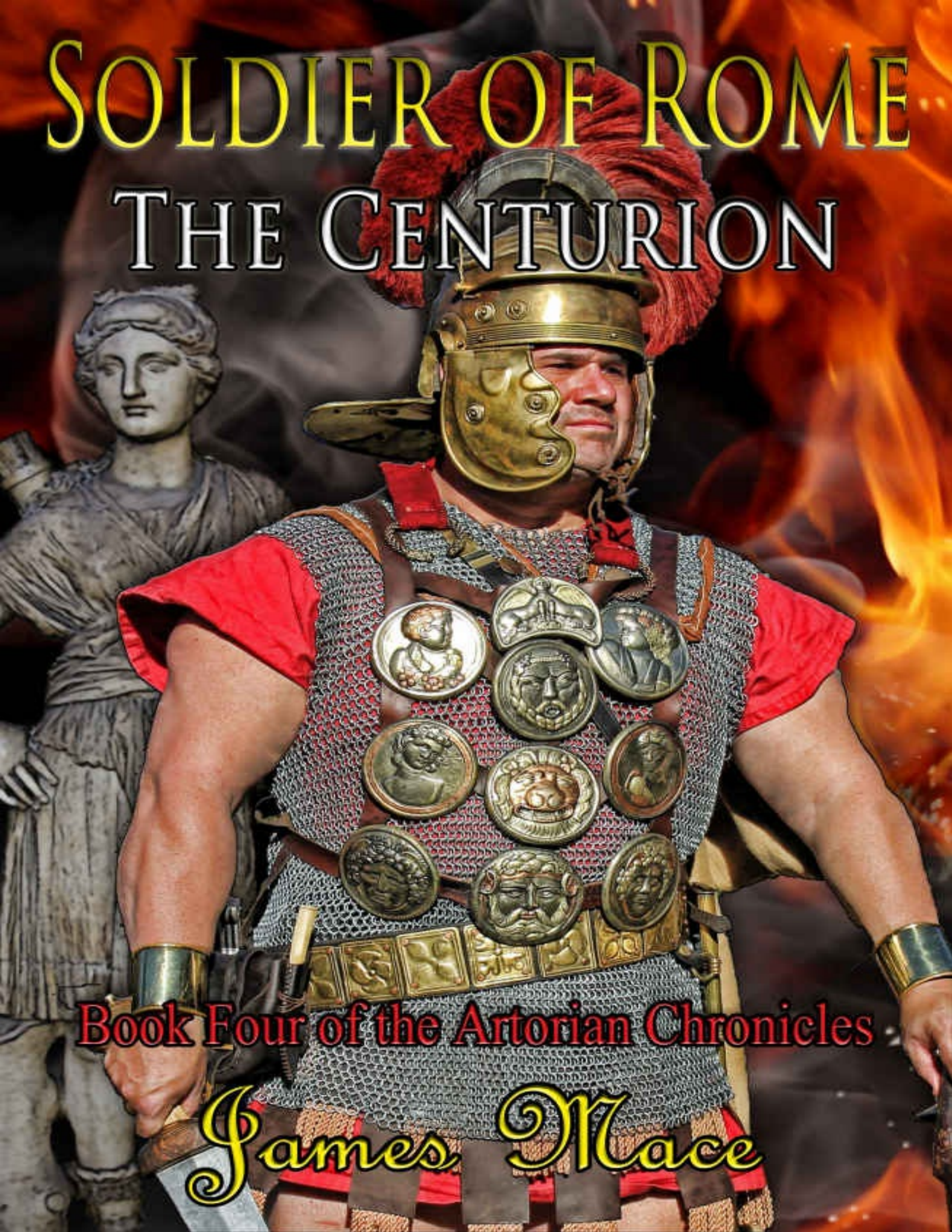

SOLDIER OF ROME
THE CENTURION
Book Four of the Artorian Chronicles
James Mace

Soldier of Rome
The Centurion

Book Four of the Artorian Chronicles

James Mace

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And though our hearts are broken
We have to wipe the tears away
In vain they did not suffer
Ten thousand strong will seize the day

- Iced Earth, *Ten Thousand Strong*

Dedicated in memory of
Ian Edward LaMott
1992 – 2008

The Works of James Mace

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

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

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

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

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

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

* Stand-alone novel or novella

Preface

In the year 28 A.D. the people of Frisia, a previously loyal province, were suffering under the oppression of the Roman magistrate, a former Centurion named Olennius. So blinded by greed had he become, that he taxed the populous well beyond their means to produce. Now impoverished and risking starvation, the Frisians did the unspeakable and sought open rebellion as their only means of survival.

The Emperor Tiberius, now living in self-imposed isolation on the isle of Capri, is deeply troubled upon hearing that such a staunchly loyal province would seek to throw off the rule of Rome. Nevertheless, he orders the mobilization of the Army of the Rhine to suppress the Frisians back into docile submission, never knowing the real reason as to the origin of the rebellion.

As the Twentieth Legion marches north into Frisia on its first major campaign in eight years, Centurion Artorius finds himself facing his first major battle since taking over his Century. Years of relative peace, combined with the mass discharges of many of his veteran soldiers, have left the ranks filled with a number of young and inexperienced legionaries. For over a third of his men this will be their first action. The Frisians, in their desperation, know that they face death either by starvation in peace or slaughter on the battlefield. For Artorius and his legionaries the crucible of war will end in heartbreak; for only after the devastation of battle does the truth arise.

Cast of Characters

Soldiers:

Titus Artorius Justus – Centurion of the Third Cohort's Second Century
Magnus Flavianus – Artorius' best friend and the Century's Chief Weapons Instructor
Gaius Praxus – Optio of the Second Century
Rufio – Signifier of the Second Century
Platorius Macro – Centurion Primus Ordo in the First Cohort
Valerius Proculus – Centurion Primus Ordo in the First Cohort
Marcus Vitruvius – Centurion of the Third Cohort's Third Century
Statorius – Optio of the Third Century
Calvinus – Centurion Primus Pilus of the Twentieth Legion
Lucius Apronius – Governor General of Germania Inferior
Gaius Longinus – Legionary recruit, he is the son of Artorius' friend, Justus Longinus
Felix, Decimus, Valens, Carbo, Gavius – Legionaries

Noble Romans:

Tiberius Caesar – Emperor of Rome
Livia Augusta – Mother of Tiberius and widow of Emperor Augustus Caesar
Claudius – Nephew of Tiberius and Grandson of Livia / suffers from lameness and speech impediment
Livilla – Niece of Tiberius and Granddaughter of Livia / widow of Drusus Julius Caesar
Antonia – Mother of Livilla, Claudius, and Germanicus (deceased) / daughter of Marc Antony and widow of Tiberius' brother Drusus Nero
Agrippina – Widow of Germanicus and half-sister of Tiberius' late ex-wife, Vipsania, she mistrusts and despises the Emperor
Lucius Aelius Sejanus – Commanding Prefect of the Praetorian Guard, he is Tiberius' most trusted advisor

Claudia Procula – Betrothed to Pontius Pilate, she is also a distant cousin of Centurion
Proculus
Diana Procula – Claudia's older sister and domina of the Proculus family's Gallic estate

Frisians:

Dibbald Segon – King of Frisia
Femke – Queen of Frisia
Klaes – son of Dibbald and Femke
Amke – Niece of Dibbald, leader of the all-female regiment, *The Daughters of Freyja*
Tabbo – Tribal war chief and leader of the Frisian army
Edeline – Wife of Tabbo
Lourens, Sjoerd, Eitel, Olbert - Warriors

Roman Military Ranks

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

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

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

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

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

Aquilifer – This man was a senior Signifier bearing the Eagle Standard of a Legion. (*Aquila* means eagle). This standard was the most important

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

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

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

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

Centurion Primus Pilus – Also referred to as the *Chief* or *Master* Centurion, this is the pinnacle of the career of a Roman soldier. Though socially subordinate to the Tribunes, the Centurion Primus Pilus possessed more power and influence than any, and was in fact third-in-command of the entire legion. He was also the commander of the elite First Cohort in battle.

Upon retirement, a Centurion Primus Pilus (and possibly Centurions of lesser ranks as well) was elevated into the Patrician Class of society. He could then stand for public office, and his sons would be eligible for appointments as Tribunes. Even while still serving in the ranks, a Centurion Primus Pilus was allowed to wear the narrow purple stripe of a Patrician on his toga; such was the respect Roman society held for them.

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

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

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

Legion Infantry Strength (estimated)

Legionaries – 3,780
First Cohort Legionaries – 700

Decanii – 610
Tesserarii – 59
Signifiers – 59
Options – 59
Aquilifer - 1
Centurions – 45 (approximately 80 men to a Century)
Centurions Pilus Prior – 9
Centurions Primus Ordo – 4
Centurion Primus Pilus – 1
Tribunes – 6
Chief Tribune – 1
Legate – 1

Chapter I: Gods and Emperors

The Imperial Palace, Rome
March, 25 A.D.
***

It was a dreary day despite the bright morning sun. Then again, every day was gloomy to the Emperor Tiberius Claudius Nero Caesar. Since the death of his son, Drusus, two years before, there had been no joy in his life. No amount of leisure, concubines, or political and military triumphs for Rome could ease the pain in his heart. His ever gloomy nature had alienated him from subjects. Indeed, many had forgotten that Tiberius had once led the legions to great victories. He had been the greatest military leader in a generation, never once suffering the ignominy of defeat. But that was so long ago. The man who had once been Rome's greatest champion, who had succeeded the divine Augustus to the imperial throne, was now little more than a broken soul.

Tiberius stood in the archway leading out to the second story balcony that was connected to the office where he spent most of his days. He placed a hand on the pillar and hung his head, feeling too tired to care about anything. In his other hand was a pair of medallions on silver chains. One bore the image of his deceased former wife, Vipsania; the other was of his son. He clutched both tightly, to the point where the images were embedded into his hand.

"You cannot dwell on the past forever." The voice of his mother, the Empress Livia, cut into him like a sharp knife.

"When one has lost all which one loves, what else can he do but dwell on it?" His response sounded full of self-pity, and he loathed himself for it. Tiberius had taken pride his entire life on his physical and mental strength. It was that very strength that the divine Augustus had called upon countless times when Tiberius served him as a soldier and statesman. Now he felt enfeebled, and it sickened him.

"I always thought a boy loved his mother," Livia replied, though her voice had noticeably softened from its usual harsh tone.

“Do not think that I don’t love you, Mother,” the Emperor replied sullenly. “It’s just different between us, that’s all. Vipsania was the only woman whom I ever loved, and she was the only person who ever truly accepted me for who I am. And Drusus…”

“Love is not something one marries for,” Livia said as she walked towards him. “Vipsania was a good woman, but aside from giving you your son, she was useless to us. I can sympathize with your loss of Drusus, though. He was my grandson, and remember that I, too, know what it is like to bury a child.” Tiberius winced at the sudden memory. How many years had it been since his beloved brother, whom he had named his son after, had died?

“It’s ironic, isn’t it?” Tiberius conjectured. “Here I stand, ruler of an Empire of seventy million souls, and yet I have always failed those closest to me. I was the elder brother and should have been able to protect Drusus. And whatever your disposition may have been towards Vipsania, she was still my wife! You know I never forgave Augustus for taking her from me. As for my son…his debaucheries and lifestyle were his undoing. Of all that I have lost in my life, he was the one I could have saved! My own son needed me, and I failed him.”

“You cannot forget the other seventy million within the Empire who still need their Emperor,” Livia chided gently. She knew Tiberius was inconsolable when it came to the loss of those close to him, regardless of whether or not he was to blame for their demise.

“I am reminded of it every day,” the Emperor acknowledged. “For eleven years now I have borne the mantle of *Caesar*.”

“And do you still love Rome, as you once did?”

“Love…and hate her,” Tiberius answered. “I won’t lie to you; there are days I wish I could wake up and find the city below vanished in an instant. Cast it all down into oblivion! But no, the city is eternal, and the Empire that she spawned will continue long after I am gone.”

“It is about when you are gone that I wish to speak with you,” Livia said, causing Tiberius to throw his hands up in the air and storm back into his office.

“Oh, Mother, not you too!” he barked. “A day never passes that I am not constantly chastised over the issue of the succession. I would just rather Rome became a republic once more after I am gone; a true republic, not the farce that we have now.” His last remark caused Livia to glare at him. Even at his age her stern gaze unnerved him.

“You don’t believe that any more than I do!” she snapped. “You may be a lot of things, but a republican is not one of them, so don’t play stupid with me! Your brother was infatuated with the Republic, but you, I always thought were the more sensible of the two when it came to that.” Tiberius let out a resigned sigh as he sat down behind his desk.

“You know me too well, Mother,” he conceded. “Alright, so I don’t believe in the Republic. Mind you, it’s not that I don’t like the principles. It’s that the Senate lacks the competence to rule over a whorehouse, let alone an Empire that stretches from Hispania to Arabia. There are maybe a dozen decent men amongst their ranks; a dozen out of the two hundred active members and further additional four hundred of the senatorial class!”

“Then you must decide *now* who will maintain the Empire after you have gone!”

“Why, so they can plot against me and have me removed?” Tiberius rebuked. “The sons of Germanicus serve as my heirs. Despite the ill feelings of their mother towards me, I still see little need to view them as anything less than my adoptive grandchildren.”

“The Senate worries that your animosity towards Agrippina will undo any sense of stability with her sons succeeding to the imperial throne,” Livia added.

“The Senate will deal with my decisions like they do everything else,” Tiberius responded forcefully. “The sons of Germanicus will continue to serve as my heirs, provided their bitch of a mother keeps her place.”



It was the first time ever that Livia had invited her grandson, Claudius, to dinner. He looked around nervously as he limped into the Empress’ private dining room within the imperial palace. Whereas his brother, Germanicus, had been a sculpture’s dream, physically gifted and unnaturally strong, Claudius had been born with a number of disabilities. It was as if the gods had shorted him because of all the gifts they had given his brother. His club foot made walking difficult, and his head twitched involuntarily. Stuttering didn’t help. While his afflictions were genuine, Livia had suspected for some time that he exaggerated them in public.

“Th…th…thank you for inviting me to d…dinner, Grandmother,” Claudius struggled to say. A slave handed him an oversized chalice of wine,

which he immediately drank heavily from. It was embarrassing that he was so nervous around her, but then Livia reckoned she had never been very kind to him, often berating him as a fool and an embarrassment to the family.

By the time he made his way to his couch he had already emptied the chalice and was asking for more. Livia grinned inside, for the wine she had supplied was very potent and would loosen his tongue. She needed to see if her intuition about his exaggerated afflictions was true before she let him know her intentions.

"I'm glad you made it," Livia said after allowing for a slightly awkward silence.

"Y…y…yes," he started to say when Livia cut him off.

"Oh stop it!" she snapped. "I know that you can speak properly, so lay off the charade already."

"S…sorry, Grandmother. I will try to speak better."

"I know more about you than you realize," Livia said, leaning forward slightly. This caused Claudius to wince. "You didn't think you could hide under the guise of a fool forever, did you?"

"N…no, Grandmother, I suppose not." Claudius took another long pull of wine and tried to relax a bit. There was no point in playing the fool with Livia any longer.

"I wanted to also say that I know this is a trying time for you right now," the Empress said, causing Claudius to lower his head and take another long drink of wine. "I, too, understand what it is like to lose a child." Claudius' son, also named Claudius, had been in his teens and was, in fact, betrothed to the daughter of the Praetorian Prefect, Sejanus, when he succumbed to a mysterious death by asphyxiation. Though the circumstances were suspicious, murder had been ruled out.

"H…he was a good lad," Claudius replied quietly. The death of his son was but one of the trials he had been facing of late.

"Doubtless his marriage to Junilla would have been good for you as well," Livia added. "Oh, don't think I'm heartless. I just know that your son marrying the daughter of Sejanus would have placed you in a good position politically since my husband, as well as your uncle, has denied you in this regard."

"Augustus did not care for my history of the civil wars that I wrote all those years ago," Claudius said, leaning back on his couch and sampling some figs. "He apologized to me for having it disposed of, although this was

many years later."

"Your timing was terrible," Livia replied. "While Augustus always appreciated candor, it was too soon after the civil war against Antony that you wrote possibly the most critical work ever written about him. It also served as a stark reminder to him that you are Marc Antony's grandson. He knew your popularity with the Senate, as well as the common people, and he could not allow the possibility of them becoming sentimental and longing for the Republic to return. Most had forgotten that Antony was a traitor who had abandoned Rome in the first place."

"I assure you, Grandmother, that my sentiments have nothing to do with my lineage," Claudius stated.

"No, I understand you are still infatuated with that archaic system of government known as the Republic," Livia countered. "It is all well and good. Your father was a republican at heart, as was his father. I suspect even Augustus himself longed for the days when the Senate could rule on its own. But those days are no more. Like it or not, Claudius, Rome *needs* a strong emperor. The Empire is too large for that squabbling mass of panderers and politicians to run effectively. I swear most of them cannot even agree on what to serve for lunch, let alone make important decisions affecting Syria or Hispania."

"There are still good men in the Senate," Claudius replied, allowing himself to get a touch defensive. "Last summer when my house burned down, it was Caecina Severus who demanded that the public pay for its rebuild."

"I will grant you that Severus is among the good ones," Livia conceded, "though he is a rare breed. He's always had a soft spot for our family after he served with your brother in Germania." Claudius smiled briefly at the mention of Germanicus.

"Severus' ties run deep with our family," the Empress continued. "He served with and mentored both your father and your uncle, back when they were young soldiers bloodying their swords for the first time." Livia took a drink of her own wine as she let Claudius contemplate where she was leading this discussion. She then thought about her grandson. How old was he now; thirty-five perhaps? She realized that she had said more words to him in the previous hour than in all those years combined. She just hoped that her present reassessment of the lad was correct.

The awkward silence drew out until the servants brought their dinner. Claudius' eyes brightened as he saw a large platter of spiced mushrooms

placed on the table. Ignoring the bland broths and gruel his grandmother preferred, he helped himself to a huge bowl of the delectable mushrooms.

"Really, Claudius," Livia chastised, "must you make a swine of yourself? The way you are gobbling those mushrooms will be the death of you, I'm sure."

"Grandmother," he said slowly, trying not to let the wine disable his thoughts. "You did not invite me over just to discuss my republican sympathies, or my eating preferences." It was a bold statement, one which brought a smile to Livia's face. She then produced a pair of scrolls, one of which she handed to her grandson.

"This is a prophecy, given to me by my son's astrologer, Thrasyllus," Livia explained. "That obnoxious rat of a man is annoyingly accurate in his predictions sometimes."

"All this says is that a son of Germanicus will follow Tiberius to the imperial throne," Claudius said after reading a few lines of the scroll. "There is no surprise there. After all, my nephews, Drusus and Nero, were adopted by my uncle."

"Keep reading," Livia replied, taking another drink from her chalice. Claudius' eyes grew wide as he finished reading.

"But this can only refer to the youngest, Gaius Caligula!"

"Yes, vile little monster that he is," Livia agreed. Germanicus' youngest son, Gaius, who was known as *Caligula* due to his mother dressing him in legionary caligae sandals as a child, was just shy of his thirteenth birthday and already displaying his terrible qualities. His mother, Agrippina, spoiled and refused to discipline him, much to the chagrin of Claudius and all of their family friends. Claudius feared that the child was not just a mischievous brat; he felt that there was something much darker to him.

"What did my uncle say when he saw this?" Claudius asked, holding the scroll up.

"He doesn't know," Livia replied. "I paid Thrasyllus to keep quiet, and he knows not to cross me." Claudius contemplated what he was reading before responding.

"But if this holds true, then my uncle still has a number of years left in power," he said after drinking some water and trying to clear his mind. "If by then you're dead, what difference does it make to you?"

"Because I still serve Rome," Livia stated with an air of power in her voice. "Don't think that because I am extremely old, and a woman, that I

can't still influence what happens in the Empire. I confess there is another reason. You know I spent the majority of my life married to Augustus. I divorced your grandfather and married him back when he was still known as Gaius Octavian and long before he came to power. He spent more than forty years as Emperor of the Roman Empire, and was deified by the Senate.

"As a god, Augustus is free from any retribution the divines may have exercised against him in the next life. His enemies are powerless against him in both life and death. I do not hold such an advantage against the Fates."

"So you wish to become a goddess," Claudius surmised, exhaling loudly. "Well, you certainly don't lack for ambition, Grandmother." He looked like he immediately regretted his words, though the Empress dowager did not take offense, for her grandson was correct.

"My son does not believe in the deification of monarchs, though he allowed the Senate to make Augustus a god for political stability," Livia replied. "He would not allow himself to be cast as the one who attempted to deny the beloved Augustus his divinity. Tiberius will make no such concessions for his dear old mother. So I must look to another."

"You think I can influence Gaius Caligula to make you a goddess?" Claudius asked. "I admit that he always acts as if he is fond of me as his uncle…" Livia's laughter cut him short and he sat up quickly, startled.

"Oh, you are a fool after all!" Livia mused, tossing the other, much larger, scroll at her grandson. "No, if Gaius Caligula does indeed succeed my son as emperor, I suspect that he will not sit on the throne for long. But I will still need you if I am ever to reach the divine and see my beloved Augustus again."

"Of course," Claudius replied. "Not sure what a fool like me can accomplish, but if it is in my power, Augustus will take you by the hand and lead you into paradise." As he spoke he started to unroll the scroll before realizing it was an entire book. "What is this?"

"Prophecies of the Divine Sybil, kept out of the official texts by order of Augustus. Mark well the dates, for the Sybil has never been wrong on such important matters. In fifteen, perhaps sixteen years' time, your destiny will be revealed to you."

That evening Claudius sat in his study, reading the book Livia had given him. His wife had already moved out of the house. Claudius was divorcing her on grounds of infidelity, seeing as how she was now pregnant with a child

that could not possibly be his. There was also the issue of her being suspected in the murder conspiracy involving her sister-in-law's death. Still, the issues with her were the least of his worries. As he read, the effects of the wine from earlier suddenly evaporated. His eyes grew wide as he read the prophecies set forth by Sybil, Rome's holiest of oracles.

"No," he gasped. "It cannot be!"

Chapter II: An Uneasy Peace

Fortress of the Twentieth Legion, Valeria, Cologne, Germania

***

"The frost is off the ground," Calvinus observed as he eyed the cool spring morning. The Legion's Master Centurion leaned on the dew-stained rampart of the front gate as he watched the city of Cologne coming to life in the light of the rising sun. Markets were opening, with merchants noisily setting up their wares as a section of legionaries marched towards the gate having finished their nighttime patrol of the city.

"And with no spring campaign planned, we need to keep the men duly occupied," replied Lucius Apronius, the Commanding Legate.

Training for the annual *Legion Champion* tournament would keep some of the lads busy as they sought to dethrone the young soldier who held that honor. For Optio Titus Artorius Justus, the pressure of defending his title did not weigh on him like it would others. For starters, he was not required to take part in the tournament itself. Rather, the competition would take place without him, with a *tournament winner* being named. That legionary would then face Artorius, the defending champion, a week later in a single bout.

The previous spring had been the first time Artorius had defended his title since the Third Cohort returned from its garrison duty at Lugdunum. The match had been anticlimactic, with the Optio dispatching his opponent in less than a minute.

"You know everyone was a lot more excited to watch the Pankration competition," added Calvinus, the Legion's Master Centurion. "It was something different, watching men fight in the arena without weapons."

Apronius responded with a scowl. "That's all very well, except for the fact that nearly a third of the men who took part in that tournament ended up badly injured and unable to perform their basic duties for almost a month!"

"There are no campaigns planned," Calvinus reasoned as they descended the ramparts and entered the Legate's quarters. "This corner of the Empire is relatively at peace for once, so if the lads want to beat themselves into oblivion in the name of sport, let them." He then shuffled through some papers that he had brought into the commanding Legate's office and handed

two of them to Apronius.

"Retirement certificates requiring your signature," he explained. "Two of my First Cohort Centurions have decided to call it a career."

Apronius whistled quietly when he read the citations. The men were among the Centurions Primus Ordo, the elite commanders of the centuries within the First Cohort. There were only four per legion, and they were senior to the Cohort Commanders, answerable only to the Master Centurion. One man had been in the legions for thirty-two years, the other for twenty-nine. Each had had a distinguished career, as only the best within the ranks ever made it to Centurion, and of these only a minute few ever made it to Primus Ordo.

"We will make sure we have a proper send-off for these men," the Legate directed as he signed the orders. "I take it you have replacements selected?"

"Your predecessor, Legate Gaius Silius, had already authorized two men to be placed on the roles as selectees for these positions. Both men are of the Third Cohort. One is their commander, Centurion Pilus Prior Valerius Proculus. The other commands the Third Cohort's Second Century, Centurion Platorius Macro."



The sky was cloudless and the sun bright. For Tabbo, war chief of the Frisian army, this was the perfect day. The path leading through Braduhenna Wood to the River Rhine was clear this day, though groves of trees lay thick on either side, creating a canopy of shade. Frisia was a tiny kingdom along the coast of the North Sea. Though their territories lay east of the Rhine, they were still a sub-province of the Roman Empire and subject to what amounted to a modest tribute. It was ruled by King Dibbald Segon, son of Diocarus Segon. Diocarus had been an old man when he came to the throne; his father, Adel IV, had been a young boy when he became King and ruled an astronomically long eighty-one years. Diocarus' reign was much shorter, lasting only four years. His son, Dibbald, had ruled for ten years so far. He was also a great warrior, and father to Prince Klaes, who was roughly the same age as Tabbo. Both men had led two cohorts of allied auxiliaries for Rome during the Germanic Wars and had fought at Idistaviso nine years prior.

Tabbo was in his early thirties and displayed a strong, Nordic physique.

He kept his hair around shoulder length, and his face was clean shaven, showing his powerful, square jaw line. He wore a simple tunic vest this day, along with woolen breaches. Like all Frisian warriors he was an expert in close combat and preferred using a short, double-bladed hand axe as his primary weapon, which was attached to a baldric and hung off his left side. In battle he would wear a bronze helmet and carry an oblong shield, though today was not a day for battle. In fact, the last time Tabbo had swung his axe in anger was at Idistaviso.

With him walked a strong and attractive young woman. Her name was Amke, and she was the niece of King Dibbald. Frisian culture allowed certain women to serve as warriors within a special regiment of the King's bodyguard. Amke was only twenty years old, but she was already a capable warrior.

"I've never been this far west before," she observed as she and Tabbo approached the southernmost bridge.

"I know," Tabbo replied, "that is why I have brought you with me today."

"Where are we going?" the young warrior maiden asked as they stepped onto the wooden bridge. It was sturdy, built by the Romans four decades previously. Half a dozen men could comfortably walk abreast and it was perfect for trade. Amke paused to gaze into the water of the rushing Rhine.

"A little place up on a hill off the beaten path a bit," Tabbo answered. "There is something I want you to see." As war chief, Tabbo was responsible for all the fighting men, and the women at that, who served Frisia under arms. As niece of the King, Amke was soon to be named the head of the all-female regiment of the King's bodyguard, and Tabbo felt the need to help with her education of the world around them and the people they dealt with. One never knew whom they would have to fight beside, or against for that matter. As soon as they crossed, Tabbo led them north through an open field. After a mile or so, they came to a wooded hill. Amke followed the war chief in silence as he made his way to the top. There he found a spot overlooking a small open valley.

"Here we are," he said, as he sat beneath a large shade tree, bushes to his front masking his presence to the valley bellow.

"What am I looking for?" Amke asked as she knelt down next to him.

Tabbo grinned and pointed down into the valley.

"Out there," he replied, "where that road comes out of the tree line. You will see them soon enough. They always come around this time of day,

especially on pleasant days like this." Amke wanted to ask him who he was referring to, but decided to sit and wait.

As the sun reached its apex in the sky, they heard the sound of footfalls marching in step, along with the rhythmic banging of metal on metal. The sun caught the standard carried at the front of the column as they exited the trees across the way. It was a brilliant standard, one that Amke had never seen before; a long pole with a series of several silver discs running up it. A small rectangular plaque was above these, and at the very top was a copper hand, palm facing towards them. The man who carried the standard wore bronze scale armor and a helmet with some type of animal skin covering it. The men who marched behind the standard, and were now fanning out on either side into a large rectangular formation, were equally impressive.

"So these are the Romans," Amke observed.

"Not just Romans," Tabbo added. "These are *legionaries*, the best fighting men in the entire Empire." Their iron armor consisted of banded plates around the torso, as well as vertical plates covering the shoulders. Their helmets had a protruding neck plate off the back with guards covering the cheeks. Each carried a large, rectangular shield that was painted a bright red with gold colored wings coming off the bronze metal boss in the center. Brass strips ran the along the edges as well.

"I did not know there was so much iron in the entire world!" Amke said, marveling at the gleaming armor.

This caused Tabbo to chuckle softly.

"This is but a single Century," the war chief explained, "a paltry fraction of a legion. They paint their shields bright so that not only can a commander identify his men, but so that the enemy can see them coming and be afraid. If you count their heads, there are not even eighty men on the field. Imagine what their enemies must feel when facing a legion of five thousand of these men!"

"You admire the Romans," Amke noted, still watching the scene below as a soldier in the distance who looked to be wearing chainmail instead of plate armor raised his short staff in the air. His helmet was adorned with a red horsehair crest that ran transverse across the top. The legionaries immediately halted.

"Squads one through five, make ready for javelin practice!" The man's voice carried a great distance. *"Squads six through ten, to the training stakes!"*

“That man is a Centurion,” Tabbo explained to the unasked question. “And yes, I do admire the Romans greatly. I have fought beside them before, in fact, our people have adopted some of their practices in close combat to our own weapons and tactics. As you can see by looking at the men attacking those tall poles with their short swords, they like to get in close to their enemy. The Romans believe that those who fight with longer weapons, such as spears and pole arms, do so because they are afraid of their enemy. A Roman gets right into his opponent’s face, making him look him in the eye and feel his breath before being killed. That is why our people fight in close with short hand axes, swords, and stabbing spears, rather than the great spears and clubs that many of the neighboring tribal kingdoms use.”

“I admit they are impressive to watch,” Amke conceded, “though I can’t help but wonder if perhaps your admiration runs a little too deep. You sound almost as if you revere the Romans.”

“Not at all,” Tabbo snorted. “I have no love for their Government or the petty magistrates they send out to collect their taxes. Their army I have the highest respect for. One *must* know an ally or enemy’s strengths and respect them, as well as any potential weaknesses. Many of the younger generation wonder why we give tribute to Rome, when all they see is the single magistrate and his tax collectors who every spring come to collect cattle hides. You are one of the most prominent voices of that generation, and as a leader of the King’s bodyguard it is important for you to understand why we pay tribute to Rome. It was men such as these, under the command of the General Drusus Nero, who was the current Emperor’s brother, that expediently routed our warriors all those years ago.”

“Can they be beaten?” Amke asked. “I’ve heard stories…”

“They are fearsome, but they are still men,” the war chief answered. “Yes, they can be defeated. The stories you have heard stem from the Cherusci tribe, who formed an alliance of twelve tribes sixteen years ago to oust the Romans from their lands. In simple terms, they succeeded. Three legions were destroyed in the forest known as Teutoburger Wald. The Emperor’s nephew, Germanicus Caesar, who was the son of the great Drusus Nero, invaded six years later with an army of eight legions, plus auxiliaries and allied troops. I was one of those allies.”

“I remember that a little bit,” Amke added. “I was only eleven when you, the prince, and several hundred of our warriors left to fight the Cherusci. I never knew that it was Rome you were fighting for. I thought it was simply

an intertribal affair between the Frisians and the Cherusci. Most of you were back before the harvest moon, so I thought little of it. Although, I do remember, vaguely, the funeral pyres for some of our warriors."

"We ended up facing the Cherusci cavalry," Tabbo explained. "Like most of the tribes within the Germanic Alliance, they were a fearsome enemy. One in ten of our warriors who left to fight beside Germanicus Caesar never returned. Our losses still paled in comparison to what the legions did on that field of Idistaviso, and later at the stronghold of Angrivari."

"But Rome never conquered the lands of the Cherusci," Amke replied.

Tabbo confirmed with a nod. "True, though not because they couldn't. The Emperor Augustus died the year before Germanicus launched his invasion. In his will he forbade the expansion of the Empire beyond the Rhine. This did not mean that the Romans could not still invade and raze civilizations to ash; it simply meant that they would not stay once the fighting was over. Under the order of Emperor Tiberius, who our own noble King fought beside many years ago, Germanicus laid waste to the tribes east of the Rhine. The Marsi were nearly exterminated, and the Cherusci paid dearly in lives and spoils. Even their wives, children, the old, and the infirm were not spared from the legions' wrath. Those who could not flee…" His voice trailed off and his eyes seemed lost, as if seeing beyond. Suddenly he shook his head, brought back to the present.

"My apologies," he said, swallowing hard. "I will speak no more of that time." Amke noticed sweat had suddenly formed on his brow, even though it was not hot out.

The war chief, like her cousin Prince Klaes, had always been a mentor and brotherly figure to her. Amke then understood the paradox within Tabbo. He understood the Romans and held their war fighting abilities with the highest respect, but there was something darker, something that he had almost told her yet elected not to. Amke knew about the brutal nature of tribal warfare, where villages would be destroyed and all within killed or enslaved. Yet from what she could see of the few dozen legionaries training in the open valley below, she sensed that once unleashed, the Roman war machine was able to inflict death and destruction on an unimaginable scale. She was both horrified and fascinated at the same time by the concept of such fearsome power.



Artorius was elated when he heard the news regarding the promotion of his Centurion, Platorius Macro, to the First Cohort. He had served as Macro's second-in-command for two years; the Centurion having been a father figure and mentor to him ever since he first joined the legions ten years ago. At twenty-seven years of age, Optio Titus Artorius Justus was still the youngest of his rank within the Third Cohort. He also knew that he was three years shy of the minimum age requirement for promotion to the rank of Centurion, so he understood that he would not be considered as Macro's replacement. The Centurion noted this as he spoke to his Optio while directing servants to pack up his personal belongings out of the Centurion's quarters.

"I'm just glad that regardless of who replaces me, the men of the Second Century still have a strong leader they can look to," he said as he pointed to a chest with a number of his personal affects. A pair of slaves hefted the chest with a pair of grunts and hobbled out of the room.

"You flatter me, sir," Artorius replied with a shrug. "There are a number of solid leaders within this century. I daresay any of the Principal Officers and probably half the Decanii could step into my position."

"Well, it's a shame none of them will," Macro said as he led the Optio out of his quarters and into the open street. It was an early spring morning, and the fortress of the Twentieth and First Legions in Cologne was always a bustle of activity at this time of day. Squads and centuries of legionaries marched towards the drill and parade fields for training, others ran in small formations as part of their daily physical fitness, administrators and logisticians went about the business of supporting and supplying the legions with the mountains of food and equipment they needed.

"I am still too young to replace you," Artorius observed.

"Young in years, but not experience," Macro countered. "On every action this legion has fought since you enlisted you have been singled out for your valor and leadership. That's far more than can be said for my replacement." He walked along the road towards the east gate, hands clasped behind his back as he did so.

"You know who it is then," Artorius said.

Macro nodded. "Yes, and you're not going to like it. His name is Fulvius; he was a direct appointment, meaning he has never spent a day in the ranks as a legionary. The sad thing about our society is that Rome is full of men in

positions of power who got there not because of their own accomplishments, but rather because of whom their father's were, or their father's friends for that matter."

"So he got to where he's at because of who his father sucked up to," Artorius replied with a shrug while trying to maintain a positive outlook. In truth, he hated the idea of losing Centurion Macro for some upstart who had never served in the ranks and was suddenly placed in power. "It is part of the world we live in and can't be helped."

"Thing is, I know Fulvius, at least enough to know that he is everything that is wrong with the system," the Centurion responded. "He has never served in a major battle and probably has never even drawn his sword against the enemy. His father has powerful friends in the Senate who owe him a number of favors; perhaps he's blackmailing them after they got caught fucking each other's wives or something. So unless Fulvius does something blatantly criminal, and believe me he walks the line on this, nothing ever happens to him. He simply gets moved to another assignment."

"And becomes someone else's problem," Artorius observed with a sigh.

"The good news is that he rarely stays in one assignment for more than a year, so hopefully we will be rid of him soon enough and can get a Centurion of quality into the Second."

"Well, at least we know Proculus won't put up with any stupid bullshit," Artorius said with satisfaction. His demeanor soured when he saw the look of consternation on Macro's face.

"I guess you haven't heard," he replied as they exited the gate. A pair of legionaries on duty saluted the Centurion as they passed. "Proculus is moving on to the First Cohort, too."

"Well, you can't tell me we are getting a lackluster Pilus Prior as well to replace him," the Optio reasoned. When Macro did not reply Artorius stopped walking and stared at his Centurion. "Oh, come on! Don't tell me we get some weak-willed limp-dick as our Cohort Commander!"

"That is exactly what you are getting," Macro said, his face full of sympathy. "Lincinius means well enough, but to be quite honest, he has no balls. He got his position because his father has even better friends than Fulvius. Artorius, I tell you these things not to try to discourage you. I've spent too many years making this Century what it is, and I don't plan on sitting back from a comfortable billet in the First Cohort and watching it all fall apart. You need to know what to expect. You know I'm always here for

you, but once I leave and take the promotion to Primus Ordo, I cannot directly interfere."

Artorius decided to vent his frustrations the best way he knew how. Under normal circumstances, those in his position would head to the tavern to get slobbering drunk and waste their coin on wine and prostitutes. While the idea of a few hours of uninhibited sex with a delicate young maiden sounded good, he was not going to do so under the conditions brought on by too much drink. He preferred to be in control of his senses when he violated a willing, supple woman. Instead he walked over to a small walled-in courtyard that his good friend, Centurion Vitruvius, had built. It was a microcosm of the gymnasium they had used during their three years in Lugdunum. Artorius had a passion for the gymnasium; it allowed him to exert all his frustrations in the purity of brutal power.

Vitruvius had taken boulders of various weights and had them sculpted into perfect spheres for lifting. He had the metal smiths cast heavy balls with handles that could be used for other strength building exercises. An iron bar was held up by wooden supports at a height of a normal man's arm stretched above his head. He wanted to set up some climbing ropes as well, but was waiting on the materials to build the scaffolding necessary.

Artorius removed his tunic, revealing a mountainous, powerful body beneath. Though he was of average height, his muscular frame was out of proportion and made him look inhuman. His forearms were larger than a normal man's biceps, and his biceps looked like they belonged on someone's legs. His neck was thick with the muscles that came out of his shoulders, inflating it to even bigger size. His chest was large and his back ripped with muscle, all tapering into a normal-sized waist. Jutting out from his waist was a pair of thick and well-defined legs. What he lacked in height he more than made up for in size and power. Only Centurion Vitruvius and the Norseman, Sergeant Magnus, came close to matching him. All three had trained together at the Lugdunum gymnasium and each was his own icon of strength. All three required their tunics to be custom made, along with their armor.

He decided to work his chest and shoulders this day. He made sure he properly stretched and limbered up his muscles, lest in his frustration he injure himself. He took a medium-sized boulder and while lying on a bench he went through a series of presses. He then took a pair of the handled metal balls and used them to stretch and strengthen his chest. Boulders of

increasing weight were pressed overhead to add size to his shoulders, while he took a pair of the heaviest weights and let them hang from each hand while shrugging his shoulders. It felt good as his muscles burned.

"You could have come and got me first, you know!" Centurion Vitruvius' booming voice interrupted his thoughts, and he almost dropped the weights.

"Sorry, I had to burn off some aggression first," he replied without sounding apologetic. Vitruvius removed his tunic, revealing a taller, though almost equally well-muscled body. He leapt up and grabbed the bar and started to repeatedly pull his body up, working his back muscles. He then dropped to the ground and addressed his former protégé.

"If it's about the new Pilus Prior, I understand."

"At least you have command of your own century," Artorius replied, dropping the weights. "You don't have to answer to some pompous ass that has never had to draw his blade against the enemy."

"Yes, not a good situation to be in," the Centurion agreed. "To go from having Macro and Proculus to…well to be honest, I'm not sure what."

"I don't know," Artorius grunted as he hefted an even greater sized boulder over his head. "I just hope that our fears are unfounded and things won't be so bad. After all, Macro and Proculus could not stay with us forever. Perhaps we should give their replacements a chance."

Vitruvius simply grunted as he walked over to where he had set up a pair of stone steps on a platform. There was a gap that was just large enough for a man to stand with his feet shoulder width apart. A large square block with a rope fixed to it sat in the hole. The Centurion squatted down, grabbed the rope in both hands, and proceeded to repeatedly lift the heavy weight out of the hole, his forearms, back, and legs threatening to tear through the skin as blood rushed to the engorged muscles. His face red from exertion, he dropped the block after several repetitions.

"So how's the family?" Artorius asked as he set a boulder down after working his shoulders. His former mentor was down on one knee, catching his breath.

"Well enough," Vitruvius replied. "Celia keeps me in line, and the boys are getting bigger and scrappier every day!" There was a broad grin on the Centurion's face, which Artorius could not help but match. Vitruvius had married the daughter of a wine merchant soon after their return from Lugdunum. Though the family did a very respectable amount of business, in private, Vitruvius would complain that his father-in-law's wine was

overpriced and “tastes like mule piss!” Celia had born him twin sons, Marcus and Tiberius, the year before. It seemed like the two had learned to fight before they had even fully learned how to walk. They were always rolling on the ground, trying to beat each other, which their mother found appalling, especially since Vitruvius encouraged it.

“And what about you?” Vitruvius asked. “No comely young lady that’s caught your attention lately?”

“Eh, not for more than a couple hours at a time,” Artorius replied with a laugh as he stretched his arms and shoulders out. He had a few more exercises to do before heading over to the bathhouse. He was contemplating getting a full body massage while he was at it.

“Well, you’ve still got time,” the Centurion conjectured, while grabbing the rope for some more heavy dead-lifts with the stone block. “After all, you cannot legally get married until you’re a Centurion anyway.”

“I don’t worry about that,” the Optio replied. “Besides, there is only one woman I think I will ever truly love.” His last remark caused Vitruvius to drop the stone with a loud thump into the sand below.

“What the fuck, Artorius?” he asked sternly. “No one in Roman society marries for something as asinine and mythological as love! Marriage serves a practical function in life; it allows us to form bonds between houses, plus it gives us the legitimate means of producing the next generation of Romans. If a couple does grow to love one another, it is only after a number of years of being constantly in each other’s presence, but it’s not like it’s a condition of a successful marriage.”

“I know,” Artorius replied with a sigh. “I guess after Lady Diana I just became a bit idealistic is all.”

Vitruvius snorted in reply. “To hell with idealism,” he retorted. “No good ever came from a man being stricken with love for a woman, at least not before he was married to her for a number of years. Don’t believe me? Look what happened to Marc Antony!”

“Do you love Celia?” Artorius asked.

Vitruvius gave a shrug.

“I’m rather fond of her,” he conceded. “And she did give me two extraordinary sons! I confess she is a good woman, but love? In a few years, perhaps. You need to get such idealistic notions out of your mind. Only weak-willed effeminate poets write about such things as if they truly exist.”

“Yes, well, I suppose I need to spend a bit more time in the brothels

then," the Optio replied with a grin and a wink. It was only partially true. Though he enjoyed the physical pleasures of women, Artorius felt a lingering and hollow feeling since he had last seen Diana two years before. Perhaps it was because he still got the occasional letter from her that he allowed himself to hope. But Vitruvius was right; any such fanciful notions were nothing more than a sappy poet's fantasy. And besides, he had more pressing matters to concern himself with.

Chapter III: A Disgrace in the Ranks

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During the first week after Macro's replacement arrived, the situation had been even worse than Artorius had anticipated. Fulvius was fat, to the point that the Optio wondered if he even had a set of armor that fit. He reeked of wine and cheap booze the minute he stepped into the Century's main office, and without a word he had stepped into the Centurion's quarters and slammed the door. He was rarely seen the first few days, not once making a century formation. Artorius explained to the men that their new Centurion was ill and that he would make his appearance to them soon enough. It soon became apparent that he was performing the duties of both Optio and Centurion. It was at the end of the first week that Fulvius made his presence known, at least to Artorius.

"Optio!" he shouted from the Centurion's office. *"Where the bloody hell is my Optio?"* The legionary who had been assigned as the Centurion's aide for the week was relieved when he saw that Artorius happened to be in the outer office. He quickly excused himself from the room as Artorius entered.

"You called for me, Centurion?" The Optio stood with his hands clasped behind his back, trying to hide his revulsion at the sight of his superior. Fulvius looked to have sobered up, though he was in need of a shave and looked like he had not bathed in a week. He had a parchment in his hand, which Artorius recognized as the Century's duty roster for the month.

"There is a problem with this," Fulvius said, holding the document up accusingly.

"It's the monthly roster," Artorius explained. "Where is the problem?"

"Your judgment fails you I see," the Centurion said with a scowl. "The placement of legionaries on each duty seems to be done entirely at random. Those wishing to avoid the less desirable duties need to do so through a stipend to the Centurion."

Artorius glared at him when he comprehended what Fulvius was saying.

"Each squad within the Century has an equal share of the burden," he explained. "With the exception of those on *immune* status, all legionaries are required to pull the same duties."

"No longer," Fulvius retorted. "I want this list scrapped and revised with those who are willing to pay a stipend being exempt."

“But that means the other legionaries will have to shoulder more of the burden!”

“Do you have a problem with that, *Optio?”* There was a sneer forming on Fulvius’ face as he used his rank to trump Artorius. He also seemed to note that not once had the Optio called him *sir*.

“To be perfectly blunt, yes, I do!” Artorius was flabbergasted and not ready to back down without at least trying to make things right. “The Tesserarius and the Decanii spend an entire day each month working on that roster. What you are proposing will undermine the whole system, to say nothing of the issues of good order and discipline! And for what? So you can fatten your own coffers on their wages?”

Fulvius became enraged at this insubordination. He grabbed his vine stick and slammed it on the desk.

“Do you dare to tell me what my place is?” he fumed. “It is perfectly within my rights to allow the men to offer a stipend to avoid placement on the duty roster!”

“You mean they can bribe you to get out of work,” Artorius growled. He knew he was losing this fight, but he made sure his final point stuck. Fulvius then rushed towards him, holding his vine stick in front of him.

“You getting insubordinate with me, boy?” he snarled as Artorius remained rigid. “Perhaps I need to teach you a bit of a lesson.” As he started to pull his vine stick back, Artorius quickly reached up and grabbed the end of it, all the while remaining fixed in his spot with his other hand still clasped behind his back.

“Careful you don’t overstep your authority,” he said coolly. “A Centurion may use corporal punishment on legionaries, but to strike a Decanus or Principal Officer requires the approval of the Cohort Commander.” Fulvius attempted to pull his stick away, but Artorius kept his grip firm. “You should also know that a report for every such punishment must be sent forward to the Centurion Primus Pilus. So before you strike me, you might want to make sure you can get the approval of Lincinius. I don’t doubt he will give it to you. But I think you should also make certain once said punishment is executed, that Master Centurion Calvinus will find it was justifiable.”

As he released his grip on the vine stick, Artorius wondered if Fulvius would know he was partially bluffing. Certainly a Centurion could strike any one of his men if he saw fit, advising the Cohort Commander later, if at all. In fact, Macro had struck Artorius with his vine stick on one occasion without

anyone's approval, and Artorius had been a Decanus at the time. The blow had been justified, and besides, Macro had a solid reputation of being stern but fair. Yet even if Fulvius was aware of Artorius' bluff, he had to know that if he did strike his Optio, word of it would eventually reach Master Centurion Calvinus, who would want answers as to why a brand new Centurion with a spotty record was striking a highly decorated Optio on little more than a whim. Artorius had been candid and forceful with his statements to Fulvius, but at no time had he crossed the line to insubordination. Macro had always appreciated his candor, even if he did find it irritating from time to time.

Artorius forced himself to keep his composure and remain stoic as Fulvius slowly lowered his vine stick. His bluff had worked, it seemed. His fleshy face was red with anger and he stood nose to nose with the Optio. Artorius almost gagged on his rotten breath, which stank of bile and sour wine.

"You may think that you run this century, *Optio,"* Fulvius whispered, his voice thick with venom. "There is a new order here. Your friend, Macro, isn't here to protect you anymore. I have friends more powerful than you can possibly imagine. Remember that before I have you flogged and busted down to a mere ranker. Whether you like it or not, boy, I *own* you!"

Artorius left for the gym that evening in a seething rage. He was followed out by his friend, Praxus, who was also the Century's Tesserarius.

"Hey Artorius!" he shouted, running to catch up to his friend. "What the hell, man? What's Fulvius doing, telling us to scrap the damned duty roster! He's bringing back the practice of bribery for gods' sake!"

Artorius spun and glared at his friend.

"You think I don't know that?" he snapped, his face red and the veins in his neck bulging. "Damn it, Praxus, I am fucking powerless to stop him if he wants to bring that practice back. Technically, what he's doing is not illegal. And even if we all think it should be, we don't set policy or regulation. What would you have me do?"

Praxus nodded his head and looked down, apologetic.

"I'm sorry, Artorius. I just see where this will lead, and so do you. A couple of the lads may take Fulvius up on his offer, and that alone will bugger up the duty rosters. I also know that if not enough of the lads start coming forward with bribes, he'll start randomly punishing them for not fattening his purse. We've got to find a way to stop him. I don't want the men

to suffer needlessly because of him."

At that moment they saw the door to the Century's office open and the legionary who had been assigned as the Centurion's aide walked out. Whereas ten minutes prior his face had been unblemished, there was now an ugly black and blue mark across the left side of his face. His eye was swollen and purple.

"Here, Legionary!" Artorius shouted to the young man, who quickly jogged over and stood with his hands clasped behind his back.

"Sir?" the lad asked, trying to maintain his bearing.

"What the hell happened to you?" Artorius suspected he knew the answer.

"Centurion said I was insubordinate, when he asked me if I would like to offer up a few coins to keep off the duty roster next month," the soldier explained, "I respectfully declined, saying that my lady is expecting a child within a month, and I need all the coin I can get to care for her and my son or daughter. That's all I said, sir, I swear."

"And for that he said you were insubordinate?" Praxus asked, his face showing deep concern.

"Yes, sir. I promise there was no more said by me." The legionary's face showed signs of desperation as he did not know what to do and looked fearful. The young man had been in the army for just over six months and was still very new to the legions. It was not that he was a stranger to physical punishment.

Artorius had remembered lashing the soldier a couple of times himself during recruit training. This had always been as a means of correction during stake drills, weapons practice, or century maneuvers. It was never personal, and he never struck a recruit in the face. Roman society placed great emphasis on physical appearance, and for Fulvius to blatantly smash his vine stick across the young man's face was a sign of great disrespect.

"It's already starting," Praxus said, looking over at his Optio, whose face tightened.

"Sirs, may I speak freely?" the legionary asked. He looked exasperated and in desperate need to voice his concerns to someone in authority.

"Walk with us," Artorius replied, as he and Praxus tried to put as much distance between themselves and the Century's billet, lest Fulvius be watching them.

"Sir, I understand the need for hard discipline in the legions," the soldier

said quickly, as if trying to say everything he could before it escaped him. “I’ve always borne my lashes with dignity, for they were always warranted. I have also spent time as an aide before. I got tasked to spend a week as Centurion Macro’s aide right out of recruit training. I was scared out of my mind to be working so close to him, but he was alright. You and he have always been hard but fair with us. Punishments and rewards were always doled out based on our merits, nothing more or less. But now…” He stopped and lowered his head. His body was trembling slightly and it took every ounce of his resolve to keep his composure.

“Now rewards will be based on who bribes the Centurion,” Praxus continued for him, “and punishments will come to those who are unable or unwilling to do so.”

“Forgive me sir,” the legionary said, maintaining his bearing once more. “I just do not know what to do. I have one more day left as his aide and I don’t know if I can go back there tomorrow…I hate that he hides behind his rank. He told me that if I dared to raise a hand to protect myself that he would have me flogged and then strangled! I know that in a fair fight I could break him…sorry, sirs, I mean no disrespect to his position.”

“It is not you who disrespects his office,” Artorius replied finally. “We will do what we can. As for tomorrow, I know the Century is scheduled for a day-long road march, so go have your face attended to and get some rest.”

“We are?” Praxus asked with a look of puzzlement on his face. As he caught Artorius’ stare, his eyes suddenly brightened. “Ah yes, of course. It will be good for the lads’ fitness since it is that time of year again.”

Artorius dreaded returning to the Century’s administrative office, but he knew he had no choice. Rufio, the Century’s Signifier, had made himself scarce at some point. Fulvius was sitting behind a desk with his feet up on it, drinking a cup of foul smelling wine. Drinking during duty hours was a severely punishable offense, regardless of one’s rank. Artorius decided to mind his tongue.

“You’ve got some discipline problems within this century I see,” Fulvius mused, waving his vine stick absentmindedly. “If you’re not quick to correct them, I will do it for you.”

“As part of maintaining order, as well as the men’s physical fitness, we are scheduled for a road march tomorrow,” Artorius replied. “Since it’s early in the spring we will keep it light, only about fifteen miles. It is customary for

the Centurion to lead us on these marches. It will give the men a chance to meet you in person."

"Can't," Fulvius replied immediately, "got pressing business to take care of. You'd best start pressing the men about my offers regarding the duty roster. I want to see results by the time you get back."

It was late when Artorius and Vitruvius knocked on the door to Centurion Lincinius' quarters. The Optio had explained the situation to his friend, who offered to go with him to help make his case to the Cohort Commander.

"We have to try and let the system work," Vitruvius had advised.

"Who the hell is it knocking on my door at this hour?" They heard coming from inside the room. The outer office of the First Century was lit by a small oil lamp on the Signifier's desk. As Lincinius opened the door he was surprised at the sight of the two men who greeted him.

"Oh, Centurion Vitruvius," he said with a nod. "Ah, and you are Optio…"

"Artorius," the Optio replied. "Sir, we need your help. I apologize for the hour, but this cannot wait."

"Very well," the Pilus Prior replied, coming out into the office. "What is it that requires you to wake your Cohort Commander in the middle of the night?" He tried to give off an air of authority, but the façade was weak and Lincinius appeared to know it. He was smaller in stature, a good two inches shorter than Artorius, with a frame that looked to be sixty to seventy pounds lighter than either of the other two men in the room.

"It's Centurion Fulvius," Artorius said, bringing a bored sigh from Lincinius, who walked over to a pitcher of water that always sat on the Signifier's desk and poured himself a cup.

"Spare me the details," he responded. "Fulvius is a hard man to know, but you just need to get used to him is all."

"He's an abusive prick!" Vitruvius snapped. "He's been here but a week and already he's brought down the morale and discipline within the Second Century!"

"Your Century is the Third," Lincinius observed. "The affairs of the Second are not your concern."

"With all due respect, yes, they are," Vitruvius asserted. "I spent many years in the Second; I know all of the Principal Officers, Decanii, and most of the veteran legionaries. And as Commander of the Third Century of this

cohort, the good order and discipline of all centuries is a concern to me. If one century fails on the line, our entire cohort collapses! We are all in this together, and I will not let one man bring us down!"

"You forget yourself, Centurion," Lincinius replied, still trying to maintain some semblance of authority over Vitruvius. He, at last, gave up and sighed while turning away from the men. "Look, I am not unsympathetic to you. I understand what you are talking about."

"Then why not do something about it?" Artorius pleaded. "You're his superior! He answers directly to you."

"Only according to the army," Lincinius replied, facing them once more. "You see, I have known Fulvius for some time. He was a bully since the time I met him as a child. I never thought we'd end up in the same legion together, let alone the same cohort. At the time we were eligible, my family held greater sway within Roman politics, and I was commissioned as a Centurion Pilus Prior. Fulvius had to settle with being a regular Centurion. Over the years my family has fallen out of favor, to the point that Fulvius now wields far greater power than I do. Every Cohort Commander he has fallen under has understood this, and so they keep shuffling him around the Empire, always keeping him away from the fighting and never leaving him in one place for very long."

"Typical," Vitruvius scowled. "Meantime the men in the ranks pay the price for his abuse and incompetence, but they don't really matter do they?" The Centurion was quickly stepping over the line in terms of insubordination, though if Lincinius was scared of Fulvius, he was certainly terrified of Vitruvius, whose bald head shone in the lamplight.

"I wish I could help," Lincinius said, wincing at the looks of disgust that Vitruvius and Artorius gave him. "All I can say is keep Fulvius pacified and he will be gone within a year; sooner if the Rhine Army should be mobilized for war. His protectors also make certain that he is never assigned to a Century that may see actual combat."

"At least they did one thing right," Vitruvius growled. "Meantime, those left behind have to live with this mess before legionaries die needlessly!"

"We will speak no more of this," Lincinius said with finality, though he dared not look either of the men in the face. "Do not trouble me with this again." Immediately he walked back into his quarters and closed the door.

"I wonder if he'll hide underneath the blankets and hope that we are gone," Vitruvius spat.

“Regardless,” Artorius replied, “now my men really are on their own.”

Artorius brooded over the events from the night before as he led the Second Century on a march up the road, away from Cologne. The men marched in body armor, though they left helmets, shields, and javelins behind. Each wore his gladius and carried just some rations in his pack. The winter months on the Rhine were unsuitable for marching, and in spite of their best efforts, the men’s fitness always suffered slightly as a result. A few weeks would get them back into shape soon enough. There was a lot of tension in the air, and he suspected that all of the men dreaded the thought of returning to the fortress. He could not say he blamed them at all.

That night as Artorius and Vitruvius walked in silence past the Century’s barracks, they heard a loud cry coming from inside the main office. The men stopped and stared at each other.

“Dear gods, he’s done it again,” Artorius said quickly as he turned and raced towards the sound, which was now accompanied by the echo of a loud slapping sound. Vitruvius was on his heels as Artorius burst into the office.

On the floor in a pool of blood lay the hapless legionary who had been tasked with being Centurion Fulvius’ aide for the week. His head was covered in numerous cuts and abrasions. Blood was oozing from several nasty gashes, as well as from his left ear. His tunic was torn, showing nasty scouring along his back. The Centurion himself had a glazed look in his eye, his chest heaving with his exertions, and a broken wine jug in one hand and his vine stick in the other. Bloodied pieces of the jug lay on the floor, a sign that the young legionary had been hit repeatedly with the jug, as well as the vine stick.

“What is the meaning of this?” Artorius snapped, all sense of protocol having vanished in the horror of what he saw.

“Not your concern, *Optio,”* Fulvius sneered. “This worthless pile of dog shit knocked over and shattered one of my wine goblets! And now he’s paying the price for his clumsiness.”

“A clay wine goblet that cost you nothing!” Vitruvius observed. “This is an outrage and an abuse of the power given to you!”

“Back off, Vitruvius!” Fulvius roared. “I do not tell you how to run your century, don’t you dare come in here and tell me how to run mine!” He quickly stepped back as Vitruvius moved towards him. “Don’t even think

about it! You may be the greatest hand-to-hand fighter to have ever lived, but I have friends, Vitruvius; powerful friends who would break you and your career at a simple snap of the fingers!" As he turned towards the fallen legionary he raised his vine stick once more. He would thrash the poor man some more, just to spite the two men witnessing. As he brought the stick down once more in a hard smash, Artorius leapt forward and stopped the blow with his Optio's staff.

"Enough!" he growled through clenched teeth. Fulvius started to laugh.

"You daring to challenge me, boy?" he said in mock surprise. With surprisingly quick reflexes he threw the remains of the wine jug at Artorius. It shattered against the Optio's shoulder as the Centurion drew his gladius and swung it in a hard back slash. The weapon cleaved through the staff and Artorius quickly stepped back, instinctively drawing his own gladius.

Fulvius lunged forward, his sword raised high to smash down on him. In doing so, he violated one of the most basic rules of legionary close combat; that one never slashes with the gladius. Artorius rushed in and grabbed his sword arm by the wrist, kneeing him hard in the groin. The Centurion let out a loud groan as his breath was taken from him. His gladius fell from his hand, his eyes wide in terror as Artorius slammed him into the wall, his own weapon pointed at his throat.

"You will never harm another one of my men again!" the Optio said quietly into his ear. With a blinding, cold hatred he had not felt in years he slammed the gladius into the side of Fulvius' neck. The jugular burst by the razor-sharp blade, spraying forth dark crimson; the wicked man's windpipe cleaved in two as Artorius drove his weapon home. The Centurion tried to gasp, but his breath was cut off by the sword that ran through his neck. Blood gushed in torrents onto Artorius' arms as he held the man upright against the wall, his fat, grotesque body twitching pathetically. As his victim's eyes clouded over and rolled into the back of his head, Artorius jerked his weapon free and let the body fall. It slid down slowly, staining the wall with streaks of blood. Fulvius continued to spasm as blood and spittle spewed from his mouth, as well as the sides of his ruptured neck. Artorius dropped his gladius onto the nearest table and ran to check on the legionary, who was still unconscious on the floor. Vitruvius immediately regained his composure, in spite of what he had just witnessed, and knelt down to help him.

"He's been beaten pretty badly," he observed as Artorius ran his hands over the man, checking the extent of his injuries.

“He’s got some broken ribs and nasty cuts, but at least his skull is still intact,” the Optio replied. The legionary coughed quietly and tried to open his eyes.

“Optio…Artorius,” he whispered through the blood and slobber that caked his lips.

“It’s alright son,” Artorius replied. “He won’t be hurting you, or anyone else, anymore.” Just then two legionaries rushed into the office through the still open door, gladii drawn.

“What the fuck happened?” one of the men asked.

“Get a medic,” Artorius ordered. “This man is badly hurt and needs to be taken to the hospital as soon as possible.”

“Yes sir,” the legionary replied. It was only then that they noticed the corpse of their Centurion. It was sitting partially upright, blood still running down each side of the neck like a macabre waterfall, his tongue protruding from the side of his mouth. The two legionaries could not help but smile.

“Nicely done,” one of them whispered.

“Gods damn it!” Artorius snapped. “What part of ‘get a medic’ did you two not understand?” The legionaries immediately left the office after a brief tousle when they both tried to get out the door first. Artorius could not make out what was said between the two, but one started for the hospital, while the other ran back towards the barracks.

“The whole bloody legion will know about this before the hour is up,” Vitruvius observed with a scowl.

“That they will,” Artorius replied. He then gave the legionary a final assessment before rising to his feet. Walking over to the table he picked up his gladius and stared at the blood-soaked blade. He then looked over at the man he had just slain and allowed himself a defiant sneer of his own.

“Where are your powerful friends now?” he mocked. Taking a deep breath he became serious once more. He turned and faced Vitruvius, glancing one more time at his weapon and wiped it off with a rag on the table before offering it to the Centurion, pommel first. “You have to place me under arrest, you know.”

“Look Artorius…”

“Now is not the time to get sentimental,” the Optio stressed. “Vitruvius, you are my friend, but I have committed murder.”

“Murder of a vile man, who was about to needlessly kill one of our own men!” the Centurion spat, reluctantly taking the gladius from Artorius.

“That may be,” Artorius agreed, “but Fulvius was right when he said that he has powerful friends. They won’t stop until I have been strangled for his execution. I knew when I killed him that I was sacrificing myself by doing so. And yet…I could not allow him to harm another one of my men! If my own life is the price to be paid for their safety, then it is a price I am willing to pay.” Vitruvius remained silent as he walked over to where Fulvius had dropped his gladius. The Centurion picked up the weapon and placed it next to the dead man’s hand.

“The record will show that he was still armed and posing a direct threat when you defended yourself,” Vitruvius explained. Artorius gave a hapless grin and nodded.

The office became alive with activity as one of the legionaries returned with a team of medics from the hospital just as Praxus and Rufio returned. Magnus was also standing in the doorway with a large group of legionaries. The medics ignored the rest of the men and immediately began to work on the injured soldier.

“Shit,” Magus said quietly as he stared at the slain Centurion. “Well done!”

“Sergeant Magnus!” Vitruvius barked. “You will place Optio Artorius under arrest on the charge of murder. Take him to the guard house at once.” Magnus looked over at Artorius and was immediately berated by the Centurion. *“At the double, damn you!”*

Artorius gave an affirmative nod to Magnus, who swallowed hard and signaled for several legionaries to come with him. The two men’s gazes met, and the Norseman did not know whether to be elated at the death of the hated Centurion or terrified for his friend. Vitruvius followed them out into the night, his heart breaking at the sight of his friend and protégé being marched to the guard house by the very men whose lives he had possibly saved. It was a gross injustice, but he knew there was nothing they could do about it.

“Vitruvius.” The Centurion was startled out of his thoughts by Praxus, who stood right next to him, his face full of vexation. “What the hell happened?”

“That is for the courts to decide,” Vitruvius replied as he marched off into the blackness.

Chapter IV: Soul Forged

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Diana approached the gate of the fortress at Cologne. She had never been to Germania, and though the province fascinated her, it was not what she wished to see. For Diana Procula was finally taking a journey for herself and not on the whims of others.

She was taller than most women, with strong shoulders and extremely powerful legs, molded on years of horseback riding. Though well muscled, she was at the same time very feminine, her stunning face and deep-set grayish blue eyes masking her strength. She wore a form fitted tunic and high cut riding breaches, with a legionary gladius strapped to her hip. Between her attire and with her shoulder length hair dyed a dark blonde, one would almost mistake her for a German or Gaul, rather than a Roman noblewoman.

She stopped her horse just shy of the gate. Two legionaries from the First Legion, Germanica, were on duty. She dismounted and walked towards the men.

"Good day, ma'am," one of the men said. "If you're wishing to enter the fortress, you'll have to check your horse in at the stables, just inside the gate. Also, no weapons are allowed inside."

"I see," Diana replied with a sigh.

"Who are you here to see, miss?" the other soldier asked.

"Optio Artorius," she replied. "He's with the Third Cohort of the Twentieth Legion."

"Artorius…" the first legionary said while thinking for a moment, his face suddenly brightening. "Oh sure, I know who he is! He's Valeria's *Legion Champion*. He has been for a few years now."

"Isn't he the one who got himself into a spot of trouble recently?" the other soldier asked, causing his companion to smack him in the stomach with the butt of his javelin.

"Excuse me?" Diana asked, suddenly concerned. She had not received word from Artorius for several months now. They had written sporadically to each other since his return from Gaul, but he had never mentioned any trouble.

"Sorry ma'am," the first soldier replied. "Something we can't talk about…um, is there anyone else here you know?"

“Yes,” Diana replied, suddenly agitated. “Centurion Valerius Proculus is my cousin.”

“Oh, of course!” the first soldier said quickly. “He’s one of the Primi Ordinones of the Twentieth. Here, I’ll show you how to get to his house…uh, you still need to leave your weapon here, ma’am. Most sorry for the inconvenience.”

The fortress at Cologne was huge, especially since it housed two entire legions. The long rows of century billets were laid out in neat lines, six to a group for each cohort. Diana had heard that the layout scheme for all Roman fortresses was almost identical, dependant on the terrain and location. So, in reality, a legionary would know where to find a specific cohort or century at any fortress within the entire Empire. The chaotic logistics were fascinating to watch as carts hauled grain to the storage silos, cattle hides to the leather shops, raw iron to the metal smiths. Intermixed were units and individual soldiers going about their duties. Though it looked like total mayhem, Diana saw a type of orderliness to the whole thing. The legion functioned like a well oiled machine from centuries of experience.

There seemed to be a lot of activity coming from the area around the Principia, the headquarters of the Legion, though she paid it no mind. As she walked along the road leading towards the housing for the Centurions Primus Ordo, Diana unknowingly strolled past the billets of the Third Cohort. It was then that she saw Sergeant Magnus walking her way at a feverish pace. His fair skin and mop of blonde hair made him easy to spot in a crowd. His head was down and he looked focused, uncharacteristically worried about something.

“Magnus!” Diana shouted, causing the Norseman to stumble as she caught him by surprise.

He turned and stared at her for a second, his mind so wrapped up in whatever vexed him that it took him a moment to recognize her.

“Lady Diana!” he replied, eyes wide. “W…what are you doing here?”

Taken aback by the manner of greeting, Diana stood with her hands on her hips.

“Is that how one says ‘Hello?’” she asked. “Not, ‘good morning,’ or ‘good to see you Diana.’ Seriously, Magnus!”

The Decanus chuckled nervously and shook his head after she planted a kiss on his cheek.

“My apologies,” he said, taking a deep breath. “It’s just…well; your timing isn’t exactly the best. You see, things aren’t going well right now.”

The deep consternation on his face unnerved Diana. She folded her hands in front of her and started to fidget nervously.

“Why?” she asked. “What’s happened? Where is he?” She sensed something was terribly wrong concerning Artorius.

“I think you’d better come with me,” Magnus replied, placing an arm around her shoulder and guiding her over to the Second Century’s billets. Inside the main office a pair of legionaries was scrubbing what looked like blood off of the tiled floor, as well as the far wall.

“What happened here?” Diana asked, jolting back in surprise. A look of horror then crossed her face. “Artorius…is he?”

“No, that’s not his blood,” Magnus replied reassuring. “He’s fine, at least for the time being.”

“Please explain,” Diana replied, her face darkening.

“You may want to sit down for this,” the Decanus replied, holding a chair out for her at the center table. He then snapped his fingers and the two legionaries quickly exited the office. He told Diana everything that had transpired over the last two weeks. Diana’s hands were on the table, and they started to tremble as Magnus told her about Artorius’ killing of Centurion Fulvius and his subsequent arrest for murder.

“W…what’s going to happen to him?” Diana’s voice was cracking and she found it difficult to speak as a dark shadow crossed her heart. Just two weeks before, her cousin’s wife, Vorena, had come from Rome to tell her that she was going to take over the running of hers and Proculus’ estate. Diana was free to stay with her, of course, but also to leave if she wished. On a whim she decided to visit the one she still loved. She had hoped to surprise him, but now in a mocking of the Fates, it was she who had been surprised.

“To be honest, I don’t know,” Magnus replied. “He’s not condemned yet. Fulvius had powerful friends, and they sent for one of the most venomous prosecutors they could find. However, the decision still falls under the jurisdiction of Legate Apronius. After all, he is the Governor General of the province. Yes, he is a senator, but he is fair. Artorius also has friends that he hadn’t counted on before.”

“But…but you said he confessed to his crime,” Diana argued. “Can they really find him *not guilty* of murder when he admits he did it?”

“There is always hope, my lady; there is always hope.”

Magnus words were of little encouragement, especially since he did not look as though he believed them himself. He suggested that she should wait inside Artorius' quarters for the time being. The Decanus did not know how long the trial would last. He had said it could take a week, or be over that afternoon. She tried to fight the panic that consumed her as she paced back and forth in the small Optio's room.

It wasn't much, though given that the legionaries lived in eight-man barracks rooms, the privacy alone probably counted for much. A dirty tunic and a couple pairs of woolen socks lay tossed in a corner, but at least the bed was made. His custom fitted segmentata body armor was hanging on a wooden rack; the helmet lay on top, both meticulously clean and glossy. A trunk sat on the left side of the bed. It was open and Diana saw that it contained mostly clothes, along with a few personal effects. She walked over to the desk, which had numerous documents strewn about haphazardly. She allowed herself a short laugh at how Artorius always appeared to be well organized to his men, but in private everything was often a disheveled mess.

Diana's strong sense of cleanliness and order gave her the compulsive habit of putting things in order that appeared in disarray. She sat down and started going through the piles on the desk; at least it would keep her mind occupied for the time being. Anything that looked to be work related she placed in one pile in a tray, which by the amount of dust it collected looked like he had never used. She then saw a series of small scrolls and smiled as she read them. They were various commendations Artorius had received over the years.

This is to certify that the Silver Torque for Valor has been awarded to Legionary Titus Artorius Justus for valorous conduct…

…is hereby promoted to the rank of Decanus / Sergeant of Legionaries.

…awarded the Florian Crest for the elimination of the rebel leader, Julius Florus.

As a testament to the valor, fidelity, and superior leadership capabilities, Titus Artorius Justus is hereby promoted to the rank of Optio.

There were others, and it brought a sad smile to Diana's face to read them. How could one who had given so much to Rome fall so suddenly? It sounded as if he had acted in self defense, to say nothing of protecting a stricken legionary. She then started shaking once more, fearing that there would be no justice for him. The world was a cruel, unforgiving place, and it was almost never fair or just. She finished tidying up, laid the scrolls reverently in his chest for safe keeping, and then walked over to his bed, suddenly very tired. She pulled the blankets back and lay down on her side, while still fully clothed. She pulled the pillow into her face, breathing in his familiar scent, and began sobbing uncontrollably.



Prince Klaes joined Tabbo this day as he headed towards the Rhine bridges once more. He had not seen the Romans for some time, not since Idistaviso. It was a cloudy morning, with a biting chill in the air.

"I take it my cousin was awestruck when she saw the legionaries from Flevum," the prince said as they came to a clearing by the bridge.

"She said she did not know there was so much iron in the entire world," Tabbo replied with a laugh. "I confess I still stop and stare when watching them on the march."

"What I would like is to get my hands on a suit of their segmentata plate armor," Klaes mused. "Granted it's a bit heavy, but still the protection offered is excellent. It's perfect for the type of close-in fighting we train for, don't you think?"

"I suppose if I were ever struck in the torso or shoulders I would prefer to be wearing something that protected well," Tabbo agreed. "I've never given it much thought, though. Even when we fight in close, I still like the flexibility that comes from not being encumbered by all that extra weight. Besides, you know our people could never afford to outfit even a fraction of our army like the Romans. We've always had to rely on more than just discipline and sound protective equipment."

As they sat down on the hill, they were joined by a warrior named Olbert, who was a good friend to both men. Like Tabbo, he was also devoid of facial hair, though his face was marked by scars. Unlike most of the warriors in their tribe, he was bald, with just a trace of bristling hairs about the sides and back of his head.

“Watching the toy soldiers play, are we?” he asked as he knelt down next to them, an ever-present grin on his face.

“Studying them,” Tabbo replied. “And you would do well to do the same.”

“What for?” Olbert asked with a shrug. “My axe will cleave any one of them in half if need be.”

“I forget you’ve never witnessed the Romans in battle,” Klaes said with a sigh. “Even if you did manage to breach their shield wall, your axe would bounce off their armor if you tried to cut one in half.”

“Not to mention the man’s companions on either side of him would run you through,” Tabbo added. Olbert took his axe out and slammed it into a nearby stump.

“You two sound like a couple of old women!” he growled at them. “If you’re so scared of the Romans, then why not go down there and offer to suck their cocks, lest you provoke them!”

“Mind your tongue!” Tabbo retorted. “And don’t mistake *respect* for *fear*. Rome may not be our enemy, but it is still good to learn how they fight. We must never forget that it was only a generation ago that we faced them, and gods forbid should we have to again. I do not wish for us to suffer the same disastrous consequences.”



“This trial is now brought to order,” Master Centurion Calvinus spoke, his voice echoing throughout the hall. He was reading the formal charge brought forth by a magistrate named Pinarius, who was also present as the prosecutor. *“The charge is that Optio Titus Artorius Justus did willfully commit the crime of murder against a superior officer; that he did so with malice and without sufficient provocation. He is further charged with gross insubordination by preventing his Centurion from exercising his right to discipline a legionary.”* Calvinus looked as if his guts were being turned inside out.

From the report given to him by Vitruvius it was clear that Artorius had only acted in defense of a fellow soldier, and subsequently himself. Still, there was much that he did not know about the incident, and he needed to get all the facts out in the open before rendering a verdict.

Artorius stood in the barricaded stand at the center of the room, facing the

tribunal. The Tribunes would act as a type of jury, giving their votes to his guilt or innocence to Apronius. While he could overrule a verdict of the Tribunes, to do so would reflect very badly on him, and the Governor General scarcely knew who Artorius was, other than he had won the *Legion Champion* tournament, fighting other legionaries in what amounted to a game with wooden swords. The Tribunes were all young politicians doing the required six months of compulsory military service that Rome demanded of them. Artorius did not know if they were out for justice, or if they would vote in whatever way seemed politically expedient. After all, since Fulvius had had friends in the Senate, it might do well for a young Tribune seeking a magisterial position to vote in the way particular senators wanted.

Master Centurion Calvinus was the only person on the tribunal that Artorius had any real faith in. However, he was a nonvoting member and was only there as an advisor. As powerful as he was within the army, the opinion of a Centurion Primus Pilus meant little to an Equestrian who was already looking ahead to the next step in his political career once his mandatory service was complete.

"I now wish to address the defendant before we move on to witnesses," Pinarius said, to which Apronius nodded in approval.

The man stalked back and forth in front of the stand, like a wild beast mocking his prey. He was a weasel-looking man, slight of build and walking with a partial stoop; yet he seemed to somehow be able to turn his nose up at the Optio behind the short barricade. Artorius thought that it must have made the man feel good to wield power over one such as him. His expression seemed to cry out, *all your muscles can't save you now!*

"*Optio* Artorius," Pinarius said, not bothering to hide the disdain in his voice. "You have already confessed to the killing of your superior, Centurion Fulvius, and yet you wish for the court to believe that it was due to extenuating circumstances. Please do explain."

"Centurion Fulvius was using excessive corporal punishment against a legionary…" he started to say before Pinarius cut him off.

"You speculate on what is excessive, but that is not your place!"

"The man was lying face down in a pool of his own blood," Artorius retorted while trying to maintain his composure. "He's been confined to the hospital for a month. If Fulvius had been allowed to continue, the man would be dead."

"Are you a medic? Again, a presumption on your part," the prosecutor

retorted. “How are we to know that the Centurion, exercising what is legally his right, may I remind you, wasn’t finished exacting punishment before you barged in and assaulted him?”

“First off, he assaulted me,” Artorius responded. “This can be verified by Centurion Vitruvius. Second, he was drunk out of his mind, like he usually was.”

“Ah, but how can we know he was drunk?” Pinarius said with a dismissive wave. “You killed him, leaving no way of anyone else witnessing his state of sobriety.”

“The room reeked of rotten wine,” Artorius answered.

“Yes, a jug was found shattered on the floor, with wine spilled everywhere,” Pinarius retorted quickly.

Artorius’ anger was rising by the second, though he knew that this was not the time to be losing his tongue.

“I think *that* would suffice to account for the smell, wouldn’t you say?”

“And yet he still drew his gladius and assaulted me!” the Optio seethed, his temper finally getting the best of him. He swallowed hard, knowing that he was playing right into Pinarius’ hands.

“A bit of a hothead, aren’t you?” he said smoothly. “You used your Optio’s staff of office to prevent your superior from exercising his legal right. You shoved your staff in his face and he felt threatened. If you had a sword and someone attacked you with a staff, don’t you think you would draw, too?” He turned away quickly, not allowing Artorius to respond.

“Legate Apronius,” Pinarius said, addressing the Governor General. “It seems pretty obvious what has transpired. We know the rest of the story by this Optio’s admission. The fact of the case is that Centurion Fulvius was killed by Optio Artorius. What other evidence do we need?” He raised his hands by his sides in emphasis.

“We still have other witnesses whose testimony may be relevant,” Apronius replied, bringing a bored sigh from Pinarius.

“Very well, if you wish.”

Centurion Vitruvius’ testimony went almost exactly the same as Artorius’ since he was the only other firsthand witness. Two legionaries testified about the abuses Fulvius had exacted on them, bringing rebukes from the prosecutor that the Centurion had done nothing illegal, and that he was within his rights to physically chastise his men as he saw fit. When Tesserarius Praxus brought up the use of bribes instituted by the Centurion, Pinarius

again forcibly reminded the assembly that this was not an illegal practice either. The only man who spoke favorably for Fulvius was Lincinius, the Cohort Commander. Artorius glowered at the man, knowing he was only speaking up for Fulvius in order to save himself from the fallout from the slain Centurion's friends. Finally, Apronius spoke up.

"I think it is time for the tribunal to recess and reach a decision," he said solemnly. "The facts of the case are rather precise; however no verdict can be made hastily." He then stood and left with the Tribunes and Master Centurion behind him.

"Calvinus, do you have anything you wish to say before the Tribunes render a verdict?" Apronius asked as the men all sat around the table.

"I do," the Master Centurion replied, standing up from his chair. "The facts of this are that Optio Artorius did slay Centurion Fulvius; however, the circumstances leading up to it does not bode well for the Centurion. Fulvius had a spotty record at best…"

"Which Pinarius said is irrelevant to this case," a Tribune interrupted. Calvinus shot him a blistering gaze but kept his voice calm.

"And is it Pinarius, a known friend of Fulvius and his patrons, who decides guilt or innocence here?" the Master Centurion retorted. "The way I understand it, it is you with the tribunician power who decide this case, not the prosecutor. I know that anything less than a full conviction will not be seen as…*politically* expedient."

"Calvinus, what are you insinuating?" the Legion's Chief Tribune asked, suddenly irritated. He was normally close with the Master Centurion, relying on him heavily as a mentor. He was, however, outraged at what Calvinus might be implying.

"I'm not one to insinuate," he replied, "so I will just say it outright. Fulvius had friends within the Senate. They want revenge, and what do they care if it comes at the life of a mere Optio who was doing what he honestly believed was the right thing? After all, the lives of the plebian rankers mean nothing, they never have! So what's one more sacrificed if it will help one of us keep favor with those in the Senate who would wish his demise?"

"Damn it, Calvinus!" Apronius snapped, slamming a fist on the table. The Master Centurion raised a hand apologetically.

"Forgive me, sir," he replied. "I only state what each of you is thinking, or at least knows is the reality of situations such as this. I'm not saying

whether you should convict or acquit Optio Artorius, all I wish is that it be done with justice rather than political expediency in mind. I ask that we do what is right for no other reason than it *is the right thing to do*."

The Tribunes muttered a few things amongst themselves before Apronius asked each if they were ready to cast their votes. When all said that they were, a basket was passed around. Each man would write his vote on a slip of papyrus and place it in the basket. According to the law, only a majority vote of guilty was required. The Legate had forbidden the men from discussing their votes with anyone, so unless a unanimous verdict was reached, no one would know how each man had voted. As they headed back to the courtroom Calvinus stopped Apronius in the hallway.

"One last thing, regardless of whether or not Optio Artorius is convicted, the Third Cohort's Second Century still needs a leader. One man has led them this entire time, and I think you know who he is." Apronius paused and gazed at the floor. He then looked Calvinus in the eye and nodded. The Master Centurion hoped that Apronius had guessed his intentions. He also quickly prayed to any god or spirit that was in the vicinity and willing to listen that the Tribunes had made their decision based on justice rather than politics. He then went back into the office and grabbed a scroll from a box and scribbled a few lines onto it before returning to the courtroom.

The buzz of voices in the room immediately died as Apronius and the rest of the judicial delegation walked back into the room. Artorius was calm; resigning himself to whatever fate awaited him. He only hoped that if sentenced to strangulation that he would at least die with some semblance of dignity and not do something embarrassing like shit himself at the last.

"At this time, I will read the votes as cast by members of the tribunal!" Apronius' voice boomed. He then took each paper out and read it to the assembly. *"Guilty."*

A grumbling started amongst the legionaries present, who were quickly silenced by Master Centurion Calvinus, who slammed his fist onto the tribunal table.

Apronius then continued, *"Guilty…not guilty…guilty…not guilty…not guilty."* The room was now abuzz with activity as all realized that the number of votes cast was equal.

"At ease!" shouted Calvinus, silencing the room once more. The Legate closed his eyes and raised his head up, as if seeking guidance from the divine.

He then looked hard on Artorius and spoke.

"The tribunal has reached a deadlock," he said. "Therefore, the responsibility of casting the verdict falls on me and me alone. Optio Artorius." Apronius' face was cold and distant. "On the charge of murder, this court finds you…*not guilty."* A loud cheer erupted throughout the hall as Pinarius stood to protest, his face showing his sense of shock and betrayal.

"At fucking ease before I personally castrate every last one of you!" Calvinus roared. "That includes you, prosecutor! You will not interrupt this court or the Governor General while the verdict is read." He then turned and nodded to Apronius, who continued.

"On the charge of assault on a superior officer this court finds you *not guilty*. It is the opinion of the court that you acted only in defense of yourself, as well as that of a fellow soldier. We find that the Centurion Fulvius was acting well beyond the limits of his authority and that this abuse almost led to the unnecessary death of a valuable legionary. It was your actions that saved the man's life." Artorius was dumbstruck in disbelief. "The charge of insubordination is dismissed due to a lack of viable witnesses. Therefore, Optio Artorius is to be released at once and allowed to return to his duties."

As Artorius turned to leave he was interrupted by the Legate.

"I did not say you were dismissed!" Apronius barked. "You may stand down, but you are not dismissed yet. There is a new set of charges we must first deal with. *Centurion Lincinius!"*

The Cohort Commander was shocked to hear his name spoken and fumbled with his reply before stumbling forward to stand before the Legate.

"Sir?" he asked, suddenly afraid.

"You allowed a tyrant to run amuck within the Third Cohort," Apronius observed. "You have allowed the morale, good order, and discipline within an entire century to lapse. You did nothing while good men were punished for crimes they did not commit, and the combat readiness of the entire cohort was compromised as a result."

"It has never been policy within the Legion for either the Legate or myself to interfere with the Cohort Commanders," Calvinus added. "However, you have betrayed the trust placed in you and as a result are no longer fit to lead the Third Cohort."

"Sirs, I protest!" Lincinius bellowed.

"Therefore," Apronius interrupted, "you are relieved of your duties as Centurion Pilus Prior, pending a formal investigation. You are dismissed."

Lincinius looked like he had been struck down by the gods themselves as he walked slowly from the hall, the enraged prosecutor in tow, muttering in low voices. The men gathered sneered at them, but kept their tongues lest Master Centurion Calvinus make good on his threat. There was an awkward silence until the legionaries guarding the door unlocked it, and the men were at last outside.

"Optio Artorius!" Apronius spoke. His voice had relaxed considerably, though it was still strained by tension.

"Yes, sir!" the Optio replied as he stood rigid before his Commanding General. He had yet to even comprehend that he had been acquitted of any wrong doing in the murder of their former Centurion.

"You acted in accordance of your charge as a leader of legionaries and saved one of your men from a needless death. While I do not agree with the precedent this may set, the facts are that I am now short a Centurion within the Third Cohort, two in fact; that and I know the men of the Second Century will follow you anywhere. You have been their real leader since Centurion Macro left for the First Cohort. You will, therefore, continue to lead them in the position that should have been yours by right, if not by protocol." He then nodded to Master Centurion Calvinus, who stood and read from the scroll he still clutched in his hands.

"Optio Titus Artorius Justus: As a testament of your selfless leadership, extreme valor in the face of Rome's many enemies, and absolute fidelity to the Legion and the Emperor, you are hereby promoted to the rank of *Centurion.* You will assume immediate command of Second Century of the Third Cohort, Twentieth Legion."

"Centurion Vitruvius," Apronius said.

"Sir!" Vitruvius replied, walking quickly from the crowd and standing before the Legate.

"You are now the interim Commander of the Third Cohort, pending the results of the investigation against Lincinius. You have full authority to execute these duties as you see fit, though we cannot promote you to the rank of Centurion Pilus Prior until the investigation has been completed and any actions taken against Lincinius are resolved. Though, as a word of advice, I would not plan on returning to your former Century."

He still had yet to fully comprehend what had transpired that morning, his mind a whirl of conflicting thoughts. Had he truly done the right thing?

Legate Apronius seemed to think so. And though the worst was over, Artorius knew that Fulvius' friends in Rome would be enraged and seek whatever retribution they could exact against him. He just shook his head as he explained his concerns to Praxus and Magnus as they walked away from the cheering masses.

"And you wonder why I'm in no rush to become a Centurion!" Magnus snorted. "It's too political at that level, and in Roman politics we know just how dangerous that can be. No, thank you, I'll stick to fighting enemies who at least have the decency to look me in the eye and make it plain that they are trying to kill me."

"I always thought I could avoid the political fray until at least making Centurion Pilus Prior," Artorius replied. "The Cohort Commanders are the ones who have to at least start playing nice politically, since they can be given independent commands within the provinces."

"Well, Magnus has a point about the violence of Roman politics," Praxus added. "Hell, you've proven that!" Artorius scowled at the remark, but then shook his head in resignation. "Hey, it's nothing new, old friend. I mean at least we're not of the Senatorial or even Equestrian classes of society. Some of the greatest politicians and statesmen Rome has ever had have met with terrible ends: Gracchus, Cicero, Pompey, the divine Julius himself. Even the great Marc Antony fell from grace due to politics."

"And a certain Alexandrian twat," Magnus observed. "Antony was a great soldier and general, and was one of Julius Caesar's right hand men. How far the mighty can fall…"

"A bit extreme comparing my circumstances to those, don't you think?" Artorius asked. "Whether through fame or infamy, those names you mentioned will all be remembered by posterity. Who, even a generation from now, will remember the name Titus Artorius Justus?"

"We tell you these things so that you can learn from them," Praxus replied. "You need to see where these men went wrong and where those such as the divine Augustus did it right. You did not want to get thrown into the political fray; however, you doing the right thing and executing that bastard Fulvius has made you some powerful enemies. These are enemies who don't care how good of a soldier and leader of legionaries you are, or how many awards for valor may decorate your chest. You've got to start making friends in the right places. You've already got an advantage there with Pontius Pilate."

“That’s true,” Magnus concurred. “He may only be an Equestrian, but he’s Deputy Prefect of the Praetorians, answering only to Sejanus. Hell, that gives you practically a direct link to the Emperor himself!”

“I’ve always been leery of Sejanus,” Artorius responded. “I know Pilate admires him, but there is just something about him that makes me uneasy. Justus Longinus hates him with a passion. Says he’s a poison in Tiberius’ ear.”

“Well, our friend Justus doesn’t have senators and magistrates out for his blood, now does he?” Praxus retorted, placing a reassuring hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Doesn’t matter if Sejanus is the biggest prick in the Empire, he is still one of the most powerful men in the world, and you, my friend, have the opportunity to use that to your advantage.”

Artorius and his friends continued their conversation as they returned to his room at the Century’s barracks in order to move his gear over to the Centurion’s billet, which had been cleaned out during his confinement and trial. Magnus and Praxus were joined by Rufio and several of the Decanii, who were talking quickly amongst themselves. Even with everything that had transpired that day, nothing could have prepared Artorius for what he saw next as he opened the door to his new quarters.

Chapter V: The Centurion

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“My lady!” Artorius choked on the words as he spoke them. At first he thought his eyes must be deceiving him, but in the dark, curled up on his bed and fast asleep was the Lady Diana.

“Oh shit!” Magnus swore while slapping his forehead. “I completely forgot she was here! Sorry about that. We all got caught up in…” Artorius raised a hand, silencing him. Praxus grinned and slapped the Norseman on the shoulder and they left the room, closing the door quietly behind them.

Artorius walked over to one of the shuttered windows and cracked it open, allowing just enough light in so that he could see Diana’s face. Her eyes were swollen, cheeks streaked by tears. He sighed and sat down beside her, gently caressing her shoulder and back. She let out a light whimper and opened her eyes, sitting upright abruptly at the sight of him.

“Shh, it’s okay,” he said quickly, placing his hands on her shoulders. She placed a hand over her mouth and breathed deeply.

“I thought you were dead,” she said quietly, turning her head away.

“I should have been,” Artorius conceded. “But it seems the Governor General thinks my actions were justified, so I’ve been acquitted…and promoted.” Diana turned back towards him, a shocked smile trying to force its way through the buildup of sorrow she had endured.

“Promoted?”

“Seems so,” he replied nonchalantly. “I guess the easiest way to get promoted prior to the minimum age requirement is to murder some asshole that’s standing in your way.” Diana laughed in spite of herself. She then wrapped her arms around his neck and held him close. Artorius kissed her passionately, still finding it impossible to believe that she was really there.

“What are you doing here?” he asked at length. Diana shrugged her shoulders, the smile never leaving her face.

“Vorena decided she wanted to manage the estate personally,” she replied. “She told me I needed to go where my heart was trying to take me. I cannot tell you how devastated I was to come here, only to find you had been arrested for murder!”

“Yes, that,” Artorius said with a sigh.

“Magnus told me what happened. It turned my stomach to think they

would have executed you for saving the life of one of your own men!"

"It appears that the former Centurion had powerful friends…friends who would still like to make an example out of me. But I will deal with them another time. For now, all that matters is that you are here with me."

"And I will never leave you," Diana added, taking him into her arms once more and pulling him on top of her. She quickly pulled his tunic off him as they kissed passionately. Artorius kissed his way down her neck; the Gallic tunic she preferred over the more modest Roman stola revealing her strong arms and shoulders. He unlaced the front, cupping her supple breasts in his hands and kissing each in turn. His passion was renewed in ways that he had forgotten; his hands and his mouth ravishing Diana all over, his subconscious fear being that she was nothing more than an apparition and could vanish at any moment.

"I will never leave you, my love," Diana gasped as her hands ran up and down his back and shoulders. She seemed to sense his fear and sought to reassure him as her own passion came unleashed. Frantically she pulled her riding breaches off and guided him inside her. Artorius grinned as her eyes grew wide, her attempts at stifling her groans in vain. Diana closed her eyes, arched her back and let loose a scream of passion that no one within two blocks of the barracks could mistake for anything other than pure, erotic ecstasy. Her screams continued for some time as Artorius brought her to climax again, neither one of them caring who could hear them. Soon the virile Centurion found himself unable to hold back and he let loose a loud groan as he was taken over the edge. He then collapsed on top of Diana, both of them sweating from the exertion. As he rolled onto his back, Diana laid her head on his chest and held him tightly.

"Tell me this is not all just a dream," he said as he slowly regained his breath.

"If it is a dream, then I hope I never wake," Diana replied, kissing him gently on the cheek.

"So does this mean you'll marry me?" Artorius asked. Diana sat upright, a grin crossing her face as he stammered, "now that I'm a Centurion, I am eligible and all…" He was cut off by Diana's laughter.

"Hmm, such the romantic proposal," she laughed, giving him a playful smack on the chest.

"I didn't exactly have time to come up with something more poetic," he replied with a shrug. "So is that a yes?"

Diana simply smiled and leaned down to kiss him on the lips. “I told you, I will never leave you.”

“So, that’s a *yes* I take it…”

In that moment Artorius found he was finally able to let go. All that had happened; the reign of terror under Fulvius, his murder, Artorius’ trial and acquittal, the promotion to Centurion, and the knowledge that he now had some powerful enemies in Rome no longer mattered. All that was important to him was that which he held in his arms. In an instant he knew that no matter what happened, as long as Diana was there for him, everything would be alright.



“You need to select a new Optio,” Rufio observed the next day as he helped Artorius sort through the post. There were a few official dispatches, ironically addressed to Centurion Fulvius. Artorius had been trying to sort through all the other dispatches that his predecessor had neglected to even open. The majority were personal letters addressed to men within the century. A couple had been delivered to him by mistake, and he handed these to his aid with instructions to deliver them to the correct units.

“I know,” the Centurion replied with a nod as he slumped into his chair behind his desk, his chin resting in his hand. “Forgive me, but I need to think about this.”

He decided to take a walk along the river. It served him well whenever he needed time alone to contemplate a difficult decision. The men trusted him completely to make the right choice. All the same, he did not wish to leave any perception of favoritism. Magnus was his best friend, and definitely a leader the men would follow should the worst happen to him. He also knew there were plenty among the Decanii who were worthy of promotion as well, to say nothing of his remaining Principal Officers, Praxus and Rufio. Was his desire to promote Magnus born out of respect for his friend’s talents, or was it simply that he wanted to give the position to this best friend? Even if the men would not perceive any favoritism, Artorius had to be certain for himself that he was not making ready to commit the same folly of nepotism and cronyism that he damned much of Roman society for.

He had already gone through the service records for every man in the Century that held a leadership position and Magnus’ was exemplary. He also

knew that his Nordic friend was quite happy with his current position as a squad leader. He was also the Chief Weapons Instructor for the Century, a position Artorius had held for a few years. Though the Chief Weapons Instructor was not one of the Principal Officers, and the position gave Magnus no additional leadership authority, it did provide him with a handsome stipend. With this added incentive pay, Magnus' salary was almost that of the Tesserarius. It was then that he made his decision and returned to the fortress.



Tiberius glared at the message and then threw down the scroll. Sejanus knew immediately what it contained. The Emperor sat resting the side of his face on his clenched fist.

"That bastard Gallus never ceases to be a thorn in my side," he growled. The man he referred to was a senator who had married Tiberius' former wife, Vipsania. The two were bitter enemies, their animosity unabated even after Vipsania's death. "Another one of his pets that he wants to assign as an imperial magistrate. Who is this Olennius, anyway?"

"A former Centurion, one whose appointment Gallus secured for him many years ago," Sejanus answered.

"Typical," Tiberius scoffed. "Instead of making their way through the ranks, they use political influence to garner rank that they have no right to hold."

"Yes, I remember the abject hatred you feel towards those given direct commissions within the army," the Prefect concurred.

"Why do you think I was as successful as I was in the field?" Tiberius persisted. "One of the first things I learned in Armenia during my first campaigns under Marcus Agrippa, was that one's success was directly linked to how well one listened to the voices of experience. I was but twenty-one years old at that time, and the first men Agrippa introduced to me were not the Tribunes or other nobles, but rather the Centurions of the First Cohort. They were the elite; the voices of experience and tactical savvy. I learned from them, and whenever one of them spoke, I *listened*. I owed my later successes in Transalpine Gaul, Raetia, Pannonia, and Germania to these men.

"During one of the brief periods when we weren't quarreling, before my foray into Germania in fact, Augustus went so far as to compare me to the

great Julius Caesar. He stated that while even the divine Julius had tasted defeat on occasion, I had not, nor would I ever. My proudest achievements in life came during those years, and even after winning numerous battles for Rome, I never ceased listening to my Centurions. It is *they* who run the Empire and its legions, not the Senatorial Legates who serve for mere three-year tours of duty. We of the aristocracy grant ourselves the triumphs that are really theirs, and for an ass like Gallus to appoint one of his catamites to such a position is an insult to every Centurion who won Rome's battles for me!"

"True," Sejanus agreed after allowing the Emperor to calm down from his venting. "Yet there is nothing in this decree that is illegal or violating any rules of senator-sponsored appointments. While it is your right to deny this request, since all such positions require your endorsement, it may be best to simply comply with this one for now and, thereby, get Gallus to lower his guard a bit."

"I see," Tiberius said, his face suddenly brightening. If he found any joy in life anymore it was in counter-plotting against his enemies and thwarting their plans in the long term. "We allow Gallus' plaything to have his little district and the good Senator soon becomes complacent."

"The question now becomes where we can place him where he can do us the least amount of harm and have little influence," Sejanus added. Tiberius poured over a large map of the Empire and a list of governorships and magistracies that would be vacant soon.

"Here we are!" he stated triumphantly as he pointed to a tiny spot on the map just north of Germania.

"Frisia," Sejanus observed. "A shell of a minor province if there ever was one. In fact, it's not even a real province and the magistrate is simply there to collect a modest tribute."

"Exactly," Tiberius replied, banging his hand on the table. "It is a semi-autonomous province ruled by the Segon Kings. I've met the current King, Dibbald Segon, as well as his father. A decent lot, those two. My brother was the one who pacified the region and established our relationship with them. They are mostly cattle farmers and their tribute is nominal, mostly cow hides. We have a small fort at Flevum on the border of their territory that keeps an eye on things, although nothing ever really happens there."

"Perfect," Sejanus said with a sly grin. "The ideal place to place someone of little importance."

"Yes," Tiberius continued. "That vile prick Gallus gets pacified for a little

while and his pawn is sent off to where he can do no harm to the Empire or to us."



"Tesserarius Gaius Praxus," Artorius boomed as he held up the Optio's staff of office, which Praxus clutched as well. "You are hereby promoted to the rank of *Optio.* Should I fall in battle, who will lead my men?"

"I will, Centurion!" Praxus responded in a loud voice. Artorius then nodded and released his grip on the staff.

"Rah!" the entire Century shouted with a quick raise of their gladii as Praxus took up his new position behind the formation. Artorius then addressed his men.

"Sergeant Magnus!" The Decanus briskly marched forward, saluted, and faced his Centurion. "You are hereby promoted to the rank of *Tesserarius."* Another shout came from the ranks as Magnus accepted his promotion orders.

The selection of Magnus' successor had been a difficult one. In Artorius' mind, Valens was the logical choice; however, the legionary had vehemently protested against this. It baffled the Centurion that one who had more time in the legions and had seen more combat than even himself would be content as a lowly ranker. Valens was not even a specialist with *immune* status. Still, whatever his reasons were, Artorius respected them. In the end, he found a soldier with adequate experience and a solid service record to replace Magnus as Decanus.

"You thought I was going to select you as my Optio, didn't you?"

The question took Magnus aback, and he almost choked on his wine. Though Artorius had promised a drink with all of the men he had just promoted, he needed some time with his best friend first. Magnus swallowed his drink, calmly set his cup down, and folded his hands on the table.

"Absolutely not," he replied with a shake of his head. "And if you had selected me I would have told you that you were out of your fucking mind."

Artorius cocked his head to one side, a puzzled grin crossing his face. "I don't see what would be so mindless about that," he retorted. "After all, you are one of the most decorated, charismatic, and capable leaders within the

century. The men would follow you anywhere."

"Perhaps," Magnus replied with a shrug. "I didn't say that I'm not qualified for the position; far from it. I am just not *the* most qualified. Praxus would have been my choice too, were I in your position. He is your friend, yes. That being said, the lads all know he is the most experienced and level-headed of all of us."

"That and being my friend does not get a man any favors."

"Yeah, so I've noticed," Magnus remarked with a roll of the eyes.

Artorius sat back, the look of shock on his face causing the Norseman to burst into laughter.

"Oh come on, I'm kidding." He reached across the table and smacked his friend across the shoulder for emphasis.

"Well, yeah, if being my friend did get you one special privilege, you know you would have been my first choice for Optio," the Centurion replied with a relieved sigh. Magnus' sarcasm had almost made him believe for a second that the Norseman was unhappy that he had not been selected for the position and had to settle with being the Century's Tesserarius.

"Still," Artorius continued, "does it ever feel strange to you? I mean, that I passed you up on promotion even though we have both served the exact same amount of time."

"I'll get there soon enough," Magnus replied with another shrug. "I'll make my move after I've watched you fall on your face a few times, so I learn what not to do."

The dry humor was enough to bring a chuckle and sigh of relief from Artorius as the two men finished their drinks.

Artorius stood at the head of the column of men from the Second Century, this time as their Centurion. He still wore his issued set of lorica segmentata armor. He had ordered a set of chain mail armor, known as the lorica hamata, to be custom made. He liked protection offered by the segmentata, but a Centurion was supposed to purchase his own armor, and all wore either scale or mail since it was more comfortable and allowed the wearer greater mobility. He had at first protested against this, knowing that the segmentata offered far greater protection, but it was an argument he ultimately lost. Since his armor would not be ready for at least a month, he stuck to wearing his issued segmentata. After his armor was delivered he would turn his old suit in, though as he told the armor master, "Good luck

finding another legionary that it will fit." The customary harness that he would wear, showing all of his awards and decorations, was also being made. Legionary Decimus, who worked in the leather shop, had promised he would have it ready by the end of the week. Artorius had managed to acquire an appropriate Centurion's crest made of red dyed horsehair, which he had attached to his helmet.

"Century!" he boomed as he looked back at the column of men. His heart was bursting with pride from the professional look of his legionaries. All were in full body armor with shield, javelins, and a bulging pack. Today's march would be a full twenty-five miles. They would set up a camp for the night and head back in the morning. *"Forward…march!"*

A feeling of elation washed over Artorius as he led his men out the gate of the fortress. The knowledge that he was now a Centurion was finally becoming a reality to him. Rufio was at his side with the Century's Signum. Magnus, now the Tesserarius, was at the front of the legionaries. Optio Praxus walked in the very back where his purpose was to monitor the pace and watch for stragglers. Diana was standing by the gate and raised her hand, her pride in Artorius evident as she waved to them as they passed through, a broad smile on her face.

"Ave, my lady!" the legionaries shouted in unison, causing Artorius' face to turn red and a playful laugh from Diana.

"Did you put them up to that?" Artorius asked over his shoulder.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Magnus replied, his broad grin revealing his guilt.

Artorius had tried to set their departure to coincide with the time between sunrise and when the streets of Cologne became crowded with citizens about their daily business. As they marched through the streets, shopkeepers who were opening up their places of business stopped to watch them pass by. A few small children even waved at them. A variety of street urchins stumbled beside the column, imitating the legionaries' march. Once out of town it was rolling hills, copses of trees, and fields as far as the eye could see.

It was still the first part of spring, and the air was cool. Still, the sun shone brightly and the exertion of the march felt good. The Century kept a modest pace of roughly three miles an hour. This was reasonable for men who were weighted down with armor, weapons, and full packs. The nights in Germania were still chilly this time of year, so each man had his cloak stuffed into his pack. Artorius closed his eyes and breathed deeply through his nose.

Whether it was the relief of the recent ordeals being over, the fact that he now commanded the Second Century, or if it really was just the most beautiful of days, he did not know; nor did he care. The miles seemed to slip by, and by midday they had already covered nearly twenty miles. At twenty-five miles Artorius pointed to the top of a small hill with a single tree adorning the top.

"Place the standard up there," he directed Rufio.

"Yes sir," the Signifier replied, taking off at a moderate jog up the gentle slope of the hill. Once at the top, he found a good place over by the tree to post the standard. The rest of the Century would form up around him. He slammed the spiked bottom of the Signum into the ground, drew his gladius, and gave a loud battle cry.

"Second Century!" Artorius shouted. *"At the double-time…action left… to the standard!"*

A loud shout echoed from the ranks as the Century did a sharp left face and then, in step, started to jog up the hill. Once they came to where Rufio stood, his gladius still raised, they split off to the left and right, the Decanii guiding their squads to the appropriate staging areas. Magnus oversaw the placement while Artorius and Praxus stopped in front of Rufio. The Centurion was breathing hard, but still grinning from ear to ear.

"You're sweating, sir," Rufio observed as he sheathed his gladius.

Artorius and Praxus dropped their packs and removed their helmets, sweat trickling down their necks and faces. "A Centurion never carries his own pack either."

"Soldiers will follow those who foremost lead by example," Artorius retorted. He then looked around and saw that the Century was all positioned where they needed to be.

"A bit out of practice, but they've still got it," Praxus observed.

Artorius gave an affirmative nod before shouting his next order. *"Stack your gear and weapons by squads! Set up sentry shifts…Decanii report when complete!"*

Shields were set upright with a single javelin holding it in place. Legionaries paired up and helped each other out of their heavy armor, each man stacking his in front of his shield then placing his helmet on top. Gladii were still worn on the hip. In lieu of palisade stakes, each soldier took his second javelin and stuck it, butt first and angled, in the ground on the outside of their section; a wall of evenly spaced javelins forming their perimeter. A pair of legionaries guarded the front entrance of their small camp, two more

the back. Within minutes of Artorius giving the order the entire camp was set and all squad leaders gathered in his area. He and the Principal Officers had also removed their armor and, in spite of the cool spring afternoon, each man had perspired freely from the exertion of the march.

"Well done," he told the assembled squad leaders. "Check your men for blisters on the feet and any other health problems that may have arisen. Also spot check their equipment, especially their caligae sandals, and make certain they're still serviceable. After that the men can rest and break for their afternoon meal."

"Yes, sir," the Decanii answered together before departing.

Artorius walked over to the large shade tree and sat down against it, removing his sandals.

"Damn that feels good!" he told Praxus, who sat across from him on the grass, also removing his footwear.

"You chose the perfect day to take the men out," the Optio replied. "I think after all they've been through, they needed this. Doubtless they will be cursing the cold come nightfall, but for now all is right with them."

"I put the word out that they all needed to pack at least an extra blanket," Artorius reminded him. "I'm the worst when it comes to the cold, so if I can handle it they should be just fine."

As he finished speaking Rufio and Magnus walked over. The Signifier was eating an apple and stretching out his back.

"Any thoughts on what you want the lads to do for the rest of the day?" Magnus asked. "I know we're not in hostile territory, so the men can be more at ease. I just thought we'd have something for them to do this afternoon."

"There's wild boar in this region," Praxus observed. "Maybe some of our best javelin throwers should be sent off on a little hunt."

"I like it," Artorius agreed. "Have each squad send its best javelin thrower out. They'll all go together, I don't want anyone getting lost or gored by a boar. Tell them five denarii awaits whoever brings down a boar with his javelin first. Have some of the others dig us a pit and gather firewood, also have them refill our water bladders with fresh spring water; there's a source nearby. Provided our javelin throwers hit their targets, we should have us some spitted boar for supper."

That evening would see the Second Century gathered over a large fire, a pair of boars roasting on spits. To no one's surprise, Legionary Gavius had proven his mettle as the best javelin thrower in the Century, downing a

running boar from a distance of nearly twenty meters. Another legionary had brought down a boar as well, after a struggle in a thicket. Even though Gavius had killed his first, Artorius had elected to grant both men the five denarii stipend, which was approximately a week's pay for a legionary.

"Not quite as good as the boars back home, mind you," Magnus said with his mouth full. He took a drink off his water bladder and lay back with his hands behind his head. Artorius, too, took a long drink of the cool fresh water and let out a relaxed sigh. The night was cold, and his breath fogged in front of him. He wrapped his cloak around himself and leaned back against the tree.

"You know, old friend, life is good."

Spring and summer would prove uneventful, though as expected, Artorius did succeed in defending his *Legion Champion* title once more. He was disappointed when Magnus did not enter the tournament, as he felt his Nordic friend had the best chance of beating him. He also felt that he had never fully gotten out of the shadow of his mentor, Vitruvius, who had retired from competition unbeaten. Artorius had, once in a private sparring match, fought his Cohort Commander to a draw, though this was only after being soundly beaten by him for several years.

His duties as a Centurion kept him occupied, despite the frontier enjoying a long-lasting, if ever uneasy, peace. Diana was utilizing her personal fortune to have a manor house built for them outside the fortress. Valens, whose common-law wife was Magnus' sister, Svetlana, had allowed her to stay in a spare room at their modest flat while the manor was being built. It was crowded between the three of them, plus Valens' slave woman, Erin, and her son three-year old son, Tynan. The thought of a Roman noblewoman living under such conditions would have scandalized most; yet Lady Diana found a sense of comfort and realism that was absent amongst the false flattery and constant political backstabbing of the Patrician class.

As summer turned to fall, and fall to winter, Artorius and Diana looked forward to the day they would become husband and wife, never knowing of the fires of hate that were being stoked on the edge of the Empire's frontier.

Chapter VI: Frisia

Frisian Coast along the North Sea
April, 26 A.D.
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Tabbo felt like a warrior without a profession. Since assimilating into the Roman Empire there had been little use for men of his trade. Frisia enjoyed the protection of Rome, though it took the war chief much doing to swallow his pride and admit it. His people were great fighters and had held their own during the constant warfare with their much larger neighboring tribal kingdoms. When Rome invaded across the Rhine during the wars against the Cherusci and the Germanic alliance eleven years ago, Frisia sent warriors to serve as auxiliaries alongside the legions. They had fought well and during the Battle of Idistaviso had even garnered the praise of Germanicus Caesar himself.

Even though he was a war chief of much renown, Tabbo was not the ruler of Frisia. That duty fell to his King, Dibbald Segon, a legendary warrior in his own right. Dibbald was the latest of the Segon dynasty and his son, Prince Klaes, had been a friend and brother to Tabbo since both were children. It was the prince who happened upon his friend, who was sharpening has war axe on a wheel grinder.

“Still keeping your axe sharp, I see,” Klaes observed with a grin.

He and Tabbo were both above average in height, with broad shoulders and strong jaw lines. Each kept their dark blonde hair pulled back, and though Klaes sported a long mustache that hung down either side of his mouth, Tabbo was clean shaven having adopted the more Roman grooming habit. The differences in facial hair aside, the two men did look so like they could, in fact, be brothers.

“I believe in maintaining vigilance,” Tabbo replied, relishing the sound of the stone wheel grinding on the warming steel.

“Vigilance,” Klaes said with a shrug, “against what exactly? Germania is pacified, and I don’t think the Romans will need our services again in my lifetime.” In a flash, Tabbo spun around and flung his axe towards the prince. It embedded itself deep into a tree stump just inches from him. Klaes didn’t even flinch.

“You missed,” he said sarcastically, arms folded across his chest. Both men got a laugh as he attempted to retrieve the axe, which was buried several inches into the wood. “Bloody hell, you bury this in someone and you’ll never get it back!”

“If one’s weapon is sharp and heavy enough, it can render even the strongest armor useless,” Tabbo grinned as he wrenched the axe free. He twirled it around in his hand and then set it on a nearby bench. He was still grinning when he faced Prince Klaes, whose face was now sober.

“You mention rendering the strongest armor,” Klaes said. “Whose armor are you referring to?”

“I’m not inciting violence against Rome, if that is what you’re accusing me of,” Tabbo replied.

“I didn’t say I was accusing you,” the prince stated, holding his hands up. “I was only kidding when I asked who you needed to be vigilant against. The gods know we will always have enemies, and a tiny nation such as ours needs all of its collective strength.” The two men took the dirt path that led into the woods towards the capital. Preparations were underway for the arrival of an important guest.

“It is our strength and resourcefulness that has kept us from being enslaved by any of the other tribes within the region,” Tabbo said. “You and I both fought against the Cherusci and the Germanic alliance, though I confess my role was born more out of malice towards the Cherusci rather than any affection for Rome.”

“If I may make a confession also, it was the same with me,” Klaes replied. “I know Father is rather fond of the Romans, though to be honest I have always been a bit leery of them.”

“Romans are like any other men,” Tabbo remarked. “There are good and evil amongst them. The difference is one evil man can ruin an entire people.”

“You speak of the new magistrate,” Klaes observed. “I don’t know much about him, just that he is a former Centurion.”

“A Centurion who gained his rank through birth and personal favors of the aristocracy,” Tabbo sneered. “I’ve seen such men before. They are as weak as they are hungry for power. They bully those beneath them because they think it masks their masculine shortfalls.”

“At least the last magistrate proved harmless enough,” Klaes responded. “He collected taxes for the Emperor and left Father to rule in peace.”

“I agree the last man to represent Roman interests in Frisia was of little

regard," the war chief conceded. "However, he was simply a lazy man fulfilling his required duty. I cannot say for certain why I feel so uneasy about this former Centurion, but something about this makes my skin crawl."

"Any idea where he had been stationed?" the prince asked as they reached the northern bridge leading west across the Rhine. On the other side was a small Roman fort, garrisoned by a single Cohort of legionaries and a handful of Batavian auxiliaries. The two men stopped and stared across the bridge. Tabbo breathed deeply through his nose and let out a resigned sigh.

"Egypt," he replied finally as they turned east, away from the bridge and towards the Frisian capital. He did not feel like watching Roman drill practice this day. "The bastard lived a pampered existence there his entire twenty years. Egypt has been at peace since the fall of the Ptolemy dynasty more than fifty years ago. Soldiers stationed in that corner of the Empire grow fat and spoiled gorging on Egyptian wealth."

"As long as he does nothing more than collect the taxes and leaves us in peace it doesn't matter," Klaes replied hopefully.

Tabbo said nothing more, though he knew his friend had similar misgivings, as he did. He also knew that worrying about them would solve nothing.

They passed by a grove, one dedicated to their goddess Freyja. Klaes smiled as he watched his cousin, Amke, lead a number of other young women through weapons drill. Each girl carried a short war axe or stabbing spear in one hand and a circular shield in the other. The drills that Amke lead them through were very similar to those conducted by male warriors.

"I see you are not the only one who wishes to maintain their vigilance," Klaes observed with an approving nod towards his cousin.

"Amke was the right choice to lead the *Daughters of Freyja*," Tabbo said.

"A symbolic position," Klaes added, "though one of great honor. I have little doubt that the Daughters can fight readily enough. My father, the King, has been reluctant to use them as an active regiment. Instead he keeps them close, as an extension of his bodyguard."

"Is that because he doesn't think these women are worthy of being warriors or is it simply to protect his niece?"

It was a fair question. The women of Frisia served their people in one of two ways; either they married and bore Frisian children, or they joined the Daughters of Freyja and were trained as warriors. As a member of the royal

family, Amke was chosen by King Dibbald to lead the Daughters despite the fact that she was just over a score in years.

“I don’t think he doubts their courage or tenacity,” Klaes answered as they moved on. “Besides me, Amke is the only other child of the Segon line. Father loves her as if she were his own daughter.”

Tabbo nodded, understanding the King’s desire to protect his niece.

Klaes continued, “Our culture has always valued the fighting spirit of our women. It shocks other races that we would allow any of our women to take up arms. By the same token, it also makes them wary of attacking us. Most nations are conquered once the male warriors are dead. In Frisia, they find that our ‘helpless’ women are not so helpless after all.”



Artorius never imagined that he would be suffering from a massive hangover at his own wedding. Nerves had gotten to him the night before and his friends decided to calm him down the only way they could. The manor house that Lady Diana had ordered built was still under construction. However, the banquet hall was complete and had been hastily furnished with some borrowed furniture. All of the Second Century had piled into the hall, sitting around boxes and on the floor when no more couches or table space was available. The other Centurions from the Third Cohort were also there, as were Macro, Proculus, and Master Centurion Calvinus. The usual speeches had been spoken, with everyone offering a drink to Artorius, to the point that early on in the evening he was completely inebriated and unable to stand. The next morning he could not remember if he had vomited on any of the fancier borrowed couches or not.

“You know, they say that Patrician villas have what’s called a *vomitorium*, where guests go to purge between courses of a fancy meal,” Magnus observed as he helped Artorius into his best looking tunic.

“That’s just a stupid myth,” the Centurion groaned, his head pounding and a wave of nausea rolling over him. He now regretted not having purchased a formal toga. While Options and below wore their issued tunics even when off duty, Centurions and above were strongly encouraged to purchase civilian togas. Artorius hated the garments, feeling that they were neither practical nor even fashionable. He was proud of his muscular physique and he loathed the idea of covering it beneath layers of folded

robes.

His hamata mail armor had had to be custom made to fit his disproportionately muscular frame, and it had not yet been delivered. He felt that wearing his battered segmentata would have been in poor taste.

“Do you at least have a decent belt you can wear?” the Norseman asked, rummaging through Artorius’ trunk that he kept at the foot of his bunk. He still lived in the Centurion’s quarters while waiting for the manor house to be completed. “Ah, here we go!”

Artorius strapped up his belt and gave himself a once over. He had bathed, shaved, and tried to fix his hair. He felt he was due to get it cut soon and hoped he would not look as nauseating as he felt. He ran his tongue over his teeth and grimaced.

“Here,” Magnus said, handing him a small dish smeared in paste and a bristle brush. “Lady Diana sent over some of her white wine based mouthwash that she got specially shipped from Gaul. It’s got a pretty strong scent to it, but at least it will help keep your breath from knocking her and the priest over at the ceremony!”

“That would be well below average,” Artorius muttered in reply.

“I wonder if the gods have a special punishment for that,” Magnus mused. Artorius scrubbed his teeth more vigorously, thankful that at least Roman society had included dental hygiene in their cleanliness evolution.

Diana was giving herself a final critical look in the polished bronze mirror. The slave helping her dress and adorn her hair was misty-eyed.

“My lady looks so lovely,” she murmured. “But, you don’t have an engagement ring.”

“I have the most important thing,” Diana answered. “Artorius is all I need. He’s worth more to me than all the jewels or gold in the world.”

The year that they had spent together had been the happiest time of her life. Now Rome and the gods would join them in a bond that could not be broken, either in this life or the next.

Even though his head was still pounding, Artorius was alert and very nervous when he arrived at the outdoor shrine. A priest assigned to the legion as a spiritual advisor and oracle to the commanding Legate was there to conduct the ceremony. Artorius had declined spending the extra denarii for the auspices, reasoning that if the trials he and Diana had been through had

not solidified an eternal bond between them, gutting an ox or a couple birds would not do so either. Two stools with a small table next to one sat before the altar. The table held the honey cake to be shared by the newlyweds, and an offering of it made to Jupiter.

Artorius' breath was taken from him as the love of his life walked through the arch of climbing roses. It was midmorning and the sun was shining perfectly through the arch, illuminating her glowing face. Artorius felt as if he was staring not at Lady Diana Procula, but the goddess herself, whose name she bore. She wore an elegant white stola trimmed in gold; a crown made of flowers adorned her head where her hair was pulled up. As he took her by both hands, she smiled and winked at him. He had told the priest to keep it short and to the point, not wanting to waste time on pointless ceremony, but Diana also knew what was important in a Roman wedding.

After the priest asked if she consented to the marriage, she spoke the words used for centuries, "*Quando tu Gaius, ego Gaia.* When-and-where you are Gaius; I then-and-there am Gaia." She squeezed Artorius' hands as he repeated the words to her, his voice shaking slightly with emotion.

The priest signaled for them to sit on the stools, and taking pieces of the honey cake he offered one first to the altar in honor of Jupiter, and gave the others to Artorius and Diana to eat. Once they had signed the legally binding contract, Artorius had done what he feared would never happen the year prior; he had married his Lady Diana. Nothing could have made them happier.



Olennius hated traveling by cart. He also hated traveling by horse, boat, or any other means for that matter. The fact that he was not at his posting, and had had to wait an entire year for it, irritated him to no end. He was quite the hateful person, having spent his entire life full of suspicion and spite. He blamed his father for his demeanor, though the poor man had died before Olennius was even born. Still, it was that lack of paternal guidance that he used as a crutch to justify his abusive behavior. Only one man, Senator Asinius Gallus, had shown him any sort of fond feelings at all. In fact, he had become Olennius' sponsor from a young age and had gotten him his posting as a Centurion within the legions. The legions…Olennius hated the legions, perhaps because the familiarity and brotherhood that permeated the ranks had

been denied him due to the fact that absolutely no one whom he had been stationed with remotely liked him. Thankfully his required tenure had come to a merciful end, though not before he had fattened his coffers exacting additional tributes in the east, both from the citizenry, as well as his own legionaries.

"How much bloody farther is it?" he snapped at his freedman who accompanied him in the carriage.

"Another day, sir," the man replied stoically. Olennius knew the servant hated him, enough to wish him dead, no doubt. It did not matter. The only reason the little rat was free was because Olennius' mother had granted him his freedom in her will. Whether he stayed with Olennius out of loyalty to his deceased matron, or because no one would hire him given where he had worked before, was uncertain.

"Another day," Olennius replied with a bored sigh. "Let me see those taxation reports again."

The servant reluctantly handed the scrolls over.

"It's pretty simple, sir," the freedman stated. "The tribute for Frisia has been the same since the time of Drusus Nero. The people have always complied, as well as providing auxiliary troops when required. In return, Rome gives Frisia imperial protection while allowing the Segon Kings to rule semi-autonomously."

"Yes, well the prior magistrates lacked imagination," Olennius replied with a sneer. "I have plans for this province, plans that go beyond Drusus Nero's mere dole of cattle hides."

"And what may I ask is your plan for the province?" the freedman asked.

The look of concern gave Olennius a certain amount of satisfaction.

"You will see," he said with an evil grin. "Thorn in my side you may be, but I think you will be thanking me after we are done here. If I have to live in some shithole on the North Sea, then I will do so in comfort. Consider yourself lucky that you have me for an employer and not someone without any desire to better their position in life."

Chapter VII: Simmering Hatred

***

“I hate the slave markets!” Artorius protested. “They are so damned depressing and smelly.”

“Come on,” Diana coaxed, taking him by the hand. “Every Centurion needs to have his own manservant! Besides, I have my ladies-in-waiting, as well as the household slaves, gardeners, cooks, and of course, Proximo. One more isn’t going to break us financially.”

“I just don’t relish the idea of a bondsman who will have access to my person at all times,” Artorius retorted.

“Oh, don’t be such a big girl’s blouse!” Magnus retorted as he walked behind them, grinning from ear to ear while eating an apple absentmindedly. The Norseman had decided to join his Centurion, claiming he had a good eye for quality slaves. “When was the last time one of our officers got stabbed by his own servant?”

“Yes, well you and I have had our fill of slave rebellions,” Artorius replied, causing Magnus to shrug.

“True,” the Tesserarius acknowledged. “Still, as hateful as it is, without slaves the Empire would probably cease to function. Besides, you can look at it this way; you get to save some poor sod from the mines or other worse fates. You ever notice that when you go to a Roman house that the slaves are almost all women? Most don’t have male slaves. That keeps the master from ever having doubts about the paternity of his children, or at least from having doubts coming from within his own household. A male slave who is not fortunate enough to end up as an army officer’s bondsman usually ends up either in the mines or in the arena.”

Slave markets depressed Artorius with good reason. Though he understood the need for human property, seeing the pitiful creatures that skulked amongst the cages disturbed him. The smell of unwashed bodies and flies swarming over the feces was particularly nauseating on this warm morning. The slave master walked with him, banging on the bars with his staff as Artorius asked to look at ones that might be suitable. Some stared at nothing, not even each other. Each slave had a placard hanging off his or her neck with details about their work history and talents. Prices were left to

negotiation.

“What happened to this one,” as he nodded toward a towering youth with a soiled rag for a bandage on his head.

“He got uppity with me the other day, and I had to smack him alongside of his head with my cudgel,” said the slaver. “Now I have lost money on him since he just sits there and drools. He’ll be fodder in the arena for some wild beasts.”

“Let’s see this one,” Artorius directed, pointing to a young man who already stood by the bars. His head hung slightly, hands folded in front of him, though he did not look ashamed. Artorius lifted his placard and was intrigued by what he read.

“Says here that you are an experienced metal worker,” he stated.

“Yes, dominus,” the slave replied.

“It also says that you’re a Jew,” Artorius observed.

“Which seems to drive my price down,” the slave remarked, the corners of his mouth twitching.

He then caught Diana’s stern gaze and immediately dropped his eyes, swallowing hard.

“How much?” Artorius asked the slave master.

“Two hundred denarii.”

“I reckon a skilled metal worker rates that price,” Artorius concurred. “However, the slave here brings up a valid point. As a Jew he is bound to be trouble. I’ll give you one hundred and fifty and take him off your hands now.”

“Done,” the slave master replied hastily with a short bow.

“What is your name?” Artorius asked the slave once they were back at the Century’s barracks.

“Nathaniel, master,” the slave replied.

“I bought you because skilled metal workers are few and far between, and I need someone who can properly maintain armor and weapons. I don’t suppose you have any other useful skills?”

“I can work with leather, master,” Nathaniel replied. “I am also versed in four different languages; Latin, Aramaic, Hebrew, and Gallic.”

“Don’t know that Aramaic or Hebrew will do me any good,” the Centurion observed. “However, I can always use a Gallic interpreter. I don’t suppose you can cook?”

“No, master,” Nathaniel replied, hanging his head.

“Doesn’t matter,” Artorius said with a dismissive wave. “Proximo can cook well enough. Your purpose will be to keep my armor and equipment maintained. Do you know anything about horses?”

“Yes, master.”

“Good,” Artorius gave an approving nod. “I have a horse that needs to be fed and walked daily when I’m not using him. Lady Diana takes him out more than I do, so you will need to have him ready for her use at any time.”

“Yes, master.”

“You don’t talk much, do you?” Artorius asked, trying to size up the man.

“I speak when spoken to, master.”

“One thing I wish to know is whether or not you were born into servitude?” Never having owned a slave before, he had difficulty in assessing just how he was supposed to treat and be familiar with Nathaniel. Ironically, his parents were among the few who had never owned slaves; his father preferring to tend to the vineyards personally. Though the man was his property, he figured it would be best to know as much as he could, since they would be around each other constantly. He supposed that if he wished, he could just ignore the slave like he did anything else.

“I was born a slave,” Nathaniel replied. “My grandparents were servants to King Herod the Great.”

“Hmm,” Artorius replied with eyebrows raised. He did not know if the slave was telling the truth or just trying to sound more important to his new master. It did not matter, and besides, Artorius had little time for pleasantries with someone who was now his property. He was then puzzled when he saw a bulge in the side pocket of Nathaniel’s trousers.

“What have you got there?” he asked, pointing to the pocket. Keeping his eyes lowered, the slave produced a large scroll.

“Just a book, master,” he replied. “I’ve had it with me this whole time. I promise I did not steal it.”

“Well, at least I know you can read.” Artorius then took it from him and opened it. It was all very ornate, though in a language he could not understand. “What the hell is this?”

“This contains the holy writings of my people,” Nathaniel replied. “My previous master let me have it, and the slave drivers never tried to take it from me. They said it kept me quiet.” There was a trace of a smile on his face, though he kept his head lowered respectfully.

Artorius could see the fear in his eyes that he would take the book from him.

"What sort of writings?" he asked as he continued to look through it.

"It is called the *Ketuvim*," Nathaniel explained. "It is the third and final section of our holy Tanakh. Sadly, I have never been able to attain the first two sections, the *Torah* and the *Nevi'im*."

"And does reading this holy writing bring you happiness?"

"It does, master. Its words guide my life and help me to find peace." Nathaniel's words had an effect on Artorius, and he handed the scroll back to him.

"If that's all you need to keep happy, then by all means keep reading it," he replied. "Serve me well and perhaps one day you will have your other holy writings." He watched Nathaniel's face beaming with joy.

This was all too easy! The man did not express a desire to win his freedom or anything extravagant; all he wanted was a roll of parchment containing his people's holy writings. Artorius reasoned that a few denarii spent on a couple scrolls would be an inexpensive way to keep his man's loyalty.

"Alright, well, I will show you where all the rags and polish are kept for my kit," he directed. "I prefer to maintain my gladius myself, although if you have any methods for better maintaining my weapons you are to let me know."

"Of course, master."

"Good. I keep my armor and kit at the Century's billets, so you will be spending time there. After I show you that, I will take you to the manor house. Proximo is the chief slave, and when not taking care of my equipment you will report to him."

"I understand, master."



Tabbo scowled when the wagon carrying the new Roman magistrate came to a halt. His predecessor had left with little fanfare, as was often the case. He had done his duty, collected the necessary taxes, and was probably glad to be out of the province. Still, Frisia had to be one of the more painless postings for a magistrate since the people were self-governing. One of the magistrate's duties was to exert Roman influence whenever needed and to

relay any issues from the people to the Senate. This had been all but unnecessary since the kingdom came under Roman influence.

The magistrate exited the wagon and scowled at his surroundings. Tabbo wondered if the man even knew how to smile. The war chief stood to the left, behind the King. Prince Klaes stepped forward as the Roman walked over to them, the never ending scowl still on his face.

“Magistrate Olennius, I am Prince Klaes. Please let me present my father, Dibbald Segon, King of Frisia.”

“Skip the formalities,” Olennius replied raising his hand. “I have more important things to do than exchange pleasantries. Show me to my villa!”

“Of course,” Klaes replied after a quick glance over to his father. “May I also introduce you to Tabbo of Maloriks? He is war chief and commander of the Frisian army.”

“What army?” Olennius scoffed as he made sure to walk slightly ahead of the Frisians. Behind him was a freedman, who walked with his hands folded in front of him and an apologetic expression upon his face. “Blue faced barbarians in loincloths? That’s no army, that’s a pathetic rabble.”

“Obviously the magistrate does not know our customs,” Tabbo replied with a chill to his voice. “Our people have never painted themselves blue.”

“Kindly tell your *war chief* not to speak out of turn again, or I shall have him whipped!” Olennius snapped without missing a step. Tabbo instinctively grabbed the handle of his axe, but was quickly stayed by the King, who looked at him and shook his head.

Olennius scowled even harder as he gazed upon the insides of his house. The stone walls were lit with torches, and the floor consisted of blackened slate. He stormed into the back room and threw open the shutters.

“This won’t do at all!” he barked. “A Roman magistrate, living like vile barbarians? I think not!”

“This is still better than most of our people live in,” King Dibbald replied calmly.

“Not my concern if *your* people choose to live like animals,” the magistrate retorted. “A Roman of my importance requires the best when it comes to quality of life...ye gods, there isn’t even a bath in this vile abode!” He turned and snapped his fingers to his freedman, who quickly got out a wax tablet and stylus.

“I will make a list of the upgrades required during my stay,” he

continued. “Of course, these things cost money, and it is only right that the province provide for its governor.”

“Magistrate, you are not a governor,” Dibbald corrected, to which Olennius slammed his fist onto the table in reply.

“How *dare* you tell me what my position is!” he snarled. “My appointment carries the authority of the Emperor himself and does not require the approval of a barbarian king!”

“Apologies, magistrate. I meant no offense.” Dibbald seethed inside, but he gritted his teeth and bore the indignities as best he could. There was nothing unlawful about a magistrate being rude to his provincials, though it did make for a bad start to their relationship.

“Now,” Olennius said, pulling out a scroll. “I also need to go over the taxation of the province. It is quite unsatisfactory to say the least. Cattle hides? Is that all your people are required to pay Rome for the protection we offer?”

“Those were the terms set out by the great Drusus Nero,” Dibbald replied. “He viewed them fair and just, as did the divine Augustus Caesar.”

“Yes, well I find the terms to be very much out of date,” Olennius countered. “I think cow hides are insufficient for our purposes. From now on only ox hides will suffice.” Dibbald furrowed his brow at this demand.

“Magistrate, oxes are much fewer in the region than cattle,” he protested. “We cannot supply the needed amounts. There simply are not enough oxen in the entire kingdom!”

“Again, not my problem,” Olennius said with a bored sigh. “You Frisians do make a habit of talking out of turn in the presence of your betters. Here is another list. These are what suitable tributes will be rendered for each ox hide you come up short come spring...oh, and here is another list of a down payment that will be made effective immediately.”

Dibbald glared at him as he took the scrolls from the smirking magistrate.

“Expect to hear from me again when I estimate the expenses for my housing improvements. That is all, you can go now.” He waved his hand, like a parent shooing away a nosy child.

“What an insufferable prick!” Tabbo growled as he hurled his hand axe into a nearby stump. His friends, Sjored and Olbert, accompanied him.

“That’s not the worst of it,” Olbert replied as he readied to throw his own axe. “I heard that Olennius is demanding we supply ox hides instead of

cattle.”

The other warrior stood in shock as he threw his axe with a satisfying thud into the stump. “That’s insane!” Sjoerd protested. “We don’t have enough oxen in the entire kingdom for that!”

“Tell that to your new friend,” Olbert countered, readying his axe for a throw. “I’m sure they’ll find other ways to bleed us dry.”

“Of what?” Sjoerd asked. “We are cattle farmers. There is not a whole lot one can bleed this region dry of. We grow just enough crops to feed our livestock and ourselves. It’s not as if this is a plentiful land to begin with.”

“What I fear is what will happen if he does begin taxing our people beyond our means to produce,” Tabbo added. “I mean, King Dibbald knows Tiberius! Surely the Emperor would not allow a loyal province to be abused this way!”

“I think you may be putting too much faith in the Romans,” Sjoerd replied. “I know you fought with them in the past, but you cannot allow sentimental feelings to blind you as to what may happen to our people.”

Tabbo’s anger was still simmering when he went home to his wife that evening. Edeline poured him a cup of mead and set a steaming bowl of barley porriage before him. She placed a hand on his shoulder, and he reached up and held it in his own. He looked up at his wife and tried to smile.

“It’s the new magistrate that vexes you,” Edeline stated, rather than asked. “What is he going to do to our people?”

“I don’t know,” Tabbo replied. “What I do know is that it will not be what King Adel envisioned when he agreed to the treaty proposed by Drusus Nero all those years ago. This man, Olennius, is evil. He wants to hurt our people, I can see it in his face. He is filled with nothing but contempt. I would pity him if not for the suffering I know he will bring. And for what? To line his own pockets, no doubt!”

His wife closed her eyes and held onto his shoulders. She was afraid, and Tabbo felt guilty for upsetting her.

“I’m sorry, my love,” he said as he took her hand in his. “I should not let one pompous fool unnerve me so. After all, he is just a minor magistrate and we are an allied province to Rome. What is the worst he can do?”

Chapter VIII: The House of Pontius Pilate

The Praetorian Guard Headquarters, Rome
May, 26 A.D.
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It had been more than five years since Pontius Pilate had left the Rhine legions. Aside from a year-long stint in the east with the Twelfth Legion, he had spent his entire time in Rome with the Praetorians. It had been a good assignment, though he felt many of the Emperor's guard were rather stuffy and full of themselves. He had much to get done this day and most of it involved tedious paperwork. He sat back in his chair and sighed. Damn but he missed his life with the legions!

His thoughts were interrupted by a loud knocking at the door.

"Come!" he called, pretending to be working once more. It was one of his aides. In truth, Pilate liked the young man, even if he was an upper-class snob. But then, that is what the Praetorians had become. What had once been considered the elite of the Roman army and a place for well deserving legionaries, political appointments and personal favors by Senators had left but a fraction of the Praetorians as coming from the ranks. Still, the young man who worked for him was very effective. He seemed to know what Pilate was thinking most of the time and was able to organize tasks by priorities, which the Deputy Prefect would think well.

"Sir, there are a few pieces of mail from the post for you," the Praetorian said as he sifted through the bag he carried. "A few personal letters…oh and this order from the Emperor regarding his vacation to Capri." The young man paused as he held the scroll, whose wax seal bore the mark of the Julio-Claudians.

"What is it?" Pilate asked, reading the consternation on the Praetorian's face.

"I've just been wondering about this little trip we are taking the Emperor on…I mean, there are rumors and such…"

"Such as?" Pilate folded his arms across his chest as his aide looked at the floor briefly. He hated it when rumors started floating about. They were usually wrong, and even the ones that were true caused unnecessary disruption amongst the troops. He had lambasted the Cohort Commanders

already about this several times before.

"Well, sir…is it true that this is not just a mere holiday for the Emperor? Is it true that he may not be coming back to Rome at all?"

The slight twitch of Pilate's face gave the young man his answer, though the Deputy Prefect's official answer was more vague.

"That is not for us to decide," Pilate replied curtly. "The Emperor's business is his own. We simply provide a safe and secure environment for him to rule the Empire from." He then stood and took the letters from the Praetorian, whose face suddenly brightened up.

"Oh, there was one more thing, sir," he said quickly, reaching into his belt pouch. "Got this from your soon to be father-in-law. I didn't stick it in with the rest of the post, lest it get lost. He told me he wants to hear from you by this evening."

Pilate took the short note, paused, and nodded. The Praetorian gave a quick salute and abruptly left.

Though the order from the Emperor was of much greater importance, Pilate set it unopened on the table with the rest of the post, sighed, and broke the seal on the note from Proculeius. No doubt he wanted to discuss Claudia's dowry. Pilate had been avoiding the topic for some time. The Proculeius family were indeed very wealthy, though not well connected politically, hence the value of the match for Claudia's father. He owned two enormous mansions on Palatine Hill and no doubt wanted to use one of them as the dowry. This was fine by Pilate, except for the fact that his father-in-law would be his next door neighbor and a constant burden on him. He sat down and started to read when the door swung open and Sejanus strolled in.

"Pilate, old man!" the Praetorian Prefect said in his usually loud voice. "I stopped by to see if certain dispatches had arrived yet…ah, here we go!" He recognized the imperial seal on the one scroll and reached for it. "What's this? It's still sealed! You haven't even read the order from the Emperor yet?"

"I'm sorry, Sejanus," Pilate replied. He had been taken so completely aback at the interruption by his superior and patron, that he found his mind racing. "The post just arrived a few minutes ago, and I got a bit distracted."

"Nonsense!" Sejanus retorted. "Nothing takes priority over a message from the divine Tiberius Caesar. What's this then?" He snatched the note from Pilate, his face breaking into a broad grin. "Oh yes! I forgot that my deputy is getting married in the near future. Well, no harm then. Hmm, it is

late in the day, and I think you should probably run along and see Proculeius."

"What of our dispatches and other work?" Pilate asked, but Sejanus waved it away.

"I'll take care of these. Besides, you've been buried in paperwork for days now. You're working too much. One would think you didn't care to see the sun anymore! Anyway, get the hell out of here. Report back by first watch tomorrow. We will have much to do regarding the Emperor's relocation then."

As soon as Pilate left, Sejanus' face turned dark, his cheerful demeanor disappearing. He already knew what the Emperor's order stated, so he tossed it aside as he went through the rest of the post. The nice thing about the Imperial Post was that the Praetorians got to sift through every piece of mail that came through it. Whatever did not need to go before the Emperor's eyes, or anyone else's for that matter, was properly disposed of. The people were fooled into thinking they had freedom of speech and thought. Only Sejanus and a few others knew that it was all a charade. Censorship was alive and well within the Roman Empire, and the beauty was that no one even realized it.



It was late when Pilate finished with Proculeius. He had convinced the old man to sell his vacant house, and instead, purchase a villa on the outskirts of the city. This would be a more than sufficient dowry for Claudia. In return, Pilate offered to make certain his connections in the imperial court were persuaded to show a bit of favoritism to his in-laws and their endeavors. Claudia had two brothers who their father wanted to get into politics, and what better a patron could they get than the man who was deputy to the Emperor's right hand? It was too simple, really. Pilate had a friend who was a Quaestor that supervised the imperial treasury. All he had to do was send the man a letter with the names of Claudia's brothers, and his friend would find them an appropriate place within the political conglomerate.

Servants opened the door to his house, bearing lanterns to guide their master. Pilate was completely exhausted and had not even taken off his ceremonial Praetorian armor since before dawn that morning. He needed a bath and directed a slave to draw one for him. Claudia was waiting for him,

too. As was a common custom, she already lived with her betrothed in the small Tribune's house the Praetorians had provided him. It was a decent enough house, and more than enough for just the two of them. Still, he knew that wealth equated to power in Rome, and moving into a larger villa would give an impression of such wealth.

Life was good to Pontius Pilate, and he knew that he should be grateful for this lot the Fates had given him, though even at this late hour, before marrying the woman he had grown to love, he still missed the rugged and harsh life of the legions. As servants scrubbed his relaxing body in the hot bathwater, he reminisced about directing the hell storm of scorpion bolts and flaming missiles from the onager catapults during the assault on the Angrivari stronghold ten years before. His body wasn't as firm as it used to be, and the years of soft living had added a little to his girth. But never had he felt more alive, before or since!



Artorius hated the administrative side of being a Centurion, but it was something he knew was necessary. Rufio and Praxus were both in his office when he opened the door, which puzzled him. The Signifier held a bundle of scrolls which he brought to Artorius' attention.

"What are these?" the Centurion asked, taking a seat at his desk.

"Discharge orders," Rufio answered.

"Eleven of them," Praxus added quickly.

Artorius leaned over his forearms and sighed. "What the hell, did every last one of our veterans enlist at the same time?" he asked with a trace of irritation in his voice.

"We're losing four more to the First Cohort, as well," Praxus continued. "And, unfortunately, recruiting has been slim lately."

"Damn it," Artorius swore, resting his chin in his hand. "Well, there's nothing for it. The Century's never been at full strength anyway, and with no war on the horizon, what's the loss of two entire squads?" His voice was thick with sarcasm. After all, the four legionaries selected to join the elite First Cohort had made it on their own merits, and he was happy for them. The eleven who were set to retire had more than done their share of service to the Empire.

"It gets better," Praxus said after a short pause. Artorius looked up at him

and raised an eyebrow. The Optio then nodded towards Rufio. “We’ve been going through the roster of the Century like you said…well, you kind of hit the proverbial nail on the head when asking if all our veterans enlisted at the same time. It seems a lot of them did.”

“Within the next eighteen months another dozen of our men will be at the end of their required service,” Rufio observed. “We’ve spoken to them and asked if any were interested in re-enlisting. Three agreed, and we have their new contracts already drawn up. The rest wish to go home.”

“Hmm, I thought the legion *was* home to these men,” Artorius muttered. He then realized that his two senior officers were still standing. “Oh for gods’ sake, sit down! You both hovering over me like that makes me as nervous a Vestal Virgin in a brothel!”

Rufio and Praxus grinned as they sat across from their commander.

“A lot of these men came from Hispania,” Rufio explained. “There was a massive recruiting drive back when Tiberius was campaigning in Pannonia.”

“Then it looks like we will have to start our own soon, or we’ll be the only ones left!” The Centurion’s remark got a laugh out of the three men. Artorius then let out a sigh and sat back. “Eh fuck it, I need a drink. How about you two?” He snapped his fingers and his servant Nathaniel entered the room.

“You need a drink, master?” the slave asked, his hands folded in front of him.

“Yes. Return home and tell my lady I need a jug of our finest vintage. Oh, and tell her I may not be home tonight until late. *Pressing business*.” The slave bowed as Praxus snorted.

“Pressing business requiring your best vintage,” he retorted. “That will go over well with Lady Diana!”

“Actually she is more than willing to indulge me on occasion,” Artorius remarked with a grin. “I rarely drink anymore, but when I do I think she’d prefer I did it around you rather than her.”

Praxus did his best to contain his laughter. “After the little *incident* at your prenuptial feast, I don’t blame her!”

“Nathaniel!” Diana snapped, causing the slave to almost drop the jug. She stood on the stairs leading into the wine cellar, leaning on the hand rail. “What are you doing down here at this hour?”

“M…my apologies, my lady,” the slave stammered, lowering his head

respectfully. Though Diana was always very kind to him, her strong demeanor unnerved him. He then held up the jug. “It’s just…the master…” Diana’s laughter caught him off guard, and he hung his head once more.

“Pressing business again, is it?” she laughed.

Nathaniel nodded his head sheepishly.

“Well, off with you then…and do be careful!”

The poor slave tripped on the stairs and nearly sent the jug crashing. Diana shook her head and walked into the cellar. In her hand she held a letter from her sister. She had hoped to see her husband come home at a reasonable hour this evening, for the news from her sister was of much importance to both of them.

As she walked past the wine racks, running her fingers over the various jugs and bottles, she thought about Claudia’s letter, and their pending trip to Rome. She was very much looking forward to seeing her sister, as well as the rest of her family. She had not seen her father in over a decade, not since the passing of her poor mother. He had since married a young woman who Diana vaguely remembered from her youth as being equally beautiful as she was devoid of brains or personality.

There was another reason why she was anxious to leave Cologne; at least for a short time. It stemmed from Artorius’ long nights at the Century as of late. He tried to keep the stresses of his profession from her, though she appreciated that, if asked directly he would always answer her truthfully. It was that open honesty they shared that kept the bonds of trust between them strong. She knew the pressure that was being placed upon him lately, which was made worse by the loss of…what was it? She thought he had said he was losing almost a third of his men to retirement, yet he still had the same duties and requirements as before, with no prospective recruits to fill the vacancies. Her husband needed a furlough, and a trip to Rome would be just what was needed.

The hours passed, and it was well after midnight. Neither Artorius nor Nathaniel had returned. Diana let out a sigh and carefully lit a lamp that she kept next to their bed for nights such as this. Her maidservant came to her with her cloak as Proximo held the door open for her.

“Thank you, Proximo,” Diana said as she lit the lamp and walked out into the night. “I may not be back this evening.”

Proximo simply bowed in understanding.

It was but a mile from her manor house to the gates of the fortress. The moon was almost full, and bright, negating her need for the lamp. Her reason for keeping it was to clearly identify her face to passersby, particularly guardsmen or patrolling legionaries. She saw one such patrol of six men marching in step down the street.

"Ma'am," the Decanus said with a courteous nod as she passed. Though she could not see the soldier's face nor recognize his voice, she was certain he knew who she was. *Everyone* in Cologne knew Lady Diana Procula. It was a bit unnerving having almost no sense of anonymity whatsoever. Yet it also made her feel safe knowing that more than ten thousand legionaries stood ready to protect her from any harm that villainous types would wish upon her.

The fortress was an imposing sight in the light of the moon. It was huge, seeing as how it housed two entire legions. While the city of Cologne flourished in its wake, the fortress was a city in itself. The round towers on either side of the gate each housed a pair of Scorpion ballistae and she could see the silhouettes of legionaries slowly pacing the ramparts. Ironically, the intimidation of the fortress was more for appearance sake than actual defensibility. Though there was no doubt that it could repel even the most determined assaults, the Roman army was an offensive force. Were a threat to emerge, the legions would spill forth like a stirred up hornets' nest and attack the threat head-on, rather than hiding behind the fortress walls. Tall torches were stuck in the ground leading up to the gate, where a pair of legionaries stood.

"Evening, my lady," one of the men said. He stepped into the torchlight and Diana recognized his face.

"Why good evening to you, Carbo," she replied with a smile. "I didn't think I'd see a familiar face on duty."

The legionary gave a shrug. "Usually only happens about once a month. Between both legions there are plenty of men available for this sort of duty. This night just happened to by my turn. You looking for the Centurion?"

Diana nodded with a smile.

Though Carbo had been in the legions longer than Artorius and had been his friend for over eleven years, he almost never referred to him by his name. He then nodded his head towards the inside of the fortress. "He's here; you know where to find him. I don't think he left the Century office all day, which we all know makes him very irritable."

Diana gave a short laugh and started to walk inside when the legionary blocked the way with his javelin.

"Sorry, my lady, but you know the rules." Diana took a deep breath through her nose, as her face bore a guilty expression. She then sighed and pulled her cloak back, revealing her gladius.

The other legionary gasped at the sight. Ten thousand men may have been available for her protection, but Diana did not like taking any chances, nor did her husband. She was unusually strong for a woman, and Artorius had taught her to fight very effectively. She unstrapped the weapon and handed it to Carbo, who then handed it to the other legionary.

"Here, tag this," he said to the man. "Mark it *Lady Diana Procula*…oh, and on the other side write *Centurion Titus Artorius*. That'll keep anyone from fucking with it…beg your pardon, my lady. Forgive my loose tongue."

Diana simply laughed and shook her head as she passed through the gate.

"Never thought I'd say this about a woman," the other legionary said after returning from the guardhouse, "but our Lady Diana frightens me a bit."

Even at night, Diana still knew her way through the fortress. Pairs of legionaries walked the streets on patrol, while the occasional off duty soldier wandered about. Diana found the Third Cohort's Second Century easily enough and could see a faint glow coming from the Century's office. It was empty and dark, though she could see light coming from the connecting Centurion's office. She pushed open the door and walked into the room, which smelled of wine and sweaty bodies. She extinguished her lamp as the one in the room gave off a soft glow. The slave, Nathaniel, was curled up in the corner, fast asleep. It looked like someone had thrown a blanket over him. At the Centurion's desk were three men. Optio Praxus sat with his hands in his lap somehow still balancing a goblet, chin on his chest, snoring loudly. Diana marveled that Praxus always bore a look of total contentment on his face that never went away. Rufio, the Signifier, was leaning back in his chair, making small gurgling sounds, mouth wide open, and a small stream of drool running out of the corner. And lying face first with his head resting on his hands was her husband, the immortal Centurion himself. There were three empty wine jugs on the floor, including the one Nathaniel had brought.

"Hmm, so one jug of our best vintage wasn't enough," Diana remarked with a slight grin. She walked over and gently shook Nathaniel awake. The slave was startled and bolted to his feet, making ready to string forth

numerous apologies for something he figured he must have done.

"Shh," Diana whispered, holding a finger to her lips. "Go home, Nathaniel. I will take care of the master."

The slave started to protest, but immediately stayed silent. Though he felt bound to stay by his master no matter what, he dared not question the Lady Diana. She leaned over, resting one hand on the desk while gently rubbing Artorius' back. It was the best way she knew to wake him without startling him. Even in his drunken subconscious he knew her touch and slowly sat upright. He gave a weak smile through half closed eyes, as she smiled in return and placed her arms around his waist, grunting with the effort of hoisting him up.

"Come on, Centurion," she said quietly, half carrying him into the Centurion's quarters. Since moving in with her, his bed was almost never used and the room had been little more than a place for him to store his military equipment. Still, the bed was neatly made, and Diana pulled the blankets back and laid him down. She struggled to get him out of his tunic, and then removing her own stola she lay down next to him, her arm draped across his chest, as she closed her eyes and sighed contentedly.

Chapter IX: A Better Journey Home

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The port of Ostia looked unchanged since the last time Artorius had been home. The docks were a bustle of activity, with ships coming and going, and dock workers feverishly loading and unloading cargo bound for various destinations. Yells and curses flowed in the background, with the occasional crack of a whip. The loaded and unloaded cargo seemed to be all mixed together and he could not fathom how anyone made sense of it all. Many of the crates looked identical, and he wondered how any could ever make it to their intended destinations. Diana stood with him on the rail of the ship, her hand clutching his.

Artorius was not the only Centurion to take this trip to Rome. Vitruvius had also been friends with Pontius Pilate and had received an invitation as well. His wife was seven months pregnant and regrettably unable to make the voyage. Artorius had stated that Vitruvius and Praxus had been "busy" at the same time, since Praxus' lover was also expecting their child at around the same time. Indeed, the only other wife to join Lady Diana was Svetlana. It had come as a bit of a surprise to some that she and Valens had gotten an invitation. After all, Tribunes did not make pleasantries, let alone friendships, with lowly legionaries. But then, those who knew Valens' history remembered that it was Pilate who had saved him from a terrible beating at the hands of the Emperor's former sister-in-law, Agrippina, when Valens had been caught in bed with one of her maidservants many years previously. Svetlana, being as adventurous as her husband, found the story a source of amusement.

Other men of rank had been invited, though most had been forced to decline. In all, less than half of those invited from the Twentieth Legion would be able to come. Pilate would understand though; the life of the legions still continued, and somebody had to maintain order on the frontier.

"A pity that Macro and Statorius could not come," Diana observed as she joined her husband on the rail of the ship. She closed her eyes, breathing in deeply the fresh sea breeze.

"Politics and the life of the legions do that," Artorius replied. "At least Proculus was able to get away."

Diana turned towards him, her eyebrow cocked.

“He bloody well better have!” she replied forcefully. “He is my cousin, and with no wars to fight I cannot imagine anything so important on the frontier to keep him away from taking part in the wedding of one whom he practically raised!”

“Ah yes,” Artorius remembered, “his daughter Valeria is the same age as Claudia.”

Diana nodded and smiled as she thought back to when her sister was a little girl.

“They spent so much time together. Being ten years older, I did not spend as much time with them as I would have liked.”

As the ship docked, Artorius longed to feel land under his feet once more. He was a bit wobbly at first, never having handled sea travel well. Diana seemed to handle it better than he, and she quickly took him by the hand and helped steady him. As he stood for a moment regaining his legs, he felt Vitruvius smack him hard on the shoulder, catching his attention and nearly knocking him off his still unsteady legs.

“I’ve sent servants ahead to find us suitable quarters in Rome. Meantime, I think we are going to refresh ourselves at the nearest tavern. You joining us?”

Artorius shook his head at his Cohort Commander’s question.

“Would love to, but my lady and I have someplace else to be.” He took Diana’s hand as he spoke.

Vitruvius caught both of their smiles and then remembered that this was Artorius’ home.

“Of course,” he replied with a nod. “I forget myself sometimes. Well, if you want to send your servant, Nathaniel, with mine, I’m sure he can find you suitable accommodations.”

Artorius nodded in reply and turned to Nathaniel, who was at his side. The slave gave a short bow and left with Vitruvius’ manservant.

While everyone else was getting settled in their housing in Rome, Artorius and Diana had another trip to make. His last trip home had been a sad one, and Artorius was determined that this one would be different. Though it was a few miles to his father’s house, he and Diana elected to walk instead of procuring a wagon. He had given directions to Proximo, with explicit instructions to wait at least a couple hours before leaving the docks once they secured a place to stay. Artorius wanted some private time with his

family without being assailed by the details of handling both servants and baggage.



The situation would prove worse than even Tabbo had feared. Tribute was normally collected during the first part of spring, and the Frisians had already sent off their cattle hides for the year's payment. Olennius had sent word that additional resources would be necessary to cover the administrative costs of his tenure. A taxman pounded a nail into the notice on the mead hall door before walking away. Tabbo, who knew how to read, scowled as he read the latest edict from the Roman magistrate.

"What does it say?" a young woman asked him as he spat and turned away in disgust.

"It says that in addition to ox hides we must now supply the magistrate with a ration from our corn and grain supplies."

"But we barely grow enough to support our families and animals as it is!" a farmer protested as he slammed the butt of his scythe into the dirt. "We won't have enough to eat, let alone maintain our lands and livestock!"

"I know," Tabbo said quietly as he walked briskly over to the King's hall.

Dibbald knew why the war chief had come, for he, too, had seen the edict. A copy of it was crumpled in his hand.

"I know why you're here," the King said, raising a hand before Tabbo could speak. "This Roman has gone too far. I have already sent three riders with messages telling of our plight; one to the Governor General, another to the Senate, and one to the Emperor himself. If the governor or Senate does nothing, I know that the Emperor will!"

"You put a lot of faith in Tiberius," Tabbo replied, still burning with anger at the situation. He would rather Dibbald had dealt with Olennius himself. The fact that a sovereign king would have to defer to the Roman government infuriated him.

"I know Tiberius," Dibbald replied. "I served with him during the Conquest of Raetia more than forty years ago. We were both very young then. It was his brother, Drusus Nero, who brought our people into the fold of the Empire. A number of our people had joined an alliance of Germanic tribes and raided into Gaul, only to be routed by Drusus and driven back

across the Rhine. My father felt it best to accept the deal brokered by Drusus. The tribute was nominal, and the protection offered by the legions allowed our people to prosper in peace without threat of attack from our ever hostile neighbors."

"And one man seeks to undermine all of that!" Tabbo snapped. "Olennius abuses his post and threatens to unleash the legions on us if we do not comply."

"The elders of our people remember what happened the last time Roman soldiers marched on our lands. The legions cannot be defeated in open battle."

"The Cherusci did it," Tabbo countered, referring to the ambush in Teutoburger Wald that had destroyed three legions seventeen years before.

"Yes, but Arminius also had an alliance of twelve nations on his side," Dibbald replied. "We have no such allies here, particularly after we dispatched warriors to fight against the Germanic Alliance during the invasion by Drusus' son, Germanicus Caesar."

"So we must rely on the Emperor to save our people," Tabbo acknowledged, nodding his head in resignation. He then looked his King in the face again. "I will find a way for us to beat the Romans, just in case your messengers should fail us. The gods have mercy on us."

Lourens accompanied Tabbo to the Roman drill field outside the Flevum fort. The war chief and master of horse sat on the hill, watching as two centuries drilled together. Olbert had joined them, and though he still scoffed at some of the Romans' tactics, he studied them in silence. Tabbo sat with his chin in his hand, watching the legionaries; Lourens looked awestruck. Frisia had not sent any cavalry to fight during the Germanic wars and he had never seen the Romans fight. He watched the men formed up into four ranks, and though he could not understand the commands shouted by the Centurions, his eyes grew wide as each rank unleashed a storm of javelins in rapid succession. Since each man carried a pair, eight volleys were unleashed before the soldiers unsheathed their gladii with a loud shout. Lourens shook his head in disbelief as he saw the ground littered with javelins.

"An entire wave of our warriors would be cut down with each volley," he said quietly.

"Their weight gives them extra penetrating power," Tabbo added, his eyes still fixed on the legionaries. "You'll notice the metal shafts at the end

are pliable and bend upon impact. A simple, yet effective tactic; it makes it so that their javelins cannot be thrown back at them, and any shields that they penetrate will be rendered useless."

"So how do we counter this?"

"We don't," Tabbo replied.

Lourens shook his head and looked down at the ground.

The war chief looked back at him and gave a crooked smile. "Don't worry; your cavalry will be safe enough from what you have seen. I cannot see the King wasting your men so recklessly against that. Besides, you will have your own problems to deal with."

"You're referring to *Indus' Horse*," Lourens observed.

Tabbo nodded while studying the legionaries, who were now battling a mock foe and executing rapid passages-of-lines.

"The Romans rely heavily on their infantry," Tabbo continued. "Their cavalry are few, though regrettably ours are even less. Your regiment of the household cavalry is really all we have to speak of. And while I mean no disrespect to your own valor, you had best hope that you never have to face Julius Indus in open battle."

"They can be beaten," Olbert said at last. "I *know* they can! We are smarter than they are, and it is our home we will be defending. We know the land, they do not. We must find a way to use that to our advantage."

"You are finally learning, my friend," Tabbo replied with a partial grin, "You are finally learning."



Artorius tried to drive the memories of his last journey home from his mind as he and Diana walked up the now paved road towards his father's house. It had been little more than a dirt path since he could remember, but now it was paved with flat stones all the way to where his father and stepmother lived.

"That's a lovely little cottage down there," Diana said, pointing to a small house down the hill to their right. She did not notice Artorius wince when she said that.

"That's Juliana's old residence," he replied.

The last time he had been there was when he found Camilla's body laid out on a bed, having died that very day. Diana knew about Camilla, as both

had made certain to come clean about their pasts and avoid any unpleasant surprises. She knew that Camilla had passed away when Artorius was last in Rome, but not that she had been staying at the very cottage she now admired.

Artorius took his wife by the hand and hurried her along. It was getting late, and the sun was starting to fade into the west, painting the sky in a last burst of crimson light. At least this time Primus and Juliana knew that their son was coming home and were expecting to see him. In his last letter home, Artorius had mentioned having a surprise for them, but did not mention his promotion to Centurion or his marriage to Lady Diana. They walked hand-in-hand as they approached the front of the villa that Artorius had been raised in. Juliana immediately rushed outside, embracing him hard, squealing and crying in joy.

"My son, you've come home!" she said with emphasis, kissing him on the cheek. She was still as lovely as ever, that radiant smile that had ensnared his father. Her hair was graying in places, though like many Roman women she kept it colored. She then reached out and took Diana by both hands.

"My lady, you are most welcome!" Juliana's words puzzled Artorius, and he looked over at his wife, who leaned in and kissed Juliana on both cheeks.

"Ave, Mother!"

Diana and Juliana shared an embrace while Artorius stood dumbfounded.

"What?" Diana asked, turning to her husband. "You're not the only one who writes letters home. Oh, sorry, was I supposed to be a surprise?" She smiled and stuck her tongue out at him. He could only laugh and shake his head. A commotion was heard inside and his father, Primus, limped out, holding on to his walking stick. Artorius was concerned that his father's gait had worsened from the last time he had seen him. His gray hair was not colored like his wife's, and he was considerably thinner. Still, he looked happy and full of life, something that relieved his son. He stumbled down the short step and surprised Diana by embracing her hard.

"Daughter!" he said, laughing. "It is an honor to welcome you to the family!" He then placed an arm around her shoulder, and Artorius could not help but notice that Diana was slightly taller than his father. The old farmer then took her into the house, his voice carrying on about how he would show her the vineyards later.

"I'm glad to see him so full of life," Artorius said as he and Juliana remained on the porch.

"Don't think that he's not happy to see you," his stepmother replied, arms

folded as she turned and gazed down the path.

Off to their right, into the west, the sun was setting behind the hills, the sky in the east deepening to purple with the coming of night. Artorius breathed deeply through his nose, remembering the sights and smells that he loved so much. The sweet smell of grapes always reminded him of home.

“I know,” he replied with a smile. “I admit I was surprised that Diana had already written to you. I had hoped to surprise you both, but it doesn’t matter. How is Father’s health? He doesn’t look like he walks too well anymore.”

“He doesn’t,” Juliana replied with a sad shake of her head.

In the distance, well behind the house, they could hear Primus’ boisterous voice as he showed Diana his fields of grapes.

“He turns fifty-six this summer, and yet I can’t help but feel that his years are beyond the chronological reckoning.”

“Things happen that can age someone, I know” Artorius replied as he started to walk back down the road. It was good to talk to Juliana alone. He used to go to her for counsel after his mother died. She had been like a mother to him ever since he was nine, and yet it wasn’t until ten years later that his father finally married her.

“You’ve been through much in your lifetime, too,” Juliana observed, linking her arm with his in the same manner that Primus had with Diana. “You suffered through the same tragedies that he did, and you have seen much since you left for the legions. Yet for all that, you look as though you haven’t aged a day.”

“Just lucky I suppose,” Artorius shrugged, bringing a laugh from his stepmother. “I tell myself everyday that I will never grow old, even if I live to be ninety!”

“I’m glad to see you have found one who keeps you young,” she replied, her smile never leaving her face.

“I would never say this in so many words to anyone else, but Diana is the light of my life. The entire concept of ‘family’ is still a loss to me. I know that one is supposed to marry someone of good birth who can provide us with heirs. For whatever reason, I have never cared about that. Some say that life on the frontiers de-Romanizes us and makes us more like the barbarians we fight and live beside.”

“If it makes you feel any better, your father only cares that you found someone who makes you happy.”

Juliana’s words were reassuring. Part of him thought that perhaps his

father would be disappointed that he had married one who could not have children. Of course, she also brought much wealth, as well a strong family name. Artorius mentioned this to Juliana.

“Enjoy the trappings that come with being part of the Proculeius family,” she replied, “though I know that had nothing to do with why you pursued Diana the way you did.”

“To be honest, I have no idea what drew me to her in the first place,” Artorius replied. “I think at first it was a simple infatuation, and in part because she was unattainable. It was a challenge. Over time, we grew close. And, of course, there is nothing like a crisis and the threat of death to make one appreciate what one has!” He gave a dark laugh and shook his head. He had told his parents in a letter about the terror that Heracles and the remnants of the Sacrovir Revolt had wrecked upon the city of Lugdunum. He had even saved Diana’s life during a raid on the Proculus estate. He often wondered, if not for those horrific events, would he and Diana have ever ended up together.

Chapter X: A People Apart

The House of Proculeius, Rome
May, 26 A.D.
***

"Life for me has completely changed, old friend," Pilate said as he and Artorius walked through the gardens surrounding the Proculeius estate. It was a warm evening, and Pilate took a moment to kneel down and run his fingers through the current of a man made stream that bordered the garden.

"I heard about your appointment to Judea," Artorius replied. "That's fantastic news!"

"I suppose," Pilate replied with a sigh.

Artorius furrowed his brow as his friend continued to sit and let the cool water caress his hand. Artorius clasped his hands behind his back and looked down at the ground, guessing at what bothered the Tribune.

"Look, if you are hoping to ever get another assignment back to the legions, forget about it," he said after a brief silence. "You did your time on the line…too much time according to some. Now you're getting one of only two provinces in the whole of the Empire that allows one of the Equestrian Class to be a governor."

"True," Pilate conceded. "Most of my class would kill to be in my position. Being Procurator of Judea will give me much in the way of opportunity, both politically and economically. Still, do you know why the Senatorial Class allows us to have this province, and why they don't give it to one of their own?"

Artorius shrugged and shook his head.

"It is because Judea is among the most volatile provinces in the entire Empire," Pilate explained. "Few governors even complete the minimum three-year commitment. The Jews are a strange and violent people. They have a staunch ally in the Emperor, and yet they are not even grateful for his patronage! They seem to think that all they have is because their god has given it to them. They think that the lands of Judea are their gift from God… although I'm not sure if I would praise any deity that gave my people such a desolate place!"

His last remark elicited a short laugh from Artorius.

Pilate was serious once more as he continued. “Did you know they are the only people within the Roman Empire that are exempt from having to worship the Roman Pantheon? In our society, religion is viewed as a very personal matter. Every citizen is allowed to worship any gods he chooses in whatever fashion he sees fit; as long as he also pays homage to the gods of Rome and acknowledges the divinity of the Emperors. The Jews are the only people that are allowed to be truly monotheistic. They would have you believe it is because their god is greater than all. In truth, it is because Herod Agrippa is a close friend of the Emperor, almost like a son to him. Hell, Herod was a lifelong friend of the Emperor’s son, Drusus, may the gods rest him.”

“Then by his mercy and tolerance the Emperor is in fact inciting discord,” Artorius added. “If the people are never forced to assimilate, then how can they ever be Roman?”

“My thoughts exactly,” Pilate concurred as they approached a large, ornate pond, complete with a six-foot waterfall.

Artorius watched the fish swimming in circles at the base of the waterfall as Pilate continued.

“Gauls, Germans, Spaniards, Greeks, and even Egyptians all have become part of Roman society. They understand that being Roman is not a matter of race or ethnicity; it is about becoming a part of something greater than ourselves. Those bloody Jews don’t get it, and they never will.” He took a small stone and skipped it across the pond, scattering fish to emphasize his point.

“I swear they are all racists!” Pilate continued. “Rome conquered Judea, yet they dare to look down at us. Anyone not a Jew is scum of the earth to them. The only group of people I know of who are even more racist is the damn Senate here in Rome!”

“Of that there is no doubt,” Artorius agreed. “When Julius Caesar tried to give Gallic nobles membership into the Senate, it almost caused a riot. Hell, the Sacrovir Revolt was caused, in part, because of this!”

“If I am racist,” Pilate explained, “it has nothing to do with the color of a man’s skin or where he was born. To me, there are only two types of people; Romans and non-Romans. If a man is a Roman, I care not whether he is Italian, Greek, Syrian, or a black from Morocco. *All* citizens are Romans! Yet the Judeans don’t even view themselves as citizens of this great Empire.”

“Have you spoken to the Emperor about your concerns?” Artorius asked.

Pilate nodded and scowled.

"As a matter of fact, I have. Tiberius is rather funny when it comes to the Jews. He told me to use prudence when dealing with their sensibilities. This, coming from a man who ordered Germanicus to exterminate an entire race!"

Artorius winced at the last remark.

"Yes, I was there for that," Artorius replied with a scowl of his own. The visions were still clear as the day they happened in his mind. He remembered wiping out entire villages and murdering all within, regardless of age or gender.

Pilate's face suddenly brightened.

"You know, I just realized that this August will be ten years since Idistaviso!" The Tribune seemed happy to talk about anything other than the troublesome Jews he would soon have to try and govern over.

Artorius then recalled that his friend's experience in Germania had been different than his. Pilate had commanded the Army of the Rhine's artillery and had not taken part in the close quarters combat. There was no mistaking Pilate's valor, though his perspective was understandably shielded, since most of his work had been done launching deadly projectiles at the enemy from the scorpion ballistae and onager catapults from several hundred meters away. He had never stabbed someone through the heart and watched them die with their eyes wide in terror; let alone a mother who only wished to protect her child or the child who was too young to understand why he had to die.

"I cannot believe I could have forgotten such an important anniversary!" Pilate said, rather elated.

Artorius knew that Idistaviso was indeed an important victory for Rome, as it culminated the end of the wars against the traitor Arminius and the Germanic alliance. The mass murder of the innocents at Angrivari was little more than a punitive action after the war had been won.

"And oddly enough, both sides claimed victory," Artorius conjectured. "The Germans had Teutoburger Wald seven years before, and we had Idistaviso. I've sometimes wondered which one history will remember."

"Since we write the history books, I would think Idistaviso," Pilate scoffed. "The loss of three legions in Teutoburger Wald was indeed tragic, but you cannot tell me we didn't avenge them."

"There's no doubt about that," Artorius conceded as he threw a rock into the pond before both men continued on. "Still, we have yet to re-cross the Rhine and take back the lands that were lost. We paid back in blood the loss

of Roman life, yet the lands east of the Rhine still belong to the barbarians. I wonder if history will forgive that."



It would be time soon, time to leave the infernal city forever. For all the Senate and people knew, the Emperor was simply going on an extended holiday. Even Tiberius wondered if he was, in fact, leaving Rome forever, but then he steeled himself to his task. Even Livia did not know when he was leaving. Instead, the Empress dowager would wake in the morning to find her son gone and she practically alone in the imperial palace.

The traffic was busy during the night, as was usual. Since Roman law prohibited anything other than pedestrians to move throughout the city during the daytime, any form of wheeled transport had to move during the hours of darkness. This made Rome a city that never truly slept, and also made any real form of secrecy for the Emperor impossible. A cohort of the Praetorian Guard had cleared the streets leading to the harbor at Ostia. Such a large presence of the Emperor's personal bodyguard made his movements known. Another entire cohort acted as his escort, and they would accompany him to Capri. Sejanus sat across from him in a large, covered litter carried by a dozen slaves.

"Don't you even want to look upon the city one last time?" the Prefect asked as they rode in silence down the Appian Way. Soon they would reach the crossroads that would lead them to the port city just outside Rome.

"Why bother?" the Emperor replied with a scowl. "I know it's still there, even though I wish it would just vanish into oblivion some days. To tell the truth, Sejanus, I don't know why the gods mock me and let me linger on so long. I swear they despise me!"

"The gods preserve you because there is no one else able to rule the world," Sejanus replied smoothly. "Were something to happen to you, the Empire would fall into chaos."

"Then the gods did a poor job of planning for the future," Tiberius retorted. "They should never have taken my son from me! I confess that I have cared about very little since Drusus died. I persevere out of a sense of duty alone."

Sejanus stayed quiet as the Emperor went on about his late son. Though both had done their best to serve Tiberius, the Praetorian Prefect and Drusus

Julius Caesar had been hateful enemies. On more than one occasion the Imperial Prince had physically accosted him. Sejanus reluctantly admitted to himself that he had possibly overplayed his hand when he had asked Tiberius for the hand of Livilla, Drusus' widow, in marriage. Tiberius never even suspected that Sejanus and Livilla had been lovers for some time. Still, in what was one of the only instances where he went against his Praetorian Prefect, the Emperor had denied Sejanus' request, stating that to ask such a thing so soon after Livilla was made a widow was in very poor taste.

Sejanus had quickly apologized for overstepping his bounds and had never broached the subject again, much to Livilla's chagrin. Tiberius was hardly a young man anymore; in fact, he had been fifty-five when he became Caesar twelve years before. How much longer could he possibly linger? But then, the Emperor was in annoyingly good health, no doubt kept robust by his years in the legions during the reign of Augustus. The Prefect then sighed as Tiberius went on about his son, who he had practically ignored when he was alive.

At least he doesn't know, Sejanus thought to himself.



Artorius was looking forward to seeing Magnus' family. He had only briefly met his oldest brother, Oleg, and that was right after Camilla's death when he wasn't in the best frame of mind. He had never met Magnus' father, Svend, or his other brother, Hansi, who served as an oarsman in the Roman Navy.

Svend had done well for himself as the owner of a textile mill that Oleg now ran for him. His house, though not quite as large as the patrician villas that dotted the Esquiline Hill, was still quite spacious. As Artorius and Diana approached the large, ornate door, it was hastily thrown open from inside, and a number of servants spilled out, as if running in terror.

"They've gone mad!" one shouted as a loud crash echoed from within. Diana stood with her mouth open and Artorius with an eyebrow cocked, as what looked like two men wrestling, fell over a table in the atrium. The larger of the two, whom they suspected to be Magnus, was picked up and carried quickly out the door. The man carrying the Norseman stumbled, and they both fell into the fish pond with a loud splash. This did not stop either of them, as both threw fists and knees at each other while the fish scattered and

servants cowered. Finally the one man stood and tried to kick Magnus in the side.

"Eighty-eight years old and I can still boot your sissy backside!"

"Who is *that?"* Diana asked in a low whisper, gripping her husband's arm.

Artorius let out a soft chuckle.

"I forget, you've never met Mad Olaf," he replied. The old Nordic warlord and former Auxilia Centurion splashed around as he turned to see who had mentioned his name.

"Ah, if it isn't young Artorius!" he shouted with a laugh, pulling himself out of the pond. Magnus sat up and spewed a mouthful of water out before letting out a sigh.

"And good to see you too, Olaf," Artorius replied as he was embraced by the dripping older man in a hard bear hug. "Still mad as ever, I see."

"Aye, and still able to thrash my weakling grandsons!" Olaf responded with a boisterous laugh. He then noticed Diana for the first time, her eyes wide and not sure if she should laugh or be scared of the old Norseman who had upended Magnus into the pond.

"And who have we here, then?" Olaf asked, his naturally bellowing voice softening considerably, his eyes gave the lady a quick once over.

"Olaf, may I present my wife, the Lady Diana," Artorius replied as Diana gave a short curtsey.

"Of course," Olaf said, nodding enthusiastically, "of the Proculeius house! My lady, you are even more beautiful than I had heard." He placed his hand over his heart and gave a deep bow of respect.

Diana marveled at how such a gruff, surly man could all of the sudden show the softest demeanor and manners towards women.

"If you two are done breaking everything in my house and garden!" a voice called from the entranceway.

Artorius looked over to see a man he could only assume was Magnus' father. He was taller than Olaf, though like his sons he was clean shaven and his blonde hair kept shorter. He also wore a Roman toga, while Olaf was dressed in Nordic breaches and a vest.

"City living has made you soft, son!" Olaf said with a dismissive wave. "You're lucky young Magnus here chose a masculine career in the legions, even if his decrepit grandfather can still toss him around like a sack of moldy potatoes!" Svend let out a sigh as he followed his father into the house, where

Olaf shouted that he needed some fresh clothes and a towel.

"I didn't know Olaf was here," Artorius replied, trying to stifle a laugh at the sight of his friend.

"Neither did I," Magnus admitted as he removed his water-soaked sandals. "I only showed up just before you did. Turns out Grandfather is headed to Arabia to see what all the fuss is about their horses. He was set to leave yesterday, but decided to stay long enough to give me a 'warm welcome,' as he put it."

Both men turned to see Diana leaning against the doorway, hand over her mouth, her breathing ragged, laughing uncontrollably.

"I'm sorry," she gasped, trying to compose herself. "It's just the look on your face…" Her own face was now red as she burst into laughter once more and collapsed on the step.

Magnus was a sight to behold, his mop of blonde hair frayed in every direction, with his head band matted to his forehead. His left cheek was turning purple and his lip was cut. His eyes had a slightly glassy look as he flopped down beside her and began laughing himself.

That night Artorius found he could not sleep, despite the fact that the bed in one of Pilate's many guestrooms was very comfortable. He lay on his back, staring into the blackness. Diana's inside leg was intertwined with his, which usually made him feel comforted and relaxed by her presence. Despite all that, he was edgy and could not shut his brain down. He understood why Pilate needed to talk about anything other than Judea, and it was, indeed, almost the tenth anniversary of the Battle of Idistaviso. Doubtless there would be some type of celebration within the city. Two cohorts of the Praetorian Guard had taken part in the battle, and he was certain they would take the opportunity to be paraded through Rome like heroes once more.

Slowly he eased his leg out from underneath Diana's. He gave her a gentle caress on the shoulder and kissed her on the cheek. She let out a whimper but was immediately back to sleep. He bumped into an end table and cursed under his breath, hoping he would not wake his wife up. He stepped out onto the balcony as a warm breeze blew in off the Tiber. He both loved and hated nights like this, where memories of the past kept him from sleep. He climbed up onto the wide marble railing and looked out across the expanse of the city below. Rome never slept, especially since night was the only time traffic was allowed to move within the Eternal City. During the

daytime, only pedestrians and litters were allowed on the streets, so it was after the sun set that the true bustle of the city began.

He looked up to the sky. It was a clear night, and the stars shone brightly. He closed his eyes and wondered if his brother and his mother were up there somewhere. He wasn't sure what he believed in, theologically. The Roman Pantheon seemed too perverse, even by his standards. The deities Romans worshipped struck him as an orgy of grandeur whose purpose was to make men feel like they were more important in the divine scheme of things than they really were. Perhaps the Jews were right to shun all that in favor of a single god. It certainly kept things simple, having to only account for the eccentricities of a single divinity!

Regardless of who or what may have created the universe, Artorius still had a long suppressed fascination with the afterlife. He knew there had to be one; after all, he had seen his brother seven years after his death. It was absurd to acknowledge such a thing, but Metellus' face was still burned into his mind as clearly as the day he saw him just after the triumphal parade of Germanicus. The two had even conversed briefly before his brother faded and left him. To this day, Artorius had yet to tell anyone about what he had seen, not even his beloved wife. He did not believe in keeping secrets from Diana, and he longed to tell her. He just could never find the words nor the appropriate time and place. Would she think he was mad? Perhaps, but then again maybe he was. It was mid May, still a couple months shy of the tenth anniversary of Idistaviso, yet it was nine years that very month since the Triumph of Germanicus and the divine vision of his brother.

He felt the presence of a set of eyes watching him, and he was unsurprised to see Diana leaning against the rail next to him.

"Can't sleep again," she stated rather than asked.

He nodded as he stepped down from the rail. He was completely naked, as was normal. Diana had on a loose fitting robe that was undone in the front. He never tired of looking at her, perfect as she was in supple grace and fit beauty. The light from the stars showed just enough of her firm breasts and well defined stomach. Though his conscience mourned their inability to have children, his inner lustful mind was glad that her body had never suffered the ravages of childbirth. It was a welcome sight, and he reached out to her.

Chapter XI: Proculeius' Hospitality

The House of Proculeius, Rome
15 June, 26 A.D.
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It was two days before the nuptials between Pontius Pilate and Claudia Procula were scheduled to take place. At the insistence of Claudia's father, Proculeius, a massive banquet would be held that evening before all the formalities of the pending marriage rituals began. Artorius was discouraged because the formal toga he had ordered had not been delivered before his departure from the Rhine. He had tried on others that the clothing merchants had, but none of the hateful garments fit him right. Those large enough to fit around his gigantic chest and shoulders had been designed for men of much greater height, not to mention abdominal girth, than the young Centurion.

Diana had told him repeatedly to quit worrying about it, even though her formal stola only made them clash when they walked together hand-in-hand. All of the other legionaries were wearing their best tunics, though anyone who was a Centurion or above was in a formal toga. As the assembled host of friends met at the inn just up the road from where the Proculeius mansion was, Artorius felt grossly out of place.

"If it makes you feel any better," Vitruvius said, "it took three months for my toga to arrive."

Artorius glared at him, but then shrugged. Vitruvius was basically a taller version of himself when it came to body frame. The fact that he had been a Centurion for a number of years and had not put off buying all the trappings of his position had made it easy for him. His young protégé had not even considered buying formal dress clothes until roughly a month before coming to Rome, and he realized he had nothing appropriate to wear.

"Eh, our good Centurion stands out too much in a crowd to be mistaken for a lowly legionary like the rest of us," Valens said, smacking Artorius on the shoulder.

He, too, looked out of place when he stood with Svetlana. Though not a noblewoman, Svetlana and her brother Magnus' family was very wealthy. Their grandfather, Mad Olaf, had insisted that she wear the best gown that his fortune could afford. The Norsewoman had the good sense not to allow her grandfather to purchase her anything that would outshine the patrician and

equestrian class ladies.

“Hey, where’s Centurion Proculus?” Praxus asked; looking around to make sure everyone was there.

Last thing any of them wanted was for one of their own who had been invited to Pilate’s prenuptial banquet to be off drunk, whoring, or at the gambling dens.

“He’s staying at the Proculeius house,” Magnus answered. “Him being family and all.”

“So just how big is this place?” Valens thought aloud.

“You’ll see,” Artorius replied with a grin. “Alright, everyone will be on their best behavior, at least until the patricians start hitting the wine and start puking. They can get almost as rowdy as drunken legionaries, only difference is they have a lot nicer things they get to break.”

“Yeah, we’re not allowed to have nice things,” Valens complained.

The small procession left the inn in high spirits. There were approximately two dozen legionaries in the group. The top two soldiers from each cohort had been given leave to attend, as well as a few personal acquaintances for Tribune Pilate. All were excited because opportunities for mere plebs to celebrate with the nobility came but once in a lifetime, if at all. Artorius and Diana walked with his Cohort Commander Vitruvius, who, while Artorius felt out of place being devoid of a proper toga, felt the same for having had to leave his wife in Cologne.

It seemed strange to Artorius that he had never even met his father-in-law before. Diana had reluctantly let him read a couple of letters Proculeius sent to her just after their own marriage. He expressed disappointment that she had decided to bind herself to a lowly plebian that could only attain their social status at the end of his career. He later stated that as a barren divorcee she was free to be with whomever she wanted, though he wished that if she was going to be with someone, that she could have at least tried to find a man of quality. Centurion Proculus had warned him in advance of Proculeius’ nature and disdain towards anything plebian. Proculus said the only reason he was even tolerated was because he was family, and that his rank had somehow earned him the right to associate with his distant cousins.

Like most villas in Rome, the gateway leading into the courtyard of the Proculeius mansion was rather plain and unassuming. A few potted trees and plants were the only ornaments, until they entered the opulent atrium. One would never guess the grandeur that awaited them inside. People were

gathering at the place like flies on honey; magistrates, Plebian Tribunes, business owners associated with Proculeius, and even a few senators. The legionaries stood in awe at the sight of the magnificent banquet hall, once they were inside. It looked large enough to hold an entire cohort, with couches and small tables strewn throughout. At the far side was the head table, on a short dais, with the most ornate couches behind. Artorius noted that, aside from those on the head table, the goblets and plates were all clay rather than the ornate silver. He reasoned that this would be a rather rowdy feast, and Proculeius felt that clay was more expendable than silver. As they mingled in the foyer, wondering where their place would be to sit, Artorius saw his father-in-law for the first time.

He was a taller man, though aside from that he resembled neither of his daughters. His father had made their family's name, and the younger Proculeius had always lived reluctantly in his shadow. His father's status had made the family extremely wealthy and given them all a comfortable lifestyle. He wore an ornate toga and was almost as splendidly dressed as any of the senators present. The host at any Roman banquet needed to make the best impression possible, hence the look of consternation as he quickly walked towards them.

"What are legionaries doing in my house?" he fumed, his voice angry but quiet, lest any of the senators notice the plebian soldiers amongst the throng of guests.

"And good to see you too, Father!" Diana retorted. "Ten years I've been from Rome, and this is how we're greeted?"

"Daughter, it *is* good to see you," Proculeius replied, giving her a quick kiss on the cheek. The woman who accompanied him looked to be younger than Diana, and one could only assume that he married her in order to keep up his own appearances. He then glared at Artorius.

"Hmm, so you must be my new son-in-law," he said curtly. "I suppose your presence will be tolerated this evening, in spite of the disrespect you show my house in your manner of dress." Artorius' face twitched, but he kept his composure.

"We appreciate your hospitality," he replied, pretending not to hear the insult.

"Oh, no," Proculeius responded. "I said *your* presence will be tolerated… that and your fellow Centurion, who at least has the courtesy to make himself presentable. But these…" He waved his hand with disdain while glaring at

the legionaries.

"With all due respect, sir, these are soldiers of Rome," Vitruvius replied smoothly as he glided up beside Artorius. "They are the ones who protect you while you sleep and while you feast in your great banquet hall."

"And their place is on the frontier, rather than my banquet hall!" Proculeius scowled. "I will *not* have my house and reputation tarnished by their presence."

"They are *my* guests," Pilate said, stepping between Proculeius and the legionaries. "These men fought beside me through hell itself, and I will not have them dismissed like this. If they go, I go."

Knowing that he could not have a feast without the groom, Proculeius gave a false smile once he realized Pilate was not bluffing.

"Very well," he replied coldly. "If you wish to continue to stain yourself with the contagion of the legions, so be it. But they cannot stay in the hall. Your friends will eat in the kitchens and outside in the gardens."

Artorius started to protest when Praxus grabbed him by the shoulder from behind.

"It's alright," he said quietly. "This place is a little too stuffy for us anyway."

Feeling as if he had gotten the best of the rabble, Proculeius abruptly turned and walked away, his giggling wife in tow.

A few hours later, after a series of speeches and several courses, Artorius decided to take a break from the prenuptial feast when a late guest arrived. He gave a broad grin as he recognized a face that he had not seen in many years.

"Justus, you old sod!" he shouted, saluting with a full cup of wine, which he slopped onto the expensive marble floor.

His friend was adorned in a crisp white toga with the appropriate trimmings, to include the Equestrian's narrow purple stripe. Though technically not a part of the equities until after retirement, Centurion's still serving were authorized to wear the status when in civilian garb.

"Well, the gods do have a sense of humor after all!" Justus Longinus replied boisterously, embracing his friend in a hard bear hug. Artorius cursed himself that here was his friend of equal rank looking like a patrician, and he was in what amounted to little more than an expensive red tunic and a polished Centurion's belt.

“Easy there,” Artorius protested with a loud belch. “People are going to think I’m your bloody catamite or something!”

Justus laughed and cuffed him across the ear.

“Damn, but you’ve gotten big,” he replied as he released him. “How many years has it been now?”

“Too many,” Artorius replied, resting his arm on Justus’ shoulder. “A couple years before I joined the legions, in fact. Say, weren’t you taller than me back then?”

His red-haired friend gave a short laugh and nodded as if embarrassed.

“Yes, though I think now you still have to stretch to get me by an inch! And I think I was right in stating that the gods have a sense of humor, *Centurion.”*

Artorius shrugged in mock humility.

“Ah, just got lucky I suppose.”

“I’ll say,” Justus emphasized. “You beat me to it by a full year, you bitch! I was just promoted to the Centurionate two months ago.”

“Well, there isn’t as much going on in the east now is there? Not like the Centurions are as willing to give up their comfortable billets in that corner of the Empire,” Artorius mused, his eyes clouding slightly. It was still warm and mildly stuffy in the atrium. He had hoped to get some cool air outside to sober up, but instead found he was now more inebriated.

“Justus!” a female voice snapped.

Artorius glanced over his friend’s shoulder and saw his fellow Centurion’s wife walking through the large double doors.

“Artorius, I would like you to meet my wife, Flavia.”

“It is an honor to meet you at last,” Flavia said with a short curtsey.

“The honor is mine.” Artorius forced his brain to think clearly as he bowed and took her hand, kissing the back of it.

“Uh, you seem to be drooling a bit,” Flavia said with a nervous laugh.

Just then Diana appeared at Artorius’ side.

“And you must be the lady Diana.”

“A pleasure,” she replied, taking both of Flavia’s hands. “Forgive my husband. He just needs to get some fresh air.” She playfully prodded Artorius with her knee before leading Flavia into the banquet hall.

Artorius burst into laughter, which was cut short when he turned and saw that Justus was stone faced.

“Um…sorry old friend,” he stammered. “First time I’ve seen you in gods’

know how many years, and I slobber on your wife's hand."

Justus forced a short laugh.

"It's not that," he replied. "Look, if you can sober your ass up for a few, I do wish to talk with you before I get lost in the frenzy of Pilate's prenuptial celebration. Once I start hitting the sauce, I'm fucked."

A raucous cheer erupted from within the hall as if emphasizing his point.

"Sure…" Artorius replied as he stumbled out the door. He downed some more wine, and then splashed the remainder into his face before dunking his head in a nearby fountain. The water was quite cold and he beat his right foot on the ground as if counting off the time. When he figured he was alert he pulled his head out with a dramatic gasp.

"That's better… I think," he said with a loud sigh of relief. His mind was at least temporarily cleared, and he slicked his soaked hair back. "So how's that son of yours doing, anyway?"

"It is about him that I wish to speak with you," Justus replied, leaning up against the fountain next to him.

"What is he now, fourteen?"

"Sixteen," Justus corrected. "Another year and he'll be of legal age to join the legions."

"You must be proud," Artorius mused.

"Normally I would be," Justus agreed. "The thing is, I'm afraid for Gaius. When he was two we took him to a priest to see his future, spent a shitload of money on it, too, what with the sacrificial birds and all that poking through their guts. The son of a bitch told Flavia and me that our son will not live to see a full score in years. He said that my son will die in battle before he reaches his twentieth birthday!" His hands gripped the edge of the fountain, his knuckles turning white.

Suddenly Artorius no longer felt any of the effects of his previous imbibing, his mind clearing in an instant.

"So refuse to sign his endorsement to join the legions," Artorius offered. "After all, one must have proof of citizenship…"

"Spare me the technicalities," Justus growled. "I know how it works, and trust me, my wife has asked me to do the same thing. I also know that I would only delay the inevitable. Every recruiting officer in the entire eastern region of the Empire knows that Gaius is my son. Once he's of age they can enlist him with or without my approval. Besides, it is his life to live, though I wish he was not so damn adamant about following me into the ranks. I didn't

spend a fortune on his education so that he could stab barbarians for a living!"

"Fuck the auspices," Artorius retorted.

Justus looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

"I'm serious! We make our own path in life, Justus. Our fates are not ruled by the flight of a gods' damned bird or by what color their bloody entrails are. For being such an advanced and learned society, Rome has some truly backward traditions. I mean, seriously, since when do educated men believe disemboweling a peacock will somehow win favor with the gods? Only a fucking moron believes they can tell the future from a swallow's liver."

"My wife believes it," Justus replied quietly.

Artorius smacked himself on the forehead.

"Damn it, that's twice in one hour that I've insulted your wife."

"No offense taken," his friend replied, shaking his head. "And besides, I don't believe much in omens either. If I believe it at all, it's because Flavia believes. Her devout faith in the gods is what sustains mine. I suppose she feels that she has to have enough faith for both of us."

"Faith that your son will die before he's twenty," Artorius thought aloud. He closed his eyes, expecting a sharp rebuke from Justus.

"Do you even believe in the gods?" Justus asked after a short pause.

Artorius shrugged his shoulders.

"I believe in *something*," he emphasized. He almost let slip about his encounter with his brother's soul, but stopped himself short. He was suddenly grateful he had at least sobered up partially. Surely Justus would have thought him mad were he to tell him about seeing and speaking with Metellus.

"I believe something created us," he continued. "Whether it was one god or many, I have no idea. What I do know is we did not just appear out of nowhere. I think man makes the gods look like us so we can relate to them, so that in our arrogance we can say we are made in their image. What I don't believe is that we can determine the will of any such deities based on slashing the throat of a bull or gutting a bird."

"That's why I've always liked you, Artorius," Justus said, looking his way and forcing a smile. "You never hold back and are not one to mince words."

"Hence, why I would be a lousy politician," Artorius replied, getting a

short laugh out of his friend.

Justus took a deep breath and let out a sigh of relief.

“You’ve grown up since I last saw you,” the red-haired Centurion said. “You’ve grown stronger in both mind and body.”

Artorius’ face gave an involuntary twitch as Justus had unknowingly repeated the last words of advice his brother had given him while he was alive. Justus did not notice, and instead gave Artorius a friendly smack on the shoulder.

“Come!” he said. “Let us return to the celebrations!”

As they made their way back towards the raucous sounds coming from within the house, they saw a man leaning over the large fountain by the main entrance, dry heaving like he was about to throw up. Upon closer examination they recognized him as one of the Praetorian Tribunes.

“Hmm, seems the Emperor’s bodyguards can’t hold their drink,” Artorius laughed as the man heaved again.

“Hey, not in the fountain, you Praetorian twat!” Justus shouted as he walked over and gave the Tribune a hard kick to the backside.

It wasn’t every day one had the opportunity to commit assault on a superior officer, especially one of the “elite” Praetorians, and get away with it. Artorius walked over and grabbed the Tribune by the neck of his tunic and guided him towards some bushes. The dry heaving was soon followed by the splash of half digested wine, ale, and stomach acid all mixed together in a noxious combination.

“Good gods, what did that man eat?” Justus snorted, his senses assailed by the stench.

“Well, at least there’s no chunks,” Artorius observed.

“What’s he been drinking then, ram’s piss?” Justus was disgusted, yet at the same time starting to chuckle. “Seriously, it smells like…”

“…like a bitter, sour ass!” Artorius finished for him, leading both men to laughing uproariously.

They left the Tribune to his misery as a pair of slaves stood off to the side, waiting to offer assistance, though unable to hide the disgust on their own faces at the stench. The two Centurions then walked towards the house with an arm around each other’s shoulders, debating over how either knew what ram’s piss and a sour ass smelled or tasted like.

“You should have just let him spew in the fountain,” Artorius said as they walked into the foyer.

“Well, this place does belong to your father-in-law…” Justus began to say.

“Who’s a royal asshole,” Artorius finished. He then briefly told Justus about the dispute they had with Claudia and Diana’s father over the presence of legionaries within his banquet hall.

Justus was feeling the effects of drink as he stared unrelentingly at Sejanus. The Praetorian Prefect pretended not to notice. It would be reasonable to think that he did not, given the large numbers of people and the amount of commotion within the hall. It was only when Sejanus got up from his couch and left that Justus looked down and started eating once more. Flavia sat nervously by her husband, clutching his forearm the entire time.

“No love lost between you two then,” Artorius stated, trying to break the ice. Between all the lamp flames and the plethora of human bodies the room was stifling, yet he felt a cold chill running down his back.

“That man is a menace to Rome,” Justus growled, taking another pull off his wine.

“Be easy, love,” Flavia said quietly, “the wrong ears may hear your words.”

“Oh, yes, I quite forgot that defaming the commander of the fucking bodyguards now constitutes treason!” Justus said in a louder voice, although no one else seemed to hear him besides Flavia, Artorius, and Diana.

“What are you talking about?” Artorius asked, suddenly interested.

Diana elbowed him hard, not wanting him to encourage Justus any more. It was already too late.

“Just that free speech is not what it once was,” Justus continued. “Make no mistake, I am no republican; however, one has to admit that during the Republic one could be far more relaxed with one’s tongue than you can today. Take for example poor Senator Cremutius Cordus…”

“A man whose words incited sedition and treason!” Sejanus’ voice sounded behind them.

Thankfully, no one else was paying them any mind, though Flavia’s face darkened, and she lowered her head while closing her eyes. Justus only grinned thinly, his eyes shining with hatred for Sejanus. In spite of Artorius shaking his head, he turned and stood face-to-face with the Praetorian Prefect. Sejanus stood about half a head taller than the Centurion, though both men were of equal muscular size. The Prefect appeared to be impressed

that Justus was not intimidated by him.

"Cordus wrote a bloody history book," Justus retorted. "Where was the harm in that?"

"The harm," Sejanus said; his tone like one would use on an ignorant schoolboy, "was that he dared to eulogize the murderers of the Divine Julius Caesar *as the last of the Romans*."

"A stupid one-line eulogy in the entire text," Justus retorted. "And you accused him of treason for that! The poor bastard starved himself to death, and you burned his writings as if he were inciting a rebellion against our beloved Emperor!"

Across the banquet hall Pontius Pilate saw the dispute going on. His eyes grew wide with anxiety, and he attempted to work his way through the celebrating throngs of people lest Justus get himself into greater trouble.

"The treason laws of Augustus have been re-enacted to protect the Emperor…"

"Who in his own words stated, *in a free state there should be freedom of speech and thought*,"

Justus interrupted with a sneer. "Those were the words of Emperor Tiberius Claudius Nero himself. Do you deny it?"

Before Sejanus could answer, Pilate forced his way between the men.

"I think we've all had a little too much to drink and are letting our tongues get the best of us," he said quickly. The Praetorian Prefect turned his nose up slightly at Justus.

"Yes, this upstart of a Centurion would certainly not be so loose with his words in the presence of his betters were he sober," he said icily. "You're drunk, so I will let your…*indiscretions* go."

"Fuck you, Sejanus," Justus retorted, causing his wife to gasp and Artorius to grab him from behind by both shoulders.

"Easy there, old friend," he said quietly into his ear.

Sejanus shoved Pilate aside and stood nose-to-nose with the Centurion. Again he could not help but ruefully admire that Justus still wasn't backing down.

"Think yourself lucky that you're a friend of Pontius Pilate's," he said quietly. He then stepped back and in a louder voice stated, "Though I do now question what kind of people my deputy calls his friends." He then walked slowly away, as Pilate guided him by the shoulder.

Flavia's hand was over her mouth in shock, and Artorius let out a relieved

sigh as Justus grinned in triumph. Diana laid her head on her husband's shoulder, wine and a sense of relief making her suddenly tired.

"You have to admit, that took some Herculanian-sized balls," Magnus observed as he casually walked over to the group, a wine cup in hand. He appeared to be more sober than anyone else in the room.

"Magnus, what are you doing here?" Artorius asked, suddenly remembering Proculeius' directive that anyone below the rank of Centurion was prohibited from dining in the banquet hall.

"Oh, come on," the Norseman said, looking around. "Everyone here is completely wasted; no one will even know I was here. Besides, we're running out of alcohol in the kitchens, and the slaves won't give us the keys to the cellar where I know all the good stuff is."

"So?" Artorius questioned.

"So, either I find a key from someone or else the boys are going to use one of the tables as a battering ram on the cellar door. I would rather they didn't, lest we mere plebeians wear out our welcome with the great Proculeius…no offence intended, my lady."

"Mmm, none taken," Diana replied, her eyes still closed and arms wrapped around Artorius' left arm.

The Centurion was suddenly aware once more of the party going on around them. So intent had they all been on watching Justus' exchange with Sejanus that he had failed to notice the hundred or so boisterous souls drinking and shouting to make themselves heard in Proculeius' hall. All looked to be completely intoxicated, and many were passed out on their couches or on the floor. Wine goblets and food trays littered the ground as servants worked frantically to try to keep up with the ever growing mess. Across the hall, next to where Pilate's couch sat, was Proculeius, his butt and legs still on the couch, though the rest of his body was on the floor where his arms were splayed out to his sides.

"I've got an idea," Artorius said with a grin.

He then handed his wife over to Flavia, who guided her onto a couch. Justus had sat back down and was eating and drinking as if nothing had happened.

"Please forgive my friend, he meant no harm," Pilate pleaded once he and Sejanus were alone.

"I've never known a man to use the words *fuck you* and not mean any

harm," Sejanus replied coldly. Pilate swallowed hard but then decided to take a chance. After all, he should be the last person who needed to be afraid of Sejanus.

"Justus did have a point," he observed. He started to explain quickly as his superior raised an eyebrow at the statement. "After all, his quote of the Emperor was exact. Besides, he's nothing more than a Centurion from the east."

"I remember him," Sejanus said, his voice still cool, though not with the venom it once held. "He was but a mere Optio when last in Rome; sent here to spy on us for the nosy Legates of the east who can't seem to handle their own affairs, yet they feel the need to stick their dripping noses into the Emperor's. Tiberius was correct to recall that nuisance Lamia and make him absentee governor from Rome. You're right, of course. Your friend is harmless enough, as long as he's in the east. See to it that he stays there." His face was close to Pilate's as he spoke his last words.

The Tribune nodded in reply, relieved that Sejanus seemed to let the matter drop. The Praetorian Commander then started back towards the hall, suddenly cheerful once more as he turned and faced his deputy.

"Seems you've been neglecting someone all night, old friend," he said with a wink as Claudia walked past him.

"There you are, love!" she said with exasperation. She immediately saw the vexation on his face even after Sejanus left. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he replied with a quick shake of the head. He was suddenly tired. He knew he would have to deal with Justus later and lay out for him just how close he had come to oblivion. The thought of that sapped whatever energy he had left.

"Many of our guests are either passed out or having their servants take them home," Claudia said with a yawn. "It seems that Father gave his personal key to your legionaries in kitchen and gave them access to his special stock of best wine. I think there's a whole other party going on in the wine cellar."

Pilate chuckled quietly at the thought of how livid Proculeius would be when he saw that his private cellar had been raided by the legionaries he spat upon. In his extreme stupor, he would never remember for certain if, in fact, he had given his personal key to the soldiers.

"I think we should be off to home and bed ourselves," Claudia insisted. "Our friends will have the marriage feast to debauch themselves again."

Pilate nodded in concurrence and put his arm around her waist as they walked towards one of the side exits, not wishing to pass through the now trashed banquet hall.

Another party had, indeed, begun in the cellar. Artorius stood at the top of the stairs, laughing to himself as he absently turned Proculeius' key over in his hand. The kitchen slaves stood mortified, but they dared not protest. After all, the Centurion had the Master's key. Praxus stumbled up the stairs, a sloshing silver goblet in his hand.

"You have got to try this!" he slurred, thrusting the ornate chalice into Artorius' hand. "We found his personal stash, and all I can say is he must have paid a fortune for it!" Artorius sniffed the wine and took a long, slow drink. It was a mellow red wine, with just a touch of sweetness that was not too overpowering.

"Very nice," he replied, taking another drink. "Where did you get the cup?"

"He keeps the silver down there as well," Praxus replied. He then let out a loud belch before continuing. "Don't worry; the lads know they are not to walk off with any of it! I told them we will be good to our gracious host, asshole that he is…no offence, sir!"

"None taken," Artorius laughed. "He is an asshole, though gracious with his wine." He made certain that his men thought that Proculeius had indeed given him his personal key, which would make his story more believable when the time came to explain to his father-in-law how filthy legionaries consumed his most precious vintage.

"I need to piss!" a voice shouted from bellow.

"No going on the floor!" he heard Magnus shout. "We are respectable guests to our Centurion's beloved father-in-law! Here, we'll use the empty vat."

Artorius almost dropped the goblet as he burst into laughter. Knowing his men, they would all relieve themselves into the empty vat, and then replace it onto the shelves as if it still contained Proculeius' wine.

"We need some quality prostitutes, too," another soldier called out. "I want to fuck something!"

"Anybody know where the nearest brothel is?" yet another asked.

"Two miles east, I think," Legionary Decimus said, his voice slurred.

"No it's not, dumbass!" they heard Carbo retort. "It's to the west."

“All I know is I need to bury my cock is something warm and wet,” the first legionary asserted.

“Stick it in the piss vat!” Decimus replied, bringing more drunken laughter from their friends. Artorius laughed and shook his head. He really was enjoying the spectacle his men were putting on. A few years ago he would have been one of the worst offenders of the lot. But now the responsible leader within him knew he had to rein his men in soon, lest they do something drastic.

“Give them another half an hour and then start rounding everyone up,” Artorius directed.

Even in his drunken state Praxus still comprehended an order when it was given.

“Yes, sir,” he replied with a hiccup.

A woman’s shrieking echoed from down the hall, followed by sounds of laughter. Artorius and Praxus watched as Valens came through the kitchen, a fetching young servant woman draped over his shoulder. Svetlana was behind them and was smacking the girl on the butt, who yelped gleefully at each swat.

“Oh, she likes this then, the saucy little bitch!” Svetlana laughed as they passed the Centurion and Optio and headed towards the servant’s quarters.

“Does Magnus know that his sister…” Praxus started to say but could not find the words.

“That his sister is a female replica of Valens?” Artorius finished for him. “I’m almost certain, though we never mention it around him.”

It was only after the last of his legionaries had safely left the Proculeius estate—with the exception of Valens who was occupied with Svetlana and the slave woman—Artorius returned to the banquet hall to find his wife. Diana lay curled up on one of the couches, with other guests strewn throughout. Pilate and Claudia had long since departed, and slaves had taken their host to his room. Justus and Flavia also had left earlier, which was just as well. Though Artorius had enjoyed watching his friend stand up to Sejanus, he knew that Justus had played a very dangerous hand.

He had considered simply finding a blanket for Diana and letting her sleep where she lay, not wishing to wake her. He then thought better of it and did not wish to leave his wife in the sticky room that a few hours before had smelled of fine wine and delicacies, but now stunk of spilled wine, sweat, and

even a trace of vomit and urine.

“Patricians do know how to party,” he said with a crooked grin as he bent down and picked his wife up.

Diana moaned quietly and put her arms around his neck, her eyes still shut. The night air felt good as he carried his wife the few blocks over to Pilate’s house. The upstairs floor where the guest quarters were was cool, dark, and quiet. It was a far cry from where they had just come.

He helped Diana out of her clothes. She was semiconscious, though her eyes had remained shut the entire time. He got himself undressed and opened a window, letting the cool breeze caress his body. He then lay down next to his wife and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter XII: A King Undone

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A group of five of Olennius' henchmen stood outside the door to King Dibbald's hall. They carried clubs, and their leader wore a sword on his hip. It was this man who greeted the King with a sneer.

"The magistrate wishes to see you," he said through his teeth.

Queen Femke found it laughable that the man was trying to look fierce, even though he had the face of a ferret, with a bowl cut hair style that looked ridiculous on his oblong head. Dibbald let out a sigh.

"It is the end of the day," he replied. "I was retiring for supper. Perhaps the magistrate can wait until morning."

The thug immediately drew his sword and pointed it at the King's chest. A pair of warriors who escorted Dibbald drew their axes and stood protectively in front of him. The King placed his hand between them and gently pushed them off.

"I see you still have at least some sense," the ugly man with the sword replied. "Wouldn't want to cause a fuss and have to call on the legions, now would we?" He gave a sickening grin as he signaled for the King to follow him. "Oh, and gather all the people from the capital into the public square. Master Olennius needs to address them, too."

Amke clutched Klaes' hand as she watched her uncle walk up onto the dais in the center of town. In front of him was a large tarp, and she wondered what could possibly be underneath it. She guessed that whatever it was had something to do with why the entire town was summoned to see Olennius so late in the day. The magistrate was standing smug next to the King, who bore a look of resignation on his face.

"People of Frisia!" Olennius shouted to the assembly. "It would seem that there are traitors in your midst, people who would undo the years of peace and prosperity that have existed for nearly four decades! *Behold the traitors!"* With his last words, two of his men threw back the tarp, revealing the corpses of the messengers that Dibbald had sent. Women gasped at the sight of the men, their eyes bulging and tongues protruding from their gaping mouths. Purple marks on their necks showed that they had been strangled.

"These men," Olennius continued, "carried with them messages of

treason! One even had words of slander to be delivered to the Emperor himself! Look well upon them and see the fate of all who would disrupt the harmony of our corner of the Empire!" He then nodded to two of his men, who forcefully removed the King's tunic. Olennius then picked up a corded whip off a bench.

Dibbald raised a hand, staying those who sought to rush to his defense. Amke released the grip on her cousin's hand and started to rush forward, drawing her axe. Klaes quickly restrained her, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her away.

"Let me go!" she shouted. "By the gods, it's your father they are going to whip!" The shouts and protestations from the crowd drowned out her words.

"Not this way!" Klaes said into her ear. Amke ceased in her struggles and faced her cousin, whose tears matched her own. "Please cousin; there will be a time, but not today…not yet."

Both turned back towards the raised dais. Olennius appeared to be enjoying himself. He snapped the whip on the platform in an attempt to silence the crowd.

"Your own King has allowed these traitors to run free within his domain!" he called over the shouts of the people. "For this he must be punished. Even a king is not above the law!"

With that he stepped behind Dibbald and with much flamboyance lashed him across the back with the whip. The slap of the cords against his flesh caused even Amke's stomach to turn. She held a hand over her mouth as Olennius lashed the King repeatedly. The cries of protest had turned to ones of revulsion. Amke could see Queen Femke being held close by Tabbo, whose face was purple with blinding hatred. King Dibbald made not a sound as the whip scored him again. The clenching of his fists was the only sign he gave of the agony he was feeling. After more than a dozen lashes, Olennius rolled up his whip.

"Let this be a lesson that your people *never* forget!"

Without another word he and his henchmen left the dais and walked out of the town square. The crowd was in a state of shock at what they had witnessed. All was quiet as Amke forced her way to the front. She and Klaes then climbed onto the dais. Dibbald could no longer hold back his tears of shame, though he still made not a sound as they ran down his cheeks. Amke, her own face soaked in tears, placed her hands on either side of his face, and at last he allowed himself to look at her. She then placed her arms around her

uncle, careful not to touch his bloody and lacerated back. The King's strength left him as Amke and Klaes helped him down, practically carrying him back to his hall. Tabbo and his wife held onto Queen Femke as they followed close behind. The will of their King was broken, and with it the will of the Frisian people.

"I will gut that bastard myself!" Amke snarled as she furiously ground a sharpening stone across the head of her axe later that evening.

Lourens was much more slow and methodic as he ran a whet stone over the blade of his cavalry spear. As head of the King's household cavalry regiment, he worked in tandem with the Daughters of Freyja as part of Dibbald Segon's personal guard.

"In due time, love," Lourens replied.

Amke hated it when he called her that. It was no secret that the Master of Horse held a certain amount of affection for her, despite being fifteen years her elder, as well as married with a son that was a couple years younger than she. To his credit, whatever his personal feelings may have been, Lourens always maintained a professional rapport with the King's niece.

"Time for *what?"* Amke retorted. "Our people go hungry, the King has just been humiliated in front of the entire kingdom, and our will to fight is all but broken. What exactly are we supposed to be waiting for? For famine and disease to render our people so weak that we cannot possibly fight the Romans?"

Lourens ceased in sharpening his spear and gazed at the young woman, whose face shown in the light of the nearby fire. He hated himself for the feelings he had for her, for he knew it was inappropriate. He knew that now was not the time to deal with such things, so he forced any fond thoughts of Amke from his mind.

"Tabbo and Olbert are seeking a way to fight the Romans," he replied after gathering his thoughts. "With any hopes of contacting the Roman authorities dashed, we need to find a way to deal with the situation ourselves. Your uncle had hoped to find a solution that would avoid bringing the wrath of the legions upon us. Our warriors are brave and they excel at the same type of close combat that the Romans do, but there are many things we lack. The Romans have auxiliary cavalry that will overwhelm our own, as much as it pains me to confess. Our weapons and armor are also severely lacking when compared to theirs. The Roman army is simply a better equipped and more

efficient killing force than ours. And even if they don't let loose the legions against us, they can simply withdraw their protection and leave us at the mercy of the Cherusci and other tribes to the east."

"So what if they do?" Amke retorted, grinding the stone into her axe even harder. "At least they make it known when they intend to plunder and conquer. Rome pretends to be our friends. They sicken us with their flattery and promises of protection. My father was a great warrior for both Adel and Diocarus Segon, long before he married Diocarus' daughter, my mother."

"Yes," Lourens replied, "and he also saw the terror that the Romans could bring. Don't forget that my father was killed by the forces of Drusus Nero. We were unprepared for the Romans when they came and they rolled right over us."

"We had never seen their kind before," Amke added, her temper cooling slightly. "Such discipline, my father said! I understood why he admired them, and when Drusus offered our people such reasonable terms it seemed too good to refuse. I wonder, though, if Drusus had other reasons for wishing to end the fighting so quickly." Amke's eyes brightened as a realization came to her.

"What do you mean?" Lourens was suddenly interested to know what the young warrior maiden was thinking.

"Think about it," she continued. "It is understandable that Rome would want to end the fighting in any war as soon as possible and he could have set any terms he wanted. Why so little? Did he see the potential our people possessed, and he looked to stifle it with diplomacy rather than the sword?"

"Doubtful," the Master of Horse replied. "As much as it pains me to admit it, we were soundly beaten. He could have demanded any terms he wanted."

"Then perhaps Drusus Nero was the great man that some say he was."

"There is a ring of truth to your words," Lourens replied as he started to sharpen his spear once more. "Drusus respected our people, though not because of our fighting prowess. He had hoped to integrate us fully as a province of the Empire. He died before he could follow through on this. His brother, Tiberius, did not see this the same way he did. Although this could be because, at the time, he was too busy fighting in Germania proper. Drusus had another reason for suing for peace so quickly with us. He needed all of his forces available to help his brother against our neighbors to the east."

"I try not to hate the Romans," Amke said after a brief silence. She was

now staring into the fire, which danced in her greenish blue eyes. “But this spawn of hell that infects our lands has undone what relations existed between our peoples for the last forty years. I don’t know if we can defeat them, but we have a better chance against the legions than we do against starvation.”



The actual wedding of Pontius Pilate and Claudia Procula had been rather anticlimactic compared to the prenuptial feast and all that had transpired. The auspices were taken, much to Artorius’ annoyance, the vows spoken, and the two finally bound together after many years of betrothal. Somehow the Praetorians and legionaries managed to mingle without starting a brawl amongst each other during the marriage feast. Flavia had dragged Justus away early, lest he start another quarrel with Sejanus. She understood what another spat between those two could mean, even if her husband did not.

Too soon the day came for their return voyage. Though Artorius was sad to see his friends leave, and to say his goodbyes to Pilate and Claudia, he was more melancholy about not having spent more time with his father and Juliana. He said as much to Diana as they watched Ostia slowly disappear from the back of the ship that would take them on the first leg of their voyage back to the Rhine.

“They are wonderful people,” she replied, wrapping her arm through his and gazing at the ring on the third finger of her left hand. Her father-in-law had shyly presented it to her during their farewell meal. It had been the ring on Artorius’ mother’s finger for many years. It was a rather plain ring, all that Primus as a teacher and former legionary had been able to afford. And yet, it meant more to Diana than the most expensive gold and jewels in the world. “To tell the truth, I would have much rather spent more time with them than with my own father and stepmother.”

Artorius bit the inside of his cheek and stifled a laugh.

“You don’t have to refrain from saying what’s on your mind,” Diana scolded gently as she squeezed his arm. “I know you think my father’s an ass, and really I don’t blame you.”

“*Pompous prick*, I think is what Magnus called him,” Artorius replied. He then shrugged. “At least none of his mannerisms passed on to you or Claudia.”

“No, we both took after our mother,” she replied. It was then her turn to stifle a giggle at the mentioning of the Norseman’s name. “Speaking of Magnus, I know about the ‘present’ he and the rest of the boys left in the wine cellar. I still can’t fathom how I was the only one to see you take the key from Father! Even he thinks he must have given it to you.”

“A bit of divine justice, perhaps,” Artorius chuckled.

“Yes, it was,” Diana replied. “You know that vat the boys used to relieve themselves with had contained his most expensive vintage! Thankfully, servants discovered this well before he asked for it.”

“That’s too bad,” Artorius said with a trace of disappointment in his voice. “I can imagine the look on his face had he tried to sample a taste!”

“Oh trust me, he was livid enough as it was,” his wife said while shaking her head. “At least now all he thinks is that the wine was consumed, not that some lowly legionaries then used the same empty vat to urinate in.”

“Yes, well at least they didn’t go on the floor! They were all proper gentlemen.” Artorius and Diana were both laughing out loud by this point, causing some of the ship’s crew to stare at them.

“That wine was almost a hundred years old!” Diana laughed as she envisioned the look of utter rage that her father must have possessed when he found out.

“Well, next time just you and I come here,” Artorius mused as their laughter subsided. “We will only see who we want, the rest be damned!”

Chapter XIII: Son of Longinus

Fortress of the Twentieth Legion
May, 27 A.D.
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"List of new recruits, sir," Praxus said as he handed a scroll to Artorius, who sat behind his desk with his feet up.

"Damn it Praxus, quit calling me *sir* when it's just us," the Centurion replied as he took the list from his Optio. "I see the recruiting drives have been paying off."

"Yes, sir," Praxus replied, winking at Artorius who shot him a glare. "Ten more with this group, plus the eight others who started training two weeks ago. Provided they all survive training, this will finally put us back to where we were before that entire lot all up and retired, plus a couple to spare."

"Nice. Say, why did you underline this name…oh, I see!" Artorius was caught by surprise at the name of one particular recruit, though it was one he should have been expecting. The scroll read:

Name: Gaius Longinus
Age: 17
Place of Birth: Syria
Father / Patron Sponsor: Justus Longinus

"Seems Justus' son has joined the legions after all," Praxus mused.

"That he has," Artorius agreed. "Just don't go showing him any favorable treatment, but don't single him out for extra punishment either. I know Justus will want him to make his own way in the legions. Now that I think about it, I've never even seen Gaius. I have no idea what he looks like."

"He's the only copper-haired recruit in the whole lot," the Optio replied, bringing a short laugh from Artorius.

"Figures he would get that from his father. Ah well, let me know when you need me to do my indoctrination briefing with them."

"I'll give them a week before that," Praxus remarked. "Let's break them in a bit first. Hell, none of us can even remember what went on during our first week of recruit training, so you might as well save your breath a bit with

these lads."

Gaius' back and legs hurt, as did his shoulders and arms; Hell, his entire body was in pain! He had to admit that there were no surprises when he joined the legions. Everything was just as his father had warned him it would be. His first week in the army had been nothing but physical training, all overseen by Optio Praxus. His helmet and armor had sat on the storage rack in his barracks room the entire time. He did not even have a gladius yet! All he had done was run, press boulders, and do calisthenics for sixteen hours a day. Each night he soaked in the heated baths of the legion's bathhouse, trying to soothe his worn and savaged muscles. Each morning, before dawn, it would all start again.

This morning was different. Daily calisthenics were shortened, and the morning formation run was only four miles. They were ushered afterwards over to the drill field where a lone soldier stood with his hands clasped behind his back, his gaze sizing up the recruits. Though he wore no helmet or decorations, just his red tunic, Gaius knew right away that, at last, they were meeting Centurion Artorius. He had heard his father talk about the physical anomaly that Artorius was, and given that here stood the thickest and most powerfully built soldier Gaius had ever seen, there was no one else he could be.

"Stand easy, lads," the Centurion said as the recruits stood rigid before him. Gaius took a breath and tried to keep from trembling. He wasn't sure if it was fear, or awe, or perhaps both, that made him uneasy in the presence of his commanding officer. Though his voice was booming, Artorius' demeanor, at least, made him appear to be somewhat approachable.

"*My name is Centurion Titus Artorius Justus,*" he said, confirming what Gaius knew. "You are here because, in a fit of what I assume is utter madness, you have decided that you want to become legionaries. Know this; only those who *earn* the right become soldiers of Rome! As you have seen from your first week of training, my instructors are hard, but they are fair. No one gets singled out for reward or punishment in this Century without reason. Your actions, both right and wrong, will be what decide your fate, not who your father or sponsor was. I don't give a damn if your father was a senator or shoveled shit for a living!"

"We have one standard and one standard alone in this Century; you will either make it or you won't. Unless you are willing to sweat, bleed, and even

die for the men on your left and right, then you have no place in the legions! Your crucible of pain has only just begun. Over the next seven weeks you need to not only survive, you must prove to the men of the Second Century that you deserve a place on the line with them!" After what felt like an eternity of pacing in front of them, the Centurion then nodded to Optio Praxus, whose voice startled the recruits.

"Recruits…right face!" The ten young men suspected what was coming. The Optio had not given them a reprieve from physical training out of mercy; he had simply taken time out for them to finally meet their Centurion. *"At the double time…march!"*



Tiberius paced quietly back and forth along the grass outside the wall to his villa. It was a bright and sunny day, even though on his isle of paradise away from Rome, he still felt the grip of political intrigue, with all its plots and treachery, bearing down on him. He looked down the steep path that led to the sea. There was a private dock where only the most discreet and important of ships was allowed to dock. In fact, it was only large enough for a rowboat, one of which was tying off as the Emperor paced. The ship it belonged to continued on its way through the swell of the sea. It would find its way to the main docks at the port, its crew pretending to not have disgorged its small boat with a few of their crew. It troubled Tiberius that this was how the most important correspondence got to him. It resembled the shady whispers in the dark of Roman politics, rather than that of an Emperor who ruled tens-of-millions. It was Sejanus who had suggested building of the private dock, stating that there were too many wandering eyes at the main port that could cause suspicion and trouble.

Tiberius then wondered what had happened over the last thirteen years since he had taken the mantle of *Caesar*. Though his reign had started off awkwardly, once the Senate and people came to terms with Augustus' passing, the new Emperor had proven himself a worthy successor. If he never had the engaging personality of his predecessor and step-father, Tiberius was, in fact, an even better administrator than Augustus in a number of areas. After all, he had the first-hand experience of leading men into battle that Augustus had lacked. He was also more frugal with the imperial purse, and while this led many to defame him for being a miser, Tiberius had greatly

increased the size of Rome's treasury. Yet for all that, the Emperor was all too aware that his gloomy personality permeated people's thoughts rather than any appreciation for the peace and economic stability he had brought them.

"When we lack an enemy to fight, we turn on each other," he lamented out loud.

"It is the nature of men," he heard Thrasyllus' voice behind him. The Emperor turned to see the aged astrologer standing behind him. The little bearded Greek was annoying at times, though his ability to read the stars was unnervingly accurate. Tiberius remembered many years before when he almost arranged for Thrasyllus to have a little *accident*, only to recant at the last minute when the Greek's prophecy regarding the end to his exile in Rhodes came to pass.

"You seem to seek the worst qualities of men," the Emperor replied with a trace of sarcasm in his voice.

"Hence, why you and I enjoy such a remarkable rapport," the Greek replied, matching Tiberius' sarcasm.

The Emperor had turned back towards the boat and his face twitched into almost a smile. Thrasyllus' candor was only bested by Sejanus. No other man would have talked to him in such a tone, yet the astrologer knew how close he had come to annihilation all those years ago and nothing the Emperor could do scared him anymore. If he had learned a lesson from that time, it was that blunt honesty would keep him alive and employed.

"What news do you prophesy the messengers on this boat bring?" Tiberius asked as a man in Praetorian armor disembarked at the private dock. Two of the men from the Century that lined the path walked down and shook his hand.

"I have not consulted the heavens for this, however, I can take a logical guess," Thrasyllus replied. "The man is a Praetorian, so doubtless his messages come from Sejanus. The deputation from the Sanhedrin in Judea left last week, and with Pilate struggling through his first year as procurator, I hazard that the message is from him, along with a recommendation from Sejanus. Perhaps he is requesting you give him a legion?"

Tiberius snorted in reply and stood with his hands clasped behind his back as the messenger made the long trek up the slope. The Praetorian looked to be in his late twenties, probably a Decanus from the looks of his uniform, though he was not wearing a helmet. He appeared flushed and out of breath

when he reached the top, saluting the Emperor.

“I see the Praetorians are making you lot soft,” Tiberius said as he returned the salute.

The young man looked as if he did not know whether the Emperor was jesting or reprimanding him. Tiberius liked it that way.

“Messages from the Prefect Aelius Sejanus and the Procurator Pontius Pilate for the Emperor Tiberius Claudius Nero Caesar,” the Praetorian replied, handing a pair of scrolls that were still sealed to the Emperor.

Tiberius looked back at Thrasyllus, his mouth cocked into a small smile. The astrologer simply shrugged and stood with his hands folded in front of him.

“Servants will take you to your quarters,” Tiberius told the messenger. “There you can refresh and clean yourself up. You will have my replies to take back to Rome in the morning.”

The Praetorian saluted and left, leaving the Emperor to his readings.

“Some days I find your predictions frightening,” Tiberius said to the astrologer after a taking a few minutes to read the messages from Sejanus and Pilate.

Chapter XIV: The Coming Storm

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Gaius was beaming with pride as he stood in formation, waiting to be called forward with the other recruits to take the oath of allegiance. He still wasn't certain if Centurion Artorius knew who he was or not. He figured that with eighteen new recruits in the Century it had been fairly easy to keep a low profile. As soon as they had sworn the oath and sheathed their gladii, Artorius walked the line, clasping each man's forearm and congratulating them on their ascension from *civilian* to *legionary*. When he got to Gaius he was grinning broadly.

"Your father will be proud," Artorius said with a nod as he clasped Gaius' hand. "Welcome to the Century, *Legionary* Gaius Longinus." For his part, the newly appointed legionary's face turned red and he swallowed hard. Of course it was silly to think that his Centurion did not know all along whom he was. As they exchanged salutes Gaius thought back and wondered if Centurion Artorius had actually been harsher to him than the other recruits. Indeed, the bruising from the physical discipline he had taken at the hands of the Centurion, as well as Optio Praxus, had only just started to fade in the last few days.

That evening Gaius sat quietly at a table in the corner of the tavern, sipping some local ale as the other new legionaries shared a raucous evening with their brethren in the ranks. One of his friends sat down and smacked him hard on the shoulder.

"Gaius! What the hell is it, man? Don't feel like celebrating with the rest of us?"

"They arranged the whole thing," he replied, taking a long pull of ale. It was bitter, and he could not remember why he had ordered it in the first place.

"What are you talking about?" his friend asked, taking a seat next to him.

"My father…and Centurion Artorius," he replied. "I want to make my own way in the legions, not have my way made for me by my father's friends."

"Your father knows the Centurion? Well, when you think about it, there aren't that many Centurions in the entire Roman army. I suppose those who

have been around a while probably all know each other in one manner or another."

"I guess it just never dawned on me why father was so insistent that I not join one of the eastern legions. He said his name was too well known there, and he did not want the officers and instructors showing me any leniency. Instead, he sends me clear across the Empire and has me placed under his old school friend."

The other legionary simply shrugged.

"It makes sense, I suppose," he replied. "Your father gets you out of the east, but still puts you under the charge of a Centurion he knows he can trust. Hell, as brutal as he was to us in training, I hear Centurion Artorius is nothing like the last one we had."

"You mean the one he murdered for abusing a legionary?" another of their companions blurted through slurred speech as he sat across from them, wine goblet precariously balanced in his numbing fingers. "At least that's the rumor I've heard. I tried asking the Centurion about it once, and he beat me across the legs with his vine stick and then made me do boulder squats until I threw up four times…never did get my answer either…think it's true?"

"It's true," Magnus said placing his hands on the table, having heard them from across the room. "And if I were you, I would keep talk of that to yourself! Your voice is carrying across the damned tavern! The men of this Century have done their best to forget the incidents surrounding the last Centurion; a man who is never mentioned by name and who was convicted in absentia for crimes that got his name struck from the legion's rolls. Am I making myself clear?" He grabbed the drunken soldier by the back of the neck and gave a squeeze for emphasis, half lifting him from his seat.

"Yes, sir," all three men said together.

Magnus made his way outside the tavern and was surprised to see his old friend and Centurion leaning against a pillar, brooding. A half-drunk cup of local ale hung loosely from his hand.

"I thought you didn't come here anymore," the Tesserarius observed as he leaned up against a pillar opposite his friend.

"I usually don't," Artorius replied, eyes staring off into the blackened night. "I came to reminisce a bit. You realize it's been twelve years since we were in their position?" He nodded his head towards the inside of the tavern, where his newest legionaries celebrated their ascent into the ranks. "I still

remember that night clearly. I swear the conversations were almost identical to those I overhear from our new men."

"Except we don't have a naked Valens chasing Praxus through the tavern with his gladius," Magnus replied with a laugh.

Artorius chuckled at the memory.

"Yes, well I think your sister has calmed him down a bit."

Magnus scowled briefly at Artorius' assessment.

"Svetlana is just as much of a deviant as Valens," the Norseman replied. "She may have redirected his carnal lust, but believe me, I don't think our friend has calmed down at all. Did you know he's got this thing he does to amuse himself? He gets into a wide stance and starts to thrust his hips front to back vigorously so that his balls start slapping really loud."

"Yes, I've heard *the slap*," Artorius replied, rolling his eyes. "I was talking with Proculus the other day, and the twisted fuck stands directly behind the Primus Ordo and starts doing it! Proculus could not for the life of him figure out what that loud slapping sound was."

The thought of Artorius trying to keep a straight face while one of his legionaries acted in such a vile manner directly behind one of the most senior-ranking Centurions in the legion caused Magnus to burst into a fit of laughter. Even Artorius could not help but chuckle at the absurdity of it all.

"Ah, I know you didn't come here to reminisce about my sister's disturbed, albeit amusing, husband," Magnus said at last, becoming serious once more.

Artorius finished what was left in his ale cup with a grimace.

"To be honest, old friend," he began, "I'm a bit worried about our new soldiers. There's just so many of them. They make up a full third of the Century!"

"What of it?" Magnus shrugged. "We were there once ourselves. Hell, we were barely out of recruit training when we saw our first action."

"Yes, but most of the Century was made up of veterans at that time," Artorius replied. "There were only four of us straight out of recruit training then; you, me, Gavius, and Antoninus. The veterans took care of us, and Antoninus was the only one of us to not come home from Germania."

"I remember that," Magnus said. "Poor bastard was killed at Angrivari. Look, I see what you're saying; we have a lot of inexperienced legionaries within the Century. That can't be helped. The only thing we can do is train them the best we can and hope that there aren't any real wars to fight for the

next couple years."

"It will take at least that long to get them fully proficient," Artorius agreed. "We taught them the bare basics during recruit training. Our focus now needs to be building upon that foundation, lest they all follow young Antonius to the afterlife."

"Even the veterans have become a bit complacent lately," the Tesserarius observed. "We've been so focused on the large number of recruits we had, plus no one seems to be keen on training for the Legion Champion tournament, seeing as how the lads all think you are unbeatable."

"They need to get that kind of bullshit out of their heads!" Artorius snapped, smashing the cup against the post. "I'm no god, Magnus, and I've had my ass beaten more times than I can count!"

"Sure, but not since Vitruvius retired from active competition," his friend replied with a shrug. "I agree that the men need a bit of added motivation. We'll start increasing sparring sessions, in addition to century-level drill."

Artorius gave an affirmative nod.

"Get with Praxus tomorrow and come up with a tentative schedule," he replied. "Whenever they are not on work details, they will be drilling or sparring; and that includes us! You, me, Praxus, and Rufio need to *set* the example to the rest of the century; just as the Decanii need to be the most fit and ablest fighters within their respective squads. And if they need any extra motivation, any man who bests me in single combat gets twenty denarii from my own coffers."

Magnus whistled as Artorius gave a sly grin.

"That's more than a month's pay for most of them," the Norseman observed. "I don't think you'll have too many who will be able to collect, if any."

"Doesn't matter," the Centurion replied. "If it makes them train harder, that's all I care about. I would rather we sweat now than bleed later."



"Our people starve," Tabbo said to the gathering inside his home. He had kept it small, just Prince Klaes, Amke, and a couple of warriors, including Sjoerd and Olbert. It was black outside, and a single lamp gave off a feeble light inside of the war chief's hall. "Our King's spirit has yet to recover; he takes no interest in anything, just keeps staring into the fire. We stand on the

brink. Our people can either die fighting for our freedoms, or they can slowly waste away and die of famine."

"Tabbo," Klaes replied. "There is not one of us here who disagrees with what you are saying. What I don't want is for our people to fight a war that is suicidal. Surely there must be a way for us to fight the Romans without facing extermination!"

"How can we?" Amke countered. "We've all heard the stories about what the legions did to us the last time we faced them. Klaes, you and Tabbo both fought beside the Romans! You *know* how dangerous they are!" The leader of the Daughters of Freyja was overcome by frustration and emotion. She shook her head and regained her composure.

"I don't even care anymore," she continued. "I would rather die with a Roman sword in my guts than begging for scraps from that bastard Olennius!"

"I'm with Amke," Sjoerd concurred. "The Romans can spill my guts for all I care! I've been so hungry that they are empty anyway."

"I see that it is almost time," a voice said from behind Tabbo. The group gasped as King Dibbald walked into the light. He had aged, his face drawn and pale, but the old fire was in his eyes. "I am sorry for having failed you for so long. It is time we remembered our warrior past and expelled the blight that has tainted our land. Tell the people that they are to consume the grain and barley meant to be given as tribute. We will need all our strength when the spring arrives and Olennius comes and attempts to collect his tribute!"

Olbert joined Tabbo as he walked through the woods towards the river. The war chief's face was hard with determination. Olbert had lost his usually jovial manner, the reality of what awaited them bearing down on him.

"Can the Romans be beaten?" he asked quietly. Even in the middle of the forest he still felt as if eyes were watching them. After what had happened to the King's messengers no one felt safe.

"I don't know," Tabbo replied. "I try to assure our people that we can achieve victory, but to you, my brother, I cannot lie. I have seen them fight, and they will be a fearsome enemy. I have an idea that just might work, or at least will give us a fighting chance. Archers are scarce amongst our warriors, and I will need every last one for this plan to have a chance."

"I'm listening," Olbert replied, his determination matching his war chief's.

“Next spring, when that bastard comes to collect his tribute…” Tabbo began, his eyes filled with rage.

Chapter XV: Another Way to Die

Ljouwert, Frisia
March, 28 A.D.
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Spring had come to Frisia and with it the Olennius and his tax collectors. At night on the day before they were expected to arrive in Ljouwert, a host of men gathered in the sacred grove dedicated to the goddess, Freyja. Tabbo understood his King's hesitation, as did the other warriors present.

"Rome," King Dibbald began, "has long been an ally to the people of Frisia. I served with Tiberius many years ago in Pannonia, long before he became Emperor. Our efforts to make him aware of our plight have been in vain. Our ambassadors have been assassinated. Our pleas for assistance have gone unanswered." He paused and gazed up at the sky, as if asking the gods for an answer. He knew that what he was about to propose amounted to treason against the Empire, as well as to his friend, the Emperor. Tabbo spoke up quickly.

"Sire, Tiberius may have been your friend, but will we allow our people to starve to death before he hears of their suffering? Whatever your command, know that all the warriors of our nation will follow you!"

"Starvation…enslavement," Dibbald continued, his resolve renewed with vigor. "These are what our women and children have been subjected to. If we do nothing to protect them, then we have failed in our duties as men and warriors of Frisia!"

The warriors stood silent, though there was intensity in all of their faces.

"What will you have of us do, sire?" Lourens asked.

"The magistrate Olennius has given us an ultimatum," Dibbald replied. "It is time he had his answer, in the only way left to us." As he spoke his eyes reflected the flames of vengeance.



Two dozen tax collectors stood idly in front of the raised dais in the center of Ljouwert. Olennius was so convinced of the Frisian's docility that he had but a few personal bodyguards on either side of him. As per his orders, the wives and daughters of the noblemen stood gathered in front of the dais. He knew that the Frisians would be unable to meet his taxation demands, and he and his taxmen had already made a list of who amongst the noble women would make the finest prizes for the slave trade. Olennius had his eye on Queen Femke herself. The bitch stood with an air of noble defiance at the center of the women, head held high and looking past him as if he didn't matter. The magistrate looked forward to having her as his slave. A few lashes of the whip would put her in her place, as it had her husband.

"People of Frisia!" Olennius shouted. "It is the spring equinox; the time has come for you to give Rome what is due to Rome! Have you my tribute, or shall I take it in the form of your wives and daughters?"

"We have your tribute!" King Dibbald roared as he lunged through the crowd of women. As he stood in front of his wife, he drew a hand axe from beneath his cloak. "And here it is!"

With a flash the axe flew from his hand and embedded itself in the skull of the nearest tax collector. The man never saw it coming, his eyes crossed, tongue jutting out of his twitching mouth as blood and brain streamed down his face. Olennius' eyes grew wide as the slain tax collector fell face first off the dais.

A universal cry of rage echoed forth from the gathered host. Cloaks were thrown back, swords and axes gleaming in the sunlight. The magistrate stumbled backwards and jumped from the dais as warriors swarmed his tax collectors and bodyguards. Only two men managed to escape with him, dropping their weapons as they ran for their lives. No one noticed at first, as their wrath was spilled forth on the hapless taxmen who were in shock as they were violently pulled from the dais and beaten. Though armed, the bodyguards were untrained and quickly overwhelmed.

"Don't kill them!" Tabbo shouted above the howls of rage from his warriors. "We have something better in mind." Vicious laughter replaced the war cries as they drug their helpless prey through the streets. It was just then that a warrior spotted Olennius and two of his bodyguards riding away on horseback.

“Here! Those bastards are escaping!” Tabbo leapt to the top of the dais and was enraged once more when he realized that the one man they wanted the most had gotten away.

“Freyja damn them!” he swore quietly in frustration.



“*Those barbaric bastards!* They killed my taxmen and almost had me as well!”

Apronius sat quietly while Olennius ranted, his voice breaking in panic. Finally he raised a hand to quiet the hysterical magistrate.

“The Frisians have been loyal for many years,” the Legate observed. “Why would they…”

“It doesn’t fucking matter *why!”* Olennius bellowed.

He was quickly silenced as a fist slammed onto the table. It was Master Centurion Calvinus, his face red with anger.

“Know your place, *magistrate!”* he snarled. “You *will* show respect when addressing the Imperial Legate or I will deal with you myself!”

Olennius glared at the Master Centurion, but he said no more. Calvinus stood and nodded to Apronius, who had remained composed in spite of the magistrate’s blatant insult.

“Make a full report and have it ready to address the Senate,” the Legate directed. “Doubtless they will want to know the details surrounding the potential loss of a province. I will take care of informing the Emperor myself. In the meantime, I suggest you rest and make ready to ride to Rome. We will handle the Frisians.” There was an air of finality in his words.

Olennius opened his mouth to protest, but caught sight of the Calvinus, who was clenching and unclenching his fist, the expression on his face daring the magistrate to speak out of turn again. Instead, he turned and quickly exited the Principia. Once he had left, the calmness of Apronius’ demeanor evaporated.

“How the hell that man ever became a magistrate is beyond me,” he said, his face bearing a look of utter disgust.

“I knew Olennius when he was in the ranks,” Calvinus conjectured. “Let’s just say his promotions were not based upon merit.”

“Hmm, no love lost between you two then,” Apronius remarked.

“Still, it is the way of the Empire; friends in the right places will always get one further than merits or ability. I mean, we’ve all been guilty of it, having used an influential colleague to get what we want, or even using our own status to help a friend.”

Calvinus’ face frowned at the remark, but he knew it was true. He was then reminded of Centurion Fulvius, who had been slain by then-Optio Artorius. That sorry excuse for a Roman had been another glaring example of the wrongs within the system. Given his connections, had he lived, Fulvius surely would have become another Olennius.

“Start mobilizing both legions,” Apronius ordered while the Master Centurion was still in deep thought, “and send word to Legate Labeo of the Fifth Legion.”

“Right away, sir,” Calvinus answered, quickly leaving the office. Apronius then turned to his Chief Tribune, who had been silent throughout the entire affair. “I want you to personally go find Tribune Cursor and Commander Indus. I think we shall need their assistance.”



“We are with you, my King!” a warrior cried, raising his axe to the sky as King Dibbald rode past on his magnificent charger. Tabbo and Lourens rode at his side, and both men were elated to see just how many of Frisia’s warriors were now massing at the sacred groves, a scant few miles east of the northern Rhine bridge.

“The Daughters of Freyja are with you, sire!” Amke shouted as the King and his entourage rode past her regiment. The women warriors of Frisia had a fierce air of determination about them, anxious as they were to prove their worth to their King and nation.

“All our people are with us,” Tabbo emphasized as they gazed upon the hordes of warriors assembling. “And more will come.”

“Praise the gods!” Dibbald replied. “I had feared that many of our people had lost heart.”

“Sire, every man and boy of fighting age will come,” Lourens responded, “to say nothing of your niece’s own regiment.”

“The Daughters of Freyja are indeed brave,” the King concurred with a nod. Then he muttered quietly to himself, “I just hope they are not needed.”

Tabbo's face twitched at hearing the King's thoughts, though he could not blame him. If time came to commit the Daughters to battle, then things would have taken a dire turn indeed.

"I have all the sub-chiefs breaking their warriors into their assigned regiments," Tabbo stated. "Every man knows where his place is. Our forces that have arrived over the last two days alone outnumber the Army of the Rhine. With hundreds, possibly even thousands more to come, we will give the Romans hell for what they have done!"

"Easy, friend," Prince Klaes said, riding up behind his friend. "Do not forget your own counsel on what the Romans are capable of."
"Of course," Tabbo replied with a nod. "I am simply heartened that our people have chosen to stand and fight, rather than cowering and starving in the dark."

The war chief then rode off on his own, for it was he who would lead the Frisian army on their first steps towards freedom. Just across the Rhine the small fort at Flevum was still occupied by legionaries. All the way to the bridge the path was crowded with Frisian fighting men, as well as any boy deemed old enough to carry a weapon. At the clearing just short of the bridge were a number of sub-chiefs, the regimental commanders of the Frisian army. Unlike many of their neighbors, the Frisians were highly organized, similar in structure to the Romans, though tailored to their methods of fighting.

"Hail Tabbo! Chief of chiefs!" one of the warriors cried, raising his sword in salute.

"Hail Tabbo!" the assembled leaders echoed. He could not deny that it flattered him deeply to be referred to as such. It had been twelve years since he had swung his weapon in anger. The irony was that he was now fighting against those whom he had fought beside all those years ago. There were men of the First Legion that occupied the Flevum Fort who were veterans of Idistaviso and former brothers-in-arms. It mattered not. Friendships went out like a candle in storm, and these men were now his mortal enemies.

"What orders do you bring for us on this glorious day?" Olbert, who was one of the leading regimental commanders asked.

"We are to lay siege to the fort at Flevum," Tabbo replied, eliciting an excited cheer from his men. "Easy, my friends! Remember, the fort is not the prize we seek. The King does not wish to lose men needlessly

assaulting it. We will give the Romans time to surrender peacefully. If they refuse, then we will take the fort by force."

"Why give the Romans any time?" Sjoerd asked, stepping forward in front of his men. "We gave them two years while that bastard Olennius starved and brutalized our people! Why should we give these Romans any quarter?"

"Because if we don't, the Emperor Tiberius will unleash the entire Roman Army against us," Tabbo retorted. "Let us not forget their response to the Cherusci. Some of you fought beside me at Idistaviso. You *know* the enemy we face. If we are to bloody the Romans, it will be when they send the Army of the Rhine against us. I have no doubts that they have already been mobilized and are on the move. Besieging Flevum is little more than a tactic to drive them into us."

"And where do you plan to face them?" Olbert asked, to which Tabbo smiled and pointed to the ground at his feet with his axe.

"Right here," he replied. "The Romans will not be able to mass their forces while crossing the bridges. If we can smash just one of their legions it will avenge our people. It will also make the Romans think twice about trying to attack us on Frisian soil. As soon as the Army of the Rhine has been halted and thrown back across the Rhine in defeat, the King will sue for terms with the Governor General, provided he survives. Legate Apronius is the type of Roman who leads from the front, so there is a great possibility he will fall during the battle."

"All the better for us!" Sjoerd shouted, which brought further cheers from the host.

"One question that troubles me," Olbert interjected. "How do we intend to contain a single legion on this side of the river and not allow the rest of their army to cross?" The ominous grin that crossed Tabbo's face told his men that he already knew how to deal with containing the Army of the Rhine.

As the meeting broke and Tabbo started to walk his horse away, a voice calling his name interrupted him. It was Amke, her voice filled with annoyance. Tabbo already knew what she wanted to talk to him about.

"I beg you," she pleaded. "Let the Daughters be one of the regiments to attack Flevum!"

“It is not my place to do so,” Tabbo replied with a shake of his head. “Your warriors are part of the King’s personal guard, therefore only he can allow you to take part in any battle.”

Amke’s face darkened at the explanation.

“Why is my uncle holding us back?” she asked, glaring at the war chief. “Are we to be nothing more than fetching girls, carrying weapons and wearing scant leather armor for the old warriors to jerk off to?” She was enraged, and her frustration had reached the boiling point.

“Amke, why would you say such a thing?”

“Because that’s all I am!” she retorted. “As great a warrior as Lourens is, his lust for me makes me feel dirty. Were I not clad as I am, enabling some twisted fantasy in him, and doubtless others, he would not spare me a second glance! It makes everyone feel good about having a regiment of female warriors, as if that makes our people more civilized, and therefore superior, to other tribal nations. And yet if we are not allowed to fight, then we are nothing but sexual fantasy material for a bunch of perverted old men and pubescent boys!”

Tabbo let out a sigh and knew Amke made a compelling argument.

“Daughter, I sympathize with your plight, believe me. Know this: the siege of Flevum will be but the first step towards freedom for our people. Also, remember what I showed you of the Romans. Though the King wants to avoid as much unnecessary bloodshed as possible, I know that Apronius will unleash the entire Army of the Rhine on us. Our warriors are encouraged because they have been without hope for so long, but deep down they understand that this victory will come at a terrible price. Many will die, and I promise you that some of the Daughters of Freyja will be amongst them. The King knows this, and he fears for your safety. He also knows that he will need every able-bodied warrior before this is done. I give you my word; you will get your chance to avenge yourself against the Romans. Just be careful what you wish for.”



Gaius was practically giddy with excitement as his section laid out their tent and all its components. It was standard practice before any unit movement to inventory and check the serviceability of all equipment

they would take with them.

"Weapons and full kit inspection will be done before supper tonight," his Decanus said as he read off the wax tablet where he had hastily taken as many notes as he could during the Century's leadership meeting. "Any issues will be fixed before first formation tomorrow. Centurion Artorius and Optio Praxus will be conducting an inspection of the entire Century. They will have more details about the pending expedition then."

"And I thought I was going to serve out my entire tenure in the legions without seeing any real action!" a legionary stated, causing a short laugh from Gaius. "What? I've been in the army for six years now and haven't done shit with my gladius except sharpen and oil it! I mean, how many years has it been since this legion saw any real action?"

"Eight," the Decanus answered abruptly. He then let out a sigh.

Though still a young man himself, the Sergeant was the only soldier in his squad who served during the rebellion of Sacrovir and Florus. He had enlisted just after the campaigns of Germanicus Caesar, so he understood how his men felt. He realized that the soldier who had asked the question was the oldest in the squad besides him. As he glanced at their collective faces he saw young boys. Three of his men, including Gaius Longinus, were fresh out of recruit training. The Decanus then shook his head. Youthful they may have appeared, but these were still trained legionaries. They would soon embark on the final test that would define them as men.

Artorius sat deep in thought as he scribbled notes on a copy of his Century's roster. Though he knew most of his men by both face and name, there were many that he had to stop and think about before realizing who they were.

"You alright?" Praxus' question startled him. He did not even realize that the Optio had been standing in front of him the entire time.

"Sorry," he replied, sitting back in his chair. "I was just going over the roster. I'm still trying to put all the names to faces of our men."

"Well, that's what happens when you have an overly successful recruiting drive," Praxus replied with a wink. "Hell, I worked with them through recruit training, and I'm still trying to remember all their names. Of course, you know in another twenty years this century will be going

through another mass discharge when they retire."

"Yeah, well we'll be long since gone by then." Artorius leaned forward and rested his chin in his hand. He sat pondering for a minute before speaking again. "I think we're going to have to rearrange the squads a bit. Some are stacked with veterans, while others are full of recruits. There's one that only the Decanus has served on campaign. And speaking of which, we have two Decanii who have never seen combat!"

"That happens when this corner of the Empire is at peace for so long," Praxus observed.

"I've gone through the roster," Artorius continued. "The Second Century has seventy-six men, the most we've ever had. Now of those, eighteen have just recently completed recruit training. Another seven have been in longer, but still joined after the Sacrovir Revolt. That means one in every three of our legionaries will be seeing their first action in Frisia."

Praxus thought about his Centurion's statement and then nodded.

"They may be inexperienced, but we trained them well," he replied. "I agree we should spread out our recruits some. It will help for the rookies to have somebody next to them on the line that's had the enemy's blood splattered in his face."



If one were to ask Tribune Aulus Nautius Cursor what he thought about the pending invasion of Frisia, he would say that as a soldier his job was to follow the orders of the Emperor and the Governor General. Inside, he was troubled. The Frisians had been a loyal and faithful people since being pacified by Drusus Nero. Now suddenly, they were hanging taxmen and causing the magistrate to flee for his life. It did not make any sense. He wanted to see Rodolfo about it, seeing that he was originally from Frisia. It was pointless, though. The Centurion had moved from his homeland to Gaul when he was in his late teens. The man had spent almost all of his adult life serving in the Roman Army as a cavalry officer. He had already been given citizenship when he was promoted to Centurion, with his wife and children sharing in the benefits granted to pure born Romans. No, Rodolfo would not have any answers as to why his native people had suddenly taken up arms against the

Empire. Besides, there was an issue that was far more important for Cursor to address with his senior ranking Centurion.

"You going to be alright?" Cursor asked as he watched his ranking Centurion pack his kit into his saddlebags.

Rodolfo turned and gazed at him, perplexed.

"I fail to see why I wouldn't be," he replied. Cursor gave a brief smile, then bit the inside of his cheek, thinking he needed to phrase his next words carefully.

"It's just that I know you are of Frisian ancestry…" he stopped speaking as he watched Rodolfo tense up.

The Centurion had turned back to fixing a strap on his bag when Cursor spoke.

"I thought you knew my loyalty better than that," he said quietly before turning to face the Tribune. "You want to know if fighting my kinsmen will be hard for me; well the answer is *yes*. This is not easy for me, and I daresay I will have many a sleepless night over the pending ordeal. The other thing you want to know is if I am still loyal, and will I still fight. If you are questioning my…"

Cursor raised a hand, catching the growing anger in Rodolfo's voice.

"I have never questioned your loyalty," he replied. "You have been as loyal a soldier and friend as any could hope. It's just…well, I cannot help but think how unfair this must be for you."

Rodolfo cocked a sarcastic half smile.

"Forgive me, sir, but since when has life ever been fair? I confess I am deeply troubled by this sudden rebellion in my former homeland. One of the war chiefs, Tabbo of Maloriks, was a close boyhood friend of mine, and we briefly reconnected after Idistaviso. I cannot imagine what would have driven him to fight against Rome." Rodolfo shook his head while gazing at the ground. He then nodded in resolve and faced Cursor once more. "Whatever their reasons, they have broken alliances and committed treason against the Emperor. I swore an oath, the same as you. I *will* honor it!"

Cursor ran his hand over his bald head as he walked back towards his billet. Though a fancy manor house could have easily been his, he reasoned that while deployed with his cavalry regiments, it was far more practical to live in similar quarters as his troopers. He smiled when he

saw a familiar face dismount his horse and walk briskly towards him.

"Indus, old friend!" he said enthusiastically as he clutched his former mentor's shoulder, and Indus grasped his.

"Forgive my manners, sir," Indus replied. As soon as he released Cursor's grip he rendered a salute to the Tribune.

Both men laughed as Cursor returned the courtesy.

"It's good to see you," Cursor said with a relieved sigh. "I have a feeling I'm going to need you more than ever, before this is done."

Indus shrugged in reply as both men walked towards the Tribune's billet.

"The Frisians don't have shit for cavalry," he observed casually. "They have but a single regiment, and that is little more than the King's personal bodyguard. Our own cavalry will smash them readily enough."

"It's not their cavalry that concerns me," Cursor stated. "There is much we don't know about the Frisians. They've been left to their own devices for so long, we have no idea what their actual fighting strength is. I imagine if they're serious about this rebellion, they will have mustered every man and boy old enough to carry a weapon."

"And girl," Indus added, causing Cursor to raise an eyebrow. "Oh yes, the Frisians are among those who allow their women to fight. Many are inducted into a warrior caste called *The Daughters of Freyja*. While their position is largely ceremonial, they will be called upon in dire times to defend the homeland."

"And this is as dire of a time for Frisia as any," Cursor observed.



Apronius furrowed his brow as he contemplated the information Cursor gave him. The Legates of the First and Fifth Legions sat around the table with him, as did the Chief Tribunes and Master Centurions. Behind Apronius sat the First Cohort Centurions of the Twentieth Legion. Apronius was a capable commander in his own right, though part of that competence came from relying on the counsel of his most experienced Centurions.

"Do we have any census figures for Frisia?" the Governor General asked.

"No, sir," his Chief Tribune answered. "Unfortunately, during the

census under Augustus, the Frisian population was rolled into that of Germania Inferior. We have no way of knowing how much of the population came from each district."

"Which makes it more difficult to determine just how large of an army they can field," the Legate of the First Legion added.

"What we do know is that the Frisians are professional warriors," Cursor replied. "They fielded two cohorts of auxilia infantry during the Germanic Wars. Not a large number, mind you, however their valor and fighting prowess was noted by both Germanicus and Severus. These are not mindless barbarians we will be facing."

"I have here a report compiled by Commander Indus that adds a bit more detail to what he told you," Apronius said, holding up a scroll. "You are correct that they are a highly organized fighting force, broken into numerous regiments that include the all female one you spoke of. The question we cannot answer is just how many regiments they have."

Legate Labeo of the Fifth Legion then spoke up. "On that note, sir, I would add that I don't think the Frisians will muster all of their forces at once. After all, rounding up and equipping every young boy and old man and sending them into battle may do them more harm than good. Think about the number of times amateur allied forces have gotten in the way of our legionaries."

"Regardless, we do have a sizeable army of our own," said the Fifth Legion's Master Centurion, a battle hardened veteran named Alessio. "Between our three legions we have approximately fifteen thousand men, plus an equal number of auxiliaries. I think thirty thousand men should more than suffice. Even if they can muster every man, woman, and child against us, they are less experienced and poorly equipped compared to our men; and besides, it is not like we have never been outnumbered before!"

This remark brought a number of affirmative remarks and gestures from the assembly. Apronius sat with his chin in his hand. The Master Centurion's statements held true, and the fact that timidity was not the way to deal with a rebellion, something still troubled him, nonetheless. He knew he had to exude confidence to his men, and he could not be indecisive on a mere whim.

"Labeo, your Master Centurion makes a valid point," Apronius conceded. "I confess that I do not like going into battle unless I know all

I can about the size and disposition of my enemy. However, it looks like we have all the actionable intelligence that we are going to get for the time being. Our scouts either can't find them or never return. Tribune Cursor, your cavalry will have to be our eyes and ears. It is up to you to find out exactly what we are up against."

"Yes, sir," the Tribune replied confidently.

Chapter XVI: Flevum

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Tabbo stared across the open ground at the wall surrounding the Roman fort. It was occupied by a single cohort that was detached from the First Legion out of Cologne, along with a handful of auxilia archers. All told, less than five hundred Romans remained on Frisian soil.

“I can’t wait to cut my teeth into the flesh of a Roman jugular!” a nearby warrior spat. “It is time they paid for what they have done to our people!”

Warriors around him shouted similar curses towards their former occupiers. Tabbo quietly shook his head. He felt no animosity towards these particular Romans. They were simply stationed in the wrong place at the wrong time. He had hoped to take the fort before the Army of the Rhine arrived, though he knew that Flevum was not the real prize.

“What is your command?” Sjoerd asked. “Do we send a sortie against the walls?”

Tabbo studied the wall of the fort once more. He had five thousand men with him; the rest waited on the far side of the Rhine in Braduhenna Wood along with the King. Doubtless, his force was large enough to take the fort, though he wanted to avoid excessive losses if at all possible. He reasoned that he would need every fighting man he could get before it was over.

“Send a regiment forward,” he ordered. “Have our archers and skirmishers support the advance. Have two more regiments waiting in reserve to exploit any breaches we may achieve.”

“I will lead them myself,” Sjoerd said with a large smile. He then shouted orders, which were echoed with a string of battle cries all along the Frisian siege line.

A dozen makeshift ladders were brought forward, warriors swarming around them, jostling for position to be the first ones over the wall. In front of the mass was a line of archers and dart throwers. These men would be left exposed, out in the open, dueling with the archers on the wall for superiority and covering the assault regiment as they stormed over the wall.

Sjoerd stood in front of his men, raised his short war axe high, and roared a battle cry. He then started to race towards the wall, skirmishers running in front of him and forming up a long line in front of the wall as the Roman

archers loosed their arrows upon them. Tabbo's face was grim as he watched a warrior crumple and fall to his side, an arrow piercing his guts; the first casualty of the war. The elevation and angle gave the Romans superior range, and they were able to let off several volleys before his men were close enough to the wall. His archers fired a wave of arrows in unison as the Romans hunkered down behind their wall.



The First Legion marched at the head of the column. Since it was one of their cohorts that was besieged at Flevum, their Legate had insisted they be the ones to lead the attack and save their friends. To their front in a screen line was the elite cavalry regiment, *Indus' Horse*. Cursor had ordered these men to scout the front and find the enemy, holding them in place if possible. They were directed not to press a decisive engagement, however. The army had been on the march for four days and they knew they were getting close to the fort at Flevum. The Frisians had made a critical error in not attacking the fort immediately. Instead they had hoped the garrison would surrender peacefully and they could expel the Romans from their lands with little bloodshed. It was only when their own scouts reported the Rhine Army was on the move that they had decided to act.

"The Frisians have begun their assault on the fort, sir!" a cavalryman from Indus' Horse reported to Apronius.

"Have you information on the enemy's strength?" the Governor General asked.

The scout nodded in reply.

"We have, sir. We estimate five thousand warriors surrounding the fort, though we suspect this is but a fraction of their total force."

"I concur," Apronius replied. "The region around Flevum is mostly open country, and I doubt they will wish to face us there."

"And I do not think they would openly rebel against Rome if all they could muster was five thousand fighting men," the Chief Tribune, who rode next to Apronius, added.

"Were you able to gather any intelligence on the rest of the Frisian army?" Apronius asked the scout, who shook his head.

"No, sir," he replied with a trace of discouragement in his voice. "The far side of the river is thick forest, with all possible avenues of approach covered

by Frisian skirmishers. Tribune Cursor is trying to find a way through, but since the enemy knows the terrain far better than we do, I don't think this is very likely."

"Alright," the Legate replied with a scowl as he waved for the scout to leave.

The cavalryman saluted quickly and rode forward at the gallop back to his regiment.

Some ways behind their commanding Legate, Legionary Gaius Longinus marched with his squad and the rest of the Second Century. He felt like he was lost within the mass of men and metal, and he cursed that they were so far behind the head of the advance.

"I wonder if there will be any Frisians left for us to fight!" he scoffed as he quickly stepped over a large rock in the middle of the path.

The paved road had ended a few miles back, and all there was to walk on was a dirt path used by farmers. The cohort stationed at Flevum had been tasked with paving this section all the way to the Rhine, though they were indisposed at the moment.

"You'll get your chance to die soon enough," he heard Legionary Carbo say behind him.

Gaius hunched his shoulders, momentarily embarrassed. He felt a hand clasp him by the shoulder and saw it was Legionary Valens who had stepped out of formation to walk beside him, his forearm resting easily on the pole that held his pack.

"Don't worry about it, son," the veteran legionary said. "Every new soldier wonders the same thing before his first battle. And who knows? You may not get to kill anyone today. Hell, you may not see a Frisian at all before this day is done. Our friend Carbo is right, though. You *will* get your chance before this war is over."

Valens was much older than he, and Gaius was smart enough to look up to, and listen to, the veterans. The fact that they were the same rank puzzled him. Granted, it was not unusual for a legionary to retire from the legions at the same rank he had enlisted. After all, vacancies and promotion opportunities were rare, at best. Still, Valens had the air of an experienced leader about him, and it puzzled Gaius that he was not a Decanus or higher.

"How many battles have you fought in, Valens?" Gaius asked.

"More than a few and less than too many," Valens replied.

“How do you know when it’s too many?” another young legionary asked.

The veteran soldier grinned broadly.

“When your throat’s been torn out by an enemy spear, or else you’ve been disemboweled in some gods’ forsaken hellhole, then you know you’ve been in one battle too many.” His humor was dark, but it seemed to break the barriers down a bit that always existed between the veterans and the new soldiers prior to their first engagement. Until a legionary had stood on a shield line and stared death in the face, he amounted to little.

“Some lads can go decades without a scratch,” Carbo observed. “Other poor bastards will end up castrated before they even get a chance to unleash their first javelin.”



Tabbo allowed himself a brief sigh of relief as the first ladders were raised against the wall. Perhaps the defenders would surrender, knowing that they could not possibly hold against such an overwhelming force. The Roman archers’ accuracy was infuriating, especially in light of the fact that his own archers and skirmishers had to get so much closer to be effective. The two-foot darts thrown by the skirmishers had little effect due to the range and steepness. Most that did find their mark were deflected off the auxiliaries’ mail armor. A few arrows did find their marks, striking down enemy archers in the face or throat as they exposed themselves over the wall.

As warriors formed up behind each ladder, leather tarps were thrown back from the upper corners of the wall where the Romans had posted their scorpion ballistae. Bolts were fired into the massed ranks, and Tabbo closed his eyes in frustration as one slammed through two of his men before embedding itself in a third. The crews weren’t even bothering to aim their weapons, as the Frisians were packed so closely together that it was impossible to miss. Orders were shouted to the archers and skirmishers who concentrated their efforts on the hated machines. The crews kept low behind their weapons, making them difficult to hit.

Tabbo watched as the first wave of Frisian warriors made their way up the ladders. At the top, archers had pulled back, and in their place was a wall of legionary shields. The Frisians tried to work their way over the rampart, though their attack now stalled. Those down below were anxious to get up the ladders, especially ones closest to the ends where the scorpions continued

to fire a rain of death into them. One man tried blocking the bolt with his shield, only to have it slam through and pin his shield to his chest. His sacrifice may have saved those behind him, as the bolt did not penetrate through.

Up on the wall, Frisian warriors fought savagely to try and mass their numbers and allow more of their companions to climb to the top. Knowing their predicament, the legionaries were fighting with equal ferocity. They understood that if the Frisians were able to gain any kind of a foothold on the wall, it would spell their doom. A stalemate had ensued with neither side gaining a decisive advantage.

Tabbo's face twitched in a quick grin as he watched a hapless legionary get pulled over the wall and fall screaming to his death. His joy was short-lived as another Roman smashed the bottom edge of his shield into the face of a warrior who was upended over the wall. Both sides excelled at close quarters combat, though the Romans' superior armor and weapons gave them the advantage. Legionaries from other parts of the fort were rushing quickly to support their companions and relieve them before fatigue overtook.

"Send one of the reserve regiments to the right and take them in the flank," Tabbo ordered a nearby warrior.

The man nodded and rushed off, shouting orders to one of the two regiments that waited impatiently in reserve. Tabbo was impatient himself, wishing desperately that he was with his brave men storming the wall. It was not to be. King Dibbald had placed him in charge of the attack, and therefore, his place was to coordinate the assault, not lead it. He reasoned that once a breach was made, he could then take part in the battle.

The Romans had left the minimal amount of legionaries on each of the remaining walls, and these quickly shouted back to their leaders that the Frisians were moving on one of the other walls. Tabbo noticed a Centurion shouting orders and pointing with his gladius. The archers who had fallen back now reestablished themselves on the right flank and started shooting at the Frisians who were coming at them. This group had only half as many ladders as the main effort, and Tabbo hoped they would be enough. The Romans were scrambling to place another pair of scorpions on the corners of the right wall while a handful of legionaries stood ready to repel this latest threat. The number of casualties they had sustained upset Tabbo deeply, though he knew they were necessary if the fort was going to fall.

Overall, the assault was not going badly. The Romans were losing men

too, and they did not have the numbers to spare. His men were feverishly building more ladders, and he knew if they were able to assault one more side of the fort the Romans would not have the numbers to repel them. He doubted they would even be able to hold for much longer under the onslaught against just two of the walls.

Frisian warriors were now over the second wall, and it looked as if the Romans had committed the last of their reserves against them. Scorpions continued to fire at both assault groups, though their reload times were mercifully slow. Tabbo then saw the same Centurion who had been shouting orders earlier, run over to the wall with a bucket. The contents he threw at one of the ladders. It looked like oil, and Tabbo's fears were confirmed when a legionary came forward with a lit torch and ignited the ladder. Warriors screamed in panic as the flames swept over them, most jumping or falling off. One poor bastard had taken a splash of oil to the face, which was now consumed in flames. He screamed as he fell head first from the ladder. It was a merciful end when he snapped his neck on a large boulder below.

"How many more ladders do we have?" Tabbo impatiently asked a nearby messenger.

"Three, my chief," the man replied. "They are working on five more as we speak."

"It will have to do," Tabbo said. "I will take the last reserve regiment to the left. Once the other ladders are complete, have the remainder of our men assault the fort from behind." He then cursed himself under his breath. He had not waited until all the ladders were complete and attacked all four sides of the fort at once. He was certain that it would have already fallen. Just then a scout rode up, frantically, on his horse.

"The Romans are coming!" he shouted with an air of desperation in his voice. "The Army of the Rhine approaches, my chief!"

"How far are they?" Tabbo asked, even more aggravated at this point.

"About two hours' march," the scout replied. "They have a regiment of cavalry screening their front; *Indus' Horse* from the looks of them. Behind that are three legions plus an equal number of auxiliaries."

Tabbo scowled but knew there was nothing more that could be done. Julius Indus was the greatest cavalry officer of the age, and this regiment had become legendary both during the Germanic Wars, as well as the Sacrovir Revolt in Gaul. Part of Tabbo's plan was to avoid facing the auxilia cavalry, in particular Indus' Horse.

“I doubt that the fort will fall within that time,” he sighed, admitting defeat.

“Our warriors are making progress,” a nearby sub-chief stated, “but you are right. They will not have the fort completely taken before the rest of the Roman army arrives.”

Tabbo then turned to a horn blower who had remained by his side the entire time.

“Sound the order to retreat,” he told the man. “Get our warriors off the wall.”

“Some of our men will be captured,” the sub-chief said as the ominous tone of the war horn echoed through the valley.

“A risk they all knew they were taking,” Tabbo replied coldly as he watched his men scramble down the ladders. The archers and skirmishers stayed by the wall, attempting to cover those who still fought on the ramparts as they withdrew.

It took some time to get the survivors who were able to escape away from the fort, and Tabbo refused to leave until the last man had been saved. The ladders were abandoned, their usefulness gone. As the archers rushed back towards the woods Tabbo could just make out the standards of the legions approaching from the west across the open plain. The red shields and gleaming armor stood in stark contrast to the lush green fields they trampled through. They were advancing quickly, and he knew they would be upon him within minutes.

Up in the fort a loud cheer erupted. Tabbo looked up and scowled at the sight of legionaries holding their weapons high in triumph, as if they had withheld the siege on their own. Their vexilation flag was waved back and forth from one of the corners where the man stood atop one of the scorpions, supported by his comrades.



Gaius was disappointed when he heard that they were going to push past the fort at Flevum. Even if he had not taken part in the battle, he still wished to see some dead warriors. He had never seen a Frisian before and had little idea as to what they looked like. He reasoned it would be just as good to get a view of a dead one as a live one.

The path went right by the fort, and the young legionary tried his best to

catch a quick glimpse of the battle's aftermath without falling out of formation. There was little to see. The First Legion had been the first to arrive, and the Frisians had already retreated before them. Gaius could just make out in the distance what he surmised was a pile of dead Frisian warriors. Legionaries were stacking timber on and around them, attempting to burn the bodies before they started to stink and draw more flies to the gaping wounds. Everything was damp from the recent rainfall, though Gaius reasoned, nothing a bit of oil and Roman ingenuity could not resolve.



"The Romans have overtaken Flevum," Tabbo reported to the King. Dibbald nodded. He was not surprised and had figured that his warriors would not be able to take the fort before the Rhine Army arrived.

"You came closer to taking the Roman fort than I expected," the King said. "Normally I would never order our men to conduct an assault unless I knew they could take it. However, our warriors needed to bloody themselves against the Romans. Their anger is now at its peak. It is on the wings of rage that we will drive the legions from our lands forever."

"Century…halt!" Artorius shouted, with a raise of his hand. He was at the southernmost bridge, the far half of which was partially shrouded in fog. The sky was cloudy, and the cold air had trapped the haze on the ground even through the afternoon. Instinctively, his Principal Officers and Decanii merged on where he and Rufio stood.

"Well, would you look at that," a Decanus said.

"At *what?"* another questioned. There was a break in the clouds, and the sun cast a soft glow where the men stood. Across the river was a contrast of darkness in the thick woods.

"Exactly," Artorius replied with a nod. "What fate awaits us beyond the mist?"

Chapter XVII: Wings of Rage

At the Bridge over the Rhine, Braduhenna Wood, Frisia
June, 28 A.D.
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The Frisians knew it was all about timing, knowing the Romans would have to cross here. The only other choices were a ford twenty miles upstream and another bridge even further. The Roman army was staged on the far side overlooking the long bridge; three legions, plus massive numbers of auxilia and cavalry. It had already been a long day when they arrived. The deep fog and mist making the opposite shoreline seem to disappear. Tribunes and Centurions were debating whether to cross before it got too late or encamp on their side of the river.

Unbeknownst to the Romans, the undersides of the bridges were treated with straw and pitch and their support ropes weakened. A simple but brilliant trick: allow the legions to start their crossing and then destroy the bridges out from under them.

The Frisians knew they could not torch the bridges too soon because the Romans would still have the bulk of their forces intact and would simply march twenty miles north to the ford and cross there. And yet if they waited too long …well, the legions were a fearsome enemy and if allowed to mass their numbers they would smash through the Frisians and trample them into dust. One legion was maneuvering for the crossing, followed by their auxiliaries. It appeared the Romans were going to cross this afternoon, rather than waiting until the next morning. These particular troops looked to be strictly infantry, the Germanic auxiliary cavalry was somewhere in the distance.

Hidden in a thicket, a Frisian archer waited impatiently. It had rained recently, and he prayed the tinder and kindling he brought wrapped in many layers of cloth was still dry. His companion knelt next to him, flint and steel in hand. There were many such pairings in the thick undergrowth along the river bank. They would let the first wave of legionaries cross, and then hit the bridges with flaming arrows while the auxilia crossed. That would trap a significant portion of their force, an entire legion at that, on the Frisian side of the river. The archer licked his lips in nervous anticipation.

There was a deepening fog on the far side of the river, which made Centurion Artorius apprehensive. Scouts had reported that the rebel army was huge, far larger than anticipated. One report had the enemy strength in the tens-of-thousands, though between the fog and dense woods this was impossible to verify. If it was true, Artorius had doubts as to whether or not their force would be large enough to defeat the Frisians even under ideal conditions. He also knew that whether they crossed here or at the ford to the north meant little. They would still be stretched thin and could only cross so many soldiers at a time. Speed would be the key; get enough men across to hold the far bank and allow the rest of the army to deploy.

With the possibility of battle being joined as soon as they crossed, all Centurions and Options had been ordered to leave their horses with the baggage trains. The Frisians *had* to know the legions would pursue them after breaking the siege around Flevum, and what better place to set up an ambush!

"I don't like this," he said as he was joined by Centurion Vitruvius.

His superior made an assessment of the situation and shook his head. "Neither do I," he replied. "These people aren't stupid. They knew better than to engage us in force when we liberated Flevum. No matter where we cross it's going to be a real bitch if they are waiting for us on the other side."

"My thoughts exactly," Artorius added. "And with this damn fog we can hardly see each other, let alone what may be on the far side."

"I suspect they'll hit us with everything they've got as soon as we're across," Vitruvius continued. "It's like we are at the River Styx assaulting Hades itself."

The air was damp, and Artorius felt his skin crawl as a feeling of unease came over him. He then took a deep breath.

"Well, if we're going to die storming the pits of hell, we might as well get it over with," he said with a grin.

Vitruvius returned the grin and grunted in acknowledgment.

"*Vitruvius!"* shouted Master Centurion Calvinus, who was still on his horse, coordinating final movement orders. "The Third will cross here and anchor the right flank. Make sure you leave enough room for everyone else to fall in on your left. And be sure you get across as quickly as you can; this place gives me the fucking creeps!"

"Yes, sir," Vitruvius nodded before turning back to Artorius, his grin returning. "Well, old friend, since I've already got you here, why don't you

do the honor of leading us to the other side."

"It would be an honor," Artorius replied as he clasped his Cohort Commander's forearm.

Vitruvius became somber once more.

"Get over that damn bridge as fast as possible and start pushing out to the right," he ordered as he clutched Artorius' arm harder. "Dominus will follow you with the Fourth; I will take the center, all other centuries on my left."

He then released his junior Centurion's hand and rendered a salute, which Artorius returned. Vitruvius then nodded to his Signifier, who waved the Signum to let the rest of the legion know they were set. In the distance, the Legion's Eagle was tilted forward, the signal to advance.

Artorius stepped onto the bridge, drew his gladius, and swept it in a high arc towards the far side. He turned back to see Rufio directly behind him with the Century's Signum, the rest of his men but a few paces behind, anxiously eyeing their Centurion. He cocked a half smile to reassure them before sounding the order in his loudest command voice.

"*Second Century… follow me!"*

The Frisian watched in apprehension as he saw the first of the Roman troops moving across the bridge. At the head of the formation was a rather large Centurion, his crested helmet distinguishing him from his men. The archer swallowed hard and kept his head down as more legionaries crossed at the run behind their Centurion. It was nerve racking, knowing that the Romans would soon be behind him and have him trapped between them and the river. Too late to wish he had chosen a larger bush to hide in! Still, he reminded himself again that once the bridges were burning it would be utter chaos. The legion on this side of the river would immediately be facing the onslaught of the entire Frisian nation.

Still more soldiers crossed, and yet he waited. They were told to allow this particular legion to cross in its entirety, along with some of their auxiliaries. Once he saw the Germanic and Gallic infantry on the bridge he knew it was time. Huddled over his precious tinder, his companion frantically struck the flint with his knife and prayed it would ignite.

Artorius expected to be beset by enemies at any moment, yet all was silent, *too* silent. The fog and the silence grated on him. It was cool, and he could almost see his breath in the air. And yet his body remained warm

through the heat of exertion and anticipation. Everything was drenched that he could see. He almost tripped over a fallen log and raised his weapon up to signal the obstacle to his men. The only sounds he heard were his own breathing and the footfalls of his legionaries. He could hear Rufio clearly as the Signifier hefted the Signum while keeping up with the Centurion. He then skirted to the right of a high rock outcropping, about twenty meters high and wide, that jutted straight up from the ground. From there the ground sloped and led to a large sandy bar by the river.

Just then he heard a loud commotion to his rear. He turned back to see dozens of flaming arrows shooting forth from the bushes along the riverbank towards the bridge. Though he could not see very well through the thick undergrowth, the loud clambering and disorder told him what affect they were having.

“They’ve torched the bridge!” Optio Praxus shouted as he raced towards his Centurion. “Just as the first wave of auxiliaries got across those bastards started firing into the bridges. The underside must have been treated with pitch, because even in this fucking damp it immediately ignited.”

A loud snapping sounded as the weakened ropes holding the supports of the nearest bridge gave way, accompanied by the crash of timbers, echoing the Optio’s assessment.

On the bridge, auxiliary troops were rushing forward or back, trying to reach safety as the structure keeled over onto its side as the support ropes snapped. Numerous troopers fell into the raging current, their heavy armor pulling them under to a watery grave. Legionaries on the far side of the river desperately looked back to see what was causing such havoc.

“Eyes front damn it!” Magnus shouted. Legionaries quickly refocused their attention to the front where they knew the bulk of the Frisians would come. Artorius stole a glance through the bushes and saw several dozen Frisian archers jump into the current, allowing it to carry them downstream and away from the Romans. Lightly equipped and as good swimmers as most of them were assured them a far greater chance of survival. Auxiliary archers on the other side of the river took sporadic shots at them, trying to exact at least some retribution for the loss of their friends. Though several were struck down this way, the majority soon floated out of range to safety.

“Damn, this sucks,” Artorius growled.

“That it does, sir,” Rufio concurred quietly.

Artorius looked back to see the Signifier had never left his side. “Where

would you like me to post?"

"Good question," the Centurion replied. He then shouted to Praxus, "The rest of the Cohort cross okay?"

"Looks like it," the Optio called back from his end of the line. "They're forming up just to our left."

"Cohort…halt!" The order had originated from Vitruvius and was echoed up to the front of the column by the senior officers of each century.

"Shit," Artorius swore under his breath as he turned back and surveyed the terrain on the flank. From his vantage, this was the worst place he could have halted his century. He shook his head and turned to Rufio.

"Hold here." The Signifier raised up the Signum, and then planted it in the ground, signaling the rest of the Century to hold in place. Artorius quickly made his way back up the line, past the faces of his puzzled legionaries.

Just past the rocky knoll, the rest of the cohort was forming up into battle formation, shields interlocking. They were stretched out in a long, thin line. At best they were only able to form up four ranks deep. He quickly made his way over to Centurion Vitruvius, who was directing the placement of the cohort.

"Still no sign of the enemy yet?" the cohort commander asked.

Artorius shook his head.

"None, which surprises the hell out of me. We know they are here, I just cannot understand why they haven't attacked us yet." He then motioned for Vitruvius to follow him. "With the way the cohort is set I'm in a shitty position."

Artorius then guided Vitruvius back to the end of the line. The Second Century had formed a partial square of three sides, providing security in case the Frisians chose this moment to attack.

"Oh, this isn't good," Vitruvius spoke, his eyes scanning the terrain rapidly. The Fourth Century's line ended right at the rocks, and the sloping ground with its steep grade and lack of proper footing would be impossible for the Second to effectively fight off of. The Centurions then quickly walked past where Rufio had planted the Signum. Vitruvius then looked back up the slope and grimaced as he made his decision.

"Alright, I'm placing you there," he said as he pointed to the end of the short spur that jutted downward from the rocks. "This area here is our extreme right flank, and you will hold and protect it. Your Century will form up at a right angle and secure our flank."

“You have got to be fucking me,” Artorius said in a low voice. “Look how wide this gap is! We’ll be in two ranks at most. I *cannot* effectively hold this position!”

“Look,” Vitruvius spoke, his patience waning, “the rest of the Cohort is already stretched as it is, and we will be taking the brunt of their attack. I don’t have troops to spare. You’re going to have to make do with what you have. Gods willing they won’t even know you’re here.” He saw the doubt in his young Centurion’s eyes, and he knew Artorius’ fears were well-founded. “I will see what I can do about getting some troops over here to reinforce you, but with the bridge cut it’s a right fucking mess back there.” With that he turned and ran back towards where the rest of the Cohort was forming up.

“Gather the men around,” Artorius said to Praxus as he watched his friend and mentor scramble up the incline. Once the Century was gathered in a semicircle, Artorius turned to speak with them. Theirs was a precarious position, for he knew the Frisians would find the weak point in the line and hit it with everything they had. To hold the flank would result in a blood bath. As Artorius gazed into the faces of his men, he wondered how many would survive the day.

“Men,” he started, “if you will look to our left you will see that the rest of the Cohort is forming up on what is the only defendable terrain on this side of the river. Here we will anchor the flank. We will form up in two ranks, extending all the way back to the river.” He heard a few audible gasps and low words of discouragement.

“Artorius, the Frisians are not stupid,” Praxus replied. “They will see this as the weakest point before they even engage the main body. We cannot hold this!”

“If we don’t, they will roll right up behind the rest of the Cohort and take them in the flank and rear,” Artorius replied, his voice calm. “The entire *Legion* will collapse as a result. That is what we can’t allow to happen. We face a disciplined and determined enemy. They will hit us with everything they have, but we *must* hold them long enough for the rest of the army to cross.

“If we are to die today, it will be so that our brothers may live! For every one of us who falls, five…no, *ten* of them may yet survive! What greater honor is there than that we sacrificed ourselves so our brothers may live? As long as one of us draws breath, the line will hold. Today we earn our name… *Valeria!”*

“Valeria!” echoed the rest of the Century as all raised their weapons in the air.

Artorius saluted his men with his gladius, then turned and bounded down the rocky slope to the river. He would be the last man on the entire line, with only the rushing current to protect his back. As his soldiers scrambled into position, he gazed through the lifting fog and dense trees. He could not see the Frisians yet, but he could hear them in the distance. The fog masked just how close they were. Artorius found himself breathing deeply as his body sought to overcome the twisting in his guts that had gripped him just moments before. He would not be part of the formation, instead keeping himself out front at all times. He knew that his was by far the most dangerous position to be in, which he knew was the purpose of a Centurion. Praxus would cover the rest of the line.

“Artorius!” he heard Vitruvius shout behind him. He turned to see his Cohort Commander rushing up with a small group of auxiliaries. “I brought you something. It’s not much, only about thirty men; auxiliaries who had managed to cross the torrential river as the damned flaming bridge collapsed. I’ve placed a group of archers on top of the rocks as well. There are only six of them, but it was the best I could get. There’s a Cornicen on his way as well. Since visual signaling will be impossible in this fog, we’ll have to rely on his horn to alert us if you get overrun.”

“Understood,” Artorius replied before turning to the auxiliaries. Some were soaking wet and looked disheveled, having barely escaped from drowning.

“The bridge was taken out from under us, and our whole unit ended up scattered,” the Decurion leading the auxiliaries remarked. “This is all I was able to rally. Just tell us where you need us; we will fight.”

“Very good,” Artorius replied as Vitruvius made his way back up the line, where he would fight in the very center of the Cohort. “You men will make up our third rank; however, you will not be part of the passage-of-lines. Instead, I want you to use your spears to reach over the top of our ranks and into the faces of the Frisians. I want you to build up an earthen step behind my second rank to give you height. At my command you will stab over the top with your spears and into the enemies’ faces.”

“Right you are, sir,” the Decurion acknowledged as he then relayed the order to his men. A young auxiliary had placed himself behind Artorius’ left shoulder. He turned to look at the man and did a double-take in surprise.

“Sir?” the auxiliary asked, his face showing his puzzlement.

Artorius just shook his head and turned back to the front. The lad’s face looked so familiar to him, in fact, he closely resembled…but it could not be. He suddenly remembered a vision he had seen years ago, after the Triumph of Germanicus. Artorius turned away, took a deep breath, and closed his eyes as he raised his face to the heavens.

“Brother, be here with me,” he said in a low voice. “Give me your courage and strength.” As he lowered his head and opened his eyes, he exhaled audibly. He gave a dark smile as the Frisian formations broke through the fog. His anxiety left him, and his pulse raced with anticipation.

Massed numbers of Frisians were shifting towards the right. Had they noticed the Romans’ weak point? Artorius could feel the uneasy movement in his own ranks. His men had noticed it as well.

“Here they come, sir!” the archery section leader shouted from atop the knoll.

His men took aim at the loudest sounds, and at the command, fired a volley into the fog. The legionaries below could not see where the arrows landed, nor could they tell if they struck anything, for the sound of the Frisian war cries was already in their ears.

“Javelins, ready!” Artorius shouted. As his men hefted their javelins up to their shoulders, ready to launch a wave of death into their enemy, he gave a subsequent order, “both ranks will throw simultaneously!” He took a deep breath, his gladius drawn and resting easy against his leg. In his peripheral vision he could see the archers increasing their rate of fire. The Frisians had to be close for them to be expending arrows as fast as they were.

Towards the left end of the line, Gaius stood with his first javelin resting easy on his shoulder. He swallowed hard and was trying not to start hyperventilating. For him, as well as his friends, this was their first real action. They had not seen any of the fighting during the battle around the Flevum fortress and had been anxious to face the enemy head on. It had pained Gaius that he had been in the army for over a year and was only now finally getting his chance to fight his first action. Now that they were, he was suddenly nervous.

“Mars, don’t let me fail now,” he whispered. “Give me the strength to fight hard!”

The Frisians had burned the bridges behind them and completely cut them

off before attacking. That had stolen the initiative away from the Romans, and the realization of this sat very poorly with the young legionary. He swallowed hard as he remembered Legionary Carbo's disturbing words. He quietly prayed to the plethora of deities his mother kept statues of that he not be allowed to die until he had at least unleashed his javelin.

"I don't want to die here," one of his friends whispered. There was fear in the lad's voice. "This place is cold and dark. It's not a fitting place for a Roman to meet his end!"

"Then we had best kill them before they kill us," Gaius replied, his voice surprisingly calm. "And if we are meant to die here, then let's just get it over with and make a good show while we're at it!"

His confident words brought a grin to his friend's face and some murmurs of assent from his companions on the line.

A warrior next to Tabbo screamed in pain as an arrow pierced his shoulder. The Frisian war chief jolted in surprise at how close it had come to striking him. Through the fog, he could just make out a rocky knoll to their front where he caught sight of several silhouettes. No doubt these were the archers who were firing on him and his men. Another warrior to his front took two arrows directly in the chest, falling face first into the mud without as much as a sound. In spite of this, Tabbo was ecstatic to see the rocks, for it meant he was where he needed to be. He knew that just to the left of the rocks was a path that went behind them, and behind the Roman army. The main Frisian army was heavily engaged with the legionary cohorts in the center. All Tabbo had to do was get around the rocks, and he would smash them all from behind. He knew that if the Romans were smart they would have troops placed here. It mattered not, for he had well over a thousand warriors with him; more than enough to rout whatever pathetic resistance they would meet.

"Sound the advance!" he ordered the three horn blowers next to him.

All raised their war horns, their ominous notes spelling doom for Rome. Tabbo gave a vicious grin even as two more warriors in his vicinity fell to the sporadic arrows. The drone of the horns was followed by a slowly rising battle cry. At its pitch the horde charged.

"Fuck me," Artorius heard Rufio say in a low voice.

The Signifier had planted their standard behind the formation, seeing as

how visual signals would be useless in the pending engagement. The Centurion would not be taking part in any line changes; therefore Rufio had taken it upon himself to help protect him.

"Those horns come straight from the bowels of hell," Sergeant Ostorius said, drumming his fingers nervously on the grip of his javelin, which rested on his shoulder. He was standing just to the left of Artorius, and the Centurion sneered when he heard the man's remark.

"Then it's time we sent them back to where they came from," he replied with a growl. He could hear the Frisians clearly and could just make out their force. The fog was so dense that they were almost in his face before Artorius saw them. *"First and second ranks, throw!"*

As his warriors stormed into the narrow gap between the rocks and the river, Tabbo saw an entire wave of his men fall, blood and gore spraying everywhere as a storm of javelins ripped into their bodies. Screams of pain mingled with the roar of battle cries and the sounds of hundreds of men rushing forward. A second wave came in a higher arc, striking down those behind the first group that had been savaged before even catching sight of the Romans. The enemy archers were now on their right and firing into their flank. It mattered not. There were so few of them that they were little more than a nuisance. Besides, Tabbo reckoned they would blow through the Roman lines and be past the threat soon enough. He waved his warriors forward with his hand axe and started making his way to the left of their line. He knew the Romans always placed their senior leaders on their own right and he longed to slay one of the legendary Centurions.

"Gladius draw!"

"Rah!" Two waves of javelins and the Second Century was down to using their gladii. Artorius and the men in the first rank set in their fighting stances, bracing for the initial impact of the coming storm. Those in the second rank braced their shields against their brothers to their front, each man pushing off against the auxilia step with his back foot.

As in almost every battle they had taken part in, the enemy's momentum stalled slightly as those at the front of the charge came to grips with the sight of the legionary shield wall. It was not that the Frisians were cowards. No, it was simply a matter of instinct born into all men; the desire to survive. It took inhuman amounts of courage to overcome these instincts and throw one's

body into the mass of Roman shields and flashing swords.

That pause, which was so insignificant it was hardly noticeable, was all the Romans needed to withstand the initial shock. Frisian warriors crashed with abandon into their formation, and the chaotic frenzy ensued. As the legionaries in the first rank held their ground, braced by their comrades, they started to strike back, discipline and training taking over. Hand axes, short swords, and stabbing spears pounded the shield wall as legionaries struck back with blows from their shields and quick stabs with the gladii. The Frisians were experts at close combat, and therefore well matched against their adversaries. For a time, it seemed like neither side was gaining the advantage.

The Romans' armor offered excellent protection against blows that did penetrate the shield wall. Conversely, the Frisians were mostly devoid of any protective armor aside from the occasional crude helmet or leather cuirass, and the strikes of legionary weapons soon started to cut down some of the warriors. A handful of bodies were already piling up in front of the line.

Artorius was frustrated that he was mostly on the defensive and was constantly tilting his shield up and slamming it into his foes to keep them off balance. Even when he did manage to stab with his gladius it was usually deflected away. In the first few minutes only one of his blows managed to draw blood, and even that was only a minor gash to the side of a Frisian. There were at least three warriors attacking him directly, and his focus on staying alive almost kept him from remembering his responsibilities to the rest of the Century.

"Set for passage-of-lines!" he shouted as he ducked low to avoid the swing of a large two-handed club wielded by an enormous warrior, which continued its swing into the face of one of his countrymen. The command was echoed down the line as he lunged forward from the crouch and stabbed the man in the stomach. A satisfied grin was fixed to his face as the once imposing enemy fell to the bloody ground, screaming in horrifying pain.

"Auxilia…now!" was his next command. With a shout, their allied troops rose up on their step and stabbed with their spears over the heads of the legionaries to their front. This caught the Frisians completely by surprise, and a number took spear thrusts to their faces and necks. As the enemy reeled, the Centurion gave his quick command of execution.

"Valeria!"

"Valeria!" the men of the second rank echoed as they charged forward to

replace the front line, the short gap created by the auxilia spears giving them the momentum needed to smash into the Frisian horde.

Gaius felt as if his very soul had come unleashed. He had been in the second rank during the first part of the battle, feeling the numbing blows against his shield as the soldier to his front fought for his life. He had completely forgotten about the auxiliaries behind him and was taken aback when he felt one of them bumping up against his shoulder as he stabbed over the top with his spear. Gaius could not help but feel euphoric when he saw the spear catch a Frisian directly in the eye and saw the spurt of blood come shooting out.

Upon the Centurion's command, he lunged past the legionary to his front and would have flown straight out of formation had the enemy warriors to his front not stopped him. He was surprised when the blow of his shield knocked a warrior onto his ass. However, before he could follow up with a stab to the man's vitals, another warrior immediately took his place and proceeded to smash Gaius' shield with a quick succession of blows from his hand axe. When it seemed like the man was tiring and the young legionary could strike back with his gladius, another warrior took his place and continued the assault. The Frisians were using the Romans' own tactics against them! The only difference was that the legionaries would replace entire lines with fresh troops; the Frisians were doing it as individuals.

Tabbo continued to spur his warriors forward, though he himself was anxious to get in on the fighting. He was surprised his army had lost its momentum. He forced his way to the far left of his force and had to wade out into the raging current of the river in order to see what was happening. As he clung to a hanging branch, he was shocked when he saw that the Roman lines still held. He caught sight of the crest on top of the helm of the Centurion commanding this miniscule opposition. Tabbo growled at the realization that in the narrow gap, his forces were bunched up and his numbers meant nothing. The legions had withstood the initial shock of his charge, now there would be much hard fighting in order to break them. He cursed himself and realized he should have known better.

He then made his way back to his men and started shoving his way towards the front. Only his warriors directly engaging the Romans, and those a few ranks back, were making any kind of noise. With their momentum

halted, the rest simply stood shaking their weapons in the air in restless anticipation. Those on the right kept their shields overhead as they continued to take fire from the archers on the rocks. As he got closer to the actual battle, the crowd of warriors became more spread out until he was within about a dozen meters of the Roman line. There, a force of his men, perhaps twice the number of legionaries, was furiously engaging their hated foe. The rest stayed back, knowing that bunching too close together would do them no good. Instead, they shouted words of encouragement, with small groups charging into the fray as battered and wounded warriors struggled out.

Tabbo saw three of his men engaging the enemy Centurion. Another lay dead at the Roman's feet, his eyes open, yet unseeing. He gave a loud bark, and the three men stepped back, eyes on their war chief.

"The Centurion is mine!" he bellowed. His warriors all nodded and turned to help their friends fighting the rest of the Roman force. Tabbo was impressed at the sight of his adversary. Though shorter than himself, this Roman was *big*. Granted, in their heavy armor all Romans looked much larger than they were, but this man was huge. Tabbo was glad, because he did not want to slay an inadequate foe. He limbered up his right arm, in which he carried a hand axe that bore a spike on the end, as well as on the back side. As a war chief he possessed much wealth and could have easily afforded a good sword. Instead, he found his trusted axe much more to his liking. His lips were drawn back in an evil grin as he raised his weapon high, and then pointed it at the Centurion, giving a nod. The Roman returned the grin and the gesture, then settling into his fighting stance. Devoid of war cry or any other sound, Tabbo rushed forward, his axe swinging freely by his side, ready to strike.

Artorius was impressed by the ferocity and fighting skill of his enemy. He knew the man to be a war chief, or at least a leader of sorts amongst the Frisians. He was not only powerful, but very quick with his weapons. He struck hard and fast with his axe, and he also knew how to effectively use his smaller oblong shield as a weapon, much in the same manner as a legionary. Their shields came together time and again, with the Frisian following up with short, rapid slashes with his weapon. He was able to keep his shield at the ready, thereby deflecting most of Artorius' counterstrikes with his gladius. No other warriors came at him; they were letting the two men engage in single combat. At one point, when the Frisian knocked Artorius back with

a short charge and shield collision, Rufio looked to step in and assist.

"Rufio, stay out of this!" the Centurion barked. "Take control of the line!"

"Sir!" the Signifier acknowledged as he then gave the order for the next passage-of-lines.

Artorius took in a deep breath as he squared off against his opponent once more. He could not help but wonder how Vitruvius would fare in this situation. Of course, he had been fighting for some time before even facing this man, and he was already exhausted. Still, he had much respect for his enemy, and he surmised the feeling was mutual. The warrior came at him once more, this time attacking low with a hard backhand swing with the spiked back of his axe. As Artorius dropped his shield to deflect the blow, the Frisian brought the bottom edge of his own shield up in a hard swing that caught him just above the right eye and the bridge of his nose. Artorius stumbled back, but managed to catch the Frisian hard on the shin with the bottom edge of his shield. The man lost his balance and as he started to fall sideways Artorius lunged forward, catching him in the upper arm with a stab of his gladius. His weapon did not penetrate as deeply as he hoped, for the Frisian retaliated with another backhand swing with his injured arm as he rolled to his side and immediately back to his feet. The Centurion stepped back and caught his breath. Both men were grinning at each other, and in a strange and macabre sense, both men were, at least in part, enjoying themselves. The battle that raged beside them seemed forgotten, and each man was exhilarated by the purity of the challenge his opponent presented.

As they made ready to come at each other again, loud war horns echoed in the distance behind the Frisians. His opponent looked disgusted as he backed away and looked down at the ground and sighed. He then shouted orders to his men, who were backpedaling away from the Century. They moved slowly and deliberately, warriors in the mass behind them rushing forward to assist any wounded away. It was then that Artorius realized the sun was setting behind them, though the fog to their front was still very thick. He surmised he must have injured his foe much more than he had realized, for the man's weapon arm was now soaked in blood. The Frisian gave a half smile, let out a bellowing war cry as he raised his weapon high. He then held the axe in front of his chest in a type of salute and gave a short bow. Artorius raised his own weapon, and saluted his adversary in return. The man then turned and joined his warriors as they left the field. A loud triumphant cry

erupted from the Roman lines as the legionaries and their auxiliary allies felt they had defeated the Frisians. Artorius was suddenly aware of his Signifier now standing next to him.

"They'll be back," he said in a low voice to Rufio, who could only nod in reply. He then turned to his men. *"At fucking ease, all of you!* This battle has not ended, but only just begun!"

Tabbo collapsed as soon as he reached the roaring fire where sat King Dibbald and the other Frisian warrior nobility. His arm had stiffened up on him, and he quickly got out of his tunic to see just how bad his injury was. His shin was bleeding and throbbing in pain from the blow of the Centurion's shield. Prince Klaes was at his side with a pouch full of herbs and a bandage.

"Here, you will want some of this," he said as he offered to tend to the war chief's wounds. "It will help speed the healing."

"Thank you, sire," Tabbo replied. His mouth was dry and he was craving some water.

Sensing this, Klaes snapped his fingers, and a warrior quickly brought a water skin over to them, which Tabbo greedily drank while Klaes bandaged his wound.

"My prince, it really isn't necessary…"

"Nonsense, man," Klaes replied with a grin. His father was much grimmer. King Dibbald sat on a makeshift throne and stared into the fire, his hands resting on his knees.

"You failed to break the Roman flank today," he said quietly, though his voice naturally carried far.

The rebuke struck Tabbo far worse than the Roman's blade.

"The Romans are a formidable enemy, sire," Tabbo replied, staring at the ground.

Prince Klaes was quick to jump to his defense. "Father, the bulk of our men had the Roman main line just as badly outnumbered as Tabbo did the enemy on the flank, and yet they did not achieve victory today either."

"We *will* finish them tomorrow," Tabbo spoke with determination, looking into Dibbald's face. The King continued to stare into the fire, lost as he was in thought. "They think they have been given a reprieve. They may even think they defeated us today. But no, while our warriors eat and rest, they hunger in the shivering night. No rest will come to them tonight, no respite from the terrors of the darkness."

Chapter XVIII: Eye of the Nightmare

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Several torches were placed at intervals approximately thirty meters in front of the Roman lines. Artorius was amazed that they had gotten the torches to light, given that it seemed like everything was soaked from the thick fog that clung to whatever it touched. They cast an eerie glow about the battlefield, which was strewn with few corpses. The Frisians had been able to retrieve their wounded, as well as a number of their dead.

A legionary from the First Century had been dispatched to bring Artorius to the meeting of the Cohort's leadership. He left Rufio in charge of the Century as he and Praxus followed the legionary up the sharp slope. In the dark he kept tripping over rocks and tree roots. A single torch lit the spot where the Centurions and Options were meeting. Artorius and Praxus removed their helmets as they walked into the soft glow of the light. Vitruvius and Dominus were off to the side, arguing about what sounded like a plan Vitruvius had for a breakout of the Cohort. Centurion Statorius arrived from the other end of the line, where his Fifth Century was linked to the next Cohort on the line.

"Enough!" Vitruvius said in exasperation, holding his hand up, silencing Dominus. "We'll talk about it later." Both men then turned and faced their fellow Centurions. "How is the Second surviving?"

"We're still here," Artorius replied with a nod. "Those auxiliaries helped us hold."

"Good," Vitruvius said before addressing the entire group. "As you know, I just came from meeting with Legate Apronius and the other Cohort Commanders. It seems we've lost the entire Fourth Cohort."

"They were wiped out?" Statorius asked, flabbergasted.

Vitruvius shook his head. "Not yet," he replied. "They've just disappeared. The Frisians launched a sortie as the cohorts on the left were getting set, and it seems that in the confusion they ended up separated from the rest of the Legion. There's a dwelling on this side of the river that used to belong to one of our allies. We think they may be hold up there…at least that is what we hope. All we know is the Seventh is on the extreme left and the Fourth was supposed to be next to them on the right; but when the Frisians withdrew, the Sixth was on their right with no sign of the Fourth."

"Fuck!" the Centurion from the Sixth Century swore. "It's as if we have all crossed into Hades when an entire Cohort just disappears."

"How are the rest surviving?" Artorius asked.

"They're pretty banged up, but holding," the Cohort Commander replied. "They hit the center hard, trying to take out the leadership of the Legion. They almost succeeded, too, if not for the quick thinking of Master Centurion Calvinus. He and Draco pushed the Frisians back with a storm of javelins followed by a hasty charge from the wedge. Still, the Chief Tribune was killed in the exchange. Camillus and about a dozen men held off the enemies' attempts to take the Eagle."

"I can't believe they even got that close to it," Dominus remarked.

"Today was a rough one," Vitruvius concurred. "And if we're being honest with ourselves, tomorrow will be much worse. But before we let the hand of doom take us, let your men know that there is hope. One of the unsteady old bridges on the far left of the line, past where the Legion crossed, was not completely destroyed. The Fifth Legion is working through the night to repair it. Gods willing, they will be able to cross sometime tomorrow. Failing that, Tribune Cursor has taken all of the cavalry and a large number of the auxiliary infantry and headed north to the ford twenty miles upriver. If he force marches his men through the night, they could be here by midmorning."

"Let's hope they have the strength to fight after that," Statorius remarked as all of the men huddled in close.

The lone torch was the only source of heat, and the dozen men tried to get as close as they could. An Optio blew into his hands, trying to keep them warm.

"It's not just fatigue and hunger that are hurting our men," Artorius observed.

"I know," Statorius replied. "I've got my soldiers who are not on watch sitting back-to-back against each other. That will at least keep them from having to lie down in the mud. They might at least be able to save some body heat."

Vitruvius took a deep breath and looked into the faces of his Cohort's leadership once more.

"I need to get a total count of your dead and wounded once you return to your centuries," he stated. "I know you didn't have time to accomplish this

before I summoned you. Take heart, men. Between the Fifth Legion and Cursor's ten thousand auxiliaries, there is hope for us yet."

As soon as he returned, Artorius walked down the line getting accountability of his men. Four were dead, including two of his Decanii, which was a terrible stroke of bad luck. Though the line had held, two of the auxilia were dead as well. Another twelve legionaries and four auxiliaries were wounded, though three of the legionaries would still be able to fight once their wounds were bound. Material for bandages was in short supply, with soldiers using their rags that they kept in their belts for wiping down their weapons, as well as parts of tunics. None had worn their cloaks, nor had any brought any food with them. The only items of sustainment they had brought were their water bladders. With the river behind them, water was in ample supply and legionaries were drinking as much as they could to try to fill their stomachs and at least partially quell their hunger. Artorius noted the rumbling in his own stomach as he called for a meeting of the Century's leadership. As he was short two squad leaders he took a glance at his legionaries on the line and made a quick decision.

"Valens, Felix!" he called.

The two soldiers quickly rushed over to their Centurion and stood at attention.

"Sorry, I don't have time for formalities, but you are both hereby promoted to *Decanus*, Sergeants of Legionaries. We'll take care of the orders when we get back."

"Provided any of us survive tomorrow," an eavesdropping legionary mumbled nearby.

"Yes, sir," both men answered together with a nod.

Congratulatory voices were heard from the line as a number of men had also heard the Centurion's order. In any other circumstance, Felix would have been ecstatic by the promotion. Valens had been avoiding promotion for years, though he said no words of protest. As it was, both men were very somber and determined to do what was necessary to see that their men survived the onslaught they knew would come with the dawn.

"How is the rest of the Legion holding, sir?" one of the Decanii asked.

"They held," Praxus answered, "though they are in just as bad shape as we are."

"The entire Fourth Cohort has gone missing," Artorius added, leading to

some audible gasps and confusion from his section leaders.

"How the hell did we lose an entire cohort?" another Decanus asked, flabbergasted. Artorius could only shake his head.

"Damned if I know." He then explained the situation as Vitruvius had relayed it to him. "But we cannot worry about them just yet. Right now we must look to our own survival, and the survival of the rest of the Third Cohort which is depending on us."

Just then they were joined by the section leader of the archers from the rocks.

"Sir, I should tell you our arrows are completely expended," he stated. "We need to try to retrieve what we can tonight, or we won't be of any use come morning."

"We should also recover as many of our javelins as we can," Sergeant Felix added.

The Centurion nodded in reply.

"I agree," he acknowledged. "I doubt we'll get any sleep tonight so straightening javelins will at least give the men something to keep themselves occupied. Plus it will give our enemies a bit of a shock when we throw them into their faces once again."

This got a smile and chuckle from the assembly, then Artorius was serious once more.

"Keep an eye on your men tonight. Place them in shifts, and see if we can at least try to get some rest tonight. The Frisians will undoubtedly be well rested for tomorrow's battle, and we need to salvage as much of our strength as we can."

"Sir, what about a relief?" Sergeant Valens asked. "Is there help coming?"

"The cavalry and rest of the auxiliary infantry headed north for the ford as soon as the bridges were torched," Artorius replied. "The other legions are trying to get the northernmost bridge repaired so that they can relieve us, though given the conditions I think we have a better chance of the cavalry reaching us first. Make no mistake, Tribune Cursor has forty miles to cover before he reaches us; and he cannot overly rush his advance lest his forces be too exhausted to carry the fight. Just know that they *will* come. All we have to do is stay alive until they get here."



The fog was thick and the terrain uneven as Cursor led his men on their desperate mission. Not once did he stop thinking about the gravity of the situation and the need for his men to be able to carry their attack with shock and surprise. With but a single legion and the few hundred auxiliaries who had managed to cross before the bridges collapsed, Cursor knew that he had nearly twice as many men under his command than those under Legate Apronius, who had been fighting all evening until dark. As he guided his horse over some slippery rocks he then wondered if any of their friends were even still alive.

There was no path running parallel to the river on this side and with their vision severely hampered, his men moved at a virtual crawl. The moon broke through the mist just enough to cast an eerie glow about them. All Cursor could see was his horse, the few feet of moss covered rocks and trees to his front, and maybe three or four of his men that were closest to him. It was hard to believe that he had ten thousand with him; at least he hoped they were all still with him. The sound of their march was muffled by the fog and slowness of their advance.

"All these men under my command, and yet I cannot see, much less control, any of them," he grumbled as his foot slipped on a rock and nearly caused him to fall into the small stream that jutted out from the river.

"We're all with you, sir," Centurion Rodolfo replied through the darkness. His words at least gave Cursor some comfort. To his front he saw one of the auxiliary infantrymen he had sent forward ahead of him. There were three others with the man, and they were acting as the guides and pace counters to see how far their force had traveled.

"Nineteen miles, sir," the trooper said as Cursor came within a few feet of him.

The Tribune nodded and the man jogged forward to catch up with his companions.

Can't see a bloody thing, he swore quietly to himself. *Let's just hope we don't march right past it!*

"Midnight is approaching," Rodolfo observed. "We should allow the men and horses to rest once we cross."

"I agree," Cursor replied. "Twenty miles through this shitty terrain without rest would take its toll on the best conditioned of men and beasts. We will rest after we have crossed the ford and again when we have traveled

another ten miles, and then one last time at five miles. We must make certain we save our strength or else we do the Valeria Legion no good."

"Nor ourselves," a cavalryman nearby added. Cursor looked back at the man, who quickly lowered his head. "My apologies, sir."

"Nothing to apologize for," the Tribune replied with a shake of his head. He let out a quiet sigh as the magnitude of the trooper's statement struck him. Was he bringing salvation to his brothers in the Twentieth, or was he simply leading his ten thousand in a mass suicide?

A faint glint interrupted his thoughts. The four men he had sent forward to scout the route were waving their spears towards the river. They had found the ford, much to Cursor's relief. He turned to the trooper behind him, "pass the word that we've found the crossing. All cavalry units will mount up and cross in force and clear the far side of any potential threats."

"Yes, sir," the man responded. Rodolfo was already back on his horse and barking orders to his men. It had been deathly quiet since the sun had set, and the sound of commotion in the darkness was the first real sign the Tribune had of the rest of his men with him. He had ordered them to maintain silence as they had trekked along the river, lest the enemy have scouts watching for them. Now silence was impossible to maintain, and as he rode up to the shallow crossing he was soon joined by Centurion Rodolfo and a large number of horsemen. The four scouts had somehow managed to light torches and would stay on the near side guiding all units across. Cursor then looked over to Rodolfo, who nodded that they were set. Without a word the Tribune spurred his horse to a quick gallop as he was splashed repeatedly in the darkness. The cavalry quickly fanned out in a large semicircle as soon as they were to the far side. The enemy was nowhere to be found.

This is it, Cursor thought. *Either I bring salvation or death. Gods have mercy if we are too late!*



The area by the Fifth Legion's bridge was lit by numerous torches as legionaries worked at a furious pace to make it serviceable enough for men to cross with all their weapons and armor. In the distance, the sounds of axes felling trees and men shouting orders echoed through the blackness. Though the planks had all been burned and crashed into the river, the main support posts remained intact. Off to the left a pair of sentries alternated between

watching their companions work and their sector along the river, which was devoid of movement. Only the sound of the raging river greeted their senses. The night was chilly, and the men wrapped their cloaks tight around themselves. One ate a balled up chunk of bread that had been left over from his supper. The other sentry looked over his shoulder and nudged his companion as their Tesserarius walked over to their position. The officer was making his rounds of the guard posts and work parties.

"How are you men holding up?" he asked. He had been rushing from one position to another since the afternoon, and though he wore his cloak, he let it hang loose as his face was damp with sweat. There was little perceived threat on their side of the river, and only those on sentry duty wore their body armor and helmets.

"We're doing okay, sir," one of the men answered as his friend's mouth was full of food. "It's bloody cold tonight, though." He shuddered under his cloak in emphasis and was shocked that he could see his breath.

"It is unusually cold for this time of year," the Tesserarius concurred.

"This bread's a bit doughy, too," the other soldier added as he took a drink from his water bladder to wash it down.

The Tesserarius snorted, "Be glad you're not with the Twentieth."

The soldier looked down briefly and then swallowed. The first legionary shook his head, slightly ashamed.

"Those poor bastards," he said quietly, to which the officer nodded in reply.

"They've been fighting all evening," he added. "Gods only know how many of them were killed, or how many wounded they have, with no way of treating their injuries. To say nothing of the fact that not one of them has cloak or food."

"I have some friends in the Twentieth," the soldier still eating said. He then looked up at his companions.

The Tesserarius' face was stern. "We'd better hope the bridge is complete by morning then," he observed. "Otherwise there won't be a Twentieth Legion when we cross."



Tabbo ate heartily as he tried to work the soreness out of his arm and shoulder. He knew he had to rest at some point, though he was afraid that too

much inactivity would leave his injured arm stiff and useless come morning. Still, he was grateful for the warm fire and fresh boar that his men had brought to him. There was no laughter or songs around the fires this night. His men were hopeful, yet still somber at the loss of many of their friends. He knew not how many of his own men had fallen that day. He only knew that whatever losses the Romans had suffered, they had visited back on the Frisians several times over. There was no sign of his friend, Olbert, and the war chief wondered if the brave man had fallen in battle. His heart was hardened for the time being; he could not allow himself to worry about friends who were simply missing when hundreds, if not thousands, of warriors had already fallen.

"You were reluctant to leave the field today, no?" Sjoerd asked as he joined him, a jug of mead in his hand. The war chief grunted as he continued to eat.

"I admit I did not like leaving even such a small sliver of our land in the hands of the Romans," he replied. "However, the King was right to recall us. If we had persisted we may still have been fighting with them even now. And how many more of us would have fallen? No, we have done the right thing, painful as it was to withdraw. While we warm ourselves by the fire and eat mightily, the Romans are freezing in the night while hunger takes its toll."

Sjoerd grinned in reply. "Should make their demise all the more easy tomorrow," he observed as he took a long quaff of mead.

"It will ease our struggle, yes. But that does not mean it will be easy. I have seen the way the Romans fight. We must never underestimate them." He then took another bite of meat before speaking again. "I take it the prince fought well?" Sjoerd shrugged.

"Well enough," he replied. "As well as any of us, I guess. The King ordered Eitel and me to stay by the prince's side. We only managed to directly engage the Romans a few times, and that was doing little more than banging our weapons randomly against their shield wall. You are right, though, they are a fearsome enemy. Their javelins slew many of our comrades before we even got close to them." He took another long pull off the mead jug, which was nearing empty.

"Not too much, old friend," Tabbo chided. "You will still need all your strength in the morning."

Both men laughed as Lourens walked into the light.

"Tabbo, the King has called for you."

The war chief nodded and followed the master of the household cavalry away from the fire. Lourens then pointed to where the King paced quietly in a small grove, well away from the crowded fires. Tabbo nodded and Lourens left him to his business. As Tabbo limped into the grove, he saw Dibbald with his hands clasped behind his back, his head bowed as he paced slowly in contemplation.

"You sent for me, sire?" Tabbo said at last.

"I feel I must apologize to one of my greatest war chiefs," the King said, his back still to him.

"Sire?"

"I wronged you earlier today when I berated you in front of my son and the other warriors," Dibbald said as he turned to face him. "This war weighs heavily on me, and your actions today were not a failure on your part, but rather another example of the fortitude of our enemy." He then sighed deeply, and Tabbo could see the melancholy in the King's eyes. "It breaks my heart to call Rome my enemy."

"Sire, Rome nearly starved us out of existence," Tabbo conjectured.

Dibbald raised a hand, silencing him.

"One man," he retorted, "one man alone did the unspeakable to our people." Dibbald made no mention of the personal insults he had borne, to say nothing of the flogging received in front of his household.

Tabbo knew better than to mention this to the King.

"We have been on peaceful terms with Rome for many years. It saddens me deeply because I viewed the Emperor Tiberius as a personal friend…but then Tiberius no longer rules in Rome. I have word that he now lives in seclusion on some remote isle while one of his Praetorian thugs rules Rome with the same fear and terror that Olennius brought on us."

"That terror ends tomorrow, sire." There was a fierce determination in Tabbo's voice.

The King looked over at him and smiled.

"Indeed it will. I will order our men to show clemency if the Romans choose to surrender; but I know it will be for naught. This army will not surrender. They will fight to the very last, bringing more death to both our peoples. But when it is done, I will send word to the Roman governor, if he be still alive. We will negotiate an end to this war quickly, while demanding no more than the return of our sovereignty. The Romans will be in such a shock after their army's defeat and the destruction of an entire legion that

they will cede to our…*requests.*”

Tabbo marveled at his King’s simple yet effective strategy. After defeating the Romans in battle, they would be diplomatic to them. Unlike the Germanic tribes who brought on the wrath of the entire Empire, Frisia would ask for so little, and offer to return to friendship with Rome that the Emperor, or whoever actually ruled the Empire now, would feel compelled to agree. Tabbo felt in his heart as if the King had already led his people into a new age of freedom.



Gaius stumbled in the dark as his squad provided security for the archers who were retrieving as many usable arrows as they could manage. Each of them had started off with sixty, and their section leader stated that if he could get even half that number back he would be satisfied. The Roman javelins, being a much shorter range weapon, were mostly recovered within full view of the line.

“Look at all the drag marks,” one of his companions said quietly.

In numerous places the bush was laid flat and streaked with blood from where the Frisians had drug away many of their wounded and dead. Most of the bodies were close to the line, where they had fallen either during the storm of javelins or in close combat with the Century and their auxilia attachment. Still, there was the occasional dead warrior to be found out a ways from the line. These had either been felled by arrows or had succumbed to their injuries after crawling away from the main battle.

In the faint torchlight, Gaius saw one such warrior with his back against a tree. At first he thought it was another corpse, but then he thought he saw the man’s head twitch. Curious, he walked over to the warrior, just to see if his eyes were playing tricks on him, what with the poor visibility, his utter exhaustion, plus the ever present pangs of hunger that now tormented him. He was surprised to see that the Frisian was still alive. His chest rose and fell, and his eyes opened as the young legionary knelt next to him and removed his helmet after first checking that the warrior had no weapons within reach. Gaius noticed the man had been wounded by arrows in both legs, which he assumed had happened as the Frisians retreated given that the man also bore a stab wound to his side brought on by a gladius. None of his injuries looked fatal, though he looked unable to move on his own. The warrior looked Gaius

in the face.

"Water," he said in almost a whisper. "Water…please."

Without a second thought Gaius pulled the stopper out of his water bladder and poured into the man's parched mouth. The warrior gulped down as much as he could and Gaius stopped for a moment when he saw most of it running down the sides of the warrior's face. The Frisian swallowed hard and took a few quick breaths before Gaius gave him some more to drink. He then put the stopper back into his water bladder and stood.

"Thank you," the warrior whispered with a trace of a smile on his face.

The young legionary then turned and found himself face to face with Sergeant Valens.

"What the hell, Gaius?" the Decanus asked, a trace of irritation in his voice.

"Valens, the man has been badly hurt and is of no threat," Gaius answered, temporarily forgetting that Valens was no longer a fellow legionary but now his superior.

The Decanus seemed not to notice the slip in protocol. The archers were heading back to the line, and Valens' squad was withdrawing. As they walked back, Gaius felt the eyes of the Decanus on him.

"Don't ask me why I did it," he said at last. "To tell you the truth I have no idea. It's just, when I saw that man stricken and helpless, I thought of what I would want someone to do were I in his position."

"Well, at least water is the one thing we have plenty of," Valens added, stepping into a puddle as if to emphasize. "Still, if you didn't like watching him suffer you could have just killed him."

"I could have," Gaius agreed. "But I cannot kill someone who poses no threat to us."

As Valens walked back to the lines he thought to himself, *what have we done that takes the humanity out of our young men? Was I ever that young and innocent?* He trudged on, not liking his thoughts.

Chapter XIX: When the Heroes Fall

***

Dawn brought a thinning of the fog, allowing a red glow from the rising sun to bathe the battlefield in a bloody light. Skirmishing and testing of the lines had begun in the false dawn during the previous hour. The Legion and the Frisian army were at a standoff. Vitruvius was worried about the extreme toll the frenetic pace of the battle was having on his men. Even when they were in the back of the formation, they still had to exert themselves trying to push back against the ever-pressing mass of Frisian warriors. They were mostly fresh, while his legionaries were hungry and exhausted.

"Hold this position!" he ordered his Signifier. The Pilus Prior then moved to behind the formation and sought out Centurion Dominus who was somewhere on his right. Vitruvius waved him over and told him his plan. "We need to break these bastards, and we need to do it now. At my command the First and Fourth Centuries will compress into a tight wedge formation on me. I will lead us out of this gods be damned nightmare."

Dominus' eyes grew wide.

"Vitruvius, such a plan will be suicidal for you!" he protested. "The Frisians are deliberately targeting Centurions and Options, knowing their importance. I beg you not to place yourself at the apex of the wedge."

Vitruvius smiled and shook his head.

"What kind of leader would I be if I placed one of my men in the most precarious position?" he replied calmly. "My life is of no more importance than my most junior legionary. Just make certain you stay alert for word from Artorius and the Second. With as bad as we're taking it, his men have to be going through hell."

Dominus grimaced and nodded. He then quickly stepped back to his place on the line.

"Fourth Century, make ready to advance!"

Vitruvius wiped a rag across his brow and made his way back to the First Century. There was a sense of calm about the Centurion. The Frisians had backed off slightly and were goading the Romans to come at them. Every last man in the Third Cohort was breathing heavily and completely spent. Vitruvius knew this was his last chance to save them. The fog was clearing from the morning sun, but brought the sight of packed enemy warriors in all

directions.

"First and Fourth Centuries!" he shouted with a voice that pierced the remaining rags of fog and was heard throughout the battlefield. *"Wedge formation…on me!"*

The command was echoed to his left and right. Quickly the legionaries collapsed towards the center, linking their shields together. Those in the subsequent ranks closed up, pressing their shields against their brothers in the front rank. A loud shout came from one of the Frisian leaders, and they immediately started to back up. Vitruvius' eyes narrowed as he set into his fighting stance, ready to spring.

Prince Klaes was inspired by the Romans' tenacity. He was certain that after the sleepless night and the loss of an entire cohort to mutual slaughter, those who remained would be easily dealt with. It was not to be. He knew his enemy had to be close to the breaking point, though with nowhere for them to run, they would fight to the very last. The Frisian prince almost felt a sense of camaraderie for his foe, given their tenacity and bravery. In spite of the terror that that bastard Olennius had visited on his people, he could not find it in him to hate the Romans he now faced. He would kill them, yes, but without malice or wrath.

The burly Centurion who the legionaries now clustered on particularly impressed the prince. The man was a killing machine, and Klaes knew who he was. It was the legendary Centurion Marcus Vitruvius, thought by many to be an invincible demigod. Klaes decided to put the Roman's reputation to the ultimate test. Sjoerd and Eitel were with him, with Sjoerd carrying a large two-handed war hammer. He then motioned for two burly warriors to join him. Klaes pointed his weapon towards the Centurion, who was barking subsequent orders to his legionaries.

"Let that one through," the prince ordered his men, who nodded in reply. A number of them swallowed hard as they braced for the impact of the Romans' charge. Klaes let out a loud war cry, which his warriors quickly echoed as they charged in turn.

Vitruvius gritted his teeth as every muscle in his body tensed for the pending impact. Instead, he flew right through the Frisian line, which parted before him. He went another few meters before stopping. The enemy had smashed into his men, but not him. There was an empty circle in the mass of

warriors. Within it were five men. He then realized what they had done, and he could not help but smile at their ingenuity. He limbered up his sword arm and let out a sigh.

"Five against one…not bad odds," the Centurion observed loudly. The enemy leader grinned, for he spoke perfect Latin. The men started to circle him like a pack of wolves stalking a stricken calf. But Vitruvius was no calf. He took the initiative and bounded forward, catching one of the warriors with his shield. Instead of following up on the man he just knocked down, he sidestepped and thrust his gladius hard, catching another one of the men in the stomach that gushed blood and bile as he withdrew his sword with a twist. He then stepped away as a large man with a hammer swung his weapon hard, catching Vitruvius' shield and knocked him back a pace with a grunt.

Klaes flinched as he watched one of his men fall to the Centurion's sword thrust. Though he made not a sound, he was stabbed through the stomach and would die slowly, in extreme pain. Eitel lumbered to his feet, having been knocked down by the Roman's initial shield charge.

"Attack together," the prince ordered calmly. "He cannot possibly hold us all off." He then moved forward, swinging hard with his war axe as Sjoerd gave another mighty swing with his hammer.

In a surprise move, the Roman fell flat onto his stomach, the unstoppable hammer slamming into the chest of another warrior with an audible crunch, his chest crushed and bone splinters piercing the heart. Eitel brought his sword down hard, catching the Roman on the back of the thigh as he stumbled to his feet. Nonplused, Sjoerd back swung the hammer, impacting hard onto the Centurion's helmet, tearing it from his head and leaving a bloody gash. Part of his scalp had ripped and blood flowed freely from the wound.

Soldiers of the Third Cohort fought desperately to break out against the pressing mass of Frisian warriors. Those closest to the center could catch glimpses of their revered Cohort Commander fighting for his life against a group of Frisians.

"We've stalled!" shouted the Signifier of the First Century. "Our charge has failed, we must withdraw!"

"Sir, we cannot leave Vitruvius!" a nearby Decanus shouted back as he thrust his gladius into the throat of a warrior to his front, abruptly cutting off

the man's war scream.

In such cramped quarters the Romans had a distinct advantage, and the Frisians were paying heavily for their stubborn determination. Still, the already spent legionaries were expending what was left of their energy at an alarming rate, and the Signifier knew they could not last much longer. It was then that he saw his Centurion's helmet fly from his head as a hammer blow sent Vitruvius to his knees.

"No!" the man screamed as they desperately tried to break through.

A warrior was pressed up against his shield. The two men were face to face, and the Signifier could smell his enemy's rank breath as they struggled. The Frisian carried a spear and was unable to get his weapon free as the Signifier brought his gladius up and quickly ran it across the man's neck, severing the artery and windpipe in a red, frothy mist. Even as the body fell he still gained no reprieve, as many more enemies were bearing down on them. One caught the Signifier in the thigh with a spear thrust, sending him limping backwards as he fought to suppress a groan of pain. Fatigue was taking its toll on the legionaries and with their reflexes considerably slowed, the Frisians were able to exploit and inflict casualties. The carnage on both sides was horrific, along with the screams and groans of the wounded and dying.

Vitruvius tried to clear the cobwebs from his head as he guided his shield protectively back and forth while he was down on one knee. As he stood his back leg started to cramp on him. Blood was also running down the side of his head from where his helmet had crumpled. At least it wasn't running into his eyes, and he could still see. Two of his adversaries lay dead, but he was visibly shaken and hobbled by the wound to his leg. The leader with the hand axe came at him again, while the warrior with the short sword attacked him from his right. Vitruvius blocked both blows with his shield and gladius, immediately smashing the leader in the shin with the bottom of his shield, then swinging it in a hard arc, catching the swordsman on the temple. As the warrior fell onto his face, Vitruvius stabbed him through the neck with a satisfying crunch as the razor sharp blade severed his vertebrae. He then felt the wind taken from him as a giant hammer slammed into his back, knocking him down and over the warrior he had just slain. His shield fell from his hand, which was now numb, though thankfully he still held his sword.

The Centurion rolled onto his side as both men rushed towards him. He

released his gladius and quickly drew his dagger, which he flung with deadly accuracy into the hairy belly of the huge warrior with the hammer, who had his weapon high and was ready to smash once more. A hair raising scream erupted as his war hammer dropped from his fingers as a glance down showed his doom. Before he could react further, an axe caught him on his sword arm, opening a terrible gash. Amazingly, it still functioned, and he lifted and swung his gladius in a hard backslash to keep his opponent away as he labored to his feet once more. Blood now covered the back of Vitruvius' leg and his sword arm was dripping blood freely as well, his back a flame of agony. As he faced the Frisian leader, he marveled in the fact that during his entire tenure in the legions he had never so much as been scratched in combat. Now he was bleeding from multiple wounds, his left arm was broken and useless, and he wondered just how much longer before his sword arm gave out on him. He could no longer see his men and knew that even if he did slay his final foe, the rest of the Frisian horde would only swarm in and finish him off. As if on cue, about a dozen men were now standing behind their leader. Vitruvius smiled and dropped to his knees, slamming the point of his gladius into the mud.

"Alright," he gasped. "You win." The enemy leader smiled and nodded. Klaes then came forward and stood in front of the Centurion, a sneer crossing his lips as he raised his axe to deliver the killing blow. Vitruvius grimaced as he pulled his weapon from the mud with all his remaining strength, and with superhuman effort, rammed his weapon underneath the ribcage of his opponent up to the hilt. The falling axe still managed to slash the side of his neck, which for Vitruvius was perfect timing. He wanted this man to be the one who killed him. With his strength fading fast, he reached up with his left hand, which somehow managed to function at the last, grabbed the stricken Frisian by the shoulder as he was collapsing, and pulled him down to his knees in front of him. The man's eyes were wide with shock and the stark realization that he was a dead man. His gaze was locked on the face of the man that had slain him, blood streaming from a corner of his gapping mouth.

"No," Vitruvius whispered as he dragged his victim's head closer and his breath became ragged gasps and bloody spittle escaped from his lips. "We'll call it a draw."

Thus did Centurion Pilus Prior Marcus Vitruvius pass into the afterlife; never having been defeated in single combat. His men, who witnessed this passing, bemoaned his loss. Yet they were unable to come to his aid, even in

death. The Optio of the Fourth Century finally gave the order to pull back. The Cohort had paid dearly for their bravado, though they withdrew slowly, recovering their dead and wounded lest another one of them be left behind. A few managed to catch a brief glimpse of the Frisians carrying away the body of their commander. It baffled them that Vitruvius was not left where he fell, or worse, defiled and mutilated. It almost seemed as if their enemy was showing great reverence to the slain Centurion. Six Frisian warriors carried Vitruvius' shattered body high on their shoulders in an unmistakable sign of respect.



Vitruvius had been right. On the flank, the Second Century was indeed going through a brutal hell. A hand axe caught Gaius flush on the side of his helmet, sending him to his knees. The Frisian paid with his life as one of his fellow legionaries struck the man down with a stab to the throat. The blow left a bad cramp in his neck, and his helmet was creased and cutting into his scalp. He quickly undid the leather cords under his chin and tore the helmet off. The legionary to his right fell to the ground, screaming and clutching his face as blood and grey matter gushed from an axe wound. The one who had just saved him was knocked back as he fought the onslaught of several attackers. Still on his knees with his shield protecting his front, Gaius glanced to his right and saw the stricken legionary's legs twitch and then stop. Enemy warriors were stomping and climbing past him to continue their attack.

As one leapt over the body of his friend, Gaius gave a deep howl of unholy rage and sprung forward, his gladius thrusting deep into the man's side, and the two fell over onto another pile of bodies. His shield was caught on the corpse of a Frisian, and he lost his grip. He quickly pulled his weapon from the warrior who was coughing up gouts of blood and crying in anguish. Frisians were now intermixed with their lines. Gaius realized with horror that the formation had gaping holes and had collapsed. The Second Century was now overrun. The auxilia step was now swarming with warriors, and the troopers were in a savage fight for their lives. To his left, he saw Sergeant Valens trying to rally survivors into some semblance of a formation. Gaius then yanked his shield free and fought his way towards the Decanus and the dozen or so legionaries with him.

As he stumbled towards the small formation which was now fighting off

a horde of warriors, Gaius watched an older soldier helping his badly wounded friend to safety. He fell to his side, looked back, and recognized Legionary Carbo. The man he was desperately trying to save was his close friend, Legionary Decimus.

"Come on, dumbass, don't die on me now!" Carbo pleaded.

Decimus was bleeding from the mouth, his legs wobbly, eyes wide and vacant. Both men were helmet-less and had lost their shields, as well. Decimus had his right arm around Carbo's shoulder, his left hanging useless and soaked in blood.

Suddenly Carbo gave a cry of pain, dropping his friend as he fell forward. A Frisian stood behind him, driving his spear into the small of the legionary's back.

"No!" screamed Valens.

Gaius knew the three men had been best of friends for many years, and the Decanus lost all sanity as he watched the other two crumple, slowly dying. He broke away from his tiny formation, which was now on the verge of collapse in the relentless push of the Frisian mass. Valens tilted his shield upright and slammed the bottom edge into the face of the warrior, smashing his face in with a satisfying crunch. Gaius got to his feet and fought beside the valiant Decanus who, with every fiber of his being, fought to save his friends. Gaius jumped over a body and punched a warrior on Valens' left with the boss of his shield. The two men stood shoulder to shoulder, fighting with strength beyond their reckoning.

Blinding fury consumed Gaius as he swung his shield and stabbed his gladius with reckless abandon. Together they both stabbed one warrior in the chest. As Gaius withdrew his weapon, a Frisian swung his axe, catching him on the side of the neck. Though the blow staggered him, he quickly regained his footing and in a wild thrust, slammed his gladius through his teeth and out the back of his neck. As the warrior stumbled backwards, eyes wide in terror and excruciating pain, the legionary let loose a howl of rage.

A broad grin crossed his face as he turned to face Sergeant Valens. The Decanus' eyes grew wide with the same expression as the Frisian's when he caught sight of Gaius. The legionary could not figure out what could have startled Valens about his appearance. The cries and din of battle were becoming muffled in his ears, though he guessed he had just lost some hearing from the constant noise. He was breathing heavily and felt dizzy. His shield slipped from his grip. As he looked down to see what was wrong, he

was horrified at the sight of his armor covered in dripping dark crimson. He did not need to reach up to his neck to realize the axe blow he thought had only knocked him off balance had, in fact, slain him. He slowly blinked his eyes and looked at the ground at his feet. It was covered in bodies, both friend and foe. His smile faded as his gaze locked with Valens. The Decanus' face was one of compassion for the young legionary.

"Oh, Gaius," he thought he heard him say from a distance.

The entire time from when the blow had struck his neck was no more than a handful of seconds, yet for Legionary Gaius Longinus, the last moments of his young life moved at a crawl. His gladius fell useless from his grip, and he felt himself falling forward. His soul left his body before it landed face first in the churned up mud, his blood mingling grotesquely with the mud and water, as well as the blood and flesh of the killed and maimed. His last thoughts brought some comfort. He had done his best and died a true Roman soldier. He hoped his father would be proud of him as his mind faded into darkness.



"Sir, our left flank is collapsing!" Rufio shouted to Artorius as they desperately tried to hold their position.

The Centurion turned back to the Cornicen and nodded. Just as the man started to blow into his horn a Frisian spear punctured his windpipe, bursting out the back of his neck in a spray of blood and bone. The man fell back, his horn dropping to the earth as his eyes clouded over. The horn landed amongst the tightly packed ranks of legionaries, several of whom inadvertently stepped on the instrument, smashing it.

"Son of a bitch!" Artorius swore as he pushed back once more with his shield, stabbing over the top with his gladius.

The Frisians were now pushing hard against them, and his weapon went right into his enemy's mouth. The blade severed tongue and mouth, while shattering teeth as it plunged upward into the man's brain. As Artorius wrenched his gladius free, he stepped back and caught sight of his Nordic friend on his left.

"Magnus!" he shouted. "The Cornicen is dead! Get your ass over to Vitruvius and tell him we've been overrun!"

The Norseman nodded, shouted some quick orders to his section, and

then withdrew through the auxiliaries, who were struggling to maintain their position. The legionaries were being pushed back up their short step, and now they, too, were face-to-face with their foe. One poor trooper was grabbed on the shoulder by a towering barbarian and dragged over the top of the legionaries, where he was hacked to pieces by the rampaging Frisians.

Artorius' shield arm was almost completely numb, and he fought hard to keep control as he felt the impact of Frisian axes and swords again and again. His sword arm had been cut numerous times and was crusted in blood; his, as well as his enemies'. He threw a left cross with his shield, the boss catching a Frisian on the side of the head, bones crunching underneath. He was so exhausted, his movements slowed, he failed to pull his shield back before a Frisian sword stabbed him in the upper arm. A shock went down his arm, and his shield fell useless from his grasp. In a rage, he lunged forward and wrapped his injured arm around the man's head, where his arm was subsequently smashed by the flat of an axe. Three men grabbed hold of him, one yanking his head down by the crest of his helmet. Instinctively, he cut the chin straps with his gladius and his helmet was ripped away. The three warriors fell on him, knocking him to the ground. Two held his arms while the third tried to eviscerate him. In the fray of bodies, the Frisian could not get at his face or neck, so he repeatedly stabbed the Centurion in the side with his sword. His armor could withstand much, but this man was bearing down on him with all of his weight behind each blow. Links soon began to snap. In desperation, Artorius reached up with his right hand and grabbed the Frisian on his arm by the hair. He pulled the man's head down and bit him savagely on the neck. The warrior gave a roar of pain, which Artorius echoed through his clenched teeth as his armor finally burst, and the Frisian sword bit into his side. He bit harder, tearing through flesh, foul blood spurting into his mouth as the warrior's artery was torn in two.

His dying foe fell off him, feebly clawing at his neck in agony as his companion pulled his sword out for another blow. Artorius still held his gladius and swung as hard he could, smashing the pommel into the head of the man who held his other arm. It crushed deep into his temple. As he rolled to his side and shoved his assailant off, he was slashed across the leg by the swordsman. Then, over the deafening sounds of battle, came a war cry louder than anything Artorius had ever heard. One of the auxiliaries leaped over the top of him, driving his spear into the chest of the swordsman. His weapon became stuck, and he quickly drew his gladius as he stepped back and stood

protectively over the Centurion. He then screamed in rage as another warrior came at them, driving his shield into the man's neck. As the warrior fell to the ground, the trooper pinned the bottom of his shield against his neck and violently ran his gladius across his throat. In his now blurred and reddened vision, Artorius thought he must have decapitated the man.

"Dominus!" Magnus shouted as he ran up the slope.

The Fourth Century had just pulled back and were now trying to repel the Frisian counterattack. The Centurion shouted a quick order to his Signifier and rushed back to where Magnus stood next to the rear of his formation.

"We've been overrun, the entire flank has fallen!"

"Shit," Dominus swore under his breath. He then nodded and turned back to his Century.

They had just executed a passage-of-lines and his fourth rank was completely spent.

"Third rank…action right!" the Centurion shouted. The legionaries in his third line immediately pivoted and started to step off towards them. Dominus nodded to Magnus. Magnus nodded in reply before turning his attention to the legionaries who now followed him. There were only sixteen of them, which meant the Fourth had been taking casualties as well.

"Let's go!" the Tesserarius shouted as he raced back down the slope.

It was an unholy sight that greeted them, the legionaries with him gasping in horror. The gap was filled with Frisian warriors, with only a sliver of a Roman line remaining. The auxilia had been overrun as well, and formations had all but completely collapsed. Pockets of men fought together, but there was no line anymore. Magnus steeled himself and braced hard against his shield.

"Online!" he shouted as the legionaries followed suit. He took a deep breath, adrenaline and a lust for vengeance giving him renewed strength. He would save his friends or die in the attempt. *"Charge!"*

The war cries of the Frisians had drowned out Magnus' order, and they seemed oblivious to him and his men as they smashed into the Frisian flank. Shields sent warriors reeling, gladii finishing the job. They rushed past where Optio Praxus and a single legionary still stood fighting. Then they found Sergeant Valens and three others with him. Gradually, they made their small formation bigger as surviving legionaries fell in on them. They were now at an angle to their original formation, with Magnus on the extreme right. It was

he who had to step over the bodies of his fallen companions as they fought to push the Frisians back. The right of the Second Century's line was mostly gone, with just a few auxiliaries left, and these were now in a fight for their own survival. In his peripheral vision, Magnus saw his best friend and Centurion. He was down on one knee and looked to be badly wounded, with blood streaming down his side and leg. A lone auxiliary was fighting in a berserker rage to protect him. The Norseman knew there was nothing he could do to help Artorius. As that realization came to him, their attack stalled. Even with the legionaries they had picked up from the remnants of the Second, his total force was, at most, twenty-five men. The ground was littered with corpses and wounded men, the whole area slick with bloody mud and gore.

This is it, Magnus thought to himself. *We've done all we could. Now we must fight until the bitter end.* As axes hammered his shield, he gave a great cry and fought with renewed vengeance as he accepted his fate.

Odin, let me be worthy of entering Valhalla. Today is a good day…

Chapter XX: Ten Thousand Strong

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"Where the hell are those men going?" Tribune Cursor swore as he watched small groups of auxiliary infantrymen retreating.

Cavalrymen, individually or in small groups, were also lost in the scene of battle. There was no organization to be had in the dense woods. The fog was still so thick that the Tribune had no sense of direction, whatsoever. Only the sounds of battle oriented him to where he needed to be.

"The units are all scattered, sir," a nearby Decanus shouted. "Individual companies have charged on their own. By the gods, the Frisian army is enormous!" The man was sweating profusely and trembling badly on his mount.

"It would seem that way when only a hundred men attack their entire gods' damned army!" Cursor was beside himself, his anger washing away his fatigue, pumping much needed adrenaline through his veins. He then saw a trumpeter riding aimlessly towards the river. *"Hey…you, Trumpeter!"*

The soldier looked glad to have finally found an officer, and he quickly rode over to the Tribune. Cursor then reached over, grabbed him by the collar, and gestured towards an imaginary line that ran perpendicular to the river.

"Ride up and down this line, sounding recall," he ordered. "Don't stop until every last one of our men has reformed and we've gotten some fucking order restored!"

"Yes, sir." The notes from the trumpet began echoing in the fog.

For those who were completely lost, it was something for them to orient on. Cursor knew even those who had panicked in the face of the Frisian hordes would heed its call. After all, there was nothing else for them on this side of the river. They had travelled forty miles in a single day and night, and the only way any of them were leaving this cursed place alive was to go the last few hundred meters and charge into the Frisian army together.

"Tribune Cursor!" a voice called.

Cursor looked to his left and smiled when he recognized Centurion Rodolfo, his horse at a full gallop, coming his way. The Centurion's horse reared up as he pulled the reigns in abruptly.

"The infantry is reorganizing. They are forming up along the river in

columns by cohort."

"About damn time," Cursor replied. "What of the cavalry?"

"They are far more scattered, but they seem to be heeding your trumpet's call."

Cursor galloped over to the front of the reforming auxiliary troops, holding his sword high to focus their attention on him.

"Auxilia of the Army of the Rhine! We have travelled far and hard together. Already you have accomplished far more than the best of men could hope, but it does not end now. Our way home is *forward*, straight into the bloody hearts of our enemy! Keep in formation…wait for my signal. We will charge together, and not only will we save the legions from destruction, we will snatch those rebel bastards' victory right out of their grasp and send those whores' sons to hell! *Primo Victoria!"*

A loud cry erupted from the souls of every last one of his men, piercing through the fog like the crystal rays of the sun. The Tribune centered himself on the cavalry, his trumpeter next to him. Cursor eased his horse forward, making certain he was at least a dozen feet in front of his men. They had followed him this far, and they would follow him the rest of the way. He turned and nodded to the trumpeter and then addressed his men one last time.

"Make ready to assault the gates of hell…charge of the ten thousand!"

A renewed battle cry was joined by the trumpeter sounding the advance. To their right, columns of infantry moved at a quick jog and the cavalry kept pace with them for the first two hundred meters. Once Cursor knew they were close, he signaled with his sword, and the entire wall of cavalry broke into a gallop, swords held aloft in anticipation of the necks that would slake their thirst with the blood and souls of the enemy. Instinctively, the formation moved into a giant wedge at the orders barked from the remaining Centurions.

His horse smashed into the packed Frisian ranks before Cursor even saw them. Luckily, the enemy was infinitely more surprised by the shock of an entire cavalry army smashing into their flank, and Cursor's regiments had penetrated deep into the Frisian ranks before they could react. All around him he could see nothing but the enemy. To his right, he knew were the imperiled legions, though they were still masked by the fog. Quickly, he brought his spatha down in a hard backhand slash that cleaved through the spine of a bewildered Frisian warrior. The man fell forward, his head nearly severed as his neck was split from behind. The Tribune thrust his weapon forward,

catching another enemy on the shoulder who had been too slow blocking with his shield. His sword seemed to sing in its lust for more destruction of the throng of terrified faces before him.



“The bridge is complete, sir!” a First Cohort Centurion shouted back to Legate Labeo. The northern bridge by his Fifth Legion had taken the least amount of time to repair, though it was only now, when the situation for the Roman forces on the far side had become untenable, that at least one of them was stable enough to handle the weight of legionaries in full armor. Sensing the completion of repairs, the entire Legion had been in a state of heightened readiness, armor and helmets donned with weapons at the ready.

“First, Second, and Third Cohorts will push out to the right and link up with the Valeria Legion!” Labeo ordered. “The rest of the Legion will deploy to the left and execute a right wheel into the Frisian flank!”

“Sir!” Master Centurion Alessio acknowledged as cohort commanders rushed back to their units and made ready to cross in force.

The men of the First Cohort double-timed across the rickety bridge, taking care as to not fall over the sides into the raging waters below. All remembered the disaster from the previous day as numerous auxiliary troopers had fallen into the torrential current, never to rise again. It would take some time for the entire legion to cross using a single bridge, and time was something the Romans did not have. Once his First Cohort was across, the Master Centurion ordered his men to follow him along the river bank. He directed the commanders of the Second and Third Cohorts to catch up as soon as their elements were across.

The fog was starting to dissipate, and the men of the Fifth Legion were anxious to get into the battle. The Master Centurion’s body was already soaked from the dampness in the air and the sweat of exertion. They could hear the sounds of battle ahead; war cries, screams of pain, and the clash of weapons all melded together in a symphony of horror.

“There it is!” a man on his left shouted, while pointing with his javelin.

Auxiliary infantry were pulling back, having been savaged by the Frisians when they attacked in too small of a force. The Master Centurion could just make out a handful of legionaries from the Twentieth. They had held!

His eyes narrowed, his breathing coming slow and deep as he turned and

barked his next order.

"Battle formation! Javelins ready!"

The retreating auxiliaries were stunned to see legionaries approaching them. Exhaustion, and the brutality they had faced, struck most of them numb, and they hesitated, not knowing what to do. The Master Centurion made the decision for them.

"You!" he bellowed while pointing his gladius at them. *"Reform, fall in on my right, and get your fucking asses back in the fight!"*

Though still in a state of shock, at least one of the auxiliary Centurions managed to rouse his men, and they followed him onto the First Cohort's right flank. At the subsequent order, the legionaries advanced. They no longer jogged, but rather moved at the disciplined march that came just before fury was unleashed. As they closed on the Frisians, they knew their Second and Third Cohorts would be joining them soon enough.

"Front rank…throw!"

For the Frisians who had just repelled the auxiliary assault on their flank, this latest blow proved to be too much for even the hardest of them. Javelins ripped into bodies of unsuspecting warriors, blood and filth spraying their companions in the wake of the screams of horror and pain. They had spent the better part of two days trying to destroy the legion in front of them, and now, before they could finish the task, fresh Roman troops were driving into their flank with disciplined ferocity. A wall of shields drove into them, toppling warriors in the onslaught. Their victory, once so close, was rapidly vanishing in the flash of legionary blades and the screams of the dying.

"The gods have abandoned us," Olbert said through clenched teeth. He had survived the previous day and had hoped to reunite with his friends Tabbo and Prince Klaes when this day was done. Instead, his doom bore down on him behind a wall of brightly painted shields. He gritted his teeth, limbered up his shoulders, and turned to meet his fate.



Dibbald could see little beyond the horde of men to his front. The fog was still thick, and although this impeded his situational awareness, he knew it hindered the Romans even more so. At least one entire legion was trapped on this side of the river. His men had been hammering the enemy lines for more

than a day now. Cold, hunger, and extreme fatigue were breaking them, and the Frisian King knew it would be over soon enough. He dared to think, perhaps, it would not be in vain, that his nation just might achieve a real victory against the Roman army! As he pondered this, a messenger rode quickly towards him, shouting words in a panic that Dibbald could not understand over the noise of the battle.

"My King, we are undone!" the man shouted as he halted his horse next to him. The messenger was panting, sweat rolling down his face, eyes wide with terror.

"Calm yourself," Dibbald replied. "What do you mean *undone?"* The messenger pointed over his shoulder towards the Frisian right flank, but all the King could see was fog and the massed formation of his advancing warriors.

"The Romans...I don't know how, but they've flanked us…infantry and cavalry have smashed our right flank!"

"Impossible!" Lourens shouted. "It's twenty miles upriver to the nearest ford. They can't possibly have gone around in a day!"

"They have, and they attack us now," the messenger said between gasps of breath.

As the King quickly tried to assess the situation, another messenger ran up on foot.

"Sire, the Romans have repaired one of the bridges! An entire legion has also assaulted the flank!"

Lourens looked to Dibbald, his face grim. Amke rushed to his side and grasped the bridle of his horse.

"Uncle, now is the time!" she pleaded. "Send the Daughters of Freyja into the fight! It is time we earned our right as protectors of the Segon Kings!"

Dibbald closed his eyes and swallowed. Without looking at his niece, he gave a slow nod. Amke gave an almost euphoric smile, released the reins, and rushed to her warriors.

"Daughters of Freyja!" she shouted, her hand axe raised high. "The time has come for us to earn our place in the history of our people! Now we must save our King and our nation. We can turn the tide of this battle by fighting beside our brothers in this, our people's most desperate hour! *With me!"*

A cry like a host of screaming Medusas filled the air. Amke pointed her axe towards a cohort of legionaries that were bearing down on them. At last it was time; time for her to unleash all the pent up hurt, frustration, and fury

that had been building up inside ever since the arrival of that abominable creature, Olennius. She cursed that he was not there to suffer what was coming to him; but then, soft magistrates hid behind the walls of the iron men that faced her now. She gave another cry and rushed towards her foe.

"Holy shit, they've got girls fighting for them!" a legionary shouted as he hefted his javelin to throwing position. These men were of the Fifth Legion's Sixth Cohort, and they had yet to engage the enemy.

"A woman with an axe can kill you just as effectively as a man," his Decanus warned him. "Stand ready to skewer these harlots!"

"Javelins ready!" the Centurion Pilus Prior shouted. The young soldier did not like the idea of killing women, but the faces of the howling mob racing towards him with weapons ready to strike unnerved him, enough that his morals would have to understand as he focused on a rather fetching young woman. The veins in her neck pulsed, her eyes filled with hatred.

So young, so beautiful, the soldier thought to himself. *Such a waste!*

"Front rank…throw!"

A terrible storm of javelins slammed into the ranks of Amke's warriors. Girls and young women fell screaming in pain as their guts were torn through. She held her shield up high to deflect a javelin, only to have it puncture through. The weight knocked her shield into her face, the javelin stabbing her in the upper arm. She dropped her now useless shield and clutched her arm. The puncture was painful but not serious. Next to her, one of her sister's head snapped back as a javelin ruptured her throat and tore out the back of her neck. Amke fought back a sob as the girl thrashed on the ground, clutching at her throat. Feeling terribly guilty, but knowing there was nothing else she could do; she reached down and wrenched the dying warrior's shield from her twitching fingers.

"Forgive me, sister," she pleaded quietly as she turned and faced her enemy once more, "but the living need the protection more than the dead."

Volleys of javelins tore into her sisters as they continued to rush towards the Roman shield wall. Though less than a minute had passed since she first gave the order to charge, it felt like ages. *The Daughters of Freyja* were earning their place, though at a terrible price. Amke moved at a controlled jog, no longer running blindly.

"Rah!"

The battle cry shouted by the Romans as they unsheathed their gladii caused Amke to gulp. She now understood why King Adel had sued for peace against Drusus Nero! Sadly, her generation did not have the luxury of dealing with an amicable Roman at the head of this metal juggernaut. When she was but ten feet away, she hunkered down behind her shield and ran full tilt into the Roman line.

The legionary whose shield she collided with was much larger and stronger than she. Though he gave a short step back as they hit, Amke was knocked back several feet by the shock. Her warriors on either side were also trying to smash through the Roman shield wall. Most bounced harmlessly off, the shock and casualties they had suffered under the javelin storm had thinned their ranks and left them temporarily unable to mass their numbers against the Roman line. She swung her axe in frustration, banging against the bright red and yellow shield, whose metal boss was constantly punched in her face. Her attack was doing little more than aggravate the legionary she faced, still she tried to find an opening. Unawares, she was being forced back, as were her fellow warrior maidens. One lost her footing and fell onto her back. With lightening speed a legionary lunged down and stabbed her beneath the heart.

Her sorrow turning to rage, Amke lunged forward again, ramming her shield and shoulder into the legionary she sparred with. A gladius was thrust at her face, and it was only at the last second that she managed to avoid taking a sword through the eye. She stepped back and swung her axe again, where it deflected off the brass strip on the side. As she glanced behind her to make sure of her footing, she saw a knot in the ground, jutting up about two feet. A grin came to her face as she bounced back onto it. The legionaries then stopped, and the front rank suddenly tilted their shields parallel to their bodies and stepped back past the rank behind them. These men rushed forward, taking their place. A Roman cohort executing a passage-of-lines was an awesome, and yet terrible, sight. The legionaries they now faced were completely fresh.

Amke growled, and as the Romans continued their advance she gave a cry of rage and leapt high into the air, coming down on the inside edge of a legionary’s shield. The soldier was taken by surprise long enough for Amke to follow through with a hard downward smash of her axe. It was the perfect strike, placed right where the shoulder muscles ran into the neck. To Amke’s surprise, her ever-sharp axe simply bounced off the segmentata plates that

protected his shoulders. The soldier then shoved her back with his shield, smashing her in the face with the metal boss. Her vision clouded, and she did not even feel the stabbing of his sword as it punctured her hip, gouging the muscles and bone.

She fell onto her side, her face half buried in the muck. Advancing legionaries stepped on or over her, their hobnailed caligae tearing into her flesh in places they stomped. She was unaware of the last legionary to step over her. He was the first one she had faced, and he noticed she was still alive. She never knew that he raised his gladius to finish her, only to shake his head and continue his march without driving his weapon home.

As the Daughters of Freyja fought valiantly in a battle they now knew they could not win, King Dibbald watched in sorrow. He could not see his niece amongst the fray and feared she had already fallen. Lourens scanned the battlefield for her as well, but now was seeing nothing but Roman shields and the few survivors of Amke's regiment breaking and running with the rest of the Frisian army.

"My King, you must vacate the field," Lourens advised the King. "I will take half of the household cavalry and counterattack the Romans. At least then we can ensure your safety." He then turned and addressed horsemen behind him. "Half the men will escort the King to safety; the rest will fall in on me." The warrior turned his horse about when he was stopped by the words of his King.

"No," Dibbald spoke deliberately, and yet seemingly calm. "If I do not make my stand here, then I am no King worthy of the Segon line. The entire regiment will fall in on *me*. Lourens, you and I will lead the charge together. My son is gone, our line broken. If I am to follow him this day, then at least we will make a stand that will ensure our immortality!"

The warrior nodded with deep sadness in his eyes. "We will follow you to the halls of our valiant ancestors, sire."As the finest horsemen in all of Frisia formed up around their King, Dibbald caught sight of the Roman cavalry. One of their regiments had wheeled around behind his army and was now bearing down on them. He recognized the standards of the elite *Indus' Horse*.

"At least I will die at the hands of brave men," he said quietly before nodding to one of his men, who raised his horn and sounded the charge.



Cursor and his group of picked cavalrymen were sweeping around the Frisian flank in an attempt to get behind the mob. The warriors, who had been to their left, once they charged into the fray, had been mostly killed or fled from the battle. His horse suddenly reared up in the face of a Frisian spear, only to have the warrior wielding it, cut down by a Roman lance. Cursor kept control of his mount and continued to move, hoping to find the rear flank of the enemy. At last, they turned the corner of the formation and pressed forward so they could get directly behind their enemy. Through the thinning mist he saw Indus' Horse charging at a full gallop to their left. Meeting them, also at a full charge, was the Frisian cavalry. The sounds of men, horses, shields, and spears crashing together were muffled by the clinging fog. Though a brave and worthy foe, Cursor knew the outcome of this engagement before the first blow was struck. Julius Indus commanded the finest cavalry regiment in the whole of the Empire. The Tribune then realized why he had not been able to find Indus and rally his men. They were perhaps the only ones in their entire force who had not been lost and had, in fact, been right where they were supposed to be! In the absence of orders, he had taken it upon himself to go after the Frisian King.

"Sir, the enemy is reforming!" a trooper shouted while pointing to their front.

Cursor swore under his breath as the enemy, who moments before looked as if they were fleeing, was quickly reforming their ranks.

His feelings of euphoria at the sight of the Frisian King's bodyguard cavalry being mauled by Indus' Horse was short lived, for it looked like his ten thousand had expended their charge. Auxiliary infantry units were withdrawing as the Frisians counterattacked the flanking force. The bulk of his cavalry was completely spent as well, with men and horses now falling to Frisian spears.

"Damn it!" he swore as he and Centurion Rodolfo apprised their, now desperate, situation. "Even if Indus does kill the Frisian King, we are fucked!"

"No," Rodolfo replied, pointing over the Tribune's shoulder. "Look, the Fifth Legion has crossed over the bridge!"

Cursor's face broke into a wide grin as he saw the standards of the Fifth gleaming through the fast thinning fog.

"Thank the gods," the Tribune said, closing his eyes for a second. "Five

thousand legionaries…and they are fresh, too."

"What say we finish this then?" Rodolfo said, nodding with his head towards the rear of the Frisian army.

Cursor nodded slowly, his face contorting into a determined scowl.

"Form it up, online!" he shouted as the hundred or so horsemen he had with him fell into a long, thin line parallel to the Frisian army.

Cohorts of the Fifth Legion had unleashed a torrent of javelins into the enemy, who were now wavering in the renewed Roman onslaught. Cursor hoped that by hitting them directly from behind, he would break them. His men were beyond exhausted, and he knew they could only carry their assault so far before extreme fatigue brought on by forty miles of hard marching, combined with little food and no sleep over the past two days would become too much for them. Their tasking suddenly changed as Frisian war horns sounded in desperation, and the entire mass of warriors suddenly turned and began to flee in all directions.

Cursor grinned sinisterly as he shouted his next order. *"Charge!"*

The Frisians were now scattered and leaderless, the will to fight taken from them as the Tribune led the remnants of his cavalry into their fleeing ranks. He swung his sword in an underhand motion, catching a warrior underneath the chin. His spatha was almost wrenched from his hand as the weapon caught in the man's neck while blood gushed onto the blade. Cursor jerked his weapon free, wrenching his shoulder. The enemy was escaping, some even jumping into the river in order to save themselves.



The Frisian flank had collapsed under the onslaught of the Fifth Legion and Cursor's ten thousand. The Master Centurion rammed his shield into a warrior, knocking the man onto his back. He then brought the bottom edge of his shield down in a horrific smash onto his neck. The Frisian thrashed around violently, grasping at his crushed windpipe as he fought in vain for breath. The Master Centurion brought his shield down again, breaking the man's skull with a loud crack. As they drew closer to the left flank of the Twentieth Legion, the Frisian army turned about and was now on the run. The trees were thick, and Alessio could just make out the end of the line of legionaries. He took a deep breath and slowly walked towards their position. As he did so, a Centurion from the Twentieth approached him. Alessio

recognized the man, though could not remember his name.

“Centurion Agricola, commander of the Sixth Cohort,” the man said with a salute as he got closer.

“Thank the gods!” The Master Centurion replied with a nod.

Agricola was a fearful sight. His eyes were bloodshot, his face pale and clammy. He was trying to control his rapid breathing; swallowing in spite of the fact his mouth was parched. The front of his armor looked as if it had been through a slaughterhouse. In his dark humor, Alessio surmised that, in a way, he had.

“Your men have been through hell itself,” Alessio said with an air of reverence in his voice.

Agricola took a knee and removed his helmet. His hair was matted with sweat and grime, his face cut in numerous places.

“Sir, we need your help finding our lost cohort,” he said after catching his breath.

“You *what?*”



As Cursor continued to ride forward, the last of their foes disappeared from his view. The sight that greeted him wrenched at his heart. He was at the end of the Twentieth Legion’s line, and all he could see were bodies, both Roman and Frisian. He recognized the Signum that still stood upright amongst the carnage. It was the Third Cohort’s Second Century. He gasped in realization as he saw, on the far left, his old friend, Centurion Artorius, slumped against a tree. Cursor quickly rode forward, practically leaping off his horse once he was upon his friend.

One could not even see the ground around the Centurion. Even the places that weren’t piled with bodies were still covered in pools of blood, gray matter, and bits of entrails. Cursor removed his helmet and knelt down next to Artorius, who partially opened his remaining good eye. The other had since swollen shut.

“Still alive, are we?” the Centurion said through parched lips.

“The gods obviously have a sense of humor,” Cursor replied, taking his hand. “How are you, old friend?”

Artorius was covered in blood, and his side bore a nasty gash. Cursor did

not see any wounds that looked fatal. Still, Artorius was a frightful sight.

"I'm certain I look exactly how I feel," the Centurion replied with a weak smile. His face immediately became somber, a tear forming in his right eye. "My men…you must take care of my men!"

Cursor swallowed hard and nodded.

"Trooper!" he shouted to the nearest horseman. "Take a dozen men and get all the bandages and medical supplies you can muster!"

"Yes, sir," the man replied. The trooper's face betrayed the sense of shock he felt at the frightful sight of the Second Century. It was amazing that anyone was left alive in the carnage.



The clash between the royal household regiment and the famed Indus' Horse had lasted but a few minutes. Dibbald had been struck from his horse almost immediately by a Roman lance, his body trampled in the onslaught. He felt little pain in his lower body and knew that could only mean his spine was crushed when his horse stumbled and fell on top of him. Lourens lay nearby, his eyes open and lifeless, throat torn out. His body covered in blood. Almost every member of his household cavalry had fallen. Bodies were piled around him as his men had refused to abandon their King, even though he lay dying. The Roman cavalry, having disposed of the King, now pushed to the far flank in order to envelope the now routed Frisian army. As his army retreated, one man made his way deliberately for him. It was Tabbo, his most beloved war chief.

"My King!" Tabbo cried as he dropped his weapons and knelt beside him. "By Freyja, what have they done to you?" He seemed desperate to put his hands on Dibbald, to offer some comfort to his master.

Yet his entire body was broken. Both arms and legs were shattered, splinters of bone jutting through the skin. His guts were splayed open and everything was covered in blood. How he still lived he did not know, but he knew it would not be for long.

"Tabbo," he whispered. "My son is gone, and I go to join him. It is you who must lead our people now."

"Please, sire…" the war chief started to plead but was quickly silenced as Dibbald painfully shook his head.

"You are the greatest of my war chiefs. They *will* follow you…I am

honored to name you King of Frisia." Dibbald took a few shallow breaths, his eyes clouding as they rolled into his head. He then refocused on Tabbo and gave his final words. "Do not let our sacrifice be in vain."

Tabbo hung his head, his body trembling in sorrow as he felt his King breathe his last.

"Sire, the Romans are upon us, we must flee!" a voice shouted to him.

Tabbo nodded in his first acknowledgment that he was now King of his people. He then lifted Dibbald's shattered body onto the King's horse. The prize stallion had somehow survived the onslaught and had stayed loyally by his master.

"We will rally at the sacred groves of Freyja," he ordered the few remaining men of the Household cavalry. "The Romans do not have the strength for a long pursuit. I promise you this, we may have lost the battle, but in this defeat we shall find final victory!"

As he turned to leave, his eyes fell upon one of the many wounded. It was Amke, niece of Dibbald Segon. She lay on her back in the mud, unable to turn over and crawl away. Her left arm lay crumpled across her chest, a horrifying gash running from the outside of her shoulder down to the inside of the elbow joint. Blood flowed from the wound. Tabbo rushed to her side and knelt beside her. Her right eye was swollen shut, the entire side of her face scored and a sickly hue of purple and yellow beneath the skin. A deep gash in her left hip was covered in clotted crimson.

"Oh, daughter," Tabbo mourned as he lifted the young woman into his arms.

She winced as pain overtook her, and the King reckoned that several of her ribs were broken. Bodies of her slain sisters lay around her. The Daughters of Freyja had made a valiant, albeit futile, stand.

"We tried…" she gasped, fighting for breath through the blinding pain. "We tried to save the King…we failed…we failed." The pain was too much, and Amke swooned in Tabbo's arms.

He carried the girl from the field. She was the only surviving member of the Segon line, and he would not leave her to die in that pit of suffering.

Chapter XXI: Horror and Madness

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The house looked deserted to the legionaries who approached it with caution. The stone wall surrounding the villa was just over waist high, and it was overgrown with moss and weeds. Where there had once been a gate, was now just a pair of rusted hinges which some rotting boards still clung to.

“I know this place,” Agricola said as he led a group of men from the Fifth Legion through the opening. In spite of his extreme exhaustion, he had insisted upon accompanying Alessio and his legionaries. The Pilus Prior of the Fourth Cohort was a friend of his, and he had to know his fate. Others were circling the outside of the wall and looking for clues that could lead them to the lost cohort.

“How do you know it, sir?” one of the soldiers asked as he pushed a cluster of weeds aside with his gladius.

The entire area between the wall and the house proper was an overgrown mess.

“It once belonged to a retired auxilia, who was also a Gallic noble, named Cruptorix,” the Centurion replied as he eyed the front of the house with suspicion.

The scant openings in the boarded up windows on both floors were pitch black and unnerving.

“Most of the weeds are trampled leading up to the door,” another legionary observed. “Someone’s been here.”

“Sir, we’ve got a number of drag marks and blood trails over here!” a Decanus shouted from off to the left.

Agricola had been in a stupor from lack of sleep, but now he was suddenly awake once more. He rushed over to where the Decanus was pointing towards the trees that paralleled the house about twenty meters away.

“Found a Frisian shield,” Master Centurion Alessio said, as he picked up the scoured shield. “Your lads made a stand here alright.”

The sound of loud banging on the door startled them. They looked over to see a legionary hammering on the door with the butt of his gladius while shouting to anyone who may be inside.

“I don’t get it,” he said, turning to the Centurions after his shouts went

unheeded. “If they are here, why don’t they answer? The barricades on all the doors are still in place, so if they are here, they must still be inside.”

An icy chill ran up Agricola’s spine. He looked over at Alessio, whose ashen face told him that he, too, had the same sense of dread.

“It’s going to take a fucking battering ram to break in here,” a nearby soldier said in frustration.

“Then get one!” Agricola barked. “I don’t care if you have to cut down the nearest fucking tree, get inside that gods damned house!”

Alessio shouted concurring orders to his Optio, who headed into the woods with twenty men to see if they could find a fallen tree.

“My apologies, sir,” Agricola said once they were alone.

Soldiers’ voices were heard in the background, calling out to the lost cohort.

Alessio shook his head. “Were they of my Legion, I would do the same,” he replied calmly.

Agricola shuddered once more. Though it was now midmorning, and the fog had since dissipated, he still felt cold.

Alessio started as a legionary grasped his arm. The soldier was visibly shaking in his boots. With a trembling hand he pointed to something hanging over the doorway.

Alessio pulled his arm way and looked askance of the legionary. In a whisper, the soldier started to speak, but a shudder of terror grasped his throat.

“What is it, man?” Agricola demanded.

“It’s cursed!” the man gasped.

Hanging overhead was a wreath of human and animal bones, intertwined and tied together with locks of long human hair.

“I have seen this before. It is used by the unholy barbarians to destroy men’s minds, causing unimaginable agony as their most terrible fears consume their thoughts.”

“Get a grip on yourself, soldier!” Agricola snapped.

The terrified legionary backed away, still trembling.

Within minutes, the Optio and his men returned, bearing a semi-rotting log that still looked heavy enough to break through the barricaded doors. The men made their way up the short steps to the front door. A quick series of commands and the sound of the makeshift ram slamming into the door echoed in the otherwise silent woods. Chunks of rotten wood flew off the ram

with each blow, but soon the braces on the other side of the door snapped and gave way. Agricola and Alessio quickly ran to the door as the soldiers tossed the log aside. Agricola gave a sharp kick, opening the doors just enough to allow a man to pass inside. There were no torches available, and he stumbled over upturned furniture that had been stacked against the door. He stopped just inside, allowing his eyes to adjust to the dark. Alessio and several men came in behind him.

"Can't see a bloody thing," one of them whispered, as he groped his way along the wall to the nearest boarded up window. "Here! Someone give me a hand with this!"

Two of his companions fumbled their way through the dark and with their gladii proceeded to pry out one of the boards. With a grinding snap the board crashed to the floor; the sight that greeted the men, as a dim light fell upon the room, caused them all to recoil in horror.

"What the…what the fuck happened here?" Agricola stuttered, his face clammy with shock. A slain legionary lay but a foot from him, coagulated blood sticking to his sandals. Bodies littered the floor. Laid out in neat rows was the Fourth Cohort.

"Sir, it's the same all up there," an ashen-faced legionary reported, coming down the stairs.

"Any survivors?" Alessio asked softly. The legionary shook his head in reply. He then removed his helmet and wiped his forearm across his brow.

"Seems the Frisians got to them after all," the soldier said quietly.

"Idiot!" Alessio barked. "All the entrances were barred; I scarcely think the Frisians would have sealed the place up again! And look around. Do you really think the enemy would have just left their weapons and armor on them? Use some common sense, man!"

Agricola placed a hand on his shoulder, silencing him. Alessio turned to see that the Pilus Prior had not moved. His eyes were still fixed on the dead legionary, whose lifeless eyes stared piteously up at him.

"I did not mean that the Frisians killed them directly," the legionary on the stairs explained, his eyes cast downward. He then looked into the face of his Master Centurion. "But they got to them, sir. Something scared these men into committing mutual suicide."

"This can't be possible," Alessio said with a shake of his head.

"The bodies tell a different story," Agricola replied quietly. "Look at them; all slashed through the jugular. They figured it would be a quick and

reasonably painless way to die. Did you find the officers?" As he asked the question, he at last looked up at the legionary, who nodded somberly in reply.

"Yes, sir. All Centurions and Options are in the same room upstairs."

"How is it that every last man in this cohort was convinced that this was right?" Alessio asked. "More than four hundred men and not one of them elected to fight for a chance to live! If they were going to die, they should have died fighting the enemy, not slaughtering each other!"

"What would you have us do, sir?" an Optio asked.

"Surround the house," Alessio replied. "We need to figure out what to do with the bodies. And send for carts to come pick up their weapons and armor. No sense leaving them to the Frisians. Once we get disposition orders on the bodies, we'll torch this damn place!"

As Agricola walked outside, he felt as if he were stepping out of a nightmare. Suddenly, he was very tired, and he longed to be away from this awful place. He stumbled through the broken gate where a squad of legionaries from the Fifth Legion stood guard. As soon as he felt he was out of sight, he fell against a tree and allowed himself to collapse to the earth. He dropped his helmet beside him and buried his face in his hands. After a few minutes he felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked over through tear-stained eyes to see Master Centurion Alessio kneeling beside him.

"I'm sorry." It was all he could say.

Though they were not his men or his friends, Alessio's face was ashen. "I sent word to your Commanding Legate. My lads will stay here and watch over the place."

Agricola nodded in reply. "Thank you," he said. "I just wish I knew what could possibly have terrified an entire cohort into doing what they did." He wrung his hands in frustration as he spoke.

"I don't think we'll ever know," Alessio replied. "Regardless of what did it, I say these woods are cursed, and the sooner we leave here the better!"

Word from Legate Apronius returned with the carts, giving permission to do what they thought was best.

The weapons and armor were quickly removed from the dwelling, piled in a jumbled mess as they were loaded onto the carts.

As the dwelling was emptied of all except the grisly contents, Agricola ordered, "Fire this damned building, *now!*" and stepped back.

The flames, encouraged by oil brought with the carts, eagerly began to

climb the walls.

Agricola looked up and saw the horrible wreath crumbling in the rising flames as they consumed the dwelling. That last look would haunt him for the rest of his life.



Amke winced as Tabbo applied a bandage to her hip. The new King of Frisia had many such injured warriors to attend to, but he wanted to make certain that the last of the Segons would live before moving on. Once satisfied, he stood and gazed at the ghastly sight that surrounded him.

Families had gathered at the grove to assist in the caring of their loved ones. Cries of mourning echoed in the night as the dead were laid out in rows. Mothers, wives, and children sought in vain for many who were still unaccounted for. Tabbo had no way of knowing how many dead still lay on the field, though he knew the number was far greater than what they had recovered. And how many of their wounded were now prisoners of war?

“It’s a terrible sight,” a voice said behind him. He turned to see is old friend Olbert. A gash ran across the warrior’s cheek and he walked with a limp. Tabbo allowed himself a sad smile and embraced his friend.

“It gladdens me that you live,” he said quietly.

“And to you, sire,” Olbert replied, acknowledging Tabbo as his sovereign.

“It is with a heavy heart that I take that responsibility,” the King replied. “Much have our people suffered, and now I must find them victory within the sorrow.”

“How can you possibly find victory in this?” Olbert asked, exasperated. “The Romans have beaten us, like they did under Drusus Nero!”

“No,” Tabbo replied. “They have won this battle, but our people are not broken. Look upon them, and you will see strength in their faces, despite the pain. They knew that this was the alternative to starvation, and they chose this path willingly. Do not forget that the Romans suffered greatly, as well. Exhaustion and casualties have prevented them from launching any kind of a pursuit. The legions should have been on our heels coming to this place, but look behind us. There are no soldiers, no clashing of metal coming for us in the night. We must strengthen our resolve, old friend. I do not think the

Romans wish to fight us any more unless they have no other option. Unlike the time of Drusus Nero, this time *we* will lay out the terms and see if Rome accepts.”

Chapter XXII: Battles Won and a War Lost

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There was a universal feeling of exhaustion amongst the Roman ranks. This was not the mere fatigue one felt after marching for a day in full kit and then building camp, nor was it like they felt after a day of drill or even actual battle. No, what the survivors felt was something beyond human endurance or comprehension. None of them knew their bodies could even withstand such punishment. The auxiliary infantry, who had flanked the enemy and were now trying to set up a screen line, found for the most part they were unable to even stand. The wounded were in even more dire straits due to their injuries and loss of blood. Some men fell to their knees and vomited uncontrollably; others fell down from dizziness. Even those who could stand wore vacant expressions and stared aimlessly at nothing.

As he lay against a tree, Artorius could not help but admire these men who had saved them. Forty miles they had marched in a single day and night. He knew such feats were possible, yet to do so and then charge into battle was something he would never fully understand. He turned and looked to his left. Bodies were everywhere, both Frisian and Roman. While the auxilia had been on their forced march, he and his legionaries had been in a murderous fight for their lives; a fight that, in essence, they had lost. Even the reserves that Magnus brought from the Fourth Century and led in a counterattack had bought them but temporary reprieve. Were it not for Tribune Cursor and his ten thousand strong, he knew all would have perished.

He then wondered how many *had* perished, and how many more had succumbed to wounds and exhaustion and could neither move nor call out for aid. His own injuries had gotten the best of him, though he still did not know how bad they were. His side did not hurt, yet his armor was split. It had taken a razor sharp sword with a man forcing all his weight onto it to burst through, and Artorius cursed that Centurions never kept their issued segmentata armor. The blows that wounded him would have never penetrated through the plate armor worn by legionaries. Though heavy and cumbersome, many more would have died were it not for their protective armor. The legionaries who had been slain had mostly died due to blows rendered in unprotected places like the neck, groin, or femoral artery. Only a handful, such as Legionary Carbo, had been killed by Frisians who actually were able to penetrate the

segmentata.

Artorius looked to his right when he heard a loud groaning. It was the auxiliary trooper who had saved his life. The young man was crawling on his hands and knees towards him. His helmet was gone, his forehead split open and bleeding profusely. His leg bore a nasty gash, impeding his ability to walk. Injuries and utter exhaustion limited his movements to little more than a crawl.

"Sir," the lad said as he collapsed next to the Centurion.

"You saved my life," Artorius replied. The trooper could only nod, his eyes shut from the blood and sweat running into them.

"I had to make certain you lived," he said at last.

"What do you mean?" Artorius asked, the man's emphasis puzzling him. Why did he have to live above all others?

The trooper could not answer. At first Artorius thought he was dead, but then he saw the slight rising and falling of the man's chest as his breath refused to leave him. Artorius winced as he reached over and placed a hand on the trooper's shoulder.

A short way down the line, Sergeant Valens was on his knees, sobbing uncontrollably over the bodies of his beloved friends, Decimus and Carbo. Magnus was on a knee next to him, holding his friend close, tears flowing freely down his blood-stained cheeks. Those few from the Second Century still able to stand, desperately checked their fallen companions, tears of joy or sorrow following as they sorted the wounded from the dead.

At the end of the line, Optio Praxus took charge of setting up a casualty collection point for the wounded. In reality, every soldier in the Second Century had suffered numerous injuries; it was only a matter of who could still walk and those who could no longer. The soldiers Magnus had led from the rest of the Cohort assisted him.

"Sir, what do you want us to do with the enemy wounded?" one asked. "There are a lot of them mixed in amongst our lads."

"Disarm them and bring them to the casualty collection point," Praxus replied. "Bind their hands if they still pose a threat."

"There's no way we have the resources to take care of their wounded," a legionary protested, "not with the number of losses we've sustained!"

"Shut the fuck up and do what you're told!" a Decanus from the detachment barked at him.

As the legionaries went about their task, he walked over to Praxus and said quietly, “The lad’s right you know. We can’t possibly take care of all of their wounded and our own.”

“I know,” the Optio replied in an equally low voice, though his was borne out of fatigue rather than a desire to be quiet. “My instincts tell me they will serve us better alive than dead. They are brave men and shouldn’t be left to die in the mud. At least we can gather them with their comrades, to die together.”



Apronius was perplexed that he was still alive. His entire legion had been cut off and almost annihilated. He had personally taken a stand beside Camillus in order to protect the Legion’s precious Eagle from being captured. The quick reactions of Master Centurion Calvinus had saved both the Eagle as well as the Legate’s life. In the hours since the battle, he had managed to catch a little sleep and to wash and have a shave. Scouts reported that the Frisian’s were sending a deputation to parley with them, and he, at least, needed to make himself look like a noble Roman. He was anxious for this meeting, though not just to negotiate a cessation of hostilities. Rumor had it from several eyewitnesses, including Tribune Cursor, that the Frisian King himself had been killed during the battle, along with his only son.

His headquarters tent had been hastily erected with all the formal trappings. Appearance was important, not just his own person, but the camp and what the Frisians would see of his army. With him were all the senior officers in the Legion still able to stand on their own. Only two of the Tribunes were present. One had been killed, and the other three were badly injured. The Laticlavian Tribune had also been killed. In addition to Master Centurion Calvinus, only Centurion Primus Ordo Draco was on hand, the other First Cohort Centurions amongst the wounded, including Centurions Macro and Proculus. Tribune Cursor, the man who had saved all of their lives, was given a seat next to the Legate. This esteemed honor was not lost upon anyone, least of all Cursor himself. At length a legionary stepped in and saluted.

“Sir, the Frisian deputation has arrived.” Apronius nodded and returned the salute.

“How many?”

“Only four. They came to us unarmed, stating that their small escort of cavalry would wait a mile from our camp. They assured us there are no other forces with them.”

“Very well,” Apronius replied. He and the other officers stood as the Frisians entered the tent. Their faces were cleaned of any war paint they had worn before, and they, too, had taken the time to wash and make themselves presentable. A taller, better dressed man in the front of the small group spoke first. His right shoulder was bandaged and his arm in a sling.

“I am Tabbo, King of the Frisians.”

“No,” Apronius interrupted with a shake of his head. “Your King is Dibbald Segon. Where is he?”

Tabbo’s presence alone gave him the answer he sought, though he wanted to hear it directly from them. Two of the Frisians looked away, another bit the inside of his cheek, forcing himself to keep silent. Tabbo’s eyes bored into the Roman.

“Our beloved King has gone to join his ancestors, in a place where all the valiant pass into. It is by his own words that I am now King of Frisia.”

“Then you are welcome here, sire,” Apronius said. “May the gods of both our peoples bless this gathering.”

“Aye, may Freyja and Mars both find favor in our meeting,” Tabbo remarked in an extension to the courtesy given to him.

Both men knew the battle, though brutal as it was, had decided nothing. Now diplomacy would do what it could.

“I submit that we declare an immediate cessation of hostilities and allow both sides to bury and honor their dead.”

“Granted,” Apronius replied. He then nodded to Calvinus who handed a scroll to a legionary messenger.

The Legate quickly explained, “Those are directives ordering my men not to assault, either physically or verbally, any of your peoples while they collect your dead. I expect the same will be shown from your warriors towards my legionaries. You also have permission to retrieve your wounded from our custody.”

“Of course, honorable Legate of Rome.” Tabbo knew the real reason behind this show of clemency. The Romans’ resources were stretched dangerously thin just trying to care for their own wounded. He also knew that the Frisian wounded numbered in the thousands, and removing and caring for them would tax his own forces heavily. Still, he was grateful. It was fairly

common practice when a smaller force defeated a much larger one; they would kill any wounded left on the field. The Romans' magnanimity was not lost on him.

"I must also inform you that I have been given authority by the Emperor himself to negotiate on his behalf," Apronius continued. "Any treaties or agreements made between us carry the full weight of his divine authority."

Tabbo once more nodded in acknowledgment of the Legate's statement. He then produced some documents from beneath the folds of his cloak.

"It is with a heavy heart that we have not been able to produce these for you before so much needless bloodshed," the Frisian King said as he laid them on the table. "These are edicts, signed by the Magistrate Olennius. They are the reason our peoples went to war." He continued to speak as Calvinus and Cursor each looked through the documents.

Apronius kept his eyes fixed on Tabbo, both men with their hands folded on the table.

"Our people were taxed to the point where we were starving to death, and still he demanded more. And when we were no longer able to pay, our lands, livestock, even our women and children were taken from us in payment."

"Why were we not told of this before?" Cursor asked, looking up from his reading. The seals on the documents were all official, written in legal language that the Frisians would not be able to duplicate through forgery.

"We tried," Tabbo replied, somberly. He then told of the messengers that Dibbald had sent, of their brutal fate and the ignominious flogging their King had received as a warning. "Frisia was once a loyal province of the Empire. As such, we were entitled to protection from threats both beyond our borders, as well as from within. Rome betrayed that trust. For our loyalty we were punished." He paused to let the words sink in.

Though Apronius had yet to look at the documents validating his claims, he knew that Tabbo spoke the truth.

"Know that while I bear no ill will towards the people of Rome or the Emperor himself," Tabbo continued, "my people *will not* return to the way things were. Our warriors are all gathered at a sacred grove, barely a day's march from here. If you wish to return us to subjugation by force then meet us there, for you will have to destroy us to the last. Just remember the loss you have suffered here and how much more Rome will lose before it is done. How many more of your men are you willing to send to the afterlife in order to exterminate our race? And is death how the Emperor rewards previous

loyalties?”

Apronius stole a quick glance to each side, catching the barely noticeable nods from both Calvinus and Cursor. Even Draco hung his head slightly.

“You give us much to discuss,” Apronius replied. “Return tomorrow and you will have the Emperor’s answer.”

Tabbo stood and bowed deeply before exiting the tent. Once they were gone, the Legate slumped his shoulders and let out a deep breath. He looked over at Cursor, who was still pouring through the documents.

“The Frisians have been a peaceful province for many years,” the Tribune said when he felt his Legate’s gaze bearing down on him. He then looked up and handed the edicts to Apronius. “They gave us their loyalty…and we fucked them.”



Artorius wondered if he would ever feel clean again. His body was sticky with dried sweat and flakes of blood, his hair matted to the point he could not run his fingers through it. The blood and grime came off his hands and body in clumps. He had removed his armor and tunic while a surgeon tried to clean his wound and stitch it up. He reckoned the gash in his side was probably the cleanest part of his entire body. Though he felt it would be best to put his tunic back on, the stench embedded into the garment was repugnant. A makeshift bandage was wrapped around his waist, and his body had numerous other injuries. A superficial gash marked his left thigh, and his right leg bore a nasty bruise that caused his muscles to knot up and make him walk with a limp. His left eye was swollen shut, and he struggled in vain to open it.

He sighed and grabbed his Centurion’s vine stick from where his kit was piled together and used it as a walking stick. Dominus and the other Centurions from the Cohort had assembled in this area at the center of the line. No one spoke, and though he was beyond exhausted, Artorius knew he could not sleep. He instinctively went to strap on his gladius, but his shoulder where the strap rested was scoured badly and rubbed raw, so he left his weapon as he hobbled down to the river in an attempt to wash his tunic. He came to a small eddy where medics were retrieving water as quickly as possible with which to treat the wounded.

Artorius groaned as he knelt down painfully and rinsed off his tunic. He

soaked it in the circulating waters and wrung it out a few times before he figured it was as clean as it was going to get, given the circumstances. As he made his way up the gentle slope, it dawned on him that in the fog and incessant dampness his tunic would never dry properly. He sighed as he returned to where the Centurions were now joined by their Options. He stopped and took a few deep breaths, suddenly light-headed. The surgeons had told him he'd lost a lot of blood and was severely weakened. He knew he had to lie down soon or else he would simply pass out. Artorius hung his tunic off a tree, hoping it would drip dry to the point that it would be wearable. Romans did not have modesty issues, and it would not have bothered him to walk around in nothing but his sandals, loin cloth, and the bandage around his waist, were it not for the fact that the damp air chilled him. He desperately wished for his cloak, which was across the river along with his spare tunics and the rest of his and his men's personal baggage. A sentry's alert made him immediately forget his personal discomfort.

"Frisian contingent approaching!" a Decanus shouted from the skirmish line.

With no tools or palisade stakes it was impossible to set up a proper defense and this deeply concerned the Centurions, even though they knew their commanding general was in meetings with the Frisian King himself.

"How many?" Dominus asked, rising to his feet.

"About two score," the Decanus of the watch replied over his shoulder. "Half of them are carrying torches…it looks like…I can't tell what it is they are carrying."

Artorius, Dominus, and the other Centurions walked over to where the Decanus stood. The Frisians with the torches marched alongside others who carried what looked like a wooden bier on their shoulders. The Romans then noticed the body that lay reverently on top.

"Come to bring us one of their dead?" the Decanus asked.

Artorius slowly shook his head as a chill went up his spine.

"That is no Frisian they carry," he replied.

Indeed, it was not one of their warriors that the Frisians bore. As they approached and silently lowered their burden, the Romans stood wide-eyed, they saw the body of their lost friend and fellow Centurion, Marcus Vitruvius. The blood had been washed away from his wounds, his hands folded reverently across his chest, holding his gladius against his body. His Centurion's helm smashed and with a broken crest, lay next to him.

“We return this bravest of warriors to his people,” the lead Frisian said in thickly accented Latin. “Prince Klaes, heir to the throne of Frisia, fell by his hand, along with four of our best warriors. It is in keeping with our customs that we honor such heroic valor.” With a bow the Frisians turned and slowly walked away.

Artorius had both of his eyes shut, fighting against his tears.

“Sir,” a soldier said behind him. “The list of our dead.”

He turned to see one of his legionaries holding a scrap of paper. Artorius’ soul ruptured as he read the names of all of his men who were killed during the battle, and now he sunk further into despair, seeing for himself the body of his fallen friend and mentor.

He fell to a knee and lowered his head, placing a trembling hand on Vitruvius’ now cold hands. Artorius had always believed that the man who had taught him everything he knew about close combat was invincible. For all his years in the army, numerous campaigns, and countless foes bested, Vitruvius had never been so much as scratched. Now he lay cold and lifeless, his body battered and scored, his neck slashed with the same type of wound that had killed poor Gaius Longinus. Artorius stayed there for some time, head down, and senses numb. As badly as he wanted to cry for his friends, no tears would come, though his heart was torn apart by their loss.



Valens walked the field in a daze, his eyes swollen and red. Large numbers of Frisian warriors walked around him, intermixed with legionaries and auxiliary troopers, though their purpose now was to retrieve their fallen brothers rather than fight each other anymore. He saw many expressions on their faces that told stories of shared sorrows. The warriors who had died on legionary blades had meant just as much to these men as Carbo and Decimus had meant to Valens. He glanced over to his left and saw two warriors bending down to help up one of their wounded who lay against a tree. The Decanus immediately recognized the man as the very one who Gaius had given water to the night before. He was amazed that the Frisian had not only lived through the night, but survived the battle. Valens walked over to the man, who was now standing upright, though propped up by his friends. The warrior recognized him and nodded, to which Valens did in return.

“Your…warrior,” the Frisian said. He knew little Latin, his fatigue and

injuries making it difficult for him to find the right words. “One who…gave water.”

“He’s gone,” Valens replied. When the man did not seem to understand, he swallowed and uttered the word he knew the Frisian would understand. *“Dead.* Legionary Gaius Longinus is with the gods now.”

The warrior closed his eyes tightly, almost as if he were sorry for Gaius’ loss.

“I…,” he started to say. “I will…*honor* him.” The warrior looked up, gritted his teeth, and nodded in determination. His body sagged as weariness and pain overtook him.

His companions picked him up and carried him from the scene of death. Valens stood and watched until the men were lost amongst the crowds who came to claim their fallen.

“Are you alright, Sergeant?” the voice startled Valens, and he looked to see one of his legionaries standing behind him. Beneath the grime, caked-on blood, and sweat was the face of a boy. So young; as young as poor Gaius had been, but no longer an innocent.



Evening was closing fast and the remnants of the Twentieth Legion, at least those able to still stand, stood in formation outside of Legate Apronius’ tent. They were a fearful sight. Though most had made an attempt to clean themselves, their armor was battered and still showed streaks of blood that had failed to come off. The men leaned on their shields, which were scored and no longer gave the appearance of gleaming in the remaining sunlight. Their faces carried the look of complete exhaustion that a few hours rest and some hasty rations brought across the Rhine could not alleviate. Still, there was a sense of pride in that they could stand at all. They had not suffered the fate of the legions in Teutoburger Wald nineteen years before. The Frisians had pushed them to the breaking point, and yet they had held the line.

Standing humbly before the assembled host of legionaries was the man who had saved them from annihilation. Though many accolades and thanks were given to the Fifth Legion, it was Tribune Aulus Nautius Cursor and his ten thousand that had traveled forty miles in a single day, saved the Twentieth Legion, and killed the Frisian King. Cursor stood rigid, his eyes cast slightly downwards. His own fatigue was extreme, and in light of

everything that had transpired both during and after the battle, he did not feel like a hero. Still, it was the right of the men of the Twentieth Legion to bestow Cursor with Rome's most sacred honor.

A lone legionary faced the Tribune. As was custom in these circumstances, where an award was bestowed by the men rather than the generals, one of the youngest and lowest ranking legionaries was chosen to represent the legion. That was why, in an unusual change of protocol, the senior officers stood behind the formation, rather than in front of it. This showed that the honor came from the ranks and not from the Commanding Legate. The soldier held a crown in his hands, though unlike the Civic Crown, which was made up of oak leaves, this one was woven of weeds and grasses.

"The crown of grass," the legionary spoke. Even though his face was that of a boy, his booming voice carried throughout the field. *"It is never conferred except in times of extreme desperation, by acclamation of the entire army, to its savior. While the most hallowed Civic Crown is presented for saving a single life, the Grass Crown, made from materials taken from the field of battle, is given in recognition of the valor of one who saves an entire army."*

Cursor stood silent as the legionary spoke of Rome's most hallowed recognition for valor. Indeed, it was the rarest of awards, with but a handful of Roman soldiers ever receiving it, and none had been awarded in battle for nearly one hundred years. Though the Emperor Augustus had been presented the Grass Crown by the Senate, it was in homage, rather than for military achievement.

"We remember the few who have been given this esteemed honor," the soldier continued. *"From Rome's glorious history we remember the Tribune Lucius Siccius Dentatus, the Consul Publius Decius Mus; three heroes of the Punic Wars, the Dictator Fabius Maximus, the Tribune Marcus Calpurnius Flamma, and the great Scipio Aemilianus. We also remember two of the last to have saved entire armies; Centurion Primus Pilus Petreius Atinas, and the Legate Quintus Sertorius."*

Conspicuously absent from the list was the Dictator Lucius Cornelius Sulla, who though awarded the Grass Crown during the Social War one hundred years before, the scourge later placed on his name made listing him amongst Rome's historic heroes in very poor taste. The legionary at last addressed Cursor directly.

“Tribune Aulus Nautius Cursor, it is by your actions in leading your ten thousand forty miles in a single day, flanking the Frisian army, and killing the enemy King that you have saved the Twentieth Legion from being wiped out of existence. It is by universal acclamation of the men of the Twentieth that we present you Rome’s most sacred honor, the *Grass Crown*.”

The Tribune removed his helmet, tucking it under his left arm, and bowed his head slightly as the legionary placed the crown on his bald head. The soldier then drew his gladius and turned to face the legion.

“Twentieth Legion!” he shouted. *“Gladius…draw!”*

“Rah!” responded the host of legionaries, who had been deathly silent to this point.

“Salute!”

“Ave Cursor, savior of Valeria!” the Legion cried while holding their weapons high in salute to the Tribune.

Cursor drew his own weapon and returned the salute. He then briskly turned and left the field. He removed the crown as soon as he was out of sight of the legion.

As he made his way back to where his tent had been erected he saw an old friend, Centurion Artorius, sitting on a tree stump. Though he was still without a tunic, he did manage to get his cloak to try to keep off the biting chill of the coming night.

“You know, that actually looked good on you,” the Centurion said with a smile. “Makes one forget that you’re bald.”

“Believe it or not, the ladies like my smooth head,” Cursor replied, running his hand over his dome and wiping away a few bits of grass. He then stood and stared at the crown of grass that the legionaries of the Twentieth had just presented him. Part of him wished to throw it into the river, the other part to hold it close, lest it ever get away from him.

“How many men in our history have ever been awarded that?” Artorius asked, nodding towards the crown in the Tribune’s trembling hands. “A dozen, maybe?”

“I *don’t* deserve this honor, Artorius,” Cursor replied quietly. “The Fifth Legion is who turned the tide of the battle. My auxiliaries were spent and ready to break. Hell, numerous companies had already started to retreat when the Fifth made its crossing! This is a sham, I am no hero.”

“Yes, you are,” Artorius replied, using his vine stick to stand up. “You gave the Fifth the breathing space they needed in order to cross. Had you not

hit the enemy in the flank so hard, the Fifth would have never gotten across that bridge. I know. I overheard their Master Centurion talking to Calvinus. They came upon a number of Frisian corpses just on the far side of the bridge, well past the end of our line. There were also a handful of dead and wounded auxiliaries. That means the Frisians were waiting for the Fifth. They would have ambushed them and kept them from coming to our aid. Were it not for you and your ten thousand, the Twentieth would have been ignominiously annihilated, and the Fifth would have been stuck on the far side of the river. Whether you wish to accept it or not, you *are* a hero, Cursor. You have earned your place in the annals of Rome's most valiant."

"And yet," the Tribune said after a moment's pause, "this crown feels like it is made of lead, rather than grass."

Artorius gave a sad nod, understanding what the Tribune meant.

"It is a heavy burden you now bear," he answered. "But know that your place in history is well earned."

What Artorius could not know was that the actions of the Senate would undo the ultimate honor bestowed upon his friend. Were Cursor to know that his deeds of valor would be forgotten almost immediately, he would have been relieved. As it was, he accepted that no matter what posterity said about his actions, as long as the Twentieth Legion, Valeria, breathed life, he would remain immortal in the eyes of its men.

The following day was set aside to send the fallen to Elysium. Massive funeral pyres were assembled in a clearing near the fort. Nine hundred of their comrades were to be consigned to the gods; the other four hundred of the Fourth Cohort ignominiously burned within the house, they had sacrificed each other. Several smaller pyres were arranged around the perimeter to honor those of higher rank, with fallen Tribunes and Centurions placed on individual pyres. Sergeant Valens had requested one to honor his friends, Carbo and Decimus, even though they were but legionaries. He had gathered the wood for this himself, his simple explanation of why he wanted the pyre was readily accepted. He would see them off to the Elysium Fields together; friends in death as they had been in life.

Artorius also stood by one of those pyres, while several officers and men that knew Vitruvius best, gathered near. To Artorius was given the dubious honor of torching the stacked logs holding the body of his friend. A lighted

torch was placed in his hands as he stared at the last remains of his beloved mentor. He refused to tear his eyes away as he thrust the burning pitch into the oil soaked logs. Flames arose with a roar, causing those nearest to back away. Artorius remained motionless while the flames carried Vitruvius away. As he stared into the fire, the men drew their gladii in a final silent salute.

Several hours passed, and when the coals were settling into ash, he scooped them into a small urn. He then sealed it with a cork and wax. Closing his eyes, he sent a last farewell to his dearest friend and turned away.

Chapter XXIII: Souls Broken

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Even from a great distance, the flames of the burning manor house crept high enough to cast an eerie red glow upon the camp. Four hundred and twenty-seven men had been assigned to the Fourth Cohort, and every last one had been accounted for. Agricola had ordered their weapons and armor stripped from the bodies and the house burned over their heads. No pyres of honor amongst the other fallen of the Twentieth for them. As he watched the glow in the distance, Cursor knew it was because of the shame brought on by the disgraceful and eerie manner in which they had died, and they did not warrant any sort of honors.

The Tribune lay on his cot, thankful that he had not witnessed the macabre sight that Centurion Agricola and the men of the Fifth Legion had dealt with. He had his own issues to worry about. Hundreds of auxiliary troopers had been killed or wounded during the battle. The few who had been missing had been found; two who had been wounded had, in fact, been treated and brought back to camp by the Frisians. Cursor marveled that men, who had but a few hours previously been in murderous combat, were now taking care of each others' injured.

"Tribune, sir," a Decanus said as he stuck his head into Cursor's tent. "Beg your pardon, sir, but Centurion Rodolfo has gone missing."

"What in Hades do you mean, *missing?"* Cursor asked as he followed the auxiliary towards the edge of their camp.

Torches lit the damp earth at intervals leading down the makeshift path that led to the east entrance. Once the rest of the army had crossed with all the baggage trains, the Romans had been able to set up a proper marching camp, complete with trenches and palisade stakes. They exited the camp where a squad of auxiliary infantrymen stood guard. Though there had been a cessation of hostilities, it was an uncomfortable feeling being on the Frisian side of the river. The Decanus carried a torch and led the Tribune to the tree line a few dozen meters beyond their camp.

"Me and some of the lads were conducting a sweep of the woods," he explained.

Cursor saw more torches as they walked a few meters into the trees. A squad of auxiliary infantry stood around a tree stump. A battered suit of

Centurion's scale armor lay across it, the scored helm set on top. Another stump jutted from the ground a couple feet away, and in it a gladius had been thrust.

"This is exactly how we found it, sir," a trooper said with a salute.

"That's Rodolfo's armor alright," Cursor observed.

"We know he can't have been captured," the Decanus added. "Otherwise they would have taken his armor and weapon. It's as if he just laid down his arms and left."

"Why would he leave his weapon?" another trooper asked quietly.

"Does anyone else know about this?" Cursor asked.

The Decanus shook his head. "No, sir. I came to fetch you as soon as we found it. I asked the lads on the gate if they saw the Centurion leaving, and they said they had. He was on his horse, and it looked like his saddle bags were full. They asked where he was heading, and he told them to mind their own fucking business…well, with a reply like that, a mere trooper is not exactly going to question a Centurion further, now is he?"

A breeze caused the torches to flicker in the blackness.

"Why would he leave us like this?" a trooper asked to no one in particular.

The Tribune stared at the man and then understood. These particular infantrymen were from Batavia. They probably did not even realize that Rodolfo was a Frisian by birth.

"Take his gear and follow me," Cursor ordered as he walked back towards their camp. He let out a sigh as his fears regarding Rodolfo bore down on him.

Were he but a mere trooper, his absence would not have been noticed for some time. As it was, Rodolfo was the senior ranking Centurion within the Rhine Army's Auxilia. He had been Cursor's organizational second-in-command for several years, and the two men had grown close over that time. The Centurion had reassured him constantly that though a Frisian, his loyalty was to Rome. He had kept his oath and fought with valor. Cursor now reckoned that, in the aftermath of battle, the truth had been too much for Rodolfo to bear. So far, word as to the reasons behind the war had not been made public, but Cursor knew it was only a matter of time. In spite of their losses, the Romans had defeated the Frisian army, and now had their entire force on the far side of the river. And yet no orders of a pending advance. Even the lowest legionary knew that Rome did not cross into hostile territory

and simply stop after defeating the enemy's army. The senior officers all knew the real reasons, and this include Centurion Rodolfo.

After passing through the camp entrance he made his way directly to Rodolfo's tent. As he pulled back the flap of the tent, he was not surprised to see many of the Centurion's personal effects missing, along with the blankets for his cot. On Rodolfo's desk sat a large chunk of wood. It was an unfinished bust of a horse that he had been working on.

"Set his gear on his cot," Cursor ordered.

The men did as they were ordered, their faces still showing their befuddlement. The Tribune then ordered the men to leave. He called out to the Decanus as the man walked out of the tent.

"Sir?" the auxiliary asked.

"Good work finding this," Cursor replied. "Let the officers of the watch know that with the exception of authorized patrols, *no one* is to leave camp without my expressed permission. I don't care what their rank is; no one leaves unless I personally clear it."

"Yes, sir," the Decanus replied with an understanding nod.

Cursor then sat down on Rodolfo's cot and rested his chin in his hand. He was very tired and could not remember how many of his men were of Frisian origin. How many of them would attempt to desert when word about Rome's betrayal of their people reached them? Cursor then shuddered at the thought of that vile word…*desertion*. All the evidence showed that Centurion Rodolfo had deserted his post, an offense that was punishable by death. He let out another sigh and looked around the tent.

He lit the lamp on Rodolfo's desk and tried to see if there were any clues. In the dim light he saw a piece of parchment sticking out from underneath the horse bust. Cursor unfolded it and knew what it would say before he even read the first word.

My friend and honored brother, Aulus Nautius Cursor,

It is with a heavy heart that I write these words. For nearly thirty years I have served Rome in the Auxilia. And now, at the last, Rome has betrayed me and my people. I cannot return to my people, for I have committed unjust war against them. I also can no longer serve the Empire that used me as a weapon of atrocity. Therefore, I am without a nation that I can call my own. Please do not come looking for me. I go to start my life anew.

I regret that I was unable to finish carving the horse for you.

Your loyal friend,

Rodolfo



"Do you mind explaining this to me, Tribune?" Apronius snarled as Cursor stood rigid. "Here I have an order signed by you, approving a leave of absence for Centurion Rodolfo, and at the same time you request a leave of absence for yourself."

"Yes, sir," Cursor replied, keeping his eyes looking straight ahead. The Legate shook his head, disbelieving what he was hearing.

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" he snapped. "I hope you realize we are still in Frisian territory…"

"Just for another day or so," Cursor interrupted.

Apronius slammed his hand on the table, silencing him.

"I forgive your insolence only because it was your ten thousand that saved us in Braduhenna," he said slowly. Apronius then looked away for a few seconds, trying to make sense of what the Tribune was asking of him. His voice softened slightly as he addressed Cursor once more. "You know, I would hate to have to present you with a court martial the same day you were awarded the Grass Crown. Oh, stand easy already!"

He then threw a pile of papers down in front of Cursor. They were awards recommendations. Even in the wake of such a horrific battle, with names of the dead and wounded still being tallied, the efficient Roman bureaucracy still thrived. Officers, who even if they could not stand were still able to read and write, had hastily written awards recommendations for the most valiant of their men who still lived. Most were narratives for the *Silver Torque for Valor*. Intermixed were a handful of Civic Crowns. Apronius then showed Cursor another parchment. It was a large roll of all the awards and their status. At first glance it looked as if all of them had "approved" scrawled next to them. It was then that Cursor saw Rodolfo's name on the Civic Crown list.

"You saved the entire Valeria Legion," Apronius observed. "For that you have Rome's eternal gratitude. With that in mind, I think you had better

explain to me what is happening with your Centurion."

"Yes, sir." Cursor then told the Legate how his men had found Rodolfo's armor the night before, along with the message the Centurion had left for him.

"I want to give him an official leave of absence until I can find him," the Tribune explained. "In light of the circumstances, I do not wish to charge him with desertion."

"And what of the other men in this army that are of Frisian birth or ancestry?" Apronius asked. "Centurion Rodolfo is hardly the only one who had to face the possibility of fighting members of his own family. Rumors are already running rampant as to what really happened between us and the Frisians, especially in light of our pending withdrawal. If we allow Rodolfo to arbitrarily leave, then what's to stop the other Frisian auxiliaries from doing the same thing? Hell, I have *legionaries* whose families were originally from Frisia!"

"Just give me a few days, I know I can find him and reason with him."

"Even if you are able to find him," Apronius interjected, "I doubt that you will be able to convince him to return to the ranks."

Cursor closed his eyes and tried to think fast. He then came to the most likely and reasonable course of action he could fathom.

"Rodolfo has spent more than thirty years in the army," Cursor replied calmly. "He's done his duty and proven his valor more than any man I know. He can retire from the army at any time, and to be quite blunt, he has *earned* the right to take a few liberties at the end."

Apronius sat with his chin in his hand. It was clear he did not wish to make an example out of Centurion Rodolfo. He also knew that while good order and discipline had to be maintained, Cursor was correct.

"Alright," he said at last. "I will see to what needs to be done. But know this, I hold you fully responsible for the morale and discipline of your men. Your men may be heroes now, but any lapses in order because of this and I will personally take it out of your hide!"

"Sir, the loyalty of my men has never been in question," Cursor responded. "The responsibility for their actions is mine alone. I take it then that my leave has been approved?"



Tabbo helped to redress Amke's wounds. The young warrior maiden was awake, though in terrible pain. The gash on her arm he stitched up with some thread that he found among the supplies, as well as the wound on her hip. A bandage was wrapped around the young woman's head, as well. Spouses and loved ones returned to the grove to aid the wounded. Even Queen Femke assisted in bandaging and treating the more serious injuries. She had yet to let the impact of losing her husband and her son break her, not when so many were suffering and in need of aid. It had barely sunk into Tabbo's mind that he was now King of Frisia, even after his negotiations with the Romans. While he was consciously aware of it, he was still the warrior at heart, and right now his fellow warriors needed him.

"I had one," Amke said weakly. "My sisters were falling all around me, but I got through their shield line, and I had one of them. My axe failed me… it bounced off his armor, as if the gods were mocking me. It was then that he did this to me." With her good arm she pointed to her face. "I bested a legionary, and it was only his armor that saved him."

"You fought well, sister," Tabbo said, the sibling term showing he viewed Amke as an equal. "Do not think that because the Roman survived that you are any less worthy as a warrior. Our war with Rome was short and terrible, but now it is over. A legionary may not have fallen by your hand, but you did help make our people free." Amke tried to force a smile, though the pain made her groan once more.

"I guess one more dead legionary would have made little difference," she reasoned. "Still, it sickens me that more than half of the Daughters of Freyja died out there, and I could not avenge them with even a single Roman."

"Most of our greatest warriors did not get the chance to kill a Roman either," Tabbo replied. "Many of those who did are now on funeral pyres themselves."

"I just hope the bastard who caused all this suffering pays for his crimes!"

"I have the personal reassurance of the Roman Governor General that he will," the King said. Amke looked at him in disbelief.

"And you trust this Roman?" she asked. Tabbo nodded in reply. "Why?"

"Because he has kept his word to our people," he answered. "The Romans are preparing for their withdrawal across the Rhine even as we speak. He paroled every last one of our wounded who had been taken prisoner, even going so far as to have his men tend to their wounds first. I think it will be a long time before a Roman crosses into Frisia again."

For the King of Frisia there was no rest. No sooner had Tabbo left Amke's side than he felt he needed to seek out Queen Femke. He had yet to see his own wife, Edeline, and wondered if she even knew that she was now Queen of Frisia? Thousands had gathered in and around the grove, and it was no wonder he could not find his wife. Families of the dead were carrying off the bodies under a cloud of mournful wails. Those who tended to the wounded did so with a feverish desperation to save those who were on the doorsteps of the afterlife. Frisian medicine paled in comparison to Roman, and Tabbo felt their wounded would have been better left as prisoners of war.

It was only by a stroke of luck that Tabbo found both Femke and Edeline together as they tended to a badly injured young Frisian warrior who looked to be little more than an overgrown boy. The lad was covered in sweat, and he was convulsing violently as he spewed bile and blood from his lips. Then, suddenly, he was still, his eyes staring lifelessly into the night. A shriek from his mother, who held his hand during the ordeal, caused the two women to cringe and back away slowly. Tears were in their eyes as they felt the mother's pain of loss. They stood and both caught sight of Tabbo at the same time. Edeline gave a sigh of relief upon seeing her husband.

"My King," Femke said with a deep bow. Edeline's mouth was agape, and Tabbo surmised that she did not know what had transpired in Braduhenna.

"King?" she asked.

Tabbo nodded sadly. "By the last words of Dibbald Segon before he passed into eternity," he replied. Edeline then turned and placed her arms around Femke, who finally let loose the tears she had been holding back for her husband and son. Tabbo embraced both women, his wife clinging to him as she tried to comfort Femke.

"I'm so sorry," she said repeatedly.

Femke was unable to speak and could barely gasp for breath as the weight of her loss consumed her. Tabbo guided them away and onto a patch of grass just outside of the light of a nearby fire. Edeline sat and leaned against a tree, holding the queen dowager close to her. The King was suddenly very tired. His wife sensed this and held an arm out for him. He sat down next to her and laid his head on her shoulder. He had not slept since before the Romans drove them from Flevum. Edeline laid Femke's head in her lap and wrapped both arms around her husband, who was already fast asleep.



For the Romans returning from Frisia, theirs was also a time of mourning rather than celebration. Diana stood with many of the officers' spouses, common law wives of the men of the ranks, as well as other family members as the Third Cohort slowly made its way through Cologne towards the fortress. Unlike previous campaigns, there was no music, no celebrations, and no laurels of victory. Their brave legionaries and their auxiliaries had triumphed, yes, but at such a terrible price that there was no mood for celebration, only sorrow. It had been a slow week of travel to bring them back to Cologne.

As bad as she had been told it was, nothing prepared Diana for the sight of the Second Century. Only sixteen men marched behind the Signum, which was now carried by a Decanus. Signifier Rufio was amongst the wounded, along with the rest of the Century that had not made their final journey into the hereafter. Diana's heart broke at the sight of her husband. Artorius was slumped in the saddle of his horse, the weight of his helmet threatening to send him careening forward off his mount.

There was no massed formation of the Legion, or even the individual Cohorts. Centurions halted their centuries wherever they saw fit, briefed and then dismissed their men. Artorius' injuries had been severe enough that he should have been with the hospital train, but he had insisted in coming home at the head of his men, even if there were only sixteen left fit for duty. Diana watched Praxus and Magnus ease him down from his horse. She was glad to see that they had survived relatively unscathed, although Praxus' arm was in a sling, and the side of Magnus' face looked swollen and purple. Both men had numerous scars and bruises all over their bodies. The Centurion then took off his helmet and a few words were spoken amongst the men. Diana smiled sadly as she watched her husband, helped by his friends, walk up to each one of his men, clasping their forearms and grabbing each by the shoulder. He said a few words to each that she could not hear.

He then seemed to notice her for the first time. She could tell he wanted to smile, but all he could do was let out a sigh. Praxus and Magnus attempted to help him steady himself as he walked towards the woman he loved, but he waved them off. He let out another sigh as he stood face to face with her. It was as if his mind was unable to comprehend that he was really there. His

face was pale, his one open eye vacant and red. Diana put her arms around him and guided his head onto her shoulder. He closed his eyes and slowly wrapped his arms around her waist; hesitant, as if he were afraid that maybe it was only a dream and in an instant she would be gone. His armor felt rough against her, and she knew the sooner she got him out of it the better. He smelled rank of sweat, dirt, blood, and even death. Though he had hoped she would not notice, one of the first things Diana saw was the terrible gash in the side of his chain mail where the links had been split. She shuddered at the pain such a fearsome blow must have caused him.

Servants opened the doors to their manor house as she helped him up the few steps that led inside. His arm was across her shoulders, hers gently locked around his waist to help support him. A pair of maidservants helped Diana get Artorius out of his armor. They also took his weapons and helmet and then Diana signaled for them to leave. She had already arranged for a hot bath to be drawn for her husband. She helped him out of his tunic and removed the crusted bandage from his side. She cringed at the sight of the stitched up gash. It was her turn to sigh as he suddenly looked down at the floor as if he were now ashamed.

Diana removed her stola and guided Artorius into the steaming hot water. He sat on a submerged bench, the water coming up to the middle of his chest. Even though he winced when the hot water touched his healing wounds, he gave no resistance as he let his wife bathe him. They spent some time in the bath, for Diana knew that not only did he desperately need to be cleaned, but the heat would help sooth his devastated body. After helping him from the bath and drying him off, she redressed his wound and guided him to their bedchamber. Though it was but a couple hours past midday, she knew that what her husband needed most was rest. She was completely exhausted herself, both physically and emotionally. Not a word had been said by either of them since his return and Diana knew not what the right words could possibly be. Artorius' body was broken, his very soul devastated, and her heart completely broke for him.

She guided him to their bed, only a hint of light coming in through the heavy curtains she had had installed recently. It was a warm day, though a cool and gentle breeze blew in through an open side window. As Artorius lay down on his side Diana pulled a thin sheet over them and placed herself behind him on her side. She tucked one arm underneath his neck, while the other she carefully placed over his torso. He took that hand and pulled her as

close to him as he could. It was then Diana finally broke the silence. There was really only one thing she could say to him, and it was all that mattered.

"I love you," she whispered into his ear, the tears she would not show to his face sliding down her cheeks. She held him tighter as she felt his body start to tremble violently. His own tears, that he had been denied in Frisia, now bursting forth as he was finally able to release all the pent up emotions and sorrow tormenting him since the loss of his friends. Diana clung to him until his body's shaking subsided. She then kissed him gently on the neck, pulled her arm off his waist and gently caressed his back until they both drifted off to sleep.

As he lay there taking in Diana's gentle caress, Artorius' breathing relaxed and came easily to him. Her simplest touch did so much for him, for he knew that she alone was able to heal his tortured soul. Comforted by this, he allowed himself to fall into a deep sleep for the first time in weeks. Afterwards, they would never again speak of the day he returned from Frisia.

Chapter XXIV: Call to the Fallen

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This would be the most difficult thing Artorius had ever done. By Roman tradition, the names of the slain were to be called out three times; a final call to the fallen. Each cohort held its own separate vigil, with a day to themselves to honor their brothers. Each Centurion would call out the names of his soldiers, or in the case of the First Century, Optio Macer had taken the place of Vitruvius. It would be his last official duty for his century, as he was being moved to take command of the Fourth, while Centurion Dominus was selected to take over the First Century, as well as the entire cohort.

Master Centurion Calvinus was there, along with the Primi Ordinones of the Legion. Proculus had been the Pilus Prior for the Third Cohort before Vitruvius, and he still knew most of the men well. He had to be carried in on a stretcher, as he was still in terrible shape. Centurion Macro had commanded the Second Century. It pained him deeply to know his former Optio, who many had thought to be invincible, was amongst the slain. It was incomprehensible that Vitruvius should die in battle.

It had only been two weeks since Braduhenna Wood, and Artorius was still weakened by his injuries suffered in battle. Still, he had insisted on being dressed in full armor like the rest of his men. He used his vine stick like a cane to keep himself upright. As commander of the Second Century, he would be the second to call out the names of his men. He breathed deeply, trying to fight back the tears as Macer called out the very first name for the Third Cohort.

"Centurion Pilus Prior Marcus Vitruvius…Centurion Pilus Prior Marcus Vitruvius…Centurion Pilus Prior Marcus Vitruvius!"

Each call of the name stabbed Artorius in the heart. He allowed the tears to flow, knowing that even the strongest would be unable to stop them. He focused only on keeping his voice from breaking as he listened to Macer call out the names of the First Century's dead. There were eight of them. As the last was spoken for the third time, Artorius took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He had thirteen names to speak, more than any of the other centuries in the Third Cohort. Eight of these had been new recruits from the previous fall.

His voice held as he shouted the first two names. They were the Decanii, the Sergeants of Legionaries that he had hastily replaced with Valens and

Felix. Though he could not see his men behind him, he knew the two Sergeants felt both the sorrow of loss, as well as the guilt associated with having earned their promotions on the bodies of their friends. He continued down the list, the three names that he kept for last he knew would be the hardest.

"Legionary Tiberius Carbo…Legionary Tiberius Carbo…Legionary Tiberius Carbo!" He swallowed hard as he continued, *"Legionary Decimus Lucilius…Legionary Decimus Lucilius…Legionary Decimus Lucilius!"* He tried in vain to fight back against the memories of his two friends, who had been inseparable since before he met them. Decimus had always preferred being known by his first name, rather than his family name, as was tradition. Artorius looked to the sky as he made ready to say the last name.

"Justus, my friend, forgive me," he said in a whisper before returning his gaze front. *"Legionary Gaius Longinus…Legionary Gaius Longinus… Legionary Gaius Longinus!"*



"A terrible disaster!" Tiberius shouted as he read the report. "How was this allowed to happen?"

"It would seem that Gallus' pet, Olennius, decided to set up his own system of taxation amongst the Frisians," the Tribune explained.

Apronius had selected Cursor, personally, to be his messenger to the Emperor. The Governor General had enough to deal with in rebuilding the Army of the Rhine, and he knew that Cursor would not hold back when telling Tiberius what had transpired in Frisia.

"You disrespect your betters!" a senator, who had been sent as part of a delegation from Rome, snapped. "Senator Gallus…"

"…is a fool and a scourge to the Empire!" Tiberius interrupted. "Apronius sent the good Tribune to me because he knew this man would not try to make this tragedy to be anything less than what it really is. Tell me more about this taxation." It was all in the report, but Tiberius wished to hear it from Cursor.

"Olennius took it upon himself to modify the tribute set forth by the great Drusus Nero, the gods rest him," Cursor began.

The Emperor gave a quick smile at the courtesy shown to his brother.

"But the official reports show no such change!" another senator protested,

holding up a document that showed the transactions Olennius had sent to Rome over the previous three years.

The Tribune responded by producing a pile of documents for a satchel that he had carried in with him.

“These are the real collection reports,” he responded, eyes fixed on the Emperor. “The signatures and seals all match the documents you have. What Olennius procured from the Frisians was many times what was required, and yet only the small tribute that Rome established all those years ago was ever sent.”

“And the rest?” the Emperor prodded, knowing the answer.

“I’m sure that some of it went to the building and furbishing of a new estate in the province,” Cursor answered. “The magistrate’s villa that came with the region was not good enough for him. I’m certain if you were to audit Olennius’ personal finances, the costs of the new estate did not come from his own coffers. As for the rest, we can speculate on that. The only facts we know are that, as the good senators have been quick to point out, the additional tributes taken by Olennius did not make their way to Rome.”

The two senators scowled at having helped make a case against the magistrate appointed by their friend, Senator Gallus.

“I think I know what needs to be done with Magistrate Olennius,” the Emperor said after a brief pause.

The senators both swallowed hard, but knew better than to go against Tiberius when he made his mind up about something. They just hoped that his vengeance would not be deflected towards Senator Gallus, as well. It was no secret that Tiberius and Gallus hated each other. One senator quickly spoke up, hoping to change the way the conversation was going.

“We must now decide what to do about Frisia itself,” he said quickly. “The Army of the Rhine is still in a position to finish the rebellion.”

“Apronius has already negotiated a truce,” Cursor countered, “on the Emperor’s authority.”

“Then there is nothing more to be done,” the other senator added. “Frisia was but a sliver of a province and its tribute will not be missed. Quite frankly this entire incident in Braduhenna reeks of embarrassment should it go public. Thirteen hundred soldiers dead, another five thousand wounded, and yet the Frisians still hold their lands east of the Rhine.”

“The Frisians are not mindless barbarians!” Cursor snapped. “They are well trained and highly disciplined. They torched the bridges across the

Rhine and cut off the Twentieth Legion, who fought with tenacity beyond comprehension, outnumbered at least five to one!"

"Yes, yes…we've read the report," the senator said dismissively. "We also read that an entire cohort of the Twentieth panicked and committed mutual suicide within the residence of one of our former allies. Nine hundred men were killed by the Frisian, but another four hundred died by their own hands. Not exactly acts of valor worth recognizing, now are they?" There was a defiant sneer on the man's face and he was daring Cursor to challenge him.

The Tribune turned and went to do so, when he was cut off by the Emperor, who he would not dare to try to speak over.

"The senator makes a valid point," Tiberius conceded. "Such a disgrace will bring shame to the entire Rhine Army. While we cannot fully prevent word of this from getting out, we will take no public stance on the issue. The only official statements we will make are that the Rhine Army did defeat the Frisians at both Flevum and Braduhenna, and that following negotiations between their King Tabbo and our Legate Apronius, it was decided that in the best interest of both nations, Frisia should retain its autonomy and be a neutral territory. I will leave it up to the Senate to decide what should be done regarding the performance of the Rhine army." He then waved for the senators to go, but bade Cursor to stay.

"It displeases you that I left the fate of the army in their hands," Tiberius said once the senators had departed.

"It is not my place to question your judgment, Caesar," Cursor replied, his jaw tense.

"Come off it, man," the Emperor protested. "Apronius sent you as his messenger because of your candor. Do not let your frankness fail you now!" "Then if I may be blunt," the Tribune replied. "Caesar, the Senate will betray the Rhine Army and the memory of those who fell at Braduhenna. They will publicly disavow any responsibility for the battle and pretend the deaths of thirteen hundred soldiers of Rome do not matter."

"Because they don't," Tiberius replied, causing Cursor to stare at him, his teeth grinding in anger. "The lives of individual soldiers, be they legionary or auxilia, mean nothing to the Senate, or to most of the people for that matter. The Roman Army avoided defeat, and that will be enough for them. The details matter not. No accolades will be awarded, since that will only draw attention to the war, and to be honest, this war is something that Rome would

do best to forget."

"So our men died for nothing at Braduhenna," Cursor said through clenched teeth.

The Emperor gave a sad smile and nodded. "It saddens me to say this, but yes," he replied. "There was no ultimate victory against Frisia, so to the Senate there is nothing to celebrate. The individual awards for valor will still be approved, but no awards to the Legion standards. Believe me, I find this as painful as you. I once commanded the Twentieth, and I know that at Braduhenna they certainly lived up their name, *Valeria*."

"Apronius asked me to give you this in private," Cursor said, pulling out a sealed letter. "It involves one unit that he wishes you to make an exception for."

Tiberius read the note and furrowed his brow.

"He wants to award a single century with the Crown of Valor?" he asked. "That one century must have been through hell!"

"They were, Caesar," the Tribune replied. "Only sixteen of the original seventy-six were able to stand and fight by the time it was over, but they still held. They kept the Frisians from flanking the entire Legion."

Tiberius paused, deep in thought.

"I will grant this award personally," the Emperor finally replied. He then stood and placed a hand on Cursor's shoulder. "I also heard about you being awarded the Grass Crown. Only a handful of men in Rome's glorious history have ever won this. It is the deepest honor that we can bestow; one that is often forgotten because of the extreme rarity of its awarding. Indeed, one hesitates to mention the Grass Crown, because it involves a Roman army being cut off and facing annihilation, something we like to pretend never happens."

"Yes, Caesar, the men of the Twentieth Legion did present me with the Grass Crown," Cursor admitted, a great weight suddenly crushing his spirit. "It is something that I bear with a heavy heart, for there was no joy in what I had to do."

"There never is," Tiberius replied. "Every man who has ever been presented with the Grass Crown has felt the same as you. It is something that cannot be awarded without much sacrifice. But in that pain and suffering there is also honor. Within the disgrace involved in what happened at Braduhenna you have deeply honored all soldiers of Rome."



Artorius looked over the pile of paperwork on his desk and let out a sigh. It never seemed to end! No sooner had they buried their dead than the Century, what was left of it, was back to its monotonous daily routine. Disgusted, he turned to leave, only to find his path blocked by Optio Praxus.

"I think you're going to want to look at those," he stated. Artorius glared at him, and then turned and sat behind his desk.

"What have we got then?" he asked, rubbing his forehead. He already had a bad headache and did not wish to deal with routine matters.

"First are the official promotion orders for Sergeant Felix and Sergeant Valens."

This perked Artorius up. He was always glad to sign off on promotions for worthy legionaries, and those two had done far more than any to earn theirs.

"Rufio drew up the chits for their back pay, too. It just needs your approval."

Artorius signed both without even reading them. The Signifier was a stickler for efficiency, and Artorius trusted him completely.

"What's next?" he asked.

Praxus grinned and handed him another batch of orders. "These are the citations for all of our awards. Seems Apronius was feeling generous and didn't ask too many questions."

Artorius read through each scroll in turn. Two were awards of the Civic Crown for Magnus and Valens. Valens was the only squad leader able to maintain any semblance of order once the line collapsed, and Magnus' counterattack with the men from the Fourth Century had bought them enough time to save a number of the wounded. There were fifteen Silver Torques for Valor, as well. Artorius loathed the idea of mass awards. However, the valor of his men could not be questioned, and he had personally recommended the awards for every soldier in his Century that was still standing when the battle was over. He then looked puzzled as he counted the scrolls again. There should have been fourteen, not fifteen. He then opened each one, looking at the names, in case he had missed someone. As he read through them his face suddenly darkened. Praxus swallowed hard as the Centurion slowly rolled a scroll up. His face contorted in rage, he threw it across the office. It was then that the Optio knew whose name had been on that particular order.

“Why, Praxus?” Artorius asked, shaking his head. “Why would Dominus do that to me?”

“If it makes you feel any better, at least he didn’t recommend you for the Civic Crown,” Praxus replied with his usual good nature. His attempt to calm the Centurion failed as Artorius glared at him, and he became serious once more. “Look, no one else doubts your valor on the line, so why do you?”

“Because I failed!” Artorius roared, slamming his fist onto the table. “Our orders were to hold the flank. We *failed* in our mission! We were overrun, and if not for Cursor’s cavalry we would all be dead! That responsibility is mine…as are the slain.”

Praxus then looked down for a moment.

“Artorius, *no one* could have held the flank. The entire Legion was simply holding long enough for Cursor’s auxilia, along with the Fifth Legion, to relieve us. We did what we had to, and that was simply to survive. You discredit yourself, and yet it was your valor that held the line together as long as it did. I think any other Centurion would have lost the flank on the first day.”

“I don’t know,” Artorius replied weakly. “I just don’t feel like I deserve any kind of accolades. Do you remember the first time I was awarded the Silver Torque?”

“I do,” Praxus nodded and grinned. “You got it during the Germanic Wars. It was for killing Ingiomerus, the second most important Cherusci war chief, second only to Arminius.”

“And I remember the feelings of pure ecstasy the day it was awarded,” Artorius reminisced. “It was the high point of my career up to that point. Hell, it’s still one of the best moments I’ve had in the legions! I was still a legionary then, with but two and a half years in the ranks at the time. Eleven years later and I am now getting my fourth Silver Torque for Valor, and yet it feels hollow. There’s no joy in this one, no feelings of accomplishment or self worth, nothing but guilt. I look at this award and I see not my personal valor, only the faces of my men who did not come home.”

The sun was starting to fall and the light shone red through the Centurion’s office. Artorius let out a sigh. He had intended to oversee the Century as it went through *passage-of-lines* drills and spend some time on the training stakes. The grumbling in his stomach told him that training had been completed for some time, and the men were having their supper. He sighed

and threw his stylus down. Once again he had allowed tedious, albeit necessary, paperwork ruin his plans, and he had spent the entire day in the office once more. There was still much left to do, but he was no longer in the mood. He stood and walked out into the main office when a face he had not seen some time greeted him as Centurion Statorius walked in.

"Thought I would find you here," Statorius said with a grin.

Artorius laughed and shook his head. He and his former squad leader rarely saw each other anymore. "Not for long, I'm just leaving for home."

"Not going to the tavern for a drink then?" Statorius asked.

Artorius pretended to be insulted. "Dear gods, no!" he retorted. "It's loud, dirty, and full of sullen whores!"

"Uh huh," Statorius nodded. "I thought that's why you liked it." He winked at his last statement and Artorius could not help but laugh.

"Well, let's just say my tastes have refined over the years," he clarified. "I have far better vintage at my house than they will ever have at the taverns. If you'd care to join me, you can find out for yourself."

"Why not?" Statorius mused. "After all, I live but a few blocks from you."

Artorius had forgotten that Statorius had purchased a nice villa of his own. He had married soon after his promotion to Centurion. His wife was the daughter of a flax merchant, though he figured her father's business must have done very well, for the villa Statorius lived in was almost as large and ornate as the one he and Diana lived in.

"And how is the family?" Artorius asked as they walked down the road towards the main gate. His mind had been so jumbled as of late that he could not even remember his former squad leader's wife's name or how many children he had! It shamed him and he hoped Statorius would not notice.

"They are well," his fellow Centurion replied. "With Julia expecting again, we are hoping for a boy this time."

It was then that Artorius remembered that his friend had two daughters.

"And what of the Lady Diana?"

"Well enough," Artorius replied, "though I think she tires of having to constantly entertain the wives of traveling nobles and wealthy businessmen. Even though she married a lowly Centurion, she is still of the Proculeius line, and therefore, still of great influence. Honestly, I think she wields more power than even the wife of our esteemed Legate! Thankfully she conducts most of this away from our house."

They walked in silence for some time. The sky was red as they headed out the gate, the legionaries on duty snapping to attention and saluting the Centurions. It was another mile to Artorius' villa and though each man owned a horse they usually chose to walk each day. It seemed Diana took his horse out far more often than he did.

"Let's take the long way," Statorius suggested, pointing to a dirt path that ran parallel to the river.

Artorius shrugged. "Got something on your mind?" he asked.

"Yes," Statorius replied simply as the sounds of the bustling city grew quiet. "I know you have always spent long days working at the Century."

"Longer than I would like," Artorius replied. "Believe me, I hate devoting my entire life to paperwork, especially the tedious crap. I figure it's because my organizational skills are not the best. I really need to delegate more to the Principal Officers."

"They're all good men," Statorius acknowledged. "Three of you were all in the same squad at one time." He referred to when he had been the Decanus, with Artorius, Magnus, and Praxus, all serving under him as legionaries.

"*That* feels like a lifetime ago!" Artorius said. "It was the only time I was ever in a line squad that was at full strength. It was you, me, Magnus, Praxus, Gavius, Valens…" He stopped and wiped his forehead, which was suddenly damp with sweat.

"Carbo and Decimus," Statorius finished quietly for him.

They continued to walk in silence for the next few minutes.

"It is about them you wish to talk to me," Artorius said. It was a statement, rather than a question.

"Not just them," Statorius answered. "But as I was close to them, as well…" It was his turn to find that he could not speak.

"Thirteen years," Artorius observed after a short silence. "Thirteen years I knew them. They were more than just my legionaries; they were my friends. They truly were *brothers* to me."

"Have you allowed yourself time to mourn for them, and for the others?" Statorius asked.

"We've done the call to the fallen, in case you forgot," Artorius replied, not liking where the conversation was headed.

"That's not what I asked you. I asked if *you* have allowed yourself time to mourn. My Century did not suffer nearly as badly as yours did, but I still lost

men. No one saw me for days, not even my wife, after we returned. I had to give myself time to mourn them, lest it tear me up inside. I'm sure that being around your Century reminds you of that…"

"Look, Statorius," Artorius snapped, turning to face him. "I do *not* deliberately avoid my men!"

"Not intentionally, perhaps," Statorius replied, matching his gaze. He then followed up with a difficult question; one that he knew would grate at his old friend and former protégé. "How many men do you have battle ready?"

"As of this morning, twenty-eight fit for duty. The rest come back here and there as the hospital releases them."

"And how many will come back?" Statorius was being persistent, though Artorius did not begrudge him for it.

"Perhaps another twenty," he replied. "The rest will most likely never fight again. After what happened to my father in Pannonia, I hate the idea of good men being forced out of the legions. But if they are unable to fight, they can't be legionaries."

"Sadly, no society has ever done right by its broken heroes," his fellow Centurion replied somberly.

"I won't lie to you, Statorius. The lack of fighting soldiers in my Century does serve as a stark reminder for me. Thirteen of my men never came home, and of the ones who did, as many as half will never march with us again!" His anger was rising, though it was not directed towards his friend.

Statorius simply nodded and let him continue.

"I mean, what the hell?" Artorius ranted. "We fought the most savage battle of our time and nobody fucking cares! I don't think the Roman army has ever lost as many as we did in a battle that was won; and yet when it was all over we're told to go home, that it was all one big fucking mistake! *My men died for nothing!"* His entire body trembled as rage and sorrow overtook him. He now understood why Statorius had suggested they take the long road home, and why he had deliberately avoided going through the center of town. Artorius' face was red. He looked away and shook his head.

"No triumphs for us," he continued. "No accolades of a job well done. Instead, we have been the subject of a shame that is not ours."



Apronius sat brooding over the same stigma that haunted his men. So many had fallen; his Chief Tribune was dead, two of his First Cohort Centurions were badly wounded. Proculus' injuries were so extensive that he would most likely never fight again. A message had just arrived, and his face turned red with rage as he read it.

"Message from Rome," Master Centurion Calvinus stated, rather than asked.

"Those *fucking* bastards!" Apronius snarled through clenched teeth. "They've completely disavowed our actions in Frisia. The Senate seems content to allow what happened to be simply forgotten. Hell, most people in Rome have no idea where Frisia is. Its tribute was minimal, so I doubt they will miss it very much." His voice was thick with venom. His fist closed around the scroll, crumpling it and then throwing it across the room.

Calvinus stood silently as the Governor General placed his forehead in his hands.

"How can they ignore the loss of thirteen hundred men?" the Master Centurion asked after a minute of silence. "The Army of the Rhine suffered nearly five thousand wounded, as well. That's twenty-five percent casualties! I swear by all the gods that this must be the highest percentage any Roman army has lost in a battle that they actually won. We came back from the brink of disaster, preventing another Teutoburger Wald! How can they ignore that?"

"Oh, it's simple, really," Apronius replied. "Most of our men came from the provinces. What does the Senate care if a few hundred Spaniards, Gauls, Germans, and other various non-Latin legionaries die? We won the battle, and that was good enough for them! So now they would just as soon forget it ever happened." Apronius stopped in his tirade when he saw Calvinus was gripping the edge of the table, his entire body trembling.

"They were my men," Calvinus said quietly. "Whether they were born in Italy or not, they were still citizens of Rome. They *died* serving the Empire, and the Senate dares to defile their memories!"

"Our losses have been great," Apronius concurred. "To say nothing of the loss of the entire Fourth Cohort…"

"And I'm afraid you stand to lose more." Calvinus stood upright, his face composed once more as the Legate raised an eyebrow.

"Calvinus, surely you can't mean…" The Master Centurion shook his head interrupting him.

“I’ve had enough,” he replied calmly. “Apronius, I’ve given thirty-three years of my life to the legions. Nineteen of those were with the Twentieth. I’m tired. My daughter never knew me when she was growing up. My wife barely acknowledges my existence!”

“Forgive me, Calvinus, but I did not even know you were married.”

“I keep my personal life private,” Calvinus replied with a shrug. “Besides, she doesn’t live in Cologne. Ours is a typical Roman marriage; one of political expediency and the hopes of offspring for my line, nothing more. Though I was but a legionary, my family had strong connections, ones that allowed me to get a special dispensation allowing me to marry, provided my wife did not reside where I was stationed; which suited us both fine. Our first two sons died within days of birth, a third was stillborn. My daughter, Calvina, is the only one of my children to live to adulthood.”

“How old is she?”

“She turns thirty-one next month,” Calvinus answered.

Apronius was surprised. He had envisioned a young girl, or perhaps a teenager. Still, he was glad for the change of subject.

The Master Centurion then gave a mirthless chuckle. “My son-in-law, I’ve only met twice. His father knew of my family’s wealth, in spite of my status as a mere soldier, so he knew Calvina’s dowry would be great. He is the mayor of Napoli, so it was a good match for us, too…do you realize I have a thirteen-year old grandson I’ve never even seen? I am a stranger to my entire family.”

“The love of family can push even the most committed soldier to long for retirement,” Apronius replied, his hands folded in front of him as he leaned across the table. “Tell me the truth, Calvinus, that is not the entire reason, is it?”

The Master Centurion breathed deeply through his nose and shook his head.

“No.”

“You just said you’ve spent the last nineteen years with the Twentieth,” the Legate observed, to which Calvinus replied with a nod. “There was another tragic event that happened around the time you came here.” The twitching of Calvinus jaw gave Apronius the answer he was looking for.

“Yes…I am a survivor of Teutoburger Wald,” he replied, eyes boring into Apronius.

“I am sorry to have brought up such a painful memory,” the Legate

replied, eyes on the table and unable to meet Calvinus' gaze. "We almost suffered the same fate in Frisia."

"The Fourth Cohort *did,"* Calvinus retorted. "And when I saw Proculus and Macro fall, not knowing whether they were alive or dead, and the Chief Tribune covered in his own guts and begging for death to come, I felt as if I had returned to Teutoburger. I swear I felt like I was there once more! At that time, only three men from my Century survived including me. And when I regained my senses I saw the entire Twentieth Legion sharing the same fate…"

"But we didn't!" Apronius countered. "The Fifth Legion repaired their bridge and flanked the Frisians, to say nothing of Tribune Cursor and his ten thousand."

Calvinus closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He then fixed his eyes on his commander, and Apronius knew his resolve was unshakable.

"Forgive me, sir," Calvinus said slowly. "I know my timing is horrid, but in all honestly, I just cannot see the faces of the broken and lost anymore. The gods have spared me twice, and now I think it is time for me to leave. I won't go immediately; I will stay on for a couple more months. That should be enough time for us to get the Legion back on the path to recovery, as well as find a suitable replacement."

Apronius stood and extended his hand. Calvinus was surprised at first, but then clasped Apronius' forearm in his firm grasp.

"Calvinus, you have been all that one could ever want in a Master Centurion. Give Rome three more months and I will accept your request for retirement."

Chapter XXV: A Goddess to Her Soldiers

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Proculus' injuries had been extensive, and he had yet to regain consciousness after swooning when the doctors had performed surgery on his stubborn wounds that had failed to heal, even after being back for a month. As Diana left her cousin's house, she thought about the countless others who had come back wounded, some badly maimed. As a Centurion Primus Ordo, Proculus was one of the lucky ones. He could afford his own surgeons and was able to be cared for within his own house. The average legionary languished in the fortress hospital, which given the huge number of casualties suffered during the campaign, was overflowing. Since the fortress housed two legions, its hospital had twice the space, as well as doctors and medics. Unlike the Twentieth, the First Legion had only engaged during the Siege of Flevum and had suffered few losses. Be that as it may, no army facility was equipped to handle the more than five thousand wounded legionaries and auxiliaries that were crammed into every possible space, as well as many forced to suffer outside under temporary shelters, subject to the elements.

For reasons she could not comprehend, Diana felt compelled to visit these men. While her cousin had wished to protect his wife from seeing the horrors of war's aftermath, at least he had a wife! Some of the legionaries had common-law 'wives' or significant others, though many more had no one. They suffered in silence and were all alone in the world, except for those who lay next to them in agony. Many of these were little more than boys of seventeen or eighteen, who had enlisted in the legions only a few months before.

A horrible stench greeted her as she reached the hospital. Several dozen soldiers, mostly auxiliaries, lay on tattered cloaks or torn blankets on the ground. Though they had fought just as hard and valiantly, legionaries would always take priority over their non-citizen compatriots. It was a type of bias that was simply accepted. The septic smell made Diana gag, though she fought to keep her composure. Proximo had accompanied her and was keeping a respectful distance behind his mistress. A medic was sitting on a wooden crate outside, his head resting in his right hand, while a soiled rag hung from his left.

"My lady," he said tiredly, unable to stand up. "You know this is no place

for you."

"My husband comes here every day, what do you mean it's not my place?" she asked sternly.

"My apologies, ma'am," the medic replied. "It's just…we are not equipped to handle this many wounded. No one can see what goes on in there and maintain their sanity!"

With a nod of understanding, Diana stepped over an auxiliary, who was holding a filthy rag over his abdomen, which reeked of infection. Her hand came over her mouth as she stared into the darkened hall of despair and pain. The most badly injured soldiers lay on bunks, stacked three high. Others simply curled up on the floor. Their companions had brought them bedding and blankets from their billets, though for the auxiliaries, whose forts were scattered along the Rhine, there was nothing for them but what they brought. Orderlies carried pots for the wounded to urinate or defecate in, seeing as how these men were unable to so much as walk to the latrines that were just two blocks away. Some of the wounded were in such a state of fever and delirium that they had no control over their bodily functions and the room stank of excrement.

Diana crept along the wall and looked into the other room where doctors and medics performed surgery and did the actual treatment of wounds. One poor man was lying on a table, his face clammy and pale, lips already turning blue. Gangrene had spread through his body, like so many of the others who had been badly wounded. He was fighting to stop the violent convulsions that sent shockwaves of pain through is broken body. Another soldier, perhaps the man's Centurion or Optio, stood over him, clutching his hand. The officer looked at the doctor who, with a look of emotional exhaustion, simply shook his head.

"I'm sorry, sir," the wounded legionary stammered, biting hard as another spasm sent torrents of pain through him.

"No," the officer replied gently, shaking his head. "You have nothing to be sorry for."

"Please…please tell me I fought well," the man pleaded. His eyes showed that he knew his time in this life was coming to an end.

Diana stood in the corner with her arms wrapped around herself, sobbing quietly.

"You fought like a lion!" the officer replied forcefully, bringing a brief smile from the legionary through the convulsions and pain. "It took half a

dozen of them to bring you down, and two of those bastards fell by your blade!"

"Y…you're the only father…I've ever had," the young soldier gasped. "I…I…I wanted to make you proud…" His eyes rolled into the back of his head, his tongue protruding from his mouth as his body thrashed about. His bowels let loose and the pungent odor mixed with the stench of rot that permeated the room.

"Sleep well, son," the officer whispered into the ear of the now still legionary. He attempted to close the man's eyes, though there was nothing to be done about the protruding tongue, which was bitten nearly in two. As he stood and took a deep breath, Diana recognized the man as Centurion Dominus, the man who had replaced Vitruvius as the Commander of the Third Cohort. He turned to leave and noticed Diana standing there. His face was ashen, and all he could do was give a short nod. This was the only gesture that showed he saw her, for his eyes were distant and lost.

"One more name to add to our call to the fallen," he said quietly as he stumbled from the room.

"Can I help you, my lady?" a medic asked, startling Diana, who was staring at the dead legionary that orderlies were carrying towards the back door.

A bucket of water was dumped onto the table and it was quickly wiped off with a bloody rag before a less gravely injured soldier was lifted onto it.

"No," she replied, trying to compose herself. "It is I who should be helping you. What is it you need?"

"Well, to be honest," the medic began, not sure if he should speak candidly to her, but he took a deep breath and went on. "To be honest, we are terribly short of clean bandages and rags, as you can plainly see. Not enough hot water either. And those poor auxiliaries, they haven't got so much as a proper cot, or even a pillow and nice blanket to protect them from the cold. Gods know how many more of them will perish in the freezing night! Nights in Germania, even in summer, are not kind to those who have to sleep out in that; to say nothing of their being weakened already by their wounds!"

Diana pitied the poor man. Even though he was not a legionary and did not take part in the fighting, he had to deal with the aftermath. If given the choice, most legionaries would sooner fight a thousand battles, rather than deal with the abject suffering that followed a single engagement. Diana nodded and then turned to Proximo, who stood loyally by, though his own

senses were assailed by what they had witnessed.

"Return to the manor," she directed. "Have the servants gather every spare blanket, bed sheet, towel, and whatever cloth we may have lying around. Have them boil water, as much as they can, fill every spare vat and jug in my possession. Also…tell my husband where to find me."

"Yes, my lady," Proximo replied, his face creased in worry. As soon as he had left, Diana turned to the orderly once more. She removed her stola, so that she was only wearing her tunic vest and riding breaches.

"It seems you are short staffed, as well," she asserted as she proceeded to tear her stola into long strips.



Artorius was surprised by all the activity in his house. A cart that the gardener used was piled high with sheets and blankets. Wine vats and large clay jugs were stacked alongside with steam escaping from them.

"What's going on?" he asked a slave, who was using a large rope to hold everything in place.

"My lady's orders, sir," the man replied averting his eyes downward. "This is to go to the hospital. We were also told to let you know that that is where you can find her."

"The hospital?" Artorius asked to no one in particular. He had been there every day since their return from Frisia, visiting his wounded legionaries. He knew the squalid conditions that infected the place, and the thought of his wife being there horrified him. Suddenly, injuries to his side and leg seemed to cry out as he leaned against his vine stick, a realization coming to him. He hung his head, deeply ashamed. He had returned to the comforts of his manor house, not once thinking about how he could use his ample resources to help his men. Diana had spent five minutes in that hellhole and she knew what needed to be done. He cursed himself and started the mile-long trek back to the fortress.

Night had fallen, and it had started to rain by the time he reached the hospital. The cart from his house arrived but minutes after he did. He watched as Diana rushed from the door that led to the barracks portion of the hospital. Her hair was disheveled, her stola gone, and her tunic covered in blood and other fluids. She had attempted to keep her hands and arms clean, though these were still caked with grime and flaking blood. He stood

fascinated as orderlies starting taking blankets and covering up the shivering auxiliaries that lay on the ground. Three more had taken vats of steaming water and a number of rags into the billets. Most of the rest went with Diana into the operating wing.

As he limped towards the door, he saw Diana emerge once again. She had been there since early afternoon and was completely exhausted. She had stayed on, even after the night shift at the hospital had taken over their duties from the day staff. She noticed her husband for the first time as she leaned against the door jam, her arm stretched over her head. She looked down, unsure what to say. When she looked up again, he simply nodded and took her by the arm. She directed their servants who had come with the cart to stay and assist the hospital staff with anything they required.

Not a word was spoken between them as they walked out of the gate to the fortress. Diana looked haggard in the torchlight, though the guards knew better than to say anything. Artorius pretended to not notice the looks of horror on their faces. As they approached a small stream, Diana stumbled off the path and collapsed to her knees. She started vomiting uncontrollably. Artorius knelt next to her, ignoring the growing pain in his side and leg that now made walking very difficult for him. Diana was now crying openly, her sobs echoing through the darkness.

“Dear gods, those poor boys!” she struggled to say. “So much suffering! What have they done to deserve this?” Her face fell into her hands as she let loose all the emotion that had been building up inside of her.

Artorius placed his arm around her shoulder, but when Diana turned to put her arm around his waist, she accidentally ran her hand over his stitched up side. He gasped in pain and collapsed onto his backside. Diana sobbed and turned away from him, beating her fists into the ground.

“I’m so sorry!” she cried. “I cannot even touch the one I love without hurting him!”

Artorius took a few deep breaths as he tried to clear his head. He then reached around from behind Diana and took both her hands in his.

“Here, you can grab onto me here,” he said as he pulled her closer to him.

“I cannot go home,” Diana whimpered, “not with what those boys are going through. It’s not right!” Exhaustion and sorrow consumed her, and she was in a type of stupor.

“Then we’ll just lay here,” Artorius replied, soothingly. He eased onto his side, pulling Diana close, her back resting against his chest, his powerful

arms wrapped around her waist. He winced as he accidentally bumped his wound against a rock, but managed to stifle any further groans.

“I’m sorry,” Diana cried softly.

A chill breeze made her shiver and Artorius held her tightly. He was instantly taken back to the night on the Rhine in Braduhenna, though he refrained from mentioning this.

The glow of a lamp shone over them as a passing patrol spotted them down by the water. As Artorius looked up behind him, he recognized the voice of the Decanus leading the men.

“Centurion Artorius!” Sergeant Felix said with surprise. “You alright, sir?”

Diana had tucked her head and had her eyes shut hard. Artorius could not help but chuckle softly at the absurdity of their situation.

“Fine,” he replied. “Though if you could do me a favor; run back to the barracks and grab the blanket off my bunk in the Centurion’s quarters.”

“Of course, sir,” Felix replied, shaking his head.

The entire squad looked baffled as they all glimpsed at their commander lying in the grass, arms around his wife.

“Didn’t look like they were fucking,” one of the men muttered, drawing a sharp rebuke from Felix.

Diana giggled nervously, which helped relieve some of her emotional strain.

“I’m sorry to have embarrassed you,” she said softly.

Artorius ran the back of his hand gently over the side of her face, causing her to sigh.

“After all you’ve done for the lads, there is nothing to be embarrassed about,” he replied. “I hope you don’t mind Felix fetching us a blanket. At least now those poor auxiliaries stuck outside the hospital have some comfort, thanks to you.”

“I had to do something,” Diana replied. “I couldn’t continue to live in pampered luxury while those who give me that right suffer in the cold after they have given so much. It saddens me to think that this is the aftermath of all wars, and yet once the fighting is over, those who have given the most are immediately forgotten.”

“You were named after a goddess,” Artorius observed. “And now you have become like a goddess to those men. If ever the fates gave us a divine protector, I now hold her in my arms.”

Diana returned to the hospital two days later. She insisted on working as an orderly, despite her status as both a noble and a woman. She procured medicines, bandages, and blankets to supplement the Legion's exhausted supplies. She also arranged for barrels of fresh water to be brought in and refilled daily. More permanent shelters were added to house the auxiliaries who had been outside. From sunrise to sunset she would assist the medics, while offering as much comfort to the sick and dying as she was able. It took a toll on her emotionally, though in the end it made her that much stronger. Her husband was like a father to the men of his Century, and now Lady Diana had become a goddess to the entire Legion.

Chapter XXVI: Redemption

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"Cousin?" Diana questioned as she walked into the room. Centurion Primus Ordo Valerius Proculus had contracted a fever following his terrible injuries at Braduhenna and had been unable to see visitors. His lavish bedroom at his house had been made into a hospital room by the appearance of several doctors and medics, along with all of their equipment and various ointments and other drugs. The midday sun shone on Proculus as he tried to sit upright in bed. He was still very pale, and it looked like he had lost a tremendous amount of weight.

"Dearest little Diana," he rasped, though he forced a smile. She was glad when she held his hand and felt a lot of strength in his grip. It was a good sign. She looked behind her and the doctor nodded and left the room, along with his medics.

"I'm relieved to see you are still among the living," Diana said, her broad smile one of genuine happiness.

"Perhaps," Proculus said quietly, "though I'm getting too old for this shit."

Diana stifled a giggle and placed a finger on her cousin's lips.

"Shh, don't try to talk," she replied soothingly. "I came to tell you that I got word from Vorena. She should be here in a few days." Diana was startled to see Proculus look crestfallen.

"Vorena?" he said. "She will see me like this…" He turned his head to the side, gazing out the window. His grip weakened and Diana thought she could see a tear forming in his eye.

"Vorena's your wife," she pleaded. "She should be by your side, regardless of what you look like! Please cousin, let her be here for you."

"In all our years…she has never had to see *this*. I have tried to keep it from her…did not want to upset her."

As her exhausted cousin drifted off to sleep a tear came to Diana's eye. Proculus and Vorena had been married for more than twenty years; they had two sons who were both reaching the age of maturity, as well as two younger daughters. And for all that time Proculus had tried to shield her from the horrors of how he made a living. He had made his fortune on the bodies of fallen races destroyed by Rome, but then again, so had Vorena's family.

Her paternal grandfather was the legendary Lucius Vorenus, Centurion Primus Pilus of the Eleventh Legion during the time of Julius Caesar and the conquest of Gaul. Proculus often spoke of the Centurion he had idolized as a child, never knowing that he would one day marry the man's granddaughter. He had admired Vorenus' loyalty to both Rome and to his friends. His bond with his fellow Centurion, Titus Pullo, proved unbreakable, even though they ended up on opposite sides during the civil war between Caesar and Pompey. Though they only met once when Vorenus was nearing the end of his days, he had been the epitome of what Proculus viewed to be the ideal soldier.

Vorena had, therefore, come from a military family, and Proculus knew the agony that her mother and grandmother had been through when their husbands went off to war. He had wanted to spare his wife from that, and now he found himself virtually crippled from wounds suffered on the battlefield. Diana surmised that it would upset Proculus far more than Vorena, though Diana had warned her to steel herself for when she saw her husband.



It was a modest cottage; stone walls and a thatched roof, with a chimney for the cooking fire towards the back. As Cursor rode up on his horse, he saw that it sat on a small parcel of land. The harvest was coming soon, and he could see a young man supervising a handful of workers in the field. A woman, somewhere in her mid forties from the look of her, was drawing water from a nearby well. She glanced up briefly and froze when she saw the Tribune. Cursor had wished to avoid being conspicuous by wearing his armor and plumed helmet, though he knew it was necessary. Bandits on the roads were quick to attack merchants and other travelers, but they usually stayed clear of uniformed soldiers. Besides, it would not have been long before his identity was known. A squad of auxiliary cavalrymen had accompanied him, along with Commander Julius Indus.

"We can wait for you here, sir," Indus said. He and Rodolfo had shared a long and mutually respectful professional relationship, though Indus knew that the fewer men who Rodolfo had to deal with the better.

Cursor looked back and nodded affirmatively.

"I will let you know as to his temperament," the Tribune replied, "provided this is even his residence, of course. If he is willing to see me, he

may consent to seeing at least one other old friend."

Indus gave a brief smile. "I would like that," he said.

Cursor then dismounted his horse, removed his helmet, and removed a large satchel from his horse, which he slung over his shoulder. Indus and the cavalrymen dismounted and guided their mounts over to a grove of apple trees where they would wait for him. The Tribune walked towards the cottage just as Rodolfo emerged, a carving knife held loosely in his hand.

"Still doing your woodworking, I see," Cursor greeted his friend. The former Centurion stood dumbfounded and dropped his head in resignation.

With a hand on his shoulder, Cursor walked Rodolfo over to the ox cart. The Tribune placed the satchel next to a couple of chests and a tarp.

"You may recognize this one," the Tribune explained, "you left without taking your personal chest with you. It hasn't been opened; I simply put a lock on it so that no one would mess with your personal effects. And this…" He pulled back the tarp, revealing the Centurion's helmet and squamata armor. "Whether you ever wear them again is not my concern, but they are yours. And you may want this." He reached beneath the canvas folds and pulled out Rodolfo's spatha.

The former Centurion took the weapon, which was in its scabbard, and stared at it blankly. He then set it down, though he still remained silent. Cursor then pointed to the last chest. It was much smaller than the other, though it was extremely heavy to move. At this time, the woman from the well and the youth had arrived, both pale with apprehension. Rodolfo put his arms around the woman with a shy smile and gave her a brief hug. Turning back to the Tribune he stammered an introduction of his wife and son. Cursor bowed to the woman, his hand over his heart.

"And here, we have the last thing owed to you by Rome." With that, the Tribune threw open the lid of the second chest, revealing a mass of gold and silver coins. Both Rudolfo's wife, Laurencia, and his son, Henk gasped in shock at the sight. "You forgot about your retirement savings that you've kept for all these years. Plus, I went ahead and cashed out your pension, giving you a lump sum, rather than an annual stipend. Less hassle and less contact with Rome." His face held a small, smug smile.

The amount of coin was the reason behind Apronius insisting that Cursor take a squad of cavalrymen with him. Between what Rodolfo had saved over the years, plus the monetary lump sum pension for an auxiliary Centurion, there was perhaps one hundred thousand denarii in the chest; the equivalent

of a year's salary for an entire legionary cohort.

"Father, does this mean we're rich?" Henk asked, trying to control his enthusiasm.

One hundred thousand denarii would be enough to buy them a large manor house or massive estate. Rodolfo picked up and drew his spatha, stabbing it into the cart next to the chest.

"This is blood money," he spat. "All of this was gotten through thirty years of murder!"

"As is the money paid to any professional soldier," Cursor retorted with a trace of irritation in his voice. "Look, if you don't want to take this coin that is your decision. But do you think it will make the guilt go away? Do you think it will end the nightmares that haunt you?"

Rodolfo glared at him at this last remark. A knowing grin crossed the Tribune's face, for he knew he had struck a chord.

"I know that the countless battles you have fought rend your soul," he continued, "for they terrorize my dreams, as well. No soldier that survives to see the end of a long career does so without paying a heavy toll in physical and emotional scars. You can't make them go away, my friend. But what you *can* do is take what Rome owes you for what you suffered for Her! And if not for yourself, do it for them." He nodded towards Rodolfo's family and knew that he had won.

The former Centurion placed a hand within the chest, closed his eyes and hung his head. Laurencia stepped over to him and placed a hand on his back.

"It's okay, my love," she said as she gently patted his back. "It's okay for you to let Rome make amends with you. Take what is owed to you and then let your rage go."

"I have one more thing," Cursor said as Rodolfo opened his eyes and raised his head. "Actually, it is something *you* owe *me*." He then reached into the satchel he had placed on the cart and pulled out the half finished carving of the horse bust. This brought the first smile to Rodolfo's face since Cursor's arrival.

"You do still carve, don't you?" he asked with a grin. "You promised to make this for me, so now I expect you to honor your word and finish what you started."

Rodolfo smiled broadly, tears running down his cheeks as he took the block from Cursor. He then nodded affirmatively.

"I will do so," he replied thickly, "for you, my one true friend from

Rome."

"Actually, you do have at least one other," Cursor replied, waving over to Commander Indus, who briskly walked over to them.

Rodolfo set the carving down and embraced Indus and slapped him hard on the back.

"Gods damn it, man!" Indus chastised. "You had us all worried!"

"I owe you an apology," Rodolfo replied. He then looked to Cursor, "and to you, sir."

"There is nothing to be sorry for," Cursor replied with a shake of his head. "Know that your honor is intact and the safety and care of your family ensured. You are not a deserter, but a retired Centurion of Rome."



Amke had a gloom about her that failed to dissipate. King Tabbo had noticed it ever since Braduhenna. He could scarcely blame the girl. The Daughters of Freyja had paid dearly for their valor in trying to protect her uncle, the King. Nearly half had been slain, with most of the rest badly injured for their efforts. Every day Amke visited the grove dedicated to her matron deity. It was there that Tabbo found her kneeling before an altar, her face blank, eyes shut.

"If you wish to honor the goddess, you must allow yourself to move on," the King said gently.

Amke's eyes remained closed. "I am not worthy to serve the goddess," she said after a brief pause. She then opened her eyes, but kept them fixed straight ahead. "My sisters and I were charged with defending the King, and we failed. Freyja found us unworthy and abandoned us at the end."

"You should not say such things," Tabbo soothed as he sat on a log near where Amke knelt.

At last she looked up at him. Though her eye had since reopened, her face was still discolored and partially swollen from the blow she had taken during the battle. The bandage was off her arm, as well, but the scar left behind was fearful to look upon. While her clothing covered it, the gash on her side was still a sickly, oozing mess, even as it was slowly healing. Amke now walked with a limp that she was very self conscious of. She quietly wondered if she would ever be able to walk properly, let alone wield a weapon.

"I mean no disrespect to your person, sire," she replied. "I know that my

uncle chose you to be his successor after my cousin was killed. You are a good King and have saved our people…"

Tabbo raised a hand and Amke looked down.

"Please, I know what you mean," he replied. "Dibbald Segon was the greatest of Kings. I am but a humble warrior, unworthy to follow him. But follow him I did, because he asked me to do so. I also know that he wished for me to look after those of his family that remained. Besides your aunt, Queen Femke, you are all that is left of the family of Dibbald Segon."

"And it is a line that will end with me," Amke emphasized. "Remember, I am of the Daughters of Freyja. Our place was by the King."

"It is still your place," Tabbo replied, lifting Amke's chin with his hand. His smile softened her hardened gaze. "Your King calls upon you, and the other Daughters, to stand by his side."

"We are but few in number, sire."

"I will take your few over a host of lesser mortals," Tabbo emphasized. "Amke, you are the last of the Segon line, and as such you will always hold a place of honor in my household. I will not command you to take your position as the head of the Daughters of Freyja, though if you wish to do so you will be most welcomed back."

"It is an honor I accept," Amke replied, allowing herself to smile for the first time since Braduhenna.

Tabbo helped her to her feet and walked arm in arm with her back to the capital. She still limped badly, and by the time they returned he was practically carrying her.

"I miss them," she said as he set her down on the bed inside her house. The King sat on a chair and looked at her quizzically.

"Who do you miss?"

"All of them," Amke replied. "My sisters who fell at Braduhenna, Sjoerd, my dear cousin, Klaes, Uncle Dibbald, even that deviant bastard Lourens."

"Lourens was an honorable man," Tabbo chastised. "He may have had feelings for you, but he never once tried to act upon them. And besides, what man would not have longed to be caressed by one such as you?"

Amke looked down, embarrassed by the King's statement.

"Sire, you flatter me too much," she replied. "I am scarred and broken now. I doubt any man would want me. But you are right; Lourens did stay faithful to his wife and never let his feelings for me bring disgrace to his family or mine. I guess that's why I miss him. He *was* a good man. He died

by my uncle’s side, refusing to leave him.”



It was now fall, and every day Artorius checked on his wounded men that were still in the hospital. Every few days one or two legionaries were returned to the Century. These men would be placed on light duty for various amounts of time, depending on the extent of their injuries. Many would require months of rehabilitation to regain full use of their bodies once more. Eight would never fight again and were awaiting medical discharges from the army. This left the Second Century critically short on manpower. Fifty-one names remained on the rolls, though only twenty were now fit for full duty, another fifteen had returned to the unit but were still on medical restrictions, including Artorius and Praxus. Rufio and Magnus had stepped forward and carried much of the burden of running the Century for them.

The Centurion was finally able to walk unassisted. He had lost a tremendous amount of weight, and he constantly felt weak and out of breath. That would change soon, he kept telling himself. He had started back into his workout routine, though the weights he used were much lighter than before. His side ached whenever he tried running, so for the time being he would go on extended marches with some of the men who were also recuperating. It was after one of these short marches, only about ten miles that Artorius returned to find another of the wounded waiting outside his office.

“This is an auxiliary trooper who requested to see you,” Rufio explained. “He said you would know him.”

At first Artorius did not recognize the man. He then realized who the man was and nodded. The trooper looked much different from the last time they had seen each other. Indeed, this was the first time the Centurion had seen him without either helmet or a face covered in blood. He nodded and signaled for the auxiliary to follow him into his office. As soon as he sat down behind his desk the man snapped a sharp salute.

“Trooper Metellus Artorianus reporting, sir.”

The name struck hard at Artorius, for the man had his brother’s first name. There was more to it as well.

“Your surname is the adoptive variation of my own,” he observed. “We’re not related, are we?” He grinned as he said this, his hands clasped behind his head as he leaned back in his chair.

The young man was not smiling. Instead, he swallowed hard before answering, his eyes straight ahead as if he was afraid to look at the Centurion directly.

“I…I am your nephew, sir.”

Artorius fell over backwards in his chair.

Chapter XXVII: Fathers and Sons

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Artorius paced back and forth, his hands clasped behind his back. The auxiliary trooper's remark had sent him falling backwards out of his chair. It was impossible; his brother Metellus had died childless. Surely if he had had a son Artorius would have found out by now!

"You say you are my nephew," the Centurion said at last, as he stood facing the young man. "Do explain…and for gods' sake stand easy, man!"

The trooper breathed deeply as he relaxed his stance and finally found the courage to look Artorius in the eye. Artorius tried to see if there were any similarities between this young man and himself. Could he see his brother in him? In spite of the years that had passed, he still knew his brother's face. There *could* be a resemblance…but he immediately ceased such ludicrous thoughts.

"I am the son of Metellus Artorius Maximus, Legionary of the Seventeenth; killed in action, Teutoburger Wald. My mother's name was Rowana."

"Was?" Artorius asked. "She is dead then?"

The younger Metellus nodded.

"She died of an illness last year. It was only at the last that she told me to follow my destiny. All my life she never wanted me to join the Roman army and risk sharing the same fate as my father. She never married, and still loved him to the end of her days. Yet she cursed Rome for taking him from her.

"When she knew her illness would be fatal, she finally mentioned my father having a brother and that I needed to find him. She said, 'find the Valeria Legion and determine your destiny.' Nothing else was said, I can only assume it meant she kept some connection with my father's past and knew where I could find you. It was then that she gave me these." He handed a series of documents to Artorius.

They were a series of letters and short poems. A few were love poems, written in a hand that Artorius recognized. He swallowed hard as he continued to glance through the papers.

He almost dropped the lot when he found some letters in the stack, only having to read the first few words to know what they said. He was looking at his own handwriting, which had scarcely improved since these letters had

been written twenty years before. They mostly talked about school and how he was keeping his promise about doing well in his studies. Each was closed with a favorite quote that he had learned from his brother; *With a sound mind and strong body one can accomplish anything.* There was one final letter at the very bottom, but it was in neither his nor his brother's hand. It was addressed to Rowana and the signature made Artorius tremble. It took every ounce of his self control to maintain his composure as he looked at the young man once more.

"Come with me," he said as he briskly walked out of the office.

The young man struggled to keep pace with him as the Centurion stormed out of the Century's office and headed straight to the Principia. His gaze was cold and fixated to his front as he walked into the Legion headquarters, right past Camillus, who was verifying the promotion appointments for one of the cohorts.

"What the fuck, not so much as a hello?" the Aquilifer asked as the two men walked right past him. Camillus continued to watch them as they made their way to the Master Centurion's office.

"Wait here," Artorius commanded, pointing to a spot right outside the door.

"Hey!" Camillus shouted as Artorius bolted in without so much as knocking. Just as quickly he stopped and immediately went back to his desk when he heard the raised voices inside.

"Oh, shit," he whispered.

"Centurion Artorius," Calvinus said, completely taken by surprise. There was anger in the younger Centurion's face, and the fact that he had not so much as knocked and waited for permission to enter confounded the Primus Pilus.

"Did my brother have a son?" Artorius said, his voice rising.

"Excuse me?" Calvinus replied.

"You fucking heard me!" Artorius barked.

Calvinus' eyes went wide and his surprise quickly turned to anger.

"You watch your tone with me, *Centurion!"* he shouted back. "Don't think our past history gives you the right to barge into my office unannounced and get insubordinate with me! You had better explain yourself!" He had completely forgotten the question the junior Centurion had asked.

“My apologies, sir,” Artorius replied tightly. He then held up the letter addressed to Rowana. “I thought perhaps you could explain this.”

The Master Centurion’s eyes grew wide as he recognized the letter.

“Where did you get that?”

“From an auxiliary trooper named Metellus Artorianus. Do you know him?” It all started making sense to Artorius, judging from Calvinus’ expression.

The Master Centurion looked deflated. He looked away, briefly covering his eyes with his hand.

“I know him, though I have not seen him since he was a newborn,” he replied. “It’s easy to forget just how many years have passed. The last time I saw him, his mother reaffirmed what she had written to me in response to my letter which you now hold.” He then sat behind his desk, gazing off to the side, and shook his head. “I guess little Metellus is not so little anymore.”

“He’s here,” Artorius said after a short pause. “I’ve brought him with me.”

Calvinus then looked up at the Centurion and nodded. Artorius returned to the door to see Metellus standing rigid outside, sweat forming on his brow. Camillus was sitting at his desk, studiously staring at the document in front of him, with his ear cocked towards the door. Artorius motioned with his head and Metellus followed him into the office. The young man stood before the Master Centurion and saluted. Before he could speak, Calvinus raised a hand, silencing him.

“I know who you are,” he said, taking a further moment to appraise the trooper. A sad smile then crossed Calvinus’ face. “You have your mother’s eyes…and your father’s strong jaw. Take a seat; we have much to talk about.”

All three men sat at Calvinus’ desk. The letter he had sent to Rowana had been the notification of Metellus the Elder’s death. After some rummaging around, he then produced another letter from his desk drawer and handed it to the young trooper, whose hands trembled slightly as he read his mother’s response to the Centurion.

My Dearest Calvinus,

I thank you for the kind words regarding my beloved Metellus. I have no doubts about his heroism or valor, or indeed his actions saving your life. He

may have died a hero, but he died nonetheless. My husband is still lost to me and I curse Rome for taking him from me, just as I curse the Senate and Emperor he died for, who would not even grant him the simple courtesy of honoring our marriage! He was my husband in the eyes of the gods, if not in the eyes of Rome.

Know that I would gladly follow my love into the afterlife, were it not for that I carry his child within me. He died never knowing he was to be a father, just as his child will grow up without knowing him. If it is a son that I bear, I will name him in honor of his father, but that will be his only link to Rome. I disavow any further connections with Rome, and my son will be raised as a member of my people, not his father's, lest he share the same fate.

I ask that you do not try to find me. Though I will always have fond feelings for you, I bear nothing but disdain for the legions you serve! Farewell, Calvinus, until I see you again in the next life,

Rowana

"I did not honor her request," Calvinus said when he saw that young Metellus had finished reading. "I sought her out, for no other reason than I wanted to make certain that the family of the man who saved my life was safe. You were but a few months old then. I was surprised that your mother was not angered at seeing me. Your father's grave fund was paid to your grandfather in Ostia, so I gave Rowana a bit of my own money to provide for you both. That was the last I ever saw of her. I only wrote to her one other time, and that was after I met your uncle during the Germanic Wars."

"Then that is how she knew where to find you," Metellus observed, looking over to Artorius, who nodded in reply.

The Centurion was still in shock, the realization that the man he sat next to was, in fact, his brother's son seemed surreal to him.

"Then it is time for you to take what is rightfully yours," Artorius stated.

Metellus looked at him perplexed. "What do you mean, sir?"

In answer to Metellus' question, Artorius stood and suddenly found a surge of purpose.

"Don't you see? You are a *Roman!* The citizenship that will take you another twenty-four years in the auxilia to attain is already yours by right! You've been an auxiliary for the last year when in reality you should have been serving as a legionary, should you still wish to remain in the army."

“But I cannot *prove* who my father was,” Metellus protested. “My mother is dead, and there is no one who can vouch for my lineage.”

“I possibly could,” Calvinus conjectured. “Though I admit it will be difficult. Even a Master Centurion carries little weight in matters such as this. I have not seen young Metellus since he was an infant, and if all were needed was an endorsement from me, then every auxiliary trooper in the Empire would be doing everything he could to find favor with the nearest Centurion.” Calvinus’ assessment made the situation look grim until Artorius’ face suddenly brightened.

“I have a better idea,” he said, his purpose now laid clear before him. “What about adoption?”

Metellus looked confused as Calvinus’ face broke into a grin. “A citizen may adopt whomever he chooses to be his son and heir, and you know Diana and I cannot have children.” He then faced the young trooper and placed a hand on his shoulder, taking a deep breath. “Metellus is already my nephew by blood. I would be honored to have him as my son!”



Diana’s heart leapt as Artorius explained what had happened with Metellus and Master Centurion Calvinus. She folded her hands in front of her face, her eyes wet with emotion. Her husband seemed concerned about how she would feel about the situation, and he kept trying to explain himself to her, afraid he was upsetting her.

“I want this, not just to have an heir,” he said as he paced back in forth in their bedroom. “This young man is of my blood, he *is* an Artorius by birth. Never mind that I am only eleven years his elder…I feel a bond with him already. I swear on everything I love that I felt my brother’s presence in that room! It was as if he was guiding my hand.” He had turned away as he spoke and was staring out the window into the night, afraid of what her reaction would be. A gentle breeze blew in and he closed his eyes, his arms folded across his chest. Diana reached out and wrapped her arms around him, holding him tight as she kissed him on the cheek.

“When can I meet our son?” she whispered into his ear.



For one father there would be no joyous reunion with his son. Justus stood trembling, the letter from Artorius having reached him long before the official notification from Rome. He stood inside the foyer of his house, his left hand resting on a pillar, the other holding the message from his friend in a balled up fist. His eyes were shut, face red and teeth grinding. Flavia and Gaia stood in the doorway leading into the back hallway. Flavia placed a hand over her mouth, her eyes immediately filling with tears.

"It's about Gaius, isn't it?" Gaia asked her father. Though nine years had separated her from her brother, she had always adored him. He in turn had always been there for his little sister.

Justus' face was clenched hard, unable to speak. His cheeks stained with tears, he turned to face his wife and daughter. He stared not at them, but rather at the statue of Bellona, the goddess of war, that sat on a niche behind them. As the wife of a soldier, Flavia had felt that extra care should be given to both Bellona and Victoria, whose statue also adorned the room. In fact, the entire atrium was a virtual pantheon of Roman deities. His sorrow quickly turned to hatred as he stared into the lifeless eyes of the statue. He had just come off duty and was still in his armor. Eyes still fixed on the goddess; he slowly drew his gladius and cupped the blade in his left hand. He squeezed hard, unaware that the ever sharp blade was cutting into his hand. Flavia grabbed her daughter by the shoulders and slowly backed away as blood dripped from Justus' hand.

The Centurion walked quickly over to the niche that held the large bust. It was made of a hollow ceramic; still highly ornate, though far more affordable than marble. It was also more fragile. Flavia held Gaia close as her husband raised his sword and pressed the point underneath the goddess' chin. A wicked sneer then crossed his face, and with an unholy howl of rage he swung the sword, which smashed through the bust and shattered it with a loud crash. He then lunged towards the full-body statue of Victoria and with a backhand swing smashed it in two at the torso. The upper portion flew apart as it crashed onto the floor. Flavia released her daughter and fell to her knees, holding her hands up to her face as Justus committed one terrible sacrilege after another. The smashing of ceramic echoed throughout the hall, with Justus' howls of anguish terrifying the household slaves.

As he strode towards the final statue, one of Apollo, Gaia rushed forward and came between her father and the god. Though just nine years old and half Justus' size, she managed to stay his hand with a simple touch on his wrist.

He gasped and hyperventilated as he hung his head, sweat dripping from his brow. Gaia effortlessly took the gladius from his hand. At first Justus thought his daughter was shamed by his conduct, but then he saw the cold determination in her eyes. She dropped the sword, turned and picked up the statue, and with an affirmative nod from her father, she gave her own cry of rage and smashed it onto the tile floor. As she met his gaze, Gaia's eyes flooded with tears as the pain of her brother's death overcame her. Justus grabbed her and held her close as both of them let their grief overwhelm them, his deeply cut left hand smearing blood all over the back of her stola. Flavia stumbled to her feet and limped over to her husband and daughter. All three clung to each other as they collapsed onto the floor against the wall. Justus uttered blasphemies under his breath, damning the pantheon of gods who had taken his beloved son from him. It was then that he swore he would rather be damned to the fires of hell than pay tribute to such abominations.



"I hate formalities," Artorius grumbled as he passed some documents over to Metellus, "but at least this makes everything official. This one confirms that you are a citizen of Rome by adoption, and that your name is now *Metellus Artorius Posthumous*. I felt the cognomen appropriate as it still gives a sense of bonding to your biological father, my dear brother." Artorius sighed deeply, looking away for a second.

Metellus sat quietly, reading through the official-sounding certificate of adoption. There were two other documents that Artorius was quick to explain.

"This one is your discharge from the auxilia. The other is your enlistment into the legions. You can either enlist or find yourself a job. Though the circumstances are quite unusual, Master Centurion Calvinus was able to get your auxiliary service credited towards your service obligation to the legions. He's also waived the requirement for you to go through recruit training. His argument was that anyone awarded the Civic Crown had proven their valor and worth."

Metellus smiled in reply.

"Where will I be assigned, sir?"

"The Sixth Cohort. I know the Pilus Prior, Centurion Agricola, pretty well. He took command of the Sixth right before the Sacrovir Revolt. He was

the one who alerted us to Sacrovir's intent to encase his vanguard in plate armor, thereby allowing us to come up with a plan to counter the threat."

"I heard about that," Metellus replied. "You used your entrenching pickaxes to burst through their armor."

"Well, theirs was not the best crafted armor; it was bulky and extremely heavy."

"Still, you thrashed them so soundly that not even a whisper of rebellion has been uttered in all of Gaul," the legionary added.

"For now," Artorius conceded. "There will always be those who seek to undermine the Empire and would see all that we have worked for undone. Still, at least it ensures that our profession will never cease to be a necessity. To be honest, I felt kind of bad for the Gauls. All they really wanted was to be recognized as equals within the Empire. If the damned Senate had just allowed Gauls of equal status senatorial membership, the whole rebellion could have been avoided."

"No love for the Senate from you then," Metellus mused.

"Not when a number of them were friends of my predecessor and would love nothing more than to make a lethal example of me," the Centurion agreed. "Besides, from what I've seen, most of the Senate is fucking useless. There are a few who have made excellent legion commanders, but they are a minute portion of the senatorial class. The rest cannot make up their minds about anything! Their egos lead to pointless wars and we have to clean up their mess!

"I look back on one particular rebel whom I killed with my pickaxe. He was little more than a boy and of no threat to us. What was the point of his death? I blame the selfishness of the Senate as much as I blame Sacrovir. The reign of terror that the remnants of the rebellion wrought in Lugdunum stemmed from this. So many people died such violent deaths, and I cannot help but think that many of them did not have to."

"Not a pacifist are you, sir?" Metellus asked, causing Artorius to laugh.

It must have seemed baffling that one of the most well-known Centurions within the Twentieth Legion was speaking out against war.

"Not at all," Artorius replied. "The wars against the Germanic Alliance were totally justified, and I regret nothing that we did. I took no pleasure in much of the killing, particularly that of their women and children. Much of it still haunts me; however, it was a brutal necessity. I believe in wars of conquest and of retribution. What I do not support are wars of convenience,

started by fat aristocrats who avoid the fighting and dirty work. Of course, when we joined the legions we gave up our right to pick and choose where we fight. We don't have to like it, but we have to show up and do our duty."

"Kind of like our war against the Frisians," Metellus observed, bringing a hard glare from Artorius, which made the young legionary nervous. "My apologies, sir."

"No, you are right," Artorius replied, shaking his head. "When we destroyed the rebellion of Sacrovir and Florus, our losses were minimal. No one questioned *why* they had rebelled, we just accepted that they had and our punishments were just. Against the Frisians we have paid a terrible price, and the Senate has betrayed the memories of those slain by dismissing the war as a simple misunderstanding. They only begrudgingly acknowledged Tribune Cursor's awarding of the Grass Crown, yet they will grant him no further accolades or recognition. It's as if what we went through never happened."

"That's easy for them to believe," Metellus growled, his own horrible memories of Braduhenna gnawing at him. "Those bastards did not see the carnage and pain."



The two years since becoming Procurator of Judea had been a challenge for Pontius Pilate. The Jews were by far the most fickle, difficult, and unpleasant people he had ever dealt with. How Herod Agrippa had maintained such a lifelong friendship with the Emperor baffled him. Still, it was this friendship that made Pilate's life a misery at times, for Tiberius was fond of Herod, and therefore, sympathetic to the wills of Herod's people. Anytime a dispute arose between Pilate and the Sanhedrin, the Jewish elders would threaten to go to the Emperor and make their grievances directly to him. The fact that they made good on this threat a few times already had soured Pilate's relations with them.

"The Emperor expects me to maintain the peace, and yet he bows to the Jews at every perceived offence," he vented as he pored over edicts and protocols requiring his attention.

"The Jews are offended if a Roman, or any non-Jew for that matter, dares to breathe the same air as them," his freedman clerk observed.

Pilate snorted in reply.

"They are an arrogant people, no doubt about that. It is only because

Tiberius allows them to worship their one God that they think themselves better than those who rule them. I've tried to be patient with them, but every act I do seems to offend them, even when they benefit from it!"

"You are speaking of the aqueduct?" the freedman asked.

Pilate nodded. "I am. They wanted an aqueduct, and the city has benefited from it. But who did they expect to pay for it? Themselves? Hardly! Their temple has mountains of gold that they get in offerings to their strange deity. Well, if God is supposed to be there for them, then why wouldn't He want His temple funds used to give His people fresh and ample water supply? But no! The second I ordered the temple to pay for the aqueduct the Sanhedrin were up in arms as if I had raped their mothers!"

"Perhaps we should, since they're going to complain anyway."

The freedman's attempt at humor only soured Pilate's mood, though he pretended not to hear.

"Those damned auxiliaries are of no help either," he ranted. "I've begged the Syrian Legate to, at least, attach a cohort of legionaries to Judea. He swears they are all needed in Syria, which hasn't had a real crisis in decades! Of course, he promises to *'clean up my mess'* should things go to shit here."

"Samaritan auxiliaries don't make the most disciplined soldiers," the clerk conceded. "Mostly they just bully the people while enforcing taxation… whether taxes are due or not!"

"They don't make us many friends," Pilate added. "Bastards can't follow orders either. When the Jews rebelled about the aqueduct, I specifically told them to disperse the crowd with batons and avoid unnecessary bloodshed. What do they do? They use their swords and kill a bunch of citizens instead!" Pilate then walked over to the window that overlooked the city. He was thankful that he spent most of his time in the port of Caesarea, rather than that stink hole, Jerusalem. He could not fathom what was so special and holy about that infernal place to the Jews.

Just then the door was opened, and he smiled for the first time all day as Claudia walked in. His wife sensed what vexed him, and she placed an arm around his shoulders and kissed him on the cheek. The clerk bowed and left the room.

"I feel alone, Claudia," Pilate said as he breathed in the sea air on a gentle breeze. "Sejanus told me this would be a difficult task, but that if I succeeded here, only the gods could know what honors await me. It wouldn't be such a hellish burden if that bastard Lamia would just give me some support!"

“Lamia is stuck in Rome,” Claudia observed, “so what good can he do you?”

“He is still Governor of Syria,” Pilate sighed. “Yet Tiberius does not trust him and will not let him leave Rome, so he cannot even see firsthand what is happening here. He adamantly refuses to send me even a single cohort of legionaries to assist me.”

“Do you have any friends who could help?” his wife asked as she gently ran her fingers up and down his back.

Pilate nodded, though there was no optimism in his expression.

“The one man who would be willing to help is, unfortunately, in no position to do so.”

“You mean Artorius,” Claudia observed, after a seconds thought.

Pilate turned and looked his wife in the eye.

“You know what happened to him then?” he asked.

Claudia glanced at the floor and gave a sad nod.

“I received a letter from Diana,” she replied. “It came with the imperial post, which I suspect is how you heard.”

“Only the official reports which were scant at best. Sejanus added a few words, mentioning Artorius by name. No doubt he did this as a courtesy to me. After all, what does the whole of the Empire care about a thousand dead legionaries, as long as they won the battle?” There was bitterness in his voice and the expression on Claudia’s face told him that she knew better than to pursue the issue further.

“What about Justus?” she asked after a minute’s pause. “He’s your friend, too, and he is just over the border in Syria.”

Pilate gave a sad smile and shook his head.

“You forget his outburst at our prenuptial feast where he grossly insulted Sejanus,” he replied.

Claudia furrowed her brow.

“They had a spat,” she observed. “But they had both been drinking and it could not have been that bad.”

“When one says *‘fuck you’* to the Emperor’s right hand, it is usually not a good omen,” Pilate responded. “Justus is lucky to still hold his position as a Centurion in the Sixth Legion. Sejanus would have ruined him were he not my friend. No, though Justus would doubtless jump at the chance to help restore some dignity and order to this gods forsaken place, he has been relegated to obscurity.”

Claudia placed her head on her husband's shoulder as they both gazed out the window and watched ships coming into the harbor in the distance.



The leaves were full of color and falling from the trees as a breeze took hold of them. Though Artorius hated winter and the cold weather, he loved this time of year when it was not so hot and the trees colorful. He and Diana walked along the riverbank, her hand in his. His physical wounds had mostly healed, though he knew the emotional ones would leave even deeper scars. The men he had lost were slowly being replaced, but they could never be replaced where it mattered most. It was not just soldiers under his command who had died, but also close friends. Decimus and Carbo had been with him since he first joined the legions thirteen years before. And Vitruvius, his dear friend and mentor, was gone.

Yet at the same time he felt revived, almost reborn now that he had a son. Agricola had taken the young legionary into his own First Century of the Sixth Cohort.

"Agricola tells me that Metellus has so far been a model legionary," Artorius said as Diana laid her head on his shoulder, "admired by his friends, as well as his superiors."

Metellus' performance and conduct made Artorius especially proud, for he knew Agricola was a stickler for standards and at times a harsh disciplinarian. And far from showing any favors, Artorius knew the Pilus Prior would most likely expect Metellus to maintain an even higher standard of performance and conduct than his fellow legionaries.

"I'm glad to hear that," Diana replied with a smile. Though she had not raised him or even known him for long, there was already a strong bond between them. "You know, he calls me *Mother*, even though I told him it was not necessary."

This made Artorius smile in turn.

"I know I can never replace Rowana, who gave him birth and raised him."

"And yet he still feels the same type of bond with you that he had with her," Artorius replied. "I know this, because he told me."

Diana gave his hand a squeeze as they continued to walk. Their strolls together in the evenings brought him a sense of peace, in what was otherwise

his chaotic life. Before her return, Artorius' life had been chaotic at best; quite the paradox given the order and discipline in the life of a Centurion of Rome.

Chapter XXVIII: Valeria's Rebirth

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The month that followed his adoption of Metellus had been extremely hectic for Artorius. Another dozen of his men had reported back to the Century, though most would be on light duty for at least a month or so. Only a handful more were expected to return at all, the rest were still awaiting medical discharge. It broke the Centurion's heart to see his men, who had fought with extreme valor, now cast aside since they were of no use to the legions anymore. Even when the last returned, that would only leave the Second Century with a total strength of forty-six men, to include Centurion Artorius and the Principal Officers; leaving them even more under strength than he had first envisioned. That left thirty-eight vacancies within the Century. Some of the barracks rooms were almost completely vacant. Two only had one soldier living in each of them. Artorius had filled all of the Decanus vacancies from within the ranks, but two of these men had no one to lead. He had gone ahead with the promotions, feeling that it made no sense to leave any leadership position vacant, and that even without a squad to lead, these soldiers who merited the promotion should at least be able to enjoy the extra pay and benefits.

There had also been much in the way of transitions within the Legion's hierarchy. What caused the greatest stirring was the announced retirement of Master Centurion Calvinus. Centurions Primus Ordo Aemilius and Draco had also submitted their requests for discharge and retirement. Privately, Diana's cousin, Centurion Primus Ordo Proculus, had also expressed his desire to leave the legions within the next year or so. Artorius could not help but wonder if it was simply coincidence that all of these men were leaving, rather than attempting to replace Calvinus as the Legion's Primus Pilus, or if there was something more to it. Certainly they were not young men anymore, and most of them had been wounded during the Battle of Braduhenna.

It came as no surprise to anyone then, that during the Council of Centurions, Platorius Macro was selected by an almost unanimous vote to replace Calvinus as Master Centurion. Few of the cohort commanders even attempted to win the position. Most were now focused on attempting to win all of the Primus Ordo vacancies within the First Cohort. All Centurions were eligible for these positions, though Artorius knew he would not be

considered. After all, it had taken a special dispensation that allowed him to be promoted to his current rank three years shy of the minimum age requirement. He had reached that age requirement in January, when he turned thirty, and he knew that his name would not even be mentioned in the consideration to fill the Primus Ordo vacancies. It suited him just fine. His heart was with the Second Century, and he knew there was much work to be done in order to heal the wounds of his men. In his mind, taking a promotion at this time would be tantamount to abandoning those who had fought by his side and given so much of themselves.

He had been right about the Primus Ordo positions. Legate Apronius, Master Centurion Macro, and the Legion's tribunes selected three senior-ranking Centurions to fill the positions. The only one whose name Artorius recognized was his son's Cohort Commander, Centurion Agricola, who he always regarded with a high level of respect.

"All that and you can't even get a Cohort Commander position out of it?" Magnus mused as he and Artorius discussed the volatile situation amongst the Centurionate, as they walked along the riverbank. Diana had taken it upon herself to send Nathaniel with a bottle of their best wine, which the two men shared as they sat down against a tree by the river. Artorius had decided he needed to get away from the Century's offices and the mild fall breeze felt good coming off the water. The slave had returned to the manor house to procure more wine for the men.

"Anxious to replace me, are you?" he retorted as he skipped a small stone across the river.

Magnus gave a snort. "Not even a little bit," he replied. "I'm quite comfortable watching you squirm under the burdens of responsibility." Both men shared a laugh at his sarcasm. It felt good to Artorius to be able to laugh again, even briefly.

"Centurion Artorius!" The shout broke their banter up, and the Centurion sighed as he leaned back and raised his head to the sky.

"Here," he replied.

The call had come from Dominus, who stumbled through the thicket next to the tree. "There you are! Ah, I see you've got Magnus with you. Good."

"You alright, sir?" Artorius asked, looking over his shoulder.

The Cohort Commander's face was slightly flushed.

"I hope so. The Master Centurion told me to come find both of you. He

needs to see all three of us in his office, now."

"Shit," Artorius swore under his breath.

"Don't worry," Magnus replied cheerfully. "Nathaniel knows if he cannot find us to take our refreshments to the Century's office. We'll knock back a few and toast either our good fate or bad fortune when we find out what Macro wants."

It never ceased to amaze Artorius how his Nordic friend was always so calm no matter what the situation. He had no idea as to why Macro would need to see both of them and their Cohort Commander. It did not bode well for him, especially given Dominus' dishevelment.

"Enter!" Macro's voice boomed as soon as Artorius knocked.

The last time he had been in this office he had barged in on Master Centurion Calvinus. He promised himself that he would behave with a little more decorum this time. This was his first dealing with Macro since he had become the Master Centurion, and it was hard to believe that Artorius had been his Optio in the Second Century a mere three years before.

The three men entered and stood with their hands clasped behind their backs as Macro stood behind his desk reviewing some scrolls. As the light of the late afternoon sun shone through the parchment, Artorius was able to recognize that it was a roster of his Century.

"Stand easy, men," Macro said as he turned and faced them. He then addressed Artorius. "Your Century suffered the highest percentage of casualties at Braduhenna." There was an air of sadness on his face.

Artorius looked down for a second and tried to shake off the sudden bout of depression that struck him.

"So they tell me, sir," he replied stiffly.

"I see that you have fewer men fit for duty on your roster than any other century within the legion," Macro continued. "It is because of this that I have left your legionaries alone as we attempt to rebuild the Fourth Cohort."

Artorius shuddered at the mentioning of the cursed cohort, and by the look on Macro's face it seemed that Magnus and Dominus had the same reaction.

"Look, whether you think the Fourth was cursed or not," the Master Centurion remarked, correctly judging their feelings, "we cannot leave this legion minus an entire cohort. Now the recruit depots will be working overtime to send us replacements. However, I cannot have an entire cohort

made up of rookies who don't know their ass from their elbow. We've pulled experienced legionaries from most of the other cohorts, as well as promoted some of the Decanii. What we lack are candidates for Centurions. Rome is sending us two, one of whom is still an Optio, and therefore, will be brand new to the position. The First Legion is also sending us one of their experienced Options that is ready for promotion.

"The reason I brought the three of you here is because my next decision affects the Second Century, and as the Cohort Commander, Dominus needs to be kept informed. I said I was going to leave your legionaries alone, and this is still true. However, as much as I hate to leave you further shorthanded, especially amongst your best leaders, we need all the experience we can get in the Fourth." Macro's eyes then fell on Magnus. "Therefore, I am promoting Tesserarius Magnus to the rank of Centurion."

"Holy shit, I thought for a moment he was going to offer you the Pilus Prior of the Fourth!" Magnus said with a cheerful laugh as they left the Principia.

Dominus had left them, stating he had other business to attend to.

"Never happen," Artorius replied with a shake of his head, his grin just as broad as his friend's. "I'm proud of you, my friend. The way you handled yourself at Braduhenna, they would have been mad *not* to have offered you the Centurionate."

"I did what I had to do," Magnus replied, his composure suddenly dark and sober. Braduhenna will always be a blackened scar on the souls of those who survived it.

"Well, I'm glad to finally have you as my peer rather than my subordinate," Artorius said, attempting to lighten the mood.

"That means a lot, Artorius," Magnus replied with a friendly smile, "though for what it's worth, it has been an honor to serve under you. I hope I will be able to again someday."

"Fat chance," Artorius said. "Two Pilus Prior positions opened in the Fourth and the Sixth, and I wasn't exactly on the short list for either one of them."

"The Sixth?" Magnus asked. "What happened to Agricola?"

"He was promoted to the First Cohort, which I am glad to see. Agricola is one of the better Cohort Commanders within the Legion."

"Still, I cannot imagine why you aren't even being considered for one of

those positions," Magnus persisted.

Artorius was grinning, though there was a trace of bitterness behind the smile.

"You forget how I came to the Centurionate," he responded. "My deceased predecessor still has powerful friends, to include several magistrates and even a couple of senators. One senator alone can stall my career indefinitely, no matter how much our Primus Pilus would like to mentor me for something higher."

"Well, that stinks of buzzard shit!" Magnus surmised.

Artorius shrugged. "I was twenty-seven when I made Centurion, three years shy of the minimum age requirement. Whatever amount of political luck I may have had, it all got expended in one fell swoop. I dare say that if I retire at thirty-seven, or even forty-seven for that matter, I will still mostly likely remain the Centurion of the Third Cohort's Second Century."

"You sell yourself short," the Nordic Centurion-select chided. "I think you have more friends in the right places than you realize. You're just too damned daft to recognize it or use them to your advantage! Besides, I intend to keep progressing through the ranks myself, but not ahead of you. I prefer to sit back and watch you stumble for a while, that way you can learn all the difficult lessons for me."

As he returned to the Century's billet, a somber, though much awaited sight greeted him. A large ox cart sat outside, and Artorius recognized the man who sat on the bench. He knew what was beneath the canvas tarp on the back of the cart.

"Centurion Artorius!" the man said boisterously. His demeanor changed when he saw the mournful look on the Centurion's face.

"It is done, then?" Artorius asked.

The man nodded. "Exactly as you specified. I worked many long hours to get this to you in time. Luckily, I happened to have a sufficient slab of marble readily available and did not have to place an order with the quarries. Would have taken a month to get something like that delivered!"

"Wait here," Artorius replied, his expression unchanged. He went inside and found a locked box that he kept in his quarters. Inside was a large sum of gold and silver coins, many of which had been donated by friends, though the majority was his own. He walked outside and placed the box on the ox cart.

"As we agreed," he explained, "half upfront and the other half upon delivery. Follow me and I will show you where it goes."

He led the cart to just beyond the main gate, where a pair of legionaries stood, ever on guard duty. There was a small stream that ran alongside the fortress, and it was on a small hill near this, that Artorius had already selected. A rectangular hole had been dug to the measurements he had specified. As the cart came to a stop, he walked around behind it and lifted the tarp. Underneath were several slabs of ornate marble. They were slotted so that they would fit together into an altar that was almost the height of a grown man. Such a work of art had been extremely expensive, though Artorius did not care. He would have given his last denarius to see his fallen mentor properly honored. The altar would have a semi-enclosed box on top, where a bust of Centurion Vitruvius would be displayed. It was coming from a separate sculptor and had not yet arrived.

Artorius was explaining to the stone carver and his slaves how the monument was to be arranged. Just below where the bust would be placed a small niche had been carved into the front slab. This is where he would place Vitruvius' ashes. The bronze tablet that would enclose the front of the space holding his ashes was already in his quarters. On the tablet was inscribed:

Marcus Vitruvius
Centurion Pilus Prior
Killed in Action, Age 41
XX Legion, III Cohort
Soldier of Rome

"He would have liked that," a woman's voice said behind him.

Artorius turned to see a statuesque woman a few years his senior. He immediately recognized her as his fallen friend's sister, Vitruvia. The man who accompanied her, he also recognized.

"Optio Valgus!" he said.

"Centurion Artorius," Valgus replied.

The man who had savaged him through recruit training and helped mold him into a legionary was much changed since last they had seen each other twelve years before. His hair was mostly gray, despite his less than advanced years. He walked with a slight stoop and had to use a walking stick, as well as being supported by his wife. His legs had lost much of their muscularity, and he had developed a noticeable belly. Still, his face was unmistakable; it was the face of a man Artorius had looked up to and hoped to make proud as

he had struggled through recruit training, and then later while on campaign during the Germanic Wars. Artorius walked over and clasped Valgus' forearm.

"It's good to see you, sir," he said with much emphasis.

Valgus gave a sad smile and shook his head. "It is not appropriate for a Centurion to address a former Optio as *sir,"* he corrected. Artorius simply shook his head.

"I may be a Centurion," he observed, "but it was you who taught me what I know. You and…"

Both men turned towards the slabs of marble that would be the monument for Vitruvius.

"He was the greatest soldier Rome ever had," Valgus remarked. "He saved my life, you know."

"I remember," Artorius replied. "It was during that gods' awful assault we came under at the Ahenobarbi Bridges."

"I took a spear through the hip," the former Optio remembered, "and before the barbarians could finish me, here came Vitruvius and Statorius. That magnificent bastard even snapped the neck of one of those fuckers with his bare hands!"

"I think he was more afraid of what I would do to him if anything happened to you than he was of the barbarians," Vitruvia thought aloud.

"He said as much," Valgus concurred. His face then became somber. "He saved my life, and yet I could not be there to save his."

"Sir, you cannot blame yourself for what happened to Vitruvius," Artorius responded. "Two centuries tried to save him and failed."

"That does not matter," Valgus retorted. "I owed him my life. Now the debt can never be repaid. It is a scar on my soul that I must bear, both in this life and the next. I only hope he can forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive, love," Vitruvia replied gently, caressing her husband's face. Her own eyes were damp with emotion as she addressed Artorius. "Celia and the children are coming to live with us. Raising the sons of my brother is a greater task than any woman can take on alone. Fate has taken their father from them, but they will not be without fatherly influence."

Valgus gave a sad nod. "I hope that by raising my nephews into fine young men I will help atone for my failure to my brother-in-law and friend."

It baffled Artorius that Valgus could somehow blame himself for Vitruvius' death. The two men had been very close during their years as

legionaries and had come up through the ranks together. They had been more brothers than friends long before Valgus fell for Vitruvius' sister.

"At least the inscription is appropriate," Valgus observed as all three of them gazed at the memorial plaque. "He would have liked that."

The plaque was deeply etched, with the lettering blackened for emphasis. It read:

Soldier rest, thy warfare is over
Sleep the sleep that knows not breaking
Dream of battled fields no more
Days of danger, nights of waking
Rest Soldier, Rest

Chapter XXIX: A Legend Reborn

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“Fall in!”

It was an hour before dawn, late in September, and Artorius had formed up his men, ready to lead them on a ten mile road march. Slowly, the men of the Century were returning to the level of physical fitness they had once possessed. The afternoons were still warm this time of year, and Artorius decided that it would be best to start building the men’s endurance up again on marches during the cooler hours of the day.

“The Century is formed up and ready to march, Centurion,” Praxus reported with a crisp salute.

Artorius returned the courtesy, and the Optio took his place behind the formation. Their numbers may have been few, and most were still somewhat weakened by their wounds, but Artorius was determined to build his unit back to what it was. No one wore armor or helmets; not yet. He did not even wear his Centurion’s helm, so from a distance he looked like just another legionary. This suited him just fine. His men knew who he was, and he was never one for pompous displays.

Artorius knew it would take time to build his men back to their former level of fighting strength. Each man wore his gladius on his hip and carried his pack with some rations for the day. It was a start. If all he had was forty-six men, then by the gods he would make them the best forty-six legionaries in the whole of the Empire!

“Century!” he shouted. *“Right…face!”* He then took his place at the head of the small column, Rufio at his side with the Signum.

He was proud when he viewed his Century’s standard, for the brass hand that adorned the top was now bordered by a wreath, similar to that of the Civic Crown. It was symbolic of the unit’s collective valor and had been awarded to them by Legate Apronius, in the name of the Emperor, for their sacrifice in holding the flank against overwhelming numbers. The rest of the Rhine Army regarded him and his men with the highest level of respect and awe. The soldiers who had fought on the line understood what the Third Cohort’s Second Century had suffered for them.

The warm wind blew gently on the Centurion’s face as they marched

along the road that led through Cologne. The city forum was not yet alive with the crowds that would wake soon enough. At the outskirts of the city they marched past his house. Artorius could not resist breaking into a grin when he saw Diana leaning against the gate that led into their villa. She smiled and winked at him, glad to see her husband leading his men once more.

"Ave, my lady!" the men shouted.

At midmorning they reached the top of a small hill that overlooked the woods that covered the area. Artorius stood with his hands on his knees and stretched his back out. The stone marker alongside the road told him that they had gone eight miles; far better than he thought they would do. He looked back at his men, and though they looked winded they still kept pace with him. Some who had been among the more gravely wounded and just returned to duty were sweating profusely, their faces pale. One in particular was breathing heavy and looked like he was about to fall over. Artorius recognized him as one of the young legionaries who joined just prior to Braduhenna. The soldier snapped to attention as the Centurion approached him.

"You're still on light duty, aren't you?" Artorius asked.

The legionary swallowed hard, keeping his eyes straight ahead.

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir…it's just that when I saw the Century forming up, I could not watch you all leave without me. First time the Century has been together since…" The legionary dropped his gaze downwards. He was fully expecting to be chastised by his Centurion for violating the conditions of his light duty.

Instead, Artorius placed a hand on his shoulder and the legionary looked up and caught his gaze.

"There's no quit in the Second Century, is there?" Artorius asked.

The legionary stood tall, his gaze confident once more.

"No sir!"

"Then you will lead us back," the Centurion replied with an approving nod. He then turned and addressed the rest of the Century. "We'll rest here for an hour. Squad leaders, make sure your men eat and get plenty of water. Also check everyone's feet for blisters." He then found a shade tree and stretched out his lower back and his legs before sitting down beneath it. He pulled a hunk of bread and dried beef from his hip pouch and took a long pull off his water bladder. As he took in a deep breath and enjoyed the cooler

breeze coming up from the valley, Praxus hunkered down in front of him.

"The lads are finding their fighting spirit again," he said approvingly.

Artorius took another bite of bread and downed some more water before answering.

"It never left them," he replied. "Just went dormant for a while. How could it not after what we've been through? They need to build their confidence back slowly while allowing their bodies to heal properly. Take that soldier who violated his light duty restrictions in order to be with us. There is no quit in him. He will recover faster than some of us who may or may not have been injured as badly as he was. While I do not condone men violating their restrictions set forth by the medics, it makes me glad to see this kind of resolve once more. I also placed him at the head of the column going back so he can set a more measurable pace for himself, rather than trying to keep up with the rest of us."

"I just wonder if we'll ever be at full strength again," Praxus mused as he sat back against the same tree. "I know a century almost never has all of its billets filled, I just would like to see us where we were before Braduhenna."

"Never happen," Artorius replied. "Oh, we'll get most of our numbers back, but the century will never be the same again. The copper wreath that adorns our standard came at a terrible price, as do the laurels all units receive from battle. The men who replace our absent friends will have to *earn* the right to march under the Signum of the Second Century! So no, old friend, the century will never be what it was before. Through hell fire, death, and pain we have forged her into something better. The men may not realize it just yet, but they will."



The former tax collector for Frisia was nodding on his couch after a late night of drinking and some amazing nubile wenches, when a ferocious banging was heard loudly from the front of his villa. Several servants rushed to open the vibrating oak door. Olennius was shocked to see legionaries waiting at the door. Senator Gallus had set him up in comfortable quarters and had assured him that he would find a suitable assignment for him soon enough. So when he heard the loud banging on the door at an hour past midnight it took him completely by surprise. Upon further examination, he saw that it wasn't legionaries that stood outside; it was the Emperor's own

Praetorian Guard.

"Olennius?" the Decanus at the head of about a dozen men asked.

"Who wants to know?" the magistrate sneered defiantly as he ambled toward the Decanus. "And what business have you banging on people's doors at this hour?"

Before he could say another word, the Decanus slammed his fist into Olennius' gut, crumpling him to the floor where he vomited some expensive wine. The Praetorian was a big man, one who was not used to having people talk back to him.

"My *business* is the Emperor's!" he snarled as Olennius fought for breath. "And so is yours."

"But Senator Gallus promised…" Olennius' words were cut short as he was dragged to his feet and met by a hard cuff across the side of the head, the soldier's brass cuffs opening a nice slice on his forehead.

The Decanus then grabbed him by the hair, pulling his head back, and leaned down so that his face was inches from the magistrate's.

"Senator Gallus does not give orders to the Emperor, or to us!" he snapped. "Now we can do this the easy way and my lads here will escort you to the Imperial Palace. Or we can do it the hard way, which I'm sure you don't want to hear; your choice."

Olennius swallowed hard and nodded as the Decanus tightened his grip on his greasy hair and slammed him to the wall.

"Now was that so hard, sir? Be a good man and step between the two ranks of Praetorians. Don't want anything happening to you at night in the middle of Rome. It can be dangerous out there," he sneered.

The Praetorians marched on either side of him as they headed to the docks. Olennius meant to ask about the Imperial Palace but then he remembered, the Emperor was no longer in Rome. It was to Capri, Olennius would be taken. He hoped that Tiberius was feeling merciful by the time he arrived.



"What is this?" Artorius asked. Seventeen young men stood rigid in front of the Century's barracks.

"You tell me," Dominus replied with irritation. "I figured it was another one of your recruiting drives. These all arrived from the depot this morning,

asking…no, *begging* to be assigned to you."

"Dominus, I haven't done any personal recruiting drives this year," Artorius replied with genuine surprise.

"Well, Macro said that if they want to follow the *legendary* Centurion Artorius, who was he to deny them?" The Cohort Commander grinned as he finished.

"Dominus, I'm hardly a legend," Artorius retorted.

"Then your powers of observation aren't what I thought they were," Dominus replied, walking away.

Artorius exhaled audibly as his mind raced. He had not expected to receive any new recruits. Fortunately, a legionary from the Century happened to walk past him. He grabbed the man quickly.

"Fetch Optio Praxus!" he ordered. "Tell him we need to arrange billeting and training schedules for seventeen new recruits."

"Sir!" the legionary acknowledged, noticing the new men for the first time.

Artorius then stood tall and breathed in deeply. All he wore was his tunic and belt. He did not have his gleaming armor and polished helmet like he normally did when addressing new recruits. He didn't even have his vine stick, the very symbol of his office! In spite of that, these young men were in awe of him. He always joked that it was his large, muscular frame that intimidated people; however, for perhaps the first time he realized that there was more to it than that.

Slowly he walked the line of recruits, silent and with his hands clasped behind his back. They were a typical lot and still in civilian garb. Some had come from the cities, others were farmers, some the sons of merchants, and there were those whose slovenly appearance told of abject poverty. For these men, their names alone allowed them the honor of serving in the legions. Like all new candidates, they varied in age, though most were very young. The youngest were seventeen, the minimum age by law for a citizen to enlist. The oldest looked to be around twenty-five. The recruits did not know whether to be excited or terrified at the prospect of serving under the *legendary* Centurion Artorius. It mattered not. Soon they would be subjected to the harsh rigors of recruit training, where only sheer intestinal fortitude and dedication would see them through. Many, perhaps all, would sooner or later feel the wrath of his discipline via the vine stick. But then Artorius had taken his share of beatings as a recruit, and even later as a legionary. Finished with

his assessment, he walked slowly back to the center.

"*Recruits,*" he spoke. He was not yelling, yet his voice boomed deeply and carried far. *"I am Centurion Titus Artorius Justus, Commander of the Third Cohort's Second Century!"*

Chapter XXX: Imperial Justice

The Imperial Palace, Isle of Capri
October, 28 A.D.
***

Olennius' hopes of clemency faded as the Isle of Capri came into view. The Praetorians who escorted him to the Emperor's villa had maintained their silence throughout the voyage. The merchant ship they had chartered was docked on the shore just south of the *Villa Jovis*, the most private of the Emperor's houses on the island. An Imperial Navy warship patrolled the waters outside the villa; about half a century of Praetorian Guardsmen were lining the path leading up to the house.

The magistrate found he was unable to appreciate the splendor of the Emperor's estate as he was led to the gardens that overlooked the sea. Lost to his senses were the ornate statues, the smells of the botanical gardens, and the sounds of fountains whose water cascaded into pools below. A Praetorian pointed through the archway where Tiberius waited on a stone bench. The soldiers stood outside the garden, leaving Olennius alone with the Emperor.

Tiberius was not wearing his imperial toga, as expected. Instead, he had donned the armor of a Legionary Legate. The armor was old and worn, the blows of countless adversaries having scored its surface. Olennius had forgotten that the Emperor had once been among Rome's greatest generals. He further did not realize that having commanded the Twentieth, Tiberius took their savaging personally.

"I've been expecting you," the Emperor said, as he arose and turned his back to Olennius, hands clasped behind him. "Do you know why I summoned you?"

"A misunderstanding, Caesar, I assure you," the magistrate stammered. He took a quick step backwards when Tiberius whirled around and faced him.

The Emperor's gaze burned into his soul, his face as hard as stone.

"A misunderstanding, of course," Tiberius replied. "Under most circumstances I would never bother with issues surrounding such a minor province as Frisia. I allow the Senate to appoint magistrates as they see fit, and leave such magistrates to execute their duties."

“I implore you, Caesar, to know that I executed my duties only in what I felt was best for the Empire.”

In response, the Emperor tossed a scroll onto a nearby stone table.

“The tribute for Frisia was set by my brother decades ago,” he responded coldly. “And yet you took it upon yourself to alter the established sum. Strange that you sent only the required amount to Rome, and yet you extracted much more. You lined your coffers while impoverishing the people of Frisia.”

“They are nothing but mindless barbarians!” Olennius snapped. He knew he was damned unless he defended himself. “It was better for all if they had starved to death!” Tiberius snorted in reply, keeping himself surprisingly calm. Only a few who knew the Emperor best understood that the calmer Tiberius appeared, the deeper his rage. He produced another scroll, which he unfurled as he tossed it at Olennius’ feet.

“Read,” the Emperor ordered, pointing to the scroll. The magistrate picked one end and started to read.

“It is just a list of names,” he scoffed.

“Yes,” the Emperor concurred. “Roman names, or rather, Roman *soldier* names. That is the list of every legionary and auxilia soldier who died at Flevum and Braduhenna. They *died* because of your greed! Their deaths are on your head, and their souls cry out for vengeance. It has been a long time since I donned my armor. I do so now out of respect for them. And now it is time that justice was served.” With that he picked up a gladius that was in its scabbard on a nearby table. He then threw it at Olennius’ feet.

“Take your own life, and you will spare your family the ignominy of a trial and execution,” Tiberius explained dispassionately. “Everything you plundered from Frisia will be used as compensation to those who died there. You still know how to wield a gladius, don’t you?”

Olennius stared at the weapon at his feet as Tiberius again turned his back to him. He picked it up and drew the gladius from its scabbard. The blade and point were extremely sharp. The Emperor at least wanted him to be able to grant himself a quick death! No thoughts did the magistrate spare his family. Instead hatred consumed him, thoughts of betrayal. The Frisians had betrayed him, the legions who should have put the rebellion down expediently, and now the Emperor himself had betrayed him!

“Oh yes, I still know how to use a gladius,” he growled. Eyes filled with rage, he rushed towards the Emperor. His last act in this world would be to

slay the tyrant who had abandoned him and had the gall to demand he take his own life.

As he grew closer time seemed to crawl. When he was but a meter from his prey, the Emperor spun around to the right in a flash, drawing his own weapon, smashing the pommel into the side of Olennius' face. The magistrate stumbled, dropping the gladius as he fell right into the point of the Emperor's blade which plunged into his guts.

Olennius fell and rolled onto his back, clutching his stomach in horrible pain as he spewed bile and blood from his lips. Tiberius casually knelt down and wiped his blade off on the magistrate's tunic.

"No," Tiberius replied, "I don't think you ever knew how to use a gladius properly. Lucky for you I never forgot. You will take some time to die from your wound, though it is nothing compared to what the Praetorians outside that entranceway would have done to you." Bending over, the Emperor whispered, *"Remember the Twentieth."*



Alaric was startled by the sight of a body falling from the cliff and splashing into the sea. The young man stood on the prow of the ship, trying to catch a glimpse of the Emperor's villa high up on the rocks.

"What in Hades was that?" he asked some of his mates who were also above deck.

"Imperial justice, no doubt," one of the other oarsmen replied. "I suspect that our guest fell ill of the Emperor's graces. Does me good to see how far the mighty can fall…at least a hundred meters!" he chuckled.

"Alright, make ready to cast off!" the sailing master shouted.

Alaric immediately headed down below and found his seat on one of the oar benches.

It had been three years since he had left Britain, seeking for what he did not know. His mother, Milla, had been devastated by his departure. By contrast, King Breogan of the Brigantes, who had cared for Alaric and his mother since their village in Germania had been destroyed by the Romans, was supportive of his decision.

The one person that he missed the most was Breogan's daughter, Princess Cartimandua. She had been like an older sister, although he had viewed their friendship as something more than just that of siblings. It was a foolish boy's

fantasy, of course. Cartimandua was not only several years older than he, she would be Queen of the Brigantes someday. A lost boy from a destroyed Germanic race had nothing to offer her. Still, he allowed himself to feel at least some amount of affection for her. She and her father had been very kind to Milla and Alaric after their great tragedy.

As he started to row back from the docks on Capri, Alaric began to recall the embedded memories of his early past. He tried desperately to remember his father, Chief Barholden of the Marsi. Though he could vaguely remember the day he and his mother fled from their village, he could not put a face to the man who had died protecting them. And here he was, in the middle of the Mediterranean, doing a mission for the very Emperor that had ordered his people's extermination. The idea was surreal to him. Of course, he knew that Tiberius had given the order to the legions that had smashed his people into near oblivion, yet he could not place that context with the same man whose prey they had just delivered to him.

His ship was slated to return to Rome to pick up cargo bound for North Africa, more slaves no doubt. The last time they docked it had been dark, and they were there to transport the single prisoner and some Praetorian Guardsmen. These men had elected to stay at Capri for a while, looking for some leisure and entertainment. Life on the ship was dull for the most part. They remained just far enough out to sea that all he could see was the water and skyline through the small portal next to his oar. Still, it did pay a decent wage; one hundred denarii per annum, plus bonuses on specialty cargo. Each man had been given an extra three denarii just for transporting this prisoner that the Emperor was anxious to have brought to him.

The ship's captain promised them some time off in Rome, and Alaric hoped to take advantage of this. The last leave they had gotten was in Mauretania, at a bleak and desolate port that he would just as soon forget. Their cargo for that voyage was prisoners and condemned criminals bound for the sulfur mines. There hadn't even been any decent brothels to steal away his virtue. He then wondered if he was betraying his slain kinsmen by wishing to seek out physical comforts with Roman women. After all, Rome had to have the best houses of lust in the whole of the Empire, and what better place for him to finally become a man? Still, it troubled him. He knew that he should hate the Romans, but he just could not envision the few that he had seen with the people that had murdered his tribe. He was a confused lad and not sure what he was hoping to find by venturing into the Eternal City.

Part of him was fascinated by the heart of the Empire; a place which ruled the civilized world from the far reaches of Hispania to Arabia. The seemingly chaotic city lorded over all.

The other part of his soul cried out for revenge. This tore at him, for he knew he must be honor bound to avenge his murdered father and fellow tribesmen. It was difficult for him to harness this desire, since he had little to no memories of any of them or of their deaths. He vaguely remembered running to his father, who picked him up and held him close. Barholden must have known that his death approached, for he had shown his son much affection, and Alaric swore he could remember a trace of sadness, though he still struggled to envision his father's face. That was the last time he could remember seeing him. Barholden, chief of the Marsi, was killed the following day, along with most of the warriors who fought in vain to protect their families from the wrath of the legions. Alaric had never even seen a legionary before that fateful day.

Milla had been one of the best swimmers in their village, and with him across her back she had managed to cross the raging river before the Romans arrived. She had practically smothered him while she watched the legions burn the village and kill everyone within. Alaric wasn't certain if he could remember the sounds of people screaming. Milla had shielded his eyes and ears, plus the noise of the river would have drowned out most other sounds. She later told him how she watched his grandfather, aunt, and newborn cousin all murderously butchered by the soldiers. He had no memory of any of them, and therefore struggled to put any emotional weight behind her words.

"You alright?" the words of the man who shared the same oar bench startled him. The two had become friends over the last three years, though Alaric had never told him about his past or where he was originally from.

"Fine," he lied. "Just thinking, that's all."

"Yeah, well there's not much else to do on a cargo ship, now is there?" the young man mused as they both put their backs into rowing away from the isle.

Alaric had grown strong and well conditioned during his time at sea, and the task of rowing was little more than a routine for him now. Though the captain had promised them leave in Rome, his instincts told him otherwise. If they were transporting more slaves to North Africa, he figured that would be where they would be given some leisure time. Rumor also had it that they

might be headed towards the Far East; Egypt or Judea perhaps. Suddenly he didn't even care. Though not a slave, he felt trapped on the ship. It was the only sure way of holding a steady wage that he knew of; he was fed and had a place to sleep at night. He could not leave until he knew for certain what it was he was looking for. He was starting to panic that whatever it was, he would not find it sitting in the hot and sweat infested hull of a Roman cargo ship.



It had been months since the *'slaying of the Roman army,'* as people now called it. The people called for celebrations, for they had succeeded in expelling the Romans from their lands. The hated scourge brought on by that bastard Olennius was now over. Frisia was free once more! To the warriors who fought at Braduhenna, they knew better. The reality was that they had *lost* the Battle of Braduhenna, along with their beloved King, the Royal Prince, and thousands of warriors. The sound diplomacy of their new King, Tabbo, had brought freedom to Frisia, not the swords and axes of their fighters.

Still, with the time for mourning of the dead over, one particular warrior felt the time was now appropriate to conduct one last honor and to fulfill a promise made. He still needed his rudimentary crutches in order to walk great distances, and it was several miles to the sacred grove. He left in early afternoon, his young son helping him heft a sack onto his shoulder.

"Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?" the boy asked, wishing to help his father, whom he watched struggle as he tried to walk and carry the sack.

"This is something I have to do alone, lad," the warrior said. "Besides, it would not do if your mother came home to find us both missing."

His wife had been out in the woods harvesting berries all afternoon and would not be back until dark. He told his son to let her know that there was something he had to do, and that he may not be back until late, possibly the next morning.

As painful as it was, it still felt good, in a way, to stretch his stiffened legs out as he walked along the dirt road. Most of the farmers were out harvesting their crops, at least those who were still able. Many in the community worked to assist those families who had lost their fathers and sons or whose men had

come back too injured to work. It was a great strain on all, yet there was still a sense of relief in the air. Cattle hides were no longer set aside to be sent to Rome as tribute, and all the grain and hay grown would feed their livestock and themselves, not some fat, foreign aristocrat. The people would survive and thrive.

By late afternoon he arrived at the sacred grove dedicated to the goddess Freyja. It was the same place where his people had taken all of their dead and wounded after Braduhenna. He found it fitting that this was where the dead had been taken after the battle, since it was Freyja who took the fallen heroes to her great house, known as Sessrúmnir. Great stone alters were spaced throughout the edges of the grove. All of them were blackened with ash from thousands of vigils dedicated to Frisia's fallen. Blue irises, which were common in the land, grew throughout and contrasted with the scorched rock.

The warrior set down his sack and sat on a wooden bench located near one of the altars. His legs were cramping badly, and he knew it had been foolish to make such a long trek on foot alone. Still, he did not care, determined as he was to fulfill what he felt was a final honor to a fallen hero. There was still time before dark, and he pulled a slab of spitted meat wrapped in cloth, along with a small loaf of freshly baked bread from his sack. As he ate his supper in silence a gentle breeze blew through the glade. The smell of old burnt offerings mixed with the sweet scent of flowers. The sun cast its glow on the horizon, and he felt a chill as a stronger gust of wind blew through the trees.

He pulled his cloak around his shoulders and lifted the hood up over his head. There was still some dry kindling by the altar, and he pulled the flint and steel from his sack and worked on starting a small fire on the stone. As the cloud of incense smoke filled the glade, he bowed his head and started to chant prayers to his deities.

"Freyja and Óðr, hear my prayer," he said as he held his arms straight out from his sides in supplication. "Guide this fallen hero into the arms of Elysium where the valiant of his people await him. Protect him so that our own Vanir in Fólkvangr will not hinder him on his journey through the afterlife. As this man gave me life, let this sacrifice I offer to you guide him and grant him the peace befitting the valiant."

How long he stayed in the grove he could not say. He was certain hours had passed before he felt a gentle breeze channel from behind the altar,

blowing the scented smoke into his face. A feeling of euphoria came over him, and he could almost hear the voice of the fallen hero as it whispered to him on the wind. Whether he could actually hear the voice did not matter. What he felt was a bond reaching out from the boundaries of this life. He stood, bowed deeply, and turned away from the shrine as the predawn of the new day cast its glow on the horizon. As he pulled the hood of his cloak off his head he was shocked to see his wife standing just outside the firelight, watching him. He let out a sigh and hobbled over to her.

"I thought I would find you here," she said with a sad smile. "I brought the oxen cart, so you won't have to walk back."

"The walk did my legs some good," he replied, though she noticed a serious limp in his stride.

"Can I ask who it was that you came here to honor?" the question stopped the warrior in his tracks. He had done plenty of ceremonies for friends slain at Flevum and Braduhenna, and it puzzled his wife that he would return again months later.

"Someone who saved my life," he replied, turning back to face her. There was a sad smile on his face, and she replicated it with one of her own.

"Who was it?" she asked.

"His name was Gaius Longinus, soldier of Rome."

Epilog: Three Years Later

House of Artorius, Cologne, Germania
March, 31 A.D.
***

"What is it, Love?" Diana asked as Artorius furrowed his brow while reading the letter from Pontius Pilate. Diana's letter from Claudia was the exact opposite in nature as the one he had received. He could only suppose that Pilate did his best to spare his wife the stresses of his office. Still, he was certain she had to know of the troubles that beset him. Judea was one of the smallest provinces in the whole of the Empire, and it was also possibly the most difficult to maintain. One of the many issues at hand was the fact that Pilate had no legionary troops under his command, only local auxiliaries. Discipline problems were running rampant and the Procurator was desperate to find a way to fix the situation. Syria was where the nearest legionary forces were stationed, yet the Legate there had refused to detach any of his men to Pilate; only offering to "clean up the mess" should his auxiliaries prove unable to maintain order. Artorius knew that any such outside interference would spell the end for his friend. The Emperor placed a lot of faith in Pilate and did not like to be disappointed by those he personally selected for higher office.

"Pilate's letter is troubling," he replied at last. "While Claudia talks about the marvels of the East, all Pilate seems to see is conflict with the different warring factions and prophets that seem to spring out of every bush."

"Perhaps he's just working too much," Diana said as she leaned over her husband's shoulder in order to see what it was that Pilate had said. She wrapped her arms around Artorius and kissed him on the cheek as they both read. The end of the letter weighed heavily on them both.

"The time has come for me to redeem your promise," Diana read aloud. "What does he mean by that?"

Artorius sat back and placed one of his hands on his wife's arm, caressing it gently.

"I made a vow to Pilate a long time ago, that I would serve under him whenever and wherever he might need me." He then stood and made his way towards the front door.

Diana let him go, knowing he needed time to himself in order to think.

He walked to the top of a nearby hill that gave a breathtaking view of the fields below. Since moving into Diana's house, this place had become his new favorite place to come and think. As he cast his eyes on the rising sun, Centurion Artorius knew that his time on the Rhine would be ending soon, and that his destiny lay in the east.

Historical Afterward

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Following the rebellion, Frisia was freed from the Roman Empire for a brief time. With the death of Dibbald Segon, Tabbo would rule as the independent King of Frisia from 28 to 47 A.D. Rome would reestablish relations with Frisia, appending it to the Roman Empire as a client state under the joint rule of the client Kings Asconius and Adelbold. In 58 A.D. the anti-Roman usurper, Titus Boiocalus, overthrew the client Kings and attempted to break away from Rome, but was quickly put down. The Kings of the Ubbo dynasty would then rule Frisia under the status of an allied state of the Roman Empire, a status that would remain unchanged for nearly four hundred years. Today, Frisia is known as Friesland, and has been a province of the Kingdom of the Netherlands (House of Orange-Nassau) since 1813.

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