And I second the commander-in-chief,” Licinius Proculus added.

Titianus turned to his brother. “Sire, this is a council of war where decisive leadership decisions are needed, not some philosophical debate forum.”

“I agree,” Otho replied. “General Paulinus, we thank you for your many years of loyal service and applaud your many victories for Rome, including your most recent over the pretender. However, there is a time when decisive action is needed, and that time is now. Need I also remind you, you are only second-in-command of your division which now falls under Prefect Proculus? General Celsus, you will act as second to Titianus. And while your collective advice is always appreciated, I must emphasize to both of you that your mission is to follow the orders of your commanding officers and help them achieve final victory over the pretender.”

“Thank you, Caesar,” Titianus said, with a short bow.

Paulinus, utterly dejected, bowed and returned to his seat.

“Sire, there is one other matter which must be decided before the campaign can commence,” Licinius Proculus said, standing and taking center floor. “And that is the very practical matter of what your direct role will be in the coming battle.”

“Your soldiers understand your desire to personally lead them into

battle," Titianus added quickly, before the emperor could answer. "Your courage is an inspiration to every legionary under the eagles. However, we do run the very real risk of what will happen to the imperial house, should we win the battle but lose our emperor."

"It is true, sire," Proculus concurred. "You are unmarried, childless, and have no successor named. Titianus may be your brother, but we are not a hereditary monarchy like the corrupt kingdoms of the east. A valid successor to the imperial throne can only be ratified once we have defeated the pretender and sent him and his minions to Hades. For the time being, we must protect our emperor at all costs."

"Very well," Otho said. "I will withdraw to Brixellum and pray that Mars, Bellona, and Victoria grant my armies victory." He seemed both disappointed and partially relieved. Clearly, he wished to set a proper example for his soldiers, who were to fight and die in his name. However, as he had no military experience at all, he feared he lacked the martial virtues necessary to inspire soldiers in battle. He seemed both disappointed, as well as partially relieved. Clearly he wished to set a proper example to his soldiers, who were to fight and die in his name. However, as he had no military experience, he feared he lacked the martial virtues necessary to inspire soldiers in battle.

"Very good, Caesar," Titianus replied. "Brixellum is but fifteen miles from the front. We can call upon your leadership if need be. And, of course, there is an entire entourage from the senate who can keep you abreast of the happenings within the rest of the empire. Jupiter knows we will have much work to do, once the pretender is finished."

Though Paulinus and Celsus both felt strongly that Otho was making another bad decision, they decided silence was the most sensible course of action they could take. Each man secretly prayed they were wrong, but both understood that neither Proculus nor Titianus would listen to them at this point. In fact, they felt they were only kept on as nominal advisors in order to shoulder the blame should the worst happen.



The following day, 14 April, Emperor Otho departed for Brixellum, taking with him a large force of praetorians and other troops to act as his personal guard. This may have seemed unwise, as it was depriving the main army of some much-needed troops. However, given Brixellum's proximity to

Bedriacum, Otho needed sufficient protection should a rogue force of Vitellians manage to bypass the battle altogether.

While the emperor was confident his soldiers would fight with the same degree of devotion and extreme valor they displayed at Placentia, seeing him depart the camp, heading away from the direction of battle, disheartened many of the men.

"Our emperor should be at the front!" men protested despondently.

"Why does he abandon us?" was another constant complaint.

Something adding to their consternation, was that even more troops had to be detached and left behind at Bedriacum, under the command of the injured General Gallus. It was unknown if the war would be decided in a single action or not, and Bedriacum was the main supply depot and staging ground for the legions coming from the east. So, while it was a matter of absolute military practicality to make certain their strongpoint was secured, it did not sit well with the soldiers going into battle or their friends now relegated to guard duty.

Despite the grumblings among the rankers and the indecisive nature of the army's now-senior leaders, the Othonian force began its march around midmorning. Progress was slow. The soldiers walked at a leisurely step, rather than the quick cadence expected on a campaign whose intent was to close with the enemy as soon as possible. The only actions this day were feints and a few minor skirmishes between each army's cavalry scouts. By early evening, the Othonians had barely advanced a mile past Ad Castores, a distance which Paulinus and his division covered in just over three hours a few days prior. Just after dusk, a messenger arrived with a letter to Titianus from Emperor Otho.

"The emperor has strongly berated us for our faintheartedness in engaging with the enemy," the commander-in-chief told his assembled officers that night. "He implores us to show greater aggression and tenacity."

"Tomorrow we'll get the chance," Celsus remarked. "Cremona is maybe ten miles from here, and the Vitellian camp even closer. If we advance after breakfast, we can reach them by midmorning."

"The Vitellians made no attempt to engage us today," Proculus countered. "What's to say tomorrow will be any different?"

"Yes," Titianus concurred. "I think tomorrow we should advance *around* Cremona to the north. About seven miles west of the city the Padus and Addua Rivers converge. We'll camp there, give our men a day of rest, and

then engage the enemy in battle."

Paulinus and Celsus were both completely baffled by this plan.

Paulinus decided he had to speak up. "You do realize that by taking this route, in an arc around Cremona, we'll be marching within a couple of miles of the enemy camp."

"What of it?" Titianus asked. "The Vitellians showed no interest in playing the game today, why would tomorrow be any different?"

"Because," Paulinus retorted, his anger slowly getting the better of him. "If the enemy were to march within a few miles of us, strung out in a column with baggage carts, pack animals, merchant wagons, and camp whores thrown in, would you not take the opportunity to smash the shit out of him, since he has essentially exposed his neck to you? Perhaps *you* would let them simply march past us, but our enemy is neither as inexperienced nor as incompetent as you are."

The outburst was ill-timed, and Titianus' face turned red at being so gravely insulted in front of all the legates and senior officers.

Proculus intervened. "General Paulinus, need you be reminded, yet again, that you are not in command of this army? The decisions here are no longer yours to make. You will follow your orders from the commander-in-chief just like the rest of us." When there were no more words of protest or outbursts by legates who shared Paulinus' assessment of the situation, Titianus dismissed the officers back to their units. As he stepped out into the torch-lit camp, Paulinus was approached by Legate Benignus.

"Frustrating, I know," the commander of First Adiutrix said. "It's bad enough that I have an inexperienced legion with only one battle to its credit. Now we are saddled with incompetents at the very top."

"I'm done with this," Paulinus said, with a sigh of resignation. "I have stood by Otho since he ripped Galba from the throne. He called upon Celsus and I because he needed our experience. We won the first battle for him, and now he casts us aside, simply because his brother and the praetorian prefect are more popular with the rankers. Those two fucking idiots will lead this army to disaster."

"Roman armies have often been led by such ignorant twats," Benignus observed. "Sometimes they lead us to disaster, and sometimes they get lucky. Of course, that is almost as bad, since they are the ones who cover themselves with glory and are lauded by all as military geniuses. We can only do our part and try not to allow their incompetence to lose us this war."

“I know that,” Paulinus replied. “At least you have your legion to command, inexperienced as it may be. As for me, I have no command. My experience has been given the same value as those Pannonian whores our lads are busy stuffing their cocks into this night. I am nothing more than an observer in this affair.”

“Well, think of it as having the best seats at the arena,” Benignus said, with a grin.

Paulinus laughed.

It was a hateful dilemma. Yet, in the end, General Suetonius Paulinus knew there was little else he could do. The emperor had made his appointments as to who the senior commanders were and, like the rest of the army, he could now only follow his orders. He slept little that night, all the while praying to whichever gods may be listening that his trepidations proved wrong.

“But what use is it, praying to Roman gods, when it is fellow Romans we wish them to strike down?”

Chapter XXXVIII: First Battle of Bedriacum

Near Cremona, Northern Italia
15 April 69 A.D.



Legionaries in battle
(Photo © Cezary Wyszynski)

General Caecina ordered Twenty-First Rapax to begin work on a pontoon bridge to cross the River Padus, under the pretext of giving the army a viable crossing with which to raid Brixellum. In reality, it was little more than a ploy. It drew the attention of the enemy gladiators under Macer, who were now supported by two praetorian cohorts from Placentia. And, as legionaries continued their work lashing boats together and laying planks across, the alarm was sounded at the main Vitellian camp, sending them rushing back to their legion.

"Has Otho completely lost his mind?" Caecina asked.

He and Valens had ridden forward to see for themselves the baffling sight their scouts reported. Both generals shook their heads when they saw the entire enemy army, approximately thirty thousand men total, stretched out in a haphazard column, complete with all of their baggage and camp followers.

"Looks like they are out on a camping trip rather than marching to battle," Valens noted incredulously. "They do know we're here, correct?"

"If not, perhaps we should form a welcoming committee for them," Caecina suggested menacingly.

Within minutes of their return to camp, trumpet blasts sounded calling the men to arms. Legionaries helped each other into their segmented plate armor, while decani inspected their soldiers. Centurions and options sought out orders from their commanding officers. In another part of the massive camp, cavalrymen saddled their horses, while donning their own armor and weapons. Meanwhile, the two commanding generals called a hasty meeting of their legates and regimental commanders.

"We've sent a runner to bring up the Predator Legion from the Padus," a legionary reported, before being dismissed.

"They're already south, by the river on our extreme right," Caecina noted. "They may as well take the right wing of the attack."

"Fine," Valens replied.

The flat, open ground south of the road was ideally suited for legionary combat. And, though Caecina was essentially giving the best assignment to one of his own legions, Valens was not petty enough to argue the point, especially since the Twenty-First was already there. The terrain to the north near the center of their lines was full of vine-covered trees and rough, rocky ground.

"First Italica and Fifth Alaudae are both fresh and at full strength," Valens continued. "They will anchor the center and center-left. Fourth Macedonia will take the center-right. We'll place the Batavian auxiliaries on the right between the Fourth and Twenty-First."

"The northern ground is extremely rough," noted Valens cousin, Legate Manlius Valens of Legio I, *Italica*.

"Then you'd best move out as soon as your men are ready," Caecina told him.

Having no further orders awaiting him, the legate saluted, donned his helmet, and made his way quickly towards his legion's section of the camp.

"We'll keep the rest of the army in reserve," Caecina added, "first Germanica Legion in the center and auxiliary infantry cohorts on either side."

"Agreed," Valens replied. "We'll use our front rank to draw the enemy in and fix them in place. By holding at least half our men in reserve we can dispatch them as needed, thereby giving us the advantage in terms of mobility and dictating the pace of battle."

Caecina turned to their cavalry corps commander. "Take half your men and ride in support of First Italica. They have the furthest distance to march over the roughest ground. The rest keep in reserve near the flanks."

The officer saluted and left to disseminate the instructions. The rest of the commanders soon had their orders and departed to their units, where soldiers were in final preparations for battle.

As he and Valens were helped into their armor by servants, Caecina could not help but appreciate that, when not trying to undermine and ruin each other politically, he and Valens actually worked very well together. It was a pity that greed and selfish ambition had wrecked any hope of a genuine friendship, and their rivalry would likely commence once again after Otho was defeated.



"Oh, come now, General Paulinus," Licinius Proculus said, as the two rode together near the lead elements of their division. "You mustn't hate me for having put you in your place in front of the emperor. You understand, perhaps better than anyone, the need to obediently follow orders. The emperor knew I was more popular with the troops, so he gave me your command."

"War is not a popularity contest," Paulinus retorted. "But I will concede your point on the need to follow orders."

"You don't hate me then?" Proculus asked, in what the general felt was an absurd question.

"Hate?" Paulinus replied, shaking his head. "No, you're not worth the effort."

Proculus gave a forced chuckle in a weak attempt to deflect the insult.

The army was now scattered. Some elements of the column, namely the merchant wagons and supply carts, on the Via Postumia itself. Other units had veered off north and south of the road, forming their own loose columns. And though the praetorian prefect was oblivious to it, Paulinus knew well the embittered demeanor of the soldiers in the ranks. Those same men who questioned his and Celsus' loyalties only a week before were now lamenting their own impudence. Within a day of assuming command, it had become clear to even the lowest legionary or auxiliary trooper that Titianus and Proculus were utterly clueless when it came to leading armies into battle. This seemed to be emphasized when a staff tribune rode over to them at a fast canter.

"Sir, the enemy has been spotted!" the man said quickly. "General

Titianus summons you at once!”

Proculus looked at Paulinus, confused at the directive. Paulinus shrugged. They found their commander-in-chief approximately a quarter mile from a long grove of trees, whose vines created additional snares and obstacles. Cohorts of auxiliary infantry were waiting impatiently for orders, as they could see the enemy units beyond the far tree line.

“What are your orders?” Proculus asked hopefully.

Titianus’ face was pale and sweaty, his eyes wide with confusion.

“The enemy is here,” he said, in utter surprise. “Damn it all, but the enemy is here!”

“Yes,” Proculus said, trying to calm the commander-in-chief. “There appears to be a legion formed up on the left.”

“And Celsus ran off with his cavalry,” Titianus grumbled, ignoring his second. “Said something about finding the enemy flank.”

“At least one senior officer still has some sense,” Paulinus said quietly, his expression betraying his smug amusement.

“What should I do?” Titianus asked him frantically. “Damn it, Paulinus, what should I do?”

“I am not in command, as both of you have so bluntly reminded me,” the general replied. “So *you* tell me what we should do.” He paused.

Titianus glared at him with an expression of betrayal.

Paulinus tipped his head over his shoulder. “It appears General Benignus has taken the initiative, in the absence of orders.”

Proculus and Titianus were aghast as they saw, in the distance, Legio I, Adiutrix formed up into battle lines and advancing towards the enemy.

“Fuck this shit!” The generals heard an auxilia trooper shout. “Come on lads, let’s take the fight to the enemy ourselves!”

This was met with affirmative shouts and soon even the section leaders and centurions were echoing the call to battle. In a wave of populist upheaval, the entire Othonian auxiliary force began its haphazard advance through the woods. Far off to their right, the Thirteenth Legion and four cohorts from Legio XIV took this to mean the general advance had been ordered. Cornicens’ horns sounded and orders were shouted by centurions to make ready to attack.

Given the varying nature of the terrain, the battle looked to be devolving into three separate engagements. Legio I, Adiutrix, was advancing across open terrain towards what appeared to be a single enemy legion. In the

center, the whole of their auxiliaries had taken it upon themselves to assault through the woods and find the Vitellians. And on the right, up a long slope of ground, the terrain was open yet broken up with numerous crags and deep ditches. It was here the remaining legionary forces were now advancing, with General Celsus and the entire cavalry force somewhere off to their right front.

"If you need me, I'll be *observing* over there," Paulinus said, looking toward the end of the tree line, approximately a third of a mile away. From there he could watch the battles between the auxiliaries, as well as the First Adiutrix Legion.

Titianus said nothing, but watched in horror as he lost all control of his army. He was surrounded by staff officers and tribunes, mostly from the Praetorian Guard. Unfortunately, they were just as inexperienced as he was. None of them knew what they should do. Licinius Proculus quietly wheeled his horse about and followed Paulinus. He reckoned if disaster struck, the old general would know how to survive whatever happened.



Legate Benignus had been just as aware of Titianus' incompetence as Paulinus. Because of this, he took the initiative once the enemy was seen advancing on their column. There had been a complete absence of orders, so he really could not be faulted for his actions. By ordering his legion to advance, he had set in motion the entire army's assault upon the Vitellian lines.

His legionaries were eager, yet they retained their discipline, marching in step while maintaining their formation and battle lines. As the distance quickly closed, the legate recognized the standards of Legio XXI, Rapax. The Predator Legion was well known to him, as he had served beside them many years before, when he was a young chief tribune with Legio V, Alaudae. Little did Benignus know, the Twenty-First had already spilled much blood battling his two cohorts at Placentia. The Rapax legionaries recognized the standards of the First Adiutrix, and it caused their blood to boil.

"Steady lads," Benignus said, riding directly behind his center cohort. With the legion advancing into a head-to-head clash with another legion, there was little for the general to do now except calm his men's fears.

He had rehearsed the battle plan with his centurions a couple of days prior. In a move that was likely to be replicated by their enemies, they would

unleash their javelins, fall into a testudo to receive the pending storm of pila from the Vitellians, and then withdraw their front two ranks to the rear of the formation. Many of these men would have their shields rendered useless by the deeply penetrating pila and would have to try and scrounge a shield before they were rotated back into the front line.

"Javelins ready!"

Benignus did not know if the order had come from his centurions or those across the short stretch of field. With subsequent orders, legionaries gave a great cry and unleashed their salvos of javelins at each other. As predicted, both sides dropped down behind their shields in an attempt to minimize casualties. The long metal shafts of the heavy pila would burst through shields, catching the less fortunate soldiers in their unprotected arms or face. Even segmentata plate armor could not fully protect against a heavy javelin flung at close range. And, there were a few who failed to raise their shields in time and were gravely injured or killed by the missile storm.

As the First Adiutrix cohorts pulled their first two ranks back, the men of the Predator Legion did something completely unexpected. Despite losing many of their shields in the javelin storm, their officers sounded the charge, a wall of soldiers crashing into their less experienced adversaries. The rapid attack allowed the Rapax legionaries to penetrate deep into the Adiutrix ranks, causing havoc amongst the jumbled masses. Men struck away at each other with both shield and gladius. Shield-less Vitellian soldiers soon withdrew in orderly fashion. Their frenzied assault had been an attempt to crack the Othonian lines, yet still they held.

Both sides took a very brief moment to assess each other before commencing once more in the clash of shields. Then with a series of centurions' whistle blows, and shouts of rage, they two legions smashed into each other with fury. The handful of soldiers who'd been badly injured in the javelin volleys now found themselves trapped beneath the trampling feet, as both sides hammered away with shield boss and gladius. And while even the youngest of the Rapax legionaries had far more training and combat experience than their foes, neither side had ever been involved in an actual battle against fellow Romans, the attack on Placentia notwithstanding. What they lacked in experience, the Adiutrix legionaries were more than making up for in courage and brutal tenacity. Shield bosses crashed together, with men seeking the few vulnerable places on an armored legionary to inflict death or serious injury with their blades. With the segmented plate armor impervious

to most melee weapons, the exposed face, neck, underarm, and lower abdomen became the primary target for dueling combatants.

Every few minutes, centurions, with either whistles or audible commands, would order their units to execute a passage-of-lines in an attempt to keep fresh soldiers in front at all times. Despite the frenzy and deafening clashes of men and metal, casualties were surprisingly few. Fatigue or carelessness would lead the occasional soldier to leave one of his vital places exposed, only to be struck down with a hard thrust from an enemy gladius. The bloodied bodies of the dying and badly injured created even greater obstacles for those combatants still standing. The battle between legions had quickly ground into a stalemate, with neither side giving any ground. All the while, wounded legionaries attempted to crawl away from the killing and were trampled by the hobnail sandals of both friend and foe alike.

As he rode up and down the line, encouraging his men to hold the line, General Benignus saw an opportunity just to the right of his center cohorts. The enemy First Cohort was pressing hard against them and had extended themselves a few paces ahead of their main line. Their ranks were packed close together, and the legate saw their eagle standard being carried in their second rank. Benignus smirked, as he quickly dismounted his horse and drew his blade.



The battle had been joined by the majority of both sides, though the Vitellians still maintained a sizeable portion of their force in reserve. Their soldiers from First Italica were still trying to negotiate the deeply pitted terrain, on the far left of their vast battle front. General Manlius Valens was frustrated at their slow advance and was further concerned by how the wide, deep trenches and crags scattered his formations of legionaries. If Otho's forces only knew of their plight, they could easily rout the entire legion with a company of well-placed archers!

"Up Italica Legion!" the master centurion shouted, from the far side of what felt like the hundredth trench they'd crossed.

The legate's horse stumbled in the soft dirt, then regained its footing, as they came out of the defilade. Here the ground finally opened up, and the primus pilus was walking backwards, his gladius held high, as he directed where each cohort needed to be.

“Don’t worry, sir, I’ll get this lot sorted!” the master centurion said, as his general rode up to him.

The aquilifer had now pulled himself out of the trench and stood near the primus pilus with the eagle standard held high. Their legionaries were converging from three different directions, as the cohort commanders sought to organize them and make ready to continue the advance. The pitched battle being fought between the Othonian Thirteenth Gemina and the Vitellian Fifth Alaudae was taking place near the wood lines over a small hill. As for First Italica, they were essentially on their own.

“Over there, sir!” the chief tribune shouted, riding over quickly and pointing into the distance to their left.

A bitter clash was unfolding between several companies of their cavalry, greatly outnumbered by what appeared to be nearly two thousand Othonian horsemen.

“Hurry up, lads!” Manlius shouted. “We don’t want their cavalry to catch us all with our cocks hanging out, now do we?”

The Vitellian cavalry were quickly being overwhelmed and, in their confusion, they were retreating directly towards First Italica. Perhaps half the legion had managed to form its battle lines, six ranks deep. As their own horsemen became entangled amongst their formations, both the legate and master centurion completely lost their tempers.

“What in the bleeding fuck is wrong with you?” the primus pilus screamed, at the nearest panicked troopers.

The legate sought out the cavalry commander, whom he spotted by the large black crest atop his helmet. The general grabbed him viciously by the collar of his breast plate.

“Juno damn you!” he shouted. “Control this mob and get your sodden asses back in the fight!” Not being entirely unsympathetic to the plight of the cavalrymen who had already taken fearful losses, he added, “Just hold those bastards off for five minutes until I can get my legion reformed.”

The cavalry officer said nothing, his eyes vacant and face splattered with blood. He simply nodded and wheeled his horse about, his sword raised high.

Orders were now being relayed down the long line of cohorts which extended half a mile. Six cohorts occupied the front rank, with four more taking up positions in reserve.

“Second Cohort, set!”

“Fifth Cohort, set!”

“Eighth Cohort, set”

And so it went, until within just a couple of minutes the entire legion was ready to advance. Their bloodied and broken cavalry soon split off, and in their impetuous zeal, the Othonian cavalry charged headlong into the wall of legionaries. Scores of men and horses were cut down by the first salvo of javelins. The rest quickly broke off in either direction.

“Now,” the legate said, addressing his chief tribune, staff tribunes, and master centurion, “let us find the enemy and break him!”



General Benignus saw the eagle of Twenty-First Rapax as a prize to be claimed; one that would shatter the morale of her legionaries. As he dismounted his horse, he called to two centuries from the cohorts on either flank of the one being assailed by the enemy’s elite troops.

“File between our cohorts and envelope their front two ranks,” he ordered the men. “Once we snatch their eagle, we’ll pull back behind our lines.”

“We?” one of the centurions asked. “You mean you’re coming with us, sir?”

“But, of course,” the legate replied. “Can’t very well expect my men to conduct what may be a suicidal assault while I sit on my fat ass.” He pointed his spatha at the other centurion. “Take your men to the right, the rest of you follow me!”

The two centuries had only been off the battle line for a couple of minutes and were still tired, yet the thought of capturing an enemy legion’s sacred eagle renewed their strength and resolve. Advancing in a single line on either side of the heavily engaged cohort, they rushed through the battle lines catching the men in the enemy’s second and third ranks completely by surprise. Devoid of a shield, General Benignus smashed his left fist into the exposed nose of an enemy centurion before driving his spatha into the neck of the nearest legionary. His two centuries rapidly battled their way between the enemy’s second and third ranks, while their own cohort renewed their assault.

The Rapax aquilifer was inadvertently knocked over by the shield of one of his own soldiers. Falling to one knee, his right hand still clasped the eagle tightly. In a quick downward swing with his gladius, an Othonian legionary cleaved through the man’s forearm. The aquilifer fell screaming onto his

back, clutching at the bleeding stump, his severed hand still grasping the eagle. With shouts of triumph, the raiding legionaries and General Benignus, battled their way back to their own line. It was a tight, frenzied mob, with both sides struggling to identify friend from foe. At least two Adiutrix legionaries were cut down as they attempted to steal the sacred standard. As the second one fell, his neck sliced open, he tossed the eagle to one of his mates, before falling to the earth where his body would be trampled by dozens of armored soldiers.

"Damn you all!" They heard the Rapax master centurion shout at the men of his cohort. *"They've stolen our eagle…get it back!"*

While the legionaries of First Adiutrix shouted gleefully that they had captured the enemy's most sacred standard, their triumph would prove short-lived. The loss of the eagle was the greatest disgrace that could befall a legion, even worse than defeat in battle. The more suspicious legionaries believed the emblems to be imbued with the spirits of the gods themselves, and woe be to any who failed to protect the sacred emblem of Roman power!

The Rapax First Cohort flew into a complete frenzy, as did those on either side of them. They assailed the Othonian lines with reckless abandon. While a more experienced legion might have been able to hold them at bay, the tired and less proficient men of Adiutrix were soon overwhelmed in the onslaught. They made a number of Vitellian legionaries pay the ultimate price for their brazenness, yet they could not stem the tide of men whose honor was of far greater value than their lives.

As the two sides battled over the eagle, General Benignus found he was crunched between the files of soldiers on either side of him. Unable to pull his weapon back to effectively stab, he swung it in a short backhand slash, the blade glancing off the cheek guard of an enemy legionary's helm. Another nearby Vitellian soldier hefted a discarded pilum. From less than ten feet away, he flung the weapon which burst though Benignus' ornate breast plate. The heavy javelin smashed through his ribs and embedded itself in his lung. The legate cried out as he fell to his knees. The butt of the javelin buried itself in the earth and was now propping him upright.

The attack on the enemy's eagle had only expedited what many would later say was the inevitable. So-called 'experts' within the army and senate would declare that no legion of raw recruits, no matter how brave, could stand for long against their more experienced and battle-hardened peers. As the center of the First Adiutrix Legion began to collapse, soldiers from both

sides raced past the stricken legate, avoiding him like a stream passing on either side of a rock. It would be several long, agonizing minutes before Drusus Benignus expired. His hand trembled. He used the last remnants of his life's energy to keep a grip on the handle of his spatha, as he was determined to die with his sword in hand. As his vision faded, he hoped he would be remembered for having done his duty, as a soldier of Rome.



By not maintaining any sense of control over his exceptionally large army and stripping his subordinate generals of any sense of authority, Titianus had lost the battle before it even began. Both armies were similar in size, with the Vitellians enjoying a very slight advantage in numbers. The Othonians had committed their entire army from the very start, with not so much as a single cohort kept in reserve. Conversely, the Vitellian front ranks, while initially fewer in total numbers, had managed to hold the Othonians in place while their vast numbers of reserves were dispatched as needed.

Caecina and Valens had worked surprisingly well together. Coordinating the left and right wings of their army, each sending fresh troops forward or redeploying others to where the enemy lines were now weakened. Legio I, Italica, despite its tedious delay getting into the fray, caught the advance cohorts of Legio XIV completely unawares and surrounded them. Much to their credit, the four cohorts of the Gemina Martia Victrix Legion, which defeated Boudicca against all odds eight years before, fought with the same valor and resolve. Refusing to be captured, they smashed their way out. Once they extracted themselves from the encircling First Italica, they began the slow retreat back towards Bedriacum.

For the rest of the Othonian army, there was no need to wait for the order to withdraw. The Thirteenth Gemina Legion had battled Vitellius' Fifth Alaudae to an inconclusive standstill. The Vitellians were now being reinforced by two cohorts from First Germanica, and with First Italica now threatening their right flank, the Thirteenth Legion had no choice but to sound the retreat.

"The enemy flanks have broken!" an excited rider informed General Caecina.

From their vantage point behind the tree lines, he and Valens could only see one third of the entire battlefield. That they had broken Otho's flank was

a sign the end of the battle was near.

“First Adiutrix is on the run,” another messenger reported, a few minutes later. “They captured the Rapax eagle for a brief time, but their commanding legate paid for it with his life.”

“That would be Drusus Benignus,” Caecina remarked to Valens. “A pity. I always thought well of him.”

“I’ll not go so far as to say I viewed him as a personal friend,” Valens remarked. “But as a loyal soldier of the empire, there were few better.”

“Yes, well, I would hesitate to use the word ‘loyal’ in this case,” Caecina noted. “Still, he died in the cause he believed in, just like every other soldier who has fallen this day. Shall we order a general advance?”

“Now is as good a time as any,” Valens agreed. He spoke to a pair of staff tribunes. “Send word to all remaining reserve elements. They are to attack at once. The army will pursue the enemy as far as Ad Castores.”

“At which point, I would bet a thousand talents that the war will be over,” Caecina added.

Though this had been the only clash between the bulk of both armies, with most of Otho’s forces surviving the battle, there was an air of finality to the Vitellians’ victory. General Caecina suspected that, though they only suffered a close-run defeat, the armies of Marcus Salvius Otho were completely crushed.



Licinius Proculus could scarcely hide his dismay as he watched the First Adiutrix Legion falling back, little remaining of their good order and discipline.

“Just a matter of time now,” Paulinus observed, his voice surprisingly calm. “The Twenty-First will chase First Adiutrix from the field, and then turn their attention on our center lines. Once that happens, the rest of the army will collapse.”

He was no longer angry or put out by having been stripped of command. Proculus suspected the general no longer cared who won or lost the war.

“But surely,” Proculus protested, “we do not know what is happening on the right. Perhaps your old Legio XIV is holding their own.”

“Were they all in the field, I would expect the Fourteenth to fight to the death and would pit them against any of Vitellius’ legions. But, since no one

wished to wait for the rest of their soldiers to arrive, they only had four cohorts deployed today. And unless they have managed to accomplish on the right what the Rapax Legion has done on our left, then this battle is lost."

Off to their right, they saw auxilia cohorts withdrawing from the woods in disorder. In the distance, silhouetted against the ridgeline, it appeared Titianus and his staff officers were fleeing the battle as well.

"I think we have our answer," Proculus noted glumly. "What say we leave this place while we still have our heads intact? Perhaps the new emperor will find some use for us, and not send us into exile or worse."

It was a bitter thing for Suetonius Paulinus to see the very soldiers he had so recently led to victory driven from the field in ignominious defeat. But, the fault for the defeat was not his, even if Titianus chose to name him as a scapegoat, which seemed very likely.

Though he certainly had no feelings of friendship towards Proculus, the two were now comrades by necessity. And while the rest of the army made the long retreat of nearly twenty miles back towards Bedriacum, the general and the praetorian prefect headed south, towards where they hoped to find a viable fording point across the River Padus. From there, they intended to make their way to the city of Parma, where they would await the fate of the empire. Neither expected to ever see Emperor Otho again.

Chapter XXXIX: Battle's Judgment

Bedriacum, Northern Italia
15 April 69 A.D.
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That evening, the garrison at Bedriacum was appalled to learn of their army's resounding defeat. The first to arrive was a terrified staff tribune who told of the crushing of the Adiutrix Legion, as well as the death of the brave General Benignus. That the soldiery lauded the slain legate as a hero only made General Aquila's return more awkward. The legate of the Thirteenth Gemina was berated with insults from the rankers and accusations of cowardice. Aquila was suddenly in fear for his life, when General Gallus intervened.

"What is the meaning of this shit?" the general shouted, as he hobbled out of his headquarters tent, his leg bandaged and his body propped up by a pair of crutches. "This man is an honorable legate of Rome, and you *will* show him some damned respect!"

"He fled from the battle, sir," a soldier protested. "While brave Benignus gave his life for the emperor!"

"Enough already!" Gallus snapped. He then spoke calmly. "We do not know the magnitude of what has transpired. We have no knowledge as to how badly the army has been defeated, and if it even has the strength to continue to fight. But if we are going to make a stand here, then we must not turn on each other."

It was around sundown when the bulk of the exhausted army made its way into Bedriacum. And while Paulinus and Proculus were missing, Titianus and Celsus had returned with their men. The emperor's brother said nothing, just sat blankly staring straight ahead, quickly gulping down alternating cups of wine and water.

"It's over," Celsus said to Gallus, shaking his head. "We lost a third of our men this day, and those who remain are completely shattered."

"I understand," Gallus replied knowingly. "Has word been sent to the emperor?"

"Yes," Celsus answered. "But we cannot wait and see what course of action he decides upon. His praetorians will no doubt insist he fight to the death. I have no intention of doing so."

“What of Proculus and Paulinus?” Gallus asked. He glanced over at Titianus, who remained in his quiet stupor.

“No idea,” Celsus said. “Whether they were killed, captured, or simply buggered off we may never know.” He shook his head in frustration. “Damn it all, we should have waited for the Balkan legions. But they are still at least three hundred miles away. At this point, it might as well be three thousand.”

“We should meet with those officers, centurions pilus prior and above, who are still with us,” Gallus observed. “They will know the disposition of our men. We should make ourselves aware before we set about negotiating terms of surrender.”



Contrary to Caecina and Valens’ intent, the Vitellian army had maintained its pursuit well past Ad Castores. Neither general attempted to stop their men. They reckoned exhaustion would bring the chase to a close long before they reached Bedriacum. This proved true, although not until they had come within five miles of the enemy stronghold.

“I think we’ve done enough for one day,” Caecina told the exhausted legates that night.

“We’ll establish camp here, and see if Otho still has any fight left in him tomorrow,” Valens added. “In the meantime, we need to shore up our own losses, get our men some food, and give them at least a day to rest and reconsolidate.”

There were no complaints from the senior officers nor from the men in the ranks. All were completely spent, having engaged in a savage battle which, unlike most of the era, had lasted at least a couple of hours. The subsequent pursuit had taken them fifteen miles, with many of their soldiers maintaining some semblance of battle lines, marching cross-country rather than on the main road. None had eaten since breakfast, and it was now sunset.

Two cohorts had been left behind to see to their wounded and slain, while the Othonian casualties were left where they fell. All told, the army of Vitellius lost around seven thousand dead and wounded, while inflicting approximately ten thousand casualties upon their adversaries. Many of the latter were suffered after the Othonian lines collapsed, during the first couple miles of the pursuit. And while every legionary and auxiliary trooper under Caecina and Valens was convinced they had given Otho’s army a sound

beating, until the flanks collapsed the issue had been an inconclusive stalemate. Such was often the case. Many times the most decisive battles recorded by historians had been very much in doubt, right up until the very end.



Given the relatively short distance between the Bedriacum and Brixellum, it did not take long for the emperor to hear of his army's ignominious defeat. There was a somber yet defiant mood permeating the Othonian camp at Brixellum. That the Vitellians had not pursued them, but instead formed their own camp five miles from Bedriacum, told of their own state of exhaustion and crippling losses. Word had yet to reach the emperor of the pending surrender of the garrison at Bedriacum, and so his forces at Brixellum were determined to carry on the fight against the pretender. Those legates and senior officers who had taken part in the bitter fighting had a different point of view.

"I have here a dispatch from General Celsus," Otho said, addressing a host of senators from his entourage. Also present was his other praetorian prefect, Plotius Firmus, as well as tribunes Martialis and Vergilio. "Our army has been resoundingly defeated, and he asks what instructions I may have. He further implores me, as emperor, to do what is right for the greater good of Rome."

"Sire, we cannot give up now," Firmus protested. "We've suffered a setback, but we still have a sizeable garrison here, praetorian guardsmen who will stand by you until the bloody end!"

The assembled senators remained silent, and even Vitellius' brother, Lucius, remained completely impassive.

"The greater good of Rome," Otho repeated, nodding his head slowly while ignoring his prefect's pleas. What no one mentioned, though all clearly thought about, was the lack of any word at all from the emperor's own brother.

No one, except perhaps Onomastus, knew that the emperor had already decided what he would do, should his army be defeated by Vitellius. And while one would expect him to appear disheveled and utterly devastated, much like Nero at the end of his days, Otho was surprisingly calm, almost serene. His very demeanor was one of profound relief, as if he were being

saved from the burdens of ruling the empire.

"Sire, please," Firmus pleaded once more, as the assembled senators were either indifferent or too cowardly to attempt to dissuade Otho from what they suspected his fatal intentions were. "We should not lose heart, not now, not when so many lives have been lost already. I'm begging you, do not desert the army when it has been so loyal to you. Do they not deserve your devotion in return?"

"It is my devotion, my *love* for them, that compels me to what I must do," Otho replied calmly. He then gave an eloquent speech, one that would resonate down the generations and cause posterity to judge his end far more favorably than it would his life.

"To expose our men of spirit and courage to further danger is far too high a price to pay for my life. The more hope you hold out to me, the more glorious my death becomes. We have gotten to know each other, Fortuna and I, and you should not discount the shortness of my reign. For when one knows that they will not enjoy their good fortune for long, it is more difficult to show restraint. Vitellius began this civil war by forcing us to fight for the throne. I will end it, by ensuring that we fight no more than once. Let this be how posterity judges me. Let Vitellius take delight in his kinfolk, for I seek neither revenge nor consolation for my defeat."

He then looked to his enemy's brother.

"Lucius, note this well, how you and your family have been treated, and tell your brother that I ended my reign with dignity and grace. Others may have ruled longer, but none will relinquish power so bravely. It would be utterly selfish of me to ask the greatness of Rome's youth to shed their blood for me a second time. Let me carry away with me the thought that you were ready to die for me, but survive you must. I must not endanger your safety nor will you impede my decision. To dwell on one's last moments is a coward's way. The ultimate proof of my determination is that I make no complaints. To find fault with gods or men is the behavior of one who would prefer to go on living. Let me then end this war, so that others may live, and may posterity say that I died with honor."

The emperor made his way around the room, saying his personal farewells to his closest friends and colleagues. He briefly reminisced with each about happier days, and he urged them to leave at once, lest Vitellius prove far less merciful to his enemies than Otho had been. Last among these was a young boy of nearly twelve. He was Otho's nephew and Titianus' son,

Salvius Cocceianus.

"Salvius, my boy," Otho said, taking the lad by the hand. "I never told anyone this, but my intent, once the war was over, was to name you my successor. The gods denied me children, and you were the closest I have ever had to a son. By Jupiter, what a Caesar you would have been! Do not fear for your life, for as I have spared Vitellius' family, his brother, an honorable man, will see to it that mine is shown clemency. And do not mourn for your uncle, but be grateful that our family has now become among the leading houses in Rome, even in our defeat."

He embraced the boy and said his final farewells, before summoning Onomastus and a score of slaves to follow him. He took them into his private quarters and had them heft a small chest onto the table. Otho opened the lid. Inside was a mass of newly minted gold coins.

"For you, my loyal servants," he said. "I have already drafted in my will that each of you is to be granted your freedom. And there is enough coin in here that none of you will have to toil ever again."

He then addressed his freedman. "Onomastus, you have already earned your freedom, and the largest share of this gold and silver is yours. After I am gone and my ashes interred, I want you to leave Italia. Find yourself some place far away from the suffering and despair, take a wife, and raise lots of strapping sons and beautiful daughters. Know that I wish you nothing but happiness and peace in this life."

The freedman fought to control his tears, for never had he witnessed such nobility and generosity from his master. Otho then dismissed the servants and had Onomastus bring him a pair of daggers. Selecting one which he felt was ideally suited for the task, he placed it under his pillow and bid his freedman to bring him a pitcher of cold water. Instead of drowning himself in wine or other mind altering substances, he sat at his desk, drinking nothing but cold water, while writing a pair of letters. One was to his sister, telling her not to grieve, and that his fate was decreed by the gods, quite possibly in retribution for having usurped the imperial throne from Galba by force of violence. He assured her that his end was just and posterity would view him kindly.

The second letter, oddly enough, was addressed to Nero's third and final wife, Statilia Messalina. Though he had planned to adopt young Salvius Cocceianus, he had always been fond of Statilia. After his betrothal to Vinia Crispina had to be called off, Otho had contemplated making Statilia his empress consort. The war had delayed this, like the adoption of his nephew,

permanently.

After he finished, he undressed and went to bed. And there he slept more soundly than any night since he became emperor. He awoke refreshed, invigorated, and completely at peace. He offered a few prayers to the gods, that they might judge him with clemency in the next life. And while Roman society had no concept of redemption for past evils, he even went so far as to ask the soul of his departed predecessor to forgive him for his wicked crime of usurpation.

He took the dagger from under his pillow, opened the window, and gazed into the rising sun one last time. He closed his eyes and breathed in the early morning air.

"Three months," he chuckled, with a shake of his head. "It has been exactly three months since I became Caesar. And with my last act in this world, I pray that other lives might be spared."

He then placed the point of the dagger between his ribs, just over his heart. He took a deep breath, and as he exhaled, he plunged the weapon into his heart with the last of his mortal strength. The ribs cracked, and he gave a loud groan as his heart burst. Blood gushed from the wound, and he fell face first onto the bed. Within less than a minute, Emperor Marcus Salvius Otho departed this mortal life, his soul bound for wherever the gods, in their judgment, saw fit.

Just over three hundred miles away, in Gaul, a still-slumbering Aulus Vitellius became undisputed ruler of the Roman Empire.



While Otho ended the war with the taking of his own life, which was still unbeknownst to any outside of Brixellum, Titianus and Celsus set about the unpleasant task of negotiating the surrender of their army. They left Bedriacum around dawn, taking only a small escort of cavalry troopers along with some freedman scribes and administrative assistants. The Vitellian camp was just a few miles from the city, and their scouting patrols were scouring the region. When the camp was well within sight, the Othonian delegation was halted by a section of Vitellian cavalry.

"Hold!" their decanus shouted, brandishing his spear. "What business brings you to the army of Rome's true emperor, Aulus Vitellius?"

Before anyone could answer, a trooper suddenly shouted, “Here, I know this man!” All eyes turned to him, and his face was red with rage. “This is that filthy prick, Marius Celsus, who led the usurper’s cavalry at Ad Castores!”

“And Cremona,” Celsus added for him.

“Vile traitor!” the trooper spat. “I ought to spit you like a wild pig…”

“You will do no such thing!” a voice shouted, behind him. All were surprised to see that it belonged to none other than General Caecina Alienus. The trooper bowed his head and shouldered his lance, while the general apprised the contingent. “What brings you, friends?”

“The war is over,” Celsus stated. “We are here to negotiate the terms of surrender.”

“Then you are most welcome,” Caecina replied.

Titianus, Celsus, and their small entourage were escorted into the vast Vitellian encampment. The mood amongst their adversaries was an amalgam of triumph and complete exhaustion. Though they suffered a pair of rather decisive prior defeats with fearful losses of their own, in the end, they had gotten the best of the fighting. All mourned the losses among friends, while fretting over their wounded and missing comrades.

The camp extended two miles in each direction. Caecina explained that, while most of their forces were near Bedriacum, back near Cremona was their large hospital. Thousands of broken men lay strewn about there, with little more than a cloak to lie on. Some were missing limbs, others suffering fearful gashes and puncture wounds. What no one in the Othonian party realized was these were all Vitellian injured. Their own casualties had been left were they fell.

“May I offer you some refreshments?” Caecina asked, as the officers were escorted into his principia tent.

Servants brought in trays of wine and a few delicacies.

The general nodded towards his colleague, who rose from his chair. “I’m sure most of you know my co-commander, Fabius Valens.”

“It’s been a long time,” Titianus said.

“Indeed, it has,” the Vitellian general replied. “A pity war placed us on opposing sides, but I hope we can soon reconcile our differences.”

“I’ll get right to the point,” Celsus said, as the men sat around a large table. “We do not know the emperor’s intentions, for none of us have spoken to him since well before yesterday’s battle. However, as we are here to

surrender all of our armed forces in northern Italia, it is safe to surmise the war is now effectively at an end."

"And what terms are you requesting?" Valens asked.

"First, that no retribution be taken against our soldiers, whether they are officers or enlisted ranks," Celsus replied.

Though Titianus had been commander-in-chief of his brother's armed forces, he was now wisely acceding to the far more experienced general.

"That's more than reasonable," Valens conjectured. "Provided they renew their allegiance to Vitellius, most will be welcomed back into the fold as friends. I do suspect, however, that Vitellius will wish to deal with those centurions and junior officers of the Praetorian Guard who most voraciously supported his adversary, in particular, the very men who placed him on the throne."

"Agreed," Titianus spoke up before Celsus could answer. "We do ask, though, that our family be spared from any reprisals. Vitellius' own brother will testify that he and his family were treated with both dignity and respect."

"We cannot promise anything regarding your person," Valens noted. "As commanding general of his enemy's army, the emperor will wish to deal with you in person. As for your son, sister, and other family members, we can assure you of their safety."

"Now, we must decide what to do with the legions and regiments under your command," Caecina stated. "Legio XIII, Gemina, will remain in northern Italia where, as a penance for their actions, they will build a series of amphitheaters in the emperor's honor. We intend to throw lavish games for him when he comes to see the battlefield for himself, and Thirteenth Legion will build the venues for this. As for the newly-raised First Adiutrix Legion, we respect their tenacity and, therefore, they will not be disbanded. Instead, they will be sent to Hispania. The Fourteenth Gemina Martia Victrix will be removed from their garrison along the Danube and dispatched to Britannia. They are familiar with the province and will be most useful in keeping the natives there quiet."

"About First Adiutrix," Celsus said. "Their commanding legate, Drusus Benignus, was killed yesterday. His soldiers carried his body all the way to Bedriacum."

"An unfortunate turn of events that was," Caecina remarked. "Benignus was a remarkable soldier, one who both armies held the highest respect for. Our men will no doubt wish to honor him, and so both armies will oversee

his funeral arrangements."

"We will send word to the Balkan legions at once," Valens continued. "They need to be informed that the war is over, and they have a new emperor."

While numerous logistical issues were discussed, Titianus kept quiet. He was fearful of what reprisals Vitellius might take against him personally. It would be another day before they learned that his brother, Emperor Otho, was dead.



The day after the battle had been an unpleasant one for Centurion Primus Ordo Spurinna, who still commanded the garrison at Placentia. Having sent two of his praetorian cohorts towards Cremona in support of Titianus, his forces now consisted of his legionary detachment and one cohort of praetorians. Word of Otho's defeat and the surrender of their army reached them by late afternoon. All were somber as he unbolted the doors to the warehouse where the Vitellian prisoners had been housed.

"Time for our daily crust of bread?" Master Centurion Aetius asked. Though he had accepted Spurinna's offer to be his guest at the palace, after a day he felt it more appropriate to remain with his soldiers. "There are about fifty shit buckets that need to be dumped as well."

"Otho is dead," Spurinna said, ignoring the remark. "The war is over."

"Ah." Aetius stood up. He turned to the other prisoners. "Come on, lads! Get your faces out in the sun again, but don't go far."

He then walked over to Spurinna, and the two made their way together towards the eastern gate. Behind them, Othonian soldiers were meeting with their former adversaries, bringing them food and drink. All the while, they bantered as if they were long lost friends which, in fact, some of them were.

"I am sorry I did not have better accommodations for you and your men," Spurinna said. "Resources were limited, especially food. And now, I suppose my men will become your prisoners."

"I doubt it," the master centurion said, turning back to see the conglomeration of various soldiers fraternizing and laughing.

"Hard to believe they were in each other's death clutches a week ago," Spurinna remarked.

"With the war over, Vitellius will demand the legions swear their oaths to

him and leave it at that," Aetius stated. "If he were to punish the rankers like Galba did, they would turn on him once more. He may discipline some of the officers, but he needs his legionaries."

The two walked in silence for some time. Near the eastern gate, Spurinna decided to ascend the steps from which they had a clear view of the open farmlands and the river just to the north. His face was pale, and he looked as if he had not slept in days.

"What did we do it for, sir?" he asked, his eyes fixed on the wheat field trampled by Vitellian soldiers during the first assault. Near the walls, the scorched ruins of the amphitheater remained as a grim reminder of the cost of civil war; albeit, the people still blamed renegades from Cremona for the destruction of their cherished theater.

"We had our orders," Aetius replied, with a shrug.

"Yes, but…I think back to those two days when your legions launched wave after wave against these walls. We may have won the battle, yet when all was said and done we were defeated. I lost many men defending this city, while far greater numbers will bear the scars of battle for the rest of their lives. My soldiers, my *brothers*, died for nothing."

"Such is the dilemma that all defeated armies are left to ponder," the master centurion remarked. "And if you must know, I too, am haunted by this battle. Your cause may have been lost in the end, but I was personally bested here. And it would seem the Battle of Placentia made little difference in the outcome of the war. So what exactly did my soldiers fight and die for?"

Aetius placed his hands on the ramparts and gazed at the charred ruins of the theater. He contemplated his next words for a moment. "In all your years in the legions, how often have you known defeat?"

"In battle, never," Spurinna replied. "In war, once."

"That is because Rome simply does not lose wars," Aetius asserted. "Yes, we face the occasional defeat in battle, sometimes catastrophically, but this is rare. We still remember the disaster in Teutoburger Wald, sixty years ago this August, simply because it was so unthinkable. The great tragedy that comes from Romans making war on each other, is that Rome herself must win victory and suffer defeat in equal measure. I may have served on the victorious side, yet, since all the blood spilled was that of my fellow countrymen, I will never feel anything resembling triumph. Relief tempered with sorrow are the only laurels of victory we are left with."



Four days later, Otho's reinforcements from the Balkan legions made camp near Vicetia, approximately twenty-five miles east of Verona and sixty miles northeast of Bedriacum. Antonius Primus placed the camp near the southeast corner of the crossroads where the Via Postumia and the Via Annia converged. The Via Annia stretched to the southeast towards the city of Patavium, and eventually to the Italian coast. However, their path lay along the Via Postumia, which would take them southwest towards their rendezvous point with the rest of the Othonian army.

"The lads are eager," Master Centurion Vitruvius observed, as he and General Primus walked along the perimeter of the camp near the crossroads. Soldiers talked almost feverishly amongst each other while they went through the daily duties required to establish camp.

Legio VII, Gemina, occupied this position with Legio XI, Claudia, on the southeast edge, along the Via Annia. The six cohorts from Legio XIV, Gemina Martia Victrix, were digging in to the northeast along Via Postumia. The legions' indigenous cavalry, along with the auxiliary cavalry units, had established their camp on the north side of the road near a stream, so they could have water readily available for their horses. Several cohorts of auxilia infantry occupied the same bivouac. And while cavalrymen fed and watered their horses, legionary and auxilia infantry finished the digging of the regulation entrenchments, building of earthen palisades topped with sharp stakes, as well as the erection of tents and the cooking of their evening meals. Sentry shifts would soon be established. Soldiers were taking the time to clean and inspect their arms and kit, before bedding down for the night. It was an astronomical undertaking, that Roman soldiers could build such an impressive camp after marching twenty or more miles every day. Even the inexperienced legionaries of the Seventh Gemina were adapting well to the rigors of life on active service.

"Four days from now we should reach Bedriacum," Primus said. "And unless the emperor or his commanding generals have committed a horrific blunder, we will have more than sufficient forces available to smash the pretender's army into oblivion."

"If Paulinus and Celsus are commanding the two main divisions, I think we have little to fear," Vitruvius remarked. He raised an eyebrow at the look of concern on Primus' face.

“There is something you may not have known,” he said. “The emperor has named his own brother, Titianus, as commander-in-chief of the northern armies. If I felt that Titianus was the type who would listen to his veteran officers, seeing as how he has no military experience at all, then I should not be too concerned. However, we all know how egos and visions of glory can cloud a man’s better judgment.”

“Rider approaching, sir!” a sentry shouted, near the camp entrance at the crossroads.

“Ah, the emperor’s welcoming us to Italia, then?” Primus asked, with a nervous laugh. As the horseman dismounted, he noticed the grave expression on his face.

“General Primus,” the man said, with a salute. “I bring word from General Celsus.”

He handed the scroll to the legate. The corner of Primus’ mouth twitched as he read the message. He sighed and looked up at his master centurion. “Well, fuck it,” was all he managed to say.



It was midnight, and with only the faint glow of an oil lamp with which to see by, Aula Cursia Vale sat at a small table and began to write.

The emperor is dead, the civil war at an end, and yet I do not feel that peace has come to the empire. Otho took his own life, so that others may life. And yet I fear that his honorable sacrifice, arguably the noblest act of his entire short reign, will be in vain.

Vitellius’ armies will soon march triumphantly to Rome, making him the third emperor to have claimed the throne this year. A corpulent despot, and the petty puppet of his true masters, Caecina and Valens, his rise marks a continuation of this great tragedy.

And though I fear the wicked and profane tragedy of further civil war, the great game has not ended, but only changed players for the next round. Sabinus rightly suspects that his brother, the venerable Vespasian, will not simply bow before yet another Caesar, especially one who committed the unholy crime of using the emperor’s own legions to depose him. But

only time will tell if one will rise up who is able to put an end to the Reign of the Tyrants.

Appendix A: 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 corporal or 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 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.

Appendix B: Legion Organization

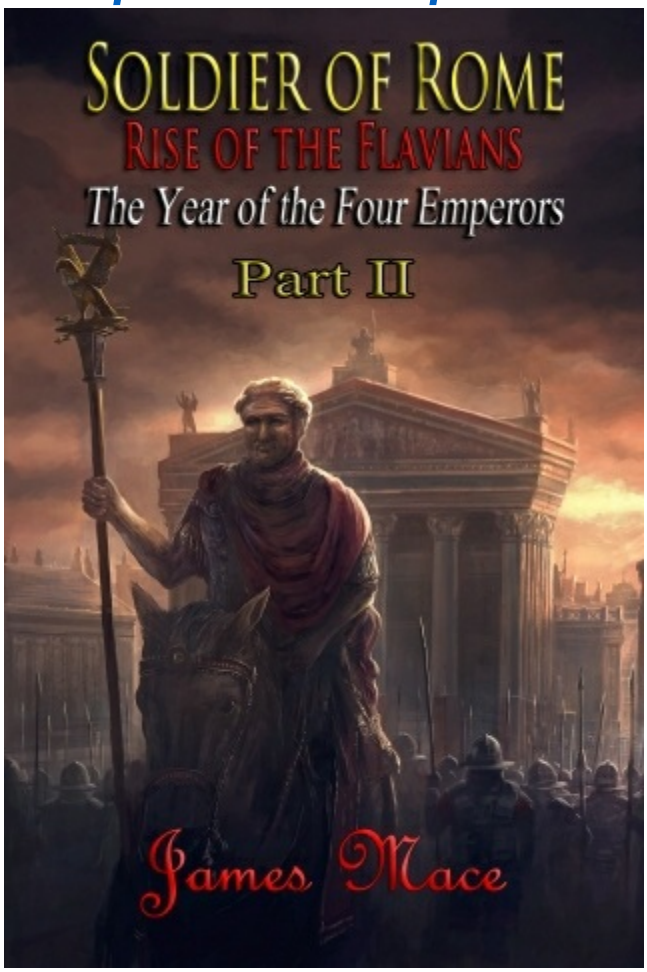
Contubernium – Alternatively called a *squad*, it was the smallest level of organization within the imperial army, consisting of seven legionaries led by a decanus.
Century – Ten squads, led by a centurion who, in turn, was assisted by an optio, signifier, and tesserarius.
Cohort – Six centuries, led by a centurion pilus prior, who also commands the first century.
First Cohort (elite) – The most experienced soldiers in the legion, it consists of five double-strength centuries and is led by the centurion primus pilus.
Legion – Nine normal cohorts plus one elite First Cohort. Commanded by a senatorial legate, with a laticlavian tribune acting as his second, along with a staff of six tribunes, as well as the aquilifer.

Total Legion Authorized Strength

Legionaries – 3,780
First Cohort Legionaries – 700
Decani – 610
Tesserarii – 59
Signifiers – 59
Options – 59
Aquilifer - 1
Centurions – 45 (approximately 80 men to a century)
Centurions Pilus Prior – 9 (one for each normal cohort)
Centurions Primus Ordo – 4
Centurion Primus Pilus – 1
Tribunes – 6
Chief Tribune – 1
Legate – 1

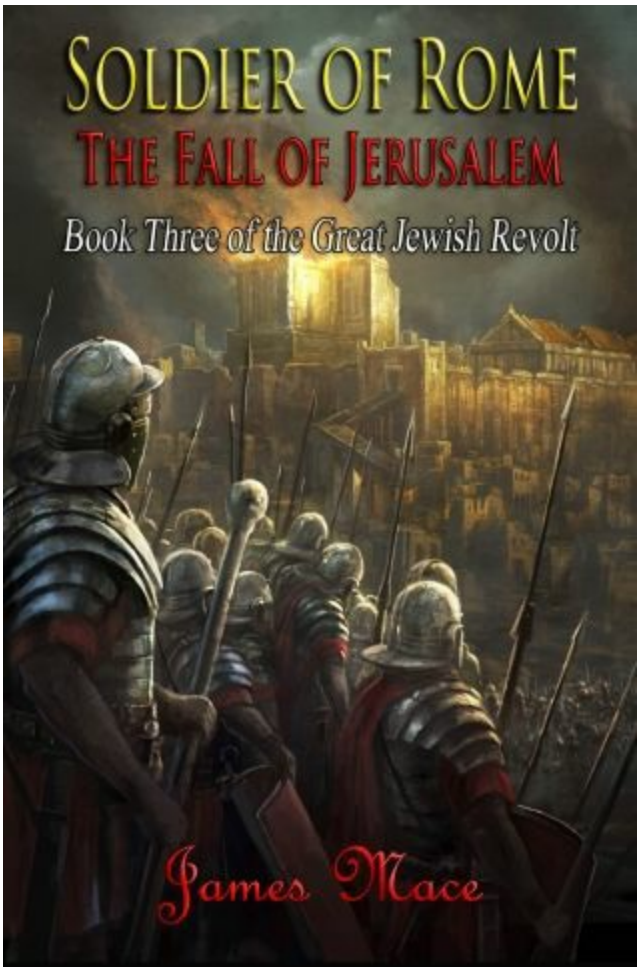
The tragic and heroic sage of The Year of the Four Emperors concludes with Part II:

Soldier of Rome: Rise of the Flavians



After which, the trilogy of the Great Jewish Revolt will be brought to its conclusion with:

Soldier of Rome: The Fall of Jerusalem


SOLDIER OF ROME
THE FALL OF JERUSALEM
Book Three of the Great Jewish Revolt
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