

IUDÆA



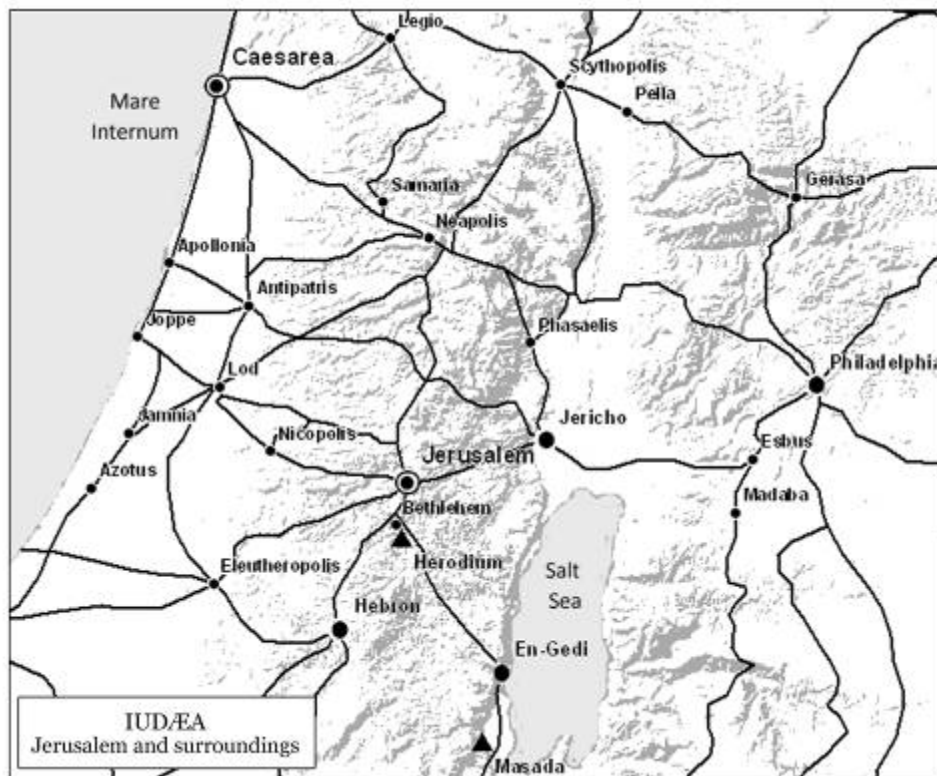
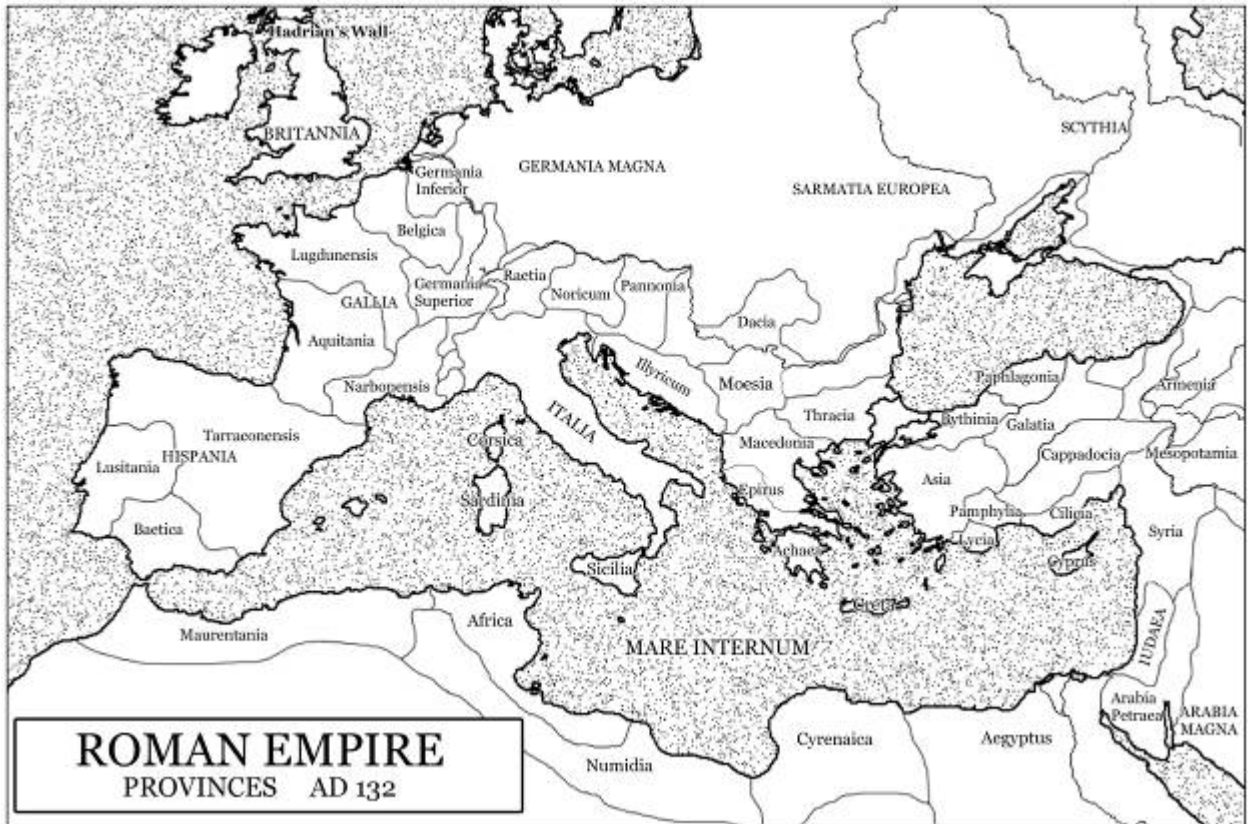
JIM BRANCH

IUDÆA

by Jim Branch

Copyright © 2011 Jim Branch

MAPS



PART I

I

[Britannia, AD 133]

I was tired and my back was sore from the day's ride. The horses plodded along the ridge, their hooves slapping at the muddy ground. The sweat under my leather armor was beginning to make me cold as the fog rolled into the lower valleys and the clouds thickened overhead. It was late afternoon, and I felt rain drops as Speratus looked to the north and motioned for us to stop.

There were sixteen of us, half the unit, with Speratus, our decurion and commanding officer, in the lead. His red cloak billowed in the wind as he waved his sword to get our attention. He pointed to just below the horizon. I was the duplicarius, second in command, and in the back keeping the men in line.

Through the mist, I could barely make out a small cart being pulled by a mule, a handful of men walking alongside. We turned our mounts off the ridge and down a steep slope. The horses jumped and slid to keep their footing. When I looked up again the men with the cart were running, whipping the mule to go faster. They were heading for the treeline and a small opening in the brush where the trail disappeared into the woods. We urged the horses into a full gallop across the plain between us and the brigands, dodging tree stumps and mud holes left from when the forest was cleared for timbers and firewood. My discomfort melted away as my heart began to pound in time with the hoof beats.

The cart was well into the woods by the time we reached the trail which was more of a small muddy stream than a serviceable path. We barreled into the narrow opening. I leaned close to my horse, Tempest, and cut away branches and briars with my sword. What little sunlight there was disappeared, and my eyes slowly adjusted to the dark woods. Not more than a couple hundred feet ahead of us, I saw a bright spot in the thick canopy. The ruts left by the cart led into a clearing. We rode into the glen, and Speratus silently motioned for us to fan out. The clearing was encircled by blackberries and thorny shrubs, and in the center, the mule stood harnessed to the cart grazing on the wet grass, oblivious to the horses.

Our six archers readied arrows and scanned the woods beyond the underbrush. We knew it was an ambush, but a few muddy brigands would be little trouble for fully trained, Roman cavalry. For a moment, everything was silent except the heavy breathing of the horses. The rain had died to a light drizzle, and the woods beyond the clearing were dark and full of mist. I heard the bow creak before I saw the first arrow. I turned Tempest toward its source and jabbed my heels into her sides. We lurched forward, my shield protecting my head and torso. Guttural screams echoed off the trees, arrows whizzed by in all directions, and my shield shuddered as the shafts stuck in the wood. I urged Tempest toward the edge of the clearing where she vaulted over the brambles. Thorns cut her belly as she crashed to the other side. Outside the clearing, I found two men drawing their next arrows, one on either side of me. I swung at the one on my right splintering his bow and knocking him back. The other one turned and ran for cover giving me the advantage. Using the bottom of my shield, I opened a bloody gash on the back of his head. He stumbled and fell to the ground.

Before I could pull up, a giant of a man emerged from behind a large oak. He was bare-chested and stood his ground. He swung a large axe screaming like a banshee the whole time. The axe sunk deep into Tempest's chest. She rolled forward tossing me out of the saddle. I used my shield to ease the fall and rolled away from the madman, but before I could get up, the axe sliced toward me. On one knee, I held up

my shield and braced myself. The axe caught the edge of my shield and ripped it off my arm leaving a long red burn from my elbow to my wrist.

The axe came at me again. I rolled to the side. It clipped my scale armor and sunk into the forest floor. I slashed back wildly managing to nick him in the side. In one motion, he ripped the axe from the ground and swung it again. I jumped back hitting a tree. The axe came within inches of my face, spraying me with mud. Continuing the motion, he brought the axe over his head and then down toward my skull. I dropped to the ground and the axe sunk into the tree.

His abdomen exposed, I drove my sword into his chest under his ribs. His expression shifted from rage to surprise. He let go of the axe with his left hand and grabbed my shoulder. The bastard was strong. I couldn't pull away. The surprise left his eyes, and his right hand reached for a large knife at his waist. He raised the knife above his head. Instead of trying to get away, I pushed my sword up to the hilt. The point came out his back, and he slumped over. He stunk of sweat and dung, and I twisted to the side to slough him off. He fell to the ground like a lead weight.

Remembering the other archer, I turned to look for him. He was standing on the other side of Tempest looking down at the dead man dumbfounded. Before I could stand up and straighten my armor, he turned and bolted into the woods. He had no armor and no weapons besides the broken bow. He would easily outrun me, so I picked up a dead branch off the ground and threw it at his legs. I got lucky and caught him behind the knees sending him tumbling into the brush. I had my sword at his back before he could stand. He rolled over to face me. It was then I realized he was not more than sixteen, no older than my eldest son.

I told him to get up, using my sword to show him what I meant in case he did not speak Latin. I prodded him back to where Tempest was laying on a blanket of blood-soaked leaves. The fighting was over, and I only saw Romans cleaning their swords. Speratus walked out from around the brambles and over to the dead man.

He kicked the behemoth in the side, "Impressive work . . . are you alright?"

"I'm fine. He was all bluster and no finesse." I knelt down next to Tempest. Her breathing was labored and choked with blood.

Speratus continued, "The bastards killed Marius, an arrow clean through the neck. And Sarkis got his leg pinned to his horse, shredded it up when he fell off, but he'll live as long as he doesn't bleed out. Lucius will take over as signifier for now."

He kept talking, but my attention was on Tempest. She had saved me more times than I could remember. She followed my every lead regardless of her own safety, even into that brigand's axe. The wound was deep, and she wasn't going to last much longer. I didn't want to see her suffer, so I took my sword and placed the tip behind her left front leg. I drove it into her heart as quickly as I could. She shuddered and I felt the muscles in her neck go limp.

Speratus had stopped talking and was watching me, "Take Marius's horse, he doesn't need it anymore."

I nodded. I pulled some rope from my saddle and went to the boy. He offered no resistance as I bound his hands, but he kept looking over at the other archer, who was starting to moan and roll his head. Speratus walked over, pulling a knife from his belt. The boy's eyes grew wide, and I turned just as Speratus pulled the man's head back and slit his throat like a freshly pinned deer. The boy lurched forward and screamed the Celtic word for father.

I recognized it because it was what my sons called me. They learned it from their mother, who was born into a local Celtic tribe called the Brigante. I held the boy back because I knew Speratus would not hesitate to do the same to him if provoked. The boy dropped to his knees, tears welling up in his eyes.

I turned to Speratus, "What did you do!"

He casually cleaned the blade of his knife, "What? He tried to kill you. Given the chance, he'd just as soon slit your throat or mine. Besides, we don't need a wounded Celt taking time away from our injured men."

"He wasn't a threat. I thought we were supposed to civilize these people not murder them."

"Always the idealist. Why didn't you try to civilize him?" Speratus pointed the knife at the man I killed. "These people don't want what we have. You know they're happy skimming off the edges and taking what doesn't belong to them." Looking down at the archer and then at the boy he continued, "An example has to be set so they know that we aren't going to let them get away with it. Either they accept the rules, or they die resisting."

"Nice speech. You do realize that was his father?" I said.

Speratus clenched his jaw, "Have you forgotten who is in charge here? My actions are not yours to question."

When he asserted his rank, I knew I had pushed him far enough, and to some extent he was right. These men weren't going to change their ways regardless if we tried to convince them with swords or rhetoric. They no more wanted the life of a Roman than I wanted the life of a Celt.

Speratus walked away. I went over to the man with the axe and picked up the knife he had intended for my back. As a Roman soldier and especially as the duplicarius, I was entitled to whatever loot I found on the battlefield. This benefit alone drove many of the soldiers. If they made it to retirement, they would get their citizenship, if they didn't have it already, along with a nice piece of land and be able to live comfortably on all their spoils.

Most of the items I kept I passed along as gifts or offerings. I didn't need a dead man's belongings haunting me. If it was an admirable opponent I might keep some small trinket as a tribute, but most I gave to the legion to support the unit or left in shrines for Mithras and Silvanus.

Passing back by the boy's father, a glint of metal caught my eye. The boy was still on his knees, staring blankly at the ground. I rolled the man over and found an ornate sword and scabbard attached to his belt. I cut the belt and pulled the sword free. The handle was made of bronze with two fanciful heads at its base that curved back toward the center. The scabbard was even more impressive with two elaborately carved eagles twisted in an aerial battle. The sword was old but in good shape. Also around the man's neck was an amulet. Wiping away the blood, I could see it had a golden hue and was engraved with strange marks. They didn't appear to be Celtic runes, but I assumed it was gold and would get a decent exchange for it.

I walked back over to the boy and pulled him to his feet.

"Someday boy, if the gods see fit, you'll be able to earn this sword back." I cut away his bonds. "For now though, you at least deserve the right to bury your father," I said.

II

The sun had set by the time we started back to the fort. Thankfully, the rain had stopped. We had killed seven brigands, taken three captive, and lost one of our own, Marius. Despite the victory, Marius's death bothered me. I was thirty-five with seventeen years in the cavalry and I still wasn't comfortable with the capriciousness of death. My belief in the gods and the afterlife weren't strong enough. What made that arrow take his life and miss the rest of us? At what moment did Marius realize he had breathed his last breath? I looked at the boy, arms bound behind his back, sitting in the back of the cart. His entire life changed in an instance as he watched his father die. I shuddered thinking about my own sons having to deal with that image. I even felt pity for the crazy man with the axe. One moment he was probably the best fighter of his tribe, maybe even a devout father, but the next he was nothing more than a pile of carrion food. It all seemed so senseless.

I was relieved to see the firelight from the milecastles along the wall. Hadrian's great wall looked more impressive at night when you couldn't tell its true size and your mind made it bigger than it was. It looked ominous on the horizon with the torchlight reflecting off the smoke and mist rising from the cooking fires and the heat of the buildings. I imagined the wall was protecting the rest of the world from hell itself. The noise from inside the fort sounded like demons preparing to flow from the gates, but the huge wooden barriers opened to reveal a handful of soldiers and a group of modest buildings. The horses were handed over to slaves, captives were put under guard, and I headed to the barracks. I was tired and sore, not the least of which from Marius's horse, or more likely from my saddle which didn't fit the horse's contours.

His horse and Tempest couldn't have been more different. Tempest was a stout snow white pony where Marius's horse was a tall and sleek, ebony Arabian. Like Marius he was originally from Syria and was brought in to appease the Syrian horse archers that made up a number of the cavalry. He was too tall for my taste and made me feel uneasy in the saddle, but he had a smooth gait and took commands well.

The stables and barracks were attached with each soldier's horses next to his quarters. I took my armor off and washed up in a basin as my servant, Philo, fetched water and hay for the horses. Each soldier was entitled to three horses. I never kept more than two. Before today, it was Tempest and her older brother Hector, who I had retired from service. Speratus didn't like me keeping the old horse around, but I didn't have the heart to send him to the dogs. He'd served faithfully just like his mother and sister. The other men derided me for my loyalty to the animals but if years in the cavalry taught me anything it was that these animals could be trusted more than the men. Especially the men Speratus recruited. He valued aggressiveness over intelligence and boldness over loyalty. It made us effective but our effectiveness often compromised our safety. Marius learned that lesson.

I cleaned my armor and went to the adjoining stables to check Philo and my new horse. Philo told me that Marius had named the horse Saad and that it meant something like gift in Marius's native tongue. I grabbed a brush from the shelf and ran it down his back. Saad's hair was smooth, his winter coat shed months ago. Tempest was a ruddier breed, her white coat coarse and matted most of the year. She wasn't the first horse that I'd lost, but she was the one my boy's had grown up with. I could fondly remember them learning to ride on her back.

Saad calmly ate his hay, content in his new quarters. I put the brush away and headed back to my room as Philo finished cleaning the stall. The room consisted of two beds, a couple of wooden trunks, and a small desk and chair. I shared the room with the third in command, the sesquiplicarius. His name was Tonius, and for the most part, he was a good soldier. He had stayed at the fort that day, but he helped to process the prisoners and inventory the stolen goods when we returned. Just as I sat down at the table to rest, he entered the room holding a small roll of parchment.

"Here is the prisoner list, sir," he said.

"Were they cooperative?" I said.

"They all gave us a name and age. I don't know if they are telling the truth but the ages fit. They all seem to understand basic Latin and appear to be in good health." He sat the parchment on the desk and then went to his bed.

I scanned the list looking for the boy's name. The youngest one on the list was fifteen, and his name was listed as Brenden. My son's face flashed in my mind. He wanted to be a soldier. It was the only example I'd ever given him. I don't know why I expected anything else? How could this Brenden have followed any other path than the one his father led him down?

I gathered the prisoner list along with the amulet from the boy's father and headed to Speratus's quarters. I tapped on the door and went in. His room was twice the size of the others and had its own latrine and glass windows. It smelled of incense and fresh wine, not the horseshit that lingered in the rest of the barracks. At the far end of the room, Speratus sat at an oak table covered in red cloth. Five candles of different heights sat at the front corners of the desk and lit up the room. He was busy rolling out a scroll as I put the list and items on the table.

I slumped down in a chair across from him. Our ranks meant little when it was just the two of us. I had known Speratus for as long as I could remember. It was hard to maintain any formality with someone who knew you as a child, who knew your fears, your failures, and your aspirations.

I waited for him to finish reading the report. The candlelight brought out the thin wrinkles coming from the corner of his eyes. We were getting old. The long days of riding and training were wearing on us. I shifted in the chair conscious of every ache and bruise. Speratus's wavy blond hair was thinning and my dark hair was quickly turning gray. We were a long way from playing swords in the mud behind the stables. Finally, he looked up from the scroll.

"What do you make of this?" he said, handing the scroll over to me.

I read it over. The provincial governor, Julius Severus, was coming to the fort, and there would be a festival in his honor tomorrow.

"I hate these things. All that fuss just to stroke the man's ego." I said.

"Well, you'd better get used to them, especially if you ever plan to make it anywhere in the legion."

"Who says I want to make it anywhere. What if I'm happy where I'm at? You go and kiss their rings and sing their praises. I'll stay and clean out the stalls."

"You're a stubborn ass. You'd better not let any of the men hear you talk like that."

I leaned forward and picked up the amulet off the desk. Blood in the grooves of the engraved letters highlighted them against the gold. I rubbed my thumb across the metal.

"You know I will go regardless. I'm just tired right now. I'll feel better after some rest," I said.

"You'd better. I don't want you talking like this in front of Metellus and the others. They'll think I've lost control of my duplicarius."

"You lost me years ago." I threw the amulet back on the desk. "Trade this in with the other trinkets for some new equipment."

I got up to leave.

He stood up with me, "Are you alright Coran? You're more distracted than usual."

"No, I'm fine."

"Is it about that Celt's father?" He looked down at the amulet on the table.

"No, just tired," I said.

But it did have something to do with that. In spite of all our years together, Speratus and I had different views of the world. The only thing was he knew what he believed, and I was only finding out what truly mattered to me.

I said goodnight and went back to my quarters. I changed into a clean tunic and sat down on the edge of the bed. I pulled a small bottle from under the bed and removed the cork. I took a long drink. It was good wine, not the watered down swill the legion provided for rations. It was from Pompeii and I spent over two denarii a bottle on it in Londinium. The wine eased my nerves and made some of my aches go away. It also helped me go to sleep. It was on nights like these that I found it hardest to fall asleep. I rehashed every move I made against the brigands. I tried to focus on the things I did right but I always came back to my mistakes, how I let my guard down or got lucky. One day I might not be so lucky. One day the sword might be going into my chest. What would I be thinking in that moment? Would I be angry? Would I find peace? Or would I just piss myself?

The bottle was empty. I sat up and the room rocked from side to side. I checked for another bottle but there was nothing there. I lay back down and closed my eyes. The room was still spinning inside my head. Sleep finally came, but it wasn't restful. It was always the same dream. It no longer frightened me like it did when I was a child, but I could do nothing but watch it unfold. The fire and the shadows, the screams and clanging of swords filled my head. I was too young to remember the details and it took me years to realize that what I was seeing wasn't some nightmarish fantasy but fragments of my own memory mixed with the vivid descriptions of others.

I was five years old and most of the garrison was fighting Picts up north leaving only a few dozen soldiers to guard the fort. My mother and I, like my own wife and children, were forced to live in the settlement outside the fort. The small settlement supported the fort and was made up of craftsmen, traders, farmers, and the unofficial, unrecognized families of the soldiers.

A group of Scots took the opportunity to attack the settlement at night knowing that most of the legion was away. They burned homes, murdered women and children, stole the livestock and emptied the granaries. My mother and I along with a few other families made it to the safety of the fort, but I saw many more that did not. The soldiers were ordered to stay inside the fort or risk giving it up. They had to watch as their friends and families were smoked out of their homes and run down like animals in the streets. Before we made it to the fort, I saw my mother's sister, carrying my four year old cousin Ayla, hit from behind by a spear, killing her instantly. Ayla clung to her mother as the spearman brought his sword over her head. I woke up as the sword came down.

My blanket was on the floor, and I was cold. Pulling it over me, I was still shivering. Morning was hours away, and I couldn't get the look on Ayla's face out of my head. She didn't understand what was going on. At that age I didn't understand. What did we do to them to deserve that? What did little Ayla do to deserve that? I didn't understand and no amount of my mother's consoling could wipe that image from

my mind. As I grew older there was little question that I was going to be a soldier and put an end to the barbarism. But as time passed, I saw or heard the same story played out again and again and it wasn't always the enemy who was barbaric.

My thoughts spiraled downward. Life was an endless millstone grinding men, women, and children into dust, into the soil. That is where we are all going to end up some day, so why fight it? What did it matter that some of us go earlier than others? What's the point? What is the fucking point? I could feel my heart begin to race, the darkness of the room crushing in on me. I hated this time of night. I wanted to see the sun to be sure I'd see another day. My chest was heavy, my breathing unsteady. The more I tried to relax and clear the desperate thoughts the more anxious I became. Ayla's innocent eyes flashed in my head, then the man with the axe, then the boy, the helplessness in their eyes. I tried to think about other things. I thought about playing with my boys, Macer and Justin. I thought about my wife, Aria. I tried to focus on her long black hair, her blue eyes, her smooth skin, the curve of her hips. My heart began to slow, and I felt like I could breathe. I looked up at the timbers in the ceiling and thought of the bright summer days I spent hewing logs for the fort. Peeling off long curly tendrils of beech and alder, I formed the green wood into sturdy beams. I could smell the wood chips and feel the warm sun on my back. My body finally relaxed and I pictured cutting a mortise. I chiseled away at the wood. Before I finished the cut, I was asleep again.

~*~*~

Speratus was easy on the men during morning drills. I was thankful. My head was still heavy from the wine. I barely paid attention as the men rode by slashing at straw dummies and firing arrows at targets from horseback. After the men finished, I put Saad through the muddy course. He moved flawlessly. By the third round, I was getting used to the horse's height and long stride. Tempest rolled across the ground like a boulder. Saad was more like a stone skipping across the water. Coming around for a final pass, I saw one of Metellus's assistants ride up to Speratus.

When I joined him, he said, "We're wanted at the principia immediately."

"What for?" I asked.

"Metellus didn't say. The assistant simply said to head straight there."

We headed for the center of the fort without talking until we got to the gate of the principia, "Have you talked to anybody about yesterday's mission?" he said.

"No, why, do you think this has something to do with that?"

"No. I don't know."

We handed our horses over to the servants and spotted Metellus waiting for us under the eaves surrounding the outer courtyard. He was wearing his parade breastplate and a clean red cloak. His hair and even his gray beard were dutifully combed. I suddenly felt unkempt with my mud splattered boots and sweaty armor.

"How were morning drills?" Metellus asked.

"Good, sir," Speratus said.

"Good," Metellus answered. He seemed preoccupied with other thoughts.

"Sir, may I ask what this is about?" Speratus said.

"It is not me that wants to see you. It is Governor Severus."

"The governor. Do you know for what?"

"You'll find out soon enough. They'll get us when they were ready."

A guard in full armor opened a nearby door and summoned us into the central corridor of the building. We followed him up a flight of stairs and waited in the hallway as he knocked on a door guarded by two more armed soldiers. An older, balding man in a gray tunic answered the door and motioned for us to come in. Inside two men stood at a table looking at a map. One was in scale armor of an eastern design and had a thin wispy beard and long dark hair pulled back and tied behind his head. The other man who I assumed to be the governor wore a heavy white tunic covered by a deep crimson toga. He was tall with short-cropped, gray hair and deep set eyes. The assistant led us to three chairs in front of the table. The governor said something in a foreign tongue to the exotic looking man who nodded and stepped back into the corner.

The assistant cleared his throat and said, "Governor, I present to you Praefectus Equitum Metellus, Decurion Aulus Cassius Speratus, and his Duplicarius Marcus Fidelis Coranus. Legionnaires, Governor Severus."

"Please have a seat." Severus said motioning toward the chairs. He remained standing. "Metellus tells me you had some success yesterday."

"Yes, sir," Speratus said.

The morning sun beamed through the window behind Severus and I squinted to see his face. Outside I heard the men finishing their morning drills and heading to the bathhouse. I wished I was out there still taking Saad through maneuvers.

Severus continued, "Metellus says that your unit is the most capable within the ala. He says you have some of the best horsemen and fighters."

Speratus sat up straight in his seat, "Yes, sir. We do what we are trained to do."

"Your father, he was in the legion?" Severus asked.

"Yes, sir. The Twentieth, Valeria Vitirx. He fought under Agricola at Mons Grapius."

"Where are you from originally? You look to be from Gallic blood."

"My family is from Aquitania. My father joined the legion under Emperor Titus."

Severus moved to his right and blocked the sunlight from the window. "And what of you Coranus?"

All I could see were spots as my eyes adjusted. "Yes, sir . . . uh . . . my father's father joined the legion in Macedonia and my father and I followed in his footsteps. My father was transferred to the Twentieth from the Fourth, Flavia Felix. I was originally in the Twentieth's cavalry until Metellus recruited me into the ala."

"Macedonia is a beautiful area. Did your father retire there?"

"No, only in death. He was killed during a Caledonian uprising twenty years ago. Along with my mother, I took his ashes back to our family's land in Macedonia."

"What rank did your father reach?" Severus asked.

"Optio, second in command of the third century in the second cohort." I said.

"Metellus tells me that he has all but offered you command of your own unit but you've declined. Why?"

The bluntness of the question surprised me. I tried not to move but I shifted in my seat, "I serve Rome, not my ambition. I feel that my skills are best being used where I'm at."

"What do you think Speratus?" Severus said.

Speratus straightened up again, "Coran is crucial to my unit's success. He has always served Rome faithfully."

"I wasn't asking if he's faithful. I want to know if you think he could handle his own command."

I stiffened in my chair. My neck, which I pulled the day before, began to tighten.

"Yes, sir. He would make a fine decurion," Speratus said.

"Good. Metellus assured me of such." He pushed the maps on the table to the side to reveal the blood-stained amulet I had brought back the day before. "Do you recognize this?"

Speratus hesitated, but both of us said, "Yes, sir."

"Where did you get it?" Severus said holding it by its leather strap.

Speratus said nothing as he balled up his hands. Uncomfortable with the silence, I responded, "It came off one of the brigands we fought yesterday."

"Is he still alive?"

Speratus still said nothing.

"No, he was killed in the skirmish," I said.

Severus put the amulet down on the table so we could see it.

"The brigand took the amulet from my scribe who was kidnapped ten days ago while traveling to Blatobulgium. This man, Elijah, is very important to me. The information he has collected over the years is critical to Rome's success not only here in Britannia but also elsewhere. I need you to find him, and just as importantly, I need you to bring back his writings because despite his value, if he hasn't survived, his writings are just as valuable, if not more so."

Severus turned to the man in the gray tunic and put out his hand. The assistant produced a scroll and handed it to the Governor. "I need him found quickly and I only want the very best for the task. Speratus select sixteen of your best men to serve as your unit." He held out the scroll to me. "And Coranus, I hereby promote you to decurion and am assigning you the sixteen men on this scroll. They were handpicked by Metellus from the ala. All other resources the ala can provide are at your disposal. Do you have any questions?"

I opened the scroll to read the names. The pain in my neck was shooting down my back. I was looking at the scroll but nothing was registering. I kept hoping that Speratus would ask a question to give me time to comprehend what had just happened.

Speratus finally spoke, "Do you have a description of Elijah and where he was kidnapped?"

Severus looked to his assistant, "Tiberius here can fill you in on all the details." I could then feel his gaze fall on me. "Do you have any problems with your orders Coranus?"

"No, sir." I should have said more, thanked him for the promotion, pledged my loyalty to the Emperor, something, but I was at a loss for words.

"Good. If you are successful I have a much bigger task for both of you. And don't worry you will be compensated for taking on these extra duties." He picked up the amulet and tossed it at me. Luckily I grabbed it before it hit me in the face. "Take that with you and bring back the first old Jewish man you can find that can read it," he said with just the hint of a smile. It was the only emotion he showed the whole meeting.

We were dismissed and Tiberius gave us each a scroll describing Elijah and the circumstances surrounding his kidnapping. Metellus informed me that my new unit would be ready to go after noon on the training grounds. As we went to our horses, Speratus congratulated me on the promotion but warned me of all the new problems I was going to have.

III

When I arrived on the training grounds Metellus had the men lined up. I recognized most of them on sight. Good soldiers were known by everyone. They were known either by their own boasts or through their commander's boasts about them. Most of what a man was in the legion was based on his exploits. The rest was based on how well he told the story of his exploits.

Three of the men were decurions. I couldn't imagine what they thought about being selected for a special unit led by someone they knew as a duplicarius. Our unit was arguably the best in the ala and I had easily five or ten years experience over any of these men, but I worried how they would take orders from someone who this morning was their inferior. I went down the line with Metellus and tried to act like I knew what I was doing.

The first four were Syrian archers, Adar, Narses, Habib, and Khalil. They were the most agile and accurate horse archers in the ala. Adar and Narses were brothers, and I had patrolled with them many times. Adar smiled and nodded when I walked by. His always dour brother remained expressionless. The next five were native Brits: Plinius, Lucanus, Surus, Cimber, and Gratian. They were ruddy men with light hair and long faces, all of them good, loyal soldiers. The next was Kleitos who I had only met once. Metellus told me he was a Greek from Anatolia who knew a handful of languages including Hebrew, Samaritan, Aramaic, and Greek. The next three were Narsica, Varus, and Ibrahim, Samaritans who had recently come from the province of Iudaea. Merula was next. He was a Spaniard and the best swordsman I knew. With a spatha in one hand and a pugio in the other, I saw him level a line of men without being touched. Then there was Catalus. He was an enormous Brit who chose to use a hammer-ax instead of the standard spatha. He was much like the axe-wielding Celt from the day before. Finally, there was Strabo, an excellent spearman and a Gaul like his cousin Speratus.

Kleitos and the Samaritans were the only men that I didn't know much about. I didn't know why Severus and Metellus included them. Kleitos was not known for his fighting ability and the Samaritans had barely been in the province long enough to know a brigand from a sack of oats. I didn't see how they were going to be much help in scouring the countryside for an old man and his books.

I turned to face all of the men, "As of now we are a unit. Your loyalty as always lies with Rome but from now on you serve this unit. You are not sixteen individuals but a single cohesive weapon. Merula, you will act as my duplicarius, Plinius, my sesquuplicarius, and Adar you will be the signifier. All of you need to start assembling your gear and moving it to the fifth barracks. We will train as a unit tomorrow morning and set out at noon. Are there any questions?"

Catalus spoke up, "Sir, can you tell us where we are going?"

"Later this evening after you've moved into the barracks, I will go over everything you need to know for tomorrow." This gave me time to find out where we were going. "Now get moving, I want everyone in the new barracks by dusk."

The men dispersed and I walked back to Metellus, "Well?" I asked.

"You did fine. They're good men. I don't think they will give you a problem but tell me, why did you pick Merula to be duplicarius?"

"He is the most independent, and I'm hoping by giving him some responsibility he will be less likely to act on his own," I said.

"So maybe you have learned something after all these years," he said slapping me on the back. "Now get me a list of the equipment you need plus a list of slaves and stable hands. No more than two each. The governor wants to keep the unit as small as possible."

I told Metellus I'd get him the lists, but I needed to gather some information first. I headed to the stockade where the three Brigante prisoners were being kept.

~~~~

Speratus arrived before me and was already interrogating the prisoners. I found the heap of a man in the first cell. His hands were tied behind his back and streaks of blood ran down his face and onto his now crimson tunic. Speratus was with the next prisoner.

"Where were you planning to meet them?" Speratus said.

All I heard was a heavy cough.

"Where!" Speratus demanded.

"Up your mother's ass," was the response.

I looked in the room in time to see Speratus kneeling the man in the lower back. The prisoner was kneeling in the center of the room, his arms tied out to either side of the cell. He winced from the blow but said nothing. He just snorted the blood in his nose into his throat and spit it on the floor.

Speratus walked around the man toward me, "I left the kid for you. I doubt he will tell me anything."

I nodded and went to the next cell. The boy was crouched at the back of the cell, his back against the wall, elbows on his knees, and hands over his ears. He glared at me like a belligerent ox.

"Do you understand Latin?" I said.

He didn't move.

"Get up, let's go," I said opening the door to the cell.

He looked up apprehensively and slowly got up. His hands and feet were shackled. He took small steps toward the door. I motioned another guard to follow us, and we walked out of the stockade to the training stables.

We sat down on a bench outside the corral where a young filly was being trained. I let the boy watch for awhile.

In Celtic I said, "What was your father's name?"

Looking straight ahead he said, "Dunham."

"You can believe it or not but I do feel badly about your father. Nevertheless your people are playing a dangerous game challenging Rome."

"You are the trespassers. For four generations we have fought Rome. It is time for you to go home," he said like he was reading a list. There was no conviction in his voice.

"This place has become my home. I've lived here for twenty-nine years. All the soldiers you see are not responsible for this conflict any more than your parents or even their parents," I continued in my broken Celtic.

He said nothing.

"Do you have a mother or siblings?"

"No. My mother died when I was born." he said.

"Do you know what is going to happen to you now?" I said in Latin.

"I don't care," he said back to me in Celtic. It was the stubborn response of youth.

"If you don't cause much trouble you will become a slave, probably in Gaul or another part of the empire. If you are obedient you may even have an opportunity to join the legion and have a chance at citizenship."

"Why would I want to become a Roman citizen?" he continued in Latin.

"It is your only chance at freedom. Rome has been around for more generations than you or I can imagine and we are not going away. You can remain a slave and never come back to your homeland or you can help us and have a chance to make your own choices."

He sat motionless staring at the horses.

I continued, "Do you remember the old man who your father got the amulet from?"

For the first time, he looked at me. I assumed he finally understood where I was going.

"What of him?"

"Do you know where he is? Is he still alive?"

"Why would I tell you? So, you can kill more of my people?"

"I'm only interested in the old man."

"The old man is crazy," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"It was his idea that we kidnap him. I think he figured we were going to kill him, and he did it to save his skin." he said.

"Why haven't your people asked for a ransom yet?"

"They think the old man is valuable for what he knows. Plus, he tells a good story."

"If you tell me where he is at I can make sure you do not spend the rest of your life in the mines or cleaning latrines," I said.

"Why should I believe you and betray my own people? Do you really think that I'm that stupid?"

I stood up and faced the boy, "Do you remember the man who killed your father?"

He looked up at me with menace in his eyes.

"His unit and mine have been tasked with finding the old man. One of us will find him. Would you rather he does it? Do you think he will take any mercy on your people? Do you think he'll offer to look out for you? You can take me at my word or not. It is your choice."

"Some fucking choice," he said.

There was innocence in his rage, but I needed to make clear the consequences of not helping me.

"Alright then, back to the stockade. I was hoping we could help each other out." I grabbed him under the arm to lift him up.

He resisted, "Wait, what happens to me now?"

"It is not my concern," I said.

"Wait, can I watch the horses some more?"

"What for?"

"I have no idea where they are now but I know where we were going to meet," he said.

I let him go.

"In two days we will gather for the summer solstice. The old man was actually looking forward to it," he said.

"Where is the meeting place?"

"I don't know exactly. I've never been to that grove."

"You know roughly where it is at?"

"All I know is that it is somewhere between the two forts north of here."

I'd scouted the area many times. It would be easy to find out if the boy was telling the truth. I asked him about the strength of the group and how they guarded Elijah, but he was vague or said he didn't know. I let him watch the horses until dinner then I took him back to his cell. Speratus was still there talking to the guards.

"What did you find out?" I said walking up to him.

His knuckles were red and the edge of his hairline was matted with sweat. "It sounds like they are taking the old man to the coast to sail farther west. What did the kid tell you?"

"He said they would be meeting for the solstice up between Blatobulgium and Castra Exploratorum."

"I don't think they would stay around the forts, especially if they plan to ransom the old Jew," Speratus said.

"That may be but I doubt they know we are on to them yet."

"Don't be naive Coran, there are spies everywhere. I bet that they've already fled, probably slit the old man's throat and left him for dead someplace."

After seventeen years, Speratus's pessimism and paranoia almost amused me.

"Very well then, you check the coast and I'll go north," I said.

Always with the last word, he added, "Just what I was thinking."

## IV

We set out early the following morning. It was half a day's ride to Castra Exploratorum, a cavalry fort used to send out scouts and hunters into Brigante territory. In my late twenties, I spent summers at the fort working on my tracking and hunting skills. I knew the road well.

The men had no complaints about their orders, but I still felt like they were keeping a close eye on me. They knew little about how I gained my position, and I felt like an impostor, like I was given my rank by subterfuge. Still, these were good men, and my reputation in the ala was well established. I knew that if I did not have their trust I would earn it in time.

During the night, it had rained, and the air had turned windy and cold, unusually cold for June. We got to the fort before noon and ate a small meal. I talked to my former commander and some of the guards about the brigands. No one could give us any additional information. We headed west toward the outpost at Blatobulgium after the horses got a chance to eat and drink. We talked to everyone we met on the road and stopped at every village and farmstead.

A third of the way to the outpost we stopped at a small farmstead located along a small stream shrouded by willow trees. I asked the farmer about the brigands but he deflected my questions and told me he had nothing to say. There was a dark bruise on the side of his face and outside his granary were fresh wagon wheel ruts and grain scattered on the ground. Tributes and taxes were levied in the fall and the farmer did not seem like the careless type.

"You are fortunate to have excess grain to sell this time of year," I said. He glanced quickly at the granary and then back to me, "What?"

"It looks like you've sold off some grain recently. Can I take a look?"

He squinted at me and said, "Fine." He walked to the granary door and removed a wooden peg from a metal clasp. The door swung open to reveal a bare floor. There wasn't enough grain to last the farmer through the summer until the harvest. Rome took its share but never so much to leave the farmers hungry and prone to revolt.

"Do you have another storehouse?" I said.

"No." The old farmer looked down at the grain on the ground. The wind picked up and ate away at the piles, spreading the seeds out into the grass.

"Did someone take this grain from you?" I said.

He looked down, his jaw locked, his eyes avoiding me.

"Are you afraid to say anything because they might come back to hurt you?" I said.

He looked at his small home.

"You know these men aren't like you and me. We do our duty. We follow the law. You pay your tax in grain and I pay mine in service." The man was clearly of local stock so I pushed harder. "They may hate Rome but they have no right to do this to one of their own people. How many years has your family farmed here?"

"It doesn't matter! You can't protect me every day and night. They've taken more from me than grain and not once did your legions protect me."

"But we are here now and I can get your grain back."

He kicked at the grain sending a swirling torrent of seed into the air, "I could care less about the grain! They beat me and my wife and raped my daughter when she tried to fight them off. Where were you then? Where!?"

"Who did this? Where did they go?" I said

"If they find out I told you they will be back and do worse. Now get out of here!"

"They will be back for sure if you don't tell us. We are your only chance to be rid of them."

"I'm an old man and if I know anything it is that if it isn't them it will be another bunch of thieves at my door. It is better to give them what they want than try and fight them and end up dead."

"After what they did to your family this time, you think they will stop from beating you to death because you give them a little grain? They are like wild dogs. You give them a taste and they will come back for more. They will bring others. They will wonder what is in the house. They will remember your daughter," I said. I didn't want to threaten him but I had to make him see they wouldn't stop.

He scowled at me but the fight had left his eyes.

"Follow the stream until it joins the river. Go along until you find a trail that fords the stream. Follow the trail," he said in a quiet voice.

"You will not regret helping us," I said.

"I already do," he said as he began walking back to his house.

~\*~

Merula, Narses, Cimber, and I went on foot from the ford. It would have been too difficult to proceed quietly with the horses over the rocky terrain. The trail narrowed to a path that wound its way through outcroppings and underbrush. Stones along the way were marked with strange symbols. Cimber said that some were Druid symbols honoring gods of the forest and others were meaningless scratches. The trail began to rise, and in the darkening forest, we spotted a level clearing at the top of the bank.

The clearing was nestled amongst large boulders and a halo of ancient oak trees. Vines were woven in an elaborate pattern between the trees forming a gnarled ring about ten feet off the ground. The opening was empty except for an enormous fire pit that had not been used for more than a month. At the other end of the circle were elaborately carved stones set up like an altar.

Around the clearing, outside the oak trees, amongst the rocks were smaller clearings with fire pits and room enough for three or four men to sleep. They looked to be used frequently, but no one was there now. We also noticed that leading out from the circle were a number of paths like the one we followed. Two of them were larger, big enough for a cart or small wagon. They headed in opposite directions along the length of the hillside, one east and one west. The farmstead and other raids we knew about were mostly in the east. We began tracking eastward looking for clues.

Time went by faster than I anticipated, and the low clouds brought dusk early. We were prepared to spend the night in the forest, and I had told the other men not to expect our return. We found shelter under a rock overhang and made a small fire. We had some cured meat and sweet wine and wrapped up in our cloaks to endure the night. I took the first watch.

The clouds cleared after the sun set, and through the trees, I watched the thin crescent of the moon travel a quarter of the way across the night sky. I woke up Narses to take the next watch and then went to relieve myself. Standing there, I heard Narses whisper to me.

"What is it?" I said.

"What?" Narses said.

"What did you say?"

"I didn't say anything."

"Come here and listen."

Narses stood next to me and after a moment said, "I hear it too."

"Wake up the others," I said.

Not more than a half mile along the trail, we saw firelight. It was down off the trail about two hundred feet in a grove of birch trees growing amongst the boulders. I sent Cimber ahead to check it out. By the time he returned, the firelight was dim and the voices quieter. There were ten adults, two boys, a mule and an old man. I thanked Fortuna for my good luck. Cimber said the men were drinking and that only one looked to be on guard. The old man was not bound or under any kind of special protection.

We waited until the fire collapsed into coals and the sliver moon was more than halfway across the sky. I sent Cimber ahead again to assess the guards. He returned quickly and said that the only guard was asleep, spear in hand, on top of one of the boulders. We took our time getting closer.

I had Narses train an arrow on the sleeping guard while Merula and Cimber watched my back as I approached the camp. Elijah was asleep on the outside of the circle, no bindings, no guard. I knelt by his side and put my hand over his mouth. He opened his eyes without a hint of surprise. I showed him the amulet. He looked around at his slumbering kidnapers and then nodded in acknowledgement. He quietly got up and grabbed a satchel that was by his side. We started walking away when he tugged on my arm and pointed back toward the camp. I shook my head, "No." He sighed and continued to follow me. Barely a man stirred, and we were back on the trail without incident. We went down the trail a ways before anyone spoke.

Elijah said, "You are early."

I turned to look at him, "What?"

"I wasn't expecting anyone for a couple days. I was hoping to witness their solstice celebration."

"Why would you want to stay with these brigands any longer than you have to?" Merula said.

"These people's rites fascinate me, plus I never like to miss a good celebration," he said.

"I'm sure the governor will throw you a celebration when you return," I said.

"Well that may be but we can't go back just yet," he said stopping in the middle of the trail.

"What do you mean?" I said.

"I need my books."

"What do you mean? What's in the bag?" I said pointing at his side.

"Oh, this and that, some bread from earlier, an extra hat, some acorns from a . . ."

"I don't care what it is if it not your books," I yelled in a whisper. "Where are the books?"

"They are back at the camp of course," he said. "You don't think they would let me go around with my books. What would keep me there?"

I stood in the trail staring back toward the brigand's camp. We could go back and try to steal the books but that seemed impossible. I thought about my promise to the farmer. I thought about what I told the boy, but I wasn't thinking like a decurion. I wasn't thinking like a leader, like the head of a unit. I was thinking like a man trying to avoid a fight.

I turned back to the men, "Cimber go back to the unit and get the men. Try to get back here before dawn. Merula, take Elijah and follow Cimber. Narses and I will stay here and keep an eye on the camp. I

want to make sure no one else shows up, and I want to be ready when they find out their hostage has escaped."

The men acted without hesitation even though I worried about them finding their way back to the unit in the dark. But we had to do this now. More Brigantes would be coming to the grove for the solstice, and if we didn't prepare before sunrise we would lose the advantage. Speratus would revel in this, the challenge, the fight, the chance for glory. I was worried about being caught off guard, about losing men all over some books. It didn't help that it was one of the shortest nights of the year, and it was more than half over.

Narses and I climbed up on a tall boulder and watched the camp in the dim light. Narses was the opposite of his brother, Adar. He hardly ever spoke and when he did it was only out of necessity. I asked him how long he thought before they would realize Elijah was gone. All he said was, "Soon." Unfortunately he was right.

The guard finally woke up and walked over to one of the blanketed mounds. He kicked it and mumbled something. The man got up and the guard lay down. On the way to his post the new guard looked around at all the other sleeping men and then at the spot where Elijah was laying. He yelled back at the other guard who looked up slowly. The new guard yelled at him again. Now he got up and looked around too. Within moments they were waking everyone up and stoking the fire.

A short man with shaggy brown hair finally took charge. He screamed at the guard and hit him on the side of the head. The guard who was a full head taller said nothing. He then went to where he was sleeping and turned over his blankets. He opened up a large leather bag and pulled out two or three books and looked them over. Now everyone was awake and crowding around the growing fire to see what was going on. The short man slung the bag over his shoulder and began barking orders. In pairs, the men lit torches and headed out in all directions. It didn't take them long to find our tracks. They followed them to the trail. All we could see were their torches flickering through the trees from our rock perch. Eventually they headed back. I had Narses ready his bow in case they found our tracks to the rock. Thankfully, they passed by and went to the camp where they began loading up the pack mule.

~\*~

They packed their belongings quickly, scanning the darkness the whole time. When they headed out they went in the opposite direction from where we came. I heard someone call the leader Torrin, and he seemed to know enough about Elijah that he wanted to avoid a conflict with whoever rescued him. This was bad for us. There were probably others along the trail heading to the solstice celebration and if he was able to find their camps I would have a much bigger problem. My men weren't going to arrive until daybreak, and I could only hope that he wouldn't find reinforcements by then.

The stars had vanished from the eastern horizon by the time I heard the horses. I told the men the situation, and we started after the brigands at a canter. If they stuck to the trail and didn't find some sympathetic souls to fight with them, they should be easy to catch and overcome. Coming over a crest in the trail, we saw them on the next hill scattering into the woods. I ordered the men to spread out and surround them. I didn't want a fight. This was their territory, they had the high ground. I had Merula stay back with Elijah, as I rode ahead to the hill. Adar and Narses stayed a hundred feet back to cover me. I rode to the top of the hill and sat in the center of the trail waiting to see my horsemen complete the circle in front of me. We had them completely surrounded but none of the brigands were in sight. The giant oaks and beech along with the boulders provided them with more than enough cover.

When all my men were in place, I said, "Come out now and we can avoid unnecessary bloodshed." I repeated the words in Celtic as best I could.

There was no reply.

"Surrender or you will be killed. Do you understand?" I said. I felt exposed sitting on the open trail. I held my shield close and kept turning Saad as I talked.

Still, no reply.

"You leave me no choice." I swung my sword in a circular motion above my head and whistled. My men slowly began closing the circle.

"If we surrender you will butcher us like pigs," I heard from behind a large rotten stump. It sounded like their leader, Torrin.

"I am no butcher. I do not wish to have your blood on my hands. Come out now before what little mercy I can afford you is gone."

From the other side of the trail, a voice called out, "Wait, wait! We don't want to fight." A man and a young woman stepped out from behind the base of an oak.

Torrin called back, "You worthless pile of donkey shit!"

"Who else wishes to be spared? Step forward now."

Others emerged from behind fallen trees and outcroppings. The leader yelled out again, "You are surrendering to sure death. You cannot trust them."

More than half of them came to the trail, no weapons in hand.

"You will face certain death if you do not come forward," I said. My men continued to close the circle.

Torrin finally jumped up onto the stump. He pointed his sword at me, and I could hear Adar's bow bend behind me. I waved him down. Killing their leader now would only eliminate what little trust they had in me.

His face was beat red and he spit when he talked, "How dare you come onto our land and threaten us. We do not go into your towns and temples and terrorize you. This act will not go unanswered."

"It is too late for you to pass your blame onto me. You are the one who has kidnapped an innocent man and terrorized your own people, stealing their livelihoods and robbing them of their dignity. You are no better than scavengers."

"We only take back what Rome has taken from us."

"No. You take what doesn't belong to you. You take what you haven't worked for. You feed on the vulnerable not because they are weak but because you are weak."

"I'd rather die than submit to pathetic Romans."

I turned my attention to the others, "Does this man speak for you? Do you want to follow him into the afterlife? Has he done anything but torment farmers and merchants and kidnap old men?" Two more men emerged from the trees.

"Why are you listening to him? They have never told us anything but lies. You will be slaves by the end of the day if you don't fight."

"I won't lie. You all will pay for your crimes but if you come with us peacefully you will live to see tomorrow," I said. He was right though. Slavery awaited most of them. Given the choice, I hoped they would take this over death.

The last three men walked past their leader and joined the others on the trail. They all looked ashamed. I don't know if it was shame for giving up the fight or for what they had done under Torrin's leadership, but they stared at the ground and wouldn't look at me or their leader.

Torrin stuck his sword in the stump and jumped down to the ground, "Curse you all. You've not only betrayed me but all your kind. I'm surrendering only to prove to you that they are the liars, they are the murderers and thieves. When they crucify me let my death be your proof."

My men closed in and tied them up. I told them to hurry. I still feared other Brigantes would be in the area shortly. Before we left, I singled out the first four individuals who surrendered. I told Merula to cut them loose.

"You can go. Take your belongings and go back to your settlement. I do not believe you wish to fight anymore than we do. I will forgive you this once and assume you've followed this little tyrant out of fear or desperation." I glanced for a second at Torrin. "But do not betray my mercy because if I come across you again in the company of brigands and murderers, slavery will not be an option." I don't know if this gesture was effective or not. I hoped it would change them, change their view of Rome, but I accepted the possibility that once back with their people they would laugh me off as a self-righteous Roman pawn. I also felt some of my own men looking at me like some idealistic fool. It didn't matter. I didn't know if I was doing the right thing but it felt right, and I was in charge.

I took a quick inventory of the brigand's belongings and made sure Elijah found his writings. We headed south back to the main road that ran between the northern outposts. We moved as quickly as we could, keeping the captives at a slow run. We were fortunate and did not come across any other groups. Back on the main road, we slowed down but remained vigilant. When we got to the muddy trail to the farmer's house, I told Catalus, Varus, and Gratian to fetch the mule that was still carrying two large sacks of grain. I sent them to the farmer and asked them to relay the message, "That justice had been done." It wouldn't restore his dignity or his daughter's innocence, but it might restore what little faith he may have in Rome.

~\*~\*~

We made it back to Castra Exploratorum before nightfall. The horses were put to stable and the men enjoyed a hearty meal of fresh rabbit and porridge. Torrin and his men were chained together and put into a makeshift stockade in the stables. After eating, I sat outside the small barracks and made some repairs to my scale armor. Elijah came along and sat down next to me.

"I do not believe I ever thanked you for rescuing me," he said.

"Your welcome. The governor was very worried about your well-being," I said.

"He wasn't worried about this decrepit old man. He was worried about what I know."

I risked overstepping my bounds but he led me to ask, "And what is it that you know that is so valuable?"

A wry smile crossed his bearded face, "I don't know until he asks me. I collect information, tidbits about this and that. I've been fortunate that more than once the governor has found it useful to have me around."

"Well it is clear you have made yourself indispensable."

"You must be pretty useful yourself for Severus to send you out to find me. He doesn't send incompetents to do his tasks."

"Right place, right time," I said.

"I think there is more to it than that but whether it was destiny or chance I do have one question for you. Why did you spare Torrin and his men? No code prevented you from killing them on the spot, and I don't believe your men would have questioned an order to attack. Did Severus ask for Torrin to be spared? Do these men have information that warrants mercy?"

I hesitated. His questions were blunt, but I didn't feel like he was questioning my decisions. He was simply seeking information.

"I was being honest when I said I am not a butcher. I already have enough blood on my hands. Besides my assignment was to bring back a kidnapped scribe not slaughter a pack of desperate thieves."

"Desperation leads men to go against their better judgment," he said.

"It can. Especially if they are weak," I said.

"So you are saying you understand these men. You see their plight and feel sorry for them."

"I never said I feel sorry for murderers and thieves. I said thieves and murderers are weak, desperate men." I was starting to tire of his babble.

"Ah, but your words and actions betray your pity for them. You have a hard time justifying killing a man that under different circumstances could be you."

"Look old man, you can mix up my words however you like but I am no murderer and if you think as a soldier I am getting soft, that I've lost my edge, then you are wrong. I chose to spare those men because I am not a murderer not because I feel sorry for them. And if you want to tell Severus that I'm not a good soldier, that I don't have what it takes, go right ahead because I am confident in the decisions I made. I know I did the right thing."

"I see," he said getting up from the bench. He started to walk away and without looking back he said, "I also think you did the right thing."

## V

I sent Plinius and Gratian ahead to inform Metellus of our success and to send a messenger out to recall Speratus. We sequestered a wagon for the prisoners, but it still took the better part of a day to make it back to the fort. When we arrived Severus was waiting in the courtyard of the principia. He greeted Elijah like an old friend, not a servant. He didn't ask about the books but looked Elijah over and promised him a fine meal and clean clothes. He came to me next.

"You have done good Coran. I am glad to see Metellus's faith in you was not unfounded. I have some big plans for you. As soon as Speratus returns I need to see the two of you so do not leave the fort until then," he said.

~\*~

Speratus returned late in the morning the following day. I didn't get a chance to talk to him before we were summoned. We met in the courtyard before going up to see Severus.

"Congratulations on your hunting trip. I see luck has favored you once again," he said.

"No luck in it. All skill," I said with a smile.

"Skill you acquired from your former commander."

"You can believe that if it helps you sleep at night."

We reached the door on the second floor of the principia and the guard let us in. The governor, his servant Tiberius, and Metellus were in the room. Severus had us sit as before, but this time he also took a seat behind the map-covered table.

"You men have proven yourselves loyal and adept soldiers and I have need of your skills. Hadrian has requested my transfer to Iudaea to quell a Jewish uprising that has become an embarrassment for Rome. I've sent my staff and bodyguards ahead to prepare my affairs in the port city of Caesarea. This means I need a new equites singulares to escort me to Iudaea. As my personal guards you will be compensated handsomely and . . ."

He continued talking about promotions and honors but I entered a haze. I ran through all the ramifications of what he just said. The soreness in my back returned. Without thinking I rubbed my neck. I snapped out of it when he started talking about the Jewish rebels.

". . . I need men like you who can move quickly and root out the enemy before they get entrenched. These zealots fight to the death and they will use any means they can to gain an advantage. Sheer numbers will not always defeat them. I need soldiers who can fight with their wits. You and your men are the kind of soldiers I need." He stood up and pulled out a map from the bottom of the stack and turned it toward us. "Here is where we are going."

We all stood up to see. I knew Iudaea was far away but it wasn't until that moment that I realized just how far. From Britannia, it couldn't have been any farther away and still be within Roman control. The farthest I had ever traveled was to Macedonia. Iudaea was almost twice as far. Severus traced the route we would take through Gaul down to the sea and then across the water to Caesarea. My legs felt weak, and I wanted to sit down but the others remained standing. A part of me was intrigued by this new adventure, but I dreaded the idea of leaving my family. I had always figured I would die on this island at the end of a

sword or if I was fortunate, of old age back in Macedonia, not in some far away province at the hands of religious fanatics. I didn't know how I was going to tell Aria and the boys.

I blurted out, "When do we leave?"

"In four days," Severus answered. "So, prepare your men and make what arrangements you need to but we must be ready to leave at the end of the week. Any other questions?"

I glanced at the other men looking for a reaction. Metellus said nothing and did not appear surprised. I assumed Severus had filled him in on everything earlier. Speratus looked like a wide-eyed child. This was the kind of opportunity he had always hoped for. This was the type of assignment that propelled men into centurion or praefectus.

"Good. Tiberius will give you the details: supplies, maps, your responsibilities as my personal guard, and such. If you have any questions ask Metellus. He has been briefed on everything."

Tiberius came forward and handed us each a scroll and an honorary medallion to signify our new status as equites singulares. As we were leaving, Severus asked if I could stay. Tiberius shut the door after the other men left.

Severus remained standing and said, "Elijah has taken a liking to you, Coranus. I too was impressed with how quickly you were able to secure his safety. Because of this, I am making you responsible for Elijah's safety for the length of our journey. I will warn you though that he has a mind of his own. So keep a close eye on him. He will be a valuable asset where we are going."

"Yes, sir," I said.

Severus looked down at the maps. He looked like he was debating something in his mind. Finally, he said, "Are you familiar with the Jewish War sixty years ago?"

"I've heard of it, but I know nothing about it."

"It was a bloody affair and both sides suffered greatly. Some of the Jews still harbor a powerful resentment over that war. We have to understand our enemy. Learn what you can from Elijah. He was there. He was a child but he watched his cities burn and saw his father killed in the fighting. He knows his people and he knows Iudaea."

"Do you worry about his loyalties?" I asked.

"No, not at all. I think he gave up picking sides long ago. His loyalty is to his curiosity not any faith or group. When I say keep an eye on him I mean make sure he doesn't wander off on one of his explorations. And don't be afraid to ask him questions. I am sure there are few he has not heard before." he said as he opened the door for me.

"Yes, sir," I said and headed down to the courtyard. Speratus was still there straightening his saddle.

"What was that about?" he said.

"The governor wanted to make sure that I was comfortable with the assignment." I don't know exactly why I lied but part of it was Speratus would feel slighted if he knew I got a specific assignment. But there was also a part of me that didn't want to tell him because he was no longer my commanding officer. It was the freedom of not having to answer to him anymore. All these years, I may have tolerated his command more than I accepted it. Unfortunately, I was never a good liar.

Speratus threw me a suspicious glance, "What did you tell him?"

"I told him I was honored to be chosen as part of his personal guard."

"What are you going to tell Aria?" The question caught me off guard but Speratus knew what was really on my mind. He knew where my true loyalties lay and that I didn't want to go.

"I don't know. It'll be hard but I don't see how I have much of a choice."

"You could always decline the governor's offer."

"And be demoted to a common foot soldier. You know as well as I do that this is a once in a lifetime assignment."

"It is. It is the kind of thing we dreamed of years ago when you still had some fight in you. When you talked about duty, honor, loyalty, and all that idealistic stuff you babble about."

"That was before Aria and the boys. I was blinded by the optimism of youth."

"So you're wiser now?"

"I don't know about wiser but definitely more tired."

We arrived at my barracks, "You can't wait to go can you?" I said.

He looked out beyond the fort's walls at the countryside, "I've had enough of this place. I'm ready for something different."

"Isn't there anything you will miss?"

"Maybe, but nothing comes to mind. That's your problem. You get too attached to things: horses, women, your foolish ideals. Those things hold you back. They're the reason why it took you so long to rise in rank. You let them sap your ambition, rob you of your focus."

He was skilled at deflecting an uncomfortable question by offering unsolicited advice.

"Those are the things that make this life bearable," I said.

"That's because your duty as a soldier is the only thing you haven't committed to," he said in a sharper tone.

"Of all my faults you know lack of loyalty to Rome is not one of them."

"Being loyal and fulfilling your potential are two different things. You know as well as I do that you could have been a decurion long ago and could even be a centurion or the commander of this ala if you wanted it. I've always known you were smarter than me but I learned a long time ago that is not what gets you ahead. Men aren't commanders, generals, or even Emperor because they are smart," he said. He looked around to see if anyone else was listening.

"They didn't get there by being idiots," I said.

"It is a different kind of smart. Something you don't possess. Knowledge about the way the world works, a shrewdness that lets them get ahead of the rest."

"Do you really think I'm that naive? For the last twenty years I've seen everything you've seen. I know how the world works, but I've chosen not to sacrifice what I think is important for some medal or rank."

He knew he'd riled me, "Again with the ideals. You can keep them. When I'm a governor or consul one day I'll make you my advisor of ethics."

I wanted to fight his cynicism but he was done. He had made his point and was trying to belay my anger. I let it go.

"I don't think I could be an advisor to a man with no ethics," I said with a laugh.

He offered a polite laugh and started leading his horse away, "Say hello to Aria for me."

Aria.

I had the feeling my conversation with her wouldn't end as well.

~~~~

I went to see Aria in the afternoon. The rules prohibited soldiers from marrying, but they weren't enforced and nothing stopped us from renting rooms in the settlement for our wives and children. Severus

even provided extra funds to assist our families while we were in Iudaea. He knew that content soldiers were loyal soldiers.

I rented the second floor of a timber and mud-brick building for Aria, Macer, and Justinus. Walking up to the building, I saw a row of sticks in the muddy ground and a thick tangle of black hair moving behind them. Macer was busily lining up the sticks and filling the gaps with the thick mud. When he saw me he called out, "Papa, papa!" He ran up to me covered in mud, pieces of straw stuck in his hair.

"What are you making?" I said.

"A wall to keep out the barbarians."

"Your mother might need that wood for the fire."

"I know, I know. I'll put it back later. Come help me with it."

I grabbed a couple of sticks and shoved them into the ground, "Is your mother upstairs?"

Macer straightened my sticks, "She is making the stew that I don't like."

"Well, you are going to eat it or nothing at all," came a voice from behind us. Aria stood at the top of the stairs, her long black hair framing her smiling face.

Both Macer and I headed for the stairs. I grabbed him by the shoulder, "Why don't you stay down here and finish your fort. I want to see it before I leave."

"Alright, I'm gonna build a tower out of those logs over there," he said.

I climbed the stairs and kissed Aria on the forehead. She grabbed me and kissed me on the lips.

"I didn't expect to see you until the end of the week," she said.

"I know. I have some news. Let's go inside."

I could smell the stew cooking before I entered the door. Spices were laid out on the table where the meat was prepared. She went to the hearth to stir the thick broth. I sat down at the table and watched her. I thought back to the first time I saw her. I was only fifteen, and I was so enthralled by her deep blue eyes that I said nothing when she said hello to me. We were both older now, but she still looked the same. She had a confidence and grace that made her irresistible, and as much as I would like to say I won her heart with my overtures it was purely by fortune that she saw something in me.

"So what is it? Are you going to keep me waiting forever?" she said, turning to face me. I looked away at the coals under the simmering pot.

"I've been given a new assignment." I said.

"What does that mean? Did they make you a decurion finally?"

"Actually they did but . . ."

"That's wonderful. You deserved that a long time ago." She put the stirring spoon down, got up, and joined me at the table. She sat close and put her arm around me. Her touch calmed me.

"It is good and it means more pay but it is not at the fort. It is . . ."

"We've moved before. We'll manage it again. Where is it? Is it closer to Londinium?" she said searching my face.

I picked at a loose thread on my sleeve not looking up. "It is different this time. Governor Severus has chosen me to be a part of his personal guard and escort him to Iudaea. The emperor himself asked Severus to go there and put down a rebellion."

Her arm retreated and she clasped her hands in her lap. "Iudaea? Where is Iudaea?"

"By Egypt at the far end of the sea."

"That's on the other side of the empire."

"I know . . ."

"Do you have to go? Why you? Can't someone else go?"

I looked her in the eyes, "You know I have to go. Not only is it an honor but you don't walk away from this without consequences. I can't . . ."

"What about Speratus. He will go for you."

"He is already going along with Metellus and a full unit of men."

"How long will you be gone? What are we going to do? I don't . . ."

I put my hand on hers, "I don't know how long I will be gone. After we take care of the rebellion, I don't know what assignment Severus might have for us. I've made plans for you and the boys to . . ."

"How will I know if you are alright? You know that . . ."

"It is no different than when I go out now. We've always known the risks."

"You can't say that it's not different. We need you here. You have to tell them . . ."

"I have to go. I don't have a choice."

She stood up, walked to the window, and opened the shutter to look at Macer. "Metellus knows you have a family. He knows you aren't like Speratus. You've said yourself you would be happy to leave the ala, to just be a carpenter. You could do that here with us."

"That is all fantasy. That is what I say when I'm tired, when I've had enough of the drills and the assignments. The fact is I'm a soldier and I'm good at it."

"But it is not who you are." She wiped a tear from her eye. "What are you going to tell the boys?"

She knew that question would test my loyalty to Rome. I stood up, lifted the edge of the table, and slammed it back down. Forks and knives scattered, and a water jug crashed to the floor. Aria jumped, but she knew my rage was not because of her.

"What do you want me to do? If I try to leave the ala I will be a deserter. I'll be hung for treason. You say become a carpenter. Who would I work for? The forts and the officials are the only ones worth working for and we wouldn't be able to get far enough away to escape my fate as a deserter. I do what I do because it gives you and the boys a chance, a chance for the boys to avoid the same fate. I will not find a better opportunity than the one Severus has offered."

"If it is the pay you are talking about I don't care about that. That's not what makes a difference. You being here makes a difference. That is what makes you different. You've always been there for us." She walked back to me and took my hands, "I know being away is going to hurt you as much as me, so why don't we go away, beyond Briton, maybe even beyond the empire. We can . . ."

"The same thing that makes me faithful to you is what makes me faithful to the ala. I have vowed my life to both and no matter how far apart we are my pledge to you won't be any weaker."

Her eyes filled with tears, "What are we going to do without you?"

"You will manage like you always do." I pulled her to me, "I've made arrangements for you and the boys to go to my family's land in Edessa. My mother and uncle will look after you." She wrapped her arms around me. "Once you see the waterfalls and olive groves your worries will go away."

She said nothing. She cried and held me tighter.

VI

The days went by quickly. We spent the mornings training, and the rest of the day, organizing our belongings, sorting out necessities and selling, storing, or giving away the remainder. Severus wanted us to travel as light as possible and with as few men as possible. He wanted no more than fifty men which was unusual. Governors usually traveled with entourages numbering in the hundreds with family, guards, officials, and servants. Only sixteen servants would accompany us. Five of these would be Severus's, including Elijah. Metellus chose only to bring one leaving Speratus and me five each to care for the horses and share the more menial tasks for the rest of the men. Metellus summoned me after morning drills the day before we were leaving to discuss some of the choices I made.

Sitting in his quarters, he looked over the list I'd given him. He looked up and asked, "How are the men? Everything will be ready by tomorrow?"

"Yes, sir. The men are already working like a unit."

He held up the list, "You've requested to have this Brigante boy named Brenden as one of your five slaves. Is this the boy who watched Speratus dispatch his father?"

I knew this would be an issue. "Yes, sir that is him."

"I trust you see the problem here."

"I will take personal responsibility for him, sir. He has a good knowledge of the horses and he gave us vital information in tracking down the brigands who had Elijah. Speratus has every right to be concerned about him looking for revenge but I don't think he will. I think he knew the risk he and his father were taking that day."

"Speratus is not my main concern. I don't want this boy using his access to someone of Severus's status as an opportunity for glory."

"I don't think the boy shares his people's hatred of Rome. I think he was simply following his father's wishes."

"It's that devotion to his father that worries me. Men can hide their deepest feelings in the name of revenge. If you insist on bringing him you will be subjected to the same punishment as him if he goes astray."

"I'm willing to accept that."

With half a smile, he said, "You're not going to make me regret suggesting you for this assignment, are you?"

"No, sir," I said.

He dismissed me but as I was almost through the door, he asked, "How are the wife and boys?"

I hesitated. I rarely discussed my private life with Metellus because of the rule against marriage.

"They are good."

"Are they staying here?"

"No, I'm using the extra pay Severus gave us to send them to Macedonia. They are going to live with my mother and the rest of my family."

"Good. How old are the boys now?"

"Six and sixteen."

"I'm sure they will have a safe journey."

"Yes, sir," I said retreating out the door.

I went back to my preparations but I thought about Brenden. I worried about my decision to bring him along. Every day he would see the man who killed his father. I don't know if I could do that. I didn't know why I felt an obligation to him, and I feared my idealism was clouding my judgment but if I was being foolish then fate would be sure to punish me.

The night passed slowly. I went over my equipment one last time: cooking pots, blankets, extra clothes, tools to fix armor and weapons, an axe and a set of chisels along with my armor, swords, javelins, bow, and arrows. I also cleaned and checked all my tack including my saddle, reins, halters, bits, and bridles. I looked for weak spots in the leather and any loose stitching. I fixed these things myself not letting the slaves do it for me like the other men. I liked the purposefulness of the work, the methodic looping of the strand binding the leather tight.

I filled the last saddlebag and picked up the sword I'd taken from Brenden's father. I thought about turning it over to the fort treasury. I could fetch a good price for it and get a considerable amount of wine with the money, but the wine would go fast and I would be breaking my promise to the boy. I shoved it in the bag.

~~~~

The sun rose in a clear sky the next day. The air was warm and a gentle breeze made the fresh spring grass sway back and forth. It was the most pleasant day I could remember, and it would be the last time I would ever set foot there. My saddlebags had never been so full and they rattled as I trotted out the gate toward the settlement. Outside my family's home I saw Macer making his way down the stairs. His arms were full of wooden bowls and pottery. Justin was at the wagon lashing ropes over the rest of our belongings. Justin reminded me of myself at that age, tall and awkward with dark eyes and wavy black hair. He was strong-willed like his mother though. The only wisdom I had ever given him he got by example. He was quick to learn by experience but rebelled at my words.

I tied my reins to the wagon, "Is this everything?"

"Almost, Mother is packing the rest of the smaller stuff now," Justin said.

Macer threw his armful on the back of the wagon and ran to me, "Papa, look, what I found when I was building my fort." He pulled an oblong stone with diagonal grooves carved in it from a pouch.

"Interesting, what is it?"

"Mama said it is a charm for good luck. That I should keep it close to protect me. Is that what it is?"

"I'm sure it is, so you better not lose it."

Justin finished tying the ropes, "How long do you think it will take us to get to Edessa?"

"If you stay with the vexillation through Lugdunum it may take weeks but once you meet up with my uncle in Verona it will go much quicker. Hopefully not more than two months travelling," I said. I don't know if those cities meant anything to him.

"Are you going to miss this place?" I asked.

He leaned on the wagon, "Yeah, but I'm ready to see more of the world. After all your stories, I am anxious to see Edessa and grandmother."

"I wish I could go with you," I said grabbing his shoulder. He bowed his head embarrassed by my affection.

I patted him on the back and headed for the staircase. Upstairs, Aria was kneeling over a small wooden box wrapping clay figurines of the various gods and goddesses she beseeched to keep the household running. I sat on the bench that ran along the wall just inside the door.

"How are you doing? It looks like Justin has almost everything loaded," I said.

Without looking she said, "I'm amazed it all fit in one wagon."

"I paid Titus, a soldier I know in the vexillation, a few extra denarii to keep an eye on you and the boys. He said he would make sure you met up with my uncle."

She put the lid on the box and secured it with a small bronze latch. She put the box by the door and joined me on the bench. She leaned against me and I could smell the incense in her hair. She was exhausted. I put my arm around her and kissed her on the top of her head.

"When are you leaving?" she said.

"Shortly, Metellus is finishing his orders for the vexillation that will be escorting you and the other families."

"I had Una read our fortunes in the sticks last night," she said.

She knew I didn't believe in the readings or her little clay idols but I never discouraged her from the things that brought her comfort. "What did she say?"

"She saw a vision of two eagles in flight attacking each other. One triumphed while the other fell to the ground."

"Hopefully it foretells our victory in Iudaea."

"What if it doesn't? What if it is the opposite?" she said, her voice steadily rising. "The boys . . . I don't know if I can . . . How am I going to know if something has happened to you?"

I didn't have an answer. I wanted to tell her not to worry but it wouldn't do any good.

"If anything happens to me make sure that the boys know I love them, that I love them as much as I love you, more than anything else in this world."

She didn't say anymore. She wrapped her arms around me and held me until the boys came up for the last items. Macer came up to me with his innocent smile.

"Put out your hand," he said to me.

"For what?" I said putting my hand flat.

"This," he said putting the stone he had found in my hand. He had secured it in a leather strap so I could wear it around my neck.

"You should keep this. It is your good luck charm," I said.

"Mother said you are going to a dangerous place. You need the luck."

"I'll take it, but don't worry; I'll bring it back to you."

He gave me a hug. "I'm going to miss you," he said.

It took all my effort not to cry. I told Justin to protect Macer and his mother and reassured them that I would be in Edessa soon. I told Macer to listen to his mother and I told Aria that I would send letters when I was able. Walking down the stairs, I didn't feel sadness as much as I felt guilt, a deep and heavy guilt that I was setting my family adrift, abandoning them. I looked back once and waved. Justin and Macer were at the wagon waving back, and Aria was halfway down the stairs, her arms crossed, her beautiful face covered in worry.

Back at the fort, I waited and thought about my family as the other men assembled. I went through my saddlebag and pulled out the Celtic sword. I thought about Aria's visit to the seer and the vision as I ran

my hand over the scabbard. I was never a believer of visions, but a cold chill ran through me as I studied the intricate detail of the bronze eagles tangled in flight.

## PART II

## VII

Metellus and Severus met us at the southern gate. Severus was dressed like a common soldier. There were no signs of his true status. He took a subordinate stance to Metellus, letting him give all the orders and address the men. We had been told not to bring attention to the governor, but I was surprised that he was forgoing all the privileges of his position.

The road leading out the southern gate and to the settlement was lined with the grotesque trophies of war. New crucifixes had risen in the past few days. Torrin, the brigand leader, was among them. I pretended to check my saddlebags and looked for Brenden among the servants. He saw Torrin but looked away. I didn't know what Torrin was to him, a bully or an inspiration, but either way, he was one of his people, more like himself than any of us.

Coming out the other side of the settlement we sped up to a canter. We passed the caravan of soldiers, families and merchants that my wife and sons were in. I saw their wagon with Aria and Justin sitting in front and Macer dangling his legs off the back. They didn't see me, and I didn't want to turn around after we passed to get their attention. I never had regrets when it came to my family but as I rode away I felt alone. I hoped they didn't blame me for leaving.

Metellus brought us to a gallop after passing the caravan. We rode at that pace for three miles. I could see the servants and Elijah were uncomfortable. They weren't used to the saddles. The servants dressed like soldiers to keep the impression that we were a standard scouting party. All were given quality horses but that did not make up for their lack of riding skills.

We reached the fort at Cataractonium after dark. The servants were physically exhausted and sore. Remarkably though, Elijah appeared to be no worse than any of the cavalry. The governor's arrival was not announced, and Metellus was regarded as the senior officer at all times. If anyone at the fort suspected the governor, nothing was said.

It took another two days to reach Londinium and the coast. I had not been to the city in years. It was twice the size I remembered, full of merchants, traders, travelers, priests of every faith, the wealthy, and the poor. There was an amphitheater and a circus for chariot races. The market was busy and full of exotic goods shipped in from the other side of the empire. Outside the city you could see the change too. Forests had been cleared and fields planted, walls constructed and ditches scoured. Like all the other major cities, Londinium did its best to emulate mother Rome.

The men wanted to stay in the city for the night. The brothels and taverns beckoned them, but Metellus arranged passage across the channel at dawn and didn't need the men nursing sore stomachs. We went to the legion fort for the night. Severus and Elijah, though, disappeared. Londinium was the provincial capital and Metellus told us to not worry about them for the night. I assumed Severus went to his residence to make final arrangements before he left.

The men were quiet. They were disappointed about missing the city's attractions. I took the break to check on Brenden. I found him in the stables tending to the animals.

"How are the horses? Are the holding up to the ride?" I asked.

"They are fine. They are tired but they are good horses," he said in his broken Latin.

"How are the other servants holding up?"

"Fine, I guess"

"Are you going to miss your home?"

"What do you think?"

"I realize it is the only place you know but I believe this is your chance to escape a fate similar to Torrin's."

He said nothing.

"This way you have something to do, something to prove yourself at."

He kept brushing. I started to walk away.

"Torrin was an ass," he said in a quiet voice.

I turned and leaned against the stall.

"At first, he said we would just steal from the Roman grain collectors. My father said that was a noble cause and would help our people but as Torrin got more followers he got greedy. He started harassing our own farmers and traders, anyone who dealt with Rome," he said.

"That's not what your father wanted?"

"No, but he couldn't leave. We depended on Torrin and the spoils we brought in, and father said that Torrin would not let us leave without a fight."

"What did you think?"

"I don't know. I listened to father."

"What do you think now?"

"I think I'm paying for what we did to our own people."

"If you keep fulfilling your duties I think that is a burden you will be able to shed," I said. He was humoring me but I wanted to keep giving him some kind of hope.

I left him to his tasks and returned to my quarters. I went to sleep early. The three days on horseback had taken more out of me than I thought.

Not long after I fell asleep I woke up to someone shaking me.

It was Metellus, "Get up. Are you awake?"

"Yes, sir," I said through blurry eyes.

"Get a few of your men. Four of Speratus's men have snuck out to the city. I need you to go out and get them back."

"Yes, sir."

I woke up Kleitos, Catalus, and Merula and found Narses playing dice with his brother and Plinius. I wanted Kleitos because of all the languages he knew. I hesitated at bringing along Merula because he was my second in command but I wanted him in case there was close-quarters fighting. Catalus I brought purely for his ability to intimidate men with his size, and Narses because of his speed.

I knew the men who snuck away well. I had fought at their side for many years. I didn't care for any of them. The worst was Lurco. He was a lecherous fool who Speratus let do whatever he liked because he was good with a bow. The other three, Flaccus, Silus, and Tubero, followed Lurco around like hungry dogs. They were younger and foolishly thought he had something to teach them. I never trusted any of them but they were all adequate soldiers.

We rode the short distance to the city from the fort. Catalus knew the city and quickly led us to the district with the most brothels and inns. We searched four before we found them. We walked into Lepida's Tavern and found Flaccus passed out on a bench and Tubero playing dice at a table in the corner.

He saw us come in and got up like he was going to run but quickly sat down and smiled. I asked where the other two were and he pointed up the staircase. I left Catalus to watch Tubero and Flaccus. I led the other men up the stairs. Reaching the top, the second door on our right opened and Silus stepped out retying his breeches. He looked surprised but offered no fight. I sent him downstairs to join the others.

Even with six other doors in the long hallway it was not difficult to find Lurco. I had heard the woman's shrieks coming up the stairs. I pounded on the door and told him to come out.

He said, "Go fuck yourself!" and something shattered against the door.

I kicked the door in. His breeches were around his feet and his hairy, white ass had red fingernail cuts running across it. He was pulling on the woman's hair from behind like a set of reins and I couldn't tell if her screams were of pain or pleasure. He barely moved when the door flew in. He was drunk and oblivious. I kicked him off the woman and he stumbled and fell against the wall. He tried to stand but tumbled onto the floor again. The woman covered herself but didn't seem concerned. I had the men drag him downstairs with his pants still around his ankles. I asked the owner for a bucket of water. I splashed half the bucket on Lucro and dumped the rest on Flaccus. Lucro finally covered himself and slowly realized what was going on.

"You bastards come all this way to ruin my night," he grumbled.

"You'll be lucky to still be a soldier come morning," I shot back.

"Go fuck your horse. Speratus was right about you. Your new position has gone to your head."

"Take'em outside," I said. I laid a denarii on the table for the door.

We bound the men's wrists and tied them to each other like slaves for the walk back to the fort. Before we could get back on our horses, seven men came charging up the street. They were waving their arms and pointing at Lurco and his men. They were yelling in a language I didn't understand.

Kleitos stepped forward and said, "They are saying that Lurco and his men cheated them out of ten denarii at dice. He wants his money back."

The man was now in my face, screaming at me. I could smell the drink on his breath and made out a few words among the curses.

"He says you owe him. That your men robbed him and the legion must pay him back," Kleitos translated.

"Tell him I owe him nothing," I said.

The man looked at his group and reached for a knife at his waist. I drove my heel into his foot. He leaned forward in pain. I hit him in the side of his head with my elbow knocking him to the ground. I pulled my sword and held it at his head. My men got on their horses and Narses quickly drew an arrow on the next closest man.

Keeping up the bravado I said, "Would anybody else like their payment?"

No one moved. I got on Saad and they left us alone as we headed back to the fort.

I handed the men over to Metellus who took them into an empty stable where I saw Speratus waiting. I could hear Metellus cursing the men as I got ready to lay down again. He punished the four men with twenty lashes each and I winced hearing the leather snap against bare flesh. Speratus would avoid the lashes, but he would not escape unscathed. The men were his responsibility, and he knew Lurco well enough to expect this of him. Metellus informed me in the morning that I was now the senior decurion and that Speratus's men would load the ships. Even the slaves were not to help.

As the sun rose, the horses were fitted with blinders and loaded onto the ships. Like the horses, I walked the boards onto the ship cautiously. I never liked the water. I was a poor swimmer and the sea doesn't show mercy. It devours the young, the old, the weak, and the strong alike. The crossing was nothing compared to what it was going to take to get to Iudaea, but it still made me uneasy. I was even more uncomfortable watching Speratus and his men struggle with the cargo and the animals. I hadn't talked to him, and he made no effort to acknowledge me.

We set out just as the sun split from the horizon. The wind was slight but filled the sails and before long we reached the other shore. It would be days from now before Aria and the boys would cross the strait, but I silently said a short prayer to Neptune for their safe passage.

~ ~ ~

We wasted no time. The next few days we rode all day. The weather was good and the men's spirits were high. While we rode, I talked with Elijah. At first it was to keep an eye on him, but later I did it to learn more about his people and Iudaea. He liked to talk and when we camped he entertained all the men with stories. He had tales about the Germans in the northern forests and about the nomads in the great desert. He also had stories about peoples beyond the reach of Rome in the east and south past the grain fields of the Nile. I don't know if what he said was true, but it didn't matter.

While we waited out an afternoon storm in a grove of chestnut trees, I asked him about growing up in Iudaea and the Jewish War.

"My father was a scribe for the Pharisees in Jerusalem. He saw how the priests and the wealthy conspired with Rome to tax their own people and suppress the peasants from rising up. He felt the temple had become corrupted so he left and joined the rebellion. I was four at the time. I don't remember much besides going from home to home hiding from Roman troops. I rarely saw my father. He lived with the other rebels in caves, the ruins of cities and villages that had been pillaged and burned, and the makeshift camps of refugees. It was not a childhood that I would wish on any child."

"How is it that you seem to hold no animosity toward Rome for all you have endured?"

"I was mad for a long time but as I grew older I realized that all men are capable of terrible acts as well as virtuous ones. It doesn't matter whether you are a Jew, Roman, Dacian, or a Caledonian all people know greed, corruption, and brutality when they see it. I've seen too much to believe that any one group knows the path to virtue."

"But surely you believe that some people have attained a higher degree of civility than others. Rome is more prosperous and secure than any other civilization in history. How can you deny this?"

"What cost does that come at? When I look around at your empire I see it being run by slaves and fed by tribute. You depend on the very people you conquer and oppress."

"Those are strong words coming from a slave."

"Severus knows my views. It is my ability to see through the fog of history and politics which makes him keep me around."

"I still don't understand how you can help him put down a rebellion of your own people."

"I call myself Jewish because that is how I was raised and men are suspicious of those who have no belief. They are no longer my people. I'm too old to believe any side is right."

"It sounds like you've given up."

"That may be," he said reaching into his satchel. "Here I have something for you." He pulled out a thick book and handed it to me.

"What is it?"

"It is a history of the Jewish War written by a Jewish aristocrat named Josephus. Many called him a traitor because he wrote this under the patronage of Emperor Vespasian."

"So you and Josephus have a lot in common."

"No, not at all. He was a self-righteous bastard that only cared about himself. I know because I worked under his tutelage many years ago. He was mostly interested in his own glory. I do not share that desire."

I shook my head, "You are a cynical old man."

"Why do you say that?"

"You believe nothing, yet you are quick to discredit men who do believe as having other motives."

"That may be," he said as he tapped the book in my hands. "But you read this book and tell me what good comes from men's belief."

The storm passed. The men were shaking out their cloaks and getting ready to go. I put the book in my saddlebag and headed out.

## VIII

Going further into Gaul, the signs of civilization increased as more fields divided up the rolling hills and fewer deer and boar were seen by the hunting parties. We also began seeing rows of grapes along the valley walls and cork trees stripped half bare for their bark.

Five days into Gaul and outside of the city of Lugdunum, Metellus informed me that there was a wealthy merchant friend of Severus that the governor wanted to visit. He needed a small contingent of men to accompany Severus and Elijah to the merchant's villa. I selected Narses, Kleitos, Cimber, Gratian, and Catalus. We set out early the next morning as the rest of the men went about their duties: hunting, scouting, and maintaining weapons and equipment.

I rode next to Severus who remained dressed as a common soldier. Beyond the camp Severus broke the morning silence, "This is beautiful country."

"Yes, sir."

"The villa we are going to is even more beautiful than this. It sits on a wooded hill overlooking a small valley lined with orchards and fields of wheat and rows of grapevines. My friend, Rufus, acquired the land for his service to Rome and he has turned a wilderness into paradise."

Up to this point we had camped along the road, stayed in forts or sequestered lodging and food from inns or homesteads. The villa sounded like a pleasant diversion from the road.

Severus continued, "This assignment would have been Speratus's if not for his unruly soldiers. You have done very well in your new role as decurion."

"Thank you, sir."

"Have you spoken to him since the incident?"

"Yes but only in passing at the morning briefings."

"You two have known each other for a long time?"

"Yes, since childhood."

"He is an ambitious man but he has to realize that simply wanting something badly will not get it for him. You must have discipline and work hard. You seem to understand this. Do you think Speratus does?" he said.

"He can be brash and there are times that our . . . I mean his men have acted recklessly but he always gets results." I didn't want to betray Speratus, but I wasn't going to lie, and I agreed with Severus.

"You have potential Coran. Unlike some commanders, I value intelligence in my officers, men who understand the consequences of their actions. When the stakes are high, recklessness leads to needless violence and dead soldiers."

"Yes, sir."

"I think that is what has happened in Iudaea, recklessness. We are going there to clean up a mess made by others. Remember that, no matter what we find, we are there to restore order not make judgments or right past wrongs but simply to restore order."

His words came across as more of a warning than advice.

~~~~

The road to the merchant's villa was lined with cyprus trees creating a barrier between the road and the many fields which surrounded us. Occasionally between the trees I caught glimpses of slaves working. They were weeding the crops and tending the grapevines. More than a half a mile through the evergreen tunnel the villa appeared over a rise in the road. It was an expansive complex surrounded by an eight foot wall. It was classically Roman with stuccoed walls and a tiled roof. It would have fit right in on the outskirts of Rome but here it was unique.

The main entrance was guarded by four sentries, two on horseback and two on foot. They were milling about eating bread and passing around a water skin. Once they saw us, the men on foot stood at attention on either side of the gate and the riders trotted out to meet us, their hands on their swords.

At twenty yards away, I pulled ahead and called, "Hail, my men and I request lodging and food in the name of the legion and Emperor Hadrian. I also carry a message for your patron from the province of Britannia."

The horsemen approached. They were not local Gauls but looked more Roman or Greek, short in stature with olive skin. Their armor and weapons were similar to ours. These men were not mercenaries. They were either retired legionnaires or a special assignment of soldiers.

The older of the two spoke, "What fort do you come from and what is your destination?"

"We are from Uxelodunum along Hadrian's Wall and are headed to Rome to deliver correspondence from the Governor of Britannia," I said.

"Let me see a copy of your orders," he said with the air of a commanding officer.

"I'd be happy to show them to your patron once you allow me and my men a place to rest and water our horses."

He looked us over and said, "Very well, follow me."

The other guards opened the gate to a spacious stone courtyard. A marble fountain gurgled water in the center. Servants were busy cleaning the fountain and sweeping debris from the cobblestones. The guard directed us toward a long stone trough with fresh water. The older guard dismounted and went across the courtyard to the central building. He returned with five more guards.

"I ask that you stay here while I inform my patron of your presence," he said.

"Before you go, I need you to deliver this to your patron." I held out a sealed scroll Severus had given me.

The guard looked at me like I was offering him a dead rat, but he took it.

Moments later a large man, over six feet tall with a large belly came striding into the courtyard. He held out his arms calling, "Severus you old mule, where are you?" Severus had told us that Rufus was an Egyptian who early in life had amassed great wealth by shipping grain and supplies for the legion when others would not. He had made himself invaluable to the empire and now he was enjoying the fruits of his labor.

Severus removed his helmet and stepped out from behind me. Rufus grabbed him and lifted him off the ground. I was caught off guard. I almost stepped in to push Rufus aside but the two men obviously were good friends. They stood in the courtyard for a long time talking about family, politics, and recent events. Finally Rufus turned to the head guard, "Give these men whatever they desire and tell the cooks to prepare a feast fit for my friend, the Governor of Britannia, and tell Longus to prepare the guest quarters along with some entertainment for tonight."

Severus said, "You are a generous man. I promise we will not overstay our welcome."

"Nonsense! You and your friends are always welcome here," Rufus said. He turned to me and my men and said, "Feel free to roam about and enjoy yourselves until we dine. My home is open to you."

With his arm around Severus, he escorted the governor inside. Elijah stayed with us and wandered around the courtyard while we removed saddles and handed the tack over to the servants. An older gentleman approached and introduced himself as Longus and led us through the main entrance into an inner courtyard filled with exotic plants, many in full bloom. A small irregular pond sat in the center, and stone paths wound their way through the greenery. Along the right side of the courtyard servants were busy preparing trays filled with bread, cheese, almonds, walnuts, olives, and salted fish. Jugs of wine and water were placed on a small table against the inner wall.

Longus pointed to the food, "Please sit and enjoy the food. The servants are at your disposal."

I told the men to eat and enjoy themselves. I grabbed some bread, wine, and almonds and went to Saad to retrieve the book Elijah had given me. I walked around the side of the villa and found a small building which looked to be a shrine that had a bench in front of it. The bench was under the shade of an oak tree and overlooked an olive orchard where slaves were busy pruning the trees. I only managed a couple of paragraphs about the Jewish aristocracy before I put the book down to relax.

I watched the birds dart from tree to tree and little white butterflies tumble on the breeze coming up the hillside. Beyond the orchard, the hills rolled with wheat and barley until they met the dark green barrier of the forest at the horizon. The sky was a crisp blue and feathery white clouds cast thin shadows over the fields like a giant bird overhead.

I missed my family. It was moments like these when I was at peace that I missed them the most. This place reminded me of my family's home in Macedonia. My memories from childhood were faint but it was paradise to me, even more beautiful than this place with rumbling waterfalls and rocky overlooks.

It was in the fall almost twenty years ago when we spread my father's ashes there. The wheat was stacked in bundles in the field and the smell of grapes was heavy in the air. I looked forward to being there again with my family.

I could just start walking and leave everything behind, but Severus and my men had put their faith in me. I made an oath to fight for Rome. An oath that was harder and harder to believe in. I believed in Rome but my will to fight wasn't as strong as it was in my youth. There was always the pressure to be stronger, faster, and tougher. Some men thrived on the challenge, the rush of combat and the euphoria of victory. As I grew older, this was lost on me. I saw the destruction, the violence, the widows, the orphans, but Severus's words echoed in my head. Our job was to restore order, to somehow bring peace to the frontiers. This land, this villa had once been wilderness and now it was an idyllic example of what Rome had to offer. I told myself that my duty was to help create a world where my family could enjoy the peace and security Rome offered.

My musings were interrupted by a servant who informed me that the meal was ready. I closed the book and followed the servant to the main hall.

I'd never seen food like that. Before the meal, they had lentils, dormice, and thrushes along with salted snails, mushrooms, and an assortment of fresh early summer vegetables. The main meal consisted of a roasted pig stuffed with sausage and exotic fruits. There were also two stuffed swans, baskets full of bread, and overflowing cups of wine.

Rufus sat on an elaborately inlaid couch at the far end of the room. A place was reserved for Severus, Elijah and me to his right while the rest of the men sat on the left. The conversation meandered between

polite compliments and rowdy stories until Rufus finally said through a mouthful of swan meat, "So, Severus what really brings you to my home?"

I, like most of my men, put down my food and looked at Severus. He didn't appear bothered by the bluntness of the question and continued picking through his food, "Why does any politician visit a wealthy man like yourself?"

"So have at it, is it a favor or money you want?" Rufus said.

"A little of both and more," Severus answered.

"You must have me mistaken for a generous man."

"Wasn't it your generosity that allowed you to acquire all this?"

Rufus let out a deep, hearty laugh, "Yes, yes, generosity is the source of my success. Very well then, what is it that you need?"

"I need safe passage to Iudaea upon one of you merchant vessels," Severus said.

"Iudaea? Why would you go there? You don't have the right complexion for the desert sun."

"I have been charged with suppressing a Jewish uprising."

"Has Rome a shortage of ships?"

"No, I just need to get there quickly and discretely."

"I see, I'm sure I can arrange something. I'm aware of the rebellion. It has slowed my trade through the province. The Nabateans complain that my shipments are not making it to them on time if at all. I certainly do not envy the task ahead of you. The Jews are a stubborn and temperamental people."

"And why do you believe that is?" said Elijah.

"Ah, you old rat. You know why. It is your history and the way you cling to it. The same way you cling to your God. A God that let your temple burn to the ground. Your people struggle against Rome like a mule against the yoke. But I will grant you the Romans are not blameless in the matter."

"If your ancestors hadn't enslaved the Jewish people in the first place there may not have been these problems." Elijah said.

"There you go again with your history, ancient history at that. When will you people learn to let it go? But I will give you credit for such a small group you have certainly proven to be a sharp thorn in Rome's side. And I do not understand Hadrian's desire to piss on your sacred relics by rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem as a Roman temple. It is as if he wants to provoke your people."

The men and I looked to Severus. Few men would question the emperor in front of a provincial governor.

Severus acknowledged the slight between bites of roasted pork, "You question Caesar?"

"I mean the man no disrespect but I do not believe he is infallible and I certainly do not believe in his divinity. He is a man who oversees a loosely woven cloth that is kept together by men like me and you," he said gesturing with a greasy hand toward us. "The gods didn't make this empire, men did. The gods don't favor Rome anymore than they favored my ancestors who built the pyramids. It is men who did these things. When I started out running weapons and supplies to the legions across the empire I was the one who took the risks. It was my men through their toil and sacrifice that got us across the seas and over the mountains. If I had waited on the gods I'd still be in Egypt chaffing wheat. The gods give us the seas to ply and the stone to quarry and the wood to build, but he doesn't show us how to do it. They left that to us to mess up." He looked past Severus and Elijah, who I assumed had heard all this before, to me, "What do you think? Am I a fool or a prophet? Will the gods strike me down for my words?" Rufus said.

I looked at Severus wondering if I should answer. He nodded his head and continued eating.

"As a soldier, I do my part by following orders." I did not want to discuss my personal beliefs in front of my superiors or my men.

"Clever answer. But haven't you ever wondered where those orders come from and to what end they might lead? What do you risk your life for? Is it for a comfortable afterlife, a cherished ideal, or simply some other man's notion of what the world should be?"

"I do it to make order out of chaos. Rome provides security and abundance. We insure civility and the rule of law. That is what keeps my family safe. That is what I fight for."

"And these things do not exist outside of the great Roman Empire?"

"I don't know, they may but I am Roman and I believe our ways are more just because we have learned from all those before us, the Egyptians, the Greeks, and our own ancestors."

"You do know the Jews believe much the same thing. They believe their laws are handed down through their ancestors from God himself. Why do you believe yours to be better?"

"I think he's had enough questions Rufus," Severus interjected.

"Very well, I just want these soldiers to know what they are up against. Elijah, have you told them the story of Masada? Have you told them the extent to which your people fight for their beliefs?" Rufus said.

"Tell the story if you wish Elijah because it also shows how far the legion is willing to go to restore order," Severus said.

Elijah pushed his food away and shifted back in his seat, "After the legions had destroyed the Jewish temple in Jerusalem and razed most of the villages in Iudaea the only resistance left was a small group of Sicarii or what some called dagger men. These were extreme zealots who took over the hilltop fortress that Herod built a hundred and sixty years ago upon a high plateau in the Iudaeian wilderness. The fortress was thought to be impregnable and the Sicarii used it as a base from which they harassed the legions. The Tenth legion led by Governor Lucius Flavius Silva finally laid siege to the fortress in the year 825, six years after the rebellion had started. Using the legions and Jewish slaves, they built a massive rampart to gain access to the citadel's walls. They broke down the wall with battering rams to find most of the buildings on fire and no people. They eventually found them, almost a thousand of them dead. Family upon family, women and children killed by their fathers and brothers who then turned the swords on themselves to avoid the fate that awaited them at the end of a Roman sword. Only two women with their children survived by hiding in the bottom of a cistern to relate the story to the historian Josephus."

Everyone at the table had stopped eating and was quiet.

Rufus cleared his throat and said, "A stubborn people, a stubborn people indeed. That is enough talk of politics and war, Longus bring in the entertainment."

The mood quickly turned festive as women dressed in sheer gowns danced around the room while others strummed kitharas and tapped small drums. The men enjoyed themselves, eating sweet breads and drinking wine while the dancers gave them more and more attention. Elijah retired early and Severus and Rufus retreated to a corner of the room where they continued their negotiations. I followed Elijah's lead and bid Rufus and Severus a good night as I grabbed a small jug of wine. Longus showed me to my room. The room was spacious and filled with beautifully carved furniture and a large bed covered in exotic fabrics. I looked forward to sleeping in a comfortable bed, but for the moment, I wanted to enjoy the wine and read. I got comfortable on a couch on the far wall away from the door and hung my sword on the arm

which was carved in the shape of an ox head. Severus said we could trust Rufus but I didn't want to get in the habit of letting my guard down.

I skipped through Josephus's text looking for interesting passages. I was struck by how much infighting occurred within the Jewish community especially considering how successful they were against the legions at the beginning of the conflict. I was also struck by the brutality Josephus described, so many died on both sides. Whole legions were wiped out, cities burned, villages massacred. I put the book down and drank more wine.

I must have fallen asleep. When I woke up the candles by the door were half gone. They flickered as the door slowly creaked open. I reached for my sword. A thin form slipped through the doorway. She looked at the bed and when she found it empty she scanned the room. She walked toward me. The candlelight shimmered off her thin silk robe. I released the sword when she stood before me and let the robe glide off her shoulders, down her breasts, and over her hips. She wasn't hiding any weapons. She was a beautiful girl, long auburn hair framing her soft green eyes.

I didn't move. I was mesmerized. I was lucky she wasn't there to slit my throat because she had the advantage. She sat down next to me and slid her hand on the inside of my leg. I came to my wits and grabbed her hand. I gently pushed her off the couch and led her to the bed. I pulled back the linen sheets, and she slid in giving me a wry smile. I covered her up and headed back to the couch.

She sat up and said, "What is wrong?" She made no effort to cover herself.

"It's not that. You are a beautiful girl but I have a wife." I picked up her robe and threw it on the bed.

"She does not have to know."

"But I'll know."

"You can think of her while you please me."

"Sorry, I made a vow."

She looked frustrated and wrapped the sheets up under her arms.

"You can stay in the bed for the night and tell Rufus whatever you need to so he isn't upset. I won't say anything."

She said thank you in a quiet voice and sunk into the down bedding. Between the soft bedding and the warmth of her body it took all of my will to remain on the uncomfortable couch. I did not sleep well. Fear and passion ruled my dreams as thoughts of the succubus asleep only a few feet away mingled with the passages from Josephus's history.

I got up early and dressed without waking the girl. I looked back at the bed before I left. I didn't know if I'd ever have the chance again to sleep in such a place but if I did it would be with Aria.

Severus finished his business with Rufus early and gave me a scroll with the details. The scroll provided the name of the ship that would be at our disposal, where we needed to meet it, and the location of other supplies and equipment Severus had purchased from Rufus. We left after noon with our bellies full and the men in good spirits.

~*~

We made it back to the camp well before dusk. The men that greeted us seemed uneasy and said little. I asked where Metellus was.

Adar answered me, "He is out with the hunting party."

"And Speratus?"

Adar looked away, "He is with the horses."

That is when I realized that what I thought was the sound of men breaking firewood was actually the crack of a whip. I headed toward the sound. Through a thicket along the end of a field, I found Speratus and a group of his men. They had a man tied to a tree. His back was crisscrossed with red welts, blood running down his back. The man with the whip was Lurco. He stopped and looked at Speratus when he saw me.

Speratus turned to me, "You are too trusting my friend."

I was about to ask him what he meant when I noticed the man on the tree was Brenden. I stormed over to Lurco and ripped the whip from his hand. I snapped it in the air.

"What is going on here!" I said, as I glared at Speratus.

"Your little stable hand tried to make off with our horses."

"I don't believe that. Untie him," I motioned at Flaccus and Tubero who were standing next to Speratus.

They looked at him for permission.

"Go ahead. I think he has learned his lesson. He is lucky I didn't hang him on the spot."

I threw the whip back at Lurco and went to the tree to help Brenden. I called Merula over. We helped him to the tents. When we sat him down he winced and almost fell forward onto the ground. Merula got Kleitos who carried our bandages and medicines. He started cleaning the wounds. Brenden rested his head against a stack of blankets, fading in and out of awareness. I left Kleitos to do his work. I wanted to check on the horses.

Two of the Samaritans, Narisca and Varus, were tending to them. They were walking two of the horses around.

"Is everything alright," I asked.

"A couple of the horses are sick. We found them lying down. We had to force them to get up and walk," Narisca said.

"Keep them moving," I said and headed back to camp.

I avoided Speratus and his men and went back to check on Brenden. He was lying on his side with his eyes closed. I didn't want to disturb him, but I needed to know what happened. I gently shook him to see if he would wake up. He opened his eyes and acknowledged me.

"Can you talk?" I asked.

He nodded his head.

"What happened with the horses?"

He mumbled something about cherries in his Celtic tongue.

"What about cherries? They are not ripe yet. What do you mean?"

"Broken tree," he said in Latin.

I put my hand on his head, "I understand. Now rest. You will be alright," I said.

Speratus was leading Metellus to the tent as I came out. Speratus pointed at the tent, "He's in there."

"Speratus has told me some disturbing news about one of your slaves," Metellus said.

I held my anger in and spoke calmly, "I believe he is mistaken."

Speratus looked surprised, "You were not even here. How could you possibly know what happened?"

"Why don't you both explain to me exactly what happened," Metellus said.

"I admit I wasn't here but after talking to the men I have an idea what went on," I said.

"I'll tell you what happened. That conniving slave boy of yours was trying to steal our horses," Speratus said.

"And how was he doing that?"

"Lurco caught him untying them in the middle of the night and pulling them away from camp."

"Where did he see this?" I said

"Over here." Speratus led us to the opposite side of camp next to the tree line.

"Were the horses tied over there?" I asked.

"I guess. What does it matter? It was a mistake for you to bring that boy along. You put my life and the Governor's life at risk. If my men hadn't caught him it would have taken days to get more horses, leaving us vulnerable." He turned to Metellus who was walking over to where the horses were tied. "I say we nail him to a tree along the road and let the vultures pick him apart. One thing for sure, I will not go on if he is with us."

There was a fallen tree that the men had tied the horses to. I broke off a branch and handed it to Metellus. Many of the leaves had been chewed off and the remaining ones were wilted and brown.

Metellus dropped the limb on the ground and looked at Speratus, "Who tied their horses here?"

"My men and I after we got done scouting last night. Why?"

"Brenden told me about the tree, and my men are tending to two horses with colic right now."

Speratus picked up the limb from the ground and looked at it.

"You don't believe that that worthless sack of mule shit knew the horses were eating this do you?" he said.

Metellus turned on Speratus, "You should have known better. Every good horseman knows that wilted cherry leaves are deadly. You were the careless one."

"How was I supposed . . ."

"Be quiet. The boy probably saved your damn horses. He stays with the unit, and you are not to lay a hand on him without coming to me first."

He turned to me next, "And you tell the boy that he better not try something like that again without informing you, me, or one of your men first. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Another incident involving him and he will be left behind," Metellus said.

Metellus headed back to his tent and Speratus followed not saying a word. A rift was growing between us and our units, but I still did not regret my decision to bring the boy along or my part in bringing in Speratus's rogue soldiers. He was the one making things worse for himself.

IX

We headed out at dawn the next day. Severus said nothing about the incident. He appeared to have faith in Metellus's ability to maintain discipline. We continued on through Narbonensis to the coast and the port city of Massilia. Brenden was in obvious pain the first few days. The other servants picked up his workload, and Kleitos tended to his wounds. I continued to read Josephus's history and talk to Elijah on and off throughout the days and nights. I missed talking with Speratus and the way things were, but I enjoyed traveling through Gaul. I wished we could travel all the way to Iudaea by land but our ship awaited us. Heading down into Massilia, we could see the sea on the horizon and smell the salty air.

We went straight through the city to the port, bypassing the garrison, the taverns and inns, the craftsmen, and all the other merchants. At the docks, Metellus led us to a storehouse that bore Rufus's crest. Inside we found casks of wine, crates of salted meats, barrels of grain, and other supplies needed for a lengthy sea voyage. We set the men to work loading wagons. In the afternoon, we brought the wagons down to the pier where Metellus stood with Severus arguing with the ship's captain.

The captain was a short man with not a hair on his head except his wild gray eyebrows which were locked in a permanent scowl. His name was Pictor and he looked to be Severus's age. Standing behind him was his first officer, Mosi.

"I don't have room for these men let alone their horses and equipment." the captain said.

"Make room. I'm not asking for your consent. I'm demanding it." Severus said.

"What gives you the right to . . ."

Metellus slapped a sealed scroll on the captain's chest. Mosi stepped forward. He was a formidable man. His skin was as dark as charcoal and crisscrossed with decorative scars. He stood a full head higher than all the other men, but Metellus didn't flinch.

"By the authority of the Emperor and with Rufus's consent, I am commandeering this ship to Caesarea." Severus said.

"Caesarea! This ship isn't going to Caesarea. I'm heading to Alexandria. You've got the wrong ship."

"Read the scroll. The ship is going to Caesarea and then you can go where you like."

"I don't know how Rufus plans to make any money having me haul around the legion's dead weight."

"Don't worry, you will get paid and if you are half as good as Rufus said you were you may even get something extra."

"Fine, we go to Caesarea, but it is up to your men to secure the horses in the hull. My men and I want nothing to do with that, and they have to clean up after them too. We have too much to worry about than cleaning up horseshit."

The boat was a large corbita that had just finished a trip to Ostia with a shipment of grain and was now loading up with iron bars, crates of nuts, and amphorae of wine to bring back to Alexandria. Along with a handful of men, I spent the day hauling lumber and blankets to the ship and building makeshift stalls in the hull. The ship had a couple of larger stalls already in the rear of the hull where Severus and Metellus's horses would stay but it wasn't designed for the number of animals we planned to bring.

The crew of the ship was not happy with our presence and actively avoided us. This was a cargo ship, and they were not used to having passengers or horses in the way. Metellus also told me that there might be legion deserters among their ranks because it was easy to hide on the seas and still garner a living.

The crew was a diverse group. A couple of the men looked to be from the land east of the Parthians while another, Adar told me was from Sinae, far to the east where the finest silk comes from. These were all freedmen and sailors by choice. The rest of the crew, about half, were slaves and looked mostly to be from the eastern provinces. Only the slaves helped us bring our supplies on board and made room for us.

We didn't finish loading until after dark and while the crew went to the taverns for the night we remained on the ship to guard our cargo and stay out of trouble. The crew returned before dawn and was busy securing ropes and unfolding sails by sunrise. It was all a blur. Seafaring was a foreign art to me. I loved the feel of the worn timbers and the craftsmanship of the ship but beyond that I did not understand anything.

The harbor quickly faded as a favorable wind filled the sails, and we raced the clouds east. I spent most of the day on deck holding on to the rail getting used to the rocking of the ship. I thought all the years in the saddle would give me an advantage, but I was wrong. I wasn't the only one with an uneasy stomach, and the crew had a good time at our expense. Very few of our men ate dinner that night even though the crew assured us it was the finest meal they had ever eaten.

I never thought I'd meet a group of men more superstitious than soldiers but the sailors recited more prayers and burnt more offerings in the first two days than I ever saw the most fearful soldier do in a month. The pleas were in every imaginable language and to gods I knew like Jupiter, Neptune, Mercury, Minerva and others like Castor and Pollux but there were dozens of other deities I did not recognize. Soldiers have their rituals and their favorite gods but they also have their training, their skill, and their fellow soldiers to offset fate. When the battle turns for the worst, every soldier knows that it can be turned back with determination, brute strength, and courage. The sailors knew another side of fate. They knew what I feared the most about the sea. When the sea turns and the waves rise and the water blows over the bow you are no longer in control. Digging in your heels, locking your shields, and pushing forward wasn't going to save you.

It took us a day and a half to reach the port of Caralis in Sardinia where we picked up amphorae of wine and olive oil. In another day, we arrived in Syracusae on the island of Sicilia. Only the horses and a handful of men were allowed to leave the ship to shake out their restlessness. We picked up more wine and some wooden chests. For four days the skies were clear and the wind steady. I marveled at the crew as they jockeyed the sails and managed the ropes and blocking. They had their routine, and they stuck to it either out of obedience or boredom. The captain who was so abrasive on land was calm at sea. He hardly had to speak a word to keep the crew in line.

Brenden stayed with the horses most of the time. He cleaned up after them and tended to the ones he knew were uneasy. He brushed their coats and talked to them. It seemed to help. None of the animals caused a problem. Elijah, Metellus, and Severus spent much of their time in the governor's room, a small storeroom next to the captain's quarters that the crew had cleaned and made suitable for Severus. I spent my time talking to the men and reading. I felt guilty relaxing but the governor was in no danger. Speratus and I avoided each other, and I saw no reason to break the calm of the journey with an argument.

A day after Sicilia the air was heavy and hot and along the horizon it was hazy. The line between sea and sky blurred. It was hard to sleep at night. The wind disappeared and lying on the deck in only a loin

cloth I was still restless and sweating. In the morning, wispy finger-like clouds crept up from the northeast. Behind them, the clouds were thick and dark. The crew was on edge. The wind had picked up, but it was still hot.

By midday, the clouds covered more than half the sky. Over the sound of flapping sails, creaking timbers, and stretching ropes, some of the men said they heard thunder. The captain had the cook make dinner early. It was a hardy meal, flanks of pork roasted in the stone-lined pit under the tiled canopy in the center of the ship. The smell was incredible, but the whole meal had a foreboding feeling. All the men ate quickly and kept an eye on the darkening sky. The sun was no longer visible and lightening flashed periodically in the north.

A cool breeze brought the smell of rain. Most men can tell when it is going to rain but the sea affords an almost divine view of the event. We could see it coming from far away. We could hear it in the thunder. We were blinded by the lightning. We could even see the wall of water pouring from the sky and all we could do was wait for it. The air got colder. The wind picked up and the waves deepened. The ship rose and sank and in front of the storm the sea turned frothy white.

Behind us, the crew ran about tightening ropes and adjusting sails. The entire ship lurched forward as we rode with the wind. It was dusk, and I hoped that with the setting sun the storm would weaken and spare us its worst. Metellus struggled across the deck which was now wet with spray. He ordered all soldiers into the hull to help with the pumps and buckets for bailing water. I wanted to see the storm hit. Like an onslaught of infantry, I wanted to get ready for it, look for its weaknesses, plow the horses through the breech, but the storm had no breech, there was no weakness. It was calmer in the hull, but my stomach turned with the waves and the horses began to whinny and stamp. We ran ropes behind the horses to keep them from coming out of their crude stalls. We all looked like drunks staggering about as the ship lurched over the waves.

When the rain hit it sounded like stones on a tile roof. Men who could face down wild-eyed barbarians swinging battle-axes couldn't hide their fear as the water began to pour in off the deck. Amphorae rattled in their holders, wooden crates slide back and forth straining their ties. The crew handed out buckets, bowls, and anything else that could be used to get rid of the water. Other men held the oil lamps which kept going out leaving us all in complete darkness except for the flashes of lightning. The waves got higher, and the ship groaned with every rise and fall. The wind shot the rain directly from above. Nothing was dry. The horses slipped on the wet floor as the ship reared. A man screamed from the bow as we fell forward. In the lightning flash, I could see him pinned against the hull by a fallen horse. The horse struggled to its feet, and the man was pulled clear.

The ship took flight only to slam down sending men to the floor, shattering amphorae, and causing the horses to break their ropes. Some of our men went to secure the horses, others clung to the support beams yelling out pleas to the gods to spare the ship, and still others simply covered in the shadows covered in vomit.

We could hear the wood splinter over the rain and the waves. It was completely dark now. One of the crew struggled to light an oil lamp. I saw a large silhouette descend from the deck. It was Mosi. Backlit by the lightning, he looked even bigger than usual. I turned to brace myself for the next wave only to feel Mosi's giant hand grab my shoulder.

"You, get three men, grab that oar and bring it on deck," he said pointing to the ceiling where the oar was strapped.

Before I could respond, he was already almost back on deck, oblivious to the pitch of the ship or the sea pouring through the hatch. I grabbed the three men closest to me, Khalil, Brenden, and Arvina, one of Speratus's men from my old unit. Khalil tried to untie the wet leather straps. I pulled the knife from his belt and cut the oar free. It was over twenty feet long and made of dense wood. We forced the end through the hatch and Arvina and I climbed on deck while the others pushed from below. The spray knocked me to my knees and when I looked around I thought we were surrounded by white capped mountains. The main sail was down and the crew was at the stern grappling with the steering oars. We slid to the front of the ship pulling Khalil and Brenden from the hull. Together we rose to our feet and shuffled along the center guide ropes toward the stern.

Mosi yelled from the opposite side, "Over here!"

We slid the oar over the roof of the galley and clambered after it. The crew waited for us. The broken handle of the old oar slogged around in the water at their feet. We tilted the handle of the oar at them and they tore it from our hands. We groped from something to hold on to. Arvina grabbed a rope running along the side of the ship. I held onto the ship's rail. The ship raced down into a watery hole and a wall of water rose over the bow. The water hit me like a sack of grain and when I opened my eyes I watched the water rush through the openings in the center of the rail. Arvina was gone and the rope he was holding ran from the mast over the side into the sea. It raced up the rail at me as the sea dragged Arvina behind the ship. It caught me under the arm and knocked me to the deck. I started to stand holding onto the rope. The water hit me again knocking me back. I looked back and saw the rope get caught under the new oar which the crew already had in place. As Arvina rose on the crest behind us the rope lifted the oar making it useless.

Mosi shouted, "Cut him loose! He's going to break the oar!"

I yelled, "Wait!" I looked back at Brenden and Khalil who were holding onto the mast. "Grab some rope and bring it here."

The ship dove into another trough. The spray rose high above our heads. The rope was still pinning the oar. We struggled past Mosi and the other oarsmen.

"He can't hold on. Let him go," Mosi said.

I knelt at the back rail and tied the rope to a timber. I could see Arvina, the rope wrapped around his arm, struggling to stay above the surface. He looked like he was losing strength. I hesitated. I would drown if I went in and Arvina would never see the rope if I threw it. I turned to Mosi to tell him to cut Arvina free but Brenden ran past me, the rope tied around his waist. He jumped out to Arvina hooking the taut rope with his right arm.

"You fool, now you've lost two men," Mosi called.

Brenden held tight and worked his way to Arvina. He wrapped his arms around his chest and locked his hands. The constant flashes of light gave me glimpses of the action.

"Cut the rope!" I said.

The instant Arvina's rope was cut, Brenden's went tight. Khalil and I pulled the rope as the waves swelled behind us. We wrapped the slack around the nearest pin. Foot by foot we pulled them in. We could only see them seconds at a time but they were both still there. We waited for each wave to pass and the spray to clear our eyes before we pulled. It seemed like forever, and I was sure the boy wouldn't be able to keep his grasp. All the slack left the rope and I looked over the rail to see Brenden and Arvina suspended from the ship's stern. It took all our strength to pull them aboard. They were both still alive,

and I collapsed against the railing trying to catch my breath. The water hit me five more times before I found the strength to stand. When I did get up we untied Brenden. The rope had burned through his shirt and reopened the wounds on his back. His hands were also raw and bloody. We dragged the two men back into the hull where the water had risen and the men were passing full buckets through the hatch.

We laid Arvina on the sacks of wet grain and Brenden on a pile of ropes. I collapsed on the floor. If the ship broke apart now I wouldn't have the strength to stay afloat. I held onto the ropes holding the amphorae and let the ship pull me over the hills and into the valleys. I don't remember much more besides being cold and wet. The sea remained rough most of the night but the wind died down and the rain subsided. Before dawn, the rolling of the ship lulled the men to sleep, and it wasn't until after sunrise that we began to assess the damage.

The crew was uninjured but some of the soldiers were hurt. Kleitos said Albus, who was crushed by the horse, had a broken arm, some broken ribs, and a deep cut on his thigh. He set all the bones and sutured the cut, but he was afraid infection might set in. The other injuries were less severe. Surus dislocated his shoulder. Arvina's and Brenden's rope burns turned dark blue, and they were in no shape to do any work. Two of the horses had broken legs and another one had a large gash in its side from a splintered beam. Only a handful of amphorae actually broke, but the smell of wine, oil, and horse urine filled the hull. Men worked constantly at the pump forcing the mixture out of the bottom of the ship. Sacks of grain, crates of dried meats, armor, clothes, spare sail cloth, along with a variety of other equipment were laid out on the deck of the ship to dry.

Severus, Pictor, and Mosi stood on a platform behind the deck cabin looking at a map. I went to the side of the ship and checked on some of my clothes when I heard Mosi call out.

"That's him! He's the one that has doomed us!" His finger pointed directly at me.

"Coran, come here please," Severus said.

The captain continued to look at the map unconcerned.

"Because of you, we will die out here. Neptune will not let you go unpunished," Mosi said to me as I walked up.

"Mosi here tells me you saved a man who fell overboard last night," Severus said.

"The slave, Brenden, actually saved him. I just helped pull them in," I said.

"Mosi thinks you should have let him go. He says the sea wanted him and you stole him away from Neptune," Severus said with a smile.

I turned to Mosi, "In the legion we don't leave men behind."

"On this boat, we respect the sea and if you don't we all pay."

"I think the gods have more to worry about than the fate of this vessel."

Mosi stepped back, "You're an arrogant fool. The gods will make a sacrifice of us all."

"Calm down Mosi. This soldier hasn't seen what we've seen. He doesn't know any better," Pictor said.

I shot back, "It is not that I don't know better. It's that . . ."

Severus held up his hand, "What Coran is saying is that we will sacrifice one of our horses to Neptune if you think it will appease the gods. We can afford to give one of the horses to the gods can't we Coran?" He gave me a searching look.

I understood what he meant, "If it will insure safe passage I will offer two horses to Neptune."

"Two will do," Mosi said.

"I'll go get them ready," I said.

I turned to walk away but stopped to check some saddles set out to dry when I overheard Pictor, "We have to go to Cyrene. The storm blew us off course, and the ship needs to be repaired. I can't risk trying to make it to Crete."

"How many days will that add?" Severus said.

"Three or four depending on what materials are available at Cyrene to fix the ship."

"We could make it to Gortyna in three days and be that many days closer to Caesarea," Severus said.

"If we hit another storm we'll be at the bottom of the sea," Pictor said.

"That is a risk I'm willing to take."

"It's not your ship, and I'm not in the business of taking risks. I'm in the business of avoiding them. We're going to Cyrene."

"If the repairs are not done in three days, I'll find another ship to take us the rest of the way."

Pictor grunted and rolled up the map. Passing me, I heard him say under his breath, "Good, maybe it will take us ten days."

I looked over some more of the tack and then went back under deck. I found Kleitos and told him to stitch up the horse with the gaping wound in its side and asked him if one of the horses with a broken leg could stand. He asked me why we would bother with the animals. They needed to be put down. I told him of the sacrifices. Mosi would not be happy if he knew the horses we were giving up were worthless.

Toward dusk Mosi asked me where the horses were. I told him that we would bring them on deck so his crew would not have to struggle with them. We draped the horses in our finest blankets hiding their wounds. I had Kleitos splint the broken leg and wrap all its leg in decorative cloth to look like adornments not bandages. We then brought the horses up the ramp slowly with men on all sides to hide the one horse's limp.

We positioned the animals behind one of the crew who was dressed in a white cloak. He spread grain around the horses and on their heads and poured wine down their backs. The weak animals didn't move. After a few prayers of thanks for our passage through the storm and a supplication for future safe passage, one horse was offered to Neptune and the other to the brothers Castor and Pollux, patron deities of sailors. The cook stepped in and stunned the animals with a large wooden mallet and then bled the animals out. The blood ran through the rail and down the side of the ship. Kleitos and I helped them lay the animals down so they could be gutted. We made sure that the one horse's wound was on the underside where it would be less likely to be noticed. The entrails were viewed to insure their purity for the gods and then tossed into the sea while further prayers were recited.

The cook finished butchering the animal and if he noticed the injuries he said nothing. The horse meat was roasted, and the crew enjoyed the feast. I drank the wine but ate salted pork instead of the horse meat. I didn't care for the taste, and it struck me as barbaric. They had to be put down, but I thought of them as fellow soldiers and I was no cannibal. Mosi came over and sat down next to me as I ate.

"This was a good sacrifice. The gods will be happy now," he said.

"Good."

"You don't believe do you?"

"I have my doubts," I said.

"You will see. The rest of the voyage we will be free of trouble," he said with a smile.

"I hope you are right. I've had enough rough seas."

"Ah, that storm wasn't even that bad. I've been through much worse."

"How long before we reach Cyrene?" I said.

"Tomorrow. We will fix the ship up, build a new steering oar, and then we be on our way again. Two or three days at most."

We talked with some of the other men until the stars were bright in the sky. The sea was peaceful, and the ship skimmed effortlessly across the surface. By morning we could see the coast and before noon we saw Cyrene's port on the horizon. The men prepared themselves for landfall. Even the crew looked anxious to touch solid ground again. Elijah was the exception. He sat at the bow of the ship looking at the approaching city.

"Are you ready to go ashore?" I said.

"No. I won't be leaving the ship," he said without looking at me.

I sat down next to him, "Why? Don't tell me you are getting used to ship life."

"History, boy, history."

"What?"

"Sixteen years ago, the Jews here rose up and killed or chased away most of the Romans and foreigners. The legion came in and cut them down, chased their leader, Lukuas, all the way to Iudaea. Since then people of my faith are not allowed here."

"But no one has to know your faith. You've said yourself that you don't even practice it. Besides, no one is going to question the scribe of a provincial governor."

"I was here before the revolt. It was a fine city. It had all the Roman comforts, and it was peaceful. But the peace never lasts. I don't blame Jew or Roman. I blame our nature. We so often take the easy path, the path of ignorance. We don't figure out how to solve our problems. We simply try to fight our way past them. No, I'll stay on the ship." He gestured toward the city, "There is nothing there for me now."

"Very well," I said and got up to leave.

"Coran," he said.

"Yes?"

He turned to face me, "The fight between cultures is not much different than the fight between men. Most often it is based on assumptions and what is not spoken."

I nodded.

X

At the port, which was miles away from the main city, we led the horses off into temporary stables and helped the crew move amphorae. Pictor had traded wine and olive oil for grain and large planks of cedar that would be used to repair the ship and make extra steering oars. When I saw the wood, I asked Mosi if I could help with the repairs.

"Are you a shipwright?" he said.

"No, but I am a carpenter and have some of my own tools," I said.

"Good enough, but I can't pay you."

I agreed and spent the day shaping a slab following the lines scribed by one of the crew. Merula took some of the men into the city to pick up supplies while others tended to the horses or helped the crew. Speratus and his unit escorted Severus into the city to seek out the governor of Cyrenaica Province in Cyrene which was the capital. I was relieved Metellus chose Speratus this time. I was content to be left alone with my tools and to make something useful.

The following day, I had the men run through drills. Both horses and men had gotten soft on the boat. It took some time for them to regain their legs. Later in the day, after Speratus had returned with Severus, I found him sitting on the pier by the ship sharpening his sword. I sat down next to him. We hadn't talked the entire trip.

He put the sword away and pulled out his dagger. He ran the blade along the stone in steady strokes.

"Do you remember when we stole our father's swords and went out beyond the fields pretending to be Achilles and Odysseus?" I said.

"What were we, nine, ten years old?"

"All I remember is scaring the sheep waving our swords around," I said.

"The sheep were always afraid of you but that was for a different reason."

"That's better than having the women being afraid of me," I said laughing.

He laughed and put the dagger next to the sword at his feet.

"You know that I didn't ask to bring in your men or escort Severus to the villa?" I said.

"I know."

"I'm not trying to vie for some position. You know I'm not that ambitious," I said.

"You've always been a good leader. Men trust you. I never understood why you stood in my shadow so long."

"I guess I was afraid of the responsibility. I let you shoulder that burden."

"You don't seem bothered by that now."

"I haven't found the time to worry. I react more than I decide lately," I said.

"I still don't think you should have brought that kid along."

"I didn't do it to spite you. I did it to give him a chance."

"Why? What do you owe him?"

"He didn't have anything left. I . . ."

"Because of me, right?"

"I'm just as much to blame as you."

"Then what makes him any different than the rest? Our duty is to protect Romans not save our enemies," he said.

"I know but I don't think the boy chose that life."

"It doesn't matter."

"Why doesn't it matter? He . . ."

"Do any of us have a choice? Look at you and me. Did we have a choice to be anything but soldiers? You do the best with what you have. That boy and his father made their choice and paid the price. Now you are trying to save him from the inevitable."

"What does that mean? I worried about bringing him along but he has proven himself again and again. He risked his life to save one of your men. What more do you want?"

"He did that because he has nothing else to lose. He'll never be a Roman any more than you'll be a carpenter."

"You are a damn cynic," I said.

"And you're an idealist. You think you can save the world one person at a time."

"I'm not trying to save the world. I'm not even trying to live up to some ideal. I'm just doing my duty like you. Your men are saying that I think I'm better than everyone else. When have I ever said that? When have I ever questioned any one in our old unit? What is really bothering you? What is really going on?"

"Nothing is going on. We just have two different views of the world. I see things for the way they are and you see them the way you want them to be."

"So I'm a fool?"

"You're only a fool when your beliefs cost you something. So far you've been lucky, but one day it will catch up to you."

I'd had enough.

"You can be a real bastard," I said.

"But you know I'm right."

"You couldn't be more wrong, but believe what you will."

"I may be a bastard but you are a stubborn ass."

"No, a stubborn ass was your first lover," I said. This at least got a laugh, and I didn't want to argue anymore so I told him I had to go work on the oar.

I never thought Speratus and I would grow apart. We'd known each other for too long. We shared too many memories. How could we think so differently? He acted like I had everything all figured out when really I'd never been more confused. Things had been going well for me but not because I'd planned anything out or I was trying to impress anyone. I was following my gut and fate had gone my way.

I had become sick of being a soldier but now as a decurion I had more control. Maybe the power had gone to my head but at least now I felt responsible for the actions I took. I knew I couldn't save the world or even convert every brigand to a Roman, but I could work to bring order to chaos. That is what I could strive for, and the more power I got, the more I could do it the way I saw fit. That is what men like Caesar and Augustus did. That is what Hadrian was doing. Without order there is no security and without security there is no prosperity.

I finally felt like I was finding my purpose.

~~~~~

I worked on the oar the following day. The crew let me work on it alone once they saw I knew what I was doing. It helped that I could use the ones on the ship as templates. Mosi looked over my work when I finished.

"This is good work. Good work for a carpenter, very good work for a soldier. I think the gods have forgiven you," he said.

"Let's not assume that until the journey is over."

"Wise words my friend, wise words," he said slapping me on the back.

We loaded the ship back up before dusk. Despite his warnings Severus never looked for another ship. He was either confident the repairs would be done or was bluffing. Besides the steering oar, the crew repaired small leaks in the hull, replaced frayed ropes, stitched up tears in the sails and replaced broken boards in the deck. The weather was pleasant and the winds were favorable so we set sail as the sun was setting.

It would take us three days to make it to Crete and then another four or five to Caesarea if the winds and weather held out. I had the men run sword drills on deck to the interest of the crew who even joined in to learn some techniques. The rest of my time I spent reading, swapping stories, and playing an occasional game of dice.

One night after I'd finished Josephus's account of the siege of Jerusalem, I found Elijah sitting by himself along the port rail.

"As your overseer you've made my job easy," I said.

"I'm getting too old to be of much trouble to anybody."

"That's not what I was thinking crawling through briars and over rocks in the forest back in Britannia."

"Do you miss that place?" he said.

"I miss my family." I felt at my pouch to make sure Macer's stone was still there.

"They should be close to Edessa by now."

"I can only hope."

Laughter erupted from across the ship where a small group sat playing knucklebones. Elijah did not look. Since Cyrene, he had not been himself. There were no stories, witty observations, or clever remarks. The only thing he did talk about was history.

"The more I read of Josephus's account of the war, the more it seems the Jews were their own worst enemy," I said.

"That is true. They did not plan well for their revolt, and there were too many factions who vied for power."

"I find it hard to believe that when Jerusalem was under siege, they killed so many of their own just because they tried to leave the city."

"Doesn't the legion have the right to execute deserters?" he said.

"But those are soldiers who have given an oath. I'm talking about innocent people just trying to avoid the violence."

"In their eyes, those people gave an oath, an oath that obligated them to stand together and defend the city. And besides, the legions would cut them down if they escaped."

"It just all seems so senseless."

"You have to understand the history. The peasants were being taxed by the Romans and the Temple to the point of slavery. They desired liberty. They believe that God is the one true ruler and that is what the Zealots promised. No Romans, no priests, no king but God himself. Wouldn't you fight for that?"

"If I believed in a God like that I might, but I know that it is men who create their own destiny," I said quietly because of the devout aboard the ship. "I agree with Seneca that, 'Religion is regarded by the common people as true, by the wise as false, and by the rulers as useful.'"

"Clever words but as Seneca knew there will always be more that believe than those that don't. And even if you don't believe in this god or that one you still believe in something, don't you? You of all men must believe in something. Why else would you be here? What is it that you are risking your life for?"

"I'm risking it for Rome, for the security it brings, for the prosperity it affords."

"Those things come at a cost. You know this but aren't willing to admit it. That is why you have my pity."

"Pity? Why do I need your pity?"

"Because one day you will see the truth, and it will either make you strong or destroy you."

"Why do I talk to you? You either contradict me or feed me foreboding riddles. If you know the truth why don't you tell me?"

"It won't be the truth until you realize it for yourself."

"Sometimes I think I would get clearer answers at Delphi."

I left him and went to find some wine. I needed to clear my head. I bought a bottle of Sicilian wine off one of the crew and went down to brush Saad. The task helped us both relax. My conversations with Elijah always made me tense. I liked him, but I always felt like he was challenging me, prodding me toward some unseen conclusion that I was too dense to comprehend. I knew my purpose now, order, security, prosperity, to create a world where I could raise my boys in peace. That is all I wanted, order to bring peace. I finished the bottle quickly and fell asleep on the sacks of grain by the horses.

When I awoke just after sunrise, Crete was in sight. We docked in the afternoon and the crew unloaded ingots of tin and loaded bundles of wool and amphorae of dye along with more wine. By nightfall, we were back on the sea taking advantage of the good weather. The next three days the wind picked up and the seas got rough, but the skies were clear and the sail was full. Pictor said we would make it to Caesarea by morning. Metellus summoned Speratus and me to Severus's quarters for a final meeting.

Severus stood at a round table covered in maps and documents. Elijah and two other scribes were busy at a small table against the wall. I hadn't seen the other scribes the whole journey and could only guess they had been kept working in the dark cabin the whole time. All of us remained standing as Severus scribbled notes on the map. The maps showed the major cities and roads of Iudaea along with the location of prominent features like mountain ranges, rivers, and lakes. I also noticed notes concerning each city's strengths and weaknesses, the location of hideouts and caves, and numbers indicating population. I quickly realized these were from Josephus's book and the Roman census.

"As I told you before, we are not going to put down this rebellion by sheer force. These are a resilient, stubborn people. When the fighting gets tough they retreat to the hills and regroup. They will avoid direct confrontation in favor of attacking our supply lines and harassing the legions on the move. I need agile and swift units to take out these small groups, to chase them down and rout them. The legions will take

care of the cities and villages, but units like yours are going to clean up the countryside. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," we said in unison.

"Your first assignment though will be to notify the legions already in Iudaea that they are under a new commander. My staff will give you details after we arrive and I find out what kind of mess my predecessor has made. Hadrian has promised me at least six more legions. We aren't going to make the same mistakes we made sixty years ago. As soon as we arrive, I will also fill out your units. I'm putting Metellus in charge of the auxiliary cavalry unit stationed in Caesarea. He will select the men out of their ranks and you will receive your orders directly from him like you did before."

Severus motioned to one of his servants. He brought two small leather bags and put them on the table.

"Here is your pay as my equites singulares. I'm afraid though that this has been the easy part." He leaned on the table and studied the map. "This war will test us. It will make heroes of some and martyrs of others. You men have the potential to do great things. I hope we can share our stories when this is all over. Before you go, I need to talk to you each alone. Coran if you could wait outside until I'm done with Speratus."

"Yes, sir," I said

I waited on the deck with Metellus. The air was cool, and we stood looking at the stars.

"I'll make sure you get a good group of men," Metellus said.

"I know," I said.

"I don't know how much longer I'm going to be able to do this."

"What?"

"I'm fifty years old. I was comfortable in Britannia. I had planned to retire there, but fate has brought me a world away."

I had known Metellus for over ten years and I'd never heard him complain. He was the example we all tried to live up to.

"Britannia will still be there when this is done," I said.

"I'm not worried about Britannia," he said.

Speratus came out of the cabin. I left Metellus and joined Severus.

"Coran, I'll come straight to the point. You have potential, probably more than Speratus. He is a good soldier and an adequate leader but as you've said he is brash. He takes unnecessary risks. You on the other hand are smart. Your intelligence gives you more options. I've been impressed by what I've seen in a short period of time. You have good instincts and show good judgment. What I want to know is where do you want to go from here?"

The first thing that came to my mind was home but I didn't understand the question. "I'm sorry?" I said.

"What position are you striving for? Centurion? Praefectus Alae like Metellus?"

"I prefer the cavalry sir."

"If you do as well as I think you can I will see that you get the rank you deserve."

"Thank you sir."

"Good luck to you son. That is all."

I slept on the deck that night watching the stars move across the sky. I dreamed about Edessa. I dreamed about showing my boys the land of our ancestors, the land of Alexander the Great, a land of

waterfalls, olive groves and grapevines. I dreamed of walking through fields of poppies in full bloom with Aria. I didn't want to wake up.

## PART III

## XI

When I woke, the sun was just breaking the horizon and the coast was in sight. As we got closer, other ships appeared, heading in and out of the busy port. Most were tacking north and south along the coast. The harbor was full, and ships took turns unloading their cargoes of garum, tin, iron, cloth, wine, glass, silver, and other products from the west in exchange for the dyes, spices, silk, resins, and cedar of the east. Half the harbor was occupied by legion triremes and liburnians. There were enough warships to hold an entire legion. The backdrop for the harbor was a blinding, white marble temple dedicated to Roma and Augustus. Even from the harbor entrance, we could see the red cloaks of soldiers scattered along the steps below the temple. There was no mistake that this was a Roman city, and a city preparing for war.

A small boat approached and asked for our origin and purpose in Caesarea. Severus told them who he was, and a path was cleared to the dock. We escorted the governor to the temple where he left offerings at the base of colossal statues of Roma and Augustus. A group of soldiers, led by the exotic looking soldier I saw with Severus at our first meeting, appeared at the temple entrance. Severus praised us for our service and told us that we would receive our specific orders soon. Tiberius stepped forward and introduced us to another man who would show us to the barracks and stables. We said our farewells and went back to the pier to help with the horses. I met Elijah half way down the pier. He and the other scribes were helping the slaves carry their books, inks, and other belongings.

"I need to give you back your book," I said.

"It was a gift. I never intended for you to return it. Besides, it may still be useful. Your adventure here hasn't even begun yet," Elijah said.

"Thank you. I will miss our discussions. I am thankful we got a chance to meet."

"I'll miss them too. Any time you are in Caesarea search me out. I always look forward to visitors."

I wished him well and we went our separate ways. Despite his ability to test my patience, I really was going to miss him.

~\*~

The city was full. We made our way through the markets where men haggled in Greek and Aramaic over baskets of produce like figs, pomegranates, radishes, beans, cucumbers, and others that Kleitos had to name for me. There was also fresh fish and fowl along with wool, balsam, and myrrh. People bartered and argued the same way as they did in Londonium or Rome but they dressed differently and were from places like Galilee, Samaria, Nabataea, and Arabia. Places I had never been or even heard of before. The air was different too. It was dry and the locals wore loose fitting clothing that made our armor look like ovens.

The camels were the most fascinating sight for the men who had never left Britannia. I had seen them in Rome and at the Coliseum in Londonium. I knew of their strength and endurance, but Catalus was not convinced. He said they looked lazy and slow. Adar assured him of his ignorance and told him that a horse will tire and be useless in the desert long before the camel even needed water.

Our fort was outside the city on its eastern fringe. It was the size of two legion bases and half was already occupied by Legion III Cyrenaica. We were led to a series of newly built barracks adjacent to the stables and training grounds. The layout of the barracks was almost identical to Uxelodunum in Britannia

except this time I was given the larger quarters at the end of the building. Metellus showed up on the first day with thirty-two soldiers, sixteen each for Speratus and me. They were mostly local recruits made up of Syrians, Nabataeans, and Idumeans.

We spent the next three days training and running drills. Many of us needed to get back in shape after our time on the ship. I quickly found that a Samaritan named Shimron was going to be helpful. He knew the region well and understood the conflict.

On the fourth day, Metellus gave us our orders. There were three legions and one auxiliary unit out in the field. Severus wanted us to notify them of his command and give them their new orders. Speratus was assigned Legion VI Ferrata and Legion X Fretensis, and I was assigned Legion XXII Deiotariana and Ala Antiana. Mine were somewhere south of Jerusalem and on the move. Not only did I have to get the orders to them, I had to find them first. I informed the men after the evening meal and told them we were leaving in the morning. Merula, Adar, Shimron and I spent most of the night studying a map of the region. This wasn't like Britannia where I knew the terrain. I was going in blind and didn't know what to expect.

The legions Speratus had to find were around Jerusalem preparing to lay siege to the city. This allowed us to travel together until we reached the Jewish holy city. We followed the shoreline until mid-morning then headed east into the hills. The land was green and fertile but not waterlogged like Britannia. There were more orchards and the hills were terraced like enormous stair steps for the gods. It wasn't as wild as I had expected. Sheep and cattle grazed the hills and farmers cultivated land their ancestors had tilled a thousand years. Ruins along the roadside attested to the age of the land and to conflicts both ancient and recent. The first major village we came to was called Lod. It still had scars from the Jewish War sixty years ago. Only half the town had been rebuilt, and it looked like it once held many more people.

Everywhere along the road, the legion was present. We stopped often to get news about the road ahead and activity in the area. Just as Vespasian did sixty years earlier, the road between Caesarea and Jerusalem was secured by stationing garrisons along its length and razing any village that fought back.

We started seeing the bodies along the road in the afternoon. Slaves dug graves for the fallen soldiers. The piles of Jewish rebels were left to rot as a reminder to others the price to be paid for insurrection. I noticed among the dead women and children. On the horizon I saw pillars of smoke rising from burned out villages.

We came to the fort of the Tenth legion late in the afternoon. Based on the commander's recommendation we spent the night at the fort. It was not that much farther to the city of Bethlehem where the Twenty-Second was last seen but we did not want to risk being caught alone if the legion had moved on.

We set out early the next morning. We rode in the shadow of crucified rebels. The vultures picked at their flesh and the stench was unbearable. Bethlehem soon came into sight. It was clear the Twenty-Second had been there. The city was smoldering and fresh crosses were planted along the road. The crosses were empty though. They stood like limbless trees in the rocky ground. Closer to the city we saw people sorting through piles outside their homes. At first when they saw us they ran back into their homes. The piles they were going through were ordinary household items: tables, chairs, bowls, and rugs. I called Shimron to my side.

"What do make of this?" I said.

"The Twenty-Second looted everything. You can see there is nothing of value in what is left," he said.

Heading into the center of the city, a small crowd gathered behind us. It was made up of women, boys and old men. They stayed at a safe distance, but their numbers grew steadily. At a crossroads, I stopped. In the center of a market, there was a pile of bodies, but they were not peasants. Young boys pulled armor, belts, sandals, and weapons from a pile of close to fifty dead soldiers. I galloped toward the boys with my sword drawn, and they scattered into the surrounding buildings and alleys. The crowd had grown and people started filling into the roads from all directions. A woman screamed something in a language I didn't understand.

"What did she say?" I said.

"She told us to go away," Shimron said.

Others started calling out. There was over a hundred of them now and more coming out of the buildings every moment. Kleitos said that they were threatening to attack us. I looked for a way out. Slaughtering women and children wasn't how I wanted to undertake my first assignment. If more came we might not even be able to fight our way out. I heard stones hitting shields from the back of the column. A fist sized rock hit Saad in the shoulder. I ordered the men into formation side by side with shields out. We galloped forward. The stones clattered against our shields. Some of the boys threw makeshift spears. The people blocking the road tried to move apart as we barreled toward them but some did not make it out of the way. An old man was knocked to the ground. A woman got caught under Adar's horse. People were thrown to either side as the horses ran at a panicked gait.

Some of the men used their swords. They slashed at hands trying to pull them from their saddles. Others used their shield and feet to bludgeon the attackers. I didn't blame them. The mob would have beaten us to death if they could get us off our horses. We galloped until the city was well behind us. I had hoped to see a fort on the other side of the city. Instead, I found soldiers stacked in piles six feet high, looted of their weapons and armor and left rotting in the hot sun. I estimated over a thousand men. They were clearly of the Twenty-Second and had been dead for more than two or three days. Whatever had happened here, the enemy was grossly underestimated.

~ ~ ~

I wasn't ready for this. I'd seen so many corpses I was beginning to wonder if I'd crossed into the underworld but I didn't remember paying Charon the toll. The land looked dead too. The green pastures and fertile valleys we saw coming in from the coast gave way to rocky plains and dry riverbeds. Josephus had spoken of the wilderness beyond Jerusalem along the Salt Sea but I took it all for exaggeration. I thought I had seen death but I'd never seen it at this scale. And if women, children, and the elderly were willing to challenge a unit of armed cavalry then I was going to see more of it.

~ ~ ~

On the horizon, there was a great mound rising from the plain. White smoke rose from its summit. I asked Shimron what it was.

"That is Herodium," he said.

I remembered the name from Josephus but that was all. "Yes, but what is it? Is it a stronghold, a temple?" I said.

"It was built by Herod as a fortress and serves as his resting place."

Our only choice at this point was to follow the trail of dead soldiers southward toward Herodium. I either had to find the Twenty-Second or verify its demise.

The number of fallen soldiers declined as we approached the fortress but there was still many strewn about the road. Out of a legion of over five thousand, there must have been two thousand dead along the road. We came to the last hill before Herodium, and for a moment, I was relieved. I saw a large mass of men gathered at the base of the hilltop fortress. I thought it was a Roman fort and the Twenty-Second. I was wrong. It was a group of rebels, probably three or four thousand strong in an old Roman camp. We backed down the hill and left the road. We hadn't seen many people along the road, but I couldn't take the risk that someone had seen us. We went west off the road toward a small group of trees. In the shade of the trees, I pulled out the map and had Merula, Shimron, and the three Samaritans, Narisca, Varus, and Ibrahim join me. The map was not very detailed and mainly showed roads, villages, and cities. Herodium was simply labeled fortress on the map. I asked the men if any of them were familiar with the area.

"Yes, sir. I traveled this way many times as a child going to Hebron," Ibrahim said.

"Is there a way we can get closer without being seen?" I said.

He thought for a moment. "In the winter months, we would get fresh water from a stream that flows over here." He pointed to a place southwest of the fortress. "It would be dry this time of year and is not far from the hill."

We spent the rest of the afternoon working our way to the streambed. We only saw a few people along the way. They seemed uninterested in our presence. Reaching the dry riverbed, I was uneasy. Cliffs eighty to a hundred feet high rose up on both sides. We were at a great disadvantage if attacked from above. We didn't go far before Ibrahim stopped me and pointed at a switchback trail leading up the eastern slope of the gully. He said that it led to the fortress.

I took Adar, Ibrahim, Shimron, and Kleitos with me. The horses scrambled their way up the slope, kicking loose stones and sliding on the bedrock. Three quarters of the way up the ground began to level off. I had the men dismount and we continued on foot. At the top, the first thing we saw was the road running alongside the hill. Beyond this, the fortress rose up like a volcano, wide at the base and flat on top. The Jewish fighters were camped north of the hill on our left. I squinted at the summit and asked Kleitos if he saw what I saw.

"A legion's standard?" he said.

"That is what it looks like to me."

What was left of the Twenty-Second appeared to be under siege on the summit. There was no way we could help them. Stands of trees were scarce, and between us and the fortress there was nothing but rocky desert. At best, we could make it to the summit, but we would never make it out. I called Merula and some of the other men to the top to go over our options. We decided to camp in the ravine for the night and observe the fortress for a possible way in. I also wanted to look for any weaknesses in the rebel's camp. If I was going to bring back reinforcements, I wanted to know everything.

While the men set up camp, I found Brenden tending to the horses. I brought his father's sword with me.

"You've done everything asked of you and have acted more like a soldier than a slave. I think you've earned the right to defend yourself," I said holding the sword up.

He looked at me bewildered.

"Go ahead. Take it. By the time this war is over, I have no doubt that you will be a soldier, so you might as well start training now."

He took it and simply said, "Thank you."



After dusk, we could see the rebels had posts set up all along the base of the hill. They were not letting anyone get in or out. With a handful of men, we ventured as far as the road and sat watching the campfires flicker in the dark. The night was almost half over and I'd shut my eyes for only a moment when a bright flash rose from the south side of the hill. Adar and Kleitos saw it too and woke up the other men. We edged closer and found cover behind some small boulders. Thirty or so rebels were standing around a small opening about a quarter of the way up the hill. Some were shoving logs and boards from a dismantled wagon into the hole. The wood quickly caught fire. Others were dragging three men to the side. The men were struggling and trying to fight. I grabbed Adar and told him to get the men, all of them.

The three men were soldiers. I could see their armor and helmets in the firelight. Shimron said there were tunnels in the hill and that the soldiers were probably trying to get a message out. They put the men on their knees, bound their hands behind their backs and stripped them down to their tunics. A large man holding one of the soldier's swords in his hand walked around them yelling. None of the soldiers moved or said a word.

The interrogator stood next to the first soldier and grabbed his hair. He leaned him forward and brought his sword down clean through the soldier's neck. The body slumped to the ground. The man held the head up to his fellow rebels and then to the two remaining soldiers. I heard the horses behind me. I ran to the road and got on Saad. I told the sixteen new recruits to take the east side where most of the rebels were coming from. The rest of us would go directly to the center and try to get the two soldiers. I told them our objective was to get the soldiers, nothing else. Once we had them, we would head south down the road.

The rebels didn't hear us until we were two hundred feet away, and I hoped we sounded like a hundred men not thirty. They didn't come out to meet us. They stood their ground until they could see us. I told Adar and Narses to aim for the big man who appeared to be their leader. The rebels on the left scattered as the horses ran through them but the ones by the leader formed a wall between us and the captives. The loose rocky slope leading up to them made it difficult to break their line. The horses slowed and balked at the swords. Adar and Narses let their arrows go but they missed or hit the men in front. I took down one man slashing through his shoulder. Kleitos leveled another cutting off the lower part of his arm.

As more of his men fell, the leader looked frustrated. He grabbed another soldier and slit his throat. As he went for the last soldier, Kleitos charged him. The rebel leader threw the captive aside and drove his sword into the horse's chest twisting it to the side. The animal tried to rear up, but he put both hands on the sword and brought the horse down on its side throwing Kleitos from the saddle.

Narses rode to the captive and helped him onto his horse. Adar went forward to help Kleitos while the rebel leader pulled his sword free. Catalus charged forward with me to attack him. He dented my shield and blocked my sword and then spun around and knocked Catalus's sword out of his hand. Adar had Kleitos, and Narses was already going back down the hill with the soldier. I signaled the men to go. The Jewish leader called after us as we rode away, but no one followed. I asked Kleitos what he said.

"Cowards. He called us cowards," Kleitos said.

We rode a long time until we found a sparse grove of trees where we set up camp in the dark. Dawn came quickly, but we didn't head right out. I wanted to talk to the soldier from the Twenty-Second. His name was Verres, and we were able to get him a sword and some leather armor but not much else.

"What rank are you?" I asked him.

"I'm just a common soldier, Sir."

"You are with the Twenty-Second?"

"Yes, sir."

"How did you get stuck on that hill?"

"Per orders after sacking Bethlehem, we were to take the fortress. It was rumored the Jewish leaders were using it as a headquarters. When we left Bethlehem, we were attacked from behind by the Jews. Stretched out along the road they were able to separate us and we took heavy losses. About half the legion made it to Herodium where we found little resistance. We stormed the fortress only to have the Jews set up at the base of the hill and block our escape. We tried once to force our way out but lost about five hundred men and retreated back into the stronghold."

"What were you doing last night?"

"We found tunnels under the fortress and thought we could use them to get out and call for reinforcements. We weren't going to stand a chance if the Jews decided on an all out attack. Most of the commanding officers are dead and there are only fifteen hundred of us left, and many of them are injured."

"Do you know anything about the Jewish army?"

"You fought their leader last night. That was Bar Kokhba."

"I've heard of him," Shimron said, "The Jews call him a messiah, an anointed king. They say he will unite the Jews and create the Kingdom of Israel."

"If it only takes a sword to conquer a nation he might just be able to do it," I said.

"They say he is at the front of every battle and has killed soldiers with his bare hands," Shimron said.

"He may be fearless but he bleeds like any man," I said.

I turned back to Verres, "Do you know where Ala Antiana is?"

"They were on the road to Hebron. They were ordered to clear the way of bandits so we could come through unharassed," he said.

"Then we continue south and hope we find them," I said.

## XII

We traveled quickly and camped out of site of the road. The road followed the high ridges and in places we could see for miles in either direction, but I still had the feeling we were the ones being watched. On the second day, we found evidence of the ala, two dead horses and fresh graves two hundred feet off the road. If any rebels were killed their bodies were either buried or taken away.

The next day we found Ala Antiana. I saw the horses first. They were in a hastily built corral with a few men tending to them. The camp was off the road on a plateau overlooking a narrow canyon. Before we made it to the outer escarpment a unit roughly the same size as ours came out to meet us. They quickly realized we were fellow soldiers, and I told them I had orders for their commander. They led us to the corrals. We left the horses with Brenden and the other slaves and continued on foot. I kept thinking that this was an odd place to have a cavalry division camped.

We walked toward the canyon, and I was met with an even odder site. Four horses were harnessed to ropes that went to a wooden construction that overhung the canyon wall. The ropes went over the top of timbers and down the cliff. They were attached to a platform the size of a mule cart with five men in it. The platform had a plank wall facing the cliff, and the men stood armed with bows. They readied arrows tipped in burning rags. We walked down to a point where the cliff jutted out and we could see what the platform was facing. Riddled throughout the cliff-face were cave openings.

My escort introduced me to Praefectus Galerius Calvus who stood watching over the entire operation. He stared intently as the men were lowered. The men struggled to keep their balance as the platform lurched with every step the horses took. He nodded at me but never took his eyes off the cliff. I couldn't see anything in the caves, but when the men were in line with one of the openings a spear flew from the darkness, then an arrow, then another. The soldiers hid behind the thin wall. Calvus made a hand motion, and two of the men stood up and shot their flaming arrows into the caves. A moment later the other two fired. They repeated this over and over. On about the fifth round, smoke began billowing from the opening. I could hear men in the caves coughing and yelling to one another. The soldiers continued the barrage. Fewer and fewer projectiles flew from the cave.

They were using regular arrows now and I could hear cries of pain. A man ran from the cave and leapt out at the platform. He hit the wall but couldn't get a hold of the wood. Fifty feet below, he hit the cliff face and tumbled down another fifty feet to the canyon floor. As the platform swayed, the soldiers dropped to their knees and grabbed onto straps tied into the wood. Another man fell from the darkness, an arrow piercing his chest.

Calvus looked to the man next to him and said, "Make sure they keep at it. Tell them to use more fire." He walked past him and looked at me, "What brings you out here?"

"I have your new orders from Governor Severus, sir," I said.

"The Governor has arrived has he? Good. He can finally start turning this thing around."

I handed him the sealed scroll Tiberius had given me in Caesarea.

"Come with me. Let's see how the other men are doing," he said. He unrolled the scroll and read it while we walked.

"I also wanted to make you aware of another urgent issue, sir," I said.

He stopped, finished reading the scroll, and looked up at me, "What is it?"

"The Twenty-Second has been trapped in the Herodium fortress by a Jewish force some three thousand strong. I don't believe there is any more than half of the legion left. The rest were killed south of Bethlehem along the road."

He shook his head and started walking again. "I told that fool to watch himself. You know what they are doing don't you? They're working out of caves like these, watching us, looking for our weaknesses, only striking when we are most vulnerable. That is why I'm not waiting for them to come to us. I'm going to them, even if I have to search every cave in these mountains."

He was striding inches away from the edge of the canyon, oblivious of the hundred foot drop.

"You saying we should go back and rescue them? That would be the right thing to do wouldn't it? But I will bet they aren't even there to save anymore. I don't want to take my men off something useful to pull some incompetent's ass out of the fire. But I guess that's the commander's fault not the soldiers. They are just following orders, good or bad whatever they may be." He held up the scroll, "According to these orders, your new orders are to fight for me. How does that sound decurion?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good, because you didn't have a choice. He is what I'll do. I'll give you a hundred cavalry to go back and see what you can do for the Twenty-Second. Even at full strength this unit would not be able to take on a force of three thousand."

We walked down a short switchback and found a group of eight men and five large dogs standing outside a narrow opening in the rocks. One man was at the opening yelling commands into the hole. Calvus stopped and turned to me.

"I'm giving you these men to verify what I already know, not to fight some losing battle. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"I know that dog there better than I know you but if Severus trusts you, I trust you. I fought for Severus in Moesia. He is a smart man. I will teach you what he taught me and this war will be over by next summer."

He turned his attention to the soldiers with the dogs. I could hear a dog in the cave barking. Calvus had them send two more dogs in and yelled up the slope for twenty soldiers. He turned to me again.

"This is the sixth cave system we found like this. They've stockpiled them with food and weapons and diverted water into cisterns they've carved in the rocks. From these caves, they control the road. They harass the legions as they pass by and then disappear into the mountains. For awhile the more skittish men were calling them ghosts or phantoms that vanished into the rocks. You superstitious Coran?"

"No, sir."

"Good, there is no place for that in war. You start worrying about shit like that you might as well slit your own throat. I don't put up with that kind of nonsense. I'm trained to solve problems. This may be a cavalry unit but if these Jewish moles aren't going to fight us in the open field then I'm going to force them out. I'm not going to let them pick off my men one by one until I'm sleeping by myself in this wasteland of a province."

The soldiers passed us and squeezed into the passage. The dogs in the cave were barking and growling and the ones left outside were anxious. They weren't scared but acted like they were missing out on something. Calvus continued to talk. He talked about the dogs. They were mastiffs originally bred from

Britannian dogs. I had used similar dogs for hunting. I had also seen one chase a man and take him down like he was a rabbit. The talk turned back to the rebels.

"So what did you see at Herodium? How did you figure out it was the Twenty-Second if the Jews had the place surrounded?" he said.

"Three soldiers tried to escape through a secret tunnel. I was able to save one. He told me that a Jew named Bar Kokhba was leading the rebels and was the man we fought off to secure his rescue."

"Bar Kokhba?" He turned and looked me in the eye. "Did you say Bar Kokhba? Why didn't you say that earlier? He is the leader of the Jews, not a leader but the leader. I would have given up a year's pay to have been there. Is this soldier sure it was him?"

"He seemed sure, but I do not know him well enough to vouch for his knowledge or honesty."

"What did he look like? What did he do?"

"He was a brute of a man. He hacked a man's head off with one blow and took down a charging horse with a gladius."

"That is Bar Kokhba. Don't be fooled. He's no brute. He is as smart as they come. Few saw this war coming and when they hit, none of us were ready for it. He's been planning this for a long time. He even has some of his people believing that he has been ordained by their god to expel Rome from Iudaea. Jerusalem will be rubble before that happens."

One of the dogs came out of the cave. His muzzle wet with blood and slobber. The other dogs got up and greeted him, their tails wagging violently. Calvus went over to the animal and rubbed his head.

"Good boy, good boy. Send in a fresh one," he said. To me he said, "If Bar Kokhba is at Herodium then you've just gained yourself another man. I'm not going to miss an opportunity to bring the bastard in."

"Yes, sir."

~\*~\*~

We left in the morning, one hundred and thirty-three men led by Calvus. The man was inexhaustible. He spent the day telling stories and riding off the road following tracks and looking for hideouts. He didn't rest, and he didn't let us rest. Despite the explorations, we made it back to Herodium in two days. Calvus, Adar, Merula, and I scouted ahead. I showed him the gully, and we used the fading light of the day to get a closer look.

Calvus was right. Everything had changed. The Jewish army was no longer at the base of the fortress. There were just the corpses of Roman soldiers. The Jews had taken back the fortress. They must have seen the desperate attempt to send out men for reinforcements as the sign of weakness that it was. The fortress was now occupied by a small Jewish force, not more than five hundred men. The rest must have moved on.

Five hundred lightly-armed peasants wasn't impossible for a hundred and thirty cavalry to overtake in the open field, but the same group guarding a fortress surrounded by a slope of loose rock made it an insurmountable task. We went back to our horses. Calvus was mumbling to himself.

"I hate it when I'm right. Those bastards didn't stand a chance. We'll look for any signs of where the main force went in the morning but then we get back to smoking them out of the rocks. If we can cripple their stockpiles and their safe havens they will have to confront us in the field or hold up in the cities. In the open, we will annihilate them, and the cities we can burn down. Now that they've taken out a legion, they will be overconfident. They will start making mistakes, and we will be there when they do."

In the morning, we didn't find any signs that the Jewish army went south. They most likely went north to a hero's welcome in Bethlehem. Everything the Twenty-Second had gained was lost. Calvus was right. The Jews were organized. They had been planning this. They had a strategy. This wasn't the same as the revolt Josephus described. Sixty years ago, the Jews fought amongst themselves and ran to the cities to defend themselves. This time they were on the offensive.

We hadn't gone far when Adar spotted two men running from the rocks toward the road. They were soldiers, beaten and bloody but alive. Calvus rode up to them.

"Are there any others alive?" he asked them.

"None we know of sir."

"How did you survive?"

"We escaped through the tunnels when they overran the fortress."

"Were you ordered to run away?"

"No, sir. Our commanding officer was dead."

"Tell me why I shouldn't leave you here for abandoning your unit."

"There was no one else left. Our deaths would not have helped anyone."

"I don't look forward to death anymore than the next man, but I will fight to the death for my men. You will be restricted to barley rations and as long as you are under my command you will take care of the horses and nothing else. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

## XIII

It was clear Calvus wasn't a man concerned with philosophy or religion or even morality. He was concerned with utility. He was a Roman soldier and men, horses, equipment, ideas, beliefs were either useful to him or they weren't. If they weren't, they were ignored or discarded. If they were, they were used to their fullest. He looked at situations like a craftsman. The enemy was like a house to be built or an axe to be forged. Just as the blacksmith doesn't worry about where the air that fills his bellows came from or where the smoke his fire makes goes, Calvus didn't worry about the blood that spilled, the cries for mercy, or the orphaned children sold into slavery. These weren't his concerns. They were for the generals, the senators, and the Emperor to worry about.

I'd seen the trait in other men. They detached themselves from the bloodshed and the suffering. I almost admired them for it. In my youth, I was more like that but Aria and the boys changed me. It was probably why the legion didn't recognize or encourage marriages. They knew it made men soft. How does a husband and a father kill women and children without seeing his own family? He will hesitate, and in that lost second, he will lose the battle.

The faces from Bethlehem haunted me. Mothers, grandparents, and even children ready to defend the only thing they had, their families. The legion taught us that our fellow soldiers were our family. They were the ones we die to protect, and if not them then it was for Rome, for order, for security, for prosperity. There was no order here though. It was all chaos.



The days passed quickly. We stayed with Ala Antiana for the rest of the summer and through the fall. Everyday was a new challenge. We stormed strongholds in the hills, scoured out caves that seemed to go on for miles, and razed villages that wouldn't give us quarter. Every time, we killed all who stood in our way, leaving only children alive to be sold like cattle. Calvus became terrifyingly efficient at eradicating any resistance. It was like watching a butcher slicing through a carcass, his knife never hit bone, and the meat fell away in perfect slabs.

We moved between Hebron and Bethlehem keeping the road secure. We left the cities to the legions and their siege works. In the fall, we began venturing out farther into the wilderness east of the mountains, down into the rocky desert. Occasionally, we would come across a group of Jews a hundred or two hundred strong, sometimes rebel fighters, sometimes refugees from the surrounding cities making their way through the desert. On that desolate landscape, we left no survivors. Calvus reminded us that in the desert there were no slave markets, no peasantry to be alarmed, and no gods to judge us. The last comment always struck me. I read Josephus enough to know the wilderness was where the Jewish god talked to the greatest of their leaders. It was in the wilderness that they went to find their god, not hide from him.

He also became fond of comparing the Jews to pests. "What would you do if you found a snake in your house? You'd kill it and throw it out because if you didn't it would come back." If it wasn't a snake it was a rat or a wild dog or a crow. All the men told themselves similar things. It wasn't possible to deal with the actual acts we committed. To keep sane you had to abstract it, give it meaning to make it rational to slaughter people like swine. There was no strong drink to make me forget at night. When I would wake

up from my dreams I would picture my wife and boys. I told myself that for them to be safe there must be order. Order brings security. Security creates prosperity. I chanted it in my head like a prayer, order, security, prosperity. Over and over, I would say it until the sun came up.



Despite my dreams, the worst visions visited me while I was awake. Between the road to Hebron and the Salt Sea, rebels attacked our column as we wound our way through a dry riverbed. They shot arrows and hurled rocks and spears from the safety of the cliffs. We did our best to shield our horses and ourselves. A few men were injured, but no one was killed. There weren't enough rebels to be a threat, and I don't believe they thought we would go after them. They did not know Calvus. He rode to the rear of the column and called up seven units. We followed him up the steep bank. The rebels turned and started running.

Going up the embankment, some of the men slide off the backs of their mounts, and two of the horses fell backward throwing their riders. Calvus ignored this and gave chase. The rebels scattered into the rocks. We killed almost thirty as they retreated. They weren't prepared to defend themselves and had few weapons. The rest made it to a small village about two miles from the streambed. The village had a low mud brick wall about four feet high which encircled roughly six dozen homes. The village was a way station for travelers with a small market and water well.

Calvus, Adar, a decurion named Stolo, and I approached the main gate. The gate was nothing more than two wooden panels not quite six feet tall clasped together with a thin metal hook. It was more for keeping the goats in and the wolves out than stopping soldiers. A small group of villagers gathered at the wall. The rest of the cavalry created a perimeter around the village.

"Your village is harboring enemies of Rome. Send them out and you will be spared," Calvus shouted.

The crowd debated amongst themselves, but no one came forward to speak.

"I'm giving you one last chance to save your village. Send out the rebels and no harm will come to you. Otherwise we will burn it to the ground with you in it. I'm not a man of patience."

"The men you speak of are not here," came a voice from the crowd.

"Leave us alone," said another voice.

Calvus turned his horse around, and we followed him back to the other men. He gathered the decurions to give out orders.

"They've made their choice. I don't have the time to negotiate with insolent villagers so we are going to return this shit hole to the desert. I also don't have time to deal with any more injuries or casualties so we are going to set the houses ablaze and pick off the people as they scurry out of their rat holes. Does everybody understand?"

To our left on the north side of the city, arrows began to fly from the low wall. The soldiers shielded themselves but the horses were hit and the men had to back away.

"Fucking camel spit. You see that? There is no place for mercy with these people. If they are ignorant enough to challenge us given the odds then they are not worthy of the skin on their backs. You have your orders. Assemble your men and shower them with fire."

It didn't take much to catch the houses on fire. It was fall and the rains hadn't come yet so everything was dry from the summer heat. Flaming arrows set the hay and straw in the animal bins ablaze, and the fire quickly spread to the houses. Mules, goats, and camels ran from the heat and broke through the gates. We waited outside watching the chaos. We were ordered not to proceed until the screams subsided.

Roofs collapsed and walls toppled over. On the west side of the village, a man and a young boy ran from the fire and smoke. A soldier nearby released two of the dogs. The first dog wrestled the man to the ground as he tried to protect the boy. The second dog grabbed the boy between his shoulder and neck and thrashed him about like a game animal. I couldn't watch. I heard one of the men behind me throwing up. I wanted to run the dog through and save the boy but it was too late. The dog did what it was trained to do. One of the soldiers had to pull the dog away from the lifeless body.

The carnage in the village was no better. It was almost dusk when we entered. It was quiet except for the crackling of the smoldering wood. Bodies lay in the streets. Clothing still burned on the blackened corpses and the smell of charred flesh was overpowering. We were told to look for survivors. The few that we found were put out of their misery.

I went into a house where the roof had collapsed onto a table. A young boy and girl were under the table. They were trapped when the table legs broke. Their burnt bodies clung to each other. I started to cry. I couldn't hold it in. I coughed to hide my sobs. They didn't deserve this. No one deserved this. I wiped the tears away and looked around to see if anyone had noticed. The other men had moved on. They all walked through the destruction as if they were half asleep. No one wanted to face the reality of what we saw.

~~~~

Winter came, and in the mountains, the days quickly became cold. The nights were unbearably cold. Our quarters were tents not the solid barracks I was used to. In the summer and fall, they were pleasant and were enough to keep in the heat during the cool nights. Now the wind cut through the fabric and I could hear teeth chattering in the quiet of the night. Few complained, but their discomfort was obvious. We were all relieved when we received new orders to secure outposts in the lower foothills.

I would have preferred to go back to the coast where the fields were green like Britannia, but I was willing to go into the desert if it meant I didn't have to spend my nights shivering in the dark. The rebels also flooded into the desert. They were not just escaping the winter cold. The legions had secured Bethlehem and Herodium and we had cleared out many of the hideouts and villages on the road to Hebron. They were running out of places to hide. The desert was their last refuge and it wasn't going to be easy to find them in the expanse.

Our first objective was the oasis city of Ein Gedi on the Salt Sea. It had been confirmed that Bar Kokhba had a base in the region. Two legions were sent there to secure the city and we were to cross the desert and identify locations for outposts to protect the supply lines. The distance to Ein Gedi was not far but the terrain was difficult and Calvus wanted to explore every wash and hillock. On the second day, Adar rode up next to me.

"You look tired," he said.

"I'm just thankful to be out of the upland."

"Do you think the Jews will break soon?"

"I'm afraid they will not break until all the men are dead or the country is in chains."

My pessimism met silence until he changed the subject a couple of miles further along.

"Saad looks good," he said.

"I think he likes being back home."

"My homeland is north of here. When Narses and I retire we are going to buy land and raise horses. Horses like Saad."

"That is a good plan," I said.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a horse bolt out of formation.

Someone yelled, "Deserter!"

Calvus turned to me.

"Coran, get three men and bring him back."

"Yes, sir. Adar, Catalus, and Varus with me," I said.

We chased after the soldier while the column continued. This wasn't the first deserter, and Calvus never let a man go. The runner was whipping his horse into a frantic gallop. He was looking over his shoulder seeing who would pursue him. The ground was strewn with rocks and holes. He was going too fast and wasn't watching. We kept a steady gallop. His horse stumbled but kept going. Sweat built up on the horse's flanks. Adar and I with our taller horses were gaining on him. Catalus and Varus fell behind.

The soldier's horse didn't have the stamina to keep up. Adar shot an arrow past him, but he didn't stop. I rode up behind him and told him to stop. He pulled out his sword. I rode up on his left side and ordered him to stop again. He spurred his horse but it wouldn't go any faster. I brought Saad close to his side. He swung at me wildly across his body. I blocked the clumsy strike. I put my foot behind his calf and lifted my leg as I swung at him. He leaned away from the sword, and I pushed him out of the saddle. He hit the ground hard and tumbled in the dirt. His horse stopped almost immediately as Adar and I circled around. We got off and approached him. He was lying in a heap covered in dust. A crimson gash on the side of his head was the only color on him. He rolled over dazed with his sword in his hand. Adar held an arrow ready. I kept my sword sheathed. Catalus and Varus caught up, and I told them to stay on their horses.

The soldier rubbed his eyes and felt the gash on his head. He looked around squinting through the settling dust. In an instant of clarity, his eyes widened, and he jumped to his feet holding the sword out defensively.

"Leave me alone. Just let me go. Why won't you just let me go?" he said.

"You have a duty son, an obligation to those men back there, an obligation to Rome," I said the words without feeling.

"I don't care. I don't care," he screamed. He ran his hand through his hair and looked at the blood streaked across his palm.

"Calm down and put the sword away."

"No. I'm not going back. I can't take it anymore," he said looking around wildly.

Tears started welling up in his eyes. I didn't know the soldier well. He had never stood out among the others. I didn't even know his name.

"You are leaving us little choice," I said.

"Just let me go. Tell them I got away. They won't know. I won't tell. Please." The tears streaked through the dirt on his face.

I tried chiding him like a child hoping it would convince him of the futility of fighting us. "You've let down all those men," I said pointing at the ala. "You've let down your brothers, your family."

"I don't want to die. I don't want to hurt anybody else. I just want to go. I just want to go home," he said sobbing, the sword became limp in his hand.

I took the sword. He didn't resist. His arms fell to his sides. I grabbed him by his shoulder.

"Everything is fine. You are going to be alright," I said.

I led him to his horse. He started mumbling to himself.

"It's too late. It's too late. I can't go back," he said.

We got to his horse, but he made no effort to get on. He just stood there with his head down.

"Come on son. Get on the horse," I said.

He started crying again. He looked up at his saddle. He put his hands up like he was getting on but grabbed a dagger that was strapped on his saddlebag. Before I could pull his arm away, he plunged it into his gut. He fell to his knees both hands on the knife.

His eyes were wide and his mouth was open, but no sound came out. I knelt down and kept him from falling over.

"Damn the gods. What did you do boy?"

He had sunk the blade deep. I went to pull it out but it was too late. Blood started to run from his mouth. He tried to speak.

"What's going to happen?" he said in a whisper.

What did he expect, the damn fool. We were all suffering. We'd all seen the same things. This wasn't the solution. I was angry. I was angry at him. I was angry at what led him to this. The anger left when I saw the fear in his eyes. He was beginning to realize what he had done.

"Don't worry," I said, "you will be in Elysium soon."

"Don't leave me," he said.

He fell on his side still conscious.

"What is Elysium like?" he said as he closed his eyes.

"It is green and lush. All the heroes of the past will be there, Caesar, Alexander, Hercules. All your ancestors will greet you." I said. I told him all the stories I had stopped believing long ago.

He started to writhe in the dirt choking on the blood. I tried to hold him still as death overtook him. His breathing was gargled and his entire body convulsed. I had seen too many men die to think that death was easy or painless. There is no glory or nobility in those last moments. We all just curl up like worms in the hot sun.

His eyes pleaded with me to do something. I kept telling him it would be alright. The blood filled his throat and he stopped breathing. I held him as he suffocated. Every muscle in his body fought to live. His face contorted in a look of horror. I closed my eyes until the struggle was over. His eyes were glassy and didn't move as the wind blew dirt over us. I laid his head on the ground and got up.

My ears were ringing. I put my hands on my knees. I felt sick. I took deep breaths. All I could think about was blackness. I stood up straight and looked for Catalus and Varus. I told them to go back to the ala, and Adar and I would catch up. I didn't want them to see me be sick.

Adar came over and offered me a cloth and some water to clean my hands. I couldn't stop my hands from shaking as I wiped away the blood.

"I'll never understand what leads a man to that," Adar said looking down at the young soldier.

"I don't know. None of us wants to be out here but to do . . ." I was exhausted and didn't feel like talking.

I started piling rocks around the body. Adar helped. Before we covered him completely, I put a coin in his mouth for Charon. I didn't believe in the underworld or the boatman, but it was tradition. I didn't believe in praying either, but I prayed. I prayed for the boy's soul and I prayed for my own. I could have stopped him. I could have saved him, but I didn't see the dagger or the desperation in his eyes. I could have let him escape. Instead, I let him go into the blackness, into nothingness.

We got back on our horses. I looked back at the pile of stones. Soon he would be nothing more than bones. One moment we are living, breathing, laughing, crying and moving around. In the next, we are nothing, no different than the dirt we are buried in. I was so tired. I just wanted to go home.

"Are you alright sir?" Adar said.

I looked up. He was waiting for me. The ala was almost out of sight. I nodded.

"I'll be fine," I said.