



GORDON
DOHERTY
LEGIONARY
LAND OF THE SACRED FIRE

LEGIONARY LAND OF THE SACRED FIRE

by Gordon Doherty

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www.gordondoherty.co.uk

Also by Gordon Doherty:

LEGIONARY

Numerius Vitellius Pavo, enslaved as a boy after the death of his legionary father, is thrust into the border legions just before they are sent to recapture the long-lost eastern Kingdom of Bosporus. This sees him thrown into the jaws of a plot, so twisted that the survival of the entire Roman world hangs in the balance...

LEGIONARY: VIPER OF THE NORTH

In the frozen lands north of the Danubius a dark legend, thought long dead, has risen again. The name is on the lips of every warrior in Gutthiuda; the one who will unite the tribes, the one whose armies will march upon the empire, the one who will bathe in Roman blood

. . .

The Viper!

STRATEGOS: BORN IN THE BORDERLANDS

When the falcon has flown, the mountain lion will charge from the east, and all Byzantium will quake. Only one man can save the empire .

. . the Haga!

STRATEGOS: RISE OF THE GOLDEN HEART

Stay strong, Haga, for the Golden Heart will rise in the west. In the morning, he will wear the guise of a lion hunter. In the afternoon, he will march to the east as if to conquer the sun itself. In the evening you will stand with him in the final battle, like an island in the storm . .

.

The writing of this volume would have been extremely difficult, nigh impossible, without the help of those who have advised me, beta-read for me, bantered with me, endured my foul-mooded days and generally kept me smiling. So, to name but a few . . .

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Table of Contents

- [Maps & Military Diagrams](#)
- [Prologue: Mesopotamia, Western Persia 25th June 363 AD](#)
- [Chapter 1](#)
- [Chapter 2](#)
- [Chapter 3](#)
- [Chapter 4](#)
- [Chapter 5](#)
- [Chapter 6](#)
- [Chapter 7](#)
- [Chapter 8](#)
- [Chapter 9](#)
- [Chapter 10](#)
- [Chapter 11](#)
- [Chapter 12](#)

- [Chapter 13](#)
- [Chapter 14](#)
- [Chapter 15](#)
- [Chapter 16](#)
- [Chapter 17](#)
- [Chapter 18](#)
- [Chapter 19](#)
- [Chapter 20](#)
- [Chapter 21](#)
- [Epilogue](#)
- [Author's Note](#)
- [Glossary](#)

High Command Structure of the Eastern Imperial Army

See glossary (at rear of book) for a
description of terms

Imperator (Emperor)

Ultimate ruler of The Eastern Roman Empire

Magister Militum (Master of Soldiers)

1 per regional grouping of provinces

Dux (Duke)

1 per province

Comes (Count)

1 per field army

Tribunus (Tribune)

1 per *limitanei* legion (sometimes more than one legion)

Tribunus (Tribune)

1 per *comitatenses* legion (sometimes more than one legion)

Structure of Legio XI Claudia Pia Fidelis

See glossary (at rear of book) for a
description of terms

XI Claudia Legion (1760 strong with full complement)

↑ *Tribunus Gallus*

First Cohort
(800 strong, comprising 5 double strength centuries)

First Century

↑ *Primus Pilus Felix*

↑ *Optio*



160 legionaries

Century

↑ Centurion

↑ *Optio*



160
legionaries

Century

↑ Centurion

↑ *Optio*



160
legionaries

Century

↑ Centurion

↑ *Optio*



160
legionaries

Century

↑ Centurion

↑ *Optio*



160
legionaries

Second Cohort
(480 strong, comprising 6 standard centuries)

First Century

↑ *Centurion Zosimus*

↑ *Optio Pavo*



80 legionaries

Century

↑ Centurion

↑ *Optio*



80
legionaries

Century

↑ Centurion

↑ *Optio*



80
legionaries

Century

↑ Centurion

↑ *Optio*



80
legionaries

Century

↑ Centurion

↑ *Optio*



80
legionaries

Century

↑ Centurion

↑ *Optio*



80
legionaries

Third Cohort
(480 strong, comprising 6 standard centuries)

First Century

↑ *Centurion Quadratus*

↑ *Optio*



80 legionaries

Century

↑ Centurion

↑ *Optio*



80
legionaries

Century

↑ Centurion

↑ *Optio*



80
legionaries

Century

↑ Centurion

↑ *Optio*



80
legionaries

Century

↑ Centurion

↑ *Optio*



80
legionaries

Century

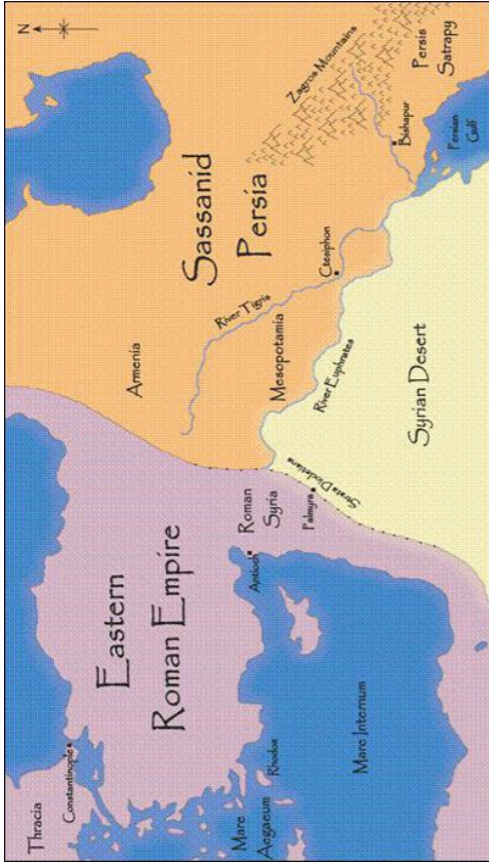
↑ Centurion

↑ *Optio*



80
legionaries

The Roman-Persian Frontier circa 377 AD



Prologue:

Mesopotamia, Western Persia

25th June 363 AD



The empire's legions fled. They thundered westwards across the baking plain, the noon sun glaring down upon them like a Persian spy. Legionaries, Syrian archers, Armenian slingers and ironclad riders – more than thirty thousand

men all told, gaunt and bathed in sweat, armour battered and caked in dust. Their staggered and untidy formation betrayed great anguish. Each of them shot fearful glances over their shoulders as they jogged, parched tongues darting out over cracked and bleeding lips.

Near the front of the retreat, Comes Domesticorum Jovian led the Imperial Guard. He cut an impressive figure, broad and tall, his face ruddy and well-weathered. But his heavy brow shaded the fear in his eyes. It was a fiery terror that needled at his guts as he thought of those who pursued them. Don't look

back, he mouthed, fixing his gaze on the west. It offered only golden dust and azure sky, but soon they would be back at the eastern banks of the Tigris. Soon they would be reunited with the Roman fleet. Soon he would be safely aboard a bireme and then back in Roman Mesopotamia on the western banks of the river. At that moment, an image flashed through his mind; of the thousands of legionaries who had been slain on this wretched campaign, their grey, lifeless eyes fixed on him. In these last weeks they had fought and died in some of the most ferocious battles he had

ever witnessed. They would never again feel the sun on their skin or the caress of their loved ones. Jovian, however, had barely sullied his sword on this journey. Yet here he was, dreaming only of his own wellbeing. He scowled at his timorous thoughts as self-loathing clutched and twisted his heart. He bit into his bottom lip until he tasted blood, then looked up to the figure riding just ahead.

Emperor Julian sat astride a white stallion, wearing a wreath that hugged his flaxen curls like a crown. He wore no armour – only pure-white robes and a sword belt.

This epitomised the man. The one who had renounced the Christian God and revitalised the old pagan ways. The strident and fearless leader who had led the army into this burning land, intent on ending the centuries-old Persian threat. The legions loved him, hailing him for his seemingly endless courage. Julian was everything Jovian longed to be.

From where . . . from where do you draw your courage? Jovian mouthed.

But his envy faded when he saw something up ahead; the shimmering golden infinity now

offered a faint, sparkling thread of turquoise. The Tigris! His heart soared momentarily, then he frowned, noticing something else; a dark smudge by the banks. The heat haze sharpened to reveal the last wisps of black smoke spiralling from the incinerated Roman fleet. Charred timbers, torn sails and smouldering masts jutting at all angles. Hundreds of vessels. Utterly ruined.

Jovian slowed. The rest of the column slowed, jaws dropping as the tang of wood smoke danced in the stifling air. He shot glances around his imperial guardsmen,

cooking alive in their scale vests. They gawped at the fleet, then twisted to behold the still and silent horizons behind them in terror. A chorus of panicked murmurs broke out all along the vast column. Eyes darted around the sweltering land, then all looked to the Emperor.

‘Emperor?’ Jovian gasped, failing to disguise the tremor in his voice. ‘The Persians did this?’

Emperor Julian stared solemnly at the ruined fleet, then gave the faintest shake of his head. ‘No, not the Persians.’

Horror shuddered through Jovian’s chest as he realised what

had happened.

Emperor Julian continued; 'I had no choice. When we set off from these banks, I gave the order to burn the fleet lest it fell into Persian hands.'

'But how will we . . . ' Jovian's eyes darted to the far banks of the river. Safety lay in sight but out of reach, across the tumbling waters of the Tigris. This was not bravery, this was madness! The emperor's hubris would be the death of them all.

'The fleet is gone. But the riverbank will protect our rear and our flanks,' Emperor Julian said as

he heeled his mount round to look over his bedraggled army then off to the east. He winked, straining to see through the heat haze that lay out there. Suddenly he sat up straighter in the saddle, a confident rictus spreading across his face. 'Yes . . . it seems that either death or glory will grace us today.'

Jovian's flesh crept as he turned to follow the emperor's gaze.

The eastern horizon offered nothing but a blur where golden dust met azure sky. Then a thunderous boom burst across the land. Then another.

‘Persian war drums!’ one panicked voice wailed. ‘They’re coming for us again!’

The heat haze flickered and a silvery dot appeared, slowly expanding to fill the eastern horizon like the horns of an iron bull. Now the war drums throbbed in an eager rhythm.

Jovian gawped at the sight. The Savaran cavalry, the Persian war machine, Shahanshah Shapur II’s finest. They seemed to rise from the sands like demons. A sea of spear tips, iron helms and riders. Each gund of one thousand men was segmented into ten drafshs of

one hundred, and each hundred carried a banner of fluttering fabric – vibrant reds, greens, golds and blues depicting bears, deer, asps and lions. And these endless ranks were punctuated by great, fierce and all-too-real creatures, the likes of which Jovian had never before set eyes upon; beasts with swishing, armour-plated trunks, bronze-coated tusks and archer-packed cabins strapped to their broad backs.

The Savaran were here to annihilate the Roman war machine that had pierced into the heart of Persian lands, the legions that had

only days ago dared to attempt a siege of the Sassanid capital of Ctesiphon. A clutch of dark-robed magi walked before this army, holding aloft gemmed, gilt torches, the flames flickering and lurching like serpents' tongues. The magi carried this, the Zoroastrian Sacred Fire, as a testament to their great god, Ahura Mazda, and to inspire the masses who marched behind.

Jovian felt his throat clenching and the familiar trembling in his limbs. A skinful of wine in the mornings had become a loathsome habit, but one he had been unable to break as he tried to cope with

the demands of his lofty post as the emperor's protector. He looked to his guardsmen, desperately trying to summon the words to rally them. He licked his lips to give an order.

'For – form up, f-face . . . ' the staccato uttering died in his throat and drew only confused frowns from his men. Self-loathing now strangled his heart.

But his shame was short-lived as, once more, Emperor Julian led the way.

'Form up, face your enemy!' Julian cried, kicking his white stallion until the beast reared up and whinnied. Buccinas were raised

to lips, the horns wailing across the ranks as standards waved frantically. Like a silver asp, the staggered mass of the Roman retreat came together and turned to form a broad and deep line facing east. They presented a wall of battered shields and a nest of spears. On each flank, an ala of some five hundred equites sagittarii shuffled on their saddles, nocking arrows to their bows, winking under the rim of their helms as they sighted their targets. These Roman horse archers were well armoured in scale and armed with the finest composite bows, but they would

meet their match today.

The rally cry of Emperor Julian had been enough to strike the fear from many thousands of Roman hearts. But not from Jovian's. Forming part of the Roman right, he and his imperial guardsmen were on the front rank. His tongue was shrivelled and utterly dry, his bladder seemingly full to bursting. There would be no escaping battle today. White lights flashed in his eyes and he felt his guts melt as he beheld the Savaran riders facing them. A solid wall of *clibanarii*; iron-masked horsemen who betrayed not a glimpse of humanity, armour

in every place there should have been flesh and tall, pointed helmets with plumes whipping behind them. Thousands of them. Sharpened lances held two-handed. Lithe mounts clad in iron plate-armour and scale aprons. The riders sighted their targets, then kicked their gnashing, frothing mounts forward at a trot with an ululating war cry.

Jovian roared, not in defiance like the imperial guardsmen around him, but in utter terror. He screwed his eyes shut in disgust at his craven heart. In this coward's darkness, he felt the blistering heat fall away momentarily. He cracked

open one eye and saw that the sky had blackened, the azure masked by a thundercloud of Persian arrows, hovering momentarily before darting down like a brood of iron raptors. Jovian's legs seemed numb and unable to respond to his primal urge to run. He gawped as those around him scattered, some splitting their ranks and others falling back to avoid the incoming hail. They were oblivious to Emperor Julian's cry to hold their lines. The arrows hammered down into backs, necks and limbs. A fine crimson mist puffed into the air all across the panicked Roman lines

and many hundreds fell. Jovian trembled in disbelief; arrows quivered in the earth and in corpses all around him – yet he was unharmed. Then he heard the Persian war horns blare once again, and saw the glint of thousands of enemy lances falling level like outstretched and accusing fingers, the *clibanarii* riders now lying flat in the saddle and coming forward at a gallop. The Persian arrows had tenderised the Roman ranks, now their lances would cut the legions to pieces.

Jovian met the inhuman eye slits of the masked rider coming for

him, clutched the Christian Chi-Rho amulet around his neck – the one thing that gave him courage – and roared his last as the Savaran charge smashed into the Roman ranks. In a flash of steel it was over. A blow wrenched Jovian's spear from his grasp and threw him from his feet. Sky and ground swapped places, hooves and boots thundering past him, dust and blood filling his throat and blinding him. Then he felt the earth shake fiercely. The trumpeting of the great, tusked creatures filled the air. Then came a terrible chorus of snapping bone, tearing flesh and

screaming men. Finally, like an ebb tide, it all died away, and he was numb.

He presumed the long blackness that followed was death. But he still felt something. A crushing pain in his head. Next, a distant, dull cry cut through the blackness.

'Emperor Julian has been slain! Throw down your weapons and they may spare us!'

In his confusion, Jovian wondered if these voices were those of the dead accompanying him to the afterlife. Perhaps his devotion to the Christian God had

been prudent. Then he realised he was floating, or perhaps being carried. He put everything into an attempt at reaching out, but heard only a pained groan topple from his lips.

‘The Comes Domesticorum – he’s alive,’ a voice said.

‘Then there is no doubt about what must happen,’ another added.

At last, Jovian’s eyes cracked open. He was in a torn, smoke-stained Roman command tent, reclined upon a cot. His guardsmen stared back at him; a circle of filthy, bloodied and sullen faces. The nearest of them stepped forward

and thrust a white robe and a wreath into his hands. He stared at the dark-red stain on the midriff of the robe; Emperor Julian's blood.

Then, as one, the guards raised their hands in salute and cried;

'Imperator!'

He looked up at them. A terror like never before gripped his heart.



It was the morning after the battle. The dawn air was already balmy and still tinged with the scent of decay and death. A cloud of carrion birds shrieked and circled overhead.

The battered remnant of the Roman army huddled against the banks of the Tigris – cowering within a mass of hastily erected tents and ramshackle palisades – pinned there by the bullhorn Savaran lines. From the Roman camp, a pocket of eighty figures strode forth, crossing the short stretch of no-man's land and entering the heart of the enemy camp.

Jovian's stride was awkward and uneven under the scrutiny of so many eyes. Masses of dawn-silhouetted Persian warriors glared at him and he felt the eyes of his own men burning on his back. This

was his first duty, or so the men had advised him; to meet with Shapur and sue for peace. The dust stung in his nostrils and the air felt like fire in his lungs. His white imperial robes were already drenched in sweat. The usual skinful of wine had not been enough this morning. To soothe his battle wounds and to still his nerves he had needed two. Yet still he trembled.

The sea of Persian warriors parted before him, revealing a vast tent at the heart of their lines. Fluttering drafsh banners encircled the tent, and one magnificent

banner crowned it, depicting a golden star bursting across a purple background. This was the Drafsh Kavian, the ultimate symbol of Sassanid Persian might. Atop the banner – where the Roman armies would mount their silver eagles – was the broad-winged and soaring guardian angel, half eagle, half man; this was the Faravahar, the sacred image of the Zoroastrian faith. Even this lifeless effigy seemed to glare down upon Jovian, stoking the self-doubt in his gut.

He summoned a speck of courage and they marched on until they reached the tent entrance.

There, a pair of tall and broad bodyguards eyed him. These men were pushtigban, the cream of the Savaran army and the shahanshah's personal guard. They wore flawless iron helms adorned with finely crafted wings on either side, scale and plate-armour vests, iron rings on their arms, and carried bronze-coated spears and shields. Like the clibanarii riders, they too wore iron masks obscuring all but the glint of steely glowers through the eye slits. Each carried a shamshir in his sword belt, the honeycomb-hilted blades cleaned since yesterday's clash.

Jovian halted before them and his eighty guards stopped behind him. He wiped a hand across his rubicund features, his bloodshot eyes bulging, his lips trembling. He was now Emperor of Rome, rich beyond imagining, power untold. Despite all this, he wanted nothing more than to turn and run from this place. He saw in his mind the waters of the Tigris, imagined throwing himself into its foaming torrents, thrashing to reach the other side. Murmurs swept around the gathered crowd as he remained, speechless, eyes darting in this craven whimsy. Finally, the

two pushtigban warriors held the tent flap open. An aged man emerged – well past his fiftieth year, Jovian reckoned. He wore a striking gilded ram's skull and skin as a crown, and his broad features were taut and unforgiving, not unlike the ram's. His grey hair hung in thick, tight curls across his shoulders, his beard equally well groomed and oiled. A pleasant scent of perfumed wax emanated from the man, cutting through the stench of death. An emerald and purple silken robe hugged his shoulders. This was Shapur II, King of Kings, Shahanshah of all Persia.

Jovian's terror grew fierce, as if wolf cubs gnashed in his belly.

Shapur dragged his gaze across Jovian, his hazel eyes glassy, before crouching onto one knee and prostrating himself to kiss the dust.

Jovian frowned, his mind spinning. Then one of his guards jabbed an elbow into his back. At once, he realised his error, and hastily fell to one knee and then lay flat too, pressing his lips to the dust. This was the Persian way – a sign of respect between adversaries. Shapur was first to stand, then he turned to his tent and beckoned Jovian inside.

Jovian stepped forward, leaving his guards behind. Inside, it was pleasantly cool and lit only by the gentle orange glow of daylight. A cloying, floral scent curled from glowing cones of incense, sweetening the air. Spoils of war lined the tent's sides, frames mounted with animal hides, ancient shields and crossed spears. In the centre of the tent sat a squat, oak table, behind which knelt an incongruous pair. One was a white-haired ox of a warrior almost as aged as Shapur, his broad features pinched in discomfort and his breath coming and going in wet

rasps. He wore a bloodstained bandage around his abdomen, barely covering what looked like a mortal wound from yesterday's battle, and a red silk robe held in place by a brooch bearing the image of a golden lion. The other at the table was a slightly-built, sharp-eyed man in a blue silk robe whom Jovian could only liken to a sickly carrion bird. He was hairless, the skin on his scalp and face pallid and stretched so thin that it highlighted every contour of bone and snaking vein. His eyes were gold. His nose curved like a sharp beak over thin, colourless lips.

Shapur knelt beside this pair, then gestured for Jovian to sit opposite. The shahanshah then gestured to the injured warrior and the shrivelled, bald man in turn; 'Cyrus, Spahbad of the Persis Satrapy, and Ramak, Archimagus of those lands, will be joining us in our negotiations.' Cyrus nodded curtly, while Ramak remained statue-still, his eyes seeming to search Jovian.

Jovian awkwardly knelt opposite them. As soon as he settled, his eyes latched onto the silver goblet of dark-red wine that a slave placed before him. He poked out his tongue to wet his lips,

reaching for the cup, when Shapur spoke in Greek.

‘We find ourselves at an unfortunate juncture, Roman brother.’

Jovian snatched his hand back from the goblet, cursing his shaking fingers. His mouth had never been drier. He shuffled to sit straight and tried to flush the fear from his face, but his upper lip twitched nervously.

‘Your armies are broken,’ Shapur continued, ‘you have nowhere to flee. Persian steel and the dark, cold depths of the Tigris ensnare you. So what am I to do?’

‘I trust we will be able to find a

solution to this problem, Persian brother?' Jovian croaked in reply.

'Oh, I am sure we will,' Shapur said. 'In my years I have seen many brave Romans dare to stride into these lands. I grow tired of their folly and of spilling their blood.'

Jovian heard the retort in his mind. And your armies have just as often marched gaily into Roman Anatolia and Syria, claiming those lands as your own by ancestral right. But fear gripped him before he could muster the courage to voice this, and so he merely nodded.

'I know the thoughts that dance

in your mind, Roman. As masters of east and west, we each have much to take pride in, but more to be shameful of,' Shapur added, his gaze growing distant and a hint of submission lacing his words.

For a precious moment, Jovian felt his fear ebb just a fraction. This legendary figure who had led Persia and her armies like a god for so long cut a tired figure. Cyrus and Ramak seemed unaffected by their shahanshah's melancholy though. Cyrus looked on with a barely tempered scowl, his disdain for Jovian plain. Archimagus Ramak, however, perplexed him most of all.

The man watched him studiously, as if searching his thoughts, reading them like a scroll. Then the archimagus turned his eyes upon Shapur, and Jovian wondered if he could read the great king of kings as easily. A curious creature, Jovian surmised. He snatched at the goblet and gulped at the wine, anxious to wash away his distress.

Shapur continued; 'The struggle is endless, Rome tears at our borders and then Persia finds itself battering back at Rome's. To and fro. Forlorn fathers look on from the afterlife as their sons repeat their follies.' He stopped, his gaze again

growing distant, as if caught in a storm of unpleasant memories. Finally, he snapped out of his malaise, his eyes meeting Jovian's once more. 'Today, Persia is the master of this eternal struggle.' He paused for a moment, the silence from Jovian upholding his assertion, then pushed out a sheaf of paper. It had two passages inked upon it – one in Parsi and one in Greek. 'If you wish to see your army safely back in Roman lands, then I am sure you will see the wisdom in conceding to me the following imperial possessions.'

Jovian nodded then listened as

Shapur read the document aloud. Virtually all of Roman-held Mesopotamia was to be surrendered. Everything between the Tigris and the Euphrates. Five trade-rich and strategically positioned regions, plus fifteen well-walled forts. Worse, the three mighty fortress cities on the western banks of the Euphrates – Nisibis, Singara and Castra Maurorum – were to be abandoned by Rome then garrisoned and populated by Persia. These were the bulwarks of Rome's eastern frontier. With these three cities, Shapur and his armies would have

the perfect staging post to crush the remainder of Roman Syria. The blood pounded in Jovian's ears. His eyes darted. He clutched the goblet and drank deeply. Yet the wine struggled to quell his panic.

'You must accept these concessions,' Shapur concluded, placing the scroll before him. 'Else I will be forced to darken the shores of the Tigris with yet more blood.'

The words felt like an icy lance through Jovian's gut.

'Do you accept?' Cyrus hissed, thumping a fist upon the table then wincing and clutching at his bandaged wound.

'At ease, Spahbad,' Shapur raised a placatory hand to Cyrus. 'The Roman will agree, I am sure. The new lands will be yours, as we discussed.'

Jovian looked up, blinking. He looked to the scroll. Several copies lay rolled up beside it. His lips trembled. So far, his meekness and cowardice had afflicted his life like an insatiable parasite. Now it threatened the empire. His thoughts swirled like a sandstorm until he saw one possibility. Let them have the fortress cities, let them have Mesopotamia, he thought, but they must give

something in return.

‘Permit me to present to you an amendment,’ he croaked.

Shapur’s eyes narrowed at this. Cyrus frowned in confusion, then Ramak leant in close to him, whispering in his ear.

Cyrus nodded, then fixed Jovian with a foul glare, his nose wrinkling; ‘You are in no position to bargain.’

Shapur raised a hand to the spahbad. ‘A bargain is more virtuous than yet another slaughter.’ Then his expression darkened. ‘But it must be the right bargain. Go on.’

Jovian gulped. ‘Have

Mesopotamia. But the armies of Persia must never set foot west of the River Euphrates. In return, Rome's legions will never tread upon its eastern banks.'

At this, Cyrus' eyes darted this way and that in confusion. Ramak seemed unmoved, then leant in to whisper again in Cyrus' ear. Cyrus' pallid face wrinkled in anger, then he cast out a disdainful hand towards Jovian. 'With our blade at his neck, he endeavours to dictate the destiny of our people?'

Jovian continued before Cyrus could protest further. 'While such an amendment might be to our

advantage now, it may not be so for long. The eternal struggle you speak of will doubtless soon swing back upon Persia eventually. Let us end it. Here. Now.' He heard the words as if spoken by another. His chest tingled with pride.

Shapur's eyes darted as he contemplated the suggestion. A long silence passed. 'A noble proposal,' he said at last. 'But will the generations to come abide by such an agreement, when we are both but dust and bones?'

The Persian Shahanshah contemplated his own words in another silence. Jovian willed him

to agree. Cyrus and Ramak looked on, eyes narrowed. At last, Shapur gave a faint nod. 'Perhaps, with some adjustment, an amendment can bring stability between our great empires.'

Cyrus stood up at this, his chest heaving in disgust. 'I must protest!'

Shapur looked up to his spahbad, and spoke calmly. 'Leave us then, Cyrus, while we draw up the finer detail of the agreement.'

Cyrus stood, glowered around the gathering, then strode from the table. Jovian instinctively tensed like a strung bow as the man brushed past him. The spahbad

stopped at the tent flap, his breath coming and going in a weak and wet rattle, then beckoned Ramak with him. The archimagus hesitated at first, seemingly unable to tear his steady gaze from Jovian. Then he too stood and followed Cyrus outside.

‘Cyrus is a brave and loyal Spahbad,’ Shapur muttered as the pair left the tent, ‘but a troubled soul in these last years. He will not live past sunset with that wound.’

Jovian wished he could share Shapur’s pity for the man, but he could think of nothing other than the scroll before him. As it stood,

the detail allowed him and his army to retreat to Roman Syria with their lives. But with the territorial concessions made, his reign as emperor was likely to be short and brutal, with the Persian army free to push home their advantage. Peace of some sort was a must. But would a perpetual peace be truly possible, or would pursuing this endanger his chances of ending this day both free and alive? With a shiver, his mind flitted with the tales of past Roman Emperors who had met their fate at the hands of the Persian rulers. He was yet unsure of how far he could push the

great Shapur. The wording of the amendment would be key; it could be the saviour of him, or even of the empire. A question struck him at that moment; which was more important?

How Jovian handled these next moments would define him as a person. A craven or a hero.

He thought of something his father had often repeated in his twilight years of drunken haze, something Jovian had never understood. Until now.

Fear and courage are brothers, warring within the soul.

One will hasten death to you;

one will reap a darker toll.

Fourteen Years Later

May 377 AD

The Roman Province of Thracia

Chapter 1



A stiff breeze carried a cool grey mizzle of rain across the deserted Thracian plain. Then a wagon appeared from the south. Laden with flax, it rocked across the soft grass, the wheels cutting into the wet soil, releasing an earthy scent. The man and girl on the driver's berth were sodden, their hair plastered to their faces. The man drove his mounts with one eye

closed to the rain and the other searching the grey up ahead for the outline of Adrianople.

'Can you see it, Father?' little Tacita asked.

Pontius spat the rainwater from his lips as the wagon bucked and leapt over another dip in the earth. 'Not yet,' he said edgily, peering into the grey, 'not yet.'

He had been nervous about this shortcut from the start. The going was treacherous and he had lost his bearings more than once, but so long as they reached the market in Adrianople safely, his decision to avoid the main roads

would prove a prudent one.

Almost as soon as he had comforted himself with this thought, the sound of hooves thudding on wet earth echoed from the surrounding grey. The breath caught in his throat as, from the mist, grey shapes emerged. Riders. Nine of them. Terror crawled across his skin as he beheld the nearest; braided golden locks knotted atop the head, blue stigmas spiralling across the face, nose wrinkled and teeth bared. A Gothic warrior. Steam billowed from the mount's nose and churning mud flew up in its wake. The rider held aloft a

longsword and let loose a roar that sent Pontius and Tacita scrambling back from the driver's berth. Pontius wrapped an arm around his daughter to shield her, gawping as the longsword swept down for him.

But a cracking of bone rang out and the snarling rider froze, something juddering in his exposed flank. A legionary plumbata. Blood leapt from the Goth's lips as he dropped his sword and clutched at the lead-weighted dart embedded in his ribs. His eyes rolled in his head and he toppled from the saddle, then the riderless mount hared off past the wagon. Pontius

shuddered, darting glances all around. Likewise, the other eight Gothic riders coming for the wagon slowed, uncertain. Then, from the grey behind the wagon, another rumble of hooves rang out, and a lone rider galloped into view. He wore no armour but a spatha hung from his sword belt - a Roman! He was a young man; lean, dark, and shaven-headed, with an aquiline nose. His glower was black under his thick brow as he lifted another of the lead darts from his saddle. Moments later, a second rider burst into view; young too, but broader-shouldered with blonde locks and

pale skin, also wearing just a tunic, sword belt and boots. The pair held the Gothic riders at bay with their glowers for a few heartbeats. But the Goths realised they still had the weight of numbers and trotted forward menacingly. At this, the two Roman riders loosed another dart each, striking down two more foes, before drawing their spathas.

‘Equites!’ the dark Roman rider cried out, waving his spatha to a point behind the Goths.

The six remaining Goths frowned and slowed, then looked over their shoulders. From the mizzle, a turma of thirty Roman

riders emerged, clad in mail, soaked red cloaks and crowned with iron helms, spathas drawn. With a cry, the equites and the two unarmoured Roman riders rushed for the Goths. In moments it was over, one Gothic head flying from its shoulders to bounce across the sodden plain, another run through and the rest fleeing in panic.

Pontius lifted his shaking arm from his daughter, in disbelief that both were unharmed. The dark rider and his blonde comrade sidled up to the wagon, both slick with rain, chests heaving and faces stained with blood-spray.

'Be on your way to the city, and be swift,' the dark one said.

Pontius nodded hurriedly. 'Aye, aye we will,' he agreed, taking the reins with one shaking hand and turning Tacita's gaze from the headless Gothic corpse with the other. 'But who are you? You are not legionaries?' he said, eyeing their dress.

'Aye, we are legionaries. But for today we are scouts. I am Optio Numerius Vitellius Pavo of Legio XI Claudia, second cohort, first century. This my Tesserarius, Sura,' he gestured to his blond comrade. 'We've been tracking those Gothic

riders for two days. Luck would have it we met with the equites on patrol just this morning; else we might not have been able to save you.'

'Well I will make an offering to Mithras tonight,' Pontius grinned. 'May he be with you in all your efforts, Legionary.'

With that, he lashed the reins of his horses and the wagon moved off once again.



Pavo and Sura parted from the equites then travelled south-east for the rest of the day. When

darkness fell, they camped under the shelter of a spruce thicket on a soft carpet of pine needles then rose at dawn to yet another damp day. After sharing a light breakfast of boiled eggs, bread and honey, they drank and watered their mounts at a nearby stream, readying to set off for Constantinople.

Pavo splashed the cool water over his stubbled scalp then looked over his shoulder and off to the north-west from where they had come. Through the grey cloud, he could just make out the Haemus Mountains, the peaks looming like

the fangs of a predator. Moesia and Thracia, once Roman heartlands, were now riven by the Gothic War and occupied by Fritigern's hordes. The Roman limes had been hastily withdrawn to the south of the mountains in an attempt to curb the Gothic movements. But the impoverished limitanei legions manning those new timber forts and patrolling those treacherous lands had been battered back further still in these last weeks. Indeed, he thought, touching his fingers to the dark stain on his ribs and the stinging Gothic longsword cut underneath, enemy scouts were

being sighted further south with every passing week, roving ever closer to the major cities, Adrianople and Constantinople itself.

‘Take a good, long look,’ Sura said, resting an elbow on Pavo’s shoulder and gazing back with him. ‘For it will be some time before we set eyes upon these lands again.’

Pavo thought of the mission that had been hanging over the XI Claudia for these last weeks. A mission that would take them thousands of miles to the east, to the Persian frontier. He shrugged. ‘When I first joined the legion,

everything about this land seemed wretched. Now it feels like I'm leaving my home behind in its hour of need.'

Sura chuckled dryly at this, patting at the legionary phalera medallion hanging on a strap around Pavo's neck. 'All you've talked of these last two weeks is about going to the Persian frontier. About him.'

Pavo shared an earnest gaze with his friend. Sura was one of the few who knew the truth behind the phalera. About Father. 'Aye, I may fret about this place when we are gone, but nothing will stop me

going east.'

Sura grinned. 'Stubborn whoreson since the day I met you.'

They set off once more across the plains, grateful when at last they reached the paved Via Egnatia, the great highway winding west-east across Thracia. By mid-morning, the clouds and mizzle had dispersed and a languid sunshine bathed the land. Before noon, they were within sight of Constantinople.

The imperial capital dominated the horizon, a mass of marble and limestone perched on the edge of the land, framed by the glittering waters of the Golden Horn

in the north, the Bosphorus Strait in the east and the Propontus in the south. The broad walls were gemmed with glinting intercisa helms, scale vests and sharpened spear tips of the sentries. The banners atop the towers hung limp in the windless and clement air. Pavo took a deep breath to appreciate the sight, the pleasant heat, the chattering cicada song and the nutty scent of barely. For just a moment, the war with the Goths that raged in the north, and what lay ahead in the east seemed comfortably distant. Then Sura spoiled the moment of serenity.

‘That cheeky bastard’s on watch again,’ he grumbled as they approached, squinting up at the battlements above the arched Saturninus Gate.

Pavo followed his gaze to the sneering sentries up there, then called out; ‘Optio Numerius Vitellius Pavo of the XI Claudia, returning from scouting duty.’

The lead sentry, a short, plump man, glowered down the length of his nose as if he was a giant. ‘Ah, the limitanei dregs – taking up space in our city barracks now that your border forts have been shattered?’ The words

betrayed not a hint of humour.

'Perhaps you would like to discuss this with the tribunos of my legion?' Pavo fixed him with a gimlet stare until the man looked away to his comrades. He heard their mutterings carried on a gentle breeze.

'He's with Tribunus Gallus?' one voice hissed. 'Open the bloody gates, quickly!'

The thick, iron-studded timber gates groaned open and the pair heeled their mounts on under the shade of the fortified gateway. At once, the sedate chatter of the open countryside was gone. In its

place came the frenzied babble of the city streets. The influx of refugees from the Gothic war had swollen this ward to breaking point. The broad, marble-lined Imperial Way was packed with a sea of ruddy faces, gleaming bald pates, waving arms, swishing horse manes and tails and juddering wagons. Aromas of wood smoke, sweat and dung battled in the air as the pair picked their way through these masses. They passed under the shade of a squat marble cistern, then had to wait their turn to trot around a pile of grain sacks being unloaded beside the horreum to fill

its silos.

A trader forced his way in front of Sura as he waited. 'For you, ochre to stain your skin!' the man yelled, holding up a clay pot.

'Nah, you can't improve upon perfection.' Sura shrugged and rode on past the trader, rounding the grain sacks.

'You can't polish horseshit either,' Pavo mused in his friend's wake, cocking an eyebrow. 'Though you certainly can talk it.'

Sura scowled over his shoulder at Pavo as the trader melted back into the throng, roaring with laughter.

The Imperial Way led them downhill, and the grandeur of the city was unveiled before them. Sweeping hills encrusted with marble and brick, tall and ornate palaces, red-tiled Christian domes and columns bearing statues of emperors past pointing skywards. The opulence intensified as the peninsula tapered to its tip, where the Imperial Palace sat perched high on the first hill, overlooking the Hippodrome. Workers crawled over this finery like ants, still busy harvesting gold from the finest monuments to fund the legions in the Gothic struggle.

They cut across the Forum of the Ox and made their way to the north of the city. After passing under the shadow of the Great Aqueduct of Valens, they approached the city's northern sea walls where a salt-tang from the Golden Horn spiced the air. Pavo looked up to the small, squat barrack compound at the end of the street, near the Neorion Harbour gate. Instantly, he and Sura halted as a barking voice from within the compound cut across the hubbub of the streets. A voice that refused to be ignored.

Gallus.

'Could scare the shit out of a bear from fifty stadia,' Sura muttered, sitting upright, shoulders squared.

Pavo straightened likewise, instantly sympathising with the poor legionaries in there and on the sharp end of the tirade. The Tribunus of the XI Claudia Legion was relentless. A man who ate as rarely as he slept, and seldom showed anything other than pure steel to his ranks. But a man with boundless courage.

They came to the main gate of the barrack compound. This had been the home for Gallus and his

small vexillatio of the XI Claudia for these last few weeks. Two centuries, detached from the rest of the legion and stationed here to prepare for the mission to the east. The sentry on the barrack walls wheeled a hand in the air to someone unseen, below.

The gates creaked open and the training yard inside the compound was unveiled. One century of eighty men marched in tight formation around the square, ruby shields only inches apart, their mail vests polished and their tunics underneath bleached white with purple hems. The iron fins on their

intercisa helmets bobbed like a school of sharks. Their spear tips pierced the air and their spathas swung from their scabbards in time to the march. And, as a recent measure, each man carried a composite bow strapped to his back. The aquilifer marched near the front, carrying the legion standard; a staff topped with a silver eagle, and a ruby bull banner hanging from the crossbar just underneath. This was Centurion Quadratus' century, but today Primus Pilus Felix – Gallus' right-hand man – led them. This short and swarthy, fork-bearded Greek

showed no sign of fatigue as the drill went on. And it had been ongoing for some time, Pavo reckoned, going by the sweat lashing from some of his younger comrades' faces. Some of them shot furtive and pleading glances to the rear compound wall. Pavo looked to the figure standing up there and knew their pleas would go unheard.

Gallus was perched there like a bird of prey, watching in silence, his ruby cloak wrapped around his tall, lean frame. The plume of his intercisa danced in the sea breeze. The rim and cheek guards of his helm hugged his gaunt, starved-

wolf expression. Rumours had spread that Gallus was ill at ease with this mission and with the enforced separation from the remainder of his legion – the few other tattered centuries of the XI Claudia still stationed out in the makeshift Thracian Limes. Indeed, Gallus' mood often seemed aligned to that of a bear with a hangover who had just trodden upon a rusty nail. The tribunus' ice-blue eyes scrutinised every movement of the marching men, just waiting to bark them into line should they dare stray an inch from their positions.

As he and Sura dismounted,

Pavo noticed Gallus' glare flick across to them. They tensed instinctively.

Then a heavy pair of hands slapped onto their shoulders from behind. 'Finished pussyng about on horseback, have you?' a gruff voice spoke.

Pavo's heart lurched and Sura yelped beside him. He spun to see Centurion Zosimus, his immediate superior and leader of the other century of the vexillatio. The oak-limbed and granite-faced giant wore a mischievous grin under his shattered nose, and his stubbled anvil jaw and shaven scalp were

bathed in sweat.

‘Yes, sir!’ the pair replied.

‘At ease,’ the big Thracian said, picking some strand of meat from his teeth. Then he frowned, his gaze shifting to the bloodstain on Pavo’s tunic. ‘What happened out there?’

‘It’s nothing, the bleeding has stopped,’ Pavo replied. ‘A Gothic scouting party had broken through the temporary limes and they were riding south-east of Adrianople.’

‘South-east of the city?’ Zosimus’ eyes widened and his skin paled.

Pavo bit his tongue in censure,

remembering that Zosimus' wife and young daughter were still in Adrianople. 'They were just looking for easy pillage sir. Only nine of them – little more than brigands. They were harassing a group of farming wagons but we headed them off. Adrianople itself is still untroubled – we met with a turma of equites from the V Macedonica out there, and their decurion assured me that the city is now well bolstered and garrisoned should the Goths turn on its walls.'

'Aye, well, get your wound seen to in any case,' Zosimus flicked a finger to the flat-roofed

building in the corner of the compound, 'Gallus has insisted that all such things are checked and cleaned up before we set sail tomorrow. I'm bunking near you and I don't want bloody maggots crawling about when I'm trying to sleep.' The big Thracian scratched at his jaw, then clicked his fingers as they made to turn away. 'Oh, and get straight back out here when you've been seen to – Gallus wants to inspect our century this afternoon. We might only be limitanei – as the smart-arses in this city are quick enough to remind us – but he doesn't want us

stumbling out to the east like some rabble of militia.'

'Yes, sir,' Pavo nodded stiffly.

The pair led their mounts to the stable and tethered them there, feeding each a clump of hay by the water trough. From there, they strolled over to the valetudinarium. Inside this medical building was a single, large room with a broad bench running along one wall, strewn with pots, scalpels, forceps and bloodstained linen bandages. Five of the six beds were empty. The sixth bed in the far corner bore the sweat-streaked, hulking figure of Centurion Quadratus, dressed

only in a loincloth. A woman stood over him, back turned, tending to his injured ankle. The big Gaul roared in agony as the amber-haired nurse twisted his foot round in its full range of motion.

‘Oh stifle your yelping – I thought you were supposed to be a fearless centurion?’ the woman chided him casually.

‘In the name of Mithras – give me more wine!’ Quadratus roared, grappling at the ends of his blonde moustache to distract himself from the pain. His eyes fell upon Pavo. ‘I know you said she was dangerous in bed, but this is bloody torture!’

At once, the woman stopped what she was doing, stood upright, then spun to face Pavo. Her amber locks swished round in her wake and her usually milky skin was flushed with anger. She rested her hands on her hips and at that moment her sapphire gaze seemed even more fearsome than Gallus'.

'Felicia, I only said that when they had plied me with wine . . . ' he started

'And anyway,' Sura butted in in an attempt to help, 'it's a compliment, sort of . . . '

This only seemed to ignite Felicia's fury further. Without

shifting her gaze from the pair, she reached down and wrenched at Quadratus' ankle once more, eliciting another hoarse cry from the centurion.

Pavo and Sura flinched as if feeling the pain first-hand.

Felicia then strode purposefully over to Pavo. But her anger faded when she saw the blood on his tunic. 'What on earth have you done to yourself out there?' She hiked the garment up to examine his ribs. 'Scouting, you said – how many scouts end up nearly gutted on a Gothic longsword.'

Sura made eyes at Pavo then

motioned to the doorway. 'Felicia, I'm fine. I'll leave you two to talk.'

With Sura gone and Quadratus harrumphing in the far corner, they were alone.

'You seem tense,' Pavo offered, slipping his hands around her waist.

She batted his advances away and insisted on prodding at his wound. 'I spent the morning tearing an arrow head from a boy's lung,' she said tersely, lifting his tunic to his shoulders then soaking a pad of linen with acetum and dabbing it across the wound to clear it of blood and dirt. 'I don't have time to

relax. Now take that filthy tunic off,' she grumbled, helping him remove the garment so he stood in only boots and loincloth.

Pavo searched for the right words as she hurriedly wrapped a length of bandage around his lean torso. Felicia had been through so much in these last few years. She had lost everyone. Everyone except Pavo. Now he was to leave her behind.

'If we don't speak honestly now, Felicia, then . . . ' his words trailed off and he changed his tack, looping his arms around her once more. When she tried to resist and

brush him off again, he gripped her tightly, until he felt her heart beat against his breast. 'Tonight is our last night together. By noon tomorrow, I will be at sea, headed east. And I will be gone for some time.'

I might never return, like Father, a voice added from the dark recesses of his mind.

At last, Felicia's façade crumbled. 'Don't you know that my every thought rests on that?' she said, her voice cracking. A sob escaped as she buried her head in Pavo's chest. 'I've heard what the Persian frontier is like. I . . . ' her

voice cracked.

Pavo held a palm to her face and stroked away a tear with his thumb.

Felicia met his gaze. 'Do you even know why you have been summoned there?'

Pavo could offer nothing. All anyone of the XI Claudia vexillatio knew was that they had to make their way east, to the city of Antioch. There, Emperor Valens would disclose to them the details of this sortie that had so far remained shrouded in mystery. 'Felicia, I don't know, even Gallus doesn't know, but . . . ' he said,

barely realising that he was toying with the outline of the phalera as he spoke.

‘But you have to go, regardless?’ she finished. ‘Even if there was no mission, you would have to go east, wouldn’t you?’ She traced a finger over the medallion too now.

Legio II Parthica the inscription read. Father’s legion. Since the day the old crone had pressed the piece into Pavo’s hand, it had given him strength. Strength to survive after news came to him of Father’s slaying in the sacking of the eastern city of Bezabde.

Strength to carry on through the years of slavery that followed. Strength to seize his chance of freedom and serve in the legions. Then, just weeks ago, that had all changed with word brought from the Persian frontier. It seemed that some of the Parthica had survived the fall of Bezabde, being taken captive and sent to toil in the treacherous Persian salt mines.

Even without horse, coin or water, I would travel east alone to find out what happened to you. If Mithras wills it, I will find you or your bones out there, Father, the voice in his mind answered with

alarming clarity. He looked down as a tear of his own splashed onto Felicia's fingers, then nodded in silence.

They each looked up, seeing each other through their sorrowful blur, then Pavo pressed his lips to Felicia's, tasting her salty tears. Their embrace was lasting and they clung to one another, her warmth like a salve to his tired body. It took a gruff grunt from the corner of the room to end their moment, somewhat abruptly.

'When you two come up for air, can I get some wine over here?' Quadratus moaned. 'I need

something to numb the bloody pain.'

At this, Felicia's face split with a wide and toothy grin and she wiped the tears from her eyes. The sight warmed Pavo's heart. Felicia squeezed his hand then slipped away to tend to Quadratus. Pavo gazed after her, until Gallus' barking from the walls snapped him from his trance. He looked to the doorway and out into the training yard. The iron tribunus was now descending the stairs to berate his men further. Pavo stepped outside, readying to help Zosimus in gathering the century. He heard the

lapping of waves from over the sea walls and saw the masts of the two triremes that would carry them towards the rising sun. A shiver danced across his skin and he answered the dark whispers in his mind.

To the east, then.

Chapter 2



The following morning at dawn the XI Claudia set out on their voyage to Antioch. With a crew of well-fed remiges manning the oars, the two triremes cut through the calm, turquoise waters of the Propontus, startling thick, silvery shoals of fish and weaving between myriad verdant islands. The one hundred and sixty legionaries of the XI Claudia wandered the decks of this

miniature fleet – Gallus, Felix, Centurion Zosimus and his century on the lead vessel and Centurion Quadratus and his men on the other. Unburdened of armour and packs, they were in good spirits. On the flagship, they helped with the rigging, jibed with the overly officious beneficiarius' insistence on supply crates being stacked at perfect right angles, and played dice on the deck in the pleasant early summer sunshine.

At this stage, Pavo could only laugh at the memory of his previous sea voyage – for some reason he had spent that journey doubled

over the lip of the vessel, hurling up bile, but this time his stomach was calm like the still waters. But, when the fleet passed through the Hellespont and entered the waters of the Mare Aegaeum, he remembered exactly why that was. A wind picked up and the waves grew choppy. In moments, Pavo felt as if his gut was on fire and his head spun as if he had drunk too much ale. He staggered across deck to the prow, then doubled over to reacquaint himself with the olives, bread and watered wine he had consumed at the outset of the voyage. His vomiting session

roused a chorus of cheering from his comrades, supportively orchestrated by Zosimus and Sura. They were swiftly silenced, however, when a sudden, sharp gust cast some orangey, bilious spray back over their faces.

Tired and nauseous, Pavo found sleep easy to come by. A stiff northerly wind helped them on past the islands of Chios and Samos and into the southern stretches of the Aegaeum. He woke on the fifth day of their journey as they stopped at the well-fortified port of Rhodes to take on fresh water and rations. Just stepping onto solid land

instantly refreshed him. They visited one of the many dockside taverns, but only had time to fill their bellies with a thick and hearty lamb stew and a few jugs of the famed local wine. Quadratus was particularly disgusted at having to leave again so soon – just as a curvaceous local woman was growing merry enough to succumb to his charms. Meanwhile, Gallus had spent the whole time ashore quarrelling with the portmaster about something.

They set off again, turning east to sail into the Mare Internum and along the coast of southern

Anatolia. Pavo took up a spot at the stern, resting his back against the lip of the vessel, awaiting the return of the vile nausea.

He pulled a strip of scarlet silk from his belt and held it under his nose. Felicia had scented the piece with a rose perfume. He closed his eyes and imagined nuzzling into her neck, just as he had done on that last night. Gallus had given him leave from the barracks. So, in their tenement room by the Saturninus Gate, he and Felicia had eaten a meal of figs and pheasant, washed down with a jug of rich red wine. They had made love until

exhaustion put an end to their endeavours. Then he had slept without nightmares. The visions that had haunted his nights for years rarely let him be; images of Father stood alone on a sea of sand dunes, his empty, staring eye sockets, his hands outstretched, then the sandstorm that always rose and consumed them both. Tears welled in Pavo's eyes.

At that moment, a wave rolled under the ship, shaking Pavo back to the present. He braced for the sickness to return. But it did not. He frowned, patting his belly.

'Found your sea legs at last?'

Felix asked, strolling across the deck.

‘I pray to Mithras I have,’ Pavo chuckled.

‘Well the next test will be to see how we cope in the heat of Syria.’ Felix eyed the horizon and stroked at his forked beard as he said this. ‘This sortie might be little more than policing Antioch or something. They have trouble with partisan urban cohorts in the eastern cities, I hear. We might rarely have to step out of the shade . . . but I doubt it.’

‘Do you have anything to go on, sir?’

'About the mission? Not a thing. Not a bloody thing.' His expression was stern and his gaze had drifted to Gallus, standing near the prow, silent and staring, his plume and cloak fluttering in the breeze. While the rest of the legionaries wore only tunics and boots, Gallus was – as always – encased in armour. 'I fear the tribunos knows more than he is letting on. He's protecting us.' Felix looked to Pavo with the driest of grins. 'And Gallus rarely shies from scaring the shit out of us. So whatever it is, it will not be pretty.' Felix took a long pull on his skin of

soured wine and issued a brisk sigh. 'And things are going askew already,' he said, lowering his voice. 'Keep this from the ranks, but we were expecting to meet an escort galley in Rhodos – men sent from Antioch by Emperor Valens to guide us through the pirate-ridden waters ahead and safely to the east.'

'Aye?' Pavo frowned, remembering Gallus' quarrel with the portmaster. 'You suspect trouble?'

'No, I expect it,' he said with a mirthless grin, then strode over to a cluster of legionaries playing dice.

Pavo heard the raucous

laughter that erupted as Felix made some quip about one legionary's personal hygiene. But he could not shift his gaze from Gallus.



The salt spray had long-since coated Gallus and chilled his skin, but he was unblinking. He sensed the world drift by all around him, as if crying out to him to remind him he was alive. The sun-bleached coastline of southern Anatolia, the crashing waves, the skirling breeze, the tang of the sea air, an occasional shadow from scudding clouds and the heat of the pleasant

sun. But he was lost in his thoughts. His gaze remained on the small, carved wooden idol in his hand. It was well worn, but the features of a muscular Mithras emerging from cold, lifeless rock were still discernible.

Mithras, he mouthed silently; we made a bargain, did we not? I pledged everything to you and asked only one thing in return. That you allow me to forget.

No sooner had the words crossed his lips than the images returned to him. Olivia. The sweet, scented nape of her neck. The warmth of her as he slid his hands

around her waist. The awe in which he beheld the tiny bundle in her arms. Baby Marcus' ice-blue eyes staring back at him in equal wonderment. Ice-blue, like steel. At once, he closed his eyes. But he could not stave off the echoes of the clashing blades, then the images of the roaring pyre and the blackened bodies of mother and child at the heart of its fury.

Why will you not allow me to forget? Must I do more for you?

Only a stinging spray of saltwater offered any form of reply. He took off his helmet, shaking the water from the black plume, then

smoothed at his grey-flecked peak of hair. He turned from the prow to look over the deck and his men. Their faces were untroubled. They jibed and joked. They still had the gift of the soldier's skin, he thought. That tough callus that grew over a legionary's heart soon after his first taste of bloodshed and loss. They might need it, he thought, the dark cloud of the missing escort galley still hovering in his thoughts.

At that moment, his gaze fell on a lone figure at the stern. Pavo. The young optio had been a mere recruit only a year or so previously. Crucially, he had been one of the

few that had survived the treacherous events in the time since. He noticed that Pavo looked to the eastern horizon, lost in thought like a reflection of himself only moments ago. The young optio toyed with the bronze medallion hung around his neck. Gallus knew of the lad's conviction that the piece was some link to his father.

'Aye, we all seek answers,' he muttered to himself. Realising he was close to smiling, he gripped the idol of Mithras tightly once more, tucked it away in his purse and grimaced, turning to face forward once again. 'Perhaps the east will

offer us both . . . ' his words trailed off.

Squinting and shading his eyes from the sun, he saw something in the waves between their fleet and a limestone cove on the coast. It was a liburnian – a swift vessel with a solitary mast and a single bank of oars. The sail was sun-bleached and dyed with red, vertical stripes. There was something splashing, thrashing wildly in the vessel's wake. The crew seemed to be crowded around the stern, cheering and whooping. Gallus frowned and then his nose wrinkled as he saw what they dragged behind the boat.

A man, bound at the wrists. His body was stained red with wounds, and the crew were throwing cuts of bloody meat into the surrounding water. The man's distant screams were harrowing, and Gallus soon realised why. Dark, shining humps split the water's surface near the thrashing man. Then fins and thrashing tails. Next, the surface erupted as a blacktip shark burst from the depths. Its jaws stretching wide to reveal a ridged, pink throat lined with dagger-like teeth. In an instant, the jaws clamped down upon the tethered wretch. This cut the screaming short as blood

pumped into the air and the water turned crimson. A cheer erupted before another poor soul was led up to the stern of the vessel. His wrists were shackled, and he wore a blood-spattered, off-white tunic hemmed with purple – legionary issue. The man puffed his chest out in defiance and spat some curse at his captors, drawing raucous laughter from them. The crew pulled in the rope from the sea and looped the frayed and bloodied end around the man's shackles.

'No! Pirates?' Felix said, sidling up next to him.

'Aye, Cretans, I'd wager. And

that,' he stabbed a finger at the crippled hull of a Roman bireme dashed against the rocks near the edge of the cove, pirates scurrying across its remains to salvage its cargo, 'was the escort vessel we were supposed to meet in Rhodos.' He nodded to the man in chains at the stern of the liburnian. 'And that poor bastard,' Gallus continued as the crew kicked the shackled man from the ship and into the sea, 'is the last of her crew.' Blood spray and tortured screaming followed, and both men looked away, sickened.

'Look, there's another

liburnian,' Zosimus added, stabbing a finger between Gallus and Felix, pointing to the cove. Sure enough, hidden by a protective arm of rock, another of the nimble pirate warships rested, its bow anchored on a stretch of white sand.

Gallus' skin prickled. Centurion Quadratus' trireme was far behind – barely a dot in the western horizon, and they could not risk facing these two light and lithe pirate liburnians alone. He sucked in a breath to give the order to turn round, but another cry cut him off.

'Mithras, they've seen us!' Noster shrieked.

A lone figure high up on the seaborne liburnian's mast was waving and crying out, one hand pointing right at the Roman trireme. The men on deck instantly leapt into action, rushing to man the oars and adjust the rigging. Likewise, the train of men on the shore of the cove dropped their cargo and rushed to the beached liburnian, readying to launch it.

Gallus' eyes narrowed on the liburnian as it tacked round under oar until the wind filled its sails. At once, the oars were withdrawn and the nimble vessel cut through the waves, headed straight for the lone

Roman trireme. He glanced to the gradually growing form of Quadratus' ship – still too far away to aid them, then swept his gaze across his men, meeting the eyes of every one of them.

'We're on our own. To arms!'



Pavo buckled his sword belt on over his mail shirt, fumbled with the straps of his helmet, hefted his shield and spear, then took his place just in front of the legionary line. They stood facing the prow, watching as the liburnian sliced ever closer. His heart thundered in

his chest and he welcomed wryly the now familiar pre-battle symptoms of a parched mouth and full-to-bursting bladder.

‘Get your armour on! Shields up, spears held high, take the strain!’ Centurion Zosimus cried, striding across the legionary front as the pirate liburnian sliced ever closer.

Pavo saw Habitus and Sextus jostling to swap places in the line. He barked at them; ‘You heard the centurion – get in line, ready to face your enemy!’

‘Noster, Rufus – will you lift your bloody shields,’ Sura added

from his position on the right of the front rank. 'The centurion and optio will shout at you and tell you they're going to kick your arses, but I will actually kick your arses!'

Meanwhile, Gallus was perched at the front of the vessel with the beneficiarius, one foot on the prow, one hand grasping the rigging for balance, the other raised, directly overhead. They had to destroy or engage the seaborne liburnian before it could garner support from the other one, almost fully launched now. In a good wind like this, the two liburnians would dance around the sturdy but

cumbersome Roman trireme.

'Come on,' Gallus growled through gritted teeth, one fist clenched, as if willing the Roman trireme and the onrushing liburnian to collide. Pavo saw there were more than one hundred crewmen onboard. A motley bunch, scarred, sun-burnished, some lining the prow, others clinging to the mast and the rigging. They clutched blades, spears, shields and bows and were clad in leather and scale vests. Some wore felt caps, others old Roman helmets and some eastern style conical helms with leather aventails. At the last, the

pirate vessel banked to one side. Gallus' hand fell to the right. 'They're cutting past!'

'To the right, ready plumbatae!' Zosimus cried. Each in the legionary line unclipped one of the lead-weighted darts from the rear of their shield. With a thunder of boots and rustling of armour, they rushed to the right lip of the trireme.

Pavo hoisted his plumbata as the trireme tilted, revealing the deck of the liburnian – a good seven feet lower than the trireme's. The pirate crew had bunched together mid-deck and every one of

them held a sling overhead, already blurred in motion and ready to loose.

‘Shields!’ Gallus cried as they cast their sling-arms forward and loosed.

Pavo dropped his dart and pulled up his shield with a heartbeat to spare, a piece of shot crunching through it and hissing past his temple. The legionary nearest him was punched back, too slow to raise his shield, the shot taking him in the cheek. Three others fell back likewise, the rest of the hail flying overhead, or battering down on shields and deck.

The liburnian peeled away, seemingly ready to circle around and come headlong for the trireme once more. The pirate leader looked back at them, perched on the stern. He was a swarthy man with dark, curly hair and glinting gold hoops in each ear. He wore hide boots, a fine white tunic, an embroidered green cape and a curved falcata in his sword belt. His face split in a broad grin as he took to calmly carving slices from an apple with his dagger and crunching upon them. 'Be sure not to bleed upon your cargo – keep it good for me!' he called out, then threw his

head back in laughter.

Zosimus roared at this, thumping a fist down upon the vessel's edge. 'Draw your bows! This time, be ready!'

Pavo glanced over his shoulder to see Quadratus' trireme closer but still too far away to help. Then he glanced to the cove, the second liburnian was now free of the sand and the crew were climbing aboard. 'They'll tear us apart like those sharks,' he hissed to Sura, by his side.

'They're coming again!' Gallus cried out from the prow, his eyes trained along his nose like a hawk

watching its prey.

'Nock your bows, be ready to loose!' Pavo cried as he nocked an arrow to his own bowstring then drew it back until his arm tensed and his forefinger touched his cheek, his gaze trained on the spot where the liburnian would pass in moments. But something didn't feel right. His bow seemed to lack tension. As before, the liburnian cut across the right of the Roman trireme. Zosimus raised his arm and chopped it down like an axe. 'Loo . . . ' his words trailed off.

The deck was empty . . . no, the crew were crouched behind the

lip of the vessel, shielded from Roman sights. The legionary bows slackened in confusion. Suddenly a whirring filled the air, from the liburnian's sail.

Pavo looked up just in time to see the shark-like grins of the clutch of slingers clinging to the mast, and perched along the timbers behind the sail. 'Loose!' Zosimus cried. The Roman bows loosed, but with a flurry of dull and weak twangs, arrows flew wildly off course, some dropping meekly into the waves, others sailing high up, almost vertically, before toppling back onto the Roman deck. Not one troubled

the pirate crew. Pavo glared at his bow – the sinew and horn had split and the bowstring was sodden. The damp! he cursed, then braced as he heard the pirate slings spitting forth. 'Down!'

A punch of ripping flesh and crunching bone rang out. The salt spray was tinged red. One young legionary staggered back, dropping his shield and clutching at the dark-red hole that a piece of slingshot had punched in his forehead. Confusion washed over his features as blood pumped from the hole, then his eyes rolled and he crumpled to the deck. Seven more

fell. The undamaged liburnian once again peeled clear of the Roman vessel. The pirate leader threw his apple core into the waves then cupped his hands around his mouth;

‘Your ships will make a fine addition to my fleet,’ he cried, his smile broadening.

Zosimus threw down his shield and grappled the edge of the vessel with one hand then reached out with the other, as if strangling an imaginary victim. ‘Come and fight us on foot, face to face, steel against steel.’

Felix watched as the liburnian came round again. ‘We need to halt

them, pin them, somehow.'

'Aye, a harpax would be a fine thing,' Gallus growled, his expression darker than a thundercloud.

Pavo's thoughts raced – he had seen etchings of the ancient grappling hook that the republican galleys had used, centuries ago, to snare, reel in and then board enemy vessels. But etchings were of no use now. He looked all across the deck. There were planks of timber, barrels and strips of leather and linen, but they needed something solid – something fastened to their trireme that would

also catch on the pirate liburnian. Then his eyes locked onto the anchor chain.

He looked up, seeing Gallus' eyes fixed on it too. The tribunos turned, met Pavo's gaze and those of every man nearby. 'Get the anchor to the lip of the boat!'

'What the?' Sura frowned as a group of legionaries clustered around the rusting iron burden. 'We're dropping anchor?'

'In a way, yes,' Pavo wheezed as he crouched and helped lift the iron monolith to his shoulders, the barnacles scraping on his knuckles. Even with the efforts of twelve

men, the burden was enormous.
'Now give us a hand.'

'They're coming round again,'
Zosimus yelled, 'and the second
liburnian is on its way too.'

Gallus' glare sharpened as he
ushered Pavo and the legionaries
over to the ship's edge. 'That's it,
keep low, keep down,' he
encouraged them as they took the
anchor on their backs, crouching
below the lip of the vessel.

The liburnian cut once more
along the side of the trireme.

'Slings again, ready shields!'
Zosimus bawled.

But before the Cretan pirates

could loose their hail, Gallus stood tall. 'Up and over!' he roared.

Pavo cried with the colossal effort of rising with the anchor on his back. His comrades groaned likewise, but the iron monolith ground and splintered against the edge of the trireme and then, at once, the weight was gone.

Pavo panted, seeing the pirates gawp, their slings falling limp. The pirate captain's broad grin faded, and his face greyed as the anchor hurtled down, then plunged into the deck of the liburnian with a crash of shredding timber. Dust and splinters billowed into the air, and

then all was silent. For a moment, it seemed that the hole in the deck had caused little harm as the liburnian continued on its sweeping course. But then the anchor chain lifted and grew taut as the liburnian drew away from the hull of the Roman trireme. First, there was a groan of timber, then a chopping, snapping and shredding of collapsing hull. The Roman trireme tilted, but the lighter liburnian took the brunt of the stress.

‘Pull down the sails!’ the pirate captain cried. But it was too late. With the liburnian at full sail, the grappling anchor caused the pirate

vessel to pivot sharply, almost dragging its hull below the water so acute was the angle. This jolted the pirates, casting them across the decks like toys. Some were catapulted overboard, one serving as an appetiser for the gathered shiver of sharks – his body torn apart in moments.

As the snared and crippled liburnian settled, the legionaries hauled at the anchor chain and drew the vessel back towards the trireme. When the hulls touched, Gallus stepped up on the edge of the trireme and glowered down on the pirate crew, his teeth clenched

and his eyes alight with fury. Pavo joined him. Zosimus, Sura and the rest of the century were quick to follow.

‘Finish them!’ he roared.

Like swooping eagles, the century leapt down onto the pirate deck. They came together as one, nudging together, spears raised, shields interlocked. The pirates’ shock faded when they realised they had no option but to fight or die.

The leader drew his hook-ended falcata blade, then waved his men together. They presented a rabble of shields and blades. With a

cry, they rushed the Roman square.

Pavo felt his whole body tremble with battle-rage as a roar tumbled from his lungs and mixed with those of his comrades. A clatter of iron on iron was accompanied by a ferocious jolt to his shield arm as the Cretan pirate charge battered the Roman square back.

'Stay together! Cut to the throat, to the thigh, keep your shields high,' Pavo cried out as he felt the legionaries either side of him struggle to stay on their feet. He lowered his shield just enough to see over it, and was greeted by

the sight of a bald, sunburnt giant thrusting a curved blade at his face. Pavo jinked to one side, the blade singing past his ear, then jabbed his spear out, lancing the giant through the chest. The giant's grimace suddenly vanished, and a look of confusion replaced it along with an eruption of black blood from his lips and nostrils. Pavo ripped his spear back from the man's ribs, then slipped on something and crashed to the deck. He shuddered as he realised he had fallen in the spilled guts of one of his dead comrades, but when the legionary square pushed forward around him, he

knew they were winning. He leapt up and barged forward to take his place in the front line again, drawing his spatha and hacking out at the rodent-faced brigand that lurched for him. The spatha blade cut through the man's neck and brought with it a shower of blood. Pavo felt the hot gore splatter on his lips and grimaced at the familiar metallic stench.

'Come on – let's finish this,' he heard Gallus urge them on. 'These bastards have had their day, now let's show them the road to Hades!'

With renewed vigour, the Roman square barged forward.

Pirates fell in swathes and the shattered decks ran slick with blood.

‘Fight on, you dogs,’ the pirate captain roared, hacking at one of his men who fled from the fight, ‘our reinforcements are almost here.’

Pavo heard the ensuing pirate roar of approval and shot a glance out to sea. Indeed, the second liburnian was slicing towards them, a hundred or more eager crewmen perched around the edge of the vessel, eager to join and surely turn the fight. But, like a predator lunging from the waves, the prow of

Centurion Quadratus' trireme hammered into the side of the second liburnian. The smaller ship crumpled under the impact and the crew were cast into the waves.

The pirates before Pavo fell silent and blanched at this, some backing off only to be cut down by the legionary advance. The last few even took to leaping overboard, preferring to take their chances with the sharks instead of the blood-soaked Roman blades. At the last, only the pirate leader remained. He backed away, towards the stern, readying to leap into the water. But he glanced

down there only to see the blacktip sharks gorging on the foolish pirates thrashing nearby. Dissuaded by this sight, he looked up to the panting, snarling, gore-streaked Roman century.

Gallus strode over to the captain and lifted his spatha to the man's throat, his icy glare trained along the blade's length. Pavo saw the pirate's languid grin fade and his confidence waver. The man dropped his bloodstained falcata. The blade stabbed into the deck and quivered. He raised his hands either side in supplication.

'There is no need for any more

bloodshed,' he said, unclipping a bulging leather purse from his belt. It was worn and bore a flaking image of a tawny gold lion. 'The man who hired me promised me riches that could pay a whole legion for a year. This is but a downpayment.' He held out the purse to Gallus, shaking it with a thick clunking of coins. 'I will let you have this,' he said, his eyes glinting. 'You could retire, live the life of a senator or a noble with your family?' he searched Gallus' eyes. 'Just put me ashore.'

Gallus glowered at the man, his knuckles whitening on the hilt of

his spatha, the tip of the blade poking into the man's skin. Pavo was sure he would swipe the pirate's head from his shoulders. Then, when a droplet of blood trickled from the man's neck, Gallus blinked, as if woken from some trance. 'Centurion Zosimus . . . put this man ashore,' Gallus said stonily, sheathing his spatha and turning from the man to stride to where the beneficiarius and his crew had established a gangplank between the two interlocked vessels

'Sir?' Zosimus frowned as Gallus swept past him. Then

realisation dawned. 'Ah, right, with pleasure, sir.'

The pirate leader held the purse out towards Zosimus, grinning weakly.

Zosimus looked him up and down, then swung a tree-trunk leg up and into the man's crotch. The resulting thud conjured a chorus of pained gasps from the watching men of the century. The pirate leader could only mouth some obscenity soundlessly as he doubled over, eyes bulging. Zosimus turned away from the man and jabbed his elbow back sharply. The captain fell from the side of the vessel, flailing,

then plunged below the waves.

Pavo stared at the spot where he had stood, and heard the man's last gurgling cries of terror before they were cut short and replaced by the ripping of meat and crunching of bone. He felt not a pinch of sympathy for the man as he counted eighteen felled legionary comrades lying still on the bloodied decks. He sheathed his spatha, nodded to Sura and followed the century back onto the trireme.



From the cliff top overlooking the limestone cove, a figure watched as

the two triremes set sail once more to the east. The brief had been simple; crush the Roman expedition before it even reaches Antioch. So he had furnished with coin the overly confident Cretan pirate captain to sink the escort and the main expeditionary fleet. But the foolish brigand had been more interested in torturing the escort crew than looking out for the main expeditionary force. And the crew of the two triremes seemed a hardier lot than expected. Limitanei, or so he had been told, but this group seemed as battle-hardened as anything he had seen on the

eastern frontier.

Just then, something on the shoreline caught his eye. A ragged man had crawled from the waves, bleeding profusely from one thigh where much of the flesh had been ripped away. He noticed the gold hoops dangling from the ears. Was this the foolish captain, somehow having thrashed his way clear of the feasting sharks to drag himself ashore – surely not? He flitted down the rough staircase hewn into the cliff, then scuttled across the white sand to the bloodied man. The pirate captain looked up at him weakly, stretching out one hand, his

face ghostly white.

'He-help,' the captain trembled.

'Yes, yes,' the figure nodded. 'I'll see you right.' He crouched by the captain's side, plucked the leather purse with the tawny gold lion from the man's grasp and tied it onto a chest strap he wore under his tunic. Then he slipped a serrated dagger from his belt, grappled the captain's sodden locks, wrenched the head back and tore the blade across the man's throat. A surge of dark blood erupted from the captain's severed windpipe and his body sagged then flopped onto

the sand lifelessly.

The figure wiped his dagger on a rag, stood and looked again to the departing triremes. A stiff grimace wrinkled his face; he would have to hurry back to the Antioch before he was missed. More importantly, he would have to send messengers to his paymasters to report this failure. His mood darkened as he thought of those who had gone before him and failed. Their deaths had been far, far darker than anything he had witnessed here today.

Chapter 3



Just after noon on the eleventh day, the triremes reached the Syrian coast, left the open sea and entered the estuary of the Orontes River. The sea winds died and the remiges worked the oars to take the vessel upriver. They passed by shimmering green crop fields, clusters of juniper woods, stretches of golden dust and sun-bleached rocky hills before coming to a small

timber dock. Two auxiliaries stood at the end of the jetty, wearing light linen tunics and felt caps to protect their scalps from the sun. This pair helped dock the ships and then showed them onto the road to Antioch.

So the vexillatio set off along a road that followed the banks of the Orontes, through a series of valleys carved by the great river. At first, the march was a welcome relief after weeks at sea. Pavo marched at the rear of Zosimus' century, clacking his cane on the flagstones to keep the men in formation, occasionally marching

ahead to talk with Zosimus and Sura.

But as the afternoon wore on, the dry air seemed to sap the spring from their steps. The cicada song grew ferocious and the dust seemed to cling to their throats. After a while, the only noise was the crunch-crunch of boots and the grunting of Centurion Quadratus slapping a persistent mosquito from his neck repeatedly, then swiping at it with a volley of curses as it buzzed around his head. When he threatened to rip its wings off, the insect seemed to take heed at last and leave him alone – only to buzz

across Pavo and Sura's heads and set about feasting on Centurion Zosimus' stubbled scalp.

Pavo chuckled at this, then winced, feeling the sun sting on his arms – more than at any time on the deck of the trireme. He had noticed how Sura's fair skin had become dappled with freckles from their time at sea. But now his friend had definitely turned a shade or two pinker, with his neck approaching an angry red.

'The sun here feels different, eh?' Pavo said, marching level with his friend

Sura shrugged nonchalantly.

'Here, tie this round your neck,' he insisted, pulling the linen batting that padded the inside of his intercisa and offering it to Sura.

But Sura waved him away; 'Back in Adrianople, they used to have this fire walking thing. In the alleys behind the basilica. People would bet that they could walk on hot coals for a count of ninety. Nobody managed past seventy. Not one,' he puffed out his chest and jabbed a thumb against his breast.

'Until you?' Pavo snatched the words from his friend's mouth.

Sura confirmed this with an all-knowing nod. 'By the time we

reach Antioch, I'll be in fine fettle. I'll show them how to drink, and I'll give the local women a bit of Thracian charm,' he chuckled at this, a mischievous grin spreading across his face.

Pavo cocked one eyebrow in doubt then took a swig from his water skin. 'We might have to be cautious here, Sura. From what I hear, Antioch – indeed, this whole land – isn't like Thracia or Moesia. They're devout Christians in these parts. Sober, solemn types. There won't be taverns full of roaring, ruddy, drunken dogs.'

'Cah!' Sura swiped a hand

through the air as if swatting an imaginary gnat. 'Not till we get there.'

Pavo tried and failed to stifle a chuckle. 'We should tread carefully, that's all I'm saying.'

Sunset cast a deep pinkish-orange light and stretched shadows across the land, and brought a welcome cooling of the air. At the last light of day, they rounded a bend in the valley and set eyes upon the magnificent city of Antioch, Emperor Valens' headquarters for his struggles with the Persian Empire.

The panting of the column

died away at the sight. They had all seen the majesty of Constantinople; this place was smaller but by no means was it any less magnificent. The city's colossal, baked limestone walls enveloped a section of the Orontes valley. The northern and southern walls bridged the river and the eastern walls strode undeterred up the steep slopes of Mount Silpius, the battlements up there surely providing a fine vista of the Syrian Desert that lay to the east. Sturdy square towers studded the wall, crested by purple imperial banners. The battlements were well garrisoned, sentries patrolling every

twenty feet or so. Up on the mountaintop walls, he saw the outline of ballistae, the bolt-throwing devices fixed and pointing eastwards. Inside the walls, he could make out a sea of marble structures; palaces, arches, aqueducts, domes, columns, arenas and many Chi-Rho topped Christian churches. The majority of these structures seemed fresh and unblemished – clearly recent constructions.

As they came closer to the city, Pavo noticed activity on the wall up ahead. A few hundred feet east of the point where the Orontes

flowed under the bridged section of the wall, the flagstoned road they marched on met with the Porta Orientalis. This arched, north-easterly gate was low and wide. Atop the two towers bookending it, a cluster of sentries filed into place to scrutinise the approaching vexillatio.

Just then, one raised a buccina to his lips and the sound of the horn keened through the valley. It echoed between the mountains either side, as if a thousand shade armies were signalling in reply. When the melody of the horn finally died, Pavo and the vexillatio came

to a halt before the gate. Pavo saw that the men up there were legionaries, silver Chi-Rho emblems etched on their blue shields, and each of them wore the stoniest of glares. A faint breeze blew around Pavo's shoulders as if to highlight the silence.

Finally, Gallus stepped forward. 'Tribunus Manius Atius Gallus of the XI Claudia Pia Fidelis,' he held up a scroll and shook it. 'Emperor Valens awaits our arrival.'

The legionaries on the gatehouse seemed deaf to his words for a moment, then grudgingly gave a curt nod and

signalled for the gates to be opened. Pavo glanced up just before they marched under the shade of the gateway. The legionaries glowered down on them, noses wrinkled, eyes flinty.

Sura leant in to Pavo's ear. 'Friendly bastards, eh?'



Gallus stood in the cool shade of the palace campaign room, awaiting Emperor Valens. The marbled floors and towering arched ceilings seemed intent on magnifying his every shuffle or clearing of his throat. The Christian

mosaics adorning the walls glared down on him accusingly, their gold-flecked and austere lustre amplified in the dancing lamplight. He had been given the chance to bathe in the nearby thermae then dress in fresh clothes before this meeting. Now he stood in his freshly polished mail, helmet clasped underarm. He was ready.

Ready for what? he mused, not for the first time. The emperor's brief had been succinct, to say the least; Bring your best men to Antioch.

He sighed and turned his gaze on the eastern wall of the chamber.

There, a tall, arched window lay ajar. A clement night breeze tumbled in and brought with it the thick scent of incense, burning on the sill. Outside, blackness reigned, punctuated only by starlight and torches. The crickets lent a chorus to the endless babbling of the Orontes. A lectern stood before the window, bearing a scroll with a chart of the night sky etched upon it. In the centre of the room, a map of the empire covered a broad oak table. Upon it were carved wooden pieces – each representing a legion. Gallus eyed the clusters of pieces in Thracia and those here in the east.

Everywhere else, there were precious few pieces.

Footsteps shook him from his thoughts. He stood rigid and readied to salute, his eyes darting to the doorway. When Valens entered, he wore an earnest, welcoming look that belied the austerity all around him. His snow-white fringe partially masked the network of frown lines on his forehead and dangled to a point just above arched eyebrows and sharp, studious blue eyes. He wore a long, purple robe and a ceremonial, muscled bronze cuirass. Flanking him were two candidati,

the tenacious warriors who seldom left his side. They wore no armour, preferring just light and pure-white linen tunics for swiftness of movement. They carried gold-threaded spears, spathas and white shields emblazoned with a gold Chi-Rho emblem.

Valens stopped before Gallus.

‘Imperator!’ Gallus barked, throwing an arm up stiffly.

‘Tribunus Gallus,’ Valens said with a nod and a gentle smile. ‘At ease. Much has happened since last we met.’

Gallus felt pleasantly disarmed by the emperor’s familiar tone. And

Valens was right, he realised, thinking of that brief spell at the palace in Constantinople over a year ago. He had dined with the emperor and a rabble of power-hungry vultures whose ambitions lay masked behind senatorial and ecclesiastical robes. The calamitous Bosphorus mission had followed soon after. The months that followed saw the Danubian Limes torn apart, the XI Claudia forced to flee into southern Thracia as the Goths went on the rampage. 'Much has happened, Emperor, and much of it regrettable.'

'The regrets are for me to

reflect upon, Tribunus. You and your men have done your utmost to protect the empire – indeed, that is why you are here,’ Valens said, then turned away and paced across the room. ‘Perhaps one day the empire will be but a distant memory. Yet the people who choose to remember it will recall the legacy of the brutish Emperor Valens.’ He spread out his arms by the open window. ‘In times of relative peace and prosperity I have embellished the cities of the empire in an effort to breathe life into those ancient settlements and hope into the hearts of their peoples.

Constantinople, Alexandria, Nicomedia, Adrianople, I have cared for all these places as if they were my homes. Here in Antioch I commissioned the fine, open space of the new forum, dedicated to my departed brother,' he pointed to the circular clearing across the river, part-hidden in the sprawl of domes and marble structures. There, a column stretched into the night sky, with a gilded statue of Valentinian perched on its tip, in muscled armour, one hand on his heart and the other holding a spatha skywards.

Gallus stared at the sight of

the dead Western Emperor. His top lip twitched. Hatred built in his veins. He thought of Olivia, of Marcus. It had been under that cur's reign that . . .

'I spent vast sums from the imperial treasury on revitalising the Great Church of Constantine,' Valens continued, stirring him from his dark thoughts, nodding to the largest of domes to the south-east, 'because the people implored me that I must. And there are the baths, the arena, the gardens . . . ' he stopped, his head dropping a little. 'But this will be forgotten. The dark tide of war will be my legacy.

Yes, I have waged wars, and bloody ones too.' He shook his head as if stirring from some troubled memory. 'But now the tide of war has turned against the empire, Gallus, and ferociously so.'

'Thracia can be saved, Emperor,' Gallus interjected. The words came from his heart.

'From where do you draw such hope?' Valens asked, looking over his shoulder from the window, one eyebrow arched.

These words seemed to search inside Gallus' armour. At once, he touched a hand to his purse, feeling for the idol in there.

'Mithras stands with the legions back in Thracia.'

'Then let us pray he betters Wodin and the Gothic hordes,' Valens said with a mirthless snort. 'But the fate of Thracia must wait. For a more ferocious and wily enemy now prowls at our door. The eastern frontier is on the brink, Tribunus.' He swung round from the window, his eyes shaded under a deep frown. 'Persia's gaze is upon us.'

This was it, the moment Gallus had been waiting for. The brief that had brought him and his men east. 'Emperor?'

'Shapur has taken control of Armenia. Ten thousand Persian riders now patrol those lands and puppet the fickle princes who once swore loyalty to Rome.'

'And you suspect the king of kings now readies to invade the empire?' Gallus' eyes narrowed as he said this, his gaze flicking to the campaign map.

'Nobody knows what is brewing in Shapur's mind. But I have heard rumour and counter-rumour that he is coming under ever-increasing pressure to make a decisive move,' Valens' expression darkened. 'There are many within

Persian lands who resent the House of Sassan. They see no reason why their ancient houses should not rule Persia in Shapur's stead. They will demand that Shapur moves upon our empire or they will have his head and seize his throne. The taking of Armenia serves as a dark portent. Roman Syria is in absolutely no state to deal with an incursion of any kind.' He strode over to the campaign table, resting an oil lamp near the centre of the map. Beckoning Gallus over and gesturing to the stools beside the table, he sat and tapped the spot on the map north-west of

Constantinople, where the new temporary lines had been set up in Thracia. 'Had it not been for the Gothic migrations across the Danubius, I would not have had to divert many of my eastern legions to those lands.' He then swept his finger across the map, almost tracing the route of the XI Claudia's voyage, bringing it to a rest in the area just east of Antioch. Here, more than forty soldier-pieces were spread out in a line running north to south. 'The number of pieces here is misleading. Many of these legions are little more than vexillationes, some numbering only a few

hundred like your own. Barely twenty five thousand men, stretching from northern Syria, all the way down to Egypt. And nearly half of them are mere limitanei . . . ' he looked up, fixing Gallus with his gaze. 'I mean no offence, Tribunus. The border soldiers here barely compare with your kind – and that is exactly why I summoned you.'

Gallus smoothed at his chin with a thumb and forefinger. 'Yet the eastern defences are sturdy, are they not? The fortifications along the Strata Diocletiana are legendary,' he suggested, drawing a finger along the line on the map

that ran from Armenia in the north down past Palmyra in the south. He had heard many tales of the proud network of stone forts that studded that desert road. 'Surely – limitanei or otherwise – these legions here could bed in and man our strongholds should Shapur choose to invade?'

Valens pulled a wry smile. 'The Strata Diocletiana has fallen into grievous disrepair. There are scarcely enough legionaries to garrison those forts, let alone funds to repair them. If Shapur turns his armies upon them, they will fall.'

Gallus frowned. Suddenly, the

memory of the ballistae lining Antioch's mountaintop eastern walls took on an air of desperation – like some final bastion. 'And the Persians, what forces can they muster against us?'

Valens' gaze grew distant. 'Including the Armenian garrison, nearly one hundred thousand warriors. Perhaps a third are paighan – peasant infantry, many of them chained and forced to march. But the heart of the Persian army, over half, are Savaran.'

'The Savaran?' Gallus asked. 'The Persian cavalry?'

Valens' brow knitted in a

frown. 'Cavalry? Aye, perhaps you could call them that. Though the empire over I have yet to see riders so fierce.'

'Emperor?' Gallus asked, agitated by the sense of unease creeping back into his gut.

'The detail we can come to later on,' Valens waved a hand as if swatting a mayfly, 'but you should be aware that the Sassanid rulers have changed the Persian way of war. In these last decades, they have shed the last vestiges of the old Parthian dynasty. They have fine forts, broad roads – they even model their borders on our limites.

Their standing armies are as well-drilled as any legion.' He stopped, screwing up his eyes and pinching the top of his nose as if fending off a headache. 'Suffice to say they are a formidable foe.'

Gallus smoothed the tip of his chin. 'Perhaps their unity – or lack of it – might be exploited? If Shapur has his enemies as you say,' he offered.

'A salient question, Tribunus, and one I have exhausted in these last months.' Valens' eyes sparkled keenly. 'Unity is a multi-faceted concept. To a man, the Persians fight under the banner of their

Zoroastrian god, Ahura Mazda, and unanimously rail against anything they see as the work of his antithesis, Ahriman. After that, internecine rivalries and power struggles muddy Persian politics so wickedly that few have a clear picture of how things truly stand. The spahbads who answer to Shapur control vast wings of the Savaran. They are like kings themselves, fiercely proud of their satrapies and their ancient and noble houses. And then there are the Zoroastrian Magi who walk before the armies, carrying torches that blaze with the Sacred Fire, a

symbol of their faith. These men are mystical, powerful figures who control the hearts of people, armies and kings alike.'

'It sounds like we could stoke some trouble that might keep them occupied?' Gallus persisted.

Valens' lips played with a smile. 'Again, you echo my thoughts of recent times. Indeed, I have tried. Last year I sent a party of riders into The Satrapy of Elam in an attempt to bribe the spahbad and his army.'

'Did the riders return?' Gallus asked, sure he knew the answer already.

‘In a manner of speaking, yes. Their heads were delivered to a fort on the Strata Diocletiana, mouths stuffed with Roman coins,’ as Valens said this, his gaze faltered. ‘The Persians will not turn upon one another for a few bags of Roman gold . . . and our coffers are all but empty in any case,’ he said dryly. ‘Subterfuge of any other kind – stoking up rivalries, instigating blood-feuds, that kind of thing – takes time, Gallus. And I fear time is running out. This year, next year at the latest, the Persian armies will fall upon these lands.’

‘Very well,’ Gallus nodded, his

gut twisting further. 'So if invasion is inevitable, and our fortifications cannot withstand such an assault, then why have you called us east, Emperor? Surely my vexillatio can offer little to change this?'

Valens shook his head slowly. 'On the contrary, Tribunus. I know that you and your hardy men can.' He clapped his hands and a pair of slaves hurried in with a jug of watered wine and a plate of fresh bread, figs and cheese. 'Fill your belly and I will explain.'

Valens poured a goblet of wine and added three parts water, then swirled the concoction, gazing

at the surface. 'Fourteen years ago, an emperor died on the edge of a Persian blade.'

'Julian,' Gallus nodded, folding a piece of bread around a chunk of cheese and chewing upon it. He washed the mouthful down with water, forgoing wine as always. 'I remember his reign. I was a young lad at the time. The Apostate, they called him – he had little time for Christian meekness.' He said this with the beginnings of a dry chuckle, then remembered that Valens was a staunch Arian Christian and thought better of it.

Valens beheld him with a

solemn gaze; 'Then you will know of the man who succeeded him.'

'Jovian,' Gallus affirmed. 'I remember little of his reign, other than that it was short. Very short. He was dead within a year, was he not?'

'Jovian was a sot, Tribunus,' Valens said, the stark words echoing around the chamber. 'He stumbled into power and then swiftly drowned himself in wine, leaving a trail of destruction in his wake. They say he died of accidental poisoning, but I heard the truth – he was found, soaked in his own vomit, surrounded by

wineskins. Yet it was not wine that killed him. It was fear – a fear that he could escape only in a drunken haze. It takes a brave man to bear the burden of empire on his shoulders. The deaths of countless thousands haunting your dreams. The staring eyes of the living.'

Valens' tone was clipped, yet his eyes betrayed a hint of glassiness. Gallus wondered if this was pity for poor Jovian, or for himself.

'But on the day he acceded to the purple – the day after Julian had been slain, when the Roman army were pinned like wounded

deer to the banks of the Tigris by the Savaran lances – Jovian found himself forced to concede a humiliating peace with Shapur. He gave away almost everything the empire had worked so hard to gain. Centuries of struggle, oceans of legionary blood, gone in a heartbeat.' Valens leant forward, the lamplight dancing in his eyes. 'But there is a chance, just a sliver of chance, that Jovian negotiated one thing in Rome's favour that day. Something that, all these years later, could be the saviour of the east.'

Gallus' spine tingled. The oil

lamp on the edge of the table flickered as a cool night breeze tumbled in through the window like the breath of a shade.

‘Shapur is a ferocious adversary, but a noble one. It is thought that somehow Jovian convinced the shahanshah to agree to a lasting truce. That the lands west of the Euphrates were forever to remain unburdened by the Persian yoke.’

Gallus’ eyes widened. ‘That’s everything . . . Antioch, Beroea, Damascus, the Strata Diocletiana.’

‘Now you are beginning to understand, Tribunus?’ Valens’

earnest smile returned. 'A perpetual peace. The border kingdoms – Armenia, Iberia and the hordes of Saracen nomads in the Syrian Desert – would support such a treaty. They would stand with us against any Persian invasion.'

'Then we must present this treaty . . . '

Valens held up a hand, fingers splayed. 'Five copies of the treaty were prepared. Five scrolls. Two were given to Jovian and his retinue, three remained with Shapur. But in the flight across the Tigris, the Roman copies were lost. Indeed, much was lost; some

soldiers took to wading into the river in their armour and drowned in their haste. Many arrived back in their homelands starved and dressed in filthy rags like beggars.'

Gallus nodded. 'Then the Persian copies?'

Valens shook his head solemnly. 'Over the years, they too have vanished. The copy held in Ctesiphon was destroyed when rioters ransacked the library. The copy in Susa, too, was lost in a great fire that ravaged the city. The third copy was sent to the Satrapy of Persis. But the camel rider disappeared on his journey there.'

‘Disappeared?’ Gallus’ nose wrinkled in suspicion.

Valens held out his palms, at a loss for an answer. ‘Slain, lost, consumed by the sands. I don’t know. But he vanished and the scroll with him.’

‘If all of the scrolls are lost, then this is a false hope, surely?’ Gallus leant back with a frustrated sigh.

‘Indeed, but something has come to light in recent months, Tribunus.’ Valens countered. ‘The last scroll – the one sent to the Satrapy of Persis – may still exist.’

‘So where is it?’ Gallus asked.

‘That, we do not know, Tribunus,’ Valens sighed and clapped his hands, ‘but this man may be able to help in that respect.’ The slaves led a man of some forty years into the campaign room. He was tall, with knotted limbs and sun-burnished skin. His grey-streaked, fair hair dangled to his chin, straw-like and bleached by the sun, while his thick beard was pure white. His haggard features and crooked shoulders told of a hard life while the fine tunic he wore spoke of a recent change in fortunes. A Christian Chi-Rho hung on a strap around his neck. Valens continued;

'It is a miracle that Centurion Carbo even stands before us. He was captured by Shapur's armies at the sack of Bezabde. He spent many years in the Dalaki salt mines.'

'Dalaki?' Gallus frowned.

Valens nodded. 'Right in the heart of the Satrapy of Persis.'

Gallus beheld Carbo. Carbo met his gaze, then swiftly averted his eyes.

Nervous, or something to hide? Gallus thought. He batted the idea away and listened as Valens spoke.

'Speak, Centurion,' Valens prompted him.

Carbo shuffled and stood proud. 'In my time in the mines I met many rogues, criminals and prisoners of war. There was one Persian – a man sentenced to spend his life underground at the salt face. I slept nearby him in the days before he asphyxiated from the lung disease of the mines. He spoke much with his last breaths. He cursed himself incessantly, whispering of his folly in ever laying hands on some scroll. A scroll that bore the mark of Jovian and Shapur.'

Gallus sat forward, interest piqued.

'This rogue, he had a final lucid moment. He claimed that he and his band of brigands were the ones who had seized the scroll, ambushing the desert messenger. One by one, his band were captured, tortured and slain. All except him. He hid high in the Zagros Mountains for months, living off carrion left behind by vultures, sleeping in caves. All the while clutching the scroll, his only possession. He had stolen it in hope of selling it for riches, but instead, it brought him only poverty and misery. Finally, maddened by heat, hunger and isolation, he came

down from the mountains and stole into Bishapur in search of food. Coinless, he snatched a loaf of bread from a baker's stall then hid in a shaded alley to devour every last crumb. As he made his way through the streets to leave the city, he said sentries seemed to follow him like shadows, their eyes darting and furtive whenever he met their gaze. Then, when he came to the city gate, a sentry barred his way, and another two rushed him from behind. He panicked, sure they recognised him as the scroll thief. He said he had never run as far or as fast in his life

from those who pursued him. All through the city he fled, through palaces, temples, squares and gardens. But they caught him in the end, and in the end they suspected nothing of the scroll. It was the stolen loaf of bread that saw him sentenced to the mines.'

Carbo finished and silence hung in the chamber.

Gallus cocked an eyebrow, looking to Valens and Carbo in turn, expecting more. 'And the scroll? Where is it?'

Valens sighed; 'In the mountains, perhaps, in one of the caves this wretch hid. In Bishapur,

even. Or maybe deep in the mines.'

Carbo shrugged. 'The man did not go as far as to tell me.'

Gallus slumped back with a sigh, clenching and unclenching his fists. 'This is tenuous indeed. How much faith can we place in the words of some filthy and maddened beggar at the foot of a mine?' he asked. And you; how much faith can we put in a man who has spent many years in deepest Persia? he thought.

Carbo held out his hands. 'All I can tell you is that he said this with his dying breaths. Why would a man lie with his last words?'

Now Carbo seemed to hold Gallus' gaze earnestly. Gallus' eyes narrowed, unable to judge this character.

'It is a thread, Tribunus.' Valens said, pinching his thumb and forefinger together. 'The finest of threads. But we must grasp at it. We must seek out the scroll.'

Realisation dawned on Gallus. He sat upright and met Emperor Valens' unblinking gaze. 'You summoned us here to send us into Persia?'

'I would not have brought you here if I had any doubts as to your suitability,' Valens replied firmly. He

clapped his hands again.

This time a short, stocky man in his late twenties was shown into the room. He could have been described politely as swarthy, but the truth was he was filthy and unshaven. He wore a frayed tunic and a dark-brown, Phrygian cap, with jet-black, oily locks dangling from the rim. Overall he had the look of an unwashed Mithras, Gallus thought, his nose wrinkling.

'Yabet is half Greek, half Iberian. He will guide you into southern Persia and the Satrapy of Persis.'

Gallus' mind spun. He glanced

at the campaign map and the most direct route into Persia; Mesopotamia. The area between the Euphrates and the Tigris was shaded a light green to indicate the fertile earth that distinguished the ancient land. 'Across the two great rivers? Those lands are thick with Persian forts and settlements, are they not? Like the Roman limites, didn't you say?'

'Exactly,' Valens replied, 'so you are to take a far lonelier route.' He traced his finger from Antioch, dragging it south-east, across the stretch of map that skirted Mesopotamia and was shaded in

unbroken yellow. 'The Syrian Desert is treacherous, but Yabet will see you all the way across it.' His finger stopped near the tip of the Persian Gulf. 'Once at the Gulf, you are to stow your armour and anything that identifies you as legionaries, then buy a berth on some trade ferry – something that will take you across the water. On the far shore is the Satrapy of Persis. Once you have infiltrated that land, your ingenuity will be the key. Comb the towns and cities, buy what information you can from the rogues that litter the Persian alleyways, leave no stone unturned. Greek-speakers are

common in those parts. Find this scroll, Tribunus, and save your empire.'

Gallus worked hard to suppress his urge to challenge this epic proposal.

'Your vexillatio will be complemented by a century from the city garrison. The men of the XVI Flavia Firma are good soldiers, Tribunus. And they'll be led by a good man. A brave man eager to march into enemy lands.'

Gallus followed Valens' extended finger and saw that it pointed to Carbo.

His eyes narrowed and his

mood grew darker.

Chapter 4



Pavo drained his wine cup then thumped it down on the scarred oak bench. He gazed round the dimly-lit, red-brick tavern with a contented sigh as he felt his troubles washing away. There was a distinct fuzziness behind his eyes and the banter of the thirty or so Claudia legionaries around him melted into a soothing babble. Now when he touched a finger to the

phalera on his chest, he felt a keen sense of optimism. Had Father once been in this city? Had he maybe drunk with his comrades in this very tavern – at this very bench?

He chuckled at the powers of the drink as he poured himself another measure from the jug then reached out for the water to dilute it, halting only when he remembered they were drinking it neat and there was no water jug. They had only been here for an hour at most. After dropping their packs and armour at the city barracks by the eastern gate, they had set off in search of

refreshment. Led by Zosimus, Quadratus and Felix, they had wandered through the streets, still busy despite the late hour. They passed through the Forum of Valentinian, lined with merchant stalls. Next, they had wondered past an open-fronted basilica, packed with Christian worshippers chanting along to the promptings of a priest. Only when they reached the agora near the south of the city, they had found what they were looking for; a stirring pole and vine leaves resting by an open doorway – the symbol of wine and ale known the empire over.

But inside it was very different from the chaotic – often perilous – drinking pits that he had grown used to on the Danubian frontier. There, the taverns were always packed with jabbering legionaries, locals and a mixture of Goths and travelling traders. There, a legionary was almost guaranteed a black eye or a thundering hangover as a memento of his night out. Here, there were only a few locals dotted around the other benches, most sipping watered wine and chatting quietly, some eating mutton and vegetable stew. The bench commandeered by the XI

Claudia was in stark contrast: at the far end, Zosimus and Quadratus seemed keen to make this place a little more like home, exchanging insults in between frequent mouthfuls of ale. It was obviously strong, like the wine, given Zosimus' ruddy features and Quadratus' giddy grin.

'Aye, and on the first day I joined up, Zosimus here was supposed to show me how to use the bow drill to light a campfire.' Quadratus spliced his words with laughter, his blonde moustache jostling. 'He was all wrinkled and serious looking, as if he was some

kind of survival expert . . . then the bloody fool goes and sends a shower of sparks over himself – a moment later and the hem of his tunic's on fire!' Quadratus doubled over at this, roaring, and the rest of the bench erupted in laughter too. 'Nearly burnt his bloody cock off!'

Zosimus' complexion reddened, his anvil jaw straining as he fired angry glances around the table. 'Aye, well, it'd be wrong of me to tell these lads here of the time you once farted a whole contubernium out of the barrack blocks at Durostorum, eh?' He met the eyes of the others around the

bench and jabbed a finger at the big Gaulish centurion. 'Had three portions of bean and root stew and apparently he was at it all night. The other seven lads in there with him couldn't take it any more, they came stumbling out, retching and choking. One of the poor sods ended up having nightmares for weeks afterwards!'

There was a hiatus of shocked faces around the bench, then they erupted once more in laughter.

Quadratus' beaming smile faded at this and he shook his head and smoothed at his moustache as if in firm denial, booming out over

the hilarity; 'Nah, nah, that's a long way from the truth. The beans were on the turn, you see, and I only had two portions . . . '

At that moment, a hand slapped on Pavo's shoulder. He twisted round to see Sura. 'You're feeling better?'

Sura pushed in to sit next to Pavo. 'I told you – a couple of hours sleep and I'd be in fine fettle.'

Pavo was unconvinced, seeing the odd, ruddy glow on his friend's skin. 'How did you know we were here?'

Sura cocked an eyebrow. 'I just followed the twisted scowls of

the local populace – they're a sober bunch, eh?'

'Aye, I wonder that we shouldn't be moving onto watered wine soon?'

'I'll let you suggest that to those two,' Sura nodded to Zosimus and Quadratus at the end of the bench.

Just then, Felix guided a cook from the tavern kitchen over to the bench. The man carried a long platter with seven steaming joints of lamb on it. He placed it down and at once all eyes turned to the fare, which Felix supplemented with pots of honey and piles of nuts.

‘See?’ Pavo said. ‘Felix will keep us right. He knows that’s the sensible way to calm the drinking – some good food’ll sober us up and have most of the lads feeling sleepy in no time.’

As if to confound him, Felix then piped up to the cook; ‘and send out, ooh, another ten jugs of wine while you’re at it, will you?’

‘You were saying?’ Sura chuckled.

‘This lot is on Tribunus Gallus,’ Felix grinned to the table.

As the rest of the legionaries cheered at this, Pavo could not help but grin. He helped himself to a

chunk of the tender, sweet lamb and then had his fill of nuts and honey. As he washed it down with a generous swig of wine, he realised a hangover was unavoidable. It was then he heard the scuffling of boots from the street.

He twisted to see a cluster of some forty garrison legionaries. They were off-duty and without their weapons, but some still wore their mail shirts and bore the weary looks of men who had just finished a punishing shift of sentry duty. As they passed by the Claudia bench, some anecdote from Quadratus evoked another chorus of raucous

laughter. At this, the leader of the sentries fired an instinctive and frosty glare at them, his sharp nose wrinkling. His hair was long and tucked behind his ears – a distinctly un-Roman style that seemed popular in this part of the empire.

A few of the Claudia legionaries noticed his sour look and replied with indignant frowns. Pavo felt the first twinge of trouble.

‘Relax,’ Sura nudged him with an elbow and pinged a fingernail against the end of his cup. ‘Once they’ve had a few jugs of this stuff in them they’ll be at ease too.’

The evening wore on and Pavo

reckoned it was nearing midnight. A group of local young women – dark-eyed and dusky-skinned – came in at that point. They were dressed in simple robes and seemed eager to keep themselves to themselves. They took up a bench between the Claudia men and the sentries – who supped at their drinks and chatted in muted tones. Sura was swift to approach the women. When they refused his offer to come over to the Claudia bench, he then had a jug of wine sent to their table. Soon, the women cast aside their shyness and began chatting with the Claudia legionaries. Pavo shook

his head with a smile as he saw the women now bore a warm glow in their cheeks just like his comrades. But he noticed the sharp-faced sentry's glare. He was making no attempt to conceal his disgust at the behaviour of the foreign soldiers.

Then he overheard Sura's boasts to a full-figured brunette amongst the women.

'Aye, so the Cretan pirates were moments from putting a hole in the side of our galley. This lot were cowering at the far side of the deck,' he scoffed, waving a hand dismissively at the rest of the

Claudia. 'But I came up with a plan at the last moment to save us all. I scooped up the ship's anchor, heaved it all the way up to the boat's edge. Adrianople's champion weightlifter, you see. Three years running,' he jabbed a thumb to his chest. 'Anyway, I got to the boat's edge with this huge iron anchor, then I hurled it . . . ' his words trailed away, his confidence faltering as he realised many of his comrades, Zosimus, Felix and Quadratus included, had quietened down to listen in.

'Aye, carry on,' Quadratus chirped, twisting a splinter of wood

in his teeth to weed out a sinew of lamb.

Sura gulped a few times, then nodded. 'I . . . hurled it and . . . '

The brunette seemed altogether bemused by his tale, and somewhat attuned to Quadratus' thinking. 'And? Come on, don't be so shy.'

'I hurled it fifty feet . . . twenty feet?' Sura dithered, testing how much liberty he could take. 'It crashed through the pirate craft and saved us all,' he ended hurriedly, his face glowing red.

'Oh aye, it's all true,' Zosimus agreed, then his face bent into a

wicked grin under his squashed nose. 'You should see the size of his muscles. Go on,' the centurion prompted Sura, 'off with your tunic – show her!'

Sura shot a wide-eyed look of terror at Zosimus. But the big Thracian, Quadratus and Felix all smiled back at him.

'Go on then,' the brunette added, stifling a hiccup then stroking Sura's bicep.

'No, I . . . er . . . oh bollocks,' he muttered. Like a man being led to dig his own grave, Sura hiked up his tunic, pulled it over his head and tossed it down. He stood in his

loincloth, sulking, his torso milk-white where his tunic had been and in painful contrast to his lobster pink arms and ruddy features.

Silence filled every inch of the tavern for a heartbeat, until Zosimus threw his head back and laughed like a drain. Every Claudia legionary joined in. Even Pavo couldn't contain himself, snorting wine through his nose as he saw his friend scowling indignantly.

Suddenly, a hurled cup bounced across the floor and the screeching of a stool culled the laughter. The sharp-faced leader of the sentries had shot to standing,

his chest rising and falling. His eyes were alive with fury and he shook with rage. 'Enough!' he barked, striding over to slam a fist on the end of the Claudia bench. The cups leapt and wobbled, some spilling frothing ale and wine. 'This is my city, my home.' His tone was mean and clipped. 'The emperor may have summoned you east to do his bidding, but do not think that makes you more worthy than us.'

Pavo frowned as the man turned his gaze on the curvy brunette by Sura's side. 'I will not have you fraternising with these Thracian curs.' He grappled at the

brunette's arm. 'Come!'

'Take your hands off me, Baptista. I'm your sister, not your dog,' she snapped, standing then wriggling clear of his grasp.

'You would rather stay in the company of these . . . animals?' Baptista said. His sister stifled a sigh, then brushed past him, beckoning her friends. As the women stormed from the inn, Baptista turned his gaze upon the Claudia men, the rest of the sentries stood behind him, glowering darkly. 'Animals who worship Mithras . . . a bloodthirsty animal like no other.'

At this, Pavo felt the atmosphere change irretrievably. The warm camaraderie of moments ago drained like a cistern. Felix shot to his feet, Zosimus and Quadratus flanked him. Thirty more stools screeched as the Claudia stood with them. Like rats scattering from a sudden, bright light, the people dotted around the tavern bolted for the door. Pavo stood firm with his comrades, but his mind spun through a series of unsatisfactory ways to dampen the tension. In the no man's land between the opposing groups, Sura stood, gulping as he quietly slipped his

tunic back on.

Felix broke the silence, speaking in a baritone murmur through grinding teeth; 'So the emperor summoned us east. We didn't ask for this. So curse us if you will, but never speak ill of Mithras.'

'We will protect our holy city from the godless as we see fit,' Baptista rasped in reply.

'Godless?' Zosimus said with an incredulous grin.

At this moment, Sura decided to step back over to his own lines. Baptista shot out an arm, clasping at his shoulder. 'I didn't say you could move, cur! Stay where you - '

His words were cut short by the crunch of Sura's knuckles smashing onto bone. Baptista staggered back, cupping his hands to his bloodied nose and mouth. Two half-teeth dropped to the flagstoned floor along with a trickle of blood.

The other sentries gawped, then filled their lungs. 'At them!' they roared and then launched forward, leaping over the Claudia bench. In reply, Zosimus, Quadratus and Felix led a counter-charge from the Claudia.

Pavo managed to get one foot on the bench before the palms of a

wild-eyed, bearded sentry butted him backwards. The pair fell, tumbling through a sea of legs. Serrated curses and pained grunts echoed all around them. The man unleashed a series of quick, hard jabs into Pavo's ribs, and the fiery pain sobered him instantly. He thrashed with his knee, kicking the man from him, then followed up with a left hook. His knuckles cracked as they met the man's jaw and he roared in agony, but his foe stumbled back and slumped in the shadows.

'Pavo!' Sura cried.

He swung to see a stool

hurtling through the air towards him and ducked just under it. The stool splintered against the wall. Blinking through the swarm of flailing fists and tumbling bodies, Pavo saw Sura, pinned to the table, Baptista throttling him. He leapt up onto the bench, hopped over the form of Quadratus wrestling with one sentry, ducked under the swing of another sentry, then spun as a stray hook caught him square on the cheek. Dazed, he flailed then toppled down onto Baptista's back. The roaring sentry leader released Sura, then spun round, trying to shake Pavo off. Dizzy and

nauseous, Pavo could only cling onto the man's shoulders. Meanwhile, Sura danced around the spinning pair, looking to jab a foot at Baptista.

'Keep him still, Pavo. Keep him still while I boot his ba . . . '

'Enough!' a voice cut through the air like a jagged blade. A voice like no other.

The din of the quarrel faded as quickly as it had begun. Pavo slid from Baptista's shoulders. All eyes looked to doorway. Four figures stood there.

Gallus glowered upon them, his top lip wrinkled in disdain. He

was flanked by a short, filthy looking man on one side and a tall, haggard sort in a legionary tunic on the other. Gallus strode forward into the lamplight. Panting men wiped blood from their mouths and noses and cupped hands to their bruises as they scrutinised the newcomers.

Gallus strode amongst them, seeking and then swallowing each of the seething words that seemed to come to his taut lips. Pavo gulped.

At that moment, the haggard man stepped forward. 'Ah, Gallus, I can see that your men have already

introduced themselves to my century.'

Pavo shared a frown with Sura, then looked to Baptista.

Baptista and his sentries beheld the men of the Claudia in return.

'Optio Baptista of the XVI Flavia Firma is my finest man,' the haggard one confirmed. 'He and the rest of my century will make a fine escort for our mission.'

Every man in the room adopted a look of utter disgust.



XI Claudia and XVI Flavia Firma

legionaries clustered around the benches of the wrecked tavern, muttering as they tended to their wounds and offered muted and somewhat forced apologies. The noise faded into the background as Pavo stared across the bench. This weather-beaten, crooked-shouldered centurion sitting opposite had introduced himself as Carbo. The merriness was gone, memories of the brawl were fading and he felt the bruises only as a dull and distant throb. Even Gallus' caustic reproach to the brawling legionaries and then his briefing on their mission seemed secondary.

Yes, they were to march through the burning heart of the Syrian Desert hunting some lost scroll. But that mattered little. Because Carbo's last words echoed in his ears like thunder.

'Lad, are you alright?' Carbo frowned, stroking at his white beard. 'Take a blow to the head, did you?'

'You said . . . Legio II Parthica?' Pavo stammered.

Carbo sat a little taller at the mention. 'Aye, my legion,' he pulled up the short sleeve of his tunic to reveal a faded legionary stigma. Under it was the outline of a

centaur – the emblem of the legion. But the pride on his face faded. 'Until they were butchered at Bezabde.'

Pavo's heart lurched at this. 'But not all of the Parthica were slain. I heard that someone in the east came back, someone . . . ' Pavo's skin tingled in realisation. 'You?'

Carbo shrugged. 'Aye, it would have been me. Nobody seemed to know that there were survivors until I staggered into this city and spoke of it.'

Pavo's thoughts raced in a hundred different directions. 'The

mines, were you in the salt mines?’

Carbo seemed guarded at this and avoided Pavo’s gaze. ‘I was.’

‘What of the others?’

‘Of the Parthica?’ Carbo frowned. ‘Lad, what is it you’re after?’

‘Falco,’ Pavo said, hearing his own words as if from a dream. ‘Mettius Vitellius Falco.’

Carbo gazed back at him emptily and Pavo felt all hope dying. But at last the centurion’s cracked and haggard features bent into a vague smile. ‘A stubborn and brave whoreson. Aye, of course I remember Falco – he was a good

friend. The kind of friend who would stand by your side, through anything,' he fell silent, as if reliving some memory. 'How do you . . . '

Pavo cut him off, pulling his phalera medallion from his collar. 'I am his son.'

Carbo's eyes widened and he sat back. 'Falco's boy?'

'I think of him every day. I thought him dead since Bezabde. Did he . . . ?'

Carbo held Pavo's gaze. His features were grave, his eyes troubled.

The blood pounded in Pavo's ears like a war drum.

‘On that last day when Bezabde fell, he was on the walls, roaring like a lion. Legionaries lay dead and dying around him, many took to fleeing through the streets, hoping to escape through the far gates. Not Falco. He fought on . . . and he survived.’

Pavo’s limbs quivered at these words. ‘He’s alive?’

Carbo failed to hold Pavo’s gaze. ‘I pray to all the gods, no, for he was chained and sent to the mines with me. Dalaki – in the heart of the Persis Satrapy. And more than ten years have passed since I left those accursed caves.

Few men live more than a handful of years in that airless and dark realm and nobody escapes. Nobody.'

'But you did? So maybe . . . '

Pavo fired back.

'I did not escape,' Carbo cut him off swiftly, his eyes dropping to the left and searching over a crack in the flagstones. 'I was freed from the mines when a Persian noble bought me – to serve as a household slave . . . '

Pavo's thoughts swirled and Carbo's words faded into the background noise. His gaze darted across the scarred surface of the

bench as he considered the possibilities. He thought of the nightmare, of Father, haggard and gaunt, lost in the sands of the desert. A shiver marched up his spine like a legion of shades. 'But he was alive?'

Carbo looked at him. An odd look, as if judging him. 'Trouble yourself with this mission alone, lad. To comb the lands of the Persis Satrapy for this lost scroll – that is a forlorn hope indeed. Do not burden yourself with another such.'

Pavo tilted his head to one side. 'Aye, it's the slimmest of hopes, but I will seize it. My

shoulders have broadened much in these past few years. I am not afraid. I will never give up. Even if only to find Father's bones.'

Carbo searched his eyes, then offered him a pensive smile. 'You are truly Falco's son, Pavo.'

Just then, Felix came over. 'Carbo,' he beckoned, 'Gallus wants to talk over the route with you once more before we head back to the barracks,' he scratched at his forked beard with a sigh, 'for some long overdue sleep.'

Carbo offered Pavo a curt nod, then left to talk with Tribunus Gallus.

Pavo stared into a cup of water for what felt like an eternity. It took a howl from Noster the legionary to stir him from his thoughts. He glanced around the tavern. At the nearest bench, Quadratus dabbed at his bloodied cheek with a water-dampened linen rag. Sura rubbed at his bruised throat and gulped at a cup of cool water. Zosimus tended to Noster's sprained wrist, fixing a splint to the young legionary's arm and telling him in no uncertain terms how soft he was for being unable to withstand a bit of pain. Baptista's men grumbled and groaned

likewise on the other side of the tavern, casting regular baleful glances at the men of the XI Claudia who were to be their marching comrades.

‘Optio?’ A voice spoke.

Pavo twisted round to see Yabet offering him a fresh cup of water. He accepted, then made space for the short, grubby guide to sit beside him. He brought with him a faint waft of ‘ripe’ mushrooms.

‘You have marched in the desert before?’ Yabet asked.

‘I’ve marched in the snow, on the dirt, in the mud, through the tall grass of home. But no, the desert

will be new to me.'

'Ah,' Yabet cackled, 'then you do not yet know how to march.'

Pavo found the little man's grin infectious. 'How many days will we be out there, before we reach the Satrapy of Persis?'

Yabet scratched his unshaven jaw and pulled his brown Phrygian cap back from his forehead. 'It depends entirely on what we come across.' He looked off through the open door and into the tiny patch of the star-speckled night sky visible outside. 'Forty days or more, I would say.'

Pavo cocked an eyebrow. Now

that was a march. 'Just as the desert is new to me, the Persian ranks are too. I have heard one word mentioned a lot in hushed tones – here and in the barracks we are billeted . . . the Sav - '

'The Savaran,' Yabet finished for him, a sober look erasing his grin. 'Those riders are like nothing you will have faced before. Some call them the iron centaurs. They are nimble, near-invincible . . . and deadly. They harness tusked beasts many times the size of the largest mount.' He swept his hands out as if to encompass all before him, 'then stoke these creatures into a

fury and drive them into their enemy's lines, trampling soldiers underfoot like ants. But these riders and great creatures might never trouble you. I've heard of hardy legionaries out there who have perished without ever coming near a Persian lance. The sands that separate us from the Persian Empire are deadlier than any blade and more formidable than the tallest of walls.'

Pavo raised both eyebrows, quite unsure what to say.

'But I will be by your side,' Yabet said and tapped a finger to his temple, his canny grin returning.

'I know where the water lies in that dry land. It is as my mother used to say; don't enter the desert unless you have a camel or an Iberian guide,' he said, gesturing to himself. Then he nudged Pavo. 'I am not a camel, by the way.' With that, Yabet winked, slapped him on the shoulder then left to introduce himself to the others.



The innkeeper sighed as the last of the legionary party trudged out into the night. The tavern now empty, he swept shards of shattered jugs and splinters from the floor,

muttering to himself as he saw one partially finished leg of lamb smeared across the flagstones. Still, the men from the Thracian legion had tripled his normal nightly income, he thought with a wry chuckle. He rested his broom by the door and reached up to bolt it. But he stopped, sensing that the place was not empty after all. He twisted round, a cold shiver wriggling across his neck. There was one figure, cloaked in the shadows of the far corner. All he could see was a hand, weighing something over and over.

‘Didn’t you hear my call? The

tavern's closed,' he grunted, hoping it sounded aggressive enough. But the figure didn't move. 'I said - ' but the words caught in his throat when he saw the thing the figure weighed. A leather purse adorned with a faded, tawny gold lion – stained with blood. At last, the figure in the shadows stirred, glowering at him from the darkness. It was one of the men from the legionary rabble, he was sure.

When the figure shot to standing, the innkeeper dropped his gaze and pretended to be sweeping the floor listlessly. He felt the figure's eyes burn on his skin, heard

footsteps crossing the tavern floor then the squeaking of the door opening. With that, the figure was gone, off into the night after the legionary rabble.

The innkeeper breathed a sigh of relief, then frowned, realising he had seen the golden lion motif before. 'Just what is a man of the empire doing with a Persian purse?' he chuckled.

Chapter 5



Pavo staggered round and round, sweeping his gaze over the dunes. Endless as always. Confusion danced in his thoughts. 'Father?' he spun around looking for the solitary figure the nightmare always offered – the tortured, hunched figure with the empty, cauterised eye sockets, arms outstretched, calling for him. But the dunes were empty and he was alone. Pavo seized the moment

'Show me my father or leave me be,' he snarled into the ether. Just then, as if in riposte, the sandstorm picked up, hurling stinging grains against his skin. But he refused to shield himself from it, squaring his jaw in defiance. The storm grew ferocious, roaring, almost casting him to the ground. 'You cannot hurt me anymore!' he cried out.

Suddenly, something burst from the dunes underfoot and grasped at his ankles. Terror shot through him as he saw a knotted, bony hand jutting from the sand, clutching him. It pulled him down, into the dunes. He kicked and

thrashed, but to no avail. The hands grappled at his knees, and he saw the top of a head emerging from the sand. He grasped for his dagger only to find it was not there. So he clamped his hands around a nearby rock and held it overhead.

At that moment, the head emerged from the sand as the storm grew deafening.

‘Father?’ Pavo recoiled at the gawping, sightless face – more sickly and aged than ever.

‘Beware, Pavo!’ Father cried, his straggly, greying locks whipping up in the tumult. ‘Beware!’

Then, like a predator’s jaws,

the sand swallowed Father once again. Pavo cried out at this, only for the sand to suck him down too. It rushed to his waist in one heartbeat, and in the next, the sand was around his neck. A heartbeat later the air was gone from his lungs as the sand enveloped his face. He opened his mouth to scream and the sand poured in, muting his cry and filling his mouth and nostrils.

‘No!’ he cried aloud. His eyes shot open and he saw that he was entangled in his sweat-soaked blanket. He panted and clutched the phalera, then looked down from

his upper bunk and around the contubernium block. The seven other slumbering forms of Pavo's contubernium lay bathed in dawn light. A handful of them nearby had stirred at Pavo's outburst.

'And there we have it – who needs a wake-up call when we have Pavo and his bloody nightmares?' Zosimus croaked testily from the bunk opposite. The centurion slid his legs from the bed and groaned, wiping his eyes with balled fists.

Just then, a trumpeting volley of farts sounded from the adjacent contubernium chamber and echoed along the colonnaded porch of the

sleeping block.

Sura roused at this, cocking an eyebrow; 'And who needs a buccina when you have Quadratus?'

Pavo shook his head clear of the nightmare, then winced as the crushing, rhythmic thud of a hangover took its place. His mouth was moistureless and felt as if it had been stripped of skin and a stabbing pain persisted behind one eye. Sighing, he pulled on the tunic folded under his pillow, then slid his legs round to drop from the bunk. He landed on the flagstones – already warmed from the dawn sun – with a yelp, and clutched a hand

to his ribs. More, he felt a stinging on his cheek and touched a hand to the swollen, flowering bruise there. The scrapes and bumps from the brawl in the tavern last night had seemed innocuous when they had come back here, well into the hours of darkness.

‘Mithras, I feel like a beaten dog,’ Sura croaked as he stood likewise, rubbing his throat.

‘Aye, well that makes three of us,’ Zosimus grimaced as he stood, stark naked, eyeing his bruises then cupping his testicles to examine the swollen, purple one. With a shrug, he hooked his tunic from his bunk

side and dropped it over his hulking frame, then rolled his head this way and that – the bones in his neck cricking as he did so. Next, he sucked in a breath that seemed to double the size of his chest then took to striding around the other five bunks, booting at the frames.

‘Right, you pussies! Get up and get your marching gear together!’ The still-drowsy legionaries sat up with a start, some with a yelp. They scrambled out of their bedding, bleary-eyed and throwing salutes. ‘Tribunus Gallus is finalising things with the emperor. We move out at mid-

morning when he gets back. So don't piss about – after last night, I don't want any sloppy armour or kit showing up my century.'

Habitus, the beanpole legionary who had joined the XI Claudia only months ago, was last to rise. 'Yes, sir!' he barked, blinking the sleep from his eyes.

'Mithras!' Zosimus backed away, cupping a hand over his mouth. 'What in Hades have you been eating, soldier? You're breath smells like you've been munching on pig shit!' The rest of the legionaries stifled their laughter as Habitus reddened. Satisfied with his

torturing of the younger lads, Zosimus strutted from the contubernium, chuckling to himself. Few noticed the big Thracian frowning in disgust when he breathed into his hand and caught wind of his own breath. 'Must have been that bloody ale,' he muttered as he left.

Pavo and Sura took to waking the others of the century, then went outside and into the dry morning heat. The dusty drill yard at the heart of the fort was cramped, and hemmed by the colonnaded contubernia blocks. On the far side of the yard was the principia, the

heart of the barracks. Like the rest of Antioch in daylight, all of the buildings seemed to reflect and intensify the sun's glare.

'I suppose the Flavia Firma lads will be in a similar state as us,' Sura mused.

Pavo was about to agree when he saw the glinting square of armoured men at the far side of the principia; Baptista and his century, fully prepared to march already, waiting on Centurion Carbo, passing the time by scowling upon the newly woken XI Claudia men. The Flavia Firma were a comitatenses legion. Thus, unlike their limitanei

counterparts, they wore fine scale vests, new shields freshly painted in dark-blue with the silver Chi-Rho emblem, fresh leather boots and recently tempered intercisas with flared noseguards, spathas and spears. To add salt to the wounds, they each looked fresh and alert, only the bruises from the brawl spoiling their immaculate turnout.

Sura grumbled; 'Those bastards are far too self-assured for my liking – there's no man more smug than he without a hangover.'

They strolled over to a water barrel tucked into a shaded corner nearby. The pair cupped the tepid

water in their hands and soaked their faces and scalps over and over again. The liquid helped calm the stinging bruises on Pavo's face just a fraction. He took a linen rag and soaked it, then clamped it to his ribs under his tunic.

'I don't think I've ever felt less ready for a march,' he confessed.

'Aye, my skin feels like fire,' Sura grumbled, examining his ruddy arms. 'Time to see if this works,' he said, lifting the small clay flask from his belt. 'I bought it from some old goat at the market yesterday evening. He claimed it was jasmine oil and it would shield me from the

sun,' he said, tipping the lotion onto his palms then rubbing it onto his shoulders and face. He pulled a self-satisfied grin, then almost as quickly it fell again. 'Mithras, it's itchy.'

'Better itchy than burnt,' Pavo chuckled.

The pair re-joined their comrades in the shade of the contubernia block porch. They sat, cross-legged, munching on salted fish and fresh bread brought in from the market at the foot of Mount Silpius. To a man, they washed their meal down with water – soured wine was far from their

fragile minds. They worked on their armour with rags and olive oil, sharing muted banter. Felix strode amongst them offering words of encouragement and the younger legionaries in particular seemed buoyed whenever the primus pilus addressed them by name.

Zosimus wandered over to Pavo and handed him a folded wax tablet. 'Here's the orders of the day, Optio. Basic stuff – how much water the men should be taking on when we're marching and the like.'

'I'll take good care of them, sir.' Pavo took the tablet and tucked it into his belt, then tilted his

helmet back and scratched his sweat-streaked forehead. 'Though they'll probably have melted before noon.'

Zosimus chuckled at this and wandered off.

They assembled their kit, looping a length of rope around their packs and stuffing a sickle, bow drill and digging basket into the hemp pack. Next, they added their rations. The emphasis was on water – three skins per man. Added to this, they each packed a wrap of hardtack biscuit, plus a small sack of grain and a measure of lard to cook more of this tasteless but

nutritious food. Emperor Valens had seen to it that each man also had slices of salted beef, a round of smoked cheese, a parcel of dried figs and a small flask of rich, soured wine.

Most of the men took only the clothes they wore, plus a light cloak and extra linen batting to protect their heads from the sun when they were not wearing helmets. They would march with their chain mail and helms, carrying their spears, shields and spathas as well as their packs, it seemed. Pavo weighed his pack – and it was anything but light. The first step of the journey

was to head for the Strata Diocletiana – the great road that swept north-south through the Syrian Desert and marked the edge of the empire. Many miles to carry such a burden.

Just then, a gurgling, baritone groan sounded from the fort gates. All heads swept round.

‘The dromedarii escort!’ Yabet called out, striding from the principia excitedly.

The gates creaked open and near fifty knot-legged, hump-backed camels ambled inside, beholding the three centuries with a lackadaisical gaze. A clutch of

sixteen riders were seated between the humps of the leading camels. The riders wore bleached white robes – long sleeved and hanging to their ankles. They had no body armour but wore Roman helmets and carried legionary spears. Each of them was swarthy-skinned and they chattered in a trilling tongue, urging the relaxed beasts onwards with whistling and the occasional swiping of canes.

‘Mithras!’ Zosimus pinched his nose as one camel came close. The beast had a mean eye and jutting teeth. ‘Looks like my sister-in-law . . . and smells worse than Quadratus!’

Quadratus' ears perked up and a scowl twisted his face, but before he could reply, Felix cut in; 'Load the tents and your packs onto their backs. Less burden will mean a lighter, cooler march.'

At this, a cheer erupted from the two XI Claudia centuries, and some one hundred and forty packs thudded into the dust. The century of Flavia Firma men were more reserved in their reaction.

As Pavo helped strap his pack to the nearest camel's back, he noticed that Carbo had appeared and now stood in the shade of the principia chatting with Yabet.

'So those two will lead us to this scroll,' Sura muttered, sounding unconvinced. Then he looked to Pavo. 'And who knows what else?'

Pavo felt a prickling of nervous energy in his heart at this. Father. Last night he had told Sura all about Carbo's revelation and the memory lifted his mood. But the jagged images of the sandstorm nightmare came to him and he shook his head. 'Let us tackle the desert first.'

Just then, footsteps echoed from the street.

'Get in line!' Zosimus bawled, instantly sensing who was

approaching. Quadratus echoed the order to his century. The men rushed into position.

'Come on, this is no drill, tighten up,' Pavo barked, seeing Habitus, Noster and Sextus leaving a gap between their shields. He fell back to the rear of the century and clacked his staff against his shield. At the right of the first rank, Sura backed up the demand with a thump of his spear butt into the ground. The three offenders bunched up in a heartbeat and the XI Claudia ranks were ready – replete bar the eighteen they had lost in the pirate clash. Their

scuffed ruby shields and worn, patched armour contrasted sharply with that of the Flavia Firma ranks, but their faces bore the grimaces of men well versed in legionary life. All within the compound fell silent as the gates creaked open. The tall, lean figure of Gallus strode in and beheld the three centuries of the expedition force.

Gallus met the eyes of each and every man. Then he nodded to the XI Claudia aquilifer, who raised the ruby bull standard in the air.

'Move out!' the tribunus bellowed.

Chapter 6



The midday sun baked the lands of the Persis Satrapy. A rocky river gorge stretched across the flat brushland as if cut by a giant's plough long ago, from the jagged peaks of the Zagros Mountains in the east, snaking off towards the Persian Gulf in the west. A road ran along the fertile southern banks of this gorge, passing lush meadows and shimmering crop fields. Where

the brushland met the mountains, the great city of Bishapur stood, hugged to the north by the gorge and fuelled from east and west by a steady stream of wagons, men and cattle.

Today was market day, a day that brought people to the city from many miles around. Sentries lined the beetling, sun-bleached and near-perfectly square walls, watching over the influx. The market-goers brought with them hides, wheat, dates, oil, figs and oranges. Once inside, these crowds spilled through the palm-lined streets and around the arched,

stucco-clad villas and halls. They were headed for the centre of the city. Here lay the main market square at the foot of the acropolis. The stench of dung clashed with an aroma of cooking meat and the cries of traders mixed with the jabber of shoppers and the twanging of a highly-strung lute. Exotic animals were led in a parade around the square, ostrich eggs decorated with peacock feathers were held aloft like some grand prize and dark-skinned Indian slaves were led in chains to trading platforms. It seemed that not even a blade could splice this mob. Then

all of a sudden they parted and the incessant babble died. All heads turned to the figure saddled on a white mare, ambling towards the stone staircase cut into the acropolis mount.

This was Tamur, noble son of the House of Aspaphet. At just twenty-six he was the Spahbad of the armies of the Persis Satrapy. When he rode, he could call upon more than fifteen thousand spears to ride and march with him. Today he wore a red silk robe in place of armour, but there was no mistaking his stock as a warrior. The veins on his temples pressed against the

skin and his sleek dark locks were scraped back into a tail of curls that dangled to his shoulders. His chest bulged and his shoulders were broad enough to carry a man on each with ease. His fawn skin was smooth, spoiled only by a serrated battle scar on his cheek and a white scar welt across the bridge of his broken nose. His lips were turned down in a fixed gurn and his hazel eyes reflected this mood. Riding with him were a pair of ironclad and wing-helmed pushtigban riders. Just as their kind served Shapur in the great city of Ctesiphon, the few hundred garrisoned here in

Bishapur were Tamur's loyal bodyguards.

As his subjects bowed all around him, Tamur traced his gaze up the carved steps before him. Up there on one edge of the acropolis stood his palace. The palace of his father, Cyrus, and his father before him. The high-vaulted roofs seemed to climb upon one another, with the centre-most stretching highest, as if to touch the sky itself. The structure was majestic, surrounded by orchards, palms and fountains. He felt that familiar needling in his chest. This land of his forefathers was the heart of all Persia. Yet his

noble lineage, the House of Aspaphet, remained subsumed in Shapur's realm, his family mere vassals.

He traced a finger over the brooch fastening his robe – it bore the image of a golden lion, his family's crest. 'My father once spoke highly of you, Shapur,' he muttered to himself as they begun the ascent, 'but then he saw you for what you were. Like him, I will not be your dog.'

As he said this, his gaze swept to the other edge of the acropolis. Here stood the Fire Temple. The polished limestone walls of the

temple offered four arched entrances, north, south, east and west. The blue dome cresting the temple glistened in the white-hot afternoon sun. This place would offer him the key to his stolen destiny.

They reached the top of the winding carved steps and trotted onto the plateau. Sixteen Median spearmen posted around the temple leapt to attention on seeing their leader. They wore pointed iron helms and clutched lengthy spears, and their chests were clad in leather armour.

Tamur dismounted, his guards

doing likewise to flank him, then he strode to the temple's eastern entrance. Inside, the sweltering heat of the day instantly lifted. The cool interior was shaded and silent. As they strode through the whitewashed, arched corridor, an orange light danced on the polished black slabs underfoot. Then the spitting and crackling of a fire grew louder and louder, and a new heat emerged; fiercer than the sun. They came to the square chamber at the heart of the temple. The Sacred Fire burned fiercely in this room, directly under the blue dome. The flames danced in a deep, circular pit

in the floor, illuminating the mosaics on the walls and the arched corner niches; soulless masks, staring faces and sultry women draped only in transparent veils. The air above the pit rippled in a haze, bringing the gilt ceiling relief of the Faravahar to life.

‘Leave us,’ Tamur said to his guards. With a chinking of iron, their footsteps died away.

He looked up and across the flames. ‘The talks are over.’

A silence hung in the air.

‘And what does Shapur have to say?’ a voice called out in reply, echoing around the domed area. On

the other side of the fire, a face appeared, rippling and changing in the fierce heat haze: taut skin, hairless, with golden eyes and a hawk-like nose bent over narrow lips.

Tamur stifled a sigh. 'He speaks of nothing but goodwill for his satrapies, Archimagus.'

At this, the figure emerged fully, walking around the fire. Archimagus Ramak held the key to his destiny. Despite the many thousands of warriors he could call upon as spahbad, it was Ramak who harnessed the Sacred Fire and held the power of the Divine Ahura

Mazda in his hands. As such, every Zoroastrian in these lands would heed Ramak's word if the archimagus wished it so. His father had taught him as much.

'Shapur's cheap words are turning you from our plans? Your resolve is weakening, Spahbad?' Ramak hissed.

'No, Archimagus, never,' Tamur punched a fist to his broad breast and squared his rock-like jaw, his nostrils flaring in defiance.

'Remember, Shapur sent your father to his death all those years ago – ordering his Savaran wing to lead the charge on the Roman lines

by the Tigris.'

Tamur's mind flashed with memories of his adolescence. The dark days after news of his father's death had crushed him. All that his father had promised to teach him – how to ride, how to lead men, how to seize the battlefield – was gone with that news. Pretenders to his father's seat at the head of the Persis Satrapy had gathered like carrion birds. Then, as now, it was Ramak who had seen them off, then shielded him, nurtured him.

'Your father wanted then what we both want now. The House of Aspaphet has been asleep too long.

Shapur's reign is but a yoke for your noble lineage.' Ramak purred. 'You control a vast portion of the Savaran riders. But this alone is not enough to challenge Shapur. You need to expand your holdings. The Satrapy of Persis and the lands to the south are not populous or rich enough to support your designs. This was your father's problem and now it is yours.'

Tamur's thoughts buzzed like a swarm of hornets. He remembered a time when he was little more than a babe, when Father was not all-consumed by the desire to challenge Shapur. The

years before Ramak rose to the post of archimagus. He felt the beginnings of a frown.

‘So Roman Syria must be acquired,’ Ramak continued, scattering his nascent thoughts. ‘And while Shapur hesitates over the taking of those ripe lands, we must not. We must capitalise upon his dithering,’ Ramak held up a hand and curled his fingers into a shaking fist.

‘Yes,’ Tamur nodded, focusing on Ramak’s words. ‘And I have told you time and again, Archimagus; my armies are ready to march west, to crush the Roman cities and forts,

to seize the trade routes, to enrich and swell my ranks and then to march upon Shapur's palace in Ctesiphon.' Tamur's heart beat faster as he spoke and he broke out in a fresh sweat. This always happened in moments of tense conversation; while others seemed able to remain cool and composed, his body was always swift to ready for battle.

Ramak nodded as if in acquiescence, scooping a wiry arm up and around Tamur's shoulders. 'While Shapur hesitates, you, brave spahbad, are too eager. Any advance upon Roman lands must be

seen as legitimate. Thus, we must resolve the matter of the lost - '

'The lost scroll of Jovian and Shapur?' Tamur could not catch his temper. 'You still insist we first find this cursed scroll that may not even exist?'

Ramak tightened his grip on Tamur's shoulder. It was cold and belied the aged archimagus' feeble form. He held up his other hand before Tamur's face, a single, bony finger extended. 'I was there with your father the day those scrolls were written; Shapur's weakness was showing even then. He conceded something to the Roman

Emperor Jovian that day. Should the last remaining copy of that scroll contain the clause I fear it does – then we must ensure it never falls into Roman hands. For if it does, we could never breach the Roman borders. If we did, Shapur and Rome would come against us, the proud princes of Armenia and Iberia would offer us no shelter. Even the desert raiders and the gruff Isaurians would turn their blades upon us. The House of Aspaphet would be ground into the dust. Your father and his fathers would be shamed like never before.’ Ramak leant in closer to hiss in

Tamur's ear. 'Your young sons would be tossed from the walls of Bishapur and their brains dashed out against the rocks.'

Tamur slumped at this and pinched the top of his nose between thumb and forefinger. At last, he nodded, clutching one hand over the golden lion brooch on his breast. 'Aye, your reasoning is sound as always, Archimagus.' Yet his thoughts churned and he frowned. 'But if the scroll is truly lost somewhere in our land, then why should we fear that the Romans will find it?'

'Because a messenger came in

while you were travelling,' Ramak nodded slowly, his eyes narrowing as he stroked his beard. 'The spies I planted throughout Roman Syria some time ago have confirmed my fears. A Roman expedition is to set off into the desert. They are coming to these lands in search of the scroll. They might know of its whereabouts or they might not. Either way we must . . . '

'Crush them!' Tamur finished, punching a fist into his palm.

'All is in hand, brave spahbad. All is in hand,' Ramak assured him, the light of the fire dancing in his eyes. 'I have a man in the ranks of

the Roman expedition. They will march out into the desert, and they will die.' He outstretched both arms to the blazing fire pit. 'Ahura Mazda wills it!' he purred.

As Ramak's words echoed around the dome, Tamur felt a wave of relief and a cold sliver of fear at this man's foresight.

Ramak continued; 'We will crush the expedition, and then we will set our sights on Roman Syria. I have already issued notice to the outlying towns – the muster of your armies is even now underway.'

Tamur felt a surge of anger at another man giving orders to his

armies. But before he could voice his displeasure, Ramak's face bent into a wide grin.

'And the mustering will be complete within three moons, in time for the Jashan of Shahrevar. The Festival of Iron will be a momentous day for us. It will be the day that our armies set forth to destroy the lie . . . to seize Roman Syria and drive the empire's legions into the sea. The first step on the journey to restore your honour, and that of your noble house!'

Tamur felt his heart pounding once more, his ire buried under a wave of hubris, and he nodded.

‘Remember, Tamur, with me by your side, you harness the power of Ahura Mazda,’ Ramak continued. ‘With me by your side, your destiny can be realised.’

Tamur steeled his troubled features. ‘Yes, Archimagus.’

Chapter 7



The column marched due east from Antioch for four days. With every mile, the air became dryer, the sun fiercer and the greenery sparser. Now pale dust seemed to be swallowing up all but a few hardy shrubs dotting the hilly and scree-strewn lands. Tunics were sodden with sweat, boots and armour started chafing on skin.

Gallus and Felix led the

column. Carbo walked with them, pointing out the route, while Yabet had taken to dropping back to banter with the men. He would share words of advice; 'Stay ahead of your body's needs – eat before you are hungry, drink before you are thirsty. Finally – and this is vital; if you need to shit,' he stopped, walking backwards before them, a grave look on his face and one finger wagging in the air, 'make sure you are downwind of me first!' his face melted into a wicked grin, stirring the weary men of the XI Claudia into belly laughter. Those of the Flavia Firma century who

laughed were quickly stared down by Baptista.

The three centuries marched abreast. The XI Claudia centuries were side by side on the right with the aquilifer carrying the ruby bull banner proudly at their head. The Flavia Firma century were on the left with their dark-blue Chi-Rho banner held even higher as if in competition. The three centuries screened the camel train in the centre – or, as Pavo had put it, the camels screened the XI Claudia from the Flavia Firma, each party exchanging haughty glares and scowls when their eyes met.

'Raging because the emperor chose us, then raging when he chose them to help us – unbelievable,' Zosimus muttered, before wrenching the cork from his soured wineskin to take a pull on the contents. The big Thracian smacked his lips together in satisfaction, a sparkle of mischief lighting his eyes, then he started whistling the first notes of a song in praise of Mithras. In moments, Quadratus, heading up the other century, had joined in with the words. Soon, the whole right side of the column was in song. The singing was brutal and peppered

with spontaneous obscenity but their spirits soared, and Pavo was sure he could see a hint of a smile touching the edge of Gallus' lips up ahead. Baptista and the Flavia Firma men were less than amused, to put it mildly.

Just then, one camel strayed out of line, trotting along directly in front of Centurion Quadratus, its tail swishing, brushing and batting near the Gaul. Quadratus' face puckered in an angry grimace as he exchanged heated words with the nearest dromedarius rider.

'I'm bloody sick and tired of watching a camel's arse, complete

with flies and regular consignments of turds and farts, in this bloody inferno.'

Yabet latched onto this, dropping back to chirp; 'Ah, now you know how the men marching behind you feel!'

Both centuries of the XI Claudia erupted in laughter at this and Yabet moved quickly to the head of the column once more, ducking as if to avoid the volley of abuse hurled at him by Quadratus.

Eventually the sun dipped to the horizon, tinting the land in a rich orange hue. The men eagerly awaited dusk to come and sweep

the heat away. At this point, they came to a small crater in the land ringed by rich green reeds.

A babble broke out amongst the ranks and one phrase surfaced. 'Fresh water?'

They approached it eagerly, but sighs rang out when they saw that the crater contained only dust. Gallus's jaw shuffled in annoyance as he looked around the arid land.

At this point, Yabet slid down the side of the basin. He looked around at the lie of the reeds above, scratched his jaw, then pulled out a dagger and began gouging at the dust of the basin

wall below the thickest of the reeds. The dirt grew darker. First red, then dark-brown. Finally, as if the land had come to life, a muddy brown trickle spidered from the burrowed hole. A murmur of interest broke out, then grew to a raucous cheer when the muddy trickle became a clear, tumbling stream. Yabet held up a cupped hand to drink from the spring, then twisted round to the vexillatio with a broad grin that transcended language.

Gallus almost smiled. Almost. Then he gave the order to make camp for the night.

By the morning of the fifth day of the march, the rocky hillsides had fallen away, leaving flat, dusty steppe-land in every direction, even the hardy shrubs now absent. The heat was intense already and seemed ready to bake them once again. Then, just as the morale started to ebb, a ripple of excitement spread around the column.

‘There’s a road,’ Zosimus panted, seeing the edges of old, worn flagstones jutting from the dust here and there, running north to south.

‘The Strata Diocletiana?’ Gallus looked to Yabet and Carbo, who nodded in confirmation.

‘This is it, the Limes Arabicus. The edge of the empire.’ Carbo said.

‘The sandy arse of the empire, more like,’ Quadratus muttered.

But Carbo didn’t hear this. The centurion shaded his eyes, stretched out a finger and pointed north, then south. ‘You see the quadriburgia?’

Gallus strained to look along the road in both directions. He could make it out, just; in the horizon at each end, rippling in the

heat haze, was a tiny, sun-bleached bump in the otherwise flat horizon.

‘Each of those forts house a cohort of limitanei. Some can even accommodate full legions. We should head south along this road. If we’ve stayed true to our course then that fort should hold a cohort of the III Cyrenaica . . . and a cistern-full of water!’

‘You know this place well?’ Gallus asked over the men’s cheers.

Carbo’s weathered features creased in a reminiscent grin. ‘Legio II Parthica once marched these lands like gods; the sight of our gold centaur banner was enough to

ward off any threat from the east. Heroes to a man.'

An unspoken sense of calm and wellbeing spread across the column as they approached the southerly quadriburgium. From a distance, they could discern that it was a sturdy-looking medium sized fort with four protruding watchtowers, one at each corner. But when they arrived at the foot of the sun-bleached walls of the fortification, they saw only a handful of intercisa helms glinting atop the battlements. Equally, the expected tink-tink of hammers, whinnying of horses and babbling of

men was curiously absent. There was no tang of wood smoke, nor the pungent reek of latrines.

'A bit quiet, isn't it?' Quadratus grunted as they came to a halt at the foot of the northern gate.

Just then, a lone head popped over the top of the gatehouse. An aged, sunburnt legionary, his lips cracked and blistered, puffs of white hair poking out below a linen rag tied over his scalp. The old man threw an arm up in salute, and was swift and attentive in opening the gate. The men of the column were even hastier to pile inside and surround the shaded cistern by the

eastern wall. But as Gallus entered, he swiftly understood Emperor Valens' concerns. He counted just twenty-three legionaries dotted around the walls and honing tools and weapons in the workshop. A few of them wore battered intercisa helmets, but possessed no other armour.

'So much for the full cohort,' he muttered dryly to Carbo.

'Aye, it would seem that much has changed since last I was here.'

The aged man from the walls scuttled down the stone steps, belying his years. He skidded to a halt before Gallus, squaring his

shoulders. His skin was lashed with sweat and he was dressed in a worn linen tunic, sword belt and frayed sandals. Once more, he threw up his arm in salute.

‘Optio Silvanus of the III Cyrenaica, third cohort, second century!’ he croaked.

Gallus cocked an eyebrow. ‘Where is the rest of your cohort, Optio?’

The old man’s face fell. ‘What you see here is my cohort, sir. An imperial messenger promised a relief force - a fresh century,’ he shook his head. ‘But that was last summer.’

‘Where is your commanding officer?’

The old man’s shoulders sagged now, and it seemed that every one of his days was etched on his face. ‘I am in charge, sir. The last centurion was slain in the autumn. Desert raiders drew him and twenty of our men out. He was a brave man, but . . . ’

‘But he went too far into the sands?’ Yabet finished for Silvanus with a wince.

Silvanus nodded. ‘They ran out of water. The desert raiders didn’t even slay them in the end; they just let them cook in their armour and

die of thirst.'

Gallus' nose wrinkled at this, then he shook the sorry tale from his thoughts. 'Then you should be commended, Optio, for holding this fort in the time since. You have my sympathies, for the limes of the east fare little better than those of Thracia, it seems,' Gallus remarked wryly. 'Yet in Thracia, from where we have come, we have watched our fabricae being stripped of every last surplus of weapons and armour. Ships brimming with such supplies have set off from our ports, sent east – here – to bolster these limes against the expected Persian

invasion.'

'Indeed, sir,' the Silvanus nodded. 'But it is the few comitatenses legions holed up in the fortress cities of Damascus, Antioch and Palmyra who receive those goods, not us,' he flashed a dry but nervous smile. 'Yet it is my men and I who will face the wrath of the Persians before any of them.'

Gallus could not contain a dry snort at this.

The optio nodded to one of his men by the ovens. 'Now, if you will permit me, sir. I can have fresh bread and cool water ready for you and your men before noon. You can

eat with us then rest until the worst of the midday heat has passed.'

A chorus of parched croaking and rumbling bellies sounded behind Gallus.



The column marched on down the Strata Diocletiana. Each of the forts they came to afforded them water and shelter for the night. At noon on the eleventh day, they reached the desert city of Palmyra.

The figure marching with them cast his eyes over this, what was once a marvel of the empire. The western end of the city was a

charred, tumbled ruin, with skeletal buildings, toppled columns and flagstones prised from the weed-strewn streets. The opposite end of the city clung to the greatness of the past, a vibrant, bustling market square thriving around the base of the three massive legionary forts that had been thrown up against the city's eastern walls. This was the last bastion of the empire the vexillatio would enjoy before they set out into the wastes of the Syrian Desert. The figure's thoughts turned over and over. This was the moment to put his plan into action.

The steely Tribunus Gallus led

his men inside the city's eastern gates, then to the sparsely populated barrack blocks of the nearest of the three forts – the home of the IV Scythica. Barely a few centuries garrisoned this colossal, thick-walled compound, and it was no doubt the same in the other two forts.

The figure watched Gallus question the centurion who led a single century in drill-practice.

'Where is the rest of your legion, Centurion? I grew used to witnessing such paucity of manpower in the quadriburgia leading here, but I did not expect

such a sight within these walls too.'

The centurion shuffled nervously. 'They're out east, sir, in the desert.'

'Ah, yes, the emperor did say the Scythica were running down some Persian raid, but they must have been out there for weeks now?'

'Yes, sir. They left three weeks ago yesterday.'

Gallus' expression darkened. 'When did you last hear from them?'

The centurion's lips trembled. His hesitation said it all.

'You haven't heard from them in all that time?'

As the centurion searched for a reply, the figure watched on, grinning, knowing full-well what would have happened to the IV Scythica by now.

The centurion held his hands out in supplication, then pointed to the north. 'Within imperial lands, communication is swift and predictable. The Strata Diocletiana allows a horseman to ride from the banks of the Euphrates to here in less than three days.' He shook his head and glanced up to the colossal eastern city wall that formed one end of the fortress. 'But out there, there is nothing. Just burning dust,

desert raiders . . . and Persian blades.'

Gallus' lips twitched, struggling to contain some stinging rebuke. 'I will leave you to inspire your men with such stirring reverie, Centurion. Now, I assume there is ample room in the barracks for us?'

The centurion nodded, gulping, then motioned towards a barrack block cast in shade, next to a small, domed *thermae*. 'You can take up the sleeping quarters of the men currently out in the desert.'

When Gallus turned to face his *vexillatio* and bark them to their quarters, the figure moved with

them, grinning. He bathed in the
thermae, ate and wandered
amongst the men. When at last
darkness fell, he crept from the fort.
The city glowed in orange
torchlight. Flitting shadows of
citizens, traders and thieves danced
across the colossal walls of the
three legionary fortresses. The
figure stole through the alleys
running parallel with the
colonnaded main street. It was vital
he went unseen, for tonight would
be his last chance to plan what was
to happen. Tomorrow, the
mismatched band of legionaries
was to set off into the heart of the

desert, leaving imperial lands behind. No more legionary patrols, no more safe havens. Thousands of miles of white-hot desert.

He reached the ruined end of the city where every shadow held some shady character. But he sought out just one. The lead dromedarius and his men had insisted on camping here, away from the hustle and bustle of the eastern end of the city. They had kindled a fire at one edge of this abandoned forum. Some sat in silence, carving slices from fruit with their daggers, others were busy brushing and feeding their foul

camels. He saw the lead rider, crouched in the palm of a giant marble hand that had fallen from some statue or other.

How apt, he mused. This man and his dromedarii would do their part for Persian coin.

Yes, the figure purred, toying with the cracked leather purse, stroking the tawny gold image of a lion, the desert holds the bones of many a brave traveller. In the days to come, it will claim those of a few hundred more.

Chapter 8



It was mid-afternoon on the third day after leaving imperial lands, and all signs of life were gone. Utterly gone. No birdsong, no chattering of cicadas, not a dot of greenery to be seen. In every direction, the shimmering horizon offered only the infinite burnt-gold flats of the Syrian Desert and an unbroken azure sky. Now only the crunch-crunch of boots on arid dust,

dry gasps from parched mouths and the occasional angry groaning of the camel train could be heard. The water skins that had been filled to brimming at Palmyra were now empty or sloshing with soupy, brackish dregs. Even the camels seemed near-defeated by the ferocious heat.

Pavo's ankles had rubbed free of skin on the first day after leaving Palmyra and were now wrapped in linen batting. Yet the dust still seemed to find its way inside his boots and armour, clinging to the sweat underneath and scraping on his flesh. And his head felt like a

baking loaf of bread inside his intercisa.

Up ahead, Gallus was in conversation with Carbo and Yabet. Carbo seemed to be insistent on one route, jabbing his finger at a spot on the map, while Yabet protested and tapped another. Pavo saw Gallus' eyes narrow on each of them. The man trusted few, and these two were strangers. At last, the tribunus made his choice, issuing a terse command. At this, the aquilifer hoisted the legionary banner and the column veered a little to the south.

'Water or shelter, do you

reckon?' Zosimus asked in a hushed tone.

Pavo winced as the collar of his mailshirt touched his neck once more, singeing his skin. 'Both, I hope.'

They marched on until late afternoon. Pavo ran his tongue across his lips, each as dry as a dead toad. He patted his water skin, knowing there was but two mouthfuls left in it. If he was to drink it now then . . . he looked up to the featureless horizon before them. No, not featureless.

'Hold on,' he croaked. 'We're outside imperial territory, aye?'

Sura and Zosimus nodded in reply.

'Then what's that?' he pointed ahead.

Sura and Zosimus followed his outstretched finger. In the heat haze ahead, a shimmering, limestone hump spoiled the flat skyline. A murmur of interest broke out across the ranks. As they marched closer, it took shape as a structure, some kind of fortlet. It was small, barely one hundred feet long and broad.

'It's imperial!' Felix said.

Pavo and every other man in the column shielded their eyes from

the sun, eager to catch sight of some legionary garrison on the battlements.

Zosimus chuckled, clapping and rubbing his shovel-hands together. 'Water, shade . . . the lot!'

But Pavo did not share his centurion's enthusiasm. He saw Tribunus Gallus' eyes dart from the fortlet to the map, an intense frown knitting his brow. The men at the quadriburgia and those in Palmyra had made no mention of outlying encampments.

Just then, the haze fell away and the reality of the structure sharpened before them. The walls

were deserted and crumbling, sections of the battlements having toppled into heaps of rubble around the base. The gateway bore a thick, dark crack above its arch, and the desiccated, shattered remnants of the gates hung ajar from bent hinges. Atop the gatehouse, the remnants of some banner remained – a dry pole with a torn, sun-bleached rag hanging limply. A collective sigh poured from the column. The place had been long abandoned.

Carbo was first to speak. He cast a hand towards the fortlet. 'This would once have served as a

waystation of sorts, to supply and shelter troops heading from Syria to the banks of the Euphrates and to provide early warning of Persian attacks. It would have housed maybe a turma of equites and a few auxiliaries, so there could still be supplies inside.'

This elicited little enthusiasm from the column.

'Aye, fifty year old hard tack? Mmmm,' Sura whispered to Pavo, rubbing his belly sarcastically.

They marched into the fort in silence. Inside was as derelict as out. A half-collapsed timber stable in one corner was near-buried in a

build-up of dust. A flaking saddle, a splintered spear shaft and a dented trough lay long discarded nearby. A small limestone cistern stood near the stable. It bore a crack down one side. Felix strode forward to draw his spatha and bash the hilt upon the cistern. The noise was only part-echo. The primus pilus shot a look round to the column. A look of hope. He slid his spatha blade into the crack in the side, and shook the blade to antagonise the fissure. The stonework barely moved if at all, but the motion was enough to release a portion of the cistern's contents.

Dust.

It poured onto the ground and billowed up, over Felix and across the watching ranks. It seemed all this fort had to offer was shade, Pavo realised, the dust clinging to his tongue. A cool place to contemplate their thirst.

Just then, a frantic shuffling sounded from behind them. As one, the column spun round to the southern end of the fortlet, hands going to spatha hilts, spears clenched tightly. The small barrack block there ran the length of the wall. It was nearly roofless and the colonnaded porch area ruined, with

empty bird nests along the tops of few still standing columns. The structure had two doorways, one at either end. From inside the barrack building, the shuffling noise sounded again.

Nobody spoke. All hands clamped tighter on their spears.

Gallus nodded to Zosimus and Pavo. Pavo slid a shield from the back of the nearest camel. The pair stepped from their positions and stalked towards the nearest doorway into the building. Meanwhile, Carbo nodded for Baptista and one of his legionaries to move towards the far doorway.

Pavo drew his spatha as he approached, eyes peering over the tip of his shield. Zosimus crouched beside him, part-protected by Pavo's shield, holding his spear up so the tip hovered at gut level. All he could see inside was a blackness cast by the remaining portion of roof, and his eyes strained to adapt to this after hours of constant, glaring sun. His heart rapped on his ribs as he edged under the doorway. He knew just how swiftly a long, tiring march could be transformed into the chaos of battle. He had been caught in many Gothic ambushes in Thracia – and

they always started like this. A scream and a flash of iron was usually all the warning the attackers would afford. But here the Goths were a distant trouble. Here, Persia and her allies were at large. He shared an affirmative glance with Zosimus, then the pair lurched into the building.

Nothing.

His vision sharpened, and he saw the skeletal frames of legionary bunks and the black stain of a hearth. Another shuffle sounded in the next room. He and Zosimus shared a tacit affirmation once more. They stalked towards the

next doorway then leapt through, spatha and spear readied to strike. At the same time, two silhouetted figures leapt towards them from the far end. Panic struck both he and Zosimus. He hefted his spatha high and the big Thracian lunged forward with his spear. The pair before them leapt forwards likewise. But they halted at the last, blades inches from flesh, the identities of the pair revealed in the gloom.

Baptista and his man panted, the snarling expressions on their faces blackly reminiscent of that night at the tavern in Antioch.

Baptista's spatha edge hovered next to Pavo's throat, his glare baleful. Then their shoulders sagged. Each man stowed their weapons and stood tall. The four looked around the room, and quickly located the source of the shuffling.

The pair of vultures scuffling around on the floor suddenly realised they were not alone. In a flurry of wings and feathers, they took flight with haste and their muse was revealed. A skeleton bearing the last traces of a legionary tunic lay slumped against the wall. A leather sword belt and

scabbard remained tied around the waist, absurdly oversized given the wearer's present condition. The skull grinned back at the four.

'Well if you won't eat your hard tack . . . ' Zosimus muttered dryly.

The four remained in silence until the grinding of a boot on the dusty floor behind jolted each of them.

Gallus had entered the derelict barrack room. He eyed the skeleton with disdain, then looked around the four. 'Have the men fall out. Post four sentries to each wall. We make camp here for the night.'



As the sun fell below the horizon, the legionaries erected the last of the goatskin tents around the floor of the broken fortlet. Each contubernium of eight men kindled a fire and soon plumes of sweet wood smoke puffed lazily into the still night air and firelight danced on the inner walls of the small compound. The men sipped carefully at the dregs of water in their skins, then settled by their tents to prepare portions of bread, salted beef and cheese. Pavo and Sura sat cross-legged outside their

contubernium tent, tucking into their meals and then sipping on their skins, supplemented with a few swigs of the rich soured wine.

‘I could drink two skins of water right now, without stopping for breath,’ Sura croaked dryly.

Quadratus and Felix wandered over, the little Greek tossing a pair of dice in his hands. ‘Anyone fancy losing some coins?’ he winked, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder to Yabet, who followed him. ‘This one does, apparently.’

Pavo shuffled round for the pair to sit, then Zosimus and a few others came over too. They

bantered in muted tones as they played, taking their minds off their nagging thirsts. Each man took a turn to tell a story. Some were humourous, some ribald, and others simple tales of family life back home. Then it came to Pavo.

‘Come on then – you’ve always got something to say. Tell us what you know about Persia,’ Zosimus flicked a finger in his direction.

Pavo felt all eyes fall upon him. He thought back to his days in Constantinople, before legionary life, and his snatched reading sessions in the library. A chill danced up his spine as he

remembered one particular text. It depicted a man, misshapen and splayed out on some frame. 'About a hundred years ago, Emperor Valerian fought the Persians. His army was overcome and he was left with no option but to surrender to Shahanshah Shapur – a forefather of Shapur II. Whole legions surrendered with him. The king of kings had them marched into Persian territory. Many were harnessed like oxen on the Persian farms, others were sent into the mines and some were put to work in building Bishapur, a new city for the shahanshah.'

‘What of Valerian though?’ Felix asked, sucking on his water skin.

Pavo looked round to see the faces of his comrades, each hanging on his next words. ‘The shahanshah kept him hostage in the palace at Bishapur, forcing him to watch the enslaved legionaries build the new city around it.’

‘Not so bad,’ Zosimus curled his bottom lip. ‘Bit of wine, plenty of women?’

Pavo cocked an eyebrow. ‘Aye, you would think so. But living in a palace doesn’t mean living like a king. Some say Shapur sought to

humiliate him, forcing him to kneel and act as a footstool. Then one day, bad news reached the shahanshah from one of his borders. A Kushan tribe had revolted, slain a wing of his army and sacked the cities there. Nobody knows for sure what happened, but some say that Shapur flew into a rage, taking up a shamshir and hacking down slaves. Finally, he turned upon Valerian . . . '

'He cut the emperor down?' Quadratus guessed, his nose wrinkling.

Pavo shook his head. 'No, it was far worse. Shapur ordered him

skinned alive.' Gasps of disgust rang out around the fire. 'Some believe his skin still hangs in that palace in Bishapur, like a trophy.' Silence hung over the group, nobody quite sure what to say.

'Well thanks for that,' Zosimus uttered at last, eyes wide. 'Next time we want a gentle story before turning in, I'll be sure to ask someone else.'

Pavo shrugged, ready to defend his tale. But before he could speak, a baritone drone split the air. A chill danced up Pavo's spine as all heads darted this way and that. Then they saw the source; on

the other side of the fort, Centurion Carbo led Baptista and his men in prayer. He stood with his head bowed and his hands clasped. The rest of the men faced him, kneeling, hands clasped and heads bowed. Pavo noticed that the men of the Flavia Firma had yet to touch the food they had prepared.

Yabet was first to comment; 'Still haunting, no matter how many times you hear it, eh?'

Pavo nodded. The Christian legionaries had prayed like this most nights, and more so on Sundays. He was intrigued by the looks of devotion on the faces of

Baptista and those with him, eyes closed, expressions sombre. But when he looked to Carbo, he saw the centurion's eyes were open, staring, lost in some memory. In a flash, Carbo's eyes met with Pavo's, as if realising he was being watched, then he quickly averted his gaze and returned to prayer. Pavo frowned. After weeks of being in Carbo's company, the man was still a guarded and nervous figure.

Felix also watched the ritual. 'Mithras is with us, and let's hope their God is too,' he commented pensively, flicking a finger up to the east. 'We'll need gods and more on

our side, out there.'

Nobody spoke for a moment, all eyes looking up above the eastern fort wall as the prayer reverberated around them.

'Mithras'll do for me,' Quadratus broke the silence and then emitted a gurgling belch that seemed to last an eternity. The men's frowns melted into smiles and chuckling.

'That's how it usually starts, before the farting,' Zosimus muttered, flicking his head towards the big Gaul, 'I just hope Mithras is with the poor bastards in his tent.'

'Hmm?' Quadratus frowned,

sucking a string of meat from his teeth.

‘Nothing,’ Zosimus replied with a chuckle.

Yabet turned to Quadratus and said innocently; ‘Perhaps you should sleep with the tent flap open tonight, no?’

Quadratus looked puzzled momentarily, then realised he was being made fun of again. He tossed down his water skin and gestured for Felix to throw him the dice. ‘Right, I’m in – I’m going to empty this cheeky little bugger’s purse.’

‘Ah, the familiar, brave words of the many whom I have gone on

to relieve of their gold,' Yabet grinned. The gathering legionaries cackled at this, which only seemed to infuriate Quadratus further.

They played dice around the fire until night brought with it a pitch-black sky splashed with an infinite speckling of stars. While the gathering of the XI Claudia men was warm and jovial, most of the men of the XVI Flavia Firma had doused their fires and retired to their tents already, bar the handful on watch atop the crumbled battlements. Pavo looked up from the gathering and noticed Gallus, standing alone at the south-eastern

corner of the fortlet walls, looking to the horizon. And at the north-eastern corner, Carbo stood alone, his gaze lost in the ground before him.

‘What do you make of him?’ Sura mused, following his gaze.

Pavo looked Sura in the eye. ‘He served with my father, told me of his past but . . . I don’t know, I can’t read him.’

Sura sighed and nodded. ‘Well I think we’ve learned in these last years to be wary of strangers.’

Pavo’s expression darkened. He noticed that Carbo seemed to be muttering to himself incessantly.

'Aye, hard times and hard lessons.'

The faintest trace of a cool breeze danced over their skins.



Pavo found sleep hard to come by. Every fleeting moment of drowsiness was torn away by the first flashes of that nightmare of Father, buried below the sands. When Sura erupted in a grating chorus of snoring, Pavo gave up, slid from his cot and made for the tent flap.

Outside, the desert air was pleasantly cool – some of the sentries on the walls had even

drawn their cloaks around their shoulders as they looked out across the darkness. A few men trudged to and from the latrines – a hole dug in the corner of the fortlet. But there were two figures atop the walls who looked as if they had not moved since sunset. Gallus and Carbo, at adjacent corners.

Pavo looked to each of them in turn, then climbed the stone steps towards his tribunos. 'All quiet out there, eh, sir?' He offered tentatively as he approached.

'Indeed, I don't like it,' Gallus replied dryly without breaking his eastwards gaze.

'I can take over your shift, sir, if you like? I have little chance of sleeping anyway.'

'I'm not on shift,' Gallus muttered. 'And sleep and I tend to be at odds at the best of times.'

Pavo smiled at this, though only because he knew the tribunos could not see him. He made to lift his nearly empty water skin to offer Gallus some, then hesitated and replaced it; the man ate and drank as rarely as he slept. Apart from military matters, Gallus spoke with few, and few knew how to speak with him. The silence grew brittle and suddenly Pavo felt conscious of

invading Gallus' solitude. 'Good night, sir,' he said, then turned to leave.

'I know what keeps you awake, lad. I heard you talking with Carbo in Antioch – at the tavern,' Gallus said, halting Pavo in his step. 'I understand that finding out what happened to your father must dominate your every thought. But this scroll we seek, it means everything to the empire. Do you realise just what might happen if we fail to find it?'

Pavo turned, gulping. He felt the outline of the phalera on his chest. 'Sir, you can rely on me. I

wouldn't jeopardise the lives of the men for anything.'

'Wouldn't you?' Gallus twisted round, one eyebrow cocked. 'Wouldn't you do anything – just to be rid of the nightmares that plague you?'

Pavo felt pinned by the tribunus' glower.

Then, mercifully, Gallus sighed and his shoulders relaxed. He sat on the tip of the walls, facing Pavo, then held out a hand. 'And yes, I'll have a pull on that water, if you have enough to spare. We need more, and soon, but damn, I'm thirsty.'

Pavo gingerly stepped over to sit beside him, pulling the cork from the skin, taking a modest swig then handing it over. Gallus sipped at it, his gaze distant as if it had taken him back to some time in the past. A silence passed between them.

‘What you said to Carbo, back at the tavern; about seizing upon the slimmest of hopes,’ he hesitated, plugging the cork back in the skin and searching for the words. ‘I can tell you that I would do the same.’ He sighed and looked up to the stars. ‘Indeed, just to have the chance would be some comfort.’

Pavo frowned. Few knew anything of Gallus' past. Even those he trusted like brothers in the XI Claudia; Felix, Zosimus and Quadratus knew little of the man inside the iron carapace. But there was one who had known something. His thoughts spun back to the gore-sodden plain of Ad Salices, only months ago, when he had held the dying Optio Avitus in his arms. Avitus' last words had remained lodged in Pavo's thoughts, and he had never summoned the courage to share them with the man they concerned.

'Avitus told you, didn't he?'

Gallus said suddenly.

Startled, Pavo was lost for a reply.

'Come on, lad. You're rarely short of words,' Gallus said.

Pavo's thoughts spun. Doubt needled on his lips as he summoned the words. 'Sir, he told me he was a speculatore, an assassin, a man sent into the legion to . . . ' his breath dropped to a whisper, his eyes darting around, ' . . . to kill you.'

Gallus nodded, his lips taut. 'And by Mithras he turned out to be one of my best men.'

The pair shared a silence, both

thinking of their lost comrade. The man had shunned his life as an assassin and fought like a lion in the Claudia ranks. His last words had never made sense to Pavo. 'Why was he sent after you, sir?' he asked tentatively.

'He was an assassin, lad. Just as you were once a slave. Just as I was once . . . ' his words trailed off and he gazed eastwards again, shaking his head. 'Everyone has a past, Pavo. We all make choices. Every day. You are young, and your biggest choices lie ahead.' He pushed the water skin back into Pavo's hand. 'While some of us

have to live with the past, the black choices we made and cannot undo.'

Pavo saw for the first time a glassiness in Gallus' eyes. But almost as soon as it was there, it was gone again. Gallus' face wrinkled and he shook his head, the steely glare returning.

'Don't trouble yourself with my maudlin words,' he said, standing, offering Pavo an arm. 'Think only of your legion and what lies ahead. Try to get some sleep if you can. Tomorrow, another day of hard marching awaits us.'

Pavo clasped Gallus' arm and hauled himself to his feet. 'Aye, sir.'

The pair parted and Pavo made his way back down into the fort, glancing over to his tent. Then he again noticed Centurion Carbo, still on his own at the other corner of the battlements. Pavo wondered if the haggard centurion found sleep difficult too. He considered then if it would be the time to approach him and talk with him more. Perhaps he could tell him of the nightmare of Father. Aye, sleep can wait, Pavo thought, ascending the steps nearest. Barefoot, he made little noise as he ascended. Then he heard a sibilant whisper. Carbo was still muttering to himself. The same

thing over and over again. A cold finger of realisation traced its way up his spine. The centurion was speaking Parsi, the language of the Persians, the language of his one-time captors. Pavo backed away, confused, picking his way back to his tent.



Darkness had long since fallen and all bar the sentries and a few others were asleep. Gallus stared out from the battlements, then started when a groan sounded from outside. He peered down to see the small camp the dromedarii riders had made just

outside the walls. The riders sat in a ring around a fire, cooking stew and jabbering in their own tongue. The camels yawned and snored, lying around them like a protective wall. There was little room inside the fortlet and in any case, it was their preferred way of doing things. Besides, the damned beasts smelled like Hades itself, he thought, wincing as he caught their scent on the night air. But these animals would be vital, he concluded, for without them to carry shields, armour and tents, the men would be burdened intolerably and they would drain whatever

water they had in half the time.

Water, he thought once more. They would have to find a fresh source soon. The only blessing was that his nagging thirst kept the other thoughts at bay. A pang of guilt touched his heart at this, and he placed a hand on his purse, feeling the idol of Mithras in there. He screwed up his eyes to stave off the swirl of memories this summoned, then glanced across the crumbling walls.

Sixteen steely men of the Flavia Firma were dotted around the other intact sections of battlement and by the ruined gates.

Each of them was alert, eyes searching the gloom outside. Good men, Gallus thought. Only Baptista, the pious and belligerent optio, gave him cause for concern. The man seemed bitter at playing a secondary role in this mission, and his attitude had been fractious to the morale of the column. And then there was Centurion Carbo. An odd individual, Gallus surmised, taciturn and guarded. His gaze fell to the opposite corner of the fort. Carbo was there, still. For many years, Gallus had adopted an outright distrust of all he met. Trust had to be earned, and this man shielded

too many secrets for his liking. A man who had miraculously returned to the empire having dwelt within the dark mines in the heart of Persia. The only confirmed survivor of the slaughter at Bezabde. The man had already fuelled young Pavo's hopes with his claims that the lad's father had survived Bezabde too.

As if sensing eyes upon him, Carbo glanced around the fort furtively, then his gaze snagged on Gallus. The pair stared at one another for but a heartbeat, until Carbo looked away and swiftly descended the steps into the

fortlet. There, he crossed paths with Yabet who offered some suggestion, resting a hand on his shoulder. Just then, a muted call brought a rustle of activity and a change of watch. Gallus saw Baptista beckoning his men down from the battlements. At the same time, stretching Claudia legionaries shuffled from their tents, readying to replace them. When Gallus glanced back to the spot where Carbo had stood, it was empty.

He barely had time to frown at this before he heard footsteps approaching, flitting up the steps to the battlements. He turned,

expecting to see one of his men coming to take up a sentry post here. Instead, Carbo rose into view.

'You do not sleep, it seems?' Carbo asked.

'Nor you?' Gallus countered.

Carbo ignored the question and held out a skin. 'We have pooled our water supplies for those who need it most.'

Gallus eyed the man guardedly.

'Take it. If you're performing a double-stint on the walls then you'll need it.'

Gallus took the skin and sipped at it. The water was cool

and refreshing indeed. He nodded and lifted the skin in appreciation.

‘Until morning, Tribunus,’ Carbo said, before turning to descend the stairs.

Gallus watched his every step.



Darkness clung to Gallus’ every sense, as if he was trapped in the reeds at the bottom of a murky lake. Pain rolled through his head like a thundercloud and his body was wracked with stabbing pains. He grunted, unsure if this was some nightmare or otherwise. Then he heard a distant voice calling to him.

At once, the darkness fell away, as if he was shooting for the surface.

‘Sir . . . sir!’

‘Felix?’ he grunted, prising his eyes open. He squinted through a bleary film, the sunlight blinding. Shapes stood over him.

‘Sir, they’re gone!’

Gallus fumbled, trying to stand.

‘Help him up!’ he heard Quadratus bark. At once, a sea of hands lifted and steadied him. Now his head pounded like a Gothic war drum. His mouth was dry, shrivelled and rife with a bitter, burning taste. He shook his head, panting for air,

then wiped at his eyes. He was on the same spot on the corner of the battlements. It was well past dawn. The men of the Claudia stood all around him on the battlements or on the fort floor below, looking up, their faces etched with fear.

‘What happened?’ he croaked.

‘The camels are gone,’ Felix replied, fighting the tremor of panic in his voice.

‘The camels, the dromedarii riders, the rations, the supplies, nearly everything!’ Sura added.

‘Gone?’ he roared, grappling the crenelated walls and glowering down to the spot outside where the

riders and beasts had been camped. Deserted. The land in every direction was empty too. Then he pushed back and squinted to look across the battlements. 'The sentries saw nothing?'

Pavo was first to respond; 'Not a thing, sir. We found them up here at dawn, slumped, muttering and incoherent like you.'

'The dromedarii have betrayed us,' Yabet said, his eyes wide in realisation. 'But someone . . . '

'But someone in here was in league with them,' Gallus cut in, his vision and thoughts sharpening at last. His gaze fell upon the water

skin lying by his feet. He lifted it; it was missing only the few sips he had taken.

‘Sir?’ Felix frowned.

But Gallus stood and brushed past them, then flitted down the steps and into the fortlet, the pounding in his head stoking his fury. He strode between the embers of cooking fires and came to a halt before Carbo’s tent. The Flavia Firma legionaries nearby watched Gallus’ approach, rising to their feet when the scowling Baptista stood first. The Claudia men rushed to gather around too.

‘Carbo!’ Gallus roared.

Nothing.

He tore his spatha from his scabbard. 'By Mithras I'll cut your tent down around you. Come out and face me.'

He heard a groan from inside. The tent flap rippled and then a hand drew it back. Carbo stumbled out into the light. He looked more haggard than ever, his tousled hair plastered across his sweat-streaked face and his eyes glassy.

'You poisoned me!' Gallus roared, pointing the tip of his blade at Carbo's chest.

Carbo frowned, his eyes darting, his hands clutched to his

head. 'Aye, you were poisoned. But so was I, you fool!' At that moment, Carbo doubled over and retched, orange bile bursting from his lips. He fell to his knees, gagging. 'The water,' he spluttered, 'it must have been the water.'

Gallus let a growl spill from his clenched teeth. 'Aye, it must have been, mustn't it? So you took a sip of your own poison to give yourself an alibi. Not good enough!' He pressed the tip of his blade into Carbo's chest, forcing him to stand tall once more. At this, Baptista swiped his spatha from his scabbard and made to lunge forward, but a

raised hand from Carbo stopped him.

‘Search his tent!’ Gallus nodded to Habitus and Noster.

‘You think this was my doing, Tribunus?’ Carbo growled as the young legionaries rooted around the tent behind him. ‘Your lack of trust is striking!’

Gallus pinned him with a gimlet stare. ‘Just how did you find your way from the Persian salt mines when so many others perished?’ he growled, searching Carbo’s eyes for that telltale glimmer of guilt. Carbo’s pupils dilated then he looked away swiftly.

‘Perhaps one day we will discuss it, Tribunus. I suggest we focus on the present, piece together . . . ’

‘We found this, sir,’ Noster gasped, pushing out of the tent. He held up a small, clay vial.

Gallus’ eyes narrowed as Carbo’s grew in alarm. ‘No,’ Carbo stuttered as Gallus snatched the vial from Noster, pulled the cloth stopper from it and sniffed. A thick, viscous stench offended his nostrils. ‘I’ve no idea what . . . ’

‘This bastard has killed us,’ Yabet cut Carbo off, striding forward to spit a gobbet of phlegm

into the dust. 'Without the camels, not all of us will make it to the next spring.'

At this, the legionaries broke out into a panicked babble.

'We must pursue the dromedarii,' one voice called out. 'Without the camels we will burn in this land!'

'We'll never catch them, we should return to Palmyra,' another countered.

'Silence!' Gallus cried, then held out the vial to Carbo. 'If you are innocent, then drink whatever this is and prove it.'

'It is not mine. I don't know

how it got into my tent,' Carbo spat.

'Drink it,' Gallus insisted, raising his sword again to rest the tip on Carbo's neck.

Carbo looked at the vial, his hand trembling as he raised it to his lips.

Gallus watched through narrowed eyes. Then, at the last, something caught his eye. It changed everything. The man standing nearest to Carbo had something poking from the open neck of his tunic. A leather strap from which hung a purse. Bloodstained and adorned with a golden lion motif.

'Stop!' Gallus barked, knocking the vial from Carbo's grasp with a flick of the sword.

'Tribunus?' Carbo frowned.

But Gallus' eyes were on the man by his side. 'Yabet?'

Yabet frowned as the tip of Gallus' sword swung away from Carbo and came to a rest against his chest. 'Tribunus, what is this?'

Gallus hooked his spatha blade around the leather strap on Yabet's chest and lifted the purse out. 'No, what is this?'

Yabet smiled weakly as all eyes turned upon him. 'My purse. What of it?'

Gallus shook with rage. 'The last time I saw this, it was clutched in the hands of the Cretan pirate captain. The last time I saw that whoreson, he was as good as a shark's breakfast. So tell me, guide; how did you come by it?'

Yabet said nothing.

'You will talk, guide. You will tell me everything.'

At this, Yabet chuckled in disbelief. His laughter faded as he saw the wall of stony legionary faces surrounding him. His shoulders slumped and he held out his hands in supplication. 'I will tell you everything . . . ' Then, in a

flash, he snatched something from his belt. Another vial. He cracked it open and swallowed the contents. ' . . . when we next speak in Hades. This dose will still my tongue forever.' At once, the poison took hold. He clutched his throat and gagged, his face reddening, foam gathering at the corners of his lips. His back arched, blood erupted from his nostrils, then he fell to one knee and crashed face-first into the dust, shuddering. All legionary eyes gawped at the twitching corpse.

Gallus looked up, sheathing his spatha. He fixed his gaze on Carbo.

‘If you had given me a chance to explain, Tribunus,’ Carbo muttered through taut lips, ‘I would have told you; Yabet organised the pooling of the water last night.’

‘Aye, so it appears,’ Gallus offered flatly. ‘And now we rely on you alone to guide us.’

Carbo offered nothing other than a steely glare, then he turned away to ready his century.

Gallus looked to the ruined barrack roof. There, the local vultures fluttered, eagerly eyeing Yabet’s fresh corpse.

‘The little bastard,’ Zosimus said, beholding the guide’s body,

scraping at his cropped scalp and shaking his head.

‘What’s our next move, sir?’ Pavo asked.

Gallus eyed him. ‘We push on. We must. Water is our priority now.’

‘The camel rider and Yabet, sir – do you think they were just out to rob us?’ Pavo asked, frowning at the purse in Gallus’ hands. ‘What if . . .’ he peered out through the broken fort gates.

‘Let’s assume it was merely brigandage for now,’ Gallus replied, weighing the purse. ‘Now see to it that the centuries are formed up.’

‘Yes, sir.’

When Pavo had gone, and he went unwatched, Gallus dug a coin from the purse and examined it. It bore the image of a blazing fire pit, with two figures standing either side of it. An odd chill passed over his heart as he gazed at the featureless faces of the two. This was a pure-silver Persian dirham, he realised. To share this knowledge with the men might destroy morale. He tucked the purse away and filled his lungs.

'Gather your equipment. We move on, and we make haste.'



A thunderstorm raged over Bishapur, bringing with it precious rain. Ramak stood silent and unnoticed in the doorway of the grand hall of the Palace. He toyed with the silver dirham, a blaze of lightning tearing across the sky, bringing the coin's temple motif to life and lighting his eyes like a fire. He looked from the coin and into the hall. Three tall arches opened up the north wall of the high-vaulted chamber, offering a panoramic vista of the night sky and myriad guttering torches from the lower city, spread out below and cowering under the tempest.

The floor of the grand hall was crowded with finery and the spoils of war. Fine sculptures, ancient shields and ornate pottery. Then there was a line of suits of armour from spahbads past. Many of them had lived and died as his puppet, he enthused. At that moment, his eyes settled on the lone, ox-like figure standing at the end of this line, by his father's armour. Spahbad Tamur gazed through the arches and into the night. He was muttering to himself, or perhaps to his dead father. Doubts, fears. I have conditioned him well, Ramak thought. Fear will keep this oaf by

my side. Then, when my ambitions are realised, I can dispense with him as I did his father . . . then perhaps I can bring his son to heel?

So little stood in the way of his ambitions now. There was just the splinter in the flesh that was Emperor Valens' desperate bid to find the lost scroll. He looked back down to the coin and grinned. That ember of Roman resistance would be snuffed out soon enough.

Chapter 9



After leaving the accursed fort, the column marched south-east and into the endless golden flats for another day and a half without incident – the only enemies being the fierce heat, the arid desert air and the near empty water skins. Deprived of the camels, they once more carried their shields and the scraps of rations not stolen by the dromedarii. The going underfoot

both helped and hindered the pace of the march. When it was unbroken, the pace quickened, but when they came across pitted, cracked land, men stumbled and slowed. There had to be an oasis or a spring of some sort soon – the map was marked with such locations, but finding them precisely would be next to impossible without an experienced guide. With Yabet dead and the camel riders gone, they were in dire trouble.

Despite this, they had been glad when the ruin of that accursed fortlet had fallen away into the haze behind them; if some follow-

up raid had been planned to finish off the mission, then they would find nothing but two graves at that place: Yabet's and that of the long-dead legionary skeleton. Carbo, Baptista and the Flavia Firma men had carried out the burials with full Christian rites.

'Slow!' Gallus barked from the head of the column. As one, they dropped the pace to a walk. All necks stretched to look ahead.

Pavo saw nothing. But he felt something underfoot. A tremor.

'Riders?' Sura said, stepping forward from the front rank.

The heat haze rippled, then

shapes emerged from the south-east. Thrashing, knotted legs, pained groaning and trilling cries. Camel riders, hundreds of them. Easily twice as many as the legionary column, a tall dust cloud billowing up behind them. They wore loose white robes, whipping in their slipstream. They wore linen scarfs on their heads. A few carried hide and cane shields and some held spears. All of them carried bows.

Gallus paced ahead, one hand raised, the other on his sword hilt, eyes scouring the approaching pack.

‘Desert raiders,’ Carbo hissed, recognising them first.

Pavo’s eyes darted. These riders were the bane of the no man’s land between the two great empires, siding with Rome and Persia in turn and as it suited them. Then he spotted the handful in their midst, wearing Roman helms and carrying legionary spears. The dromedarii. ‘Treacherous bastards!’ he spat. The sentiment was echoed all along the Roman ranks. Just then, a chorus of ululating battle cries split the air and the desert raiders split into a wide crescent, as if to envelop the legionary line. At

that moment, the soldier's curse struck Pavo like a lance, swelling his bladder and bringing thunder to his heart.

'Double line!' Gallus bellowed. A buccina sang to underline the order and the legionary standards waved frantically. Carbo rushed off to head up his own century. Pavo jogged over to push into place alongside Zosimus on one side and Sura on the other. Over one hundred shields clattered into place, presenting a wall, half ruby and half blue. Only spear tips, helms and determined eyes were visible over the rims. The single

rank behind pressed into place. This shallow but wide formation would make it harder for the raiders to threaten the flanks. 'Front ranks, ready plumbatae!' Gallus cried, stepping into the line to take his place just right of dead centre.

Pavo stood alongside Sura and Zosimus. The wave of desert raiders made as if to charge the Roman line. 'They won't come at our spear wall,' He insisted as he trained his gaze down the length of his spear. 'They're archers. They're going to wear us down'

But big Zosimus wasn't listening. 'Just another few feet,' he

growled, his knuckles white on the shaft of his plumbata. Then at just over a hundred paces away – just outside of plumbatae range – the raiders split in two and washed past either flank. As they did so, they loosed a storm of arrows.

‘Shields!’ Gallus cried from the centre.

Pavo’s shield arm tensed instinctively, hefting it overhead. The hail hammered into the Roman shield wall and his whole body juddered, splinters of wood spraying overhead. Wet punches of iron piercing flesh and the torn cries of the stricken rang out. Glancing

left and right, he saw the determined grimaces of his comrades and the shafts of afternoon sunlight where the unlucky few had fallen, those nearby showered in blood. Some two hundred and twenty men exhaled in relief.

‘Turn!’ Gallus cried. As one, the Roman line about-faced, presenting shields and spears to the riders reforming into one band again in the north. The raiders’ looked relaxed and confident. Some of them wore broad, shark-like grins as they nocked their bows in a leisurely fashion – as if hunting

game. Pavo glanced over his shoulder to see the legionaries of the rear rank crouching and fumbling with their packs. Moments later, he heard the stretching of wood, horn and bowstring behind him.

‘Archers, ready!’ Gallus cried. Like a rising wave, each of the legionaries in the rear rank stood tall, lifted their bows high, arrows nocked and bowstrings stretched.

The desert raiders’ easy demeanour vanished at the sight of this. A canny grin touched Pavo’s lips. Roman infantry carrying bows was still a novelty in these parts, it

seemed.

‘Loose!’ Gallus boomed.

Over one hundred bowstrings twanged in unison. The confident line of raiders at once dissolved into panic. Apart from the few who wore shields or armour, many were punched from their mounts as the arrows thudded down upon them, tearing through skin and smashing bone. Well over seventy of them fell. The rest sank into disarray, some slowing, others immediately wheeling round ready to take flight.

Now! Pavo mouthed the word, and saw Sura, Zosimus and the men nearby do the same, all eyes

trained on Gallus.

Before the lead desert raiders could rally their men, Gallus broke ahead of the Roman line, grappling the Claudia standard from the aquilifer, then swiped the banner down in a chopping motion. 'Forward!' he cried. As one, the shield wall burst into life like some iron insect, the shields jostling, the legionary war cry and the wailing buccina spilling across the desert plain.

But the raiders did not crumble in the face of the legionary charge. Instead, they rallied, the lead riders barking encouragement

to them. They were shaken, but angered too. Many had thrown down their bows and drawn their swords – long curved blades. They whipped their camels forward and unleashed their trilling battle cry once more, haring to meet the Roman advance. As Pavo raced forward, he saw one rider howl and kick his beast into a charge. Their eyes met, and he realised it was one of the traitor dromedarii. At the last, he leapt up to meet the man's vicious sword-swipe.

With a tumultuous roar and a crash of shields, blades and bone, the two sides came together. Pavo's

spear clashed with the dromedarius' blade and the blow jarred him to his core, sending him spinning into the melee. For a moment, he could see nothing but thick dust. Then it cleared like a curtain being whipped back and he saw the dromedarius again, only feet away. The man leant out and tried to cut down over Pavo's shield. Pavo butted out with his shield, deflecting the strike and the boss bloodying the camel's nose. Then he swept his spear up and into the rider's armpit, bringing forth a shower of dark blood. The man crunched to the ground. Pavo swung round to see another blade

swooping down towards him. He parried weakly, dropping his spear, but then tore out his spatha and sliced it up and across the rider's throat. The camel hared from the melee, dragging the flailing, dead rider in its wake.

Pavo stooped to take up his spear once more, twisting this way and that to make sense of the surrounding chaos. In every direction the cries of torn men were incessant, the swirling, crimson-streaked dust offering only glimpses of flashing steel. Dull shapes barged and battered at his shield, an iron blade glanced off his helmet

and another nicked the skin on his nose. As the dust thinned, he saw the bloody tumult all around. Legionaries disappeared under sweeping, charging camels. Heads spun clear of bodies as the curved blades swept to and fro. Camel riders were skewered on legionary spear tips and toppled from their saddles. He saw one rider barged from his camel, toppling to the dust only for another beast to trample across his skull, which burst like a watermelon, instantly stilling his thrashing body.

Pavo backed away, choking on the dust, straining to seek out his

comrades. Only feet away, the banners of the XI Claudia and the XVI Flavia Firma waved to and fro defiantly, dust-coated and blood-spattered. Many legionaries had fallen. He saw one Flavia Firma comrade surrounded by two desert raiders. His spatha was bent and his mail vest torn. Pavo barged through the fray to his comrade's aid, but was halted in his tracks as a blade swept up, slicing the legionary from gut to jaw. The force of the blow spun the legionary around and sent a wet splatter of blood and gut wall across Pavo's face. Then the riders turned their

attentions to Pavo. Their blades sang, swiping down at him. One he met with a parry, and the second blade crashed off his helm, sending him staggering backwards, half-blinded, before toppling into the slick carpet of gore. A legionary spear hurled from somewhere in the dust cloud took one of the riders in the throat, then a plumbata punched the other one in the gut. Pavo glanced up to see the pair of Flavia Firma legionaries who had saved him cry out as another camel rider thundered past behind them, tearing across the backs of their necks with his blade and

bringing forth thick sprays of lifeblood. Moments later, this rider was punched from his horse on the end of a legionary lance. This battle teetered on the edge of a blade. If they could stand together, it could be won, he thought, seeing Habitus and Sura fighting nearby.

But all hope drained from him when he saw something, through the battle and to the south-east. The horizon was rippling once more. The blood in his veins turned to ice. More riders. At least five hundred.

‘We’re dead!’ Habitus cried.

‘Enough of that talk!’ a blood-

soaked Sura snarled, cutting down one camel rider then barging through to bunch up beside the beanpole legionary.

Pavo pushed up to stand by Habitus' other side. 'Think only of your sword and of the guts of the riders before you,' he snarled as the three hacked and parried desperately. Yet he could not help but glance at these new riders as they drew closer. They were different, he realised. Horsemen, not camel riders. They wore light robes like the raiders, but they were armoured in dark-brown, hardened leather cuirasses, and

many wore iron helms, some plumed. Many of them stretched in their saddles, lifting bent bows into the air. Then they loosed.

Pavo gawped up at the incoming hail. It hovered, then turned to rain down for them. He clutched the phalera on his chest instinctively, waiting on the blow that would end the quest for the scroll, end his quest to find what had become of Father.

He shuddered at the series of wet thuds and gurgling cries that rang out all around him. But he, Sura and Habitus were unharmed. He blinked and the trio shared an

incredulous frown. All around them, the desert raiders had fallen limp, arrows quivering in their backs and necks, blood washing from their mouths, swords slipping from their lifeless grasps, their bodies sliding from saddles to thump into the dust like butchered meat. Not a single legionary had been harmed by the volley. The few raiders – just seven of them – who had avoided the strike broke out in a babble of panic, twisting in their saddles, only just noticing the approaching horsemen. 'Maratocupreni!' they cried. Then, as if the word had tainted the air with some dark

curse, they broke from the melee and thundered off to the south-east.

At this, one of the leather-armoured horsemen broke from the approaching five hundred and hared after the fleeing raiders. This rider sported a helm with a long, swishing plume. With the grace of a centaur, the rider nocked and loosed arrow after arrow. The seven fleeing desert raiders were punched from their mounts one by one. Only one slipped away and disappeared back into the heat haze from where he had come.

Pavo released his tight grip on

the phalera and allowed himself to breathe again. He glanced back over the dark-red mess that stained the plain. Camels and men lay tangled, jutting white bone and spilled guts adding to the glistening crimson film that coated everything. The stench of blood and open bowels was rife in the baking sun and a cloud of flies buzzed eagerly over this feast while a venue of vultures screeched overhead. Amongst the carnage, the surviving legionaries stood, panting in disbelief, some retching into the gore. Carbo stood with them, his spatha bloodied and his chest

heaving. Gallus stood nearby, his face plastered in blood and taut with fury. More than half of the column had been slain, he realised. He saw the gawping, lifeless faces of many from his century and from Quadratus' – many he had considered good friends. A hardness gripped his heart at this – a hardness he saw reflected in Sura's stony gaze at the scene. They called this the soldier's skin. It was welcome at times like this.

'Who are they, sir?' Habitus muttered, eyeing the approaching five hundred.

Pavo frowned. 'I don't know,

but keep your shield up.'

'There is no need,' a voice spoke. Carbo stood a few feet away, cleaning his spatha with a rag. The man's well-weathered features were clad in the filth of battle.

'Sir?' Pavo hesitated, glancing to the riders, hearing their chatter and the whinnying of their mounts as they came closer.

'The Maratocupreni have made their choice,' Carbo said. 'If they wanted to side with the camel raiders, you would be dead by now. We all would.' He sheathed his blade then flicked out a finger and

jabbed it to the ground. 'Lower your shields and sheathe your weapons.'

Pavo saw the blood-spattered Gallus approaching, gathering the legionaries together. He had taken the lead from Carbo and was ordering them to lower their weapons likewise.

'You'd better be right about this,' Gallus said, casting a frosty look at Carbo, then eyeing the mysterious riders.

Pavo watched as the rider with the long, swishing plume rode to the fore, the rest following in a loose pack. They slowed to a trot then came to a halt a few strides

from Gallus and Carbo. Their skin was swarthy, they sported narrow, fine features, and almost all of them were clean-shaven. They wore smears of kohl on each cheek, just under the eyes. They eyed the filthy Roman banners with narrowed eyes. The lead rider's face was cast in shade from the helm.

'Tribunus Gallus of Legio XI Claudia Pia Fidelis,' Gallus saluted. 'Your intervention was timely.' His tone was terse, almost suspicious.

'Ah! Typically warm Roman gratitude,' the lead rider laughed mirthlessly.

This one was slender and

small, Pavo realised, noticing the narrow shoulders upon which the composite bow hung. And there was something else. The voice was husky but light.

Then the lead rider removed the helm, revealing the dusky and delicate face of a young woman. Her almond-shaped eyes dominated her face, her neat nose and pursed lips. The whipping, swishing plume was in fact sleek, dark locks scooped up in a tight topknot, the tail draped down her back.

‘Izodora of the Maratocupreni,’ she introduced herself.

The smears of kohl on her

cheeks gave her a fearsome glare. Fearsome yet comely, Pavo mused. Then her gaze snapped onto him. Instantly, he looked away, embarrassed.

'You chose to loose upon the desert raiders and not us. Why?' Gallus continued.

'They were desert raiders, yes, but they were not here for mere brigandage. I have clashed with them before – they spill blood for Persian coin. I chose to loose upon them because they were the aggressors,' then her gaze hardened, 'or at least that is how it seemed. You and your men seem to

have strayed far from the Roman borders and into the desert. Perhaps I should have chosen differently?’ She sat tall on her saddle and cast Gallus a glare that almost matched that of the tribunos. ‘So, where are you headed, Tribunus Gallus?’

Gallus did well not to hesitate. ‘We were on patrol when our camel escort deserted us,’ he nodded through the thick pack of buzzing flies to the slain dromedarii amongst the desert raiders. ‘Then they gathered this band and tried to slay us. We have been without fresh water for days.’

'You set out with a camel escort?' she cocked an eyebrow. 'Those beasts are usually only needed when a man seeks to cross a desert.' She looked to the east as she said this. 'Romans crossing the desert have only ever led to one thing. War.'

Pavo noticed that her knuckles whitened on her bow. The next few moments passed like an eternity and Pavo felt his breath grow faster and faster. Only the buzzing of the flies nearby and the screeching of the vultures could be heard. Finally, she seemed to relax a little, releasing the grip on her bow. She

snapped her fingers and the riders nearest brought forward a clutch of water skins, handing them to the panting legionaries.

‘Come with us,’ she beckoned. ‘In my settlement you can see to your wounded. And you can tell me more about your . . . patrol.’



They followed Izodora and the Maratocupreni until sunset, when they came to a rift in the land like a giant axe-wound in the dusty plain, as broad as a street at this end and widening near the centre. Pavo could only imagine what monstrous

tremor in the earth had created such a fissure. While most of the legionary column made to march onwards past this crevasse, Izodora stopped, raising a hand to slow her riders. At this, the legionaries stopped too. She pushed two fingers into the corners of her mouth and emitted a shrill whistle. Silence hung in the air for but a moment, then a faint whistling sounded in reply from within the crevasse. Frowns were shared all round as Izodora led her riders to the end of the crevasse, starting on down a painfully narrow dirt slope that led into its depths.

Izodora halted on seeing Gallus and the legionaries hesitate. 'You think this is some kind of trap?' she fired back with a look and an incredulous look. 'You realise that I could have slain you all back there,' she said with a flick of the head back in the direction of the camel raider skirmish. 'With your attitude, you make me think that perhaps I should have. Stay out here if you will. I can feed and water the horses twice over instead. At least they would show some gratitude.'

For once, it seemed the iron tribunos was cowed. The acerbic words of this rider had him

searching for a reply in vain. Wordlessly, he waved the legionaries on in Izodora's wake. They marched in single file over a hundred feet down and onto the soft, dusty floor of this tight, sheer-sided valley, hidden from the plain above. It was less than a mile long. The walls were dotted with dark recesses, some at ground level, others ten, twenty or thirty feet up, with rough staircases hewn into the rock leading to them. Pavo instantly shared Gallus' fears – imagining a cluster of spear-wielding bandits tucked away in those recesses. When Izodora suddenly clapped her

hands, they froze, braced. The noise echoed through the space and seemed to stoke some movement in these alcoves. Figures emerged, a few hundred at least. Pavo's heart quickened. Until he saw that they were only children, mothers, elderly men and women and a few younger men walking on crutches. They were joined by a playful herd of goats – the kids tumbling and bleating as the mother goats led them to the far end of the valley. There, a thick carpet of grass had sprung up around a part of the rock face that sparkled and seemed to move.

‘A spring!’ Sura croaked in delight, recognising the flowing water. Slumbering near this mini-oasis was a small herd of camels.

In moments, the Maratocupreni had kindled fires and were baking bread and bringing water to the men of the column and to their own warriors. They also brought out bowls of water, salves and bandages to tend to the wounded legionaries. Before darkness had fallen, Maratocupreni and Roman alike sat around the fires, filling their bellies and slaking their thirsts.

Pavo spiked a piece of

flatbread on a wooden skewer and held it over the flames to toast. Having downed his armour and boots, he felt cooler and lighter. But the aches and pains of the march were quick to come to the fore. His feet were aching, swollen and dotted with raw patches where his boots had rubbed through several layers of skin. His shoulders felt crooked from the uneven weight in his pack, and his neck was red-raw from the sun and the chafing of his chain mail. He crunched into the charred bread and supped at his cool water. A good night's sleep would help his body heal. Surely he

was tired enough to stave off the nightmares tonight.

The crackling of the embers echoed endlessly between the sheer cliff walls, the flames casting dancing shadows up the rock faces. He felt his eyelids drooping, sighed and glanced across the many faces illuminated in orange seated nearby. Felix, Quadratus and Zosimus bore dark rings under their eyes from dehydration as they sipped endlessly from their skins. They only became animated when Quadratus prised off his boots, sniffed at one, then held it up to Zosimus' face with a devious grin.

Zosimus' retching lasted almost as long as Felix's laughter.

A few fires away, Carbo, Baptista and the Flavia Firma men seemed equally drawn. Given their fatigue, the men of the XI Claudia and the XVI Flavia Firma had spoken little since the battle with the camel raiders, but every man had fought for every other in that clash, and the animosity seemed to have faded. Baptista looked up at that moment, catching Pavo's eye. The man's lips grew thin and his nose wrinkled, then he gave an almost imperceptible nod. Grudging respect at last? Pavo wondered,

nodding in reply.

The Maratocupreni warriors soon set down their armour and weapons and came to eat. They sat amongst the Romans in silence or quietly chattered amongst themselves, their charcoal locks hanging long and loose. They seemed a modest and affable people, very much in contrast to their battlefield demeanour. And the five hundred or so of them that had ridden to the rescue of the Roman column seemed to be the sum of their army. Bar the families and the few archers who had been left behind to guard the crevasse,

this was all there was of the Maratocupreni. Pavo combed his memories – he was sure he had read of them before, but the detail remained elusive.

He heard a dull chatter from one of the recesses high up on the crevasse wall. The orange flame of a campfire danced there, and Pavo recognised the tones of Izodora, along with the jagged and clearly angered words of a pair of Maratocupreni elders. He saw Izodora stand, utter some clipped parting message, then turn away from the fire to descend the stairs to the valley floor. That will have

been a wintry conversation no doubt, he mused with a hint of a grin as he watched her descend.

'She's pretty,' Sura mused by his side, 'but I bet she'd turn your cock to ice.'

Pavo was torn from his thoughts by this erudite observation. But indeed she was striking in her appearance, her almond eyes sharper than a blade. And her vixen-like, nimble hips moved gracefully. Like a strip of silk in the breeze. At that moment, he thought of the strip of red silk in his belt. Of Felicia. Guilt needled at his heart.

'You're thinking about it, you dirty bugger!' Sura gawped in mock-disgust.

'No, I was just . . . ' he shook his head clear of the thought.

'Ach, not to worry,' Sura shrugged and picked a morsel of bread from his teeth with a splinter of wood. 'Felicia's probably been at it every night back in Constantinople.'

Pavo bit back a riposte, then stood. 'Right, I'm washing and then I'm calling it a night,' he nodded to the area by the fires where some of the goatskin contubernia tents had been set up. He picked his way

through the campfires and over to the green end of the valley and the spring. There, the moon had risen to dominate the narrow window of night sky above. The scent of the grass and the feel of it brushing on his feet momentarily allowed him to imagine he was in another land – far from the arid dust. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine the cooling mizzle and fecund plains of Thracia. He cupped his hands under a jagged outcrop of rock and collected water from the trickling spring, then lashed it across his face and the dark stubble on his scalp. It soothed and calmed him,

washing the last traces of dust from his skin. He gazed up at the moon and wondered if, somewhere out there, the moon gazed down upon Father. 'Even if only to reclaim your bones, Father, I will find you.'

Sorrow stung behind his eyes and he turned away to go back to the tents. But he was stopped in his tracks. Izodora stood there, her eyes sparkling in the moonlight.

'Forgive me, I assumed I could wash here?' he stammered.

'You did. You can,' she replied dryly. 'I'm just waiting on you to finish.'

Pavo looked over her shoulder

to see that Habitus had found some last reserves of energy to play with a pair of Maratocupreni children. The little girl clasped one hand and the boy the other, while the beanpole legionary spun on the spot, lifting them and whirling them around. Their laughter was pleasant to his ear. 'I don't know what my tribunus said to you, but every one of these men is grateful for your coming to our rescue today. Had the camel raiders not cut us down, then thirst would have finished us.'

Her gaze remained flinty. 'Do you know how much I have risked by bringing you here? The elders,'

she jabbed a finger up at the cliff face alcove where she had come from, 'they say I have brought demons to our home. They want my warriors to arm and cut your throats tonight while you sleep.'

Her words turned Pavo's blood to ice. He caught sight of the white-robed archers strolling along the higher alcoves on the cliff wall, quivers full. 'I . . . we're just soldiers. We mean you no harm . . . ,

'Your men will not be harmed,' she cut him off. 'I am in charge here, not the elders.'

Pavo gulped, not entirely

reassured by this. 'But why do your elders despise us?'

'You may not like my answer, legionary,' she said, her eyes meeting his.

'Perhaps not, but I'd prefer some answer to none,' he shrugged.

Izodora pulled in a deep breath and nodded, as if bracing herself. 'Seven years ago, I was just a girl,' she looked over to the little girl now being tossed up and down in the air by Habitus, 'only a few years older than her. We lived in Roman lands and there were many more of us then – ten times more.

My people enjoyed villas, wells, orchards of date palms and vast green fields to graze our goats. We were good people, with good hearts,' she clasped a hand to her breast, 'well, most of us were. Some grew greedy, yes, and withheld taxes from the empire. Others took to brigandage. One band ambushed a patrol of Roman scouts and killed many of them.'

Pavo held out his hands in bemusement. 'Show me a people who don't have such characters in their midst.'

Her eyes narrowed. 'Tell me then, how would you deal with such

troubles?’

Pavo squirmed at this, sure he would step on the worst possible answer. ‘Trap and gut the bastards who darken the name of their people. Or offer money to the good-hearted folk to turn in those who cause unrest. It wouldn’t be nice, but . . . ’

‘It wouldn’t, but in comparison to what happened,’ she shook her head. ‘Your Emperor, Valens, the man you fight for, decided to eradicate such troubles in his own way. In a single night raid, a cohort of legionaries fell upon my village. They sought out not just the

brigands and the tax thieves, but every last one of us. I watched as they cut down my friends as if slaughtering cattle. They dragged my mother from her bed, my baby sister in her arms. They took them outside and led them to a pyre . . . ' her eyes grew glassy and she looked away with a snarl, her fists balled.

Pavo rested a hand on her shoulder and let a silence pass while she composed herself. At that moment, he remembered why the name of the Maratocupreni had sounded familiar. The rumours of their fate had spread around the

empire some years ago. The stories of the mass burnings had sounded so brutal they had come across as apocryphal. Not so, it seemed. 'Now I truly do not understand why you saved us today?'

'Because, without your kind, we . . . this,' she swept a hand over the valley, 'would not be here. Of the cohort sent to destroy us, one contubernium saw the brutality around them and took no part in it. They found me, cowering in terror. They led me and a cluster of others from the burning village and sent us off into the night, with little more than our mounts and what food and

water we could carry.' She looked him in the eye, wiping defiantly at a tear that escaped down her cheek. 'Do you understand now?'

'I think so,' Pavo offered.

'But if I have chosen wrongly. If you and your men have come to these lands looking to slaughter in the name of your glorious empire . . . '

Pavo grabbed both her shoulders this time, firmly. 'Never,' he gasped. 'The men you see here have only ever known desperate wars of defence. You have to believe me.'

She said nothing, her eyes

searching him. Her gaze seemed to lure out some of the blacker memories from the recesses of Pavo's mind. He slumped, nodding. 'In my time in the legions, there has been much blood spilled, I cannot deny that. I know only too well some of the gruesome deeds I have had to carry out, times when I have had to make the hardest of choices to protect the few I love.'

She cocked her head to one side at this, her expression lightening momentarily. 'This, I can understand. In these last years I have faced many such moments, and hard choices indeed. Perhaps

we have more in common than I first thought.' Then, as if a storm cloud had passed overhead, her expression grew dark once more. 'But if you only fight wars of defence, then tell me why, a few weeks ago, I watched a full legion marching this way, headed east as if to challenge Persia,'

Pavo's eyes darted. The IV Scythica?

'And now I find you and your men marching in their tracks.'

'I know nothing of this other legion. Other than that they were sent out to combat some Persian raid. The empire is in no state to

attempt any kind of invasion of Persia – indeed, that is why we are here.'

Izodora's eyes narrowed.

Pavo darted his tongue out to lick his lips. He looked past her shoulder to see that the campfires were now doused. Most of the legionaries were disappearing inside their tents and the Maratocupreni to their caves. Gallus had insisted that they were to keep their brief private, but in his heart he knew he had to tell her.

'Yes, we are headed for Persia – the very heart of the Persis Satrapy. But we seek something

that might secure the current borders and prevent war. There is a scroll . . . '

She cut him off, her brow knitting in confusion. 'Nothing can prevent war between your empires. I know this.'

He shrugged his shoulders and turned to look up to the moon again. 'It seems whimsical at best – the scroll may not even exist, or it might have long since been lost. But we've got to try to find it. Countless thousands of lives – Roman and Persian – could be spared if we succeed.' When he turned back, her expression had

softened just a little.

‘This is a noble cause,’ she conceded. ‘Fanciful, but noble. One worth fighting for. The threat of war between your empires hangs over this valley like a black cloud and so I pray you find what you are looking for.’ Her eyes narrowed as if reassessing the Roman mission. ‘Yet those camel riders you met today were but scouts. Do you realise what waits on any who intrude on the shahanshah’s lands?’

Pavo nodded grimly. ‘The Savaran? If I had a follis for every time I have heard them mentioned in hushed and frightened tones in

these last weeks,' he swiped a hand before him as if swatting an imaginary moth. 'Regardless of their might, I will be marching east.'

She ran the tip of a finger along the delicate bridge of her nose, then wagged it at him. 'You are not telling me everything. I can see it in your eyes, and in your frown that comes and goes when you fidget with that talisman.'

Pavo gawped, realising he was unconsciously gripping the phalera medallion through his tunic. He slumped and let a dry chuckle escape. 'Aye, there is more. Though nothing that should trouble you.'

Indeed, it is even more whimsical than the notion of the scroll.' He swept a hand up to the eastern tip of the valley. 'I lost my father when I was a lad – probably the same age as you when you lost your mother to . . . ' he froze.

She nodded for him to continue.

'Well I thought my father had died, many years ago.' He lifted the phalera from his tunic and smiled as he traced the inscription on it. They sat by the spring and Pavo told his story. She listened to his every word. When he had told her everything, they each talked about

their happier childhood days. By the time tiredness caught up with them, both were smiling.

When he stood to return to his tent, Izodora rose with him.

'Today, when we chose to save you and your men, I wasn't sure we made the correct choice. Even tonight, when I spoke with the village elders, I was troubled by the decision. Now, I know I have chosen wisely.' She turned in the moonlight and picked her way into the darkness.

Pavo strolled back to his tent, his heart warmed by the conversation and her parting words.

He lifted the silk rag from his belt and inhaled Felicia's scent, then clutched the phalera as he looked over his shoulder, to the moon in the east. Some things in life were worth fighting for, he affirmed, and some he would happily die for.

When he ducked inside the tent, Zosimus muttered some sleepy, gibberish about being attacked by evil goats, then Sura's eyes popped open and his trademark mischievous grin appeared from nowhere.

'You dirty bugger!' he whispered.

Pavo considered protesting his

innocence, but simply shrugged and fell into his cot with a chuckle.

Chapter 10



The following morning at dawn, the men of the column climbed the steep path from the valley and filtered onto the golden desert flatland outside the Maratocupreni crevasse. Now they readied themselves to set off once more to the south-east. Izodora had persuaded the elders to provide twenty-five camels from their herd to carry the burden of shields and

tents. She had also agreed to let the legionaries with the gravest wounds from the camel raider skirmish remain in the valley to be tended to. Now just over one hundred of the original three centuries would march onwards.

Pavo watched Izodora as she walked amongst the men, flanked by two Maratocupreni riders in their leather cuirasses and helms, handing two water skins and parcels of bread to each legionary. It seemed his words to her last night had convinced her of the nobility of their quest. But there was something else, a finality and

sadness in the way she beheld the legionaries. He recalled her words of warning about the Savaran. A shiver gathered at the base of his spine and tried to march up his back, but he shrugged the growing dread away.

A hundred thousand iron riders will not stop me going east.

'Eyes front, dirty bugger,' Sura interrupted his thoughts.

'Aye, are you doing this, or not?' Zosimus growled, stabbing a finger into Pavo's chest.

Pavo turned back to his current task. He picked up the clay bowl and swiped his thumbs

through the kohl it held. He pressed his thumbs to Zosimus' scowling features, then rubbed them along under the big Thracian's eyes, leaving a dark smear of the substance on each cheek. Zosimus glared at Pavo as if he had just spilled his wine cup. Quadratus did not help matters by stifling fits of laughter.

'This better not be some sort of joke,' Zosimus growled, shooting nervous glances to those nearby. 'I'm not some bloody catamite, you know.'

'If it was a joke, would I be wearing it?' Pavo added, pointing to

his own cheeks. 'Would they be wearing it?' he nodded to Izodora and her men. It was Izodora who had advised them to use it. 'It'll dull the reflection of the sun – your skin will not burn and your eyes will not tire so swiftly,' Pavo assured him. Then a legionary from Quadratus' century strolled up to apply the dark paste to the big Gaul's cheeks. His fits of laughter ended abruptly and this seemed to calm Zosimus. All around them, other men of the column applied kohl in a similar fashion, fastened their boots and helms into place and slid on their mail vests.

Before the sun had fully risen, the two legionary standards – brushed clean of the worst of the dust and blood – were raised and they were ready to set off. Izodora and her riders escorted them for a few miles, then pointed them in the direction of the next water source. Pavo saw Gallus approach her before she departed. The tribunos lifted the frayed, tawny gold lion purse from his belt and placed it in her palm, offering with it just a few muted words. She seemed to behold Gallus in silence for a few moments, before she and her riders turned back for the crevasse,

gradually melting into the growing heat haze.

The march was brisk at first, the men eager to cover as many miles as possible before the midday heat challenged them. But the morning sun was fierce enough. The rawness of Pavo's ankles came back swiftly, despite the cooling balms the Maratocupreni had applied to his skin that morning. Already, his tunic was soaked through with sweat, his mail stung to the touch and his helmet seemed to be cooking his brain once more. It was a small mercy that they had the camels to carry their shields

and some of the ration packs. The biggest discomfort for Pavo, however, was Sura's incessant questioning.

'You didn't? What do you mean you didn't?' Sura asked, his face overly smeared in kohl and the skin on his arms plastered in the pale jasmine paste.

'I mean just that. Nothing happened,' Pavo insisted again.

'You were out there for hours with her. What did you do then?'

At this, all the legionaries nearby seemed to cock an ear to the conversation, and Centurion Zosimus looked over his shoulder

with an eager eye.

‘We . . . ’ Pavo started, then sighed in resignation. ‘We talked, that’s all.’

‘Talked?’ Sura gawped in mock horror.

‘I’d give her a bloody good talking too, I can tell you,’ Zosimus chuckled, his broad shoulders jostling.

Pavo made to defend Izodora’s honour, but hesitated on seeing the mischievous grins Sura and Zosimus wore – eager for Pavo to dig a deeper hole for himself. ‘I’ll be marching at the rear,’ he grumbled, falling back.

He heard Sura's words trailing off as he fell back. 'Aye, I bet she'd like that too . . . '

He berated the lads at the back a little more harshly than they deserved, partly to quell his annoyance and partly because this would keep his mind and theirs from the heat – something Zosimus had suggested. The toll of the camel raider attack had been heavy. Discounting the injured remaining with the Maratocupreni, Zosimus' century now numbered just thirty-one, and Quadratus' century had been depleted to just thirty-nine. Likewise, the Flavia

Firma had lost nearly half of their number – barely forty marching with Carbo and Baptista.

‘This mission was never about numbers,’ Felix said in a hushed tone.

Pavo looked to the primus pilus. His gaze was flinty.

‘If the emperor sought to seize this scroll by force, he would have scraped together and sent in many legions. So long as one of us marches on, we can still do this.’

Pavo smiled wearily. ‘Aye, one man, one scroll. The future of the empire.’

‘An easy task . . . for once,’

Felix grinned then turned to berate the legionaries further before rousing them into a chorus of song.

They carried on at a good pace until the sun reached its zenith. Now the heat was intense – like never before on this journey. Until now, Pavo had felt such ferocity only when stood near the soot-stained smithy furnaces in the fort fabricae, watching glowing new spatha blades passing from the flames to be tempered and honed. The singing had fallen away and a rhythmic gasping had replaced it, punctuated by the popping of corks from water skins and frantic

guzzling of water.

'We're in trouble again,' Zosimus whispered when Pavo drew level with him.

'Aye,' Pavo agreed, then glanced down at the deeper dust they marched through – it was gradually becoming coarser and sandier. His boots seemed to sink a few inches into this with every stride, then pull at his soles as he made to take the next, 'and the going is harder underfoot.'

As if sensing the change of fortune, Gallus called back over his shoulder 'By the end of the day we'll be at the next spring. Mithras

wills us on, men. He and the sun are kin. The brother of Mithras will not spite us.' At this, a hoarse but raucous cheer erupted from the XI Claudia men. Gallus nodded over to Carbo. The man was withdrawn as usual, his lips twitching in some inner dialogue, but he noticed Gallus' prompting and took his cue, clutching his Chi-Rho and crying to his men. 'God marches by our sides. Feel his strength in your every stride.'

The men of the Flavia Firma responded with a baritone roar that reverberated all around and belied their scant number; 'Nobiscum

Deus!'

Days passed and the surrounding land seemed to defy their efforts as they wandered ever-further from imperial territory. The golden flats seemed infinite, the horizon utterly unchanging between dawn and dusk. Dust stung their eyes and clung to the backs of their throats. Every man's shins and ankles were now red and bleeding. Towards the end of the morning on the fifth day after leaving the Maratocupreni, and the twentieth day of their trek overall, the legionaries could only think back wistfully to the relatively

clement lands around that hidden valley. The four springs Izodora had charted for them had been found and nearly drained. But the last of them had been two days' march previously. Now their skins were drained and utterly dry.

They halted near noon, clinging to the sliver of shade offered by a rare pile of rocks. Gallus and Carbo saw their men close to collapsing from sheer exhaustion, and gave the order for armour to be shed and loaded onto the camels. The camels groaned at their extra burden, but the men gasped in relief at shedding of

those heavy garments. When they set off next, they would march in helms, boots and tunics, and carry just their sword belts and spears.

Pavo sat in the dust, his back resting against the rock – hot despite being in the shade. He chewed tenaciously on one of his last slivers of hardtack. Eventually he spat it out – the morsel barely dampened with saliva. He sighed and let his head slump forward onto his knees. Behind closed eyelids he could see the crystal clear waters of the fountains in Constantinople, the endless tumbling torrents of the River Danubius, and he longed to

feel the freshness of a winter's breeze on the plains of Thracia. But the sun glared down on him without pity, gradually dragging the cloak of shade away from the rock until its rays stung at his legs.

Sura nudged him and jolted him from his thoughts. 'Here, he's a bit eager, isn't he?' he croaked.

Pavo looked up to see Quadratus stepping out from the shade, squinting to the south-east.

'How many days of marching did you say we had left, sir, before we reach the Persian Gulf?' the big Gaul quizzed.

All heads twisted to Gallus.

Blistered and cracked lips, bloodshot and narrowed eyes, burnt and gaunt faces awaited his response.

Pavo knew the answer would not help morale – not in the slightest. They had spent some twenty days on this march. By Yabet's estimate – assuming the man had spoken the truth at all – of forty days that meant at least another twenty days left.

'We have some way to go yet, Centurion,' Gallus replied cautiously after studying the map.

'Aye, then what's that?' Quadratus stabbed a finger out,

smoothing his dust-coated moustache with the other hand.

As one, the men of the column rose, curiosity overcoming fatigue.

Pavo stood with them and squinted at the rippling heat haze out to the south-east. The gold and azure of the horizon seemed to flash with white and . . . green?

'It might be an oasis?' Felix suggested, stabbing out his tongue in a vain effort to dampen his lips.

Gallus frowned and looked to Carbo. The Flavia Firma Centurion shook his head in doubt.

Pavo thought again of Izodora's warnings.

‘We will find out soon enough,’ Gallus replied. ‘Lift your weapons and form up.’

The column set off, all eyes trained on the strange dancing colour ahead. Their footsteps were silent thanks to the thick dust, and the exhausted panting of moments before was bated and nervous now. The horizon drew closer, and the strange flickering green seemed to come and go more frequently. Eventually, just as the sun reached its zenith, they saw that the flatland was rising, and a gentle ridge in the land lay ahead. The green shimmering seemed to lie just

beyond the ridge.

Pavo and Sura shared a glance riddled with anxiety and hope.

Water or Persian steel?

They crested the rise and every man drew in a breath, then gasped.

Pavo gawped, disbelieving of what lay before them.

Like a shade, the flickering green was utterly gone.

Before them lay only snaking, golden sand dunes. Miles and miles of them, as far as the eye could see.

'Mithras, no!' Felix croaked by his side, his face drawn and pale.

Quadratus and Zosimus flanked the little primus pilus and muttered weak, disbelieving curses of their own.

Pavo felt the sun's glare like never before, his skin crawling as sweat spidered down his back. He heard Carbo's hushed words to Gallus nearby.

'It was as I feared,' Carbo said. 'A mirage, a trick of the light. Men see water, lush green grass and palms, only for it to melt away into the burning sands.'

Gallus' head dropped at this. The sight of the iron tribunus in despair tainted Pavo's thoughts

with fear and doubt. Then he looked out over the sea of sand seeking some ember of hope. But all he found were images of the nightmare – Father standing there on the dunes, reaching out for him.

A shiver clawed through the murderous heat and grappled his heart.



By the time he entered the western gate of Bishapur, Jabbah's breath came and went in shallow, rasping gasps and he could taste the metallic tang of blood on his tongue. The arrow wound to his

back had nearly been the end of him, he realised, thinking of the Maratocupreni riders who had felled his band. He reaffirmed his grip around the waist of the leather-armoured Persian scout who had found him. He heard the rider click his tongue, directing the mare, and looked up to see that they were headed towards the acropolis. A blue-domed temple and a tall, fine palace awaited them at the top.

He glanced weakly around the sun-baked lower city streets; high-arched villas, tessellated courtyards and stucco-clad fountains. Persian citizens paused in their daily tasks

to gawp at his ruinous state; a group of women dressed in fine, vibrant silks and slippers and carrying baskets of oranges shrunk at the sight of him; men riding wagons frowned, farmers driving herds stared and those slicked in sweat as they repaired a tannery stopped to mutter and point.

They cut across the market square as they headed for the acropolis. Jabbah frowned at the activity there. Sweat-soaked workers hewed timber and erected poles, forming what looked like an arc of seating, nestled into the base of the acropolis. 'An arena?' he

croaked. He had seen the like before, in Palmyra and the other desert cities that had been touched by Rome.

‘Aye,’ the scout replied. ‘For the Jashan of Shahrevar. The archimagus wants to hold blood games on that day. The Festival of Iron is the talk of this entire city and all of the Persis Satrapy. Ahura Mazda wills that something special is to happen that day.’

Jabbah frowned, gawping at the sheer scale of this arena. Meanwhile, the scout identified himself to the pair of wing-helmed pushtigban warriors standing guard

at the foot of the mount. The pair parted and the scout ascended the stone steps carved into the acropolis-side, reaching the plateau and then cantering to the domed temple. There, they dismounted and the scout tethered the mare. The scout then led Jabbah inside the arched entrance of the temple. The shade soothed his blistered and cracked skin and eased the fire in his lungs. Finally, they came to the domed central chamber and the crackling pit of the Sacred Fire in the floor. It was even hotter in here than outside.

The hunched, bald, hawk-

faced man who awaited them there rubbed his hands together as if warming them from some bitter cold, his golden eyes seeming to scrutinise Jabbah. The scout rider pressed his hands on Jabbah's shoulders, forcing him to his knees.

'He brings word from the west, Archimagus Ramak,' the scout said. 'We found him prone on his horse, near-death in the heart of the desert. He claims that his men's assault on the Roman column failed, and he has ridden for days on end – to get word to you.'

Jabbah nodded. 'It is true. The Iberian you planted in the Romans'

midst was not with them, but still we fought bravely. We were almost victorious, until the Maratocupreni saved the Romans at the last.'

'So you rode on the cusp of death, to inform me that the Roman column marches on?' Ramak asked, crouching and cupping Jabbah's jaw.

Jabbah felt the man's gaze rake at his soul. He nodded weakly. 'I come from a noble line. Like my father and his father before him, when I take coin in return for doing some deed, I will not rest until I see that the deed is done.'

'Very noble indeed,' Ramak

nodded through taut lips. 'A noble fool to the last. For only a fool would come before me in failure.'

Jabbah frowned as Ramak's grip grew fiercer upon his jaw. The archimagus' lips curled back in a grimace and he squeezed until his hand trembled, his nails splitting Jabbah's flesh and drawing blood. But Jabbah did not flinch. His eyes darted over the archimagus' face. It seemed nobility was not a trait shared by this holy man. 'If I am to die for my failure then so be it.'

Ramak released his grip and stood tall. With a throaty but mirthless laugh, he turned to the

fire pit and fumbled with something resting in there. 'No, you are to live.'

Jabbah frowned, shuffling to catch sight of the archimagus' hands.

'You will live,' Ramak reaffirmed, ' . . . in the deepest chambers of my salt mine.'

Jabbah's heart froze and then thundered in terror. The dark tales of the mines had spread far and wide amongst his people. They talked of it as the underworld, the antithesis of the wide and endless plains of the living. Where men suffered brutal and short lives in

darkness and squalor. 'No . . . NO!' he gasped, scrambling back from Ramak towards the temple entrance. He saw the light of day outside and reached out for it as he clambered on all fours. But then two wing-helmed silhouettes stepped over the entrance, blocking his path. The Persian scout grappled at his shoulders and hauled him back to kneel again. 'Kill me!' Jabbah grasped at the scout's thigh, his eyes manic and darting. 'Don't put me in those mines! No man should face such a fate!'

'Hold him,' Ramak said, still tending to something in the fire.

Jabbah's neck cracked as the scout grappled him by the hair and wrenched his head back. His eyes bulged as he saw Ramak turn round from the fire. The man grinned as he lifted a dual-pronged, white-hot poker, fresh from the flames.

'And in the dark, airless mines,' Ramak enthused, 'you will have little need for your sight.'

The last thing Jabbah saw was the tips of the poker, with Ramak's animal grin in the sweltering background. The white-hot irons grew closer and closer until they filled his field of vision. Then, with a pair of thick pops and an unearthly

pain that filled his head like fire, the prongs lanced into his eyeballs and sunk inside the sockets. Wet, hot fluid spilled from his eye sockets and down his cheeks and he heard his own animal moaning. Eternal blackness was upon him.

As the scout dragged him away by the hair, he heard the archimagus talking, as if addressing the fire itself.

'The mercenaries have failed me, but my spahbad will not! Ride well, Tamur, and crush those who dare to enter our lands.'



Four days of marching through the dunes saw the legionary column transformed beyond recognition. The banners were stowed on the ever-more burdened camels. Now, to a man, the legionaries wore no helmets, just linen rags tied around their heads and thick smears of kohl on their noses and cheeks. Many had slit their tunics from collar to breastbone to allow a fraction more airflow. They had marched from imperial lands carrying their spears high and proud, now they used them as crooks, to haul their weary limbs up the endless banks of burning sand.

Pavo stabbed his spear butt into one dune as he approached the crest, then afforded barely a glance at the thousand more dunes that lay beyond. He tilted his head back and closed his eyes, his rasping breaths mingling with those of the men around him. He wondered if the muddy pool they had come across yesterday had been a blessing or a curse, for the tepid, grainy water they had drank from it served only to prolong this agony. Some men had fallen ill from drinking it, vomiting through the bitterly cold night. They were gaunt, burnt and trembling. None

had fallen, yet. But Pavo knew that sixteen days more of this lay ahead before they reached the waters of the Gulf. The desert would have its victims before then, of that he was sure.

He realised his vision was narrowing. He recognised this moment from the countless battles of his time in the legions – the moment when the last drops of energy were ebbing. He blinked and shook his head, clutching the phalera, seeking out the will to go on.

He half-staggered, half-slid down the far side of the dune. The

sand kicked up by his clumsy descent clung to his lips and nostrils as he came to a halt at the bottom of the dune, on his knees. He coughed weakly and waved away Sura's offer of a hand, propping himself up using his spear shaft.

'Come on,' he croaked to the swaying, trembling men of the century behind him. 'Every dune we pass is one more enemy defeated.'

Suddenly, the sand before him puckered. A black, shiny scorpion burst into view, no bigger than his thumb. The creature scurried up the dune then plunged back under the sand near the tip.

Centurion Quadratus gasped from a few paces behind. 'Maybe we should follow that little bastard – perhaps he knows the way to water?'

A weak, croaking chuckle toppled from Pavo's chest at this, in spite of his fatigue. Sura joined in and soon the rest of the column did too. Pavo saw Gallus with Carbo, up ahead. The iron tribunos turned his head a fraction at the sound of laughter. A cocked eyebrow was the closest the man came to showing his approval.

Zosimus fired back at Quadratus. 'Water? Who needs

water?’ he held his hands out and looked up as if enjoying the sun. ‘It could be worse than this . . . a night sleeping under Quadratus’ bunk . . . death by farting!’

Now the column broke out in an even louder chorus of desperate laughter. The noise echoed out over the countless miles of dunes all around them. Even Baptista and his men joined in. At the last, it seemed, adversity had bound them together in some small way.

Pavo trudged on, trying to focus on memories of Felicia, trying to draw inspiration from the phalera around his neck. His gaze hung on

the sand before him as they marched over dune after dune, until the sun began to fall. Now the blinding light dulled to a tired orange and the dunes cast long shadows across the land.

Just then, an unexpected faint breeze picked up. Pavo's skin chilled despite the dry heat. He drew his gaze up and around. The dunes were a dark red now, and the south-eastern horizon was a deep blue speckled with the first stars. But there was something else. A murky shape swirled there, between sand and sky. A colossal, writhing mass – as if the dusk had

come to life in a fury.

‘What in Hades?’ Felix croaked, mopping the sweat from his brow and squinting at this billowing mass.

‘What is that?’ Sura added.

All around, the staggering ranks came to a halt atop the lip of one lengthy dune, gawping at the mass. The breeze picked up and lifted the linen rags on their heads. Few thought of the comfort the breeze provided as the shape grew broader and broader, until it was as wide as the horizon itself and stretched high into the sky.

Pavo gawped, seeing dune

after dune swallowed up as the thrashing mass came for them at speed. A single sand grain carried by the breeze stung against the burnt skin of his face. He touched a hand to his cheek, then looked up at the approaching dark wall. A howling pierced the air; a gale that brought with it a spray of sand. Pavo's mind flashed with those haunting images; the nightmare of Father, the storm that always consumed him.

He looked across the lip of the dune to see Carbo, wide-eyed likewise, his linen headscarf whipping in the sudden squall. 'It is

a sandstorm – take shelter!’ the centurion cried out. No sooner had he uttered the cry than the wall of swirling, darting sand raced across the last few dunes like a predator, the roar growing deafening. The ferocious wind cut through the next nearest dune and threw up sands at the gawping legionaries.

Baptista cried out, wide-eyed; ‘God have merc - ’

The roaring gale consumed his words utterly.

It seemed to suck the air from Pavo’s lungs, battering him. White lights flashed in his field of vision as the sand stung at his eyeballs and

raked at his skin. He caught only flashes of those around him. Sura, staggering, blinded, trying to wrap his linen scarf over his face in vain. Quadratus, chasing one fleeing camel and clawing at the packs on its back. Gallus crying out to his men, his words for once defeated by the roar of the sandstorm.

Fingers grappled Pavo's arm. He spun round, shielding his eyes. Through the cracks in his fingers he made out Zosimus, bawling something at him from only inches away. The few words he made out sounded weak and distant.

` . . . the tent! . . . Quadratus .

. . .the tent!’

Pavo blinked and looked this way and that. He saw that Quadratus had hauled a tent pack from one of the camels. The big Gaul was flailing at the flat goatskin in an attempt to unravel and provide some kind of cloak that they could shelter under. But the skin was flapping in a fury as if eager to soar off with the gale. Zosimus beckoned him then dipped his head and fought his way through the storm’s ire. Pavo followed. The three used their weight to peg down three corners of the goatskin, and they cried out

to Sura to come and secure the fourth. Meanwhile, Gallus and Carbo tried their best to bring the rest of the men together, ready to cram as many as possible under this desperate shelter.

Sura staggered through the tumult and leapt to throw himself onto the goatskin, but before he landed, the storm picked up and showed all its strength. As if being snatched away by a god, the goatskin was gone, sucked up into the air. In that instant, the faces around Pavo disappeared too and the sand grew thick as stone. Every inch of flesh burned under the

bombardment of the burning grains and then the squall blew him from his feet. When he tried to stand, he was blown back, one step, then another, then he found himself staggering away. He fell down the side of another dune, tumbling round and round. When he stood, panic raced through his veins as he realised he had completely lost his bearings. How far had he strayed? Eyes shut tight from the blinding sand, he covered his mouth to suck in a breath, coughing as the sand coated his mouth. He roared with all the force he could muster;

‘XI Claudia!’

Nothing but the storm roared back.

Then he trod on something. Something solid. He fell again and saw the staring, dead features of a Flavia Firma legionary. The man was buried up to his chest, his mouth open in a scream, lips blue from the sand that had packed his mouth and asphyxiated him.

Pavo gawped; the nightmare was upon him. He spun in every direction, lifting the collar of his tunic to shield his nose and mouth.

'XI Claudia!'

A wall of sand threw him from his feet again. He clawed to stand

once more, but the sand piled up around him impossibly. In moments, he was waist deep in it. A heartbeat later, it spilled around his chest.

As the sand piled up around his neck, he remembered Father's words from the dream.

'Beware, Pavo!'

The words echoed in his mind as darkness overcame him.

Chapter 11



The following day, the desert was still and serene. The dunes lay in a tidy weave as if having been groomed by a giant's comb. A vulture soared on the mid-morning zephyrs, its eyes trained on the slightest movement below. There would be plenty of bounty to be had following the previous night's storm. Then its gaze snapped round on something. It dropped from the

zephyr and circled lower and lower. There, it saw it; a scrawny lizard atop one dune. A fine morning meal. But then the vulture saw that the lizard was digging at the sand and something buried there – something stringy. There was a faint tinge of blood in the air – was this the raw meat of some cadaver? A far more attractive meal than a lizard. The vulture plunged and screeched. The terrified lizard darted under the sand at once.

The vulture began pecking at the stringy morsel, then it became infuriated when the tendril would not pull free of the sand. It

wrenched and wrenched until, at last, the sand shifted to reveal some shining metal disc attached to the string. The vulture strutted over to the disc and cocked its head this way and that, noticing the fleshy outline of a neck, a jaw, a face, all coated in sand. It trained its gaze on an eyelid and thought of the juicy eyeball underneath. It raised its beak to peck through the eyelid.



Pavo felt something padding up his chest then come to a halt, just over his face. The sensation stirred him from the blackness. He sat up with

a gasp, casting off the veil of sand, and swiped out, feeling some feathery mass beat at him before disappearing. His lungs burned as if he had not taken a breath in days. He could see and hear nothing but blackness and the thumping of his heart. He clawed at his eyes, stinging and full of sand. He dug the sand from his ears and at last he could hear again, the terrified screeching of a vulture fading into the distance. He scrambled forward onto all fours, spitting, coughing and retching. His limbs trembled as he stood upright and he could feel the deadly heat of day scorching

every inch of his skin, then the furious thirst that seemed to have shrivelled his insides demanded his attention. He rubbed at his eyes again. It hurt so badly that he cried out, but he could see something after this; a blur of gold and azure.

‘Pavo!’ a voice called out.
‘Pavo!’

Pavo swung round to see a blurry shape approaching.

‘Pavo, you’re alive!’ he felt a set of arms grapple his shoulders.

‘Sura?’ he croaked.

‘Sit down!’ another voice cried out.

‘Zosimus, sir? What happe - ’

he started, then something wet splashed across his face.

‘Just sit.’ A pair of hands pushed him down.

He gagged and spat, then realised the sand had been washed from his eyes. He blinked away the remaining blurriness and saw Zosimus and Sura before him. The pair were dressed in their torn, sand-encrusted tunics and looked as dreadful as he felt. Zosimus held out the rest of the water skin. ‘Drink!’

Pavo took it. ‘Water, how?’

Felix scrambled up to the lip of the dune beside him and tipped the

skin up. 'You drink, we'll talk.'

Pavo nodded and savoured the liquid that washed across his parched tongue then toppled down his throat. It was hot and polluted with sand, but it instantly brought moisture to his eyes and part-quenched his thirst. He gasped in relief, then his breath stilled when he saw a bump in the sand nearby. An arm poked from it, still and lifeless, with a splatter of dried blood nearby where the vultures had been tearing at the dead legionary's tendrils. Further away, the tortured features of a fallen camel poked from the dune, its

eyes lost to the carrion birds and the sockets crawling with insects. All around him were many such bumps and sights.

‘Is there nobody else . . . ’ Pavo uttered.

But then he saw it. In the shade of a nearby dune stood a cluster of haggard, familiar faces. The surviving men of the XI Claudia and the XVI Flavia Firma. There were many missing, it seemed, less than seventy left overall. Less than fifteen of the camel caravan had survived too. But there was something else. A tent with a pair of armoured legionaries standing by

it. They were not of the vexillatio. They carried dark-green shields each bearing the image of a golden capricorn and a Christian Chi-Rho.

‘We found them this morning when the storm died. Or rather, they found us,’ Felix shrugged. ‘They’re from the IV Scythica, just three of them – a tribunus and two legionaries. Gallus is trying to make sense of the tribunus’ ramblings.’

Pavo squinted to see Gallus and Carbo talking to some wild-eyed man in mail armour by the tent flap. The man’s thin, wispy hair was coated in sweat and sand and pointing in every direction at once.

He gripped his plumed helm underarm, his knuckles white and his face etched with terror.

Felix sighed and shook his head at the sight. 'In the meantime, they have given over their surplus rations to us – it seems there is a spring a days' march from here and they had a few skins to spare.'

Pavo nodded, then took another gulp of water. He looked around him, frowning. 'Last night,' he spoke quietly, 'I thought the sands had claimed me.'

'And we thought we had found the last of the survivors some time ago, Pavo,' Sura added. 'We

thought you were dead. If it wasn't for that bastard of a vulture, we'd never have spotted you.'

Zosimus scratched his anvil jaw and defied his chapped, broken and utterly exhausted state to crack a grin. 'Aye, so thank Mithras and that winged whoreson that you are still breathing. Else I would have had to promote the biggest smart-arse in Adrianople to optio,' he jabbed a thumb at Sura.

The four grinned at this.

Felix offered Pavo a hand and wrenched him to his feet. 'Come on, we need to be ready to move onwards. The water we have will

not last for long.'

They staggered down the dune and over to the gathering of legionaries. As they approached, Pavo overheard the wild-eyed IV Scythica Tribunus' words.

'I . . . I, we,' he scratched at his scalp and his lips flapped. 'We decided to reconnoitre . . . '

'Reconnaissance? Perhaps things are done differently in these parts, Tribunus Ovidius,' Gallus spat, 'but I have never seen a tribunus, leader of a legion, perform such a task.' The pair of legionaries with Ovidius shared a furtive glance at this, and the tribunus' top lip

began to tic. Gallus saw it. Pavo saw it.

‘You are in no position to question me, Tribunus Gallus,’ Ovidius blurted out. ‘The rest of my legion follow a short distance behind.’

Gallus eyed the tribunus with a glare that might even have chilled the infernal sun. ‘Then we can march south-east to meet with them. And you’re coming with us.’

‘No, you don’t understand, you can’t go that way!’ Ovidius wailed. At this, he snatched his spatha from his belt and held it out, waving it at those nearby as he backed away.

'You can't make me go back. They are out there, they will be the death of us – all of us!' He turned as if to run to the north, only to be stopped by Quadratus' ham-like fist crashing into his cheek. The big Gaul caught Ovidius as he slumped. 'Bloody idiot,' he grumbled.

Gallus sighed in disgust, then turned to the two legionaries who had come with Ovidius, fixing them with a winter-cold glare. 'You will carry your tribunos until he wakes. I trust you will not follow his example?'

They both nodded hurriedly.

He clicked his fingers and

turned to address the men of the XI Claudia. But he paused, seeing Pavo standing there, still alive despite the sandstorm. Pavo threw up an arm in salute. A faint narrowing of the eyes was all Gallus offered in return. That and the barest upwards flicker at the corners of his lips.

'A spring lies to the south-east. A spring and a legion that is in dire trouble. Take on what water you can and be ready to move out before noon!'



Pavo's breath came and went in

rasps as he approached the top of the latest dune. His mind taunted him with images of the thousand more dunes that would stretch out beyond it. But hoarse cries of delight rang out from the men of the vexillatio who got there just before him. Hope surged in his heart. He renewed his efforts and hauled himself atop the sandy ridge.

The dunes were no more. A flat, sandy plain stretched out ahead. Dead in the centre, only a few hundred feet away, was an ethereal green mass. Another mirage? He rubbed his eyes and

blinked. Once, twice, again. No, this was real. Date palms, long grass, thick green foliage and a shimmering, clear pool, the weakest of breezes feathering its surface. The oasis was the size of a small arena at best. Some underground spring had pierced through the desert floor to fill the pool and turn the arid dust around it into a shady, fertile haven.

The vexillatio poured forward, Pavo with them. They found strength where previously they had none. They threw down their spears then hurtled through the palms to splash into the pool. Pavo fell to his

knees, panting, the coolness of the water soothing his body, sharpening his thoughts at once. From the corner of his eye, he noticed Baptista kneeling likewise, scooping water over his long, tousled locks then clasping his hands in prayer. Zosimus, Quadratus and the others of the XI Claudia, meanwhile, offered a swift salute to Mithras, before ducking under the surface, bursting free and then drinking handful after handful of the springwater. Pavo cupped and drank likewise. The first few mouthfuls were unfamiliar to his dry, cracked throat and mouth.

Then he felt the coolness in his belly and at once, his eyes watered and he felt hope in his heart once more. As he drank, he cast his eye up and over the green fronds of the palms. Bunches of ripe, yellow-orange dates bulged under the leaves. Here they could fill their bellies and rest. Here, everything was possible once more.

'Silence!' Gallus interrupted his thoughts. All those around him stopped splashing and chattering.

Pavo looked up. The tribunos strode round the edge of the pool, having yet to slake his own thirst. He crept round to the far side, then

crouched, peering through the palm trunks. Pavo followed his gaze, and saw it too. Beyond the oasis, on the plain, a flickering column of iron moved – like some giant serpent. Pavo blinked, rising from the pool to stand tall, an odd shiver dancing across him as the hot desert breeze touched his wet skin. His spear arm clenched, and he cursed himself for having thrown down his weapon in haste. He moved his hand to his spatha hilt, watching as the iron column grew closer.

But, at the last, he saw the eagle standard this army carried. A green capricorn banner hung below

the eagle – just like that etched on the shields of Ovidius' two men. This was the IV Scythica. Over one thousand limitanei legionaries. Over one thousand spears, spathas, shields and bobbing intercisa helms. The sight was a welcome one. They were marching towards the oasis at haste – so hastily in fact that some men stumbled and others marched well out of line.

Gallus twisted round, beckoning Zosimus, Quadratus and Felix. 'Ready the men.' Then he pinned Tribunus Ovidius with his glare. The man was just coming round, rubbing at his throbbing

cheek. 'Bring him too.'

The men of the vexillatio slipped from the pool quietly, picking up their discarded weapons. Zosimus, Quadratus and Carbo organised their tattered centuries, then Felix beckoned them forward to the edge of the oasis. Readied, Gallus led them from the oasis and into the glare of the burning sun once more. At once, the approaching IV Scythica slowed, a distant babble of confusion spilling from their ranks as they squinted at Pavo and the vexillatio. Pavo shielded his eyes from the sun; their faces were haggard, sunburnt

and blistered too. But there was something else, something dancing in their eyes. Panic.

‘Signal them!’ Gallus growled. At once, the XI Claudia aquilifer hefted the grubby ruby bull banner in the air and waved it from side to side. At once, the man leading the IV Scythica saw this and immediately, he and his legion hurried on towards the oasis.

Pavo heard the terse and panicked jabberings of the approaching men. ‘Sir, something’s not right.’

‘Aye, they’re marching in full armour,’ Gallus replied with a

frown.

'And when they saw us they panicked – they thought we were someone else.'

'I told you,' a voice croaked behind them. 'We're dead men!'

They turned to see Tribunus Ovidius, now fully awake. His eyes bulged now more than ever before and he pointed to the south-east, beyond the Scythica men. The horizon was empty. The ferocious heat haze offered nothing. 'They're coming. Every man on these sands will die!' At this, Quadratus stomped over to grasp him by the collar, raising a clenched fist.

'Strike me again and I'll see to it that you are flogged and executed,' the man spat, his pupils dilated and a white froth gathering at the corners of his mouth.

'Strike a deserter and I'll give you a year of my wage purse!' another voice countered.

All heads turned to the approaching IV Scythica column. The figure leading them strode forward – a furious-looking officer. His skin was dark as coal, his brow bent like an angered bull's. Pavo noticed that the ragged, bleached white tunic he wore under his mail vest bore a broad, faded purple

stripe on the shoulder. The mark of a primus pilus, just like Felix wore. So this was Ovidius' second in command.

'This cur deserves no respect. He deserted us three nights past,' the primus pilus stabbed his finger at the chest of Ovidius and lowered his voice, 'and he left his men to die.'

Tribunus Ovidius wriggled in Quadratus' grip and made to protest, only to be silenced by a growl and a re-clenched fist.

'I guessed as much,' Gallus said.

The dark-skinned primus pilus

tore his sour glare away from Ovidius to eye Gallus and the ragged vexillatio. His eyes settled upon the frayed and filthy standards. 'The Flavia Firma?' he said upon recognising the dark-blue Chi Rho banner. Then he looked to the tattered remains of the XI Claudia's ruby bull banner. 'And what legion is this?' he frowned. 'What are you doing so far from Roman lands? We thought we were alone out here.'

Pavo saw Gallus and Carbo exchange a furtive glance.

Gallus was first to reply; 'Perhaps we should find shade and

water, then we can - '

'There is no time!' the primus pilus cut him off, his eyes widening as he shot glances over his shoulder to the south-east.

Gallus' lips moved to protest, but the words stuck in his throat. He frowned, eyeing the horizon.

Pavo saw it too. A flickering. Then the ground underfoot trembled. The approach of distant cavalry. Coming for them and coming fast. He glanced to Sura, to Zosimus, to Quadratus and Felix. They had all felt it. Yet the horizon offered nothing but dashes of flickering colours that appeared and

then faded again. Pavo's stomach clenched; More desert raiders?

Suddenly a dull crash filled the air, as if a titan had swung a hammer into the earth. It seemed to shake their very bones. Then came another crash and another.

'War drums,' the coal-skinned primus pilus cried. Then a horn wailed out too. Suddenly, a solid spot of silver pierced the horizon. The spot grew and grew, spilling round the skyline as if coaxed by the throbbing drums. The man spun back to Gallus, his face streaked with panic. 'They have been tracking us for days. Now they have

us.'

'They?' Gallus snapped.

The primus pilus' face grew sombre. 'The Savaran, Tribunus. A wing of Persia's iron riders. Thousands of them.'

Tribunus Ovidius began wailing in the background. 'I tried to tell you – we must flee!'

Gallus stepped forward, his eyes darting over the nascent silver band on the horizon. 'Can we outrun them, perhaps flee and hide in the dunes?' he asked the primus pilus.

'There is no time. They would still ride us down with ease.'

At this, a babble erupted from the gathered legionaries of the vexillatio. A steely glare from Gallus silenced them.

The primus pilus continued; 'We must stand and fight. Have your men join our left flank, and be ready,' the man leant in closer to whisper in Gallus' ear. 'With God's fortune we will be slain swiftly and spared the misery of Persian shackles.' With that, the man spun away to bark his legion into a line, facing the horizon.

Gallus frowned at the man's parting words, then shook his head clear of the thought and waved the

camels forward. 'Men, don your armour and weapons.' At once, the remaining few of the vexillatio readied for battle. Shields were hauled from the camel's backs. Scalding mail shirts were pulled on and helms were fastened. Someone thrust a spear into Pavo's grip.

'Third century . . . into line!' Zosimus cried out.

Pavo buckled his sword belt in place then echoed the order. The depleted century hastened to join with Quadratus' men on the IV Scythica left flank. Carbo, Baptista and the handful of Flavia Firma legionaries soon joined them.

Panicked breaths came and went as they pushed together, shoulder to shoulder. Shields clattered, coming together as a protective wall. Spears were raised like the spines of a trapped porcupine. All eyes peered over the tops of shields, trained on the approaching wall of silver.

The ground juddered now and the silver tide took form. Pavo gawped; an ironclad pincer of more than three thousand riders came for them, topped with vibrant banners and plumes, bristling with spear tips, arrows and blades. Those of the Flavia Firma broke out in a

Christian chant. Baptista was the epitome of their zeal, his jaw stiff, his chest rising and falling with the chorus.

Finally, Gallus' voice boomed out. 'Much hangs in the balance today; our mission, our lives . . . our empire. We are far from home, but Mithras watches over us, for in this burning land we find brothers to fight alongside.' He shot a furtive glance to Carbo and Baptista. 'We call out to two gods for providence. But we stand or fall as one. For the empire,' he spoke in a firm tone. Then he cried out and drew his spatha, bashing it on his shield boss

then thrusting it aloft; 'For the empire!'

Pavo roared along with the hardy few, a roar so fierce that it countered the Persian war drums. But only for a heartbeat. Sura and Zosimus pressed closer to him. The blood pounded in his ears. The carrion birds gathered overhead like a storm cloud. The silver mass of the Savaran raced for them.



Gallus braced, one foot ahead of the other, spear and shield clasped firmly, eyes dancing across the Persian front. A sea of bear, eagle,

horse and scorpion banners bobbed above the thundering Persian ranks, but one standard rose higher than all others. It was topped with a Faravahar, the Zoroastrian guardian angel stretching out its wings as if readying to take flight. Hanging from the crossbar was a dark silk banner emblazoned with a tawny gold lion. Gallus' top lip curled at the sight, thinking of the motif on Yabet's purse.

Heavily armoured Horsemen formed a wide and deep centre. A gund of one thousand cataphractii, he realised. The riders wore iron scales like the skin of a snake,

wrapped around their torsos and shoulders. Thick rings of iron hugged their limbs and they were crowned with pointed helms topped with dancing, balled plumes. Each wore a shamshir – a long, straight sword not unlike the Roman spatha – on their sword belt, and gripped a lengthy lance two-handed. He frowned, seeing that each spear seemed to be chained to the mount's armour at the neck and at the thigh. This was something he had not seen before.

‘It channels the full momentum of the charge into the end of the spear tip,’ Carbo cried

over the din of approaching hooves, following Gallus' gaze. 'And their horses can certainly charge.'

'Nisean mares?' Gallus reckoned seeing the dark bay and palomino colours of their tall and lithe mounts. The beasts wore scale aprons on their bodies and baked leather chamfrons strapped over their faces – with bulging bronze baskets protecting their eyes.

Flanking this cavalry centre were two small packs of running infantrymen. They looked reluctant – and barely like soldiers – wearing ragged trousers, tunics, felt caps and carrying only cane shields. This

would be the infamous Persian paighan spearmen; men forced onto the field as missile-fodder for the enemy, or for the Persian riders to pivot around. A glance to the chains on their ankles confirmed this. A handful of mail-shirted Median spearmen ran alongside them like guards. They cracked whips to drive the paighan on. To the rear of the Persian lines, there was something else. Gallus squinted, sure the dust cloud and the heat haze were playing tricks on his eyes. A dozen shapes swayed. Hulking forms, bigger than any living thing he had ever set

eyes upon. He gawped, seeing the swishing trunks, the glint of bronze-coated tusks and the jagged shapes of archers in the howdah cabins on the beasts' backs. War elephants? Mithras, no!

The earth shuddered furiously as this tide of iron swept for the beleaguered Roman pack. Gallus recognised a long forgotten sensation needling at his heart. Fear. With a growl, he crushed the unwelcome emotion. 'Stay tight, stay together. No horse will charge a nest of spears!' he bellowed.

The Persian war cry drowned out his words. He felt his men

instinctively push closer together. His eyes narrowed on the cataphractus bearing down on him, the rider's spear tip trained on the gap between the rim of his shield and the brow of his helm. He braced for the impact. But, as if swept away by an unseen wind, the cataphractii split and wheeled away at the last, like curtains being swept apart across the Roman front. Gasps of relief rang out all round, only to be caught in throats at the sight of what lay behind the cataphractii.

Another gund of iron riders. However, unlike the departed first

wave, these riders carried not lances, but bows. The weapons were already nocked with arrows, bent and raised, index fingers of bow hands pointing out as if identifying their intended victims, two more arrows clutched in the palm ready for the next volley. Over one thousand bowstrings twanged and loosed a storm of arrows skywards. Gallus gawped at the ascending storm, seeing the beauty of the strategy, realising what was to happen. The cataphractii had feigned a charge and pushed the Roman lines into a dense mass. The perfect target for their archer

companions.

The men of the XI Claudia, the Flavia Firma and the IV Scythica alike scrambled from the path of the incoming hail – the dense mass breaking apart like a shattering urn. The arrows hammered down. Most smacked into the dust where the legionaries had been moments ago. Some struck the backs of those too slow to escape, showering blood across the dust. Crucially though, the legionary line was now utterly broken.

A shiver danced up Gallus' spine as the archer cavalry split and wheeled away, just as the

cataphractii lancers had done moments ago. Waiting behind was a final gund of riders. But no ordinary riders. One thousand men and mounts, pure iron, seemingly wrought with a hammer. They bore every armament of the cataphractii, but with the additional carapace of iron plates on their chests, greaves on their shins and iron gauntlets protecting their hands. And their faces brought a wail of dismay from the stumbling legionaries; pure, sculpted iron masks with sombre features, just two eyeholes and a mirthless mouth slit betraying the merest glimpse of humanity. They

levelled their lances and kicked their mounts into an all-out charge. The war drums struck up a frantic rhythm like a panicked heartbeat as the riders' plumes danced atop their tall helms.

'This is it,' Carbo panted by his side. 'They have prised us apart like a clam. Now, the *clibanarii* will feast.'

The smattering of legionaries who had bows hurriedly nocked and loosed, and those with *plumbatae* hurled them in a disordered volley. The missiles smacked against the chests, helms and limbs of the *clibanarii*, bouncing away as if they

were merely twigs. The iron riders thundered onwards unharmed. Gallus braced.

With a smash of iron upon iron, flesh and bone, the clibanarii ploughed into the Roman lines, casting men into the air like splinters thrown up from a well-aimed arrow and trampling over others. Whole centuries crumpled under this impact. Thick clouds of dust billowed up and puffs of fine crimson mizzle spat skywards where iron met flesh. Gallus' shield shuddered as Persian lance and sword in turn battered against the boss and hacked chunks from the

edge. He staggered back, struggling to stay on his feet. Those by his side were torn down, trampled, skewered on Persian lances. Within moments, only Carbo remained with him.

‘Tribunus!’ Carbo cried.

Gallus twisted to see a clibanarii spear only inches from him. He jinked, the lance tearing through his chain mail, gouging his shoulder and sending blood spurting from the wound. He staggered back to see the rider charge past, the spear punching through the chest of one young legionary and then another, showering those cowering

behind in blood, organs and entrails. All along what had moments ago been a coordinated Roman line, the *clibanarii* hacked panicked pockets of legionaries down. Their spears plunged through necks, tore heads from shoulders, shattered limbs and barged men to the ground where they were trampled underhoof.

Gallus spun this way and that, desperate to catch sight of some show of resistance in the flurry of thick dust. Carbo had delved off into the fray, fighting desperately by the side of three men from his century. Elsewhere, clusters of legionaries

fought together – but there were so few. Some groups had pulled the riders from their saddles, others had plunged their spears into the unarmoured bellies of the mounts, bringing down rider and beast. But for every dead or dying clibanarius in the tangle of fallen bodies, there were many more shattered legionary corpses.

He coughed and retched as the dust billowed all around him, staggering through the carpet of bone, blood and spilled guts. Suddenly, a clibanarius rider burst into view, coming for him. He swung his spear shaft up to parry

the rider's lance, the collision shattering both weapons, then ducked under the follow-up kick the rider aimed from the saddle. He snatched at the rider's leg and hauled the man from the saddle. The man fell to his knees with a crunch of iron, then struggled to stand. The rider drew his shamshir and Gallus tore out his spatha. Sparks flew as the blades clashed again and again. A swift strike saw the rider score the flesh on Gallus' already bleeding shoulder. Gallus roared and hacked back, the edge of his spatha dashing against the clibanarius' midriff. It would have

been a death blow to any other, but the blade simply bounced back from the plate-armour this rider wore around his ribs. Gallus swore he could hear the masked rider laugh over the din of screaming and thundering war drums. Another strike on the rider's thighs rendered no damage – the ring armour there as hardy as the rest. Exhausted, Gallus staggered back. The clibanarius pulled off his mask to reveal his bearded, flat-boned face and a snarling grimace.

'Ahura Mazda wills death upon you and your family, Roman dog,' the rider spat in jagged Greek as he

pointed his long, straight blade at Gallus accusingly, then hefted it to strike.

Gallus stared through the rider, seeing instead the shadows of those who had taken Olivia and Marcus from him. He felt his sword arm shudder as he parried the rider's blow, then he felt the soft ripping of meat as he drove his spatha into the man's jaw, down into his throat. Hot blood erupted over Gallus' face, and he stared into and beyond the rider's bulging eyes, whispering as he tore his blade free; 'A poor choice of words, cur.' The light left the rider's eyes and

Gallus remained, staring into the past as the corpse toppled. He heard nothing but his dead wife and son's last cries. He saw nothing but their blackened corpses on the pyre. Then the tumult of the battle all around came back to him like a storm wind.

In every direction, his vexillatio and those of the IV Scythica were being butchered. He saw the coal-skinned primus pilus surrounded by the bodies of his men. The primus pilus screamed in defiance, before a clibanarius swept the head from his shoulders, bringing gouts of blood from the

neck stump. Through the crimson spray, Gallus saw that the XI Claudia banner still stood. He set off through the fray to join them.

If I am to die today then, by Mithras, it will be by their side.



Pavo wiped the blood from his eyes and grappled Tribunus Ovidius by the scruff of his mailshirt as arrows rained down around them. 'Sir! We must stand together!'

But Ovidius was insensible to these hoarse words. He clawed at Pavo's shoulders, his mouth agape, his eyes bulging as he gawped past

Pavo, off to the north-west. 'The dunes, run for the dunes!' he squealed.

Now Baptista grabbed and shook him. 'If you run, they will ride you down and . . . '

Baptista's words trailed off as he saw a pack of three of the clibanarii riders haring for them. He pushed Ovidius to one side, pulled up his shield, then nodded to Pavo who followed suit.

'Brace!' the pair cried.

Pavo, Baptista, Sura and the seven other men nearby clustered together as the three riders thundered towards them. But the

clibanarii broke to ride past them like a river round a rock. Baptista crouched as they swept past, thrusting his spear up and into the belly of one mount. The mount charged on, ripping the spear from the optio's grip, but the blow was fatal and just a few strides on, the horse crumpled, throwing the clibanarius to the ground. On the other side, Sura barged his shield boss out to knock another rider off balance. The man fell from the saddle, his cry abruptly ended when he landed on his head, the weight of his armour crushing his neck bones. The last of the three riders

galloped on and levelled his spear at the one figure who had not stood firm – Ovidius, staggering for the dunes. The rider punched his lance into Ovidius' spine. The spear burst through the tribunus' breast, skewering chunks of lung and heart. Another rider swept past in the opposite direction and scythed his sword through the top of Ovidius' helmetless head, showering the tribunus' brains across the battlefield. Ovidius' body fell, mouth agape, one hand outstretched and pointing to the dunes.

'Fool,' Baptista spat.

'Forget him; look, we're not

done yet,' Pavo jabbed a finger out to the cluster of legionaries under the XI Claudia banner, a short distance away. Gallus was there, as were Zosimus, Felix, Quadratus and Carbo plus some fifty others. They hacked and parried furiously, coated in blood. 'If we can get to them . . . '

The keening of a Persian war horn drowned out his words. At once, the *clibanarii* withdrew from the fray, leaving just these islands of hardy legionaries in a sea of bloody sand and corpses. The battle din quelled.

Pavo panted, watching as the

iron riders returned to their position in Persian centre. The cataphractii and archer cavalry had spilled round the flanks and now stood poised like pincers. Bows nocked, lances levelled. Watching, waiting. The rumbling war drums fell silent and every legionary's breath seemed to still with them. An eerie calm settled over the gory scene.

'What are they waiting for?' Sura panted, running his gaze over the Savaran noose.

Beside them, Baptista growled, clutching his Chi-Rho; 'You will soon see. I pray to God that it will be over swiftly.' He met the

eyes of both Pavo and Sura. 'Know this: we could never be friends, but you make fine comrades on the battlefield.'

'Aye,' Pavo replied, 'at the last, I am glad of you by my side.'

Baptista nodded briskly, then closed his eyes and muttered in prayer.

Pavo and Sura peered ahead, over the line of clibanarii. There seemed to be some activity there, shrouded behind the wall of dust. Suddenly, the calm was shattered as the earth rumbled under them once more. This time it was ferocious, as if titans were now

running towards them. The clibanarii parted, and the dust behind them swirled and swished rapidly, a shaft of midday sunlight piercing it and silhouetting a dozen hulking shapes. Then a dozen nightmarish, trumpeting roars rang out, shaking Pavo to his bones.

'God of the Light, no!' he gasped as the war elephants thundered into view. Their trunks swiped in fury. Their tusks were coated in bronze, the tips sharpened and serrated. Their colossal limbs crashed on the dust underfoot like falling rocks, and they came at a great pace that

belied their size. The archers packed into the howdah cabins strapped to their backs grinned zealously as they leant out to take aim with their nocked bows. The wild-eyed, eager mahout seated on the lead beast's neck yelled some jagged command, driving the creature onwards.

Pavo glanced across to Gallus and the cluster of men around the XI Claudia banner. The iron tribunos had nothing, and could only gawp at these giant creatures.

'We're dead,' Sura whispered, as if stealing Pavo's thoughts.

Instinctively, a few legionaries

nearby broke away, scrambling back. Pavo stared up at the nearest creature, its enraged features encircled by a halo of sunlight. A pair of arrows thudded down into the dust before him and then the beast lifted its huge foot. The shadow of the beast fell over him and finally his resolve cracked. He, Sura and the rest of his cluster scrambled back too.

‘Sir!’ Sextus yelped behind him, one hand outstretched having stumbled to his knees.

Pavo reached out to Sextus, when an elephant foot came crashing down upon the young

legionary, crushing him like bracken. Then the swinging trunk bashed into Pavo's breast, knocking the breath from him, cracking a rib and hurling him over the heads of the rest of his men. He landed on his back and rolled through the dust. Winded, he retched and spat, then scrambled up to see the mahout smash his iron-tipped cane on the beast's head. This maddened the creature, provoking it into swishing its head, bringing one bronze-coated tusk up and through Baptista's flank, ripping the side of his torso away. The blood of the mutilated Flavia Firma optio

showered those who fled and his lifeless corpse toppled to the dust. Sura cried out as an arrow hissed down, slashing past the side of his face with a spray of blood, then another punched into his calf, knocking him to the ground beside Pavo. Nearby he saw Gallus, Carbo and the others scrambling back likewise until they were together in a panting, panicked cluster. The war elephants rounded on them as if herding cattle, then slowed, obeying the barking commands and thrashing canes of the mahouts. The circle of great beasts glowered down upon the surviving legionaries

– less than thirty all told. Pavo squinted up as the howdah archers stretched their bows once more, each taking aim for a volley that would finish them all and end the quest for the scroll.

Pavo grappled his phalera medallion and thought of Father.

But the onslaught ceased with a single strike on the war drum. The archers' arms slackened and their gleeful grins grew sour. Silence fell over the plain bar a few snorts, whinnies and shuffles of the Persian mounts. The dust settled and the baking heat of early afternoon seared their skins.

Carbo pushed up next to Pavo, his every breath rasping, his skin and hair caked in blood.

‘What’s happening?’ Pavo whispered.

‘The victor wants to inspect his conquered subjects,’ Carbo replied. He nodded to a space behind the circle of elephants.

There, the drafsh standard draped with the golden lion banner bobbed into view. A clutch of wing-helmed riders carried the staff.

‘Pushtigban,’ Carbo whispered, ‘the cream of the Savaran. They serve as the bodyguard of the shahanshah and his underlings.’

‘The king of kings?’ Pavo gasped. ‘Shapur is here?’

Carbo shook his head, his gaze never leaving the golden lion banner. ‘No, I fear that someone far more dangerous leads this wing of the Savaran today. Someone starved of power. The Persian Empire has long been plagued by such souls.’ He nodded to the banner. ‘That is the symbol of the House of Aspaphet. The noble line of the Persis Satrapy. And if my fears are correct, then that,’ he nodded to the rider emerging from the clutch of pushtigban, ‘is Spahbad Tamur.’

Two hooded, torch-wielding magi flanked this lone rider. The Sacred Fire dancing atop the torches cast the rider in a brilliant light. His fine, fawn skin glistened with sweat and he wore his shock of dark hair scraped back into a tail of curls that jostled at his shoulders. Beads of sweat darted from his forehead, dancing over his broad, broken nose and the scar welt on the bridge. He was broad as a bull and clad in a bronze scale vest. Over his heart he wore a gilded plate embossed with the image of a lion like the one on the banner, just like that on Yabet's

purse. He cast his baleful gaze over the clutch of weary and scarred legionaries, then it snagged on the tattered banners they clutched. Suddenly, he threw his head back and let a lungful of booming laughter ring out long and loud.

‘It seems that Ahura Mazda indeed watches over us,’ he said in jagged Greek, glaring at the IV Scythica banner. ‘Not only have we succeeded in drawing out this Roman legion from their border fort, but in the same blow,’ he continued, stabbing two fingers at the XI Claudia and XVI Flavia Firma banners, ‘we have also foiled the

Roman Emperor's expedition!'

Pavo's brow knitted and he whispered to those beside him. 'They knew of the mission for the scroll?'

'From the start, it seems,' Gallus spat, hearing his words.

Pavo's mind flashed over the last few months. They had fended off the Cretan pirates, the dark hand of Yabet the guide and the camel raiders. All paid for by the coin of some foe – his eyes shot back up to the gold lion banner. Finally, where coin had failed, cold, hard Persian steel had cut this mission apart.

‘I know what you sought,’ Tamur continued, wagging a finger as if having heard Pavo’s thoughts. ‘I know only too well. But what you shall find will be very different, proud Romans, very different indeed.’ Tamur clapped his hands together. At this, the wretched paighan infantry were barged forward as if they were prisoners. Pavo saw the glistening, raw flesh under the shackles they wore on their ankles, chaining them together. ‘Yes, you shall have much time to think over your foolish mission,’ Tamur chuckled. ‘I know a fine place for meditation.’

‘It is time at last . . . ’ Carbo muttered, his burnt skin blanching. ‘Time to face the past,’ he muttered, his head jerking and his lips trembling.

‘Carbo?’ Pavo whispered, confused.

‘Shackle them to the paighan,’ Tamur continued. ‘Let them suffer with those wretches as they march to their fate.’

Eager-looking Median spearmen leapt upon the order, stalking forward with bundled chains and grappling legionaries all around Pavo. He saw Sura struggle, he heard Gallus snarl, then he felt

hands wrench at his ankles. Two spearmen were fitting shackles to his shins. Then one stopped, looking up, his gaze snagging on Pavo's phalera medallion. The man grinned, then reached up to lift it, turning it over in his hands, eyes glinting with its reflection. With a wrench of the wrist, he snapped the leather strap, pulling the piece free.

'No!' Pavo yelled, barging the other man back and swiping out to retrieve the medallion. But the spearman backed away, clutching the phalera tightly. The next thing Pavo saw was the ham-like fist of the nearest Persian spearman

swinging up and crunching into his nose. White lights filled his head and he toppled to the ground. When he tried to rise again, a spear butt crashed into the nape of his neck and he crumpled.

In the darkness, he heard Tamur's words as if from miles away.

'Kill every second Roman – the rest will be less trouble that way.'

Blackness fell upon him like a rock.

Chapter 12



The darkness seemed infinite at first; the darkness of death, Pavo was certain. But the furious heat seemed incongruous. And he seemed to be swaying in this black netherworld, swaying to a rhythm of dull and distant crunching boots on dust, spliced by the sharp crack of a whip on raw skin. He longed to see his surroundings, be it Hades or otherwise, but there was nothing.

The burning on his skin abated for a short while, and he heard the distant lapping of waves and the splashing of oars, together with the faraway shrieking of gulls and the jabbering of foreign voices. Finally, the heat of the sun dropped away and there was shade. Not the shade of night, but something else. A stifling, airless shade. He was descending, he realised. Was this the journey to Hades?

It was then that a nightmare came to him. But not the nightmare of the dunes. Now he beheld some vast, vile creature buried in the dust, only its fangless maw visible

like a gaping chasm in the ground. He saw nothing but the shadow that filled the depths of the maw, and heard nothing but tortured moans from within the creature's seven bellies. The maw flexed and chewed as if eager for its next meal. He tried to turn, but could not. He tried to slow his progress, digging his heels into the dust, clawing out, but the maw clamped onto his flesh and drew him down into the darkness of its gut.

In the belly of this beast, he heard nothing but the endless, pained cries of men. But there was something else, something splicing

the wickedness; the occasional words of a soothing voice. When the voice spoke, he felt the lip of some vessel at his lips, and liquid trickling into his throat.

One eyelid cracked open, blurry and crusted. The strip of light this cast into his eyes sent shockwaves through his head. He heard himself roar in pain as if miles distant and felt his hands clamp onto his head as if they belonged to someone else. Slowly, his other senses came back to him. He was lying down on some hard surface, dressed only in a loincloth. A constant clink-clink of iron echoed

all around. Rasping, rattling coughs came and went, nearby and faraway. The cracking of whips brought forth weak cries. He tried to fill his lungs, but his nostrils stung and the foul air seemed to steal his breath away until he broke down into a coughing fit. His tongue was shrivelled and utterly dry, and a film of something coated it. He felt the urge to retch but did not have the energy. He reached for his eyes with a trembling hand, and rubbed at them gently. Gradually, the blinding strip of light became less painful.

‘That’s it,’ a foreign voice said,

'let your body waken at its own pace.'

Pavo's heart jolted. 'Who's there?' he yelped, instinctively trying to sit bolt upright. The effort sent a white-hot pain racing through his ribs and he clutched his midriff with a cry. This in turn sent another wave of vice-like agony through his head.

'Your rib is still not healed, I see,' the voice continued. 'And your head is bound to hurt for some time.'

Pavo drew his bleary gaze around, but he could see nothing other than dull shapes. He touched

a hand to his ribs. They had been bandaged with a strip of filthy cloth. 'You did this?' He frowned.

'I am no healer, but I did what I could,' the voice replied in a wistful tone.

Pavo winced with every burning breath that pressed his lungs against his ribs. He blinked and rubbed at his eyes until he could make out the blurry outline of his surroundings. He was in a small alcove gouged into slate-blue rock. The space was cordoned off by iron bars. The ceiling, floor and walls were jagged and dancing with the shadows cast by distant torchlight

from beyond the bars. He was sitting upon a rocky shelf on one side of the cell, while the blurry figure who had spoken sat on the shelf opposite, legs crossed, head bowed.

Pavo eyed the figure nervously, then shuffled towards the bars, clasping them and straining to focus his eyes on what lay outside. He noticed a fine, white powder coating his hands. Indeed, every inch of his skin seemed to be clad in the stuff, with only beads of sweat breaking through the film. The blurriness was fading and he beheld what lay beyond the bars.

A vast, underground cavern yawned before him. The cavern walls were encrusted with glistening, jagged white crystals, some as big as towers, glinting like stars in the night sky. Pillars of this shimmering crystal climbed from the floor of the cavern and huge spikes of it hung from the ceiling. Torches crackled, fixed to the cavern walls here and there, illuminating the cave in an eerie half-light reflected all around by the crystals. Where there was no crystal, a network of walkways had been gouged into the dark-blue and russet-veined rock of the cavern

walls, leading to myriad cells like this one. Timber ladders rested here and there, linking the walkways to the cavern floor. The air in the place rippled in a haze of foul heat and everything was coated in the fine white powder.

Is this Hades? he wondered.
'Where am I?' he muttered to himself.

'The home of Ahriman, the realm of the lie,' the figure replied.
'Just a few of the monikers this place goes by. Though every man sent down here has his own name for it.'

Pavo frowned, then saw that

the cavern seemed to writhe. Men, he realised, rubbing his eyes again until his vision sharpened completely. Men clustered around the crystal face like larvae, caked in a crust of the white dust and sweat. They were dressed only in filthy loincloths and some had rags of cloth tied over their noses and mouths. Their backs were hunched and bleeding from whip wounds and their ankles were raw from their shackles. Some worked at the crystal face with pickaxes and chisels, swinging their tools into the crystal, shattering it and bringing showers of powder and chunks

tumbling to the ground around them. Others trudged to and fro, heads bowed, crystal-laden baskets strapped to their backs. These men formed a train, like ants, filing towards the middle of the cavern.

There at the centre of the cavern floor was a dark, circular hole. Directly above, the ceiling bore a matching hole. Through this broad shaft something moved vertically, like some giant, slithering serpent. A pulley, he realised, tirelessly hauling basket-loads of this crystal up to some chamber above and lowering empty baskets back down into the darkness of

another chamber below. Watching over these wretches were dark figures in baked leather armour and caps, whips and spears clasped in their hands, faces wrapped in cloth revealing only glowering eyes.

Realisation dawned on him as he crumbled some of the white powder between thumb and forefinger. Finally, he looked up to the far side of the cell and the shadowy figure.

'I am in the salt mines of Dalaki, am I not?' he said. The words sounded distant and even then he refused to believe them. His eyes darted around the cavern

outside. Father? But every hunched and rasping soul he saw seemed racked with illness, few over thirty years old. A chill finger of reality traced his skin.

‘Dalaki? That is another name for this place, yes,’ the figure replied. ‘While the Persian nobles and citizens of nearby Bishapur bathe in sunlight and dine on fresh bread and dates, we know only foul air, torchlight and scraps.’

Pavo’s thoughts churned. He had seen the dot on Gallus’ map representing the Dalaki mines. Thirty miles or more east of the Persian Gulf, deep in the belly of

the Persis Satrapy, many weeks' march from the oasis and his last memories. 'How long have I been here?'

'Three days,' the figure said. 'When they dumped you in here they said you had been feverish and muttering for some weeks before that as well.' At last, he stood up from the stony shelf and approached Pavo. The flickering torchlight revealed an emaciated figure of average height, dressed in a filthy rag of a loincloth. He had surely seen his fortieth year, Pavo guessed. His skin was sallow but caked in the white powder, as was

his thick moustache – twisted to points at either end under a broad nose. His short, thick black hair and dark, age-lined eyes instantly announced him as a Persian. He had the broad shoulders of a man who was once a warrior, but his ribs jutted and his belly was puckered, and the thick red lines of whip wounds coiled over his shoulders from his back. ‘I am Khaled,’ he announced. He held a filthy clay cup in his hand, offering it to Pavo. ‘Here, drink this. It is briny and hot, but it is all they give us.’

Pavo backed away until he felt his back press against the cell wall.

'You fear a wretch like me?' Khaled said with raised eyebrows, gesturing towards his jutting ribs. 'Come on, drink – you did not reject me when I watered you in these last days,' he said with a grin.

Pavo frowned, remembering the nightmare, the soothing voice and the drinking vessel at his lips. 'Thank you for dressing my ribs,' he said, then took the cup gingerly. He sipped at the foul water, but found his rampant thirst outweighed his disgust. He gripped it with both hands and in moments, he had drained the cup. Suddenly he realised how hungry he was. He

touched a hand to his belly, taut and puckered like Khaled's. He could not remember the last time he had eaten. Had it been the unchewable, dry hard tack on the dunes, weeks ago?

As if reading his thoughts, Khaled turned and dug something from a pile of the white powder on the floor. A stringy mass of something. He tore it in two and handed Pavo a piece. It was a chunk of white meat, no bigger than his thumb. Pavo held it to his lips tentatively.

'The salt disguises the taste,' Khaled said.

Pavo chewed on it and found the texture of the meat and the sensation of eating innervating. Then he saw the long, pink tail jutting from the pile of salt, and the red eyes and fangs of the dead rat. He closed his eyes and finished the morsel.

‘In this place you soon forget the decorum of the real world. Indeed, it pays to forget all of the real world. Down here, you have no name, no future, no hope . . . ’ he stopped as the dry air caught in his throat, then erupted into a fit of coughing, cupping his hands over his lips. It sounded serrated, as if

every organ in his body rattled from the effort. The man's legs buckled and he shot out a hand to stop himself from collapsing. Instinctively, Pavo shot up, grasping Khaled's hand, guiding him back to sitting. He saw blood on Khaled's lips. 'What's wrong with you?

Khaled wiped the blood away with the back of his hand. 'The same thing that afflicts every man who sets foot in these mines. The lung disease spares no one,' he nodded through the bars to the workers out there. 'Once it takes hold . . . it is only a matter of time.' He held up his hand. 'When the

blood is red, like this, you might have many months or even years of suffering left in you. When it is black . . . then you should make peace with your god. Few last but a handful of years in this realm.'

Pavo's eyes darted this way and that. Father had been brought here more than fifteen years ago. No, he mouthed, clutching for the phalera, then his breath froze when he found it was not there. He recalled the last moments before the blackness; the spearman tearing the medallion from his neck.

'You have lost something?' Khaled said. 'That is no surprise to

me. If they could denude you of your dignity on the way in, they would. Those who bring new slaves in usually strip them of valuables and sell them to the guards.'

The phalera, the strip of silk from Felicia. Gone. Pavo's head throbbed again. He slumped back down onto the stony shelf, raking his fingers across his scalp. He was surprised to find his hair had grown in and he could grasp it between his fingers. Likewise, he found a short beard had sprouted on his jaw. Confusion danced across his thoughts. He looked up to Khaled. 'You said the Savaran spent weeks

bringing me here?’

‘No, not the Savaran. They said they would have slit your throat from ear to ear where they captured you. But your comrades pleaded to carry you with them, through the desert.’

Pavo’s ears perked up. ‘My comrades – they are in here?’ He glanced out through the bars, his eyes scouring every sorry, hobbling figure out there.

‘There were very few Romans with you, and they were in a dire state. Many struggled just to stay on their feet.’

But Pavo barely heard him. He

remembered Tamur's order to slay every second legionary. How many had then survived the trek across the desert to this place? He filled his lungs, belying the pain in his ribs and head. 'Sura?' he bellowed, grappling the bars once more. His cry echoed around the cavern. Many heads turned, the slaves wore fearful looks, the guards wore scowls.

'No!' Khaled wrapped a hand over his mouth and pulled him back from the bars. 'Your comrades, or those that have survived their wounds, are in the lower chambers, they will not hear you. Do not draw

attention to yourself – the guards in here, they detest us as much as they despise their jobs. If you give them an excuse to . . . ’ he stopped, gawping up at the bars.

A rattling of iron bars sounded from off to the left of their cell, growing louder and closer.

‘Who . . . what is that?’ Pavo whispered.

‘It is Gorzam – a dark-hearted cur. Lie down,’ Khaled gasped, gesturing to the stone shelf. ‘Pretend you are still unconscious!’

‘Why?’

Khaled bundled him onto the shelf, then scuttled over to the

other shelf to lie down.

The rattling slowed and then stopped, and Pavo sensed a shadow creeping across him.

'Ah, Khaled,' an acerbic voice hissed, then muttered something in Parsi. The guard's eyes then locked onto Pavo and he switched to the Greek tongue. 'You two choose to make trouble?'

Pavo cracked open an eye where he lay. Khaled lay motionless, eyes closed as if asleep. But the tall, bear-shouldered guard standing outside the bars knew otherwise. He wore a baked leather cuirass over a linen

tunic and a hardened leather helm. He carried a whip in one hand and a spear in the other. The guard unlocked the cell gate and stepped inside, then reached up to unbuckle the thick cloth that obscured his face. His pitted features creased in a scowl and his dark eyes raked over Khaled's prone form like a butcher eyeing a cut of meat.

'Lost your voice, dog?' the guard spat, lifting a leg and stamping on Khaled's gut. With a cry, Khaled rolled from his stone shelf, hacking and coughing, blood dripping from his lips. 'Gorzam, please,' he pleaded.

Gorzam's face split into a gleeful black-toothed smile and he swung the whip back, the barbed tails glinting in the torchlight.

'Stop!' Pavo cried, standing.

Gorzam froze. Khaled's eyes widened and he shook his head.

Gorzam twisted round to behold Pavo. 'Ah, the Roman is awake. I have been looking forward to this.'

Pavo squared his shoulders as best he could, but this giant still dwarfed him. 'It was me you heard calling out, not Khaled.'

Gorzam's grin broadened and he laughed long and hard. 'I care

little whether it was you or him. You will both suffer!’ His grin faded into a grimace and he hefted the whip back, ready to bring it down upon Pavo.

‘Perhaps he is fit to work?’ Khaled offered quickly. ‘If you flog him he will be of no use to you for days.’

Gorzam froze once more, then his grin returned. ‘So be it,’ he hissed and lashed the whip down regardless. The iron barbs wrapped around Pavo’s back like claws, sinking into the flesh under his ribs and shoulder blades, gouging into muscle and sinew, ripping chunks of

flesh free. He heard his own roar as if it had come from another. He toppled back onto the stony shelf and writhed as the pain wracked him to his core. He looked up to see Gorzam's wild eyes and rotten-toothed grin as he hefted the whip back again. His mind flitted with those awful memories of his childhood as a slave in Senator Tarquitiu's cellar and the savage beatings he had witnessed there. Then he saw something glint on Gorzam's chest. The missing phalera, spattered with the spray of his own blood.

This was not Hades. This was

worse.



Three weeks passed. Three weeks of brutal labour at the salt face. Every day they were afforded a few hours of sleep, and without daylight, the concept of day and night was lost to them. They would be woken by Gorzam's rattling spear tip on the bars, fed and watered, then shackled and ushered to the salt crystal near the main shaft. Here, the dust was so thick it stole the breath from their lungs, stung their eyes and burned in Pavo's whip wounds – which had

turned to scar tissue after nearly two weeks of agony. Their lips and mouths were constantly cracked and bleeding, their hands raw and their feet callused. They filled basket after basket, loading each one on the pulley before returning to the salt face with an empty one. Men worked all around them, coughing and panting. Nobody spoke, nobody even made eye contact. Don't ever look the guards in the eye, Khaled had told Pavo, I have seen them kill men for less!

In his first days of mining, Pavo realised that they were deep underground – in the fourth of

seven chambers, each linked by the main shaft. So far under the surface that we could cry out until our lungs bled and nobody would hear us up there, Khaled had confirmed, dryly. On taking a full basket to the pulley, Pavo had glanced down into the dark hole of the main shaft, and wondered how many of his vexillatio toiled in the chambers below. He saw another slave nearby, neglecting his work and looking up wistfully. Pavo also risked a look up. High above, he saw a tiny disc of white. Daylight and the world of the living. He only realised he was gawping at it when

he heard Khaled's whispered warning. He turned his eyes down at once, his skin crawling as he heard footsteps thunder over to him. Gorzam had stormed past him and grappled the other slave by the throat. Khaled and Pavo could only stare at the salt crystal and continue to hack at it as Gorzam whipped at the slave again and again until the poor wretch collapsed. Even then, Gorzam did not relent, whipping at the man's head until the flesh came away and the skull crumpled. He enjoyed every lash. Then he and a comrade kicked the dead slave's corpse

towards the darkness of the main shaft. Another slave chained to the dead man dropped his pickaxe and clutched at the chains as he was dragged towards the shaft as well, begging Gorzam for mercy. The man's pleas went unheard and he toppled into the abyss with the dead man. His cries echoed until they halted with an abrupt and distant crunch. The monotonous, rhythmic chink-chink of pickaxe on salt continued as if nothing had happened.

At the start of the fifth week of his incarceration, Pavo woke first to the soothing melody of Zoroastrian

prayer. The voices of so many tortured souls in this place came together to recite the gathas, and the lilting verses echoed throughout the mines like the tumbling currents of a gentle brook. But the prayer halted abruptly at the sound of a cracking whip and the wailing of some poor slave on the end of its barbed tips. He sat bolt upright. The pain in his ribs and on his back had almost faded, but the burning in his lungs from the infernal salt dust seemed to grow fierier with every day. He scratched at his now wiry beard and straw-like, salt-encrusted hair. Khaled awakened at

the same time and the two peered through the bars at the glowing crystalline cavern. Another long shift at the salt crystals lay ahead.

The bars of the cells nearby rattled to the tune of a spearpoint. Pavo and Khaled stiffened.

'Come drink your water, dogs!' a grating voice called out gleefully. There was a shuffling of thirsty men rushing to the bars of their cells. Gorzam soon came to their cell, rattling his spearpoint more slowly, as if he had been looking forward to this. He held the whip in his other hand as if in expectation, and the guard with him carried a large

water skin. 'Cups,' Gorzam rasped.

He and Khaled approached the bars as the second guard readied the skin to pour. They passed their cups through the bars, avoiding the guards' gaze, Pavo struggling to resist a glance at the phalera on Gorzam's chest. Gorzam watched as the other guard filled the cups, then took them and handed them back through. Pavo reached out for his cup and Khaled his. His fingers were but an inch from clasping it, when Gorzam let both go. The cups bounced on the floor and the water soaked into the salt and dust in a heartbeat. Khaled

and Pavo stepped back, stifling their anger.

'Ah, it is a shame to see the precious water go to waste, is it not?' Gorzam grinned. 'Still, at least you have your food.' He nodded to the other guard. The man turned to rummage in the hemp sack he carried and produced two lumps of bread.

As Gorzam moved on to the next cell, Pavo prodded at the flint-hard, stale bread, then looked to the spilled water cups. He felt the absence of his spatha more keenly than ever. He pressed his face to the bars, watching as Gorzam

halted, he and the other guard pouring water into cups of their own, then squeezing some viscous, grainy substance into it. Pavo frowned, seeing Gorzam lick his lips then gulp at this hungrily. The guard drained the cup then spotted Pavo watching. In a flash, the whip cracked towards the bars of Pavo's cell. Pavo leapt back, the barbs gouging at the iron where his face had been a heartbeat ago.

Khaled placed an arm on his shoulder. 'He has but two joys in life: one is the strained seeds from the joy plant – the poppy,' Khaled whispered. 'Its juices calm his

pickled mind – one day hopefully he will take too much and it will kill him. The other, and by far his favourite pleasure, is to provoke the poor bastards in this place,’ Khaled said, stooping to pick up the two water cups. ‘Don’t give him what he seeks.’ He pushed Pavo’s cup into his hand. ‘Here, drink the drops that are still in there, it will give you moisture enough to chew on this year-old bread. Failing that, we can set about it with our pickaxes,’ he grinned wearily.

Pavo sat with a sigh. ‘That’s two days running he’s denied us water.’

‘It is a complement of sorts. He sees us as a threat. If they spoil our food we will be weak – not so weak we cannot work, but not so strong that we might think about tackling him or his comrades.’ Khaled nodded through the bars to where another guard was crushing the bread of another slave under his heel. ‘There are thousands of wretches in this underground vault, and only a few hundred guards.’

‘Aye, an army . . . but half-blind and lame,’ Pavo commented wryly, seeing the sorry packs of slaves cowering under the guards’ whips all around the cavern.

Suddenly, a cracking of bone sounded behind him. He swung round to see Khaled stretching his painfully thin and knotted limbs, his arms looped behind his back and the bones in his chest popping.

‘I tell you, it means less misery at the end of the shift,’ Khaled said, seeing Pavo wince with every crunch and grind. ‘Did it not aid you yesterday and the day before?’

Pavo sighed, nodded and set about following the man’s routine. First, he stretched his hamstrings by sitting on the flattest area of the cell floor and reaching out to grasp

the toes of one foot until the back of his leg burned, before switching to the other leg. He shot furtive glances at Khaled and wondered again how long the man had been in here. Years, was all Khaled had said when he asked.

‘Tell me, when you were brought here, Spahbad Tamur must have been little more than a boy?’ he asked in an attempt to date Khaled’s time in the mines.

‘Ah, yes, a young boy with a supple, malleable mind,’ Khaled shrugged, then twisted until his shoulder blades cracked. An incongruous grin of relief followed

this. 'His father, Cyrus, was the Spahbad of Persis before him. A noble soul, but one who neglected to nurture and educate his son. Thus, Tamur has fallen under the influence of others . . . '

Pavo frowned as he dipped to rest his weight on one knee then pressed forward upon it, stretching his quadriceps. 'Aye, who?'

'The same cur responsible for casting me into this place. Ramak, Archimagus of the Fire Temple.' Khaled's gaze grew distant and haunted. 'Spahbad Tamur controls a vast wing of the Savaran. Shahanshah Shapur trusts Tamur.

But it is Ramak who truly rules the Satrapy of Persis. There was an internecine war, thirteen years ago, I was chained at the ankle and forced to fight as a paighan in the armies of Tamur. He was a young warrior then – little more than a boy, as you say - over-eager and yet to understand that his orders could cost the lives of men. He sent us in against a gund of clibanarii that day. A thousand iron riders. Man for man, paighan versus clibanarius.’ Khaled shook his head.

‘The clibanarii are all but invincible, are they not?’ Pavo asked, recalling the fearsome iron-

plated, masked riders from the desert.

‘Invincible? I thought so too, once. The finest blades – lances and swords – will blunt on their plate-armour. Then I saw a shepherd’s boy fell one of them with his sling. The shot punctured the iron plate as if it was paper. So I had a sling in my belt that day on the battlefield.’ He made a gesture with his arm, as if spinning an imaginary sling. ‘Took down three of them before we were overrun. Tamur’s army was beaten back that day. He still had some light in his heart then, and consoled us at first.

But when Ramak questioned him in front of the ranks, seeking answers for his defeat, his mood grew foul. So he took out his ire upon his paighan, claiming some of us tried to run and caused the defeat. Some of us did,' he shrugged, 'but not me. Regardless, Ramak saw fit to blame me and the hundred who fought under my drafsh.' He held out his arms as if in wonderment. 'And this is my reward.' His bitter smile faded. 'Many of my people follow the noble traditions of old Persia, the traditions I was raised by: speak quietly and eloquently, never criticise bad advice, do not leer at

food being brought to you, always speak the truth . . . never mistreat a slave. In the far-flung satrapies, slaves are allowed three days of rest a month, they are not subjected to violence and can aspire to freedom. Such virtues are smiled upon by our God, Ahura Mazda, but not in these lands – not by Ramak. The archimagus does little to uphold Ahura Mazda's glory, for he is too preoccupied coveting and multiplying his own. He talks of Persia and Rome as the truth and the lie. The only truth is that Ramak is the lie.' He stopped for a moment, struggling to control his

anger. Then a canny smile lined his aged features. 'When an ambitious man seeks to harness the gods; kings, empires and armies should beware.'

'Aye, I'll say,' Pavo pulled a wry smile, remembering the events surrounding the Bosphorus mission. Then he stood to begin stretching his arms. He wondered at the significance of this pair, Tamur and Ramak. They knew of the mission for the scroll, it seemed. So they must have known of its importance. He had said nothing of the scroll to Khaled yet. He had quickly grown to like the man, and was now starting

to trust him, but past experience had told him to be wary of strangers in the guise of friends. Thus, he decided to tread cautiously. 'This Ramak . . . how far could his designs for power stretch?'

Khaled shook his arms and rolled his head on his shoulders. 'The man would gladly slide a blade between Shahanshah Shapur's ribs then sit upon his throne in Ctesiphon, and still he would not be content. But he cannot do so – for the rest of the Satrapies would crush him. Controlling the Persis Satrapy alone will not realise Ramak's wants. He needs gold to

swell his forces, to challenge Shapur.'

A cold shiver ran down Pavo's spine, thinking of the ruinous state of the Strata Diocletiana, and then of Roman Syria and the riches a conqueror could harvest from that land. 'A ripe target. And if the scroll remains lost, a viable one,' he muttered to himself.

'Eh?' Khaled cocked his head to one side.

Pavo shook his head. 'Nothing . . . perhaps I will talk of it later.' He sought to change the subject, then realised Khaled had finally answered his question. 'You were

captured and brought here thirteen years ago, you said?’

Khaled flinched at this. ‘Indeed,’ he said, his lips tightening as he twirled the ends of his moustache. ‘It has been a long time. But this place will not break me. I will not allow it. I pray to Ahura Mazda every day, and ask him to deliver me back to my family. They are out there,’ he said, gazing up as if able to see through the hundreds of feet of thick rock and out into the light of day. ‘I will be with them again.’

Pavo dropped his gaze. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you

think of that which troubles you.' But something screamed in his thoughts. If Khaled has survived here for thirteen years, then perhaps there were others who had survived for . . .

'That I know of no other in these mines who has been here longer than me tells me something,' Khaled continued, a single tear hovering on his eyelid. 'That I am destined to live on until I am reunited with them.'

His words hit Pavo like a blow to the guts. Father was dead. He had known this in the deepest recesses of his mind all along, but

the truth felt like an icy dagger to the heart. He disguised his anguish by hurriedly tying a rag of cloth over his nose and mouth in preparation for the coming shift. But his lips trembled and a stinging behind his eyes blurred his vision with a veil of tears.

Suddenly, a spear tip rattled along the bars once more. Both men braced. Pavo's heart thundered. Gorzam unlocked the cell and ushered in another pair of guards, who hurried to poke their spear tips at Pavo and Khaled's backs. Gorzam cracked the whip down on the dusty, salty cell floor

and the noise was cue enough for both men to shuffle out into the cavern obediently.

The echoing rhythm of pickaxes intensified as they trudged along one of the walkways that snaked round the cavern wall. When they came to a ramp that led down onto the cavern floor and the salt face they had worked these last weeks, Pavo turned to descend.

But Gorzam thrust his whip-wielding hand into Pavo's chest. 'Not today,' he barked, then nodded to the far edge of the cavern. There, a network of tunnels spidered off from the main cavern

and into the rock. Each tunnel was barely lit and only tall enough for a crouching man to fit into. Gorzam struggled to contain his joy. 'Today, you work in the wormholes.'

Pavo sensed Khaled brace at this. Then another guard jabbed his spear butt into the Persian's back, sending him stumbling onwards, round the walkway towards the nearest tunnel entrance. Khaled picked up a basket and a pickaxe from the pile near the tunnel, then crouched and entered the space. Pavo took a pickaxe and followed, stooping so his back was horizontal. The air in here was sweltering and

he felt his chest tighten at once. His quickened breaths barely fought off a tingling dizziness. As he stumbled along, the jagged rock overhead scraped on his back, and clouds of dust thicker than ever wafted into his eyes and mouth. Panic began to grip him as he felt the walls of the tunnel grow narrower, almost tomb-like. He stumbled and fell, then righted himself, back pressed against the dagger-sharp crystals of the tunnel wall, panting swiftly.

‘Be calm,’ Khaled grasped him by the shoulders. ‘Close your eyes. Focus on your breathing. Let each breath reach your stomach, fill your

lungs, enrich your blood.'

Pavo nodded, clenching his eyes shut. His heart hammered at first, then it slowed. The air was still foul but the deeper breaths seemed to cool and calm him. His heartbeat returned to normal as he fought back his fears.

'Now come,' Khaled beckoned, one eye on the guard scowling at them from the mouth of the tunnel.

They carried on until the torchlight from the main cavern offered only a dull glow that danced from the crystals. Every so often, the tunnel widened where men worked into the salt face. There

were pairs and trios of men, bent double as they hacked and chiselled at the salt face.

‘Why do they continue to work – there are no guards in these tunnels, it seems?’ Pavo asked.

‘That’s because no guard would want to come down into these deathly passages,’ Khaled replied. ‘They continue to work because the guards waiting at the mouth of each tunnel know how many men are in there, and they expect twelve crates of salt per man per shift. If there is one crate less . . .’

Pavo nodded, ‘I can imagine.’

They continued on, passing another group of workers. One skeletal figure trembled, racked with fever and struggling to draw breath. As Pavo passed by, the man retched and spat thick gobbets of blood. Black blood. Pavo's heart iced at the sight, remembering Khaled's description of the disease. He wondered whether to pity or envy the man – for surely death would be a freedom of sorts.

They came to the end of the tunnel and eyed the sheet of salt crystal before them. Blessedly, they could stand tall at this point, but there was little else to relish in this

location. He and Khaled shared a weary glance before they took to hacking at the face. Salt shards and dust showered back at them with every strike.

Pavo halted, coughing. He turned to fill a basket, grunting as he hefted the salt chunks into it. 'You could fit a man in one of these.'

'Many have tried to do just what you are thinking of; hiding in the baskets that are lifted to the surface on the pulley.'

'Aye?' Pavo's eyes narrowed, intrigued.

'Aye, the shaft is the only way

in or out.' Khaled shook his head. 'But at the top, they have men checking every basket. Those they find hiding, they send straight back down. No need for ladders, if you get my meaning.'

Pavo nodded faintly, horrified. He looked to the shattered salt face before them then weighed the pickaxe a few times. 'Has anyone ever tried tunnelling their way out?'

Khaled's face fell, then he boomed with laughter that filled the end of the tunnel. 'If they have tried, then perhaps in a few hundred years they might reach the surface!' He jabbed a finger

upwards. 'I told you, hundreds and hundreds of feet of pure rock. If you think it's hard mining the salt, then try swinging your axe at that!' he said, nodding to a flat patch of blue shale, veined with russet sedimentary rock.

Pavo shrugged and returned to swinging his pickaxe. Within a few hours, they had filled eight baskets. Pavo transported each full basket back to the tunnel mouth and into the cavern, his callused feet moving over the jagged floor more easily now. The air in the main cavern felt almost luxurious in comparison to that of the cramped

tunnel. He hurried over to the edge of the main shaft where he latched the basket onto the pulley system. He risked a glance up to the disc of light above, and shuddered at the thought of the poor wretches who had hidden in the baskets and come within feet of freedom, bathed in a few heartbeats of daylight, only to be cast back down the shaft to their deaths.

When he felt Gorzam's glare upon him he hurried back into the tunnel and stooped to scuttle along to its end. Khaled and he carried on hacking at the salt face. Another hour passed until Pavo's shoulders

ached. He had become used to the burning thirst that accompanied every shift but in this airless tunnel it was intensified. Self-pity drained away and then anger took over. He found a new surge of strength and began to hack furiously. The vexillatio had been all but wiped out, his friends dead or lost somewhere in this underground Hades. The mission had been swatted like a gnat by this Tamur and his master, Ramak. And the dark-hearted bastard Gorzam walked these mines wearing the phalera. Father's phalera. Father, whose bones no doubt lay

somewhere in the dust of this stinking, filthy hole in the heart of Persia, a hole he too would die in as a slave. As a slave! He snarled and his teeth ground like rocks. He smashed at the salt face until shards – some as large as men – toppled to the floor around him.

‘Stop!’ Khaled cried, grabbing his bicep.

Pavo halted, pickaxe raised overhead, panting.

‘You will bring the tunnel down on top of us,’ Khaled continued, wide-eyed, pointing to the large crack snaking across the ceiling. ‘I have seen many men

perish like this, crushed under the crystals.'

Pavo fell back, slumping against the tunnel wall, his head falling into his hands.

Khaled crouched before him. 'Pavo? What's wrong?'

'What is right?' Pavo shrugged, pulling the rag from his mouth and nose. 'This place drains hope from my every thought. If escape is impossible, then what point is there in living on in this cursed routine?'

Khaled nodded and sat, clasping his hands before him. 'Your words echo my thoughts from my first year here. I was faced with the

impossible; to live through this torture every day in the hope that something would change for me – that I would be free again.'

'Hope?' Pavo looked up, shaking his head.

'It comes from my faith, Pavo. Archimagus Ramak took everything from me the day he cast me down here. Every day since, Gorzam salts those wounds. But nobody can take the light of Ahura Mazda from my heart. His truth is my inspiration.' He clasped a hand to his bony breast. 'It lives on in me and I live on because of it.' He frowned and fixed Pavo with a firm gaze. 'You

have yet to tell me – what god do your legions look to in times of darkness?’

Pavo thought of the pious and bellicose Baptista, now but bones in the desert. He thought of his Mithras-worshipping comrades in the XI Claudia – how many of them were now but shades? ‘These are changing times for the men of Rome’s legions. Many now worship the Christian God; others, like the men of my legion, they stay true to the old ways and worship . . . worshipped Mithras.’

‘Mithras – the friend of Ahura Mazda?’ Khaled’s face lifted with a

broad smile.

Pavo nodded uncertainly. He knew only that the Mithraism of the legions had its origins far east of the Roman Empire. Before the fall of the Danubian Limes, he had often visited the Mithraeum near the fort in Durostorum with his comrades in the XI Claudia. He remembered vividly the initiation rite in that dank, underground chamber – Quadratus pressing a heated blade against his bicep. Yet he had found faith not in Mithras, but in the legionaries he had come to know like family. They trusted him like a brother. And he them. A

stinging sorrow needled behind his eyes.

But Khaled seemed transported from the mine as he recalled; 'Mithras shares Ahura Mazda's truth. Mithras is love, affection, friendship, the light of the sun. Mithras is a companion in life, in battle and in the afterlife.' He glanced back to Pavo as if snapping out of a trance. 'You and your men have chosen their faith wisely, Roman.'

'Perhaps, but then I'd hope Mithras would offer me a sign of hope . . . ' he stopped, frowning.

Khaled frowned too.

They both looked to the salt face at the end of the tunnel. From behind there, where Pavo had gouged the huge chunks of salt crystal, there was the faintest sound. A faraway hissing.

‘Water?’ The pair whispered at once.

They crawled back to the salt face and chipped carefully at it. They worked towards the sound of hissing for over an hour until they could hear it clearly. When Pavo chipped away another shard, the sound changed to a gurgling. Both men yelped as a meagre trickle of crystal-clear, ice-cold water

tumbled from the tiny opening, poured across a lip of sedimentary rock and then drained through a crack in the floor. They looked at one another, faces stretched in impossible smiles, then cupped their hands under the stream. Each took a handful and drank in silence, draining every last drop. They did the same again and again until their bellies were full, then they took to lashing the water over their faces and hair, cooling themselves and washing off the grime of sweat and dust. The coldness inside and out was like the most soothing of balms. Pavo wondered at the sound

of his and Khaled's laughter – a salve that helped dissolve his dark thoughts. He hefted his pickaxe carefully to chip more crystal from the opening to the spring, when Khaled grappled his wrist again.

'No. We are not the first to hear the rushing of water behind the rock and the salt. What trickles through here as a gentle spring might be a torrent behind these crystals. If we mine too far, the tunnel could be flooded in moments and we would drown.'

Pavo tilted his head to one side in agreement, lowering his pickaxe. 'Aye, a spring will do for

me.' Then he looked to Khaled, grinning. 'But we must fill our quota of baskets, then perhaps we will be sent back in here tomorrow?'

But Khaled's grin faded and he looked past Pavo's shoulder, down the tunnel.

A pair of eyes glinted in the gloom, blinked, then disappeared.

'Who is it?' Pavo whispered.

'Bashu!' Khaled gasped.

'A guard?'

'No.' A broad grin spread across Khaled's face, lifting his moustache. 'Something more precious than a seam of gold . . . a friend!'

The eyes jostled ever closer, then the lean form of a young man emerged into the end of the tunnel. He was handsome, with silver eyes and dark hair swept back from his face. 'Did I just see that?' Bashu asked, his eyes glinting as he beheld the trickling water.

'You can do more than see it,' Khaled said, gesturing for Bashu to approach, 'drink your fill!'

The man nodded in greeting to Pavo, then cupped his hands under the water and drank copiously.

Pavo watched him. 'Khaled, perhaps we should keep this to

ourselves, for now?' he whispered.

'Do not fear this man,' Khaled gestured towards Bashu. 'There was a traitor in the mines recently. A slave who was Gorzam's dog. He told the guards everything we spoke of. Many I once knew are now dead because of that cur. Bashu here put an end to his deeds.'

Bashu turned back from the spring, grinning, swinging his pickaxe round and cocking an eyebrow towards the tip. 'Aye, the fool strayed between me and the salt face at the wrong moment, if you take my meaning?'

Pavo nodded. 'I think I understand.'

Bashu looked to the whip scars on Pavo's shoulders. 'You already understand Gorzam's whip, I see?'

'That one will push someone too far one day,' Pavo shrugged and stooped to pick up the basket by his feet, brimming with salt crystal.

Bashu smiled at this. 'Aye, that will be a fine day!'

Pavo bent double to scuttle back through the tunnel, leaving Khaled and Bashu to talk. He rose as he came to the end of the tunnel and back into the main cavern, then

headed straight over to the pulley by the main shaft. For once, the pulley was still. He questioned this for but a moment, dumping his basket to the ground. He found his thoughts drifting. Once more, despite a voice inside him screaming at him to stop, he risked a look upwards. The distant light of day seemed curious and foreign now, so long it had been since he last felt it upon his skin. For just an instant, he let his thoughts drift. That last night with Felicia. His belly full and his heart content. The warm comfort of the bed. Her smooth, scented skin.

A roar of laughter from Gorzam was enough to snap him back to the grim present. The giant guard stood up on a shadowy alcove on the cavern wall, supping the dregs from his cup of water and crushed poppy seeds. It seemed Gorzam needed a regular dose of the mixture – a few hours into every shift. The big guard drained his cup and began to descend a rocky path towards the cavern floor. The man's usually twisted features seemed relaxed, his eyelids hooded slightly from the concoction. Pavo lifted an empty basket and made to turn for the tunnel entrance again.

But he froze, his gaze locked on the lip of the main shaft before him. A salt-coated, blonde mopped figure emerged at the tip of the ladder, coming from the chamber below. His heart thundered.

He and the other gawped at one another.

‘Pavo?’ Sura croaked.

Pavo stepped forward gingerly, as if wary of dispelling this mirage. But this was no illusion. His heart ached as he beheld his friend; joyous that he was alive and sickened at his gaunt form. Sura’s eyes were sunken and black-ringed. His cheekbone had been broken, no

doubt at the hands of the guards. His ankles were caked in salt, barely masking the raw flesh where he had been chained and marched through the desert. His ribs and shoulders jutted just like Khaled's.

'Well don't look at me like that – you look like a beggar's breakfast too you know,' Sura frowned.

It was all Pavo could do not to burst out in laughter and embrace his friend. He snatched a glance to either side, seeing Gorzam making his way over. 'I don't have long – where are you being kept?'

'We're in the chamber below. I've been sent up here for some

rope – the pulley's broken. I'm supposed to collect the baskets that come down from the chambers above.'

'We?' Pavo snatched on the word.

'Zosimus, Quadratus and Felix are down there too. I'd be mining alongside them at the salt face but . . . I tried telling them I'm the best salt miner in Adrianople . . . even I'm not sure what that was supposed to mean.' He offered with a wheezing cough and a weak grin. 'Habitus and Noster are in the chamber below us. There were others, but . . . ' he shook his head.

Pavo's eyes darted. 'Gallus . . . what about Gallus?'

Sura's face fell and he shook his head.

'They slew him? Out in the desert?' Pavo heard his words as if they were spoken by another.

'No,' Sura replied, 'he was with us all the way here – through the rest of the desert, across the Persian Gulf and out to this living nightmare. He and I carried you, you know. The Savaran seemed amused that we would want to add to our burden and they let us; we kept you watered and fed you honey when they gave it to us.

Then, when we reached the entrance to the mines,' he jabbed a finger upwards to the disc of light, 'Tamur took Gallus and Carbo away. To stand them before his master in Bishapur. Archimagus . . . ' Sura started, frowning as he tried to remember the name.

'Archimagus Ramak,' Pavo finished for him, bitterly.

'Aye,' Sura frowned in confusion. 'They were to be executed, Pavo. And that was weeks ago.'

Pavo's gaze fell away. His joy at seeing Sura faded. The iron tribunos of the XI Claudia had fallen

at last. He felt numbness creep over his heart. It was a sensation he had not experienced since he was a boy. That day when the dead-eyed legionary brought father's funeral payout to him. To Pavo, Gallus had been aloof, cold, never a friend like Sura. Never a friend . . . no, he had been so much more.

'Pavo . . . ' Sura grasped him by the shoulder, shaking him from his thoughts. 'Pavo!'

Pavo looked up, seeing the alarm in his friend's face. Sura's gaze was fixed over his shoulder. Footsteps thundered up behind him.

Pavo spun just in time to see Gorzam's twisted scowl. The whip lashed down upon him and tore at his arm.

'Get back to your post!' he roared, the brief effects of the poppy extract clearly wearing off.

Pavo scrambled back, panting in agony, seeing Sura being bundled back down the ladder by another guard. He hobbled away from Gorzam's follow-up lash, cupping his bicep, torn by the barbs. He crouched and hurried back through the tunnel, his breath coming and going in rasps through gritted teeth. Anger like never

before boiled in his veins.

Chapter 13



Gallus crouched by Olivia and held her hand as she slept. She squeezed his fingers and then turned over with a sleepy, contented sigh, wrapping one arm around little Marcus. Gallus smiled at this, pulling the blanket up to cover their shoulders. For a blessed moment, his troubles were absent. Then a log snapped in the campfire and he jolted, swinging round to

scour the darkness. A chill autumnal breeze searched under his robe and brought the cypress trees to life, but this clearing by the roadside in Northern Italy was deserted. The road itself was utterly empty too, Mediolanum but a distant glow to the west and the port city of Aquileia lost in the blackness off to the east. So they were alone, he thought. Regardless, his eyes fell upon the axe and sharpened pole resting against the wagon.

He stood, picked up the axe and strode around the wagon to make sure. The vehicle was heaped with barley and leeks as always.

Working another man's land and taking the crop surplus to market had been the extent of his troubles until just a few weeks ago – troubles he would gladly take in exchange for those he endured now.

Having circled the wagon, he reached for the skin of wine tucked under the driver's berth, then took a long pull upon it followed swiftly by another. It was unwatered and as potent as he had hoped, warming him and drowning his fears. He had taken to drinking it like this in these last weeks, knowing his thoughts would otherwise drive him to

madness.

‘Will they come for me tonight?’ he whispered, gazing up at the waning moon. ‘What they asked me to do – no man could do and live with himself afterwards. Would you not have chosen as I did?’

The moon stared back, cold and silent.

The Speculatores would be far more unforgiving. He slumped by the wagon and took another draw on the wine, gazing long and hard into the guttering campfire. He made to take another mouthful of wine, then realised the skin was empty. Just then, Olivia’s weak,

sleepy moan stirred him.

He looked at her and little Marcus. As a farming family, they had little in the way of riches, but they had each other and needed little else. This affirmation seemed to render the darkness less of a threat. He felt these maudlin thoughts sting behind his eyes and realised the wine was playing with his emotions. And a long journey to Aquileia lay ahead tomorrow. He cast his eyes once more around the deserted countryside and shook his head with a stifled chuckle.

‘Sleep, man, there is no one coming for you tonight.’

He crept over to lie behind Olivia, wrapped his arms around her waist and nuzzled into her sleep-warmed neck. A contented smile spread across her delicate features at this, and the sight was enough to lull him closer and closer to sleep. Blessedly, he fell into a dreamless slumber.

But a curious sensation crept through the blackness of sleep. He was being watched. He sat up with a start. All was silent. The trees were still.

Olivia stirred by his side.

‘What’s happening?’ she whimpered, scooping Marcus to her

breast.

‘Your choices were foolish, Gallus!’ a voice spat.

Gallus’ heart hammered until it seemed it would burst from his chest. The wine fog clung to his mind as he glanced around. The land was empty . . . until he saw shapes emerging from the trees – two speculatores wrapped in dark-red robes and veils that masked all but their bloodthirsty glares. A clutch of six gnarled, tousle-haired barbarians flanked them. Quadi, he realised – ferocious bastards. They carried swords and clubs.

Gallus shielded Olivia and

Marcus as the barbarians approached like preying wolves. His hands shot out to the ground beside him, searching for his weapons. Then he remembered leaving them by the wagon. 'You fool!' he cursed himself.

He turned and leapt towards the wagon, only to see another barbarian step from behind it, swinging his club around. The weapon smashed into his skull and he crumpled to the ground, his head filled with a swirl of bright lights and blackness. Warm blood trickled from his ears and nose, and he realised he could not move.

Olivia's scream tore the night asunder, and Marcus wailed in panic.

'He's done for,' one speculatore hissed.

'Aye,' the other one purred, 'now let's see if the farmer's wife wants to play . . . '

The screaming of his wife and child that followed raked at his soul until it fell numb. Long after they stopped, the echoes remained in Gallus' mind. He heard the two speculatores handing coins to the Quadi. Then they dispersed, spitting gobbets of phlegm upon him.

Eventually, daylight came and

his vision with it. But still he could not move. He heard the crunch of another wagon approaching. Soon, someone unfamiliar crouched over him. A weary-faced old traveller. The traveller held water to his lips, and two boys with the man helped Gallus sit upright. His head cleared then, and his eyes focused on two shapes laid out on the grass by the blackened remains of the campfire, utterly still. One tall and the other tiny.

‘No . . . ’ Gallus cried, shaking free of the traveller’s grip. He fell forward, onto his knees, reaching out with a trembling hand. ‘No!’

Gallus sat bolt upright, hands outstretched. But the shades of his dead family faded, and he realised he had awoken from one nightmare into another. This stifling-hot pit in the heart of Bishapur had been his lot for over five weeks now. The pit had a stony floor and walls, and his bones ached from sleeping on such a surface. A raised iron grating capped the cramped space, through which the midday Persian sun glared, rendering the pit furnace-like. Shadows flitted by the grating every so often, and a jagged babble of voices spilled in from every direction.

Then, from behind him, something shuffled.

Gallus started, almost forgetting he was not alone.

He twisted round. Carbo lay, curled up at the other side of the pit in a fit of troubled sleep. His head twitched and his lips trembled, then he muttered something in Parsi, again and again.

This had startled Gallus in their first days in this pit, but now he was used to hearing this Roman soldier speaking the tongue of the enemy. But in the five weeks they had been kept in this miserable hole, he had picked up only the

basics of the language himself – yes, no and the like, but not enough to follow conversation. ‘What is your secret, Centurion?’ he grumbled under his breath.

Suddenly, Carbo’s mutterings changed to Greek. ‘Forgive me . . .’

Gallus frowned. This was new, yet the tone seemed hauntingly familiar from his own nightmares.

Then Carbo sat bolt upright, reaching out as Gallus had done only moments ago. ‘I should have waited on you. Forgive me!’

‘Centurion?’ Gallus said.

For a moment, Carbo’s bulging eyes continued to stare at some

ethereal torment, his lined face slick with sweat, his chest rising and falling at haste. Then he blinked, seeing Gallus, seeing the pit walls. 'Tribunus,' he frowned, at once donning a fragile mask of non-expression. 'Is it time?'

Gallus eyed him furtively for a moment and then stood. The pit was tall enough only to allow him to stand with a crooked neck. The raised grating allowed him to see out across their surroundings; the hole was in the heart of a market square at the foot of an acropolis. His eyes were at ankle-level of the many passers-by. Persian men and

women glowered down at him, their noses wrinkling in distaste. They hauled back their inquisitive children and hissed or mouthed curses at the Roman prisoners. But there were no spearmen nearby and none approaching, it seemed. 'No, we have some time yet.'

Over the course of these last weeks, the market square around them had been transformed. An arc of timber seating had been set into the northern slopes of the acropolis, sweating workers labouring over the final sections. He glanced up, past the seating, to the twin structures studding the acropolis

plateau. The blue-domed Fire Temple and the high-vaulted palace resembled vultures perched upon a rock, eyeing their prey. Then he noticed two figures descending from the plateau. One a powerful and broad-shouldered warrior, the other his antithesis – hunched and peering, with a pallid bald crown and painfully taut features. Tamur and his master, Ramak. The curs who had sent his men into the mines and denied him the honour of sharing their fate.

We have another purpose for you, Roman, Tamur had barked, before he and Carbo had been

hauled to this sweltering pit. Carbo had been vociferous in his protests, demanding to instead be sent back into the mines, then weeping when his pleas went unheard. Another layer in the riddle of the centurion's past life, it seemed.

They had been led into Bishapur, tethered behind Tamur's mount like captured enemy kings. Gathered crowds lauded the spahbad like a hero. Gallus was certain that he and Carbo were to die that day – executed before the masses, no doubt. And if it had been up to Tamur alone that would surely have been the case. But they

were led to this market square where a crowd waited, and the lone figure of Ramak stood on a raised platform. One look in this man's eyes and Gallus realised that their deaths would be anything but swift.

Ahura Mazda, the Sacred Fire burns brightly today as you bless us with this portent, the Archimagus had said, arms outstretched, his words directed to the skies. A Persian guard hissed a translation of the Parsi into Gallus' ear. These soldiers of Rome marched from their dark realm to challenge your noble truth. Instead, it is their lie that will meet its end. Ramak had

then turned his gaze across the gathered people. The Jashan of Shahrevar will be upon us in less than two moons. On that day of the Festival of Iron, these Romans will fight their last. And as they fall to their knees, I will reveal to you Ahura Mazda's will for the people of Persis, and the House of Aspaphet.

Then, to the thunderous cheering of the thousands gathered to watch, he and Carbo had been thrown into this pit. The days since had followed a simple routine. They would wake to the infernal heat, then at mid-morning they would be taken to the gymnasium. To

prepare for what was to come. Gallus looked over the network of fresh bruises and cuts on his skin, then glanced at the sun, wondering how much longer they had before they came for them today.

A thud-thud of boots approached, and the shadows of two Median spearman blotted out the sunlight, answering the question.

‘It is time for you to bleed once more,’ one spearman grinned as the other unlocked the grating.



The populace muttered in distrust,

sharp curses rising here and there as Gallus and Carbo were marched at spearpoint around the base of the acropolis to the gymnasium. They halted in the shade of a palm cluster before the pale-pink walls and timber gates of the compound, hearing the clash-clash of swords from within and knowing what was to come. Then the gates creaked open.

The enclosed courtyard inside was cast half in shade, the other half baking in sunlight. A pair of feeble-looking, dark-skinned men stood, back-to-back, naked and wielding only spears. Circling them

were three warriors armoured in bronze scale vests and ornate, gem-studded helms decorated with broad, gilt wings. Pushtigban wearing antique armour, Gallus realised. They seemed to have foregone the masks worn by their kind only to allow them to cast baleful looks at their victims. Two of them swished curved sabres deftly, and the leader carried a hammer, spiked at one end.

Gallus scanned the gymnasium floor, spotting a severed ear and splatterings of dried blood. And there was something new; a stone block clad in dried matter. Gallus

looked from the spike hammer to the battered, bloodstained stone. The gouges in the stone were distinctly shaped just like the spike.

‘Ah, it seems we are early,’ the Median spearman behind Gallus hissed. ‘Ah well, you can relax and witness the fate of these two criminals.’

One of the two criminals threw down his spear, fell to his knees and held out his hands for mercy. Gallus followed the man’s gaze and saw the two figures watching the bout from chairs in the shade. His blood cooled. Tamur seemed uncertain how to respond to the call

for mercy. A word in his ear from Ramak saw him wave away the criminal's pleas.

The nearest of the pushtigban strolled over to the criminal. The begging man held out his hands as if reaching out to the warrior for help. The pushtigban reached out slowly, then his hand shot out like a snake and grappled both of the beggar's wrists like a shackle. Then the pushtigban swept his shamshir round to cut through the beggar's forearms. The wretch fell back, mouth agape in silent agony as he thrashed. Lifeblood pumped from his stumps as he scrambled on all

fours in an attempt to right himself. Gallus saw Ramak sit forward, his golden eyes sparkling at the spectacle. Eventually the maimed criminal slowed and groaned like some tormented animal, his strength leaving him. The pushtigban stalked over, lined up his serrated blade over the back of the man's neck, then swiped his head from his shoulders.

The other criminal watched all of this in a frozen panic. His legs trembled violently and he gripped his spear to his chest in white knuckles. The pushtigban warriors moved over to surround the man.

‘Fight,’ one said, ‘or you will suffer more than your friend. Much more.’

The man nodded jerkily, shivering as he forced himself to level his spear. At this, the pushtigban’s faces split into broad grins. Like wolves, two of them leapt upon the man, swiping their spears down. The man used his spear like a staff, parrying the strikes. But in moments, the shaft was in splinters, and he was on his knees, pleading as his friend had done moments ago. ‘I fought, I did as you asked!’

In spite of his words, the lead

pushtigban with the spiked hammer grabbed a tuft of the criminal's hair, then dragged him towards the bloodstained stone block. The pushtigban pushed the man's head onto the block, side-on, then aligned the hammer to the man's temple, lifted it back then roared as he swung it down with gusto. A sharp crack rang out, along with the wet splatter of the wretch's brains bursting from the opposite temple and showering the filthy stone. At once, the body fell limp. Ramak rose to his feet in delight. Tamur looked through the bout, his brow knitted and his lips pursed as if his

mind was elsewhere.

Gallus stared through the spectacle. Nearby slaves rushed to clear the gymnasium floor and another pair hurried out to offer Gallus and Carbo a tray of food each. A heap of nuts and dates, a pot of honey, bread and a leg of chicken, with a cup of honey-sweetened water to wash it down. Gallus eyed the delicious fare as though it was maggot-infested.

‘Eat,’ the spearman behind them grunted. ‘You will get nothing else until tomorrow.’

‘Eat? Like a prize pig? To ensure your festival blood games

are a fine spectacle?' Gallus spat over his shoulder.

'Eat!' the man yelled this time, prodding his spear tip into Gallus' spine.

Gallus lifted the chicken and tore a chunk off. He nodded for Carbo to follow suit. He threw down the sweetened water, then looked to the four figures jogging onto the gymnasium floor. Swordsmen. They wore white trousers and mail shirts and they were fawn-skinned with dark black hair and thick moustaches. They tossed two wooden swords to Gallus and Carbo. The spearmen behind them

nudged them forward, forcing them to pick the weapons up. As they stalked onto the sandy courtyard, the leader of the three pushtigban from the previous bout shouted over. He weighed his spike hammer in his grip and grinned at Gallus.

‘I look forward to the Festival, for I have yet to crush a Roman skull.’

Gallus held the man’s gaze until he and his two comrades wandered off into the shade. A cry from Carbo and a whoosh of air by his ear snapped him from the trance. He spun and threw up his wooden sword to parry the

chopping blow of the nearest swordsman. Splinters flew from the blow. At once, all thoughts dissolved and he leapt forward in riposte.



Tamur disguised a scowl as the bout carried on before him. The thought came to him again: the thing the aged warrior in his ranks had told him as they brought the captured Romans back through the desert. I fought alongside your father. Cyrus was iron-willed and noble. But something changed in him in his last years. He became

embittered. He was not himself. Some said it was as if he had been possessed by a demon.

Just then, Ramak shot to his feet, applauding a stealthy lunge from one swordsman.

Tamur looked to the archimagus, then thought of the news he had heard that morning. Two new gunds of cataphractii had been commissioned. Two thousand riders that would be recruited using silver from the House of Aspaphet. Yet he as ruler of these lands had given no such order. A question stung on his chest and demanded to be asked. 'Tell me again how it

was agreed to raise the new cavalry division?’

Ramak turned away from the fight and sat again, his top lip twitching almost imperceptibly. ‘You would search for a smudge in the bluest of skies, Spahbad. I gave the word so you did not have to. I am paving the road to your destiny.’

Tamur’s anger cooled a fraction at this. The archimagus was always swift to answer his questions and allay his fears like this.

‘Remember, Spahbad. We are on the cusp of greatness,’ Ramak continued. ‘Do not let doubts

muddy your thoughts. Your father's greatest strength was his determination.'

Tamur felt a surge of emotion at this, his eyes stinging. All his thoughts fell away.

'I see much of him in you,' Ramak smiled.

Chapter 14



Izodora shielded her eyes from the sun and squinted ahead. The sea of dunes ended there. The flats and the oasis waited just over the last sandy ridge. She clicked her tongue and the twelve riders with her picked up the pace. Their patrol had been swift and uneventful, and her thoughts were now on bathing in the cool, shady pool amidst the palms. One rider galloped ahead,

then slowed suddenly atop the sandy ridge. She frowned when he held up a hand, noticing the smattering of dark carrion birds in the air beyond.

She squeezed her mare's flanks and the beast cantered up beside the other rider. What lay before her turned her stomach. The golden, dusty flats were plastered in patches of russet blood, dried to a crisp and reeking. Punctuating this gruesome carpet were mutilated bodies, flecked with battered armour. Hundreds upon hundreds of them. Twisted chunks of meat and severed limbs, white

bone poking through chewed flesh. Swarms of gnats and mosquitoes buzzed over this carnage.

She rode down onto the flat, her lips taut. The hollow eye sockets of one Roman corpse gawped at her – the rest of the body near stripped clear of flesh. The intercisa helm had been punctured at the temple. 'Clibanarius lance,' she spoke solemnly as her fellow riders clustered nearby. Many other corpses lay with Persian arrows lodged in their iron vests and the bones underneath. She clicked her fingers. 'Check the oasis; be sure it

is unpolluted before we drink. If it is clean, we take our fill and move on at haste.'

The riders nearby nodded their assent and trotted towards the cluster of palms.

Izodora led her mare around the massacre at a gentle walk. She beheld the Roman corpses and heard a hissing, primal voice inside snarl in delight at the sight. This disgusted her even more. 'These were fathers, brothers, sons,' she chided herself. Then her gaze fell upon one intercisa helm lying upside down. Beside it lay a discarded spear. Trapped under this

was a strip of red silk.

Pavo.

'You didn't deserve to die, Roman. Some of your kind are dark-hearted, but there are others like you,' she thought of those legionaries who had saved her people on the night of the burnings.

Just then, a rider trotted back from the oasis. 'The water is uncontaminated. But there is more. We found tracks. The Savaran did this as you suspected,' he pointed to the massacre. 'And they took prisoners, back in the direction of the Persis Satrapy.'

She looked south-east. So

some of the Romans would have reached their destination after all, but in chains. She had heard of the blackheart archimagus who had harnessed the spahbad of that southern satrapy, and pitied the Romans who would be brought before him. If the young legionary, Pavo, was one of those in chains, then the noble quest for the scroll would be the last thing on his mind. Or perhaps not, she thought with a mirthless smile, remembering the legionary's pluck.

She dismounted then crouched to slake her thirst at the oasis, gazing into her reflection as the

ripples faded. Her face seemed more rounded than it had been in some time. She and her people had eaten well in these last weeks. She touched a hand to the frayed purse Pavo's wolf-like tribunos had given her. Plenty of coin remained to buy more meat and cattle from the desert trade caravans. Her thoughts swirled, troubling her, but she shook her head and stood.

She and her riders readied to set off again, back to the Maratocupreni valley. But before she gave the order to move out, an odd breeze danced across the dust from the south-east. She turned

and looked to the shimmering horizon there. One day soon, war would come from that haze. Then she flicked her head to the north-west, thinking of distant Antioch, of Emperor Valens, the man who had once ordered the destruction of her people. At that moment, memories of her chat with Pavo came to mind.

There have been times when I have had to make the hardest of choices to protect the few I love.

Her next thoughts astounded her.



Pavo woke on the stone shelf and

instantly felt the aching in his muscles. The shift at the salt face had been brutal as always and he felt as if he had been asleep for only a few heartbeats. He convulsed in a coughing fit, covering his mouth with one hand, then shuddered at the sight of the fine red spray on his palm. This had horrified him when it had first happened six days ago, but he soon realised Khaled was right: there was no escaping the lung disease of the mines.

At least they had the spring, he thought. For the last few days they had been able to slake their

thirst completely with its fresh and cool waters. Gorzam seemed unaware of the spring, but just in case, Pavo had taken to trembling and seeming grateful for the daily brackish water ration in an effort to avoid any suspicion.

He began his stretching routine, Khaled waking to join him. The Persian too had been buoyed by the discovery of the secret spring. 'Perhaps today we will stumble across gold?'

'Or,' Pavo suggested, lifting a tattered water skin from beneath a pile of salt dust, 'we put my plan into action?'

Khaled's face fell a little at this. Two days ago, Khaled had found the punctured water skin, discarded by a guard. He had managed to patch it up with a piece of rat skin and a paste made from the rodent's corpse. The pair had smuggled it to the spring and filled it. After slaking their thirsts again yesterday, Pavo had come up with his idea. Khaled had seemed reluctant at first, and even now, the doubt was etched across his face. But at last, he nodded. 'Aye, but be wary, lad.'

'In here? Always.' Pavo clutched the empty skin to his thigh

and wrapped his loincloth around to conceal it as best as he could.

‘Quickly, they’re coming,’ Khaled whispered.

The rattling of a spear tip along the cell gates seemingly caused Pavo’s fingers to bloat. He fumbled, but tied the cloth in place before he heard Gorzam’s sour tones. ‘Khaled, Roman, your rest is over. Be ready to breathe salt again in the hottest part of the mine!’

The guard with him half-filled their cups with water. The pair took to drinking hungrily – as if it was the first water they had enjoyed since the last ration. Next, Gorzam

held up two chunks of bread, then grunted and juggled something in his throat, before spitting thick, dark phlegm onto each piece and handing it through the bars.

‘Eat,’ he grunted.

Pavo felt a lurching in his gut at the thought of eating the greasy, phlegm-coated morsel.

‘Not hungry?’ Gorzam snarled, raising his whip.

Pavo backed away, feeling the water skin flap against his thigh. A lashing meant the water skin might be discovered, the spring found and the glimmer of hope extinguished. He quickly held up his hands in

acquiescence and Gorzam slackened his grip on the whip. He lifted the filthy bread to his lips and bit into it, crunching into the rock-hard bread and chewing on the slimy, glutinous topping.

His disgusting meal finished, Gorzam's spear prodded he and Khaled from the cell. They trudged along the rocky paths in the main cavern to the cramped tunnel mouth. Once inside, they scuttled along to the small chamber at the end with the spring. They worked to fill two baskets to ensure there was nothing out of the ordinary with the shift; there were no more guards

than usual, and Gorzam was standing in his usual place near the pulleys.

'This time,' Pavo nodded as they filled the third basket.

Khaled sighed and nodded. 'Very well, but be swift and do not take any risks. If you see any eyes upon you, turn back.'

Pavo nodded, filling the water skin and attaching it to his thigh. As he did so, he looked to the faint letters he had etched into the skin.

XI.

He stooped and made his way along the tunnel. As he did so, he felt the water slosh against his

thigh. Surely nobody could see or hear it though. Surely? 'No turning back,' he affirmed. He rose to standing as he left the tunnel, then unclipped the dust veil from his face and panted as he hauled the salt basket to the pulley system. Gorzam sneered at him. The man's eyes scoured the knotted scabs and scars on Pavo's shoulders, as if judging whether he would withstand a fresh whipping. The giant clenched his whip and grimaced. Pavo froze until Gorzam burst into a chorus of rasping laughter and turned away to speak with another guard.

Pavo's heart beat like a kettledrum as he mounted the full basket onto the upwards pulley. He bashed it accidentally with one shoulder as it rose and the rope squeaked as if calling out for the attention of all those nearby. Cursing his clumsiness, he looked round to see Gorzam scowling at him, whip hand clenched once more. But then another guard beckoned him. The giant's face lit up as he saw that his comrade held a purse of the poppy seeds. They left together, ascending one of the rocky paths to the dark alcove as usual.

Pavo felt a wave of relief. But he had only a short while before Gorzam returned or another guard questioned him. Glancing around, he slipped the water skin from his loincloth and slid it into the next basket on the downwards pulley. He watched it descend into the blackness of the main shaft and prayed Sura was still down there, collecting the baskets as they came down. After what seemed like an eternity, the pulley system slowed momentarily. The chink-chink of pickaxes on the salt face seemed to slow and he felt all eyes burn upon his skin as slaves and guards alike

turned to look. But within a few heartbeats, the pulley was moving. Now he had to wait even longer. Basket after basket on the upwards pulley was filled with salt and nothing else. The flimsiness of his plan seemed all too obvious now. He pretended to be stacking baskets near the pulley, when footsteps sounded behind him, growing closer. Someone in a hurry. He braced, expecting to feel Gorzam's lash. But a pair of hands slapped on his shoulders.

‘Be swift,’ a voice said, ‘Gorzam is coming.’

Pavo glanced round to see

Bashu, flitting away as swiftly as he had come, looking back over his shoulder, his handsome features wrinkled in alarm.

Now a crunching of boots on salt sounded behind. There was no mistaking the identity of this one. Sure enough, he twisted round to see Gorzam returning, his pitted face drawn and his eyelids heavy. Panic coursed in Pavo's veins and his heart rapped on his ribs. He glanced at the upcoming baskets. Salt-filled, every time. Salt and nothing else. Gorzam was only a stone's throw away and now he was alert, seeing a chance to use his

whip. Then Pavo saw it.

The neck of the water skin, poking from the next upcoming salt basket. He grappled at it and pulled it clear, fumbling to tuck it into his loincloth once more.

'Move, Roman dog!' Gorzam cried behind him.

He spun to see the whip thrashing down, inches from him. He grasped the nearest empty basket and made for the tunnel, but Gorzam's interest was piqued, his eyes searching the waist of Pavo's loincloth. 'What have you got there?' he snarled.

Pavo looked back and

mouthed silently, his thoughts jumbled. 'I . . . ' he felt the blood drain from his face, then turned to run for the tunnel, ducking down and scuttling along its length.

Gorzam's roar filled the tunnel behind him as the giant guard stooped and thundered along in pursuit. 'You will bleed for this, Roman dog!'

Pavo saw Khaled and Bashu at the end of the tunnel. They turned, saw what was coming for them then swiftly disguised the water spring with their baskets. Pavo stumbled into the tunnel's end, gasping, then turned to see Gorzam

burst into the chamber, whip raised. 'What have you got there? Tell me or you will suffer.'

'Nothing, I . . . I . . . '

Gorzam's face creased into a vile grimace and he hefted the whip back. Pavo braced for the pain that was to come, then saw the whip's iron-tipped tail lash back against the cracked mass of crystal overhead. The force of the blow sent the dark fracture on one side spidering across the ceiling, directly over Gorzam. Then it cracked. Gorzam glanced up at the teetering mass, mouth agape.

A flurry of thoughts flashed

through Pavo's mind. Before he knew it, he had launched forward, butting Gorzam back. The big guard's roar was drowned out as the mass of salt crystal fell where he had stood moments ago. A storm of salt dust engulfed the tunnel end and then billowed along its length and out through into the main cavern.

Pavo retched and gagged, blinded momentarily. When he blinked through stinging eyes, he finally saw Bashu, stooped and helping Khaled to his feet. The tunnel's end was knee deep in salt shards and dust. By his side,

Gorzam was struggling to stand, gawping at Pavo. 'You could have let me die?' There was a moment where Pavo thought of offering the man an arm to help him up, but Gorzam stood swiftly on his own, issuing a growl. He eyed Pavo, Khaled and Bashu with a steely glare, then offered a curt nod to Pavo. 'For this, I will spare you the lash today, Roman. But tomorrow,' he grinned, 'you will suffer as normal.' Finally, he flicked a finger to the baskets buried under the salt. 'See to it you fill your quota,' he grunted, then turned, stooped and headed back through the

tunnel to the main cavern.

'You might just have saved our skins, Roman,' Bashu said, watching Gorzam leave. 'Had a guard died here while we were present, we would surely have been executed.'

Pavo watched Gorzam go, his top lip wrinkling. 'Perhaps that would have been a fair price to pay, considering the guard in question?'

Khaled scuttled over beside them. 'Never mind him. Did you do it?' he said, his eyes sparkling as he untied his facemask.

Pavo frowned momentarily then remembered – the skin! 'I don't know yet,' he whispered as he

fumbled to pull it from his loincloth. It was empty, that much he could be sure of. He held the item up so the dull light reflecting from the salt face danced across the skin's surface. Under the faint etching, more letters had been added.

XI . . . Claudia.

His heart soared.

Then he saw something on the floor, almost buried in the salt dust. Something Gorzam had dropped. A small hemp purse brimming with poppy seeds. His thoughts danced this way and that. Then they settled on something that had happened on the journey through

the desert. At that moment, he realised what they had to do.



In the fifth chamber, Zosimus hauled a basket of salt onto his back and set off from the edge of the dark, shallow cavern towards the main shaft. The grumbling, squeaking pulley and the tink-tink of pickaxes sounded all around him. Clouds of salt dust billowed across his face and gathered on his scrub of hair and beard. He stopped as the breath caught in his lungs, then yet another wheezing, hacking coughing fit came on. It felt as if his

chest was on fire, today more than any other day in this accursed hole in the ground. He saw Felix up ahead; the short primus pilus was hunched and trembling as he hauled a basket onto his shoulders. The little Greek stumbled, falling to one knee. Zosimus instinctively hurried over towards him, but a guard got there first and Zosimus froze in indecision. The guard finished sucking on his water skin, wiped his lips and then belched, shaking his head as he beheld Felix, crouched and panting.

‘Weak Roman,’ he uttered in broken Greek, then swung his boot

into Felix's gut.

Felix cried out and crumpled under the blow, his basket of salt spilling across the cavern floor.

'Now look what you've done!' the guard said with a gleeful smile.

Zosimus winced. His heart willed him on, to crush the guard's face with his fists, but his head stilled him. He saw another form nearby, watching this. Quadratus was no doubt a reflection of himself; a hulking frame stretched taut after five weeks of pitiful rations, face coated in the white dust, his eyes black-ringed. A beard now accompanied the big Gaul's

moustache, matted and tousled like his hair.

When the guard had strolled off to berate another group of slaves, Zosimus and Quadratus helped Felix to his feet. Quadratus scraped the spilled salt back into the basket.

'But there will be dust and grit in there too,' Felix said, his eyes darting round to see who was watching.

'Good, then the Persian bastards can break their bloody teeth on it,' Quadratus seethed.

Felix panted, then broke down in a coughing fit. The little primus

pilus seemed to glow red for a moment in his struggle for breath. When Felix steadied himself again, Zosimus' eyes locked onto the back of the little Greek's hand; a splatter of crimson trickled over the skin, and there was more on his lips.

'Sir!' Zosimus gasped.

'It was only a matter of time,' Felix shrugged. 'For me, for you, for all of us. You've heard what the other slaves say; when the blood turns black, it's over.'

'Then we need to find a way out of here, or die trying,' Zosimus spoke solemnly.

'It's hopeless,' Felix shook his

head. 'I've spent every moment in my cell thinking about it. The main shaft is the only way out but it's too well guarded. If there were more of us, perhaps.'

Quadratus wheezed and just controlled a coughing fit of his own. 'Well maybe this will change your mind?' The big Gaul looked this way and that, then lifted a half-full water skin from the basket he carried.

Zosimus' eyes bulged. Felix stifled a gasp. 'Where in Hades did you get . . . ' Zosimus' words trailed off as Quadratus brushed the salt dust from the skin to reveal the XI

Claudia etching on there, and jabbed a thumb upwards.

‘It seems we have a comrade in the chamber above. Pavo.’

‘Aye?’ Zosimus thoughts swirled.

‘Aye, and he and Sura have been passing messages up and down since yesterday. They’re planning how they could use the pulley to escape,’ he tapped a finger to the smaller scribblings and drawings around the base of the skin.

Zosimus frowned. ‘But you’ve heard what happens to those who try to escape that way.’

'Aye,' Quadratus nodded over to the main shaft and the solitary figure of Sura, monitoring the baskets as usual. 'And Sura reckons that they are more thorough than ever at it – they spear down through every basket, or so he has heard, and at the slightest abnormality they will stop the pulley and all the guards up there on the surface will cluster round it, eager to bloody their blades.'

Felix frowned. 'Sura's always been something of a demented bastard, but this caps it all. How does that constitute a plan?'

'Ah, that's where it gets

interesting, sir. You see, perhaps the guards are a bit too keen to keep an eye on the pulley.' Quadratus' face split into a broad grin. The sight after so long in this place brought matching grins from Zosimus and Felix. 'But before I tell you the details,' he thrust out the water skin, 'drink this.'



Khaled looked up through the main shaft, the tiny disc of daylight sparkling in his eyes. 'Ahura Mazda wills that today will either be the finest of days, when I will be freed and reunited with my family . . . or

the darkest hour, when Ahriman will cast my soul forever in the shade.'

Pavo looked up with him, then glanced down to see the endless train of salt-filled baskets emerging from the darkness, rising past him and on up to the world of the living. He saw one with three notches hacked into the edge – the signal from Sura. 'It's time,' he said.

'This will work, aye?' Bashu hissed beside them. The man was nervous, his eyes darting. 'I must have my freedom from this place.'

'Relax,' Khaled rested a hand on his shoulder. 'We must be at ease or our ploy will never work.'

The three lifted empty baskets and turned from the main shaft. Nausea swam in Pavo's gut; the consequences should they be caught did not bear thinking about. Then again, he mused, neither did the prospect of remaining down here forever. He steeled himself and looked up to the shadowy alcove halfway up the cavern wall. It was a few hours into Pavo's shift and there, as always, Gorzam stood in the darkness, talking with another guard, supping at his drink. The pair were barely visible, and that was key.

Pavo, Khaled and Bashu

walked past guard after guard, their eyes trained on the ground before them as if heading back to the entrance to the cramped tunnel. But, at the last, they turned away from this, instead stepping onto the rising rocky path that clung to the cavern-side and led up to the alcove. The path was littered with slaves working at the sheer crystal face. They edged up this narrow walkway, pretending to discuss where to work. All the time, Pavo fired stealthy glances around the cavern floor. Not one guard was looking this way. They edged closer to the alcove until they could hear

Gorzam's conversation and see his outline, back turned, draining his cup. The giant's words sounded slurred, as did those of his comrade. Then Gorzam rubbed at his temples and slumped back against the alcove wall, sliding down to sit. They watched as the pair muttered, then became monosyllabic. Finally, they fell silent, heads lolling.

Pavo clenched a fist in victory. Thank you for the inspiration, Yabet, he thought, dryly.

He turned to the two with him. 'You did it!' he whispered to Bashu.

Bashu's silver eyes glinted in

the gloom. 'Only just. They let down those water skins unattended for but moments. Then,' he grinned, his handsome features creasing as he held up the empty poppy seed purse, 'I saw to it that they'd have a healthier dose than usual.'

Khaled fought to contain a chuckle. 'They will be sleeping this off for some time.'

'But we must move swiftly,' Pavo added.

He, Bashu and Khaled crawled into the alcove. They stripped Gorzam and the other guard of their baked leather helmets, cuirasses, face-veils, spears and whips and

dressed in the guard armour. Khaled took Gorzam's things as they were a better fit for his broad shoulders while Pavo took the other guard's armour. As the pair wrapped the veils across their faces, Pavo saw one thing remaining on Gorzam – the phalera. He knelt to snatch it away, feeling a pang of sadness as he did so. If they were to escape today then this suffocating hole in the ground was as close as he would come to Father's memory – only nightmares and thoughts of what might have been would be his lot from now on.

'Come on,' Khaled shook his

shoulder.

The pair turned to descend the rocky path onto the cavern floor. They marched Bashu at spearpoint, as if taking him to a new part of the mine. They went unchallenged for some time, but Pavo's mouth dried and his gut churned, just like the pre-battle nerves. All that was visible was their eyes – but a man's eyes could betray him even at the best of times. He resisted glancing at Khaled – any hint of nerves would be a dead giveaway. Then he noticed another pair of guards approaching. They appeared to be frowning, looking them over. Pavo

tensed his grip on the spear and pretended to poke at Bashu's back. They passed the two guards, then a jagged cry from the pair halted them.

'Where are you going?' the voice growled in Parsi, behind them.

Pavo slowed and stopped, the blood pounding in his ears. This was it. The plan was surely ruined. He grappled his spear and readied to turn and face the pair. Now he had no option but to fight. He turned to see one of the guards scowling, whip raised. But the man's eyes were trained over

Pavo's shoulder, to a clutch of slaves behind him. The guard lashed his whip down, then beckoned his comrade with him in stomping over to deal with the slaves.

'Time to spill some blood, eh?' the whip-wielder cackled to Pavo on the way past.

Pavo struggled to disguise his relief.

'I think it is prudent that the guard tunics are brown, do you not?' Khaled remarked through his face veil, deadpan.

They set off again and stopped by the main shaft near the

pulley, looking around the cavern and snatching furtive glances to the rising salt baskets. Finally, one rose that seemed to sway on the ropes a little more than the others, as if it carried something other than salt. Pavo gripped Khaled's shoulder in anticipation.

They watched as the basket rose past them, the slumbering form of an unconscious guard curled up inside it, a bright red lump and a flowering bruise on the back of his head. He and Khaled shared an almost disbelieving glance. 'Your Roman friends, they did it!' Bashu whispered through taut lips.

'Aye, now we must do our part,' Pavo nodded to the ladders that led up through the main shaft. They hurried over and Pavo went first, hooking his hands and feet over rung after rung. When he reached the top, he gingerly poked his head up and glanced around. This third chamber was much taller than the fourth, and had been stripped of most of its salt crystal. The ladder leading up to the second chamber was a good fifty feet away, around the mouth of the main shaft and past a forest of dark rock pillars. He looked this way and that to see that only a few guards

were nearby and none were looking at them. He climbed up and onto the floor of the third chamber, then flitted through the forest of stone columns to the next ladder. He scuttled up this ladder, all the time keeping his eye on the swinging basket, being sure not to ascend faster than it. When he reached the second chamber, he glanced down to see Khaled and, some thirty feet down and climbing, four more forms in guard armour. Sura, Quadratus, Zosimus, Felix!

He looked up to see the disc of daylight. It was now so much bigger – almost blinding. His heart

raced. The sweet prospect of freedom danced in his heart. Shielding his eyes, he saw the swinging basket ascend, nearly at the top of the pulley. He hurried to climb the ladder into the first chamber. Up here, he could feel a change in the air. It felt clean, it carried scents he had almost forgotten – just the faintest hint of shrub and bloom. Freedom was only feet away. He eyed the last ladder, and saw the outline of four spear-wielding guards in the daylight, perched at its top. When the body was discovered on the pulley, they would rush to the scene. They had

to. The plan hinged on this.

The swinging basket disappeared into the disc of light and Pavo waited. Khaled arrived beside him, Bashu close behind. 'God of the Light, let this happen!' he panted, craning his neck to the light above.

Then he heard the wheezing gasps of his comrades. He turned to them and longed to embrace each of them. The stolen guard armour they each wore disguised them well, betraying just their eyes. He noticed there were a few men missing. 'Noster and Habitus?'

'Still down there,' Quadratus

replied gravely. 'Either they couldn't take the guards or they were locked in their cells.'

Zosimus was last up the ladder. He clasped a hand to Pavo's shoulder with a glint in his weary eyes. 'Good to see you, Optio. You haven't found any scrolls lying around in this place, have you?'

Khaled frowned at this and opened his mouth to speak.

'Never mind that,' Sura gasped, looking up. 'Have they spotted the unconscious guard yet?'

Pavo raised a finger to silence his friend. At that moment, the pulley slowed. A voice above cried

out some jagged Persian curse. Other voices up there echoed the cry. 'I'd say they have now,' he replied, struggling to contain the tremor in his voice. Up above, the dull shapes of the guards around the ladder disappeared one by one, rushing over to the pulley system.

'This is it,' Pavo whispered, resting one hand on a rung of this final ladder, 'when that last guard goes too . . . '

His words faded as a scraping of timber on rock sounded. The rung was pulled from his grasp as the last guard hoisted the ladder up and onto the ground above. Only

then did the last guard leave his post to go to the pulley system. The forty feet from the floor of the first chamber to the surface above seemed like miles.

‘Mithras, no!’ Zosimus gasped.

Pavo felt all the hope in his heart dissolve. But fear quickly replaced it as shouts of alarm rang out all around the chambers below. He turned to his comrades. ‘We’ve got to go back,’ he said.

‘What?’ Quadratus gasped. ‘Are you bloody mad? Let’s wait for the ladder to come back down and we can rush them. Freedom is right there!’

‘Pavo’s right,’ Felix gasped. ‘They won’t drop that ladder back down anytime soon and there’s nowhere for us to hide in this chamber. They’ll search this place high and low until they find out who knocked out that guard,’ he jabbed a finger up to the basket at the top of the pulley, then nodded downwards, ‘and the others.’

‘Then we must be quick about it,’ Khaled said. Already, the guards in this first chamber were whipping at the slaves, driving them back from the salt face and into clusters where they could be counted.

Pavo was last to descend the

ladders back through the levels. They hurried down until they reached the third level, then flitted through the forest of stone pillars to the next ladder. They halted only when a guard leading eight colleagues barked to them. 'Where are you taking this one?' he flicked his head at Bashu, who was acting the cowering prisoner well.

The guard stared at Pavo in search of an answer. Pavo mustered the few words of Parsi Khaled had taught him. 'Down, to the next chamber.'

The guard cocked his head to one side. 'Did you not hear the

order? No movement between chambers until further notice.'

Pavo hesitated. The guard snatched on his indecision, his gaze narrowing on seeing the dark rings they all wore around their eyes, then noticing that some of them wore no boots. 'Who are you?' he said, levelling his spear and motioning for those with him to do likewise. Nestled amongst these stone pillars they were obscured from the rest of the cavern, and the guard seemed nervous. 'Remove your veils!'

'What is this, comrade?' Khaled said in a light-hearted tone,

his hands extended by his sides.

The guard's shoulders dropped a fraction, as if he was ready to back down, then his scowl snagged on Pavo's chest, where the edge of the phalera glinted. 'Hold on, that's Gorzam's . . . '

His words ended with a punch of iron into flesh and a stunned croak. Zosimus' spear quivered in the man's breastbone and the other seven with the guard gawped. 'At them!' Felix rasped. As one, they fell upon the guards like lions, driving their spears into guts, swinging their fists and smashing out teeth. Pavo leapt for the

nearest man, they clashed their spears together like swords until the guard batted Pavo's weapon away. The guard grinned and readied to thrust forward with his own lance. Pavo jinked clear of the blow, grabbed the spear shaft and pulled the guard towards him, then thrust his forehead into the guard's nose. With a crunch of bone, the man's nose flattened and he flailed backwards, stumbling past the rockfall and then swaying at the edge of the main shaft, arms swinging for balance. His eyes widened in terror as he lost the battle and toppled into the

darkness, his cry long and desperate before a meaty crunch ended it. Pavo looked around to see that the rest of the guards had been dealt with. The scuffling of boots and babble of more approaching voices started all of them into action once more. They scrabbled down the ladder into the fourth chamber.

‘Be swift, be safe,’ Pavo called after Sura, Zosimus, Felix and Quadratus as they carried on back to the fifth chamber, below.

Pavo, Bashu and Khaled saw that the guards here in their chamber were almost done

rounding up the slaves. He glanced up to the shadowy alcove to see Gorzam, sitting up, rubbing at his temples, shaking his head as other guards questioned him. The slighter guard by his side seemed equally confused.

Khaled waved Bashu off back to the cells, then pulled at Pavo's arm; 'Come on.' The Persian led him to the edge of the cavern and into the accursed tunnel, right to the end where the water spring trickled. There, the pair hurriedly stripped off their guard armour, burying it under a pile of salt rocks. Wasting no time, they scuttled back

through the tunnel then stood tall again when they came back to the cavern. No sooner had they emerged than a whip cracked by their ankles.

‘Into line!’ a prune-faced guard snarled.

Pavo backed away from the lash, bunching up with Khaled into the mass of sweating, terrified slaves.

‘We have achieved nothing today,’ Pavo whispered bitterly.

‘But we live on for tomorrow,’ Khaled replied.

Both men’s gazes were upon Gorzam as he stood tall and shook

his head, blinking and steadying himself.



Sat alone by the main shaft, Gorzam's breath came and went in fiery grunts and his head throbbed. Never had he been so humiliated, he thought, sucking hungrily on a fresh water skin and eyeing the polluted one with a low growl. The slaves were back at work and no culprit had been identified. But those responsible would be found, for he was the shahanshah of the mines. He ruled this dominion like a god. His lot on the world above was

too meagre to bear – a filthy home, no woman to cook for him since his wife had vanished. ‘I should have beat her even harder,’ his shoulders jostled in a gruff, dry chuckle. He made to take another swig of water when a voice hissed by his side.

‘I know who did this to you,’ it said.

He turned to behold the shadowy figure stacking cane baskets by the pulleys. It was the cretin who had long informed him of the other slaves’ misdemeanours. The man dropped his gaze as soon as Gorzam met it.

‘Tell me,’ Gorzam demanded.

‘You will give me freedom, as we have discussed before.’

Gorzam bristled at this. He stood, towering over this figure, his shoulders broadening. ‘I have never promised you freedom. I might see to it that you are raised to the first chamber – the air is breathable there. But if you do not tell me who did this to me, I will throw you into the shaft without hesitation. Or worse, I will tell the other slaves that the traitor is still amongst them, Bashu.’



Pavo and Khaled hobbled into their

cell and the bars clanked shut behind them. The shift that immediately followed their foiled escape plan had seemed to last for days. Now they would be afforded just a few hours of rest before the next shift began.

Pavo winced as he lay back on the stone shelf and tried to let his muscles relax. But his thoughts quickly jabbered with all that had gone wrong. He clasped his hands over his face and fought to clear his mind. They did not speak for some time, neither man sleeping, nor able to summon any words. What was there to say?

Eventually, Khaled slid from his cot and began scraping the bristles of his beard from his jaw with a sharpened slat of rock and a sprinkle of water from his cup. 'Tell me, Roman; what did your friend – the big one with the squashed nose – mean when he spoke of a scroll?'

Pavo frowned. He had barely noticed Zosimus referring to it in jest up in the first chamber. Instinctively, his lips tightened and he thought carefully about his answer. Then his shoulders slumped and he shook his head. 'It matters little now, for we are all going to live out our days in this

place. My comrades and I were sent here, all the way from Roman Syria, to seek out a scroll. It is thought to contain some agreement between your empire and mine – one that might stave off war between our armies.'

Khaled said nothing, but his grin spoke a thousand words.

Pavo sat up. 'Khaled?'

'You speak of Jovian's lost scroll. There were a few in here in years past who spoke of such a thing.' He looked up, bemused. 'The scroll is real?'

Pavo leant forward. 'It is, or it was . . . it may no longer exist, but

the mere possibility that it does brought us across the desert. Khaled, please, tell me what you know.'

Khaled shrugged, smoothing at his roughly shaven jaw with one hand, then twirling the ends of his moustache. 'I know very little, only what you have already told me. There was a slave, long ago, who claimed to have held it in his hands.'

Pavo latched onto this, remembering Gallus' description of the man who had hidden in the mountains with the scroll. 'Where is he?'

'He died many years past,' Khaled replied, the words flattening Pavo's nascent hope. 'But he passed his knowledge of the scroll on before he died, to a group who worked with him.'

Pavo's hopes picked up once more. 'What happened to this group?'

Khaled's face darkened and he shook his head.

'Dead?'

Khaled fixed him with his gaze. 'Worse. They were consigned to the seventh chamber, right at the foot of the mine. They say it is so far underground that the light

from the top of the shaft cannot even penetrate into the darkness there.'

'How long ago?'

'The passage of time is difficult to record in this place. But I would guess that it was about a year after I came here.'

'Twelve years ago?' Pavo's heart leadened. 'Then surely they have perished down there?'

Khaled's face grew weary. 'Aye, I am almost certain they have by now. A year in those depths must feel like a lifetime . . . '

As Khaled spoke of the seventh chamber, Pavo sought a

grain of hope. Their chances of escape were gone. An ember of possibility that the scroll might be found had been extinguished too. He shook his head and pulled the phalera medallion from the waist of his loincloth. His fanciful hopes of finding some trace of Father were further away than anything else, he realised, absently tracing a finger over the engraving.

Legio II Parthica.

He heard Khaled's words as if from a faraway place; 'Some Persians can survive in the dry, stale air down there for that length of time, perhaps, but not Romans.

No, they have surely perished in that deepest chamber. Indeed, we consider any souls sent down there as dead men.'

The breath froze in Pavo's lungs. One word rang over and over in his thoughts. Romans? 'They were Roman? The men sent to the seventh chamber?'

Khaled looked up, eyebrows raised, then nodded. 'Yes. This place was once worked by many of your kind. Not so many recently. It was a surprise when you and your comrades arrived.'

Pavo slid off the stone shelf and knelt before Khaled. 'But they

were Romans?’

‘Aye,’ Khaled nodded, then jabbed a finger to the phalera, ‘some wore trinkets just like yours.’

An intense shiver danced across Pavo’s skin. ‘Khaled, I need you to think back,’ he said holding up the phalera. ‘The engraving on this – did the Romans you speak of have the same markings, exactly the same?’

Khaled curled his bottom lip and nodded. ‘Yes. I’m sure of it.’

‘Romans in the seventh chamber know the whereabouts of the scroll? Legionaries of the II Parthica . . . ’ Pavo staggered back,

his head swimming, his eyes combing the floor of the cell as if to organise his jumbled thoughts. A bewildered laugh toppled from his lips.

Khaled smoothed the ends of his moustache. 'Remember, this was some twelve years ago. These men are likely to be nothing but bones now. Do not trouble yourself with thoughts of their fate . . . '

'My father may well have been one of them,' he cut Khaled off.

Khaled's eyes widened. 'Your father? The one you speak of in your nightmares.' He nodded in realisation. 'Of course.'

'So you realise that I must go down there. When my legion set out to the east, I promised myself I would find my Father or honour his bones.'

A long silence passed, then a sorrowful smile crept across Khaled's face and he laid his hands on Pavo's shoulders. 'I understand, friend. Just as I long to be reunited with my loved ones, you feel you must do this.'

'It is not a feeling, nor a compulsion of some sort.' He fixed Khaled with an unblinking gaze. 'It is a certainty. I am going down there.'

Tears appeared in Khaled's eyes. 'I once had your fire in me, lad. Many years past.' He blinked the glassiness away and came closer to Pavo. 'If you are to do this, then know that you are not alone. I will do all I can to aid you . . . ' his words trailed off and he gawped over Pavo's shoulder, to the cell gates.

An icy chill danced across Pavo's skin as the iron bars groaned open. He hurriedly tucked the phalera into his loincloth then spun to see Gorzam, trembling with rage. A second guard fumbled with the keys to the cell whilst another

figure stood behind the pair. Bashu failed to meet their gaze.

‘It was them?’ Gorzam seethed.

Bashu nodded. ‘Aye, it was them who poisoned you. I saw them put the concoction in your water – they threatened to kill me if I told you this.’

Pavo scrambled to the back of the cell and Khaled joined him. ‘Bashu? No . . .’

Gorzam stomped in and raised his whip. Khaled’s cries were drowned out by the thrashing of the barbed tails, the ripping of flesh and the thick blood-spray that coated all

in the cell. As Khaled cowered, Pavo tried to grapple him and pull him clear of the next lash, but Gorzam was unstoppable, and the barbs gouged at Pavo's arm, sending him staggering back. As Khaled took the brunt of the next blow, the second guard pinned Pavo back with his spear tip. 'Move . . . die,' he grunted in broken Greek.

Pavo winced at every blow, hearing Khaled's cries grow fainter with each. Eventually, the lash carried on to utter silence. Pavo was wet with Khaled's blood and Gorzam wore a dripping, crimson mask. After an eternity, the

whipping stopped. Gorzam panted, resting his hands on his knees. Pavo saw Khaled's staring eyes, the light in them dimming. He reached out for his friend, but Gorzam booted him away.

The giant glared at Pavo. 'I will be back to take the skin from your back later. And then every day after that. I plan to keep you alive for a few weeks. I want to see how long a man can live with the flesh ripped clear of his bones.' He nodded to the second guard and stabbed a finger at the mutilated, flayed mass that was Khaled. 'Come; let us haul this dog to the

shaft.' They lifted the still body and then with a clanging of the cell door, they were gone.

Pavo stared at the spot where Khaled had been moments ago. The flesh on his arm where he had been struck was raw, ripped to the bone. Fresh barbs, he realised, sickened. He found himself praying hurriedly to Mithras that Khaled was already dead and would not have to suffer being thrown down the main shaft. 'I pray you meet with your family soon, friend,' he sobbed, a chill settling on his heart.

He wiped at his tears, then lifted the phalera once more,

glancing from it to the cell floor and the thought of what might lie deep below.

The seventh chamber beckoned him. Nothing would stop him.

Nothing.

Chapter 15



The gymnasium echoed with the scraping of feet on sand. Gallus and Carbo circled, back-to-back, their eyes tracking the three pushtigban who stalked around them. The three wore their full bronze armour and the hammer-wielder directed the other two with clipped commands. Gallus and Carbo faced them wearing just loincloths, helms, spathas and small, circular wooden

shields. Nothing more.

Gallus glanced over to the shaded area at one side of the training court. There, Ramak and Tamur watched on. As always, Tamur seemed encouraged by some rhetoric Ramak was whispering in his ear, fists clenched as if strangling some invisible enemy. After six weeks of imprisonment, the Festival of Iron was just over a week away. The arena at the foot of the acropolis was nearly complete. Now it seemed that the archimagus and the spahbad wanted to rehearse the glorious slaughter of their

Roman prisoners. The pushtigban grinned eagerly – as if in hope that this could be more than a rehearsal.

Suddenly, the warrior with the spike hammer lunged forward and smashed his weapon down. Gallus threw up his shield arm and felt the blow like a falling rock. He crumpled to his knees and the shield shattered, half crumbling away. Numb, he pushed up, barging the splintered shield boss into the pushtigban's face. The warrior stumbled back, growling, hefting his hammer as if for a death blow.

'No blood, not today,' Ramak stood and called out.

The hammer-wielder seemed to wilt under Ramak's glare. He lowered his weapon and sneered; 'You make it all the worse for yourself, Roman. At the festival, you will suffer, and the last thing you will see will be my face. I will be smiling as I dash out your brains.' He smoothed a finger over the point of the spike on his hammer as he said this.

Just then, another pushtigban swiped his spear around for Carbo's shins. The centurion leapt over the swipe, but as he landed, the other warrior jabbed his spear forward, scoring Carbo's thigh. Carbo could

not contain a yell of pain, and he staggered, struggling to stay on his feet.

At this, Ramak sat forward. 'I said enough! I want them to walk unaided into the arena on the day of their deaths.'

The three pushtigban turned, prostrated themselves in the direction of the archimagus, then kissed the ground.

'But show me how you will despatch them,' Ramak finished, a predatory grin stretching across his face.

The three pushtigban stood up. The hammer-wielding warrior

flicked his head to one side then the other. One of his comrades swept his spear round to bash the spatha from Gallus' grip, then the other prodded his spear at Gallus' throat, driving him back until his ankle thwacked against the execution stone. 'Kneel,' the spearman spat.

With no option but to comply, Gallus knelt and lay his head on the stone. The stench of dried blood and innards encrusting the filthy stone turned his gut. The spearman stood back, then he felt the boot of the hammer-wielder press upon the back of his neck. Beside him, Carbo

had been pinned to the ground likewise, the two spearmen holding the tips of their weapons to the centurion's breast.

Gallus grimaced as the hammer wielder hefted the bronzed weapon. He refused to avoid the man's glare. The man looked over to Ramak and Tamur for approval, then grinned and let out a roar. The hammer came sweeping down then halted, the spike barely an inch from Gallus' temple.

At this, the hammer-wielder laughed aloud and looked up to his watching masters. 'Archimagus, Spahbad; this is how the Roman's

brains will be cast across the sand. It will be a fine festival. In years to come I will regale my men,' he pushed down, pressing on Gallus' windpipe, 'with tales of this wretch's pleas for mercy.'

Still, Gallus refused to look away.



Pavo chipped at the salt face at the edge of the cavern. The salt stung at his eyes, worked into his lungs and burned like fire in the seeping wounds inflicted by Gorzam's whip. Khaled's cries still echoed in his every thought, and his every

waking moment had been consumed with honouring the vow he had made with the man at the last. The seventh chamber, he affirmed, glancing over at the main shaft, or death.

He heard Gorzam's rasping laughter echo through the cavern, turning to see the giant in conversation with his colleagues. Then his gaze drifted beyond the gathering and up the sides of the chamber wall. Behind the bars of the cell up there, he saw a shadowy shape move. Bashu! The man's reward for his foul betrayal had merely been this cell slightly higher

on the wall than his old dwelling. So far, the treacherous dog had kept well away from Pavo. A shrewd strategy, cur, he grimaced, then twisted away to look back at the salt face.

A sharp pain stabbed into his hip and he stifled a cry just in time, then adjusted the slat of sharpened stone tucked in there. It was Khaled's shaving stone. He had found a whetstone of sorts to grind it to perfection. Indeed, he had slept little in between shifts in this last week, honing at the blade over and over instead. All for this moment.

He smashed his pickaxe into a shard of salt crystal, then scooped up the pieces that fell away and pressed them into his near-full basket. He heaved the basket to the pulley and hooked it onto the ropes, stooping to pick up an empty basket. Gorzam and his men had grown complacent in these last days, thinking the brutal murder of Khaled had cowed the spirit of the slaves. Indeed it had – many of them visibly trembled and cowered when Gorzam strode past. Pavo had elected to feign fear too, cowering and pleading to be excused of his daily beatings. And it had worked,

for now their eyes were not upon him. They thought him broken. They were wrong.

In a heartbeat, he stepped into an empty basket on the downwards pulley and crouched to conceal himself. The basket swung and squeaked as it settled and began to descend. The fourth chamber disappeared and the jagged rock of the main shaft rolled past. He held his breath as the rock opened out again into the fifth chamber, then glanced up to the rim of the basket. This chamber was darker and had a lower ceiling than the one Pavo had worked in all

this time. It also had pillars of rock and salt blocking the view across the space – fortunately one such column part-obscured the area around the pulley from the rest of the cavern. He looked to the stack of baskets near the pulley. A single, dark figure stood there, hunched and still. He had not heard from Sura since their foiled escape attempt. He peered at the figure, and was sure he could see a blonde lock.

‘Sura,’ Pavo whispered.

The hunched figure stood upright and spun round. It was not Sura. The albino guard wore a

menacing scowl and grasped for his spear, resting nearby.

Panic gripped Pavo's heart. He leapt from the basket, the pulley juddering behind him, and swung a desperate right hook into the guard's jaw. The blow was fierce, and his knuckles cracked. The guard staggered back, stunned, then sucked in a breath to raise the alarm. But the words never left the man's lips, a hefty salt shard crashing down on his head from behind, splintering into dust and a thousand smaller pieces. The guard crumpled and Sura stood in his place, coughing at the salt dust.

Sura looked at him with an incredulous glare. 'Pavo – what in Hades? What are you doing down here?' he hissed, shooting glances either side of the salt column; slaves chipped away there, heads bowed. Guards stalked amongst them, snarling and cracking their whips. But nobody had witnessed the incident, it seemed. He grappled the prone guard by the arms and nodded to the feet. 'Grab his ankles; we need to get him out of sight.'

They lifted the guard back into the shadows by the column and crouched there. Their dry, rasping

breaths quietened for a moment.

'I didn't mean to get you involved, or for this to happen,' Pavo said, gesturing at the guard. 'I just wanted to tell you, I'm going down. To the very bottom of this place.'

'The seventh chamber?' Sura gawped, then drummed a finger against his chest. 'And they say I'm the demented one?'

'Sura,' he grasped his friend's forearm. 'Legionaries were sent down there, legionaries who knew the whereabouts of the scroll. Some thirteen years ago. And my father may well have been one of them.'

Khaled told me, before they . . . '

Sura gulped. 'Are you sure?' His brow knitted in a frown. 'Pavo, thirteen years down there,' he started, shaking his head.

Pavo gazed at him, unblinking.

Sura fell silent and nodded. 'I understand.' His eyes darted across the ground before him, then he looked up; 'But I'm coming with you. When this one wakes up or is discovered, I'm a dead man anyway, he was assigned to watch me specifically,' he said, rising from the shadows to pull a coil of rope from the topmost basket in the stack. 'And we'll need this. I've

heard the guards talking: there's no ladder in or out of the seventh chamber, just darkness and a sixty foot drop.'

'I don't want you to get hurt for my - ' Pavo started.

Sura grasped his arm, stopping him. 'You're doing this for your father, Pavo. Let me do this for you, brother,' he finished with a trademark grin that belied his fraught, weary features.

Pavo clasped his arm to Sura's. 'Come on.'

He slipped into a basket on the down pulley and crouched below the rim, Sura doing likewise

in the next basket. They remained crouched and undetected as they descended to the sixth chamber. Here, the pulley slowed. The downward rope rolled around a polished timber wheel and the baskets began to rise again. Pavo peeked from the edge of the basket – there were no guards nearby in this, the darkest of the chambers he had been in so far. He leapt out, starting as he came face to face with a gawping slave carrying a full basket of salt. The man was probably only in his early forties, but the mines had rendered him a pitiful sight – more like a man twice

that age. He was rake-thin. Tendrils of dried blood stained his wiry moustache and beard. Pavo's lips flapped to say something as Sura leapt from the other basket to stand by him.

But the slave spoke first; 'When I was young, I used to dream of escaping,' he raised a shaking hand and pointed to the disc of light, high above. 'But I would dream of travelling up . . . you're going the wrong way!' he said, then erupted in a bout of painfully dry cackling, his teeth stained with blood.

'Come on,' Sura said, frowning

at the crazed man and backing away around the lip of the main shaft. 'We don't have long.'

Pavo followed Sura's outstretched finger to see the dull outline of a trio of guards striding through the gloom, as yet unaware of their presence.

'How do we get down?' Pavo looked into the blackness below and then for some fixture to tie the coil of rope to. His gaze snagged on a jagged outcrop of rock that hung over the shaft. 'There, what about that?'

'No, I've seen the rocks here crumble under the weight of a man.

But we can latch onto that thing,' Sura pointed to the pulley wheel in the centre of the main shaft. Attached to it by an iron axel was a cog, and revolving against the edge of this cog was another, its edge oblique to the first. Extending from the base of this second cog was a thick, vertical timber pole, studded with iron pins, revolving and driving the whole pulley system. This sturdy timber pole disappeared down into the darkness.

Pavo shivered as he heard pained groans from below, where the pole surely ended. 'What is that?' he whispered.

'Did you think the pulley ran on the will of the Persian God, or the power of Quadratus' farts?' Sura cocked an eyebrow, then threw a looped end of the rope out and around the axle between the cog and the wheel. The rope looped round on itself. Sura yanked at it, then beckoned Pavo over. 'Ready?'

Pavo took up a piece of the rope while Sura held a section six feet along. 'Ready!'

The pair moved gingerly to the edge of the black abyss, then stepped off. For a moment, they were weightless and falling, just like so many poor wretches cast

down here by Gorzam. Suddenly, the world around Pavo jolted. The bones in his arms creaked and groaned and his shoulders almost leapt from their sockets. He slid a few feet but then steadied himself. The rope swung out across the shaft, past the revolving timber pole, then back again, eventually coming to a halt with Pavo dangling in the darkness by the pole, Sura a few feet above. The pair's breath froze in their lungs when they heard a scuffling of boots above. Pavo peered up: the three guards had come to the ground they had stood on just moments ago. He could see

their wrinkled faces looking around, then squinting into the shaft, right at him, but unable to see anything other than blackness.

‘What’s going on over here?’ One of the guards asked.

Pavo realised they had accosted the crazed slave.

‘Nothing, nothing at all bar the same toil I have enjoyed for the last five years.’

‘We heard you talking to someone,’ another guard growled. A shower of dust, salt and rubble toppled past Sura and Pavo. Pavo looked up to see the crazed man being held out over the precipice by

the throat, his back turned to the shaft, his feet on the lip of the drop and his arms out wide to balance.

A dry cackle belied any fear the man felt. 'I talk to many people when I work alone. The dead walk in these places, you know. Many of them were once my friends. Let me fall, then I can join them and be free of this place.'

The guard growled, then pulled the man back from the edge and shoved him away. 'Work hard, old man – I'll be expecting fifteen baskets from you today. If not, then you will feel the barbs of my whip.' After a moment's silence, the

guards slipped away from the edge of the shaft and their footsteps faded.

In the blackness, Pavo could just make out Sura, clinging to the rope a few feet above him, his eyes wide. The pair expelled a sigh of relief, then Sura motioned to descend. Pavo shinned down the rope until there was only blackness all round. The air was utterly stale and dead here, and it had taken on an odd chill too. He looked up and realised he could no longer see the disc of light above. How far had they descended, he wondered? For a moment, he imagined that the

shaft was bottomless, and the thought of an everlasting fall into darkness played havoc with his imagination. His grip on the rope grew tighter and his descent more careful. Finally, he reached the end of the rope and halted, clinging to the frayed fibres.

‘The rope’s not long enough!’ He hissed up to Sura.

‘What? No, I heard it from the guards themselves. Sixty feet, they said, I’m certain of it.’

Pavo tentatively stretched out a foot into the darkness below, poking out in search of ground. Nothing.

'Then how come there's no ground below my - ' the frayed ends of the rope unwound in his hands. His grip deserted him and he plummeted. The terror of the fall into blackness was real. He flailed and sucked in a breath to cry out. But before the cry could manifest, he crunched onto hard ground, only feet below.

He looked up, his head spinning. A sense of relief swirled in his heart only to be snatched away again: From the surrounding gloom, three dark shapes moved towards him, arms outstretched. He clasped for the sharpened shaving stone,

tearing it from his loincloth. The nearest of the figures reached out for him and he swiped at it. Another grappled him by the shoulders. The sharpened stone fell to the ground. Terror welled in his chest and a cry leapt from his lungs. A filthy hand clasped over his mouth to stifle it.



Zosimus looked up from the ridge of salt crystal, resting an elbow on his pickaxe momentarily.

‘Are you bloody insane?’ Felix hissed beside him. ‘Get your head down, or you’ll lose it!’

‘Aye,’ Quadratus whispered

from nearby, 'don't draw their attention.'

But Zosimus ignored them, his eyes narrowing on the prone form near the main shaft, and the absence of Sura working the baskets on the pulley. Another guard was calling out from the other side of the chamber, his face wrinkled in suspicion as he eyed this scene too. This guard stalked round the edge of the main shaft to the pulley and froze. He stared at the prone form, then crouched, shaking the still figure.

'If that's Sura sleeping on duty . . . ' Felix whispered by Zosimus'

side.

Quadratus now broke cover to look with them. 'That's not Sura,' he jabbed a finger at the prone figure who was now coming around groggily, his stark white skin and hair now visible as he sat up, 'that's a guard – and someone's knocked seven shades out of him.'

'Someone? Aye, Sura,' Felix groaned.

Just then, the alarmed guard stood up and clenched his spear, looking this way and that. His groggy comrade muttered something over and over.

'They went below, get

Gorzam,' he croaked once more. At this, the alarmed guard hurried up the ladders into the chamber above.

'Did I just hear that?' Zosimus gawped. 'They went down the main shaft? They being Sura and . . . '

'Pavo!' Felix and Quadratus finished for him.

Their eyes sparkled as they looked to one another, each holding their pickaxes. Each thinking the same thing.



The hand slid away from Pavo's mouth as his eyes acclimatised to

the darkness. Slaves, he realised, seeing the dirt-encrusted features of the man before him. Almond-shaped eyes almost devoid of colour dominated his gaunt features. His hair was thin and tousled, his beard tangled. He was aged, but knotted muscle seemed to strain under his taut skin and his back was broad and hunched like some beast of burden, and he wore only a ragged loincloth. The man held up a finger to his lips.

‘Be silent. The guards hear everything,’ he whispered in Parsi, pointing a finger up the shaft.

Behind this man and the two

with him, three other hunched figures groaned like oxen as they turned a vast timber wheel. Each man drove at a handle projecting from this wheel, turning it and the iron-studded pole that drove the pulley system. There were seven handles, four of them unoccupied. The three men strained to keep the wheel turning, but it slowed and then ground to a halt, the squeaking of settling baskets echoing above.

Footsteps crunched through the dust in the chamber above. The almond-eyed man's face lengthened and his milky eyes darted. A bark

from a guard echoed down through the shaft.

‘Get the pulley moving, or I will come down there with my comrades. My whip is thirsty!’

The other two who had grappled Pavo hurried back to the empty poles on the wheel. With pained grunts, they drove the pulley back into life, the rumbling and squeaking of baskets picking up once more. With a low growl and then fading, crunching footsteps, the guard above was gone.

As soon as the guard’s footsteps had died completely, Sura thudded down next to Pavo,

startling the almond-eyed man, then raising his fists as if readying for a fight.

‘It’s alright,’ Pavo said hurriedly in Greek, lifting and tucking the sharpened rock back into the waist of his loincloth, ‘he’s one of us.’

‘Who is?’ Sura hissed, blinking. ‘I can hardly see a bloody thing!’

At this, the almond-eyed man moved forward, frowning. He held out his hands to Sura’s face, and traced his fingertips across his features.

Sura backed away until he bumped into some rocky column.

'Take your hands off . . . ' he started.

'You are no Persian,' the man cut him off.

The breath caught in Pavo and Sura's throats. The man had spoken in Greek. Not the broken, accented Greek of the Persians they had met in this land. Greek of the empire.

Pavo's skin tingled, seeing the aquiline nose and pale skin under the filth coating the man's face. 'And neither are you.'

'I'm not quite sure just what I am anymore, after so long in the darkness,' the man said, then turned to Pavo, tracing his fingers

across his jaw and then his brow. As he ran a finger over Pavo's beaky nose, his brow creased in a frown. 'Interesting . . . '

Pavo peered at each of the men working the wheel. There were six there including this man, it seemed. 'You are a legionary? These are your comrades?'

'Aye, brothers till the bitter end,' he gestured dryly towards the wheel.

'Then you are of Legio II Parthica.'

For but a heartbeat, the man's face lit up. 'I am Quintus Clovius Arius of the second cohort, second

century.' Then the light left him and his shoulders slumped. 'These men you see before you are all that remains of my proud legion. It is a long time since I last set eyes upon them,' he said sadly, passing a hand across his milky, sightless eyes.

Pavo's heart hammered on his ribs and he looked at the men by the wheel again and again. As each man strained past, turning the wheel, he saw the same sightless eyes, the callused feet scraping in the dust. Their faces were illuminated in the gloom just enough for Pavo to see. To see that

not one of them was Father.

Sura took over, stepping forward to place a hand on Pavo's shoulder. 'There are no others down here?' he asked Arius.

'None bar the few in this foul space,' Arius replied flatly, extending his arms to the blackness around the wheel.

Pavo heard the words like an icy blade to the heart.

'And definitely no guards?' Sura continued.

Arius smiled a weary smile. 'The guards refuse to work in this place. They come to visit us, yes, usually to mete out punishment

should the pulley run slowly or stop for too long. The only other visitors we get are . . . ' he extended a hand to the gloom encircling the wheel.

Pavo gazed into this blackness. At last, he made out the nest of jagged stony spikes that ringed the wheel and the foot of the mine's main shaft. Like huge teeth, jutting from the ground, twice the height of a man.

'Stalagmites,' Sura said by his side, reaching out to one.

Pavo stumbled numbly towards the spikes. At that moment, he caught scent of the

raw, metallic stench coming from them. He leapt back, the breath catching in his throat. 'What in Hades?' The jagged rocky spikes were littered with white shards, like broken pottery. But this was no pottery. Skulls grinned, shattered and cracked. Skeletons lay impaled through the ribs where they had landed. Smashed bones lay in piles like kindling. Pavo twisted to see this horror all around them. Some bodies were fresher – glistening red or dark-brown, and rats worked on tearing the last flesh from the bones. So this was the resting place of every soul thrown down the

shaft. Pavo twisted away from the scene, at once thinking of poor Khaled. His gaze fell upon a thick pile of animal remains near the wheel – some chicken bones and many rat bones.

‘At least Gorzam feeds us well,’ Arius spoke bitterly, gesturing towards the animal remains. Beside it was a bucket of water, half full, that looked like it had been lowered down from the chamber above. ‘And he keeps us well-watered too – as a farmer would do for his oxen. For if the pulley does not continue to turn and lift salt to the surface then he will feel his master’s wrath.’

Pavo glanced at Arius and the five men nearby in the gloom at the wheel. 'Yet there are so few of you?'

Arius nodded; 'When we were first sent down here, there were more of us. Those who perished soon after, we buried as best we could in the jagged rocks. When bodies were thrown down from above, we would try to bury them too, to honour them. But when we lost our sight, we lost the ability to offer the dead such dignity, to tell one shattered body from another.'

'You buried your comrades in there?' Pavo turned back to the nest

of stalagmites and the piles of skeletal remains. A chill finger traced his spine as he remembered his own vow. Even if only to reclaim your bones, Father, I will find you. 'Then the man I sought lies in there too.'

'You came here looking for someone?' Arius frowned, then his face creased in a sardonic half-grin. 'I did wonder why any man would choose to come down here.'

Pavo felt his legs move under him, his eyes hanging on the jumble of remains in the stony spikes, one hand reaching out. 'I came here for Mettius Vitellius

Falco.'

'Falco?' the almond-eyed man replied, familiarity lacing his words.

'Aye, he was my father,' Pavo said, crouching to look into the pile of bones.

'Then you are looking in the wrong place,' Arius said flatly.

'No,' Pavo shook his head, 'he was sent down here. I know this.'

'Pavo,' Sura gasped.

'I'm sorry, Sura. I was wrong. All this has been for nothing. You shouldn't have come down here with me . . . '

'Pavo!' Sura hissed again, then clamped a hand on Pavo's shoulder,

twisting him round.

Pavo stood tall, frowning at his friend, then followed Sura's outstretched arm and pointing finger. There, from the shadows at the far side of the wheel, a seventh figure shuffled forward.

A shiver of realisation raced up Pavo's spine; seven handles on the wheel . . . seven men!

This one wore a torn rag like a Roman robe. He carried with him a flat piece of slate containing a meagre pile of bloodied rat meat scraps. He was grey-haired. The long, thick tumbling locks were caked in salt dust, his shoulders

were crooked and his back hunched like the others. When the man looked up, Pavo's stomach fell away. He gawped at the aged, tired face, the blood-matted sockets where his eyes had once been. The wiry beard under a hawk-beak nose that had been broken many times. The stigma on his knotted, scarred bicep.

Legio II Parthica.

Pavo's heart crashed like a war drum. A warm wash of tears spilled across his cheeks, splitting the white coating of salt dust. 'Father?'

'I told you,' Arius spoke next to

him, resting a hand on his shoulder to pat him warmly, 'you will not find Falco amongst in the bones. He is a hardy whoreson who refuses to die, like the rest of us!'

Pavo heard Arius' words like a distant echo. Father approached him, holding out one shaking and knotted hand, a broad and frayed leather bracelet hanging loose around his sinewy wrist. He said nothing, then clasped his hands over Pavo's.

'Is this another of the dreams, taunting me?' Falco spoke in that gravelly tone Pavo had not heard since childhood.

Pavo shook his head, but was unable to reply, his lips trembling. He clasped the phalera and held it to Father's hands.

Falco gripped the phalera, an intense frown knitting his brow as he traced a fingertip across the engraving. At last he reached up to touch the hot tears on Pavo's cheeks. 'Son?'

'Father, I . . . ' his words dissolved and he and Falco embraced. It was long and lasting, both men sobbing. Myriad memories exploded through Pavo's mind. The past, the warmth of the sun on his skin as he and Father

had paddled in the waters of the Propontus, the joy of Father returning from campaign, the games he would play in the streets with his friends under Father's doting gaze. Then he recalled the last time he had embraced Father like this in the year before Bezabde; he had barely been chest-high to the broad warrior in freshly oiled armour with the scent of wood smoke and dust in his tousled chestnut locks. Now, he towered nearly a foot over Father. The years in this dark Hades had reaped their toll.

'You are the warrior now,'

Falco sobbed, as if reading his thoughts.

'So many years, Father. So many years I thought you were dead,' Pavo shook his head as they stood back. A flurry of questions danced into his mind. 'Your eyes,' Pavo raised a hand, his fingers hovering just before the bloody sockets. Memories of the nightmare barged into his thoughts. 'Gorzam did this to you?'

Falco smiled dryly at this. 'Gorzam? No. He is responsible for many of the scars that lace my back, and for putting my men and I down into this chamber. But if that

witless creature were to heat an iron to burn out my eyes, he'd doubtless pick the iron up by the hot end and injure himself. No, this happened to me before I was brought to the mines. After the fall of Bezabde, my men and I were taken to Bishapur. We were paraded in chains, marched before the spahbad in his palace, then taken to the Fire Temple. I was made an example of. The Persian Archimagus, he lifted the glowing iron from the Sacred Fire,' his head dropped in defeat, 'his was the last face I ever saw.'

Pavo shook with rage.

‘Ramak?’

Falco grappled him by the shoulders. ‘Pavo, do not be angry . . . ’ he said then broke down in a coughing fit. The coughs were dry and rasping, thick dashes of blood spitting forth with each one. The lung disease had its claws deep in his chest, it seemed.

Pavo saw the blood but could not make out its colour in the gloom. Red or black? He bowed his head and pressed his lips to the phalera, trying in vain to stifle his fury. Then another question rose to the fore. ‘This,’ he held up the phalera, ‘you sent it to me?’

Falco reached out, feeling the bronze disc and clamping it in his hands again. 'I did, Pavo.'

'The crone, how did she carry it from here to Constantinople?' Pavo remembered the withered old woman who had hobbled up to him and pressed the piece into his palm on the day he was sold into slavery.

'The crone? Is that what she was? I was sightless when she came to me. In fact, I wondered if she was real at all and not just a voice in my head.'

Pavo's eyes darted this way and that, trying to make sense of it all.

Falco pushed the phalera back into Pavo's hands. 'It does not matter how the piece came to you. What matters is that you have had it these past years. I prayed it would give you strength, to remember me and all that I taught you. I have never felt guilt such as that which overcame me when I was first sent down here. I realised just how alone you would be, so far away.'

Pavo nodded, tucking the phalera into the waist of his loincloth, tears dripping from his chin. 'Father, the phalera, the memories of you. They have made

me everything I am today. I was never alone.'

'That warms my heart like sunlight itself,' Falco sighed, clasping both hands to Pavo's shoulders. Then his face wrinkled in concern. 'But I never wished to draw you here, to this gods-forsaken realm. Indeed, my few moments of rest and sleep in this place have been plagued with nightmares of you setting out to find me. Every time, I saw you, reaching out to me . . . '

'Across the dunes,' Pavo finished for him.

Father gasped. 'Before the

sandstorm would pick up.'

'And bury us both, deep below Persian sands,' Pavo finished again.

A shiver crawled over Pavo as he and Father saw the reality of the nightmare. Pavo glanced up the main shaft. Nothing, not a glimmer of light. The nightmare had won.

'How did you end up down in this chamber, Father? What did you do to poison the guards against you so?'

Falco let out a weak sigh. 'We were betrayed.'

Pavo's brow wrinkled. 'Betrayed? By whom?'

'It matters little now. You

should not have come here, Pavo,' Falco whispered.

From above, as if confirming Falco's warning, a chorus of shouts broke out. Then came a scuffling of feet, rushing towards the shaft.

Pavo shot a glance to Sura. Sura stared back.

'They've found the guard's body,' they said in unison.

A grinding of cane on rock sounded, growing closer and closer until the bottom of a ladder thudded down nearby. Pavo shepherded Father back from the ladder, Sura and the other slaves stepping away with him.

‘By the gods,’ Arius’ jaw fell agape. ‘They’re coming for us! They will not be satiated with the flexing of their whips.’

‘Then it is time,’ Falco growled as the group backed up against the ring of stalagmites, ‘we must go to the passageway.’ He jabbed a finger downwards as he said this.

‘The passageway?’ Arius’ face visibly paled. ‘No, death awaits us there, surely?’

‘What is life down here, but a slow, lingering death? You are one of the bravest I have ever fought alongside, Arius, yet you have forgotten your valour in this place.

Now come!' Falco hissed, backing away from the cane ladder, pulling Pavo with him. The ladder before them bent and creaked as a troop of yet unseen figures descended in haste.

Pavo stumbled backwards, following Falco and the others to the edge of the stalagmite ring. Here a narrow pathway wound through the jagged debris.

'Tread carefully,' Falco said, stooping to lift a knotted cane resting against the first of the stalagmites, then using it to tap his way through the tight corridor between the forest of stone.

The serrated ground felt like blunted blades in the soles of Pavo's feet. Soon the jagged ground was replaced by the dry crunching of bones and wet slipping of putrid gristle underfoot as they passed over the pit of corpses amidst the stalagmite ring. The stench of death was rife here. The path was erratic, and every few footsteps saw someone slide or stumble, but after a few hundred feet, the stalagmites became shorter, blunter and free of the corpses of dead slaves. After that, the ground levelled out and a small cave lay ahead. Pavo heard the murmur of

those pursuing them and made to hurry ahead, but Falco pulled him back from his next footstep.

‘Slowly, Son,’ he hissed. He stretched out to tap his cane on the white, circular bed of salt powder where Pavo’s foot hovered, then stooped to pick up a small rock.

Pavo frowned as Falco lobbed the rock onto the salt bed. The rock sat still for a moment, then the salt there puckered under its weight and a heartbeat later it was sucked under – gone, as if never there. Pavo nodded, then turned to Sura. ‘Slowly. Follow my father’s step.’

As they picked their way

around the salt beds dotted over the floor. He peered into the darkness ahead and saw that the cave they were in tapered away and descended slightly as they continued along the path, the walls closing in swiftly and the ceiling growing ever-lower until it was only a little more than head height.

‘Where are we going?’ Sura hissed.

‘I fear you would not follow me if I were to tell you,’ Falco replied.

Just then, angry tones echoed behind them, from within the ring of spikes, by the wheel. ‘Find them!’

Gorzam roared.

Falco and Arius upped the pace, leading their comrades, with Pavo and Sura bringing up the rear. They hurried on until the cave became a mere passageway. The salt crystals studding the walls afforded the faintest hint of light and helped steer them round the deadly salt pits on the floor of the narrowing passageway. And there was something else – pools of black, glistening liquid. Then Pavo saw something sparkling up ahead. A solid wall of salt crystal blocking the corridor. A dead end.

‘Father?’ he gasped. Behind

them, the footsteps of Gorzam's party echoed ever closer.

Falco seemingly ignored him and tapped forward with his cane until he reached the dead end. The other slaves went with him, reaching out to feel the salt face there. They came to one large crystal – about the size of a man – resting against the dead end and took to prodding and poking at it.

Sura gawped at this, then at Pavo, then back down the passageway to the jumble of dark shapes approaching. One to the rear carried a torch, and the light from it was blinding, illuminating

the corridor in a heartbeat.

Gorzam led the charge, leaping over and weaving round the salt beds, his pitted features twisted in rage, his spear clasped as though he was trying to strangle it. Twelve guards came with him, each wearing the same look of blood lust. Running along with them like a dog was Bashu. The man was pointing, repeating over and over;

‘The Roman, I saw him come down here. I told you!’ he spat, his cold gaze fixed on Pavo. ‘Now give me my place in the first chamber!’

Gorzam slowed and the twelve guards fanned out across the

corridor as they approached, forming a wall of spears. Pavo and Sura took a step back then halted, feeling the edge of a salt pit at their heels. Pavo pulled the sharpened rock from the waist of his loincloth, holding it up in defiance. Sura stooped to pick up a jagged boulder and hefted it, ready to throw.

Gorzam swiped an arm at the corridor-end. 'Kill them. Kill them all!'

The twelve rushed forward. Sura and Pavo pushed up shoulder-to-shoulder. The spear tips rushed in towards them like the fangs of a predator. Two of the guards loosed

their spears and the shafts whipped past Pavo and Sura, piercing the frail bodies of two of Falco's comrades, spattering the dead end of the corridor in blood. The other guards raced for Pavo and Sura. Pavo and Sura let loose a roar that had graced many a battlefield. Then a punch of iron piercing flesh echoed through the passageway.

Pavo felt the hot blood spatter on his face. He blinked, glancing at Gorzam and the guards, halted only paces away. The two guards at either end swayed and crumpled to the ground, pickaxes embedded in their backs. The rest had stopped in

confusion, glancing to Pavo and Sura, their stricken comrades and then over their shoulders.

‘That’s what happens when you take a legionary’s spatha away,’ a familiar voice cried.

Pavo squinted to see the shapes rushing for Gorzam’s rear. Felix, Zosimus, Quadratus, then Habitus, Rufus, Noster and two other slaves, all bearing pickaxes. Each man bore the wild glare of a wounded war hound.

‘At them!’ Felix cried, sweeping his hand forward as if commanding a cohort. They raised their pickaxes and rushed for the

guard line.

Gorzam barked at his guards, nine of them turning to meet the oncoming charge. The two parties crashed together, pickaxes and fists swinging, spears jabbing and tearing, blood splattering across the corridor walls and polyglot cries filling the passageway.

Meanwhile, Gorzam and one other guard stalked forward to deal with Pavo and Sura, Bashu sticking close to them. Gorzam thundered forward to plunge his spear at Pavo's midriff. Pavo jinked clear of the first jab, the blade only scoring the flesh on his abdomen.

‘Ah, this will take some skill,’ Gorzam rasped. ‘I only want to wound you, you see. I want you to suffer, Roman – as I promised you when I killed that dog, Khaled. I’ll strip every inch of your skin then bury you up to your neck in salt to cure the wounds. Then you will truly know the meaning of suffering.’

Pavo dipped his brow and fixed his gaze on the guard leader, then lunged forward. The big guard stumbled back in shock. But Pavo’s wild swipe with the sharpened rock was easily parried by a swing of Gorzam’s spear. The shaft thwacked

into Pavo's wrist with a crack of bone. The makeshift blade flew from his grip into the salt pit behind him, disappearing in moments. Pavo staggered back, clutching his wrist. Then Gorzam ducked and swept his spear shaft round to smash it against Pavo's ankles. The pain was blinding and he toppled to the ground. Gorzam lined up his spear over Pavo's heart. 'Or perhaps I should just finish you now, to have the pleasure of seeing the light dim in your eyes . . . just as I did when I threw that dog Khaled down the shaft. He was still alive, you know, just before I dropped him.'

Pavo's heart thundered against his ribs and his breath came and went in short, snatched gasps through gritted teeth.

'No,' Gorzam mused, tracing the spear tip to Pavo's groin. 'A deep wound to the thigh and you'll bleed until you're weak as a lamb.' His face lit up in anticipation as he thrust the spear down. Then he frowned as the weapon clunked upon something.

Pavo frowned too. He had felt the tearing agony of sword and spear wounds before. But there was nothing. Just a dull pain.

Gorzam lifted his spear,

glowering at the tip, then at Pavo. The phalera medallion slid from Pavo's loincloth, battered and bent where it had taken the force of the blow. Pavo snatched up and gawped at the piece, then gasped as Gorzam roared and hefted the spear to strike down for a killer blow. Pavo rolled to one side, the spear tip punching down, scoring his back. He tried to stand, but felt the ground slide away under him. Panic gripped his heart; he had rolled onto a salt pit. He was sinking. The salt sucked him down. He was waist deep, then it was up to his chest. He looked up and saw

Gorzam watching on gleefully, his laughter filling the passageway.

Pavo knew he had but a heartbeat. His eyes latched onto the butt of Gorzam's spear resting by the edge of the pit. He stretched every sinew and reached out to grasp the shaft, hauling at it with all his might. Gorzam growled, shaking the spear, but Pavo clung on and prised himself clear of the salt pit. As he felt his legs pull clear, he then drew himself up and thrust his knee up and into Gorzam's guts. The big guard staggered, winded. Pavo wasted no time, shouldering him in the chest, sending him

flailing, then toppling into one of the glistening black pools. Gorzam thrashed to get to the edge of the pool, his skin slick with the viscous liquid. Pavo backed away, glancing around for a weapon.

Falco, hearing the splashing, called back from the end of the corridor where he and his comrades chipped and battered at the salt crystal. 'Put light to it – the black oil!'

Pavo frowned, then saw Gorzam's dropped torch only feet away. He stooped and lifted it, then tossed it into the black pool.

Gorzam's eyes bulged in panic.

He cried out in terror, then the torch set light to the oil with a ferocious roar and an angry inferno. At once, the corridor shone like a beacon, orange fury leaping from the pool.

Pavo staggered back, staring at the thrashing, screaming figure in the midst of the flames. He spat on the ground. 'Your last few moments are for my father, for Khaled and for all the others who have suffered under your yoke.' Gorzam's roars died away and his form sunk under the blazing surface.

Pavo spun to find Sura

wrestling with the other guard to gain control of the spear. He stooped to pick up Gorzam's spear then lunged forward, punching the tip into the guard's gut, driving the gurgling foe away from Sura and then on until the man crunched against the corridor wall.

'A weapon, for pity's sake!' Sura yelled.

Pavo threw him the second guard's spear, then the pair rushed to the fray between Felix, the XI Claudia men and the remaining guards. Six guards remained, fighting like jackals with Felix, Zosimus, Quadratus, Noster and

Habitus. Rufus and the two slaves who had come with them lay in bloody heaps on the corridor floor.

Pavo rushed to aid Noster, who was being beaten back by the furious spear jabs of one guard. But before he could reach the pair, the guard plunged his spear through Noster's throat. The young legionary gurgled and gawped at his killer, then he sunk to his knees and the life was gone from him. Pavo charged for the guard but the man spun to block. Their spear shafts clashed and the pair growled, noses inches apart. The guard kicked out at Pavo's knee. Pavo

stumbled back, then ducked to one side to avoid the follow up jab but the guard managed to kick out again, snapping Pavo's spear. At a disadvantage, Pavo backed away, then stumbled on a rock and fell. As he righted himself, he scooped up a handful of salt and hurled it at the man's face. The guard staggered back, waving his spear this way and that, blinded. Pavo grappled the splintered half of his own spear and rushed for the man, lancing him through the ribs, the tip bursting from the man's other side. The cracking of bone was accompanied by a thick splash of blood and

organs spilling from the wound.

Before the man had toppled to the ground, Pavo spun to find his next opponent. But it was over. The other guards lay still and silent. Felix was bleeding from a wound to the abdomen, but Quadratus and Zosimus were standing like a pair of twin oaks as usual – sweating, cut and bruised, but alive. Habitus had made it too, doubled over and retching.

Bashu was the only one of Gorzam's party remaining. Now he was trapped between the panting legionaries and the end of the corridor, scrabbling to and fro like a

trapped rat, his face contorted in fear. Quadratus strode over to him, lifting a spear to his neck.

'I am one of you, a slave!' Bashu nodded hurriedly, a sickly grin belying the fear in his eyes, his hands dropping by his sides.

Pavo beheld his cowering form. For just a moment, pity snaked into his heart. Then he saw the glinting dagger blade the man held just behind his back.

'No, you are a traitor,' Pavo replied stonily, then booted Bashu in the chest, toppling him into the salt pit. Bashu wailed. In moments, the salt had spilled over his arms

and legs. He thrashed, and this only served to pull him down all the faster. In a heartbeat, he was up to his neck. His silver eyes bulged in panic. The man's roar of terror was abruptly cut short as the salt spilled into his mouth and then swamped his head. His outstretched, trembling hand was the last part of him to disappear. The salt pit had fed and was still again.

Silence filled the passageway as all eyes looked over the scene.

'You two,' Felix said weakly at last, forking two fingers at Pavo and Sura, clutching his wound with the other hand, 'better bloody well have

a plan.'

Pavo looked back blankly.

'He doesn't have a bloody plan,' Quadratus snorted in disbelief.

'I don't. But my father does,' he motioned to Falco. He and the other slaves from the wheel were still chipping and battering at the salt face blocking the end of the corridor.

'Your father?' Zosimus uttered in confusion.

But Pavo ignored this and strode over to Falco. The aged men were struggling to break through the crystal. 'Father, what is this?' he

asked. Then he heard it. Just as he had heard it with Khaled. The sound of running water. But this was different, not just a faint hiss, this sounded like a rumbling torrent. Furious, endless, desperate to be unleashed.

Falco clasped his forearm. 'This mine is man-made. But around it weaves a honeycomb of natural caverns and springs. Behind this crystal, an underground river rages. We have speculated for years as to whether it leads even deeper underground, to the darkest dominions? Or, perhaps,' he pointed upwards, 'to freedom?'

Pavo's eyes darted. 'Has anyone ever seen this river?'

Falco shrugged, gesturing to his empty eye sockets and to his blind companions. 'Well that would be hard, down here. But no, we have talked about breaking down this wall for years. Every time we have hesitated. It could simply drown us and flood the mines.' He cocked his head to one side wryly. 'Though that option has its own merits.'

Just then, another babble of voices and footsteps sounded from the other end of the seventh chamber, at the main shaft and the

stalagmite ring. Habitus staggered up to the open end of the corridor, then came rushing back. 'More guards, thirty at least!'

'We have no choice – we must break through that crystal,' Arius said, his face drawn with fear.

Pavo's eyes widened and he grasped Falco by the shoulders. 'Stand back, have your men stand back too.'

Falco frowned, then ushered his aged comrades back from the boulder.

Pavo called on Zosimus. 'Sir!'

Zosimus frowned, then batted Quadratus on the arm. The pair

came over and eyed the salt face. Their eyebrows rose in unison as they heard the rushing water.

'A swim or a fight?' Zosimus mused, looking from the rock to the far end of the corridor and the approaching footsteps.

'Ach, I've had a fight already,' Quadratus shrugged, smoothing his salt-encrusted moustache, 'And I need a good wash.'

The pair of them hefted their pick axes, throwing others to Felix, Habitus, Pavo and Sura. They went at the salt face like men possessed. Shards of crystal flew in all directions, powder blinding them,

coating their skin. The rushing of water grew louder and louder, as did the thundering footsteps of the guards. Pavo glanced back to see the thirty approaching shapes at the open end of the tapering corridor, their spears glinting in the light of the torches they carried. Then a splash of something icy cold around his ankles jolted him back to the salt face. He looked down to see foaming water washing from a growing fissure, spilling out across the corridor floor. The fissure in the salt face was narrow – about the width of a blade. He hefted his pickaxe to strike again, when Falco

called from the corner of the corridor end where he and his comrades huddled.

‘No, no more! Get back – over here!’

Pavo frowned, then heard a dull, ominous crack run through the salt face. He, Sura and the others shared a tacit agreement, dropping their pickaxes and rushing over to the corner with Falco and his men.

‘Be ready,’ Falco cried. ‘As soon as the water comes, get your backs against the wall and hold on tight!’ The guards were now only a handful of paces away, and they snarled and cursed in Parsi, some

hurling their spears forward, the lances clattering against the corridor end, inches from Pavo.

Then, with a ferocious crack like a clap of thunder, the centre of the corridor-end salt face collapsed. The guards stumbled to a halt, their eyes bulging. At that moment, the arid seventh chamber of the Dalaki salt mines was quenched with a tumultuous roar. The underground river spat forth, blowing chunks of salt and rock from the opening, widening it and intensifying the deluge. Pavo and those nestled in the corner of the corridor end were spared the ferocious thrust of the

river, but the cries of the guards were drowned out, their bodies punched back through the corridor by the force of the flood. Sharp cracking rang out as the torrents dashed their bodies against the stalagmites at the other end of the chamber, the water washing the stony spikes clean of the layers of gore that had accumulated there over the years.

Pavo blinked through the spray as the river claimed the corridor. The intense flooding had slowed, but now the water level rose swiftly and steadily. It splashed around his chest, so they

shuffled to stand higher upon rocks – his head scraping on the passageway ceiling. In moments it was chest high again, then it lapped around their necks. 'Father . . . what now?' he cried as the water inched up with every heartbeat until it touched his chin.

'Now take a deep breath, be ready to swim just as I taught you, and pray that the gods wish us to be free,' Father replied.

Pavo looked to the gaping hole the river had blown in the end of the corridor. Darkness lay beyond. 'But what if - ' the water spilled into his mouth and then over

his eyes. A heartbeat later, the air was utterly gone and the corridor completely flooded. At once, he could hear only the pounding of blood in his ears and the muffled underwater cries of his fellow legionaries as they thrashed to right themselves. He felt Falco's arms clasp around his waist. Father needed him. His comrades needed him. He looked through the murky darkness to the hole in the end of the corridor, then waved towards it. In the gloom, Quadratus saw him and beckoned the others.

He swam with all his strength towards the opening, fighting the

steady current. All the while one question rang in his thoughts. What in Hades lies on the other side?

He felt the roof of the opening scrape against his heel as he passed through it. On the other side was nothing but near-black water. Bubbles rushed past his ears in thundering torrents. The water stung at his eyes, and he saw only swirling murky shapes and the thrashing limbs of his comrades. He kicked in the direction he prayed was up, but saw no sign of a surface or light of any kind. He clasped his hands to Father's. Suddenly, the current grappled

them like an invisible titan, pulling and twisting their bodies round and round. After that, there was only pure darkness. The next thing he knew, they were falling. They were plummeting downwards, deeper and deeper underground – of that there could be no doubt. They had gambled and lost. The snatched half-breath in his lungs had lost its freshness and now his chest stung, demanding more air. Panic insisted that he open his mouth to yell out, to breathe again, but then another current smashed into him from the side, parting him from Father and propelling him onwards at great

haste. He tumbled round and round until he lost all sense of direction. Up, down, all around, blackness. Nausea, burning lungs. Terror.

Chapter 16



Zubin and his goats climbed the last of the foothills before the Zagros Mountains. The hubbub around Bishapur fell away behind him and was replaced by the babbling torrents of the river gorge. He was glad to be clear of the goings on near the city. The place had become a hive of activity and expectation as the Festival Day loomed ever closer – just a week

away. At market, all the talk was of the fine new arena and the blood games it was to hold, yet Zubin had no urge to see men spill blood for entertainment, and he was sure Ahura Mazda thought likewise.

He reached the peak of the hill and stopped, wheezing as he looked down into the gorge. For this short stretch, the river widened and the foaming waters calmed to a gentle babble. The sun-bathed banks were lined with shingle and pebbles, speckled with wild red poppies and shaded in parts by twisting tamarisk trees. Some said the waters on this stretch of the

river had healing powers, the mountain meltwater augmented by a network of mineral-rich springs. As always, it would make a pleasant place to rest and eat while his goat herd drank and grazed on the tufts of long grass dividing the shingle and the gorge-side. But it was not for the agreeable surroundings that he chose to come here almost every day. He gazed up to the towering mountain peaks. His eyes rested on the tumbled, circular structure atop the nearest. Tears stung his eyelids and his bottom lip trembled.

Just then, three leaping,

bleating goat kids swept past him from behind, their ears rising and falling in play. Zubin yelped in fright, then turned to the mother goat, who ambled up the hillside to join him, her ears hanging flat to her face, her grey beard and body showing the signs of age. 'I remember when I used to feel like them,' he muttered absently, watching as the kids scrambled down the steep gorge-side. They tumbled through the shingle over to the long grass, play-biting and butting at one another. 'Now I feel I have more in common with you,' he said, stroking the mother goat's

neck. Chuckling, he made to descend the scree slope in the wake of the kids, but he froze. There, in the centre of the calm river surface, something stirred. Bubbles frothed and the water grew choppy. Suddenly, like a leaping salmon, a hulking figure burst from the water, gasping for air, arms flailing. Moments later, another figure shot up, then another and another.

‘Mithras!’ one of the figures yelled in delight. A haggard brute of a man with a blonde moustache and beard. Beside this one, another of the same stature and a squashed

nose let loose an ecstatic volley of obscenities, arms outstretched to the sky, as if he had not seen the sun in years. They clawed and scrambled their way to the shingle.

Zubin gulped, then shared a nervous glance with the mother goat.



Pavo thrashed and splashed his way to the river's edge on all-fours. There, he retched and vomited, then retched and coughed again and again until the last of the water was gone from his belly and lungs. He clutched at the sun-warmed

shingle in disbelief, breathing the sweet, clean air in wonderment, then fell on his back and squinted at his surroundings. At first, the sunlight was blinding after so long in the darkness of the mines, but gradually, shading his eyes with his hands, he saw that they were in some river valley, vast mountains to the east and tapering foothills to the west.

‘Pavo!’ Sura croaked from nearby in between spluttering fits. ‘We’re free!’

Laughter echoed nearby – instantly recognisable as that of Zosimus. ‘We bloody did it!’

Pavo sat up and hugged his knees to his chest with one arm, running the other hand through his tangled hair and wiry beard. He saw the handful of blurry figures lying or sitting nearby, each retching and coughing: Zosimus, Quadratus, Felix, Sura, Habitus. No Noster, none of the men from the wheel . . . no Father. For a moment, the events of the past few hours seemed dreamlike, and he wondered if it had all really happened.

‘Father?’ he scrambled back into the shallows, eyes darting to every ripple, every sound.

He waded in until the water lapped at his chest, then he felt Zosimus' hand on his shoulder, hauling him back. 'Don't be a bloody fool – the currents are too strong,' he said, a finality in his words.

'No!' he cried, shrugging the big Thracian off. Just then, the waters before them bubbled. A gnarled hand shot clear of the surface, clutching for the air before the ferocious undertow threatened to snatch it back under. 'Father!' Pavo gasped, seeing the frayed leather strap on the wrist. He leapt forward, clasping the hand firmly.

Zosimus uttered some half-curse then grabbed and held Pavo's waist. The two pulled, groaning. At last, they hauled Falco free of the current. Falco gasped for air and then at once slumped. Pavo and Zosimus caught him, then carried him, wading back to the shallows and splashing onto the shingle. Falco fell like a dead weight, lying on his back, his breathing laboured, his skin near-blue.

'Father?' Pavo fell to his knees. Falco did not respond. He pressed his palms upon Falco's chest, but no water came up.

'Easy,' Felix croaked, 'His

enemy is not water in the lungs, it is the cold from those icy depths.'

'Then we need fire, heat, dry robes!' Pavo looked this way and that in search of something they could use. Instead, he froze as his gaze snagged on something else: a lone man, a Persian with a neatly groomed beard dressed in a loose-fitting linen robe and trousers crouching in the long grass. He was desperately trying to pull a stubborn goat kid back into the grass. Then the goat kid bleated and the eyes of the eight were upon him.

The Persian stood up, coddled

the goat kid like a child and dabbed his tongue out to dampen his lips. Felix urged the others to their feet to surround the man.

‘A Persian soldier?’ Quadratus said, his eyes narrowing.

The Persian shook his head. ‘A soldier? The only enemies I fight are of the four-legged variety!’ He frowned as the goat kid took its cue to bite at his beard. He chided the beast, then set it down to join the others in play.

‘My name is Felix. We are Roman,’ Felix said cagily, stepping forward, ‘but we have no wish for trouble.’

‘I am Zubin. I am a farmer. I honour Ahura Mazda and pray he will strengthen my crops and allow my last years to be peaceful.’

‘But your armies will be looking for us,’ Zosimus snapped, his eyes still narrowed in distrust.

As Zosimus’ words echoed through the gorge, Zubin cocked an eyebrow. ‘Shout any louder and they will find you. But you are right, the militia will be looking for you. As they would any men who escaped the mines.’

Quadratus and Felix braced at this.

Zubin held up a hand of

supplication quickly. 'I recognise those whip wounds. My son was cast into the depths of Dalaki. The only morsel of comfort they offered me was to bring me his scar-laced corpse after he died.' He extended a finger to the tall mountains upriver, pointing to a squat circular ruin on the closest. 'I laid him to rest upon the Tower of Silence, there, atop the nearest peak. That is why I come here – to graze my goats and to remember him. I have no sympathy with those who consign men to the mines. I love Ahura Mazda, and I do not believe he would ever condone such

treatment of men.' He removed the hemp sack on his shoulder and laid out the contents. Fresh bread and dates. 'Come, eat with me.'

The eight Romans encircling the man looked to one another.

'What if we're not hungry?' Quadratus said, a hint of suspicion still glowing in his eyes. A grumble from his guts immediately followed.

'Then you should tell your belly that,' Zubin fired back, a broad grin splitting his features. 'Now please, eat,' he said, tearing off a piece of bread for himself then offering the rest to Pavo.

Pavo took the bread but

passed it straight on to Sura. 'Your offer of food is generous,' he said to Zubin, then he gestured to Falco, 'but we need fire and blankets. My Father, he is - '

'Indeed,' Zubin frowned, stepping closer to examine the prone Falco. 'He has been in the river too long.' He looked Pavo in the eye, then glanced to each of the others, drawing a long breath in through his nostrils. He shot a wistful glance up to the Tower of Silence, then turned back to them and nodded. 'Come with me.'



They carried Falco and followed Zubin from the gorge. They trekked through the deserted foothills until they came to a small farmhouse on the brow of a hillock dappled with red poppies. Inside, the single room was cool and sparsely furnished, with just a small bed in one corner, a wooden trunk by the door, a table and chairs in the centre of the floor and a hearth at the far side. Zubin wordlessly helped lay Falco on the bed, then brought thick blankets from the trunk and wrapped them around the shivering Roman. While Pavo and the others sat on the floor near the bed, Zubin then set about

kindling a fire in the hearth then heating a pan of water over it. He decanted the hot water into cups and added a generous dose of honey to each before giving one to each of them, and two to Pavo. Pavo understood and nodded his thanks. He took just a swift gulp of his own cup – the thick, sweet drink at once warming him and soothing his battered body – then held the other to Father's lips, Sura gently raising Falco's head to the cup. Most of the drink spilled across Falco's chin, but his lips trembled and opened slightly. He drank a little then sighed weakly.

'He will need to rest, eat and drink in turn. When the cold has penetrated into your heart, it is like a demon, refusing to be driven out,' Zubin said gravely.

'But he will recover, won't he?' Pavo said, turning to the Persian. He caught sight of Zubin's grave look. It was enough to answer the question. Then Falco's body shuddered in a fit of weak coughing. Pavo saw the flecks of blood on his lips. Black blood. No, Pavo mouthed. The fever and the lung disease now battled to take Father from him. His head swam and he stifled the urge to cry out in

anger. He felt Sura clasp a hand to his shoulder in reassurance.

‘You can rest here for a short while,’ Zubin said gently. ‘But I fear the men from the mines and the garrison of nearby Bishapur will be out looking for you soon.’ He flicked the hemp rug on the floor back with his foot to reveal a trapdoor. ‘I expect you are tired of dwelling underground, but my cellar would be a safer place for you to recover.’

Pavo clasped Falco’s cold hands tightly, then looked around his comrades. Felix, Zosimus and Quadratus seemed unsure of Zubin’s offer, but what other option

was there? They were weak, exhausted and wounded. Felix nodded, and they stood to help lift the trapdoor.

As Pavo readied to help carry Falco down the ladders, he fixed Zubin with an earnest gaze. 'Thank you.'

Zubin nodded modestly.

The cellar was a modest space, lit only by timber slats near the ceiling – level with the ground outside. Grain sacks were piled up around the walls, and these made makeshift beds. They afforded the most comfortable of these to Falco, wrapping him well in the blankets

then dressing themselves in the tattered robes Zubin brought them.

The next days were a meld of thick, dreamless sleep and eating and drinking their fill time and again. Zubin brought them fresh loaves, sticky sweet dates, a zesty orange fruit and urns of hearty stew. This fare soothed and warmed their battered bodies. Zubin had also brought them a small barrel of water, a roll of linen bandage and a few pots of salve. They used this to wash and treat their wounds. Pavo ate and slept by Falco's side.

On the third day, Pavo was

woken from a deep sleep when Zubin came down to the cellar to whisper to them; 'Word has spread about the disaster at the mines. Three chambers were flooded. Many slaves escaped in the chaos. Riding parties are scouring the brush and the flatlands around the mine. With any luck they will not come into these hills.'

Indeed, by the fourth day, no scouts had come by the farmhouse. More, Pavo noticed that a sparkle of strength was returning to his comrades' eyes. Sores and raw flesh had begun to heal, and their ribs seemed to jut less severely.

They had even begun to talk of their next move. But Pavo heard their words as little more than a background jabber, for he focused only on Falco, crouching by him. Father had grown feverish and now muttered almost incessantly. Zubin's honeyed hot water seemed powerless to expel the icy cold from Father's chest. The hope was dying in Pavo's heart. He held the phalera in his palm, the disc buckled where it had defied Gorzam's spear. His memories drifted to that day in the slave market when the crone had given the medallion to him, lifting him from despair. He pressed the

piece into Father's palm, wrapping his fingers over it. 'Don't give up, Father,' he whispered.

'How is he?' Sura asked, crouching beside Pavo.

'No better,' Pavo replied flatly.

'But no worse either,' Sura added firmly, clasping a hand to Pavo's shoulder.

Just then, a noise startled them. The scuffling of feet up above – more than one person. Each of them held their breath. Then they heard the bleating of a goat and Zubin's comical and one-sided conversation with the animal. They exhaled in relief and broke out in a

chuckle. Zubin opened a trapdoor at that point, him and the mother goat grinning down at them.

'I have more honeyed water and a fresh batch of dates,' he said as he descended. Then he brought out a small piece of yellow root. 'And this,' he offered it to Pavo. 'It may be the only thing that will rid him of the fever. Put it in his drink and be sure he drinks plenty and often. It will cause him to sweat out all that is in him. It will cure him, or . . . ' Zubin fell silent.

'I understand,' Pavo nodded, taking the root.

On the morning of the sixth

day in the cellar, Pavo woke before his comrades at sunrise, feeling strong and sharp. He began slicing at the yellow root with a dagger. The juices of the root had a sharp, tangy flavour, and turned the honeyed water ever more golden. He turned to Father, bathed in sweat, just as Zubin had predicted. Yet he was no less feverish, and his skin was pale. Pavo gulped, then held the cup to Falco's mouth, making sure not a drop was wasted. Shortly after, the rest of the XI Claudia woke, then sat on the grain sacks in a circle as they ate a full breakfast of goats'

cheese, bread and eggs, washing it down with sweet water.

'Ah,' Zosimus sighed, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, 'I almost feel like a legionary once again.'

Quadratus stretched his arms then cricked his neck. 'Aye, who'd have thought that it would be a Persian who would come to our aid in the end, eh?'

Felix chuckled at this, then his face fell solemn as he looked around them all and then to Falco. Pavo knew what the little Greek was going to say. 'We cannot stay here for much longer.'

Pavo nodded, clasping Falco's hand a little tighter. 'I know.'

'A long trek awaits us if we are to escape this land,' Felix continued, shooting furtive glances to Falco.

'I understand, sir,' Pavo replied.

'By nightfall tomorrow, we need to make a move - '

They all fell silent as they heard scuffling above, waiting to hear the bleating of the mother goat and Zubin's sanguine chatter. They heard Zubin, but his tone was different. His words were muffled, and Pavo strained to make them

out. Then another voice split the air like a blade.

‘You have seen nothing?’ the voice snapped.

‘I am alone in these hills. You are the first soul I have spoken to in weeks.’

A silence ensued. ‘It would not be wise to lie to us, farmer.’

‘Why would I lie?’

‘You have no love for your rulers – I know this.’

Zubin chuckled wryly. ‘I do not love them. But I do not hate them. I pity them and the fate that awaits them beyond this life.’

Pavo’s mind flashed with

images of the aggressors drawing some blade on Zubin for this retort, but there was no sound for what felt like an eternity.

‘Come on,’ the voice snarled at last, ‘this dog is wasting our time!’ A drumming of feet sounded and then faded.

Pavo shared an anxious look with his comrades. Then the trapdoor whooshed open. Zubin’s face was wrinkled in concern. ‘It is not safe here anymore.’



Under cover of night, Pavo and Sura crept through the brush atop one

hill, then peered down to the valley. A group of five Persian scout riders ate around a campfire there, and another three were posted at either end of the shallow valley. Pavo glanced back over his shoulder to the row of hills behind them, Zubin's farmhouse perched atop the furthest.

'There are too many of them,' Sura said. 'That's the third such party we've sighted.'

'Aye, they're crawling all over these hills like ants,' Pavo agreed. He looked past the guards and off to the west, seeing the faint outline of the river gorge in the darkness,

and then the orange glow of torchlight from the city of Bishapur, looming over the river where the foothills tapered off. Felix had sent them out in the hope of reconnoitring possible routes they could take to make a break towards the Gulf coast, some thirty miles into the darkness beyond the city. The primus pilus would not be pleased with their findings.

He glanced to the east and noticed that a band of dark orange glowed behind the Zagros Mountains. He batted a hand to Sura's shoulder. 'Come on, it's nearly dawn, we should get back

before it gets too light.' The pair slid back down the hillside, careful not to make too much noise, then they scuttled along the ridge of hills towards Zubin's farmhouse. Pavo noticed something as they ran; from here he could see the flatland around the city of Bishapur, and the roads leading to the city seemed to writhe in the first shafts of dawn light. Wagons, animals and vast swathes of people, pouring towards the city gates. He frowned at this, then turned his attentions on the farmhouse, ahead. And as soon as he did, he and Sura froze. Two silhouettes walked near the

farmhouse door.

'Scouts?' Sura gasped as the pair ducked behind a thorny bush.

Pavo's tongue darted out to dampen his lips, his heart crashed like a drum and he flexed his sword hand, cursing the absence of a spatha. Then his fear melted. 'No!' he said, recognising one figure as Zubin. Then it skipped a beat when he saw the other. Father!

The next moments were a blur. He scrambled up the hill, grasping and then embracing Falco. The paleness had left his skin, and he walked unaided.

'It feels as if I have awoken

from a nightmare nearly as dark as those bloody mines,' Falco croaked.

'The root?' Pavo uttered, glancing to Zubin.

Zubin grinned. 'The fever broke while you were out. He has eaten like a pregnant goat and talked only of you.'

Falco held up one hand as if to catch the morning light. 'I never thought I would feel the sun on my skin again.'

Pavo smiled, then realised the sun was rising fast, pulling the shadows from the land. 'Quickly, we must get inside – there are scouts not far from here.'

They hurried inside, Sura and Pavo rolling back the rug, readying to lift the trapdoor. But Falco halted at the table, grasping it for stability. His chest heaved and he erupted in a coughing fit. The black blood still flecked his lips. Pavo's joy was swept away at the sight.

'The root has cured one ailment, but not the lung disease of the mines,' Zubin said, his grin fading as he helped Falco to sit by the table, 'there is no cure for that foul sickness once the blood has turned black.'

Pavo gulped and sat beside Falco, stifling the flood of tears

behind his eyes. His heart ached until he thought it would burst.

‘I am surprised I have lasted this long, Pavo. Few survive as long as I have in that place,’ Falco said. ‘Memories of being with you kept me strong down there,’ Falco continued. ‘And memories of your mother.’

Pavo nodded, his thoughts a blur. Mother had died in giving birth to him and he had never felt free of the shackles of guilt at this.

‘She would never have had it any other way, Pavo,’ Falco said as if reading his thoughts. ‘Did I ever tell you that in those last moments,

when she held you in her arms? She knew she was dying, but she said to me . . . ' his words trailed off and he bowed his head.

Pavo wrapped an arm around Falco's shoulder. 'Tell me, Father.'

'She said she had never been happier than at that moment. For the three of us to have had those precious few heartbeats together meant everything to her. I may not have long Pavo, but . . . '

'Father,' Pavo cut him off. 'You are free. We will escape this land. You will return to the empire. We will find a healer,' he insisted, desperately trying to stave off the

doubts in his own mind.

Falco erupted in another fit of blood-streaked coughing, and Pavo could do little other than hold and comfort him. He saw his father reach down to the leather bracelet on his withered arm. 'Pavo, there is something you need to know . . . '

Just then, the trapdoor creaked open. Felix poked his head out then climbed into the hearth room. 'How's it looking out there?' he said as Zosimus, Quadratus and Habitus joined him.

'Scouting parties in every direction, sir,' Pavo sighed. Then he thought of the roads leading to the

city. 'And there are many people visiting Bishapur today, it seems?'

'Of course,' Zubin said in a matter-of-fact tone. 'Today is the Jashan of Shahrevar, the Festival of Iron.'

Pavo frowned. 'You seem to be one of the few who chooses not to attend?'

'There are others like me, Roman. Others who feel that the Persis Satrapy has a dark soul at its helm. The archimagus aims to whip his people into a fervour with a display of blood games today. I do not believe Ahura Mazda would wish for his people to indulge in

such brutality.'

'Archimagus Ramak?' Pavo cocked an eyebrow.

'Indeed. I imagine you met plenty of his enemies within the mines,' Zubin nodded. 'He is a foul creature. I have heard dark rumours in these past months – of mustering and recruitment. He has been gathering an army. I fear that the blood games today will be the start of something far more grave.'

The words hit Pavo like a fist; in the breakneck escape from the mines, he had forgotten about all that lay ahead. The Persian invasion of Roman Syria. The scroll.

The scroll! He swept his eyes round his comrades until they rested upon Falco, by his side.

Pavo clasped his hands to Falco's shoulders. 'The scroll,' he panted.

'The scroll?' Falco frowned.

'The scroll!' Pavo repeated. Through all the tumult of these last days and in the seeming certainty that he would never escape the mines, he had forgotten entirely of Khaled's last words – that the Romans in the seventh chamber knew of the scroll. 'Father, the scroll of Jovian. There was a man, a Persian whom I shared a cell with.

He told me that, he said that . . . ' his words tumbled out in a single breath.

Falco hushed him, placing his hands on Pavo's shoulders. 'You came out here for the scroll of Jovian? Times on the eastern frontier must be desperate indeed.'

'Aye, they are, but Father, do you - '

'Pavo,' Falco cut him off. 'Yes, I know where the scroll is.'

All eyes fell upon Falco. All breaths were stilled.

'It sits within the palace, right in the heart of Bishapur,' he said calmly.

Chapter 17



It was early afternoon on the day of the Festival of Iron. The games were about to begin and the populace of Bishapur flocked to the arena. Landworkers and peasants came with nothing other than the few coins they possessed and the rags they wore. Those from the noble houses came dressed in fine silks and carried bunches of vibrant blooms. They wore their hair tied

above their heads, with perfumed wax applied to their scalps and kohl lining their eyes to temper the sun's glare. The singing, chanting, twanging of lutes, keening of horns and thumping of drums came and went like waves of a tide as the crowds filtered into the arc of seating at the foot of the acropolis mount. Here, some enjoyed shade and cool drinks. The arena floor and the sunken pit at its heart, however, baked in the fierce afternoon sun.

Inside the pit, Gallus splashed olive oil on a rag, then took to polishing his intercisa. He rubbed

and rubbed at one spot until he could see his own reflection; sunburnt, scowling and furious. The raucous babbling of the spectators echoed across the arena floor, spilling into the pit through the raised grating. Suddenly, he tossed the helmet to one side and growled, letting his head fall into his hands, panting.

Carbo sat across from him, calmly polishing his own helm. 'Save your anger for them,' he flicked his head up to the iron grating.

'Why – why should I?' He gestured to his forearm, the

muscles there taut and bulging. 'They have fed and trained us all these weeks, for what? Just to slaughter us today like prize pigs. Why should I fight to entertain them? Why should I not simply stride out there and extend my neck, invite them to cut open my jugular.'

'Because you are a tenacious whoreson, Tribunus,' Carbo replied calmly. 'Use your troubles to fire your sword arm today.'

'My troubles?' Gallus cast him an incredulous look, shrugged, then glanced through the grating and around the arena. 'I'd say you have

been in the sun too long, Centurion.'

Carbo beheld Gallus then, his gaze for once steady, earnest. 'I am not the only one who talks in his sleep, Tribunus.'

Now Gallus' eyes darted, unable to meet Carbo's gaze.

'Fear not, Tribunus. I will not pry. I heard enough to understand that there is a black stain on your soul.

Gallus slumped to sitting, lifting his helm once more and gazing at his reflection. A long silence passed. At last, he glanced up. 'Aye, a black stain indeed.'

Carbo nodded and stood, buckling on his helmet and smoothing his tousled white beard. 'And one you must cleanse. Believe me, I know what shame can do to drive a man on.' He smiled. It was warm yet doleful. 'Indeed, it is shame that demanded I lived through our journey east and drove me back to these lands. A shame that has shackled me now for over ten years.'

Gallus frowned. 'Centurion?'

Before Carbo could reply, the clanking of a spear on the iron grating above startled him. 'Romans, be ready,' the man there

grinned, lifting the grating aside. He threw a knotted rope down to Gallus, then turned and strutted across the arena floor, shooting both hands up in the air and conjuring a cheer from the growing crowd.

Gallus strapped on his helm, then hefted his battered wooden shield. Dressed only in a loincloth, this would be his only means of protection today. He climbed from the pit, into the glare of the fierce sun. A wall of noise battered him from every side. Sweating, eager faces glared down from the steep gallery of seats overlooking the

arena floor. Pushtigban warriors studded the top row of seats like fangs and more looked down like vultures from the edge of the acropolis, above. The open end of the arena was packed with a mass of standing spectators corralled behind a timber barrier and a row of Median spearmen.

Gallus saw all heads turn to one spot. Atop the arc of seating, a timber viewing box had been erected, much like a Roman kathisma. The balcony front was emblazoned with a gilded stucco effigy of the Faravahar, the Zoroastrian winged guardian angel,

and a gold silk awning cast the enclosure in precious shade. Gemmed torches were affixed to the sides of the kathisma, the Sacred Fire dancing on each of them. Then a shadowy figure entered the enclosure, and Gallus knew who it was even before the features were uplit by the flames. Ramak. The archimagus moved to the front of the kathisma, surveying the masses like a hungry gull, his fingers coiling and uncoiling over the edge of the balcony. He wore a blue silk robe threaded with gold that glinted like his eyes.

Next, Tamur entered the

kathisma, flanked by a pair of pushtigban. His dark hair glistened with fresh oil and wax. He was armoured in a bronze scale vest with the lion emblem on the breast, and wore a gold cloak draped over his shoulders. The sight of him brought a roar from the people.

Two spearmen jogged over to Gallus and Carbo, then threw down a pair of spatha blades. Carbo took one and handed the other to Gallus.

Then Ramak threw his arms up and the crowd fell utterly silent. He cast his glare around the crowd. 'I urged you all to come today. I promised you a gift from Ahura

Mazda – a vision of our destiny.'

A murmur of excitement rippled round the crowd.

'You may have heard whisperings that the armies of Persis are mustering. This is indeed the case. More . . . they are now gathered and marching towards Bishapur, where our glorious spahbad will take his place at their head!'

Gallus tensed, realising what was coming next.

'Tomorrow, they will march west. To crush and scatter the lie. To drive Rome's legions into the sea!'

The crowd reacted, many cheering but a few gasping and some unsure.

'Soon, ancient Syria will fall to our armies. The House of Aspaphet will reign supreme once more. Our great god wills it!' At this, Ramak held out his hands, palms upturned, then raised them as if lifting some invisible burden. At the same time, the two torches either side of the kathisma flared, columns of blue-green flame shooting skywards as if conjured by the archimagus.

Now the crowd erupted, every one of them on their feet and chanting in fervour.

‘Cheap tricks to buy the hearts of thousands,’ Gallus scowled, seeing the robed magi who had thrown copper filings on the flames ducking down out of sight.

‘First,’ Ramak continued, ‘we send in our Median spearmen. Hardy hill fighters – a match for any Roman legionary.’

Gallus noticed shapes moving in the arched tunnel that led from under the bank of seating. Three lithe and tall figures emerged, their faces and moustaches slick with sweat. They wore pointed, plumed iron helmets, mail shirts and strapped boots, and carried square wicker

shields and lengthy spears. Gallus cast his eyes over the three, welcoming the anticipation of battle; the red-hot thumping of blood through his veins, the clarity of thought, the brief respite from the past.

Ramak raised both arms and cast his gaze round the crowd. Thousands of breaths halted in silent anticipation. 'Begin!' he roared, chopping his arms down like blades.

At once, drums in the highest rows of seats burst into life in a slow, steady and ominous beat. The crowd roared in delight as the three

spearman stepped around the pair in time to the drumbeat. Gallus and Carbo faced in opposing directions, the shoulders of their sword arms pressed together and their shields on the outside, twisting round with the movement of the spearman. There was no more training, no more mercy or wooden swords, Gallus realised. They had been brought here to die and die they would. The drumbeat grew faster and faster, the spearman now dancing round the pair until Gallus' mind swirled. Suddenly, the drumbeat stopped dead.

At once, the three spearman

sprung forward and the crowd roared. Gallus swiped his shield up to parry one spear thrust, then cried out as a second scored across his back. Instinctively, he spun, swung his spatha up and straight into the ribs of the spearman who had injured him. The blade pierced the chain mail and went almost hilt deep such was his anger. The spearman staggered backwards, blood pumping from his nostrils and lips as he toppled, taking the spatha with him. Weaponless, Gallus swung round to the next man and punched forward with his shield boss. This crashed into the man's

mouth and sent a shower of teeth across the arena floor. He grappled the stunned man's spear shaft, snatching it from him before driving it into the spearman's belly. Ripping the lance free, he swung round to tackle the third warrior. But he halted at the sight before him. Carbo, lips curled back and teeth clenched, blood dripping from his face, gripping the hair of the third spearman, his spatha driven through the man's throat.

The crowd fell silent.

Gallus strode over to the corpse that still bore his sword, rested a foot on the chest then tore

it free. He held the blade up in the sunlight and examined the edge.

‘Still sharp?’ Carbo asked, cleaning his own blade.

‘Aye, plenty of fight left in it,’ Gallus replied.

Together, the pair glared at the sea of faces that stared back at them. Concerned murmurs broke out – the fight had lasted barely moments. Gallus looked up at Ramak. The archimagus’ eyes narrowed and he whispered to Tamur. Then he leant from the balcony again.

‘The Median spearmen have served us well,’ he cried. ‘They have

weakened the Romans. Now, let them feel the wrath of Ahura Mazda's creations . . . '

Gallus shot a glance to Carbo. Both men looked towards the open end of the arena. There, the crowds parted in a hurry with panicked yells. The timber barrier was lifted back, and a pack of slaves hauled a vast cage onto the arena floor. They saw something inhuman inside, padding, growling. Two of them. Dark-orange emblazoned with black stripes and eyes that seemed to cut through them even at this distance.

'Tigers,' Carbo gasped at last.

The slaves gingerly batted the cage open with lengthy poles then retreated at haste. Each colossal creature was led in chains by two handlers, and a pair of spearmen guided the beasts with their lances. At every step they roared, hissed and spat, bearing their fangs.

Then another cage was brought into the arena, a chilling laughter spilling from within. The gate rumbled open and a pack of four jackals ran from the darkness. They panted and howled over and over, driven towards the centre of the arena by spearmen.

‘They’re terrified!’ Gallus

realised.

'Never is an animal more dangerous than when it knows fear,' Carbo replied.

'I didn't step out here to slay creatures,' Gallus growled in frustration.

'And they didn't come here to slay you,' Carbo fired back, 'but that is how it is. Steel yourself, Tribunus.'

Gallus stifled another growl, then pressed up, back-to-back with Carbo. He locked eyes with the nearest tiger, the jackals circling nearby. The cat's pupils shrank, then it sprang for him.



Many thousands trekked from the foothills and onto the westerly road to Bishapur. They wore wide-brimmed hats and carried linen shades stretched out over cane frames, shielding them from the fierce afternoon heat. But seven men walking amongst them had only the ragged hoods of the ill-fitting and frayed robes they wore to shield them from the worst of it.

Pavo pulled his hood tighter, sensing the scornful glares of the travellers around them. These crowds were both a danger and a

perfect way to evade the many scouting parties. They had stolen through the hills from Zubin's farmhouse, narrowly avoiding detection from the Persian scouts, then blended into this throng. Felix, Zosimus, Quadratus, Sura and Habitus walked with him, heads bowed in an effort to remain inconspicuous. And then there was Father, right by his side. Pavo winced as Falco shuddered in another fit of coughing. He was weakening visibly from this trek. Pavo had tried to convince him to remain at the farmhouse, but Father was having none of it. If you

are determined to find the scroll, then you need me – for I know exactly where it is. I'm coming, was all Falco had said.

And Zubin had been equally as adamant that he was coming with them – despite all he had already done for them. Pavo looked up, along the road they walked; the Persian farmer and his goats walked a few hundred feet ahead of the seven. I pray we don't need to call upon you, but Mithras bless you for coming with us, he mouthed.

'What the . . .' Sura muttered by Pavo's side, shaking him from his thoughts.

Pavo followed his friend's gaze down into the gorge below. There, a vast carved relief dominated the rock face. It showed the Persian God, Ahura Mazda, handing a diadem to a Persian Shahanshah. Around the next bend in the gorge, there was a grander relief still. It was as tall as six men, and depicted another Persian Shahanshah on horseback, the beast trampling on a figure that was unmistakably Roman. An emperor. Pavo fought to suppress a shudder of doubt.

As they approached the city, the throng thickened. The masses were swelling around the eastern

gates. Bodies jostled all around them and the stench of sweat and animal dung was rife. Thick dust clung to their skin and the back of their throats. Pavo squinted to see what was holding up entry into the city. He passed into the shade of the beetling walls and saw the plumed, pointed helms and spear tips of the guards lining the battlements. But there were also a few on the ground, outside the gate. He, Felix, Quadratus and Zosimus looked to one another, straining to hear their jabberings.

Falco cupped an ear to their chatter. 'They're checking every

person that enters the city. Pavo, one look at our faces – not to mention our scars – will give us away.'

Pavo's eyes darted. He saw the nearest of the sentries peering into the crowd. The man's eyes narrowed under his dusty felt cap as he scoured the sea of faces. Then his gaze seemed to snag on the group, his broad nose flaring, his bottom lip curling and his fingers flexing on his spear shaft.

'I think they've seen us, Father,' he whispered to Falco.

Falco pulled his hood down to cover his eye sockets. 'Whatever

you do, don't look at them,' he hissed.

Pavo heard these words as he locked eyes with the sentry. The guard opened his mouth to yell out to his comrades.

There was only one thing left for it now, Pavo realised. His heart thundered as he waved frantically across the crowd.



Peroz's day had already been foul. His wife had cooked him a meal last night that had churned in his gut for hours and denied him even a heartbeat of sleep. Now, while the

citizens were to enjoy the feasting and games of the Festival of Iron, he was to spend the day standing here in the stifling heat amidst this sea of toothless farmers and paupers. And it was approaching the hottest part of the day.

He tried to distract himself with thoughts of what his wife might conjure for his evening meal tonight, then remembered with a groan that she had cooked enough of the foul, gut-churning stew to last for a few days. He grappled his cane shield and spear as if throttling his troubles, then yelped when a splinter of wood on the

spear shaft pierced the skin on his palm. 'Why do you mock me, Ahura Mazda?' he muttered skywards. 'What next – a boil on my arse?'

Wave after wave of dust stuck to the sweat on his skin. The only way out of this shift would be to feign injury or . . . his gaze snagged on something in the crowd. A clutch of men. Their skin was fair, their features notably different. They bore scars and wiry, knotted beards. And one of them, one of them was missing his eyes. The escaped slaves?

He saw one of them signal to someone, something – waving

frantically. All doubt was gone. He could be a hero. Even more importantly, he would be relieved from his shift. He sucked in a breath until his lungs creaked, full and ready to call out in alarm. But then a furious bleating halted the cry in his throat.

He swung to see some disturbance in the crowd. Zubin the farmer was crying out in distress. It seemed some mother goat of his had lost her temper in the heat. She bleated angrily, butting through the crowd and sending one man and a basket of melons up into the air, then she cut across the throng.

Peroz glanced from the animal to the odd-looking men in the crowd, then back to the animal. The goat was charging straight for him, and it wore a look even more foul than his own. He glanced back to the crowd. The curious clutch of men were gone. He frowned, twisting to look to the gate – just in case they had slipped past him. Then the full force of the angry goat smacked into his hip. In an instant, sky and earth changed places and then he thudded onto the ground. He stood up, brushing himself down, choking on dust, hearing the belly laughter of the watching throng. He snarled

and shook his spear at those around him and the laughter died sharply.

Can this day get any worse?
he thought with a low growl.



The arena sweltered under the afternoon sun like a cauldron. The thunder of drums filled the air and the crowd watched on, breaths held in their lungs, awaiting the glorious moment they had been promised – the felling of the Romans. Suddenly, from the heart of the arena, a pained animal howl rang out and the thundering drums fell silent.

The crowd slumped back with a collective groan of disappointment.

Gallus staggered back from the spear lodged in the tiger's chest, his gaze fixed on the eyes of the dying creature. He had longed for the beast to follow the example of the other – the first cat having leapt up the side of the arena and onto the first row of seats, mauling three pushtigban and tearing the throat from one rotten-toothed spectator who had revelled in every moment of the action that had gone before. But both cats were now slain, as were the jackals, their torn bellies buzzing with flies and the

stench of their open guts overpowering. He dipped his head, a nausea stabbing at his stomach. They had been fighting for over an hour, his limbs were tiring and his mouth was parched.

‘Stand up, Tribunus!’ Carbo panted by his side, sweat dripping from his jaw and spidering across his chest. Like him, the centurion bore a network of cuts and scratches on his chest and legs. The blood loss was not mortal, yet.

He stood and glared defiantly up at Ramak and Tamur. They seemed rattled by the hardness of him and Carbo, that was for sure.

But Ramak's sickly features danced with shadow, uplit by the crackling flames of the Sacred Fire. He was far from finished.

What next, you whoreson?

The answer to the question came instantly, Ramak clapping his hands. Once again, the shadows in the tunnel jostled.

Gallus's eyes narrowed on the tunnel mouth. 'With me, Centurion,' he hissed to Carbo.

'I'm with you,' Carbo replied, then his words grew faint, 'I will not desert you as I deserted them.'

Gallus scowled at the man. 'Centurion?'

But before Carbo could reply, Ramak stepped forward, gesturing to the tunnel. 'Ahura Mazda watches as we come to the climax of this sacred day. Now the life will be struck from the Romans by the finest of our warriors. The champions of the pushtigban!'

All doubt washed away from the crowd at the words. The roar that erupted seemed to shake the arena floor and the drummers struck up a frantic rhythm. The three bronze-armoured warriors they had faced in training stalked from the gate underneath the kathisma. The two at the sides

swished and spun their spears and long, curved sabres. The central figure bore his weighty spike hammer with a grin that foretold the spilling of blood, then dipped his head, the exaggerated, sweeping wings on his helm poised as if readying to take flight.

‘This is it,’ Gallus said, ‘they will not let us live beyond this bout.’

Carbo stiffened. ‘Then let this bout be our finest yet, Tribunus.’

Gallus glanced to the centurion. Carbo’s knuckles were white on his sword hilt, but his eyes were distant, his lips moving soundlessly.

Forgive me . . .

Again Gallus frowned, but all confusion was swept away as the pushtigban rushed for them like swooping hawks. He rolled clear of a crashing blow from the hammer-wielder, then swiped out at one of the spearmen. The spearman sidestepped his blow and then jabbed his lance forward at Gallus' throat, halting only inches away. A roar of laughter spilled from the banks of seating at this feigned death blow.

He righted himself, then started as uneven footsteps approached him from behind. It was

Carbo, laced with cuts and breathing heavily. 'They're toying with us – saving us for that thing,' the centurion nodded to the execution stone in the middle of the arena.

'Then they can toy with my spatha hilt as it juts from their throats,' Gallus snarled. 'Pick your man and strike him down!'

'Aye, sir,' Carbo hissed.

With a roar, the pair leapt forward, Gallus leaping for the hammer-man and Carbo for the nearest spearman. With a clash of steel, Gallus' blade sheared against the tip of the hammer. Likewise,

the spearman dashed Carbo's blade from his grip. A fervent cry of approval rang out around the crowd.

'The portent is strong, my people,' Ramak cried over the hubbub. 'The Roman blade shatters on Persian steel. Rome weakens while our forces grow ever stronger. The lie is dying and the truth will prevail!' With that, he gave the pushtigban three an almost imperceptible nod. The hammer-wielder grinned, then waved his men round behind the weaponless Romans.

Gallus kept his gaze trained on

the hammer-man, even when a spear butt crashed into his back, barging him towards the execution stone. Carbo was barged forwards with him. Then both were brought to their knees by blows to the back of the legs.

Ramak leant from the kathisma balcony and spread his arms out wide. 'What happens now, happens with the blessing of Ahura Mazda. Let us praise him, then crush these warriors of the lie.' With that, he tilted his head skywards and he and a line of magi on the seats below chanted the first words of a Zoroastrian Gatha. In

moments, the entire crowd had joined in. The haunting melody filled the arena.

The hammer-wielder declined to join the prayer. Instead, he stalked over to Gallus, crouched by his side and whispered in his ear, pointing to the execution stone. 'Are you ready to die, Roman?'

Chapter 18



Pavo tightened the hood of his robe as they navigated through the thick crowds inside Bishapur. The people moved like a tide towards the heart of the festival, the scents of sweat and sweet wax curdling in the afternoon heat. The air rang with a chorus of lowing cattle, clucking chickens, barking dogs, yelling traders and screaming children, all mixed with the wall of noise from

the arena and the incessant clashing of iron blades from its heart. He could see just the top of the arc of seating, resting on the banks of the acropolis. Even higher, atop the mount, the palace and the blue-domed temple loomed over the spectacle.

His pulse quickened as they pushed into the mass of bodies near the open end of the arena. One eyepatched trader latched onto Pavo, tugging at his sleeve. He twisted to shrug the man away, then stumbled into a body in front of him. A garrison sentry who had cut across Pavo's path. The sentry

halted and glowered at him, his narrow nose wrinkling over his thick dark moustache and beard. Pavo gawped back at the man, sure he would call out in alarm. But the sentry simply growled and butted at Pavo's shoulder with the heel of a hand, then barged past him and off into the throng. Pavo fought hard to hide his shock and relief.

'Keep moving,' Falco hissed, grappling his arm. 'We make for the acropolis and we do not look back.'

The seven carried on through the sea of sweating faces. The raucous cheering of the crowd seemed to shake the earth beneath

them now, drumbeats shuddering through their bones. Pavo snatched furtive glances up over the heads of the crowd. Now he could see the full extent of the amphitheatre set against the acropolis slope. Atop the centre of the bank of seating, he saw a wooden enclosure – akin to a Roman kathisma – draped in silks and emblazoned with Zoroastrian imagery. Two figures were pressed against this balcony, leering at the combat below. Pavo's heart stilled as he recognised the first – broad like a bull, bronze-armoured and draped in a gold-threaded cloak, sleek dark locks

scraped back into a tail of curls; Tamur! There was another figure by his side. A hunched creature in a blue robe, bald and wan. The light of the flickering torch inside the box cast his features in a demonic underglow, igniting his golden eyes. Pavo's step slowed unconsciously and he remembered all that Khaled had told him.

'Pavo, what is it?' Falco asked, slowing with him.

'I think that's him . . . Ramak.'

Falco's haggard features paled at this. 'Bald like a vulture, but even less handsome?'

'That's the one,' Pavo said.

'Keep your heads down,' Felix hissed back over his shoulder, noticing the pair as well. He nodded to the near end of the stepped amphitheatre seating. Up above the top steps, there was a short ascent of palm and shrub-studded scree, then the palace towered near the edge of the acropolis plateau. The rabble on the timber steps took umbrage at Felix and Habitus' attempts to push through them. Then Zosimus and Quadratus came to the fore and their resistance soon quelled. Pavo guided Falco in their wake as they picked their way up to the rear of the amphitheatre.

Pavo shot furtive glances this way and that. The pushtigban dotted around the top rank of seats looked sharp-eyed and vigilant, frequently glancing away from the fighting in the arena to look over the crowds and the surrounding area. 'The sentries are watching everything,' he hissed, shooting a glance at the nearest guard then squinting through the noon sun to look up at the silhouette of the palace. 'We'll never get a clear run at climbing up there! We need a distraction.'

Just then, the sound of combat fell away. Then Ramak led the

crowd in chanting a gatha. Pavo turned round, frowning, seeing all nearby praying with the archimagus. Then his eyes snagged on the pair of bloodied, sweat-soaked warriors kneeling before some filthy stone on the arena floor. The blood seemed to still in his veins as he noticed the glinting, ice-blue eyes of one of them.

‘Mithras . . . is that - ’ Felix gasped by his side.

‘Gallus!’ Quadratus, Zosimus, Habitus, Sura and Pavo finished for him.

Felix shook his head in disbelief. ‘And is that . . . Carbo?’

At this, Falco grappled Pavo's arm, a dark frown upon his features. 'Did he say Carbo?'

'Aye,' Pavo frowned, 'your comrade from the Parthica.'

At this, a thunderstorm-dark look befouled Falco's face. 'Carbo . . . ' he snarled like an angered dog, then his voice fell into a low growl; 'So you came back?'



'This is it?' Gallus rasped, exhausted, the prayer echoing around him. 'They chant to their god and then they dash out our brains?'

Carbo was unresponsive. He seemed to be gazing at a point in the crowd, near the top row of seating. His lips were twitching, mouthing something. Falco?

'Centurion?' Gallus frowned, squinting up to there, unable to discern anything in the sea of chanting faces.

'I am ready to die, Tribunus. My shame is almost over. I know this for certain now, for the shades of my past have come to watch.'

Gallus bowed his head in pity. The man had lost his mind at the last.

'There was no Persian master

who bought me from the mines,' Carbo said, his words weak and choked. 'I escaped.'

Gallus looked up, his senses sharpening.

Carbo's face was tear-streaked. 'We had planned it for months, my Parthica comrades and I. The guards tasked me with working on the surface for just a day, to clear some debris from a sandstorm. It was the moment we had been waiting for. It was my job to slip away and hide in the rocks nearby until night, then draw the guards from the edges of the mine shaft entrance with some

distraction. But that day reminded me what sunlight on the skin felt like. I saw blooms, darting birds. I heard the rush of fresh wind in my ears, felt it filling my lungs. I managed to slip from the guards' sight. I managed to hide in the rocks nearby until nightfall. But then I saw how fragile our plan was. There were some twenty guards and they had mounts. Had I made some noise to draw them away, I would surely have been captured and so would my comrades were they to break from the mine. So I seized my freedom. I ran. I ran for weeks. Across the

brushland, through the dusty flats, always westwards, heading for home. I ran as fast as I could, praying the blood pounding in my ears would drown out the imagined cries of my comrades. Eventually I stumbled into the desert. I slept in the dunes, and that is when the nightmares began – nightmares that have plagued me ever since. But I had my freedom, or so I thought. It lasted only until a Greek slave merchant found me staggering through the sands, half-maddened by the sun. He shackled me and, many years later, I returned to the empire in chains.

Providence saw that I was freed to serve in the legions again,' his chest rose and fell rapidly now, his head bowed and shaking. 'Free once more, yet forever fettered by my shame.'

Gallus heard those last words as if they had been plucked from his own heart. But the guilt that danced in this man's eyes had been brewing for far longer than Gallus'.

'The men of the Parthica kept me strong in those mines – Pavo's father more than most. Yet when they needed me, I deserted them. My cowardice consigned them to a lingering death. Now, surely you

must understand why I could not refuse when Emperor Valens offered me the chance to return to this land. Nightmares and voices have haunted me for too long.' He nodded to that seemingly innocuous spot high up in the seating once more. 'Today, the very shades of those I betrayed watch on from the crowd. I seek only two things; atonement and death. Today it seems, I will have only one.'

The man's shoulders slumped and he was silent. Gallus felt empathy and loathing quarrel in his heart until he realised the recital of the gatha was over. The chanting of

the crowd fell away. Ramak leant over the kathisma balcony and pointed a talon-like finger down to the arena floor.

'Ahura Mazda looks down upon us. Let us cast the Romans to the realm of Ahriman!'

The hammer man nodded to Gallus. Hands grappled his shoulders roughly, dragging him to the execution stone.



Falco's words echoed in Pavo's ears. He wrapped an arm around his father's shoulders, scowling down upon Carbo. But while fury boiled in

Pavo's veins, Father's anger had passed like a scudding dark cloud. 'But he betrayed you? Else you might have been free long, long ago.'

'Yet I'd bargain that his years of freedom have been tortuous,' Falco patted Pavo's arm. 'He has returned to face his past. That is what matters.' He bowed over in a coughing fit, dark blood spraying on his knotted hands. 'Pavo, don't let what time we have be spoiled by anger.'

Pavo fought to suppress his rage, then it was barged aside when he saw the two pushtigban

spearman on the arena floor dragging Gallus towards the execution stone, the hammer-wielder waving his weapon to the crowd, drawing raucous cheers.

Pavo turned to Felix. 'Sir?' he croaked. His words were in harmony with the others.

The hammer-man kicked Gallus in the gut, dropping him to his knees, then pushing the side of his head onto the block.

Felix gawped at this and then up to the palace. 'The tribunos would insist that we go for the scroll,' he uttered, his words devoid of conviction.

'Sir? We can't leave him to die!' Pavo protested.

'We won't,' Felix replied, at last breaking his gaze and fixing it upon Pavo, Sura, Falco and Habitus. He jabbed a finger up the acropolis slope. 'You four will go for the scroll.' Then he nodded to Quadratus and Zosimus. 'The three of us . . . we will create a distraction so you can get up there unseen, and maybe even back down again,' he said gravely, looking to the arena floor.

'Sir, if you step into that arena you'll be . . . ' Pavo choked back his words, seeing the look of grim

finality in the eyes of Felix, Zosimus and Quadratus.

‘Aye,’ Zosimus grunted, ‘we will. So be on your way. Get that scroll.’

With that, the three turned, shoulders heaving as they sucked in breath after breath. Then, like lions, they barged through the crowds, rushing down the bank of timber seating towards the arena floor, ignorant to the protests of those they trampled upon. All eyes turned to the disturbance – the crowd, Ramak, Tamur, the sentries all around the top of the arena.

Pavo yelled out after them,

but Sura's hand clamped over his mouth.

'If we go after them then we all die,' Sura hissed. 'They're sacrificing themselves for the scroll. Don't let it be for nothing. Come on!' He yanked Pavo back towards the acropolis slope. Pavo gritted his teeth and spun away from the arena. He grappled Falco's arm and led him onto the slope, the scree crunching under their stride.

He focused on the heels of Sura and Habitus ascending before him and refused to look back.



Gallus' nose wrinkled at the stench of the hot, dried blood staining the execution stone. The crowd had fallen silent in anticipation – so he could hear only the breathing of his executioner. 'Your brains will stain the dust in moments, Roman dog,' the pushtigban grunted. 'Now look your killer in the eye, see how he smiles.'

Gallus looked to the side, his eyes straining, until he saw the grinning features of the hammer-wielder framed by azure sky. 'I see his eyes, cur, and he should know that he will see mine – every time he tries to sleep.'

This brought only a sharp jab from the other pushtigban pinning him down, the man's knuckles splitting the flesh on Gallus' cheek and sending a shower of white sparks across his vision.

'Be careful,' the hammer-wielder chided. 'I don't want him to be unconscious. I want him to feel the last moments of his life, as the spike stoves in his skull and dashes out his brains.'

The other two chuckled at this. Gallus could only watch the hammer-wielder's grin broaden as he lined up the weapon to take aim, the spike resting on Gallus'

temple, its weight splitting the skin and grinding on the bone underneath.

'Goodbye, Roman,' his killer hissed, then hefted the hammer back.

Gallus stared through the man and the glinting weapon. He saw through the thousands of faces that looked on, eager to witness his death. He saw the roadside near Mediolanum. He saw the curves of Olivia under the blankets by the campfire. She had one arm wrapped around the sleeping Marcus. He reached out to cradle them both. To shield them as he

should have done that night. Let me find them in the darkness, Mithras. Let me protect them there as I should have done in this life.

Suddenly, a cry of surprise rang out all around. Gallus felt the numbness of certain death crumble, and the pressure of the hands restraining him eased. He saw the hammer-man freeze, weapon raised, his head twisting to the edge of the arena. Gallus frowned, then a spear smacked into the dust, inches from the hammer-wielder's feet. The man staggered back, as did the other two. Gallus rolled clear of the execution stone and

looked to see three figures running towards him.

No! he mouthed in disbelief. Like a mirage, Felix led big Zosimus and Quadratus in a charge across the arena. A pair of Median spearmen lay in an unconscious heap at the edge of the ring, denuded of their weapons and shields. Felix carried a Persian shamshir, Quadratus a spear and shield and Zosimus a spear, sword and dagger. All three looked haggard and unkempt – as if they had spent these last months in Hades.

‘How in the realm of Mithras .

. . . ' Gallus stammered. A wave of warmth washed across his heart at the sight of them.

'To your feet, sir,' Felix grinned, skidding to a halt by Gallus while Zosimus and Quadratus hauled Carbo up by the shoulders, pressing the hilt of a blade into his palm.

The three pushtigban warriors glanced from the five Romans to the kathisma. Tamur grappled the edge of the balcony, ready to signal for the many other guards to storm the arena and slay these newcomers. But Ramak whispered in his ear, pointing out the cheering

crowd – buoyed by the excitement of this turn of events. Tamur nodded, instead signalling down to the tunnel. In moments, a troop of three Median spearmen emerged in their iron garb and pointed, plumed helms. They joined the pushtigban in a curved line, facing the Roman five like a set of pincers, spears levelled. The games were to continue, it seemed.

Gallus pressed up, back to back with his three officers and Carbo as the spear tips approached. 'How in Hades did you escape the mines?' he hissed to Felix.

'We did, sir, that's all that

matters. More, Pavo, Sura, Habitus and . . . Pavo's father are on their way to get the scroll,' Felix whispered back.

'Pavo's father?' Gallus uttered, then glanced to Carbo and understood what the man had seen in the crowd.

Carbo's eyes darted. 'Falco lives?'

'It seems atonement waits on you today also?' Gallus clamped a firm hand on the man's shoulder. Then his thoughts halted and he beheld Felix. 'You said they're going to get the scroll?' he gasped. In these last months he had forgotten

entirely of its existence. 'You know where it is?'

Felix's glance to the palace atop the acropolis was enough to betray an answer.

'They're going in there?' Gallus shook his head. 'That place is crawling with guards! Even if they get in, they'll never get out!'

'I said we'd create a distraction,' Felix said.

'A distraction – how, exactly?'

'I didn't think it that far through, sir,' Felix replied sheepishly.

Just then, Ramak leant from the edge of the kathisma and

chopped his arms down like axe heads. 'Destroy them!'

The Persian six stalked forward with purpose. The hammer-wielder flicked a finger out to direct those by his sides to their targets.

Quadratus, Zosimus, Carbo and Felix spread out to stand by Gallus' side.

'You think you can handle those on the flanks?' Gallus whispered.

'You should have met the whoresons we had to deal with in the mines,' Zosimus grumbled. Quadratus and Felix could not contain a dry chuckle at this.

Even Gallus felt a smile tickle his lips. 'Fine, then leave the hammer man to me.' With that, Gallus stooped to lift his plumed intercisa from the dust. He planted it on his head. At once, the iron rim framed his vision and he gained a last surge of strength. 'XI Claudia . . . forward!' he cried. The four parted. In his peripheral vision, he saw Quadratus and Felix lunging for the men on the left, Carbo and Zosimus springing to the right. Gallus stalked forward, fixed his gaze on the hammer-man and saw his foe's knuckles whitening. The hammer came up and swung round

in a ferocious swipe. Gallus saw it coming and skidded to a halt, letting the blow whoosh past his midriff. The hammer-man staggered back, desperately trying to still the weapon and bring it back round. But Gallus leapt upon him like a starved leopard, butting his head forward so the tip of his intercisa fin smashed into the man's mouth, sending teeth and blood in every direction. The man stumbled and fell, his head bashing onto the execution stone. The man flailed to right himself but the weight of his armour pinned him where he lay. Gallus hefted his spatha, then stood

over his gasping, disbelieving foe, the blade resting on the man's neck.

Thousands of pairs of eyes watched expectantly.

'No,' Gallus said, shaking his head and gazing down at the pushtigban. He tossed his spatha into the dirt and turned away. Gasps of relief sounded from the hammer-man and murmurs of confusion rippled around the crowd. Gallus glanced up to see Ramak's eyes narrowing at this move.

Then he stooped to pick up the spike hammer.

'You have sent many wretches

to their deaths in the most brutal fashion,' he said, turning back to the hammer-man. The downed man now gawped at the bloodied spike on the end of his own weapon. 'Some may have deserved it, some certainly did not. You, whoreson, have most certainly earned this.' Gallus' eyes bulged, and his teeth ground together as he hefted the hammer overhead. The pushtigban's mouth opened in a cry for mercy. But Gallus swiped the weapon down. The spike ploughed through skin, skull and brain then clunked against the stone as the pushtigban's head exploded,

fragments pattering down around Gallus like rain. Nearby, gurgling cries rang out as Felix, Quadratus, Carbo and Zosimus hacked and chopped their foes down. He saw Carbo fell the last, leaping like a wounded lion to slice through the man's neck. Their opponents felled, the Roman five stood alone, gazing stonily over the crowd.

The crowd stared back silently. Only the bleating of a distant goat herd sounded over Bishapur.

Gallus looked up to Ramak as if to challenge the archimagus. Tamur barged to the front of the

kathisma beside Ramak, nostrils flared in disgust. 'Kill them!' he cried. At once, the crowd roared in agreement, and Ramak waved a band of ten Median spearmen lining the arena forward.

Gallus, Felix, Quadratus, Zosimus and Carbo gathered once again in the centre of the arena.

Gallus glanced to the slope leading up to the palace. 'Was that enough of a distraction?' he panted.



Ramak settled back to watch as the ten spearmen leapt into battle with the Roman five. But two things

nagged at him. Firstly, the afternoon was wearing on and the sun was approaching the western horizon; when it touched the land, the festival would end. If the Romans survived until then, then his grand demonstration of Persian might with these games would look foolish. The second irritation came in the form of Tamur, by his side. The brutish warrior seemed to believe that his destiny truly rested on the outcome of this bout, his fists clenched as if striking every blow, the veins in his temples seeking to break free of the skin.

‘Perhaps we have trained

these dogs too well, Archimagus?' Tamur seethed.

Ramak bristled at this, but mustered an even tone to reply; 'Remember that today is but a façade, Spahbad, a means of bringing the people of Persis with us on our path to greatness. Should these curs somehow live to the end of the blood games, then it will not change what happens tomorrow.'

Tamur turned from the fight, his eyes wide, teeth clenched. His fists slackened and his shoulders slumped a fraction. 'But, Archimagus . . . '

'The armies are mustered, are

they not?’

‘They are coming through the Zagros Mountains as we speak, and will be formed outside the city before nightfall,’ Tamur nodded. ‘Ten thousands Savaran riders, ready to march west and seize Roman Syria.’

Ramak flicked a finger to the exhausted Roman five on the arena floor. ‘That will not change because of a few tenacious dogs who refuse to die, will it? Besides, should they live until the festival comes to an end, I will order their throats to be slit when the crowds have dispersed.’

Tamur's brow knitted. The oaf was easily confused – just like his father, Ramak thought. The spahbad's powerful frame was balanced by such a weak mind. 'Clear your mind of portents, clear your mind of Ahura Mazda's wills,' Ramak hissed, teeth bared. 'Today, all will proceed as I have planned.'

Tamur's eyes narrowed at this.

'As we have planned,' Ramak corrected himself.

Just then, a cry of horror rang out from the crowd. The head of one spearman spun from his shoulders and bounced across the arena. The hardy Roman Tribunus

had killed again. This one had made his own people doubt him. If they doubted him and the army that would form before the city tonight, things could become complicated. Already, complication was rife. The scale of the disaster at the Dalaki mines was becoming clearer with every report; three chambers were flooded and hundreds of slaves had escaped – many still roaming uncaptured. At least if the three who had burst onto the arena floor to help the plumed tribunos had come from the mines then that would soon be three less to worry about. He

swiped a hand through the air. There were plenty more salt mines. And who would need salt when the riches of Roman Syria dangled before him like a ripe fruit?

His gaze drifted skywards as he focused on the power and riches that lay ahead. That was when his gaze snagged on something, on the slope of the acropolis, approaching the base of the palace. A small cloud of dust and . . . movement. Someone was climbing up the scree. Deliberately avoiding the carved steps. Desperate not to be seen. A creeping chill spread across his skin. When the three Romans

had leapt into the arena to help the plumed tribunos, he had been bemused, little more. But if there were others . . .

‘Spahbad, you will oversee the rest of this bout,’ he said, standing, ignoring Tamur’s scowl at this order. ‘Now, I need six of your best men,’ he clicked his fingers, his gaze never leaving the top of the mount.

Chapter 19



The pushtigban atop the acropolis seemed to be relaxed. Most had downed their winged helms and masks and stood in the shade of palms clusters or near the lip of the plateau to escape the late afternoon sun and watch the combat in the arena below. Pavo, Sura, Habitus and Falco were pressed against the palace wall, around the corner from the

entrance courtyard and babbling fountain. Parakeets sang, black-shouldered kites whistled as they flitted from branch to branch and the cicada song grew louder and louder, as if determined to alert the guards to the Romans' presence.

Falco cupped a hand to his ear and gripped Pavo's arm. 'The fountain,' he wheezed, each breath rattling with blood now, 'the scroll is in the chambers beyond.'

'Father, you need to rest,' Pavo started.

'Pavo!' Falco hissed back, stifling a wet cough. 'The scroll!'

'Aye,' he winced, turning

away. He inched his head forward to peek around the corner and into the courtyard. A pair of pushtigban warriors chatted near the high, arched doorway beyond the fountain that led into the palace. His heart leapt as Sura roughly shoved himself up to peek round too.

‘If those two don’t move, we can’t risk it,’ Sura observed, less than helpfully.

Just then, a roar sounded from the arena below, louder than any before. Interest piqued, the two guards stopped talking and strolled out of the courtyard. Pavo’s heart

leapt and he ducked back, pressing himself against the wall, the others doing likewise. The two guards walked past them and on to the lip of the mount and stood, backs turned, only paces away from them.

Push them? Habitus mouthed.

No! Pavo and Sura mouthed in furious unison. Instead, Pavo beckoned the group forward. They stole into the shade of the courtyard, staying close to the walls. They sneaked past the fountain and then inside the palace.

Inside was cool and shady. Floral motifs and carvings of stags, lions and elephants adorned the

walls. Reliefs of stern Persian warriors and kings of the past glowered down upon them. The polished black tiles underfoot seemed deathly cold in comparison to the blistering hot flagstones of the courtyard. 'It's empty?' Pavo whispered, then cupped a hand over his lips as the whisper echoed around the high ceilings.

'I very much doubt it. But you will hear any foe before you see them,' Falco replied. 'Now, the scroll is not on this floor. The slave who told me of it said he concealed it in the heart of the palace. The chamber on the second floor that

looks out over the city. Find the stairwell.'

Pavo crept forward, casting his gaze along to where this vast chamber met with the next, a yawning archway dividing them. Beyond, he saw the base of a flight of polished marble stairs. 'This way,' he gestured, leading them towards it. He slowed to a halt when he heard another clatter of footsteps approaching, flitting down the stairs. Two people. He shot a glance to Sura and Habitus. They rushed to press into the shadows either side of the archway, out of sight of the stairs. Two pushtigban

warriors turned briskly from the stairwell chamber into this one, striding past Pavo and his group. A muted sigh of relief escaped Pavo's lips when, suddenly, one of the guards halted, patting his belt.

'My water skin,' he muttered, then turned back for the stairs. His eyes fell upon the four nestled in the shadows in the corner. The man's face wrinkled, his dark moustache lifting as he sucked in a breath to call out in alarm. The cry had barely left his lips before Sura was up and rushing for him. Instinctively, Pavo charged behind his friend. The pushtigban levelled

his spear at Sura, who feinted to duck one way then went the other, grappling the spear shaft as he did so and wrenching it from the man's grip. Pavo followed up with a crunching hook into the man's jaw. He toppled like a felled oak. The other guard, only feet away, rushed for the courtyard to raise the alarm. With a flash of iron, Sura loosed the spear of the fallen pushtigban like a javelin. The lance punched into the warrior's back – failing to penetrate his armour but knocking him to the floor where his head bashed against the tiles. He lay still. Sura expelled a tense breath, shook his throwing

arm and rolled his head on his shoulders. 'The games at Adrianople, three summers ago – finest javelin marksman. Shame I got drunk later and nearly skewered the judge with my one wayward throw. They took my prize purse back for that. Shower of bast - '

Pavo grappled his friend by the arm. 'Tell me about it later.' He took the shamshir from the unconscious pushtigban, while Sura took the blade of the other. Habitus took a spear. They dragged the two limp bodies into the shadows, then Pavo led Falco to the stairwell chamber, the others following close

behind. The staircase was broad and led up around the walls of this central vault – nearly three times as high as the last chamber. His eyes rested on the second of three landings. ‘The heart of the palace,’ he muttered in realisation. They hurried up to this second floor and slowed at the landing. There were no guards in sight. A bright shaft of sunlight drew his gaze to the main chamber on this floor.

Pavo led the way gingerly, flexing his grip on the honeycomb hilt of the Persian blade. They entered this, the finest chamber yet. The far wall opened up

courtesy of three tall archways, providing a breathtaking vista of sun-bathed Bishapur. Silken curtains hung either side of these archways, tied back with gold-threaded rope. The sunlight streamed in and illuminated the gilded, high vaulted ceiling and the forest of treasures that filled the floor. It was an eclectic collection of marble sculptures, porphyry carvings, suits of ancient-looking armour, shields with ornate spears crossed behind them, delicately inscribed vases and urns and fine silk drapes. They each picked their way through this treasure-trove

with bated breath. Pavo's gaze snagged on the floor mosaic – depicting a pack of Persian riders with thick, oiled beards and plumed helms, loosing their bows. A warrior on his knees before them bore their arrows in his chest – a warrior in Roman armour. Pavo gulped. Then he looked up to see Sura unwittingly backing up against one of the suits of armour. The suit had been positioned to hold a curved blade high overhead. Sura bumped the display and the arm and blade came chopping down, stopping only inches from his shoulder. His stifled yelp did little to still the nerves. He

cocked an eyebrow at Pavo as he casually returned the arm to its original position.

Pavo glared at his friend, then whispered to Habitus who was scouting the far side of the chamber. 'Guards?'

Habitus shook his head. 'We're alone, sir.'

Pavo turned to Falco. 'Father. I think this is it – the heart of the palace.'

'Aye, I can smell the finery around me . . . that and the stench of power,' Falco said, stroking a silk drape.

'The scroll, Father. Where is

it?' Pavo said. Sura and Habitus waited on the reply, wide-eyed.

Falco's face fell grave and he nodded as if about to perform some loathsome task. 'In amongst this opulence, there is a vile object. Shapur's forefather did something that he regretted until his dying breath, or so they say.'

'Father, what do you . . . ' he stopped, his gaze catching on something beyond Falco's shoulder. Something grotesque. A shiver shook him to his core despite the fierce heat of the sun streaming across the room. There, at the far end of the chamber, a timber frame

hung on the wall, as if to hold another silk drape. But instead of a drape, a human skin was stretched across it. Patchy tufts of hair on the scalp. Gaping, empty eyeholes. Tortured, torn lips. The warped, frayed and sagging skin of limbs and a torso. Pavo felt his guts turn over and he heard Habitus retch behind him. 'Emperor Valerian? So the myth is real.'

'Aye, you have found it then?' Falco replied sombrely.

'How can anyone keep such a thing in their home?' Sura spat.

Falco shook his head. 'It seems they keep it because neither

Shapur's forefather, nor any Persian Shahanshah or noble since, has been able to face this piece in order to dispose of it. Shame sees it left here to stare into eternity.'

Pavo's disgust faded momentarily. He noticed that while the other treasures in the room were spotless, the skin was heaped with dust and cobwebs. 'No Persian comes near this piece, you said.'

Falco's face creased with a wry smile. 'Exactly. And that is why the brigand hid the scroll behind it. That is why it will still be there.'

Pavo, Sura and Habitus shared a breathless glance. Seeing that

neither of the two were making haste to search the skin, Pavo stepped forward, gulping back the urge to retch as he approached and saw every tortured inch of the piece. He kicked a short footstool over and stood on it, pressing his head side-on to the wall to look up the back of the frame. It was thick with furrowed dust, but nothing else. His shoulders sagged and he made to sigh, when a puff of dust caught in his throat. He erupted in a coughing fit, and this blew swathes of the thick dust from behind the frame. So much so that, when he regained his breath, his

eye caught on something that had been revealed. A yellowed, frayed roll of paper, wedged behind the skin of the thigh. Pavo's heart thundered. He reached up, stretching every sinew in his arm. A trailing, sagging piece of skin from the foot dangled across his face as he did so, the musty stench of ancient decay permeating his senses. His fingertips scraped and scratched at the scroll. Finally, it fell from where it was wedged and firmly into his grasp.

'I have it!' he gasped, spluttering the dust from his lips and hopping down from the stool.

Sura gawped. 'We must be sure – check!'

Habitus, Sura and Falco hurried round as Pavo unravelled the scroll.

The writing was faint and completely faded in parts around the edges.

The River Euphrates is to be the border between our two great empires. Like brothers overlooking east and west, neither shall allow their armies to trespass upon the other's territory. Any such encroachment will incur the wrath of the many bold and noble kingdoms and republics that

encircle our borders.

Pavo glanced up, shaking his head. 'It's real, it's just as we hoped!'

Falco gripped his son's arm, his lips stained with black blood. 'It can stave off war with Persia?'

'Yes, it states it plainly, it . . . ' he fell silent as he read the last line in the treaty, just above the flaking wax seals of Jovian and Shapur.

While Flavius Jovianus Augustus remains at Rome's helm, this treaty will remain sacrosanct.

His heartbeat slowed and a nausea swam in his veins, as if he had just taken a blow to the guts.

‘ . . . it’s useless,’ he muttered, dropping his hands by his side. ‘Jovian did enough to protect himself and no more.’

Sura wrung his fingers through his locks, backing away. ‘We’ve come all the way from the empire, through scalding desert, through months of torture in those mines, and now into the heart of the palace to find this, a useless sheaf of paper?’

Pavo reached out a hand to console Sura. But he froze as he heard footsteps scraping at the entrance to the chamber.

‘Useless for Rome, perhaps.

But invaluable to me,' a voice rasped.

A winter-cold fear gripped Pavo. He and the group backed away as the hunched, blue-robed figure of Archimagus Ramak moved through the arched entrance, stepping between the artefacts dotted around the chamber. His fingers were steepled and his eyes hungry, peering along his sharp nose. 'That scroll has been like a demon, preying upon my dreams, stifling my ambitions. Always, it taunted me with the possibility of its existence,' Ramak continued, approaching. 'When I heard from

my spies in Antioch that Emperor Valens was to send an expedition to Persia to retrieve it, I feared the worst. And for a moment, when I watched you find it and begin to read its contents, I was sure I would have to slay you and burn the scroll, in order to smooth the coming invasion of Roman Syria.' He produced a silk cloth from his sleeve and patted it to his bald crown, blotting away the beads of sweat there. His tongue poked out to dampen his lips. 'Now, I realise the scroll is no threat to my ambitions. It never was. Jovian is long dead. Roman Syria can be

taken without reprisal. I need no longer burn the scroll.' He lifted a hand and stretched out a single, bony finger that seemed to lance into Pavo's heart. 'But you must die. All of you. Perhaps I will skin you and mount your hides alongside this one?' he grinned, nodding at Valerian's remains. He clapped his hands. At that moment, six pushtigban entered the chamber, fanning out behind Ramak, then marching in front of him in a phalanx, picking their way around the displays in the chamber towards Pavo.

Pavo tucked the scroll into his

robe. As he backed away from the approaching six, he grappled at one small stucco bust of a Persian noble and hurled it at the nearest warrior. The piece smacked against the man's forehead with a dull thud. The bust hit the floor and the warrior swayed where he stood, his helm caved in, blood gushing from his eye sockets and nostrils before he toppled to the floor. At this, the rest of the warriors growled, suddenly enraged, then rushed forward.

Pavo staggered back, knowing his sword could not compete against the lengthy pushtigban

spears. In moments, he and his comrades were cornered by the leftmost archway overlooking the courtyard and the city. Habitus used his spear as best he could, jabbing out at them, swiping to keep them back.

Pavo glanced all around him. There was only one way out of this, he realised, peering out of the archway and the fifty foot drop to the courtyard below. He felt the silken curtains trace on his skin and a glimmer of hope sparkled in his mind. He saw Sura's eyes glint too as if sharing the thought. With a yank, the pair tore the curtain from

its pole, then hurriedly tied the top to a marble sculpture of a scale-clad Persian warrior. Pavo tugged on the curtain twice and it held firm. He grappled Falco around the waist and pulled him close. 'Hold on tight,' he demanded, stepping up onto the ledge of the archway. Sura grasped the curtain too.

'Strike them down!' Ramak seethed.

'Habitus, come on!' Pavo cried, but the reply only came in the form of Habitus' bloody gurgle – a pair of pushtigban spears punching through his chest and bursting from his back. Habitus crumpled and the

pushtigban surged over his corpse, spears raised to strike.

‘Jump!’ Sura cried, barging he, Pavo and Falco from the ledge.

With a whoosh of air in his ears, Pavo realised two things. Firstly, he was falling. Secondly, he had given no thought to the length of the curtain. If it was too long, they would be dashed on the courtyard slabs. He braced as the slabs rushed up at them, waiting on the shattering impact. At the last, the curtain jolted rigid and they dangled, feet from the ground. They slid from the curtain and staggered back, pushtigban spears

clattering down around them only inches away. Ramak curled his fingers around the ledge above and glared down upon them. 'Spearmen!' he roared. His cry seemed to echo across the plateau and all over Bishapur. At once, the rustle of iron and thundering footsteps seemed to come at them from every direction.

Pavo wrenched Falco to his feet and darted past the fountain towards the palm cluster and the lip of the acropolis where they had ascended. 'Stay with me, Father!' he cried as Falco foundered, coughing, blood snaking from his

lips.

‘Pavo!’ Sura cried.

Pavo skidded to a halt just in time as a trio of Median spearmen burst into view by the cluster of palms. He swung round only to see Ramak and the pushtigban haring towards them from the palace. He looked this way and that, seeing that the only way clear was across the acropolis, towards the blue-domed Fire Temple. ‘This way!’

They hurried from the pursuing pack of warriors and rushed through a shady orchard, startling one Median spearman who had clearly not heard Ramak’s cry.

The mail-shirted spearman dropped the bright orange fruit he was munching upon, wiped his moustache clean then grappled at his spear and grimaced. Pavo ducked under the spear thrust, pulling Falco down with him. Sura followed them, throwing a sharp jab into the man's cheek, sending him staggering, dazed.

Branches thwacked against their skin as they pushed onwards, then they burst out into the sunlight again. The three stumbled on towards the temple. Ramak and the pursuing pack were only paces behind. Pavo took his father's arm,

leading him forward to the lip of the acropolis beside the temple. 'Brace yourself, Father, it will be a steep descent, but . . . ' He froze, seeing more Median spearmen climbing the scree-strewn slopes towards them, fanned out all around this end of the acropolis.

'We're trapped!' Sura said it first.

Pavo backed towards the temple now, readying to fight, but there were more than thirty men in all coming for them. With no other option presenting itself, he hauled Falco inside the temple's eastern entrance. Their footsteps echoed

along a broad, vaulted corridor. An orange light glowed at the end of the corridor, and its reflection danced on the whitewashed ceiling and sparkled on the black-slabbed floor. As they approached this light, a dryer, fiercer heat than ever before swirled around them. At last, they spilled into the temple's central chamber. A circular pit dominated this square room and the flames that danced within it licked high in the air, as if trying to reach the gilt ceiling and the relief of the winged Faravahar there.

‘We’re in the temple?’ Falco said. ‘This is the beating heart of

Ramak's realm.' He trembled with weakness, his teeth stained with black blood.

'Father, you need to stand back,' Pavo winced, glancing to each of the four passageways leading to this central chamber, shadows jostling in the slivers of daylight. 'Stay back and we'll protect you.'

'Nonsense,' Falco squared his jaw. 'I have waited over fifteen years to fight that whoreson, Ramak.'

'Father, you're all I have, please, stand back!' Pavo pleaded.

At this, Falco frowned, shaking

his head. 'You mean the crone didn't tell you?'

'Father?' Pavo frowned.

Falco pulled the strip of well-worn leather from his wrist and tied it hurriedly onto Pavo's. 'Before I met your mother, I . . . '

A storm of footsteps echoed down each corridor, cutting him off. But then the footsteps stopped. A lone, rasping voice echoed into the chamber; 'You cannot escape.'

Pavo's eyes darted as the words seemed to dance around him. The shadows of the Persian warriors in each passageway were still. The only movement came from

the southern corridor. The three backed away from this corridor, until they reached the edge of the fire pit and felt the flames sting their skin.

‘Now you will burn along with your scroll. Rome, the lie, will burn to fuel the destiny of the House of Aspaphet, the truth . . . my destiny.’ The echoing words grew closer until Ramak emerged into the chamber, flanked by two pushtigban. ‘I urge you to cast yourselves into the flames, Romans,’ he gestured to the fire pit, ‘before my guards seize you. Else you will see that I have many long and memorable ways of

introducing non-believers to the Sacred Fire.' As he said this, he sidled round the edge of the room to a rack where a variety of fire-charred irons hung. Some like swords, others hooked, some spiked. He eyed them and then looked over Falco. 'I remember you,' he said. 'I put out your eyes a long, long time ago then sent you to the mines. Perhaps this time I will have to cripple you too. Though that might be a waste of effort, for you have but hours to live anyway,' he mused, seeing the dark blood dripping from Falco's lips.

Pavo wrapped an arm around

the shivering Falco, helping him to stand tall. Father's body was growing cold. The realisation tore Pavo's heart in half. 'You might see today as some kind of victory, Archimagus. Aye, the scroll poses you no threat. But look at what stands before you; Roman legionaries, like a dagger in the heart of your realm. If a dogged few can do this, then think what the empire's many legions might achieve.'

Ramak halted in his stride and glared at Pavo, then threw his head back and boomed with laughter that filled the domed chamber.

'Your legions in Syria are weak and scattered. Most have been forced to rush west to fight the Goths. I know this.' He spread out his arms as if savouring the moment. 'I know all of this.' A serene expression hung on his face momentarily, then a shadow from the fire transformed it into a searing scowl. 'Seize them!'

In a flash, the pushtigban had their spears at Pavo and Sura's throats. Pavo braced, sword raised, ready to hack at the spear tip, but Falco squeezed his arm.

'Do not, Pavo!' Falco croaked weakly. Then he whispered in Pavo's ear. 'I will be with you, Son.'

Always.'

Pavo hesitated, frowning, his gaze hanging on father's sightless expression as the pushtigban disarmed Sura and Pavo then hauled them away from the fire pit and Falco. 'Father?' he called weakly, seeing a look of finality wash across Falco's haggard features. The pushtigban kicked at the back of Pavo's knees and he and Sura slumped to kneeling.

'The old man will die first,' Ramak purred, stepping over to Falco at the edge of the fire pit, eyeing him like a butcher examining a lamb. 'His eyes are already gone

and we will have little pleasure in his torture. The other two can watch him burn before their torture begins.'

Pavo's heart pounded on his ribs as he saw Ramak's face contort with a grin.

The archimagus drew a dagger from his belt and thrust it into Falco's midriff. The blade sunk deep and black blood washed from the wound.

Pavo heard his own cry as if from a hundred miles distant. No! He lurched up from kneeling, but a spear-point in his back winded him and dropped him to his knees

again. He reached out, lips moving wordlessly as Ramak butted his palms into Falco's chest. Falco swayed, losing his balance and falling back towards the flames. The light of the Sacred Fire danced in Ramak's eyes as he watched, grinning. 'Burn in the realm of Ahriman, Roman dog.'

'Father!' Pavo cried until he thought his heart would burst.

At the last, Falco shot out a hand and grappled Ramak's collar, halting his fall.

Ramak yelped, choking. The pushtigban seemed frozen in indecision at this. Falco's hair and

the back of his robe had already caught light, but he hauled himself up just a fraction, and pressed his face to Ramak's. 'It is time for you to face the god whose name you have darkened for so long, cur!' he hissed, then tore something from his robe. It glinted in the firelight as he brought it arcing round and across Ramak's throat. The buckled bronze phalera tore across the archimagus' neck, sending a dark spray of blood across the temple floor. Then, as one, Falco and Ramak toppled back into the fire pit. The flames consumed the pair. Ramak's screams were shrill and

lasting. Falco made not a sound.

The pushtigban scrambled forward to the edge of the fire pit to see their archimagus' blazing form thrashing and reaching out as if still in belief that he could be saved.

Pavo felt his next actions as if they were part of a dream. He rushed forward and shoulder-charged one pushtigban into the pit. The man plummeted under the weight of his armour, his gruff cries seemingly never-ending as the fire cooked him alive. The last pushtigban backed away, spear flicking from Pavo to Sura and back again. Pavo grappled one of the

timber stools nearby and held it up as a form of shield. The spearman jabbed at them confidently, his legs bracing as if readying to spring. Then, like an apparition from a nightmare, the first pushtigban hauled himself from the pit, his body ablaze and his armour glowing hot. His hoarse cries were inhuman, his face ruined by the flames. He threw himself around the chamber, clawing out at the drapes and timbers, inadvertently setting light to each. At the last, he stumbled towards his comrade, arms outstretched, his step slowing. The last pushtigban backed away, eyes

bulging in terror at the mutilated creature. Backed against the wall, the last warrior thrust his spear into the burning man's gut. The burning man wailed in agony, then wrapped his hands around the other's throat and crushed the life from his killer. The two toppled to the floor, still and silent.

Pavo and Sura stared at one another. For a heartbeat, the only noise in the chamber was the crackling of flames as the blaze spread around the walls. Then black smoke billowed over them, stealing their breath away. Through the blackness, they heard panicked

voices along each of the corridors, then barking commands and footsteps approaching. Sura picked up two shamshirs, throwing one blade to Pavo and looking to each passageway. 'What now?' he said, gagging as black smoke caught in his throat. 'Can we fight our way out of here?'

Pavo shook his head, feeling the smoke clawing at his eyes and lungs. 'No, this smoke will kill us before the Persian blades will.' He saw one piece of linen that had not yet caught fire, draped on the temple wall beside a water font. He tore this down, ripped it in two and

soaked it in the water then wrapped it round his head leaving just a thin gap to see through, giving the other piece to Sura. This seemed to shield their eyes and lungs from the worst of the smoke. 'Now, we fight,' Pavo nodded, then the pair looked again to the passageways.

The first of the approaching Persian warriors burst into the central chamber from the northern corridor. Pavo and Sura braced, ready for combat, but the warrior swiped out wildly, blinded by the stinging smoke, then doubled over, gagging and retching. Then others

staggered in likewise, tormented by the smoke and oblivious to Pavo and Sura.

'Sura, come on,' Pavo hissed, backing around the flailing men. He and Sura edged to the eastern entrance, then Pavo cast a last look back at the Sacred Fire.

Goodbye, Father, he mouthed.

With that, he and Sura plunged through the corridor. The black smoke was billowing along here too. They skirted around the disorientated Persian warriors, few even noticing them. When they burst from the end of the corridor and onto the acropolis, the black

smoke did not abate. Thick clouds of it poured across the plateau, as if a storm had emerged from the temple. Pavo retched and spat, blinking and rubbing at his eyes.

‘Look!’ Sura said, pointing down the slope to the arena. The games had ceased, the crowds were spilling from the spectacle and a panicked cry had replaced the entertained roars of before. Warriors and people alike streamed through the streets and filtered up the side of the acropolis. Many carried pots sloshing with water, many more had fallen to their knees in prayer, seeking mercy

from Ahura Mazda.

‘Pavo!’ Sura croaked.

Pavo spun to see a quartet of Median spearmen rushing towards them. The pair braced, swords raised, but the spearmen washed around them like a river around a lone rock, haring onwards to the temple before calling out to nearby comrades carrying water vessels.

Pavo looked to Sura and Sura looked back.

Then they each turned their gaze upon the arena floor below.

Chapter 20



Dark plumes of smoke billowed from the temple, blackening the skies over the city and setting light to the adjacent orchard. Soon the palace would be ablaze too. Down in the arena the drums ceased and the crowd gawped. Then, after a moment of realisation, they were fleeing the timber banks of seating, jabbering and screaming, rushing to aid those fighting the flames, their

hurried footsteps taking up the absent rhythm of the drums. Clouds of smoke billowed down across the arena, stinging eyes and bringing coughing fits to those who fled.

But while the people of Bishapur panicked and the arena drained of spectators, Spahbad Tamur remained, barking his spearmen on from the kathisma as they tore at the five Romans. When the smoke started to obscure his view, the burly warrior leapt from the enclosure and rushed down to the foot of the arena seating. There he strode along the edge, punching a fist into his palm, motioning as if

striking death blows himself.

‘Spill their blood!’ Tamur cried, the veins in his forehead bulging. ‘I want my victory, I want my blessing!’ He shot an anxious glance up to the blazing Fire Temple as he said this.

Near the centre of the arena, Gallus glanced at the snarling spahbad, then back to his foe – a hook-nosed spearman with a dark, oiled beard. He parried then swept his spatha out like a serpent’s tongue, tearing across the chest of the spearman, breaking the iron loops in the man’s mail vest and scoring deep into flesh. His foe fell

back, choking on his own blood. Gallus turned from the dying man and faced the next two spearmen who came for him. Three of the ten Medians facing them had been felled – caught cold or overconfident. But the remaining seven were fresh while he and his men were tiring.

Nearby he saw Quadratus, Carbo and Zosimus, a pair of spearmen lying in a bloody pool at their feet while they fought to fend off another three. On the other edge of the arena, another two Medians had backed Felix against the edge of the space. Suddenly,

one foe punched a spear through the little Greek's gut and into the timber strut behind him. Felix's cry echoed around the emptying arena and a thick spray of crimson blood leapt from the wound, soaking the dusty floor. Another Median spearman lined up to strike a death blow, throwing down his spear and drawing out his shamshir, lining up to strike at Felix's neck. Gallus' blood froze; the Greek's eyes met with his, a look of finality sweeping across his features.

Instinctively, Gallus lunged forward in an attempt to burst past his own two attackers and reach

Felix, but the spears of the two before him came up in a cross, blocking his path and then barging him back. He stumbled and fell.

At this, Tamur raised a hand. The two ready to slay Felix halted, waiting on their spahbad's word. 'You have fought bravely, Roman.' Tamur boomed at him from the edge of the arena, his face fixed in a dark scowl, his hands resting upon his hips, the dark smoke rippling his gold-threaded cloak. 'But now it is over. Order the rest of your men to throw down their weapons and they will live. And I will permit you a swift death.'

Gallus looked across the arena, seeing the look of defiance in Felix's eyes, the faint shake of the little Greek's head. He looked back to Tamur and replied in a steady tone; 'You will let them live? In the mines, maybe, aye. And I doubt you know how to administer a swift death. You forget I have had the pleasure of watching you and your master's deeds in the months you kept me in that pit.'

'Ramak was never my master!' Tamur roared, shaking a clenched fist in the air, flecks of spittle clouding the air before him. The man's eyes burned with indignation,

then he flicked a finger down to the two men by Felix. With a flash of iron, the Median sword swept round and chopped through Felix's neck, a dull clunk of iron biting into timber ringing out as the blade embedded deep in the wooden strut. The primus pilus' head toppled to the ground and then his body slumped too. Gallus froze. The rapid drumming of his heart suddenly slowed to a steady, crashing thud that shook him to his extremities, his vision shuddering with every beat. He saw the two Medians before him close in for the kill, lowering their spear tips towards

his throat.

He heard a guttural roar, barely realising it was his own. He felt his body convulse, his sword arm sweeping round where he lay. The spatha cleaved through the hamstrings of the nearest Median, who fell, thrashing in gouts of his own blood. The second Median halted, stunned, as Gallus rose, driving the blade up and under the man's ribs. Gallus pulled the man close, growling as he watched the light dim in his foe's eyes, then tore his blade clear. Nearby, Carbo, Quadratus and Zosimus fought with an equal fire, their faces torn in

rage at the slaying of their comrade. They hacked the arm from one Median, then Carbo tore the throat from another. When another tried to run, Quadratus' blade spun through the air, taking the warrior in the cheek, smashing the skull and sending the bearded jaw spinning away from the face along with a shower of teeth, bone shards and blood. The Median crashed forward like a speared boar.

Quadratus and Zosimus stalked towards the remaining two by Felix's body. They backed away, looked to their spahbad, then

turned and ran from the now deserted arena.

Tamur's grin melted away at this. 'You curs!' he cried, pulling a dagger from his belt then hurling it after the fleeing Medians. The short blade punched into one man's neck and the life was gone from him before he crashed to the ground.

Gallus' gaze locked onto Tamur.

Tamur glanced all around the arena 'Spearmen!' he cried, looking to the tunnel under the kathisma. His words were answered only by an echo.

Gallus watched as the

spahbad backed away, up the arena steps. 'What's wrong, Spahbad? Did you leave your hubris with your bodyguards?' Gallus asked, hauling himself from the arena floor and up onto the timber seating, following Tamur. The spahbad's eyes darted this way and that. Then, a drumming of feet landing on the top row of seats sounded. Tamur twisted to the noise.

Pavo and Sura stood there, hair tousled, skin smoke-blackened and bloodied, chests heaving.

'Reinforcements?' Quadratus cooed between snatched breaths as he hurried up to Gallus' side.

'Aye, Mithras is truly with us, it seems,' Zosimus laughed coldly through gritted teeth.

Tamur could not disguise his outright panic now, and turned to flee back towards the kathisma. Quadratus made to follow, but Gallus shot out an arm to halt him. 'Leave him – wherever he goes, there will be pushtigban, and lots of them.'

Pavo and Sura descended the wooden steps and saluted with trembling, smoke-stained arms.

'The scroll?' Gallus asked.

Pavo shook his head. 'We have it. It is of no use.'

‘But Archimagus Ramak is dead,’ Sura offered, ‘and I am certain that is a good thing.’

Gallus snorted at this. ‘Was it swift?’ he muttered, thumbing the hilt of his spatha.

‘No,’ Sura replied.

‘Good,’ Gallus said, his ice-blue eyes glinting like a blade.

He looked to Pavo and saw a glassiness in his eyes. He realised the two were alone. ‘Optio, is there nobody else with you?’

Pavo shook his head in silence.

‘Then your Father . . . ’

‘He is gone, sir.’ Pavo said,

turning his grave look upon Carbo.

The fire of the fight seemed to lessen in Carbo's eyes at these words. 'Lad, I . . . '

'I know what happened,' Pavo said stonily.

Carbo could offer no reply.

Zosimus interrupted the moment. 'Sir!' he yelled to Gallus, pointing to the tunnel. There, a cluster of shadows approached, jostling as they ran down the passageway. Spears and swords glinting. Too many to count.

Gallus looked this way and that. Then Carbo grappled his shoulder.

‘Eventually, we all must face our past, Tribunus.’ With that, the centurion turned away and loped across the arena, headed for the tunnel mouth. He stopped only to pick up the discarded spike-hammer, then twisted round to glance at Pavo and Gallus, his grey-streaked locks whipping across his fiery scowl. ‘Go . . . run!’ he yelled before turning to plunge into the shadows of the tunnel mouth with a frenzied cry. His roar was met with yelps of surprise, the crash of crumpling armour and the thick cracking of bones.

Gallus gazed into the darkness

of the tunnel mouth, Carbo's words ringing in his ears. Then hands clasped down upon his shoulders, wrenching him back, towards the open end of the arena.

'Sir, come on!' Zosimus cried.



Tamur crouched amongst the gutted ruins of the Fire Temple's central chamber. While the blaze raged on near the palace, the inferno here had been extinguished. The place was still fiercely hot and an acrid stench of charred flesh hung in the air. He gazed at the grotesque, blackened form before

him, propped against one wall in sitting position. It was hairless and near-featureless, the skin hanging in half-melted welts. This was the mighty archimagus he had looked up to for so many years – the one who had stepped in to defend him as his father's heir. This was the man who had promised him his destiny. Tamur had always feared what might happen without the Archimagus by his side. Now, he felt only a great burden lifting from his shoulders. As the surrounding smoke cleared, Tamur's thoughts came together for the first time in so long.

‘You worked my father like an ox. Then you harnessed me.’

At that moment, the corpse juddered. The charred, crispy eyelids cracked open, and Ramak’s predatory glare was upon him once again. Terror lanced through Tamur’s veins.

‘You . . . will . . . obey me, Spahbad,’ Ramak hissed in little more than a whisper. The skin of his throat had melded together with that of his jaw, fusing some serrated wound there and offering him a desperate grip on life. ‘The army . . . must wait . . . until I recover . . . ’

Tamur's terror turned to ire. Fury that this creature still tried to control him. 'I have listened to your words for too long, Archimagus. Aye, the conquest will begin. But your time is over.' He looked this way and that; nobody else was in the central chamber. Nobody had seen that the archimagus still clung to life.

Ramak's eyes grew wide as Tamur reached out with both hands, clasped them to Ramak's head, then twisted, his great arms bulging. With a tortured crunching of bone and snapping of sinew, the archimagus' head swivelled sharply

and then fell limp, dangling at an absurd angle.

Tamur stood, his nostrils flaring. 'Now I will lead my armies. I will seize my own destiny!'

He left the ruined temple and flitted down from the acropolis in a blur. First, the Romans had to be stopped before they could take word back to the empire. It was doubtful they would ever make it across such a vast distance in any case, but he had to be sure. He barged through the city streets towards the western gates, shoving the crush of sweating, babbling fools from his path. When one

prune-faced old stable hand nearly tripped him, he swiped his shamshir from his scabbard and slashed it across the old fool's belly. The man's scream was piercing. His guts bulged from the cut and then toppled onto the street. The swell of people nearby broke out into a panicked chorus at this too.

'Clear a path for me!' Tamur barked.

At once, the pack of ironclad pushtigban following him drew their blade. The rasping of iron was enough to split the crowd. They reached the western gatehouse and Tamur motioned to his men. 'Have

the gates closed. Not a soul enters or leaves this city.'

'But, Noble Spahbad, the palace is still ablaze, the palms on the slopes have caught light and now the northern quarter of the city is in flames too. Our homes will burn unless we can ferry enough river water through the gates. The levels of the cistern and the underwater canal are too low and . . .'

Tamur's arm knotted like tough rope and then he brought his knuckles round to smack into the man's mouth. The pushtigban warrior stumbled back, blood

washing down his iron chestplate. Tamur glowered at the rest of his guards. Not one held his gaze, each of them shuffling to stand upright. 'You do as I say, you do it immediately and cut down any who try to pass through these gates. If this city burns to the ground then so be it. The Romans must not leave these walls.'

As one, they dropped to their knees and kissed the ground, then leapt once more to their feet. They clipped their iron masks on and fanned out across the gates, facing into the city, spears levelled. Behind them, the western gates

swung shut. Those clutching vessels and rushing to leave for the riverbank halted, gawping at the closed gates and the line of soulless iron masks gazing back at them. At once, a wail of despair rang out, pleading for the gates to be reopened.

Tamur ignored this chorus of mewling as he ascended the stairs to the gatehouse. Smoke needled at his eyes and the late-afternoon sun burned on his glistening skin. He reached the battlements and saw that the two Median spearmen there looked terrified as they saluted. Good, he mused, fear is

power!

‘The gates are to remain closed. Five Romans are looking to escape from the city . . . ’ he stopped, seeing the taller of the two glance at the other nervously. This was more than just fear. ‘You have something to tell me?’

‘There were a group of riders, Spahbad. Just a short while ago, five of them.’ He pointed a finger to a small dust plume in the west, heading towards the Persian Gulf. ‘We thought they looked different. They trotted out for a few hundred feet and then broke into a gallop.’

Tamur felt his top lip twitch in

fury as he gazed out over the western plain. The five had a good start and there were several hours of light left in the day. He rested his fingers on the honeycomb hilt of his shamshir and considered taking the heads from this pair. Their deaths would solve nothing, but might quell his anger a fraction. He turned to gaze back across his burning city, then saw the answer to the east. Just behind Bishapur, a sea of flickering silver moved closer, pouring from the Zagros Mountain roads like a ferocious tide. The Savaran were here. He relaxed his grip on his sword and saw the pair

of sentries visibly slump in relief. A chill laugh toppled from his lips as he looked back to the west and the fleeing five.

‘Flee then, Romans. But these lands are vast and your horses will soon tire. The Savaran will be on your heels by morning. The carrion birds will feast on your corpses by noon. And I will be there to watch.’

Chapter 21



The five lay flat in their saddles, galloping in silence across the brushland of the Persis Satrapy. After Carbo's last act had given them precious moments to escape the arena, they had slipped into the panicked crowds thronging the city streets. They had acquired these mounts from a stable at the acropolis foot, unguarded by anyone bar a deaf and dithering old

stable hand with a face like a well-dried prune. He had insisted on giving them several water skins and a sack of food too, seemingly thinking they were Persian scouts. More, he had been intent on leading them to the western gates, all the while muttering about his wife's mother. They had ridden through the streets with their heads down, and it was like swimming upriver at times, with endless waves of people rushing in the opposite direction, carrying vessels of water from the cistern. But, to their relief, the gates were open to allow streams of people to bring

water in from the riverbank. The two guards on the gatehouse did seem to overly scrutinise them, but offered no challenge. At the last, the good-hearted, prune-faced old man had left them outside the gates and wandered back inside.

Pavo hoped the old man would not be punished for his part in helping them escape. A good man who was merely doing his job. A thought had crossed his mind at that moment; for every dark-hearted cur they had encountered in Persian lands, there had been just as many good souls. He thought of Khaled, of Zubin.

They rode hard for a good two hours, staying close to the Shapur River gorge. Apart from this jagged fissure, the dusty plain ahead was featureless, dry, and utterly flat. The faint band of blue that heralded the Persian Gulf seemed to forever slip further away. Worse, the outline of Bishapur still loomed behind them, magnified by the smudges of dark smoke that coiled from it and reached up into the dusk sky like claws.

As tiredness set in, Pavo found his thoughts jumbled and jabbering. His heart ached with every beat as he thought of Father. This was

tempered only by the occasional glow of pride as he recalled Father striking the life from Ramak. He ran a hand over his dirt and blood-encrusted beard, then took to smoothing at the worn leather bracelet Father had tied around his wrist. They were free. But Father was gone. Now there was no more guessing, no more doubt. He twisted to look back over his shoulder and wondered at all that burned in that city; Father, the tortured remains of Emperor Valerian, the vile creature, Ramak and, down on the arena floor, Felix. The little Greek had been at the

heart of the XI Claudia since the day he had enlisted. Ever since that day, many such men had died, and now so few remained. Habitus, Noster, Sextus and Rufus, just a few of the many that had been lost along the way in this mission. Then there was Carbo. A man who had betrayed his comrades in exchange for freedom, then found that he could not live with his deeds, marching back to the scene of his shame to die. His emotions were tangled over the centurion. On one hand, he had betrayed Father. On the other hand, if Father had been so underhand to secure his own

freedom, would Pavo have shunned him for it?

A wheezing from his bay mare snapped him from his thoughts. She was sweating and frothing at the mouth. He stroked her mane as they rode, pouring some water over her neck. 'Easy, girl,' he whispered, lying flatter in the saddle.

The others and their mounts were in a similar shape. At last, with darkness almost conquering the last of the navy blue sky in the west, Gallus called out; 'Enough. If we ride on then our mounts will be crippled.'

They crossed the river at a

shallow section then tethered their horses on the banks of the far side where dry grass provided plenty of fodder. Pavo gathered kindling and soon they had a fire crackling in a small, rocky nook by the riverside. The babbling torrents of the river, the singing cicada song and the distant howling of some desert dog was all there was to be heard. Wordlessly, they sat in the shingle around the flames, sharing out the contents of the food sack. There were three flatbreads, a clay pot of yoghurt, a cut of salted goat mutton, a parcel of dates and a small container of honey.

Pavo chewed ravenously on the meat, and it seemed to reinvigorate his limbs. The dates, yoghurt and quickly toasted bread filled his belly and made him drowsy. They washed this down with fresh river water, and let the fire die to mere embers. Each of them looked to one another with weary gazes. Gallus had the look of a hunting wolf, his usually tidy, greying peak of hair tousled and matted, his jaw lined with thick, dark stubble, his limbs taut and bulging from his months of training in the Persian gymnasium. Zosimus and Quadratus, the two titans of

the XI Claudia, were equally haggard. Quadratus' blonde beard and moustache were flowing and tangled like his hair – giving him the look more apt for his Gaulish ancestors than a hardy Roman. Zosimus' usually perma-stubbled anvil jaw and scalp were likewise sprawling with thick, dark-brown hair like some kind of unkempt street-sweeping brush, and he seemed to have aged in these last months – his broken nose more severe and his foul glare just a fraction fouler. Sura too looked ragged – his unkempt blonde mop and beard framing his sunken

cheekbone. But the eyes were the key, Pavo thought, looking round each of them once more. Each pair of eyes told the story of these last few months. The march, the treachery, the ambushes, the sandstorms, the mines, the arena, the palace. One question hung on everyone's lips. Pavo was the first to air it.

'What now?' he said, stoking the embers with a twig.

'When we reach the Gulf, perhaps we might buy a berth on a merchant cog,' Gallus suggested, avoiding the issues of their lack of coin and the certainty that there

would be a massive price on their heads.

'Aye, well we certainly aren't walking back,' Quadratus said with a wry smirk.

At this, Zosimus, Sura and Pavo erupted in a chorus of dry laughter, Gallus going as far as cocking a languid eyebrow.

When the laughter faded, Sura held up his water skin. 'If . . . when we make it back, then we'll drain the taverns of ale for Felix.' For once, he said this with no mischief and not a trace of his trademark grin. Pavo raised his water skin along with the others.

After a short silence, Gallus turned to Pavo. 'You still have the scroll?'

Pavo nodded, pulling it from his belt and handing it to him.

Gallus unfurled it and read, his eyes sparkling at first, then dulling as he came to the clause that rendered it useless. 'So Jovian chose to protect the empire only while he held the throne.'

'Saved his own skin and to Hades with the future of the empire?' Quadratus scowled.

Zosimus shrugged. 'Aye, but then he saved the lives of his army on that day too. Had he not put his

seal to that scroll, they might all have been slain . . . or worse,' he jabbed a thumb over his shoulder in the general direction of the Dalaki salt mines.

'Who knows what Jovian was thinking,' Gallus surmised. 'Reading the minds of the living is difficult and dangerous enough. Reading the minds of the dead . . . ' his words tapered off into a mirthless chuckle as he tucked the scroll inside his robe.

'Has it all been for nothing?' Zosimus shrugged, staring into the fire.

Pavo felt as if the big Thracian

had reached into his heart and pulled the words from there.

'We've lost a lot in getting this far,' Gallus nodded. 'We have little to show for it. But we tried,' he clenched a fist and glanced at the darkness and the veil of stars that cloaked the sky. 'By Mithras, we tried. That must mean something.'

Pavo saw a glassiness welling in Gallus' eyes as he searched the ether for an answer, the idol of Mithras clutched in the tribunos' right hand.

As if aware he was being watched, Gallus tossed a sinew of goat meat into the embers of the

fire, then stood, his eyes at once turning icy cold and his lips growing taut. 'All that remains is for us to ensure that word gets back to the empire. Emperor Valens must be informed of Tamur's intent. We sleep here and then we rise before dawn. We've ridden a good ten miles today so the Gulf coast is roughly another twenty miles away. I reckon we could reach the shores by mid-morning.'

'After that?' Quadratus asked, stretching and cricking his neck to either side.

Gallus turned and strode away from the fire, casting back over his

shoulder; 'After that, we pray that the gods will spirit us home.'



Pavo woke refreshed from a deep and dreamless sleep. It was still dark, but he could see the blackness of the eastern horizon was tinged with a shade of dark-blue. He sat up and scratched at his scalp. The nightmares of Father had not come to him, and he felt an odd sadness at their absence. He thought again of Father's last half-sentence.

Before I met your mother, I . .

He smoothed at the leather bracelet again and cocked a half-smile. 'I can only imagine, Father.'

At that moment, a flock of nightjars swooped overhead, emitting a gentle, soothing trill. At the same time, the dark-blue in the east split with a sliver of orange-pink dawn light. His heart warmed at the sight, and he recalled the embrace he had shared with Father.

Wiping the tears from his eyes, he stood and stretched. Oddly, while Quadratus, Zosimus and Sura lay near him, Gallus was nowhere to be seen. He stripped off his filthy robe to wade into the

shallows of the river, bracing at the chill. A glance all around the flatland offered no sign of threat. Perhaps the situation at Bishapur had spiralled out of control after they had left. Perhaps there would be nobody out looking for them. This glow of optimism lifted his heart further. He plunged under the waters and ran his fingers through his locks, rising and feeling human once more. He blinked the water from his eyes, wiped droplets from his lips and saw the other three stirring. Quadratus was last to rise, sitting bolt upright, lifting one leg and emitting a high-pitched and

tortured chorus of farts, grinning as he saw Zosimus' and Sura's faces wrinkle in disgust. Pavo waded from the river, towelling himself with his ragged robe, patting his face dry. Then he stopped, blinking.

Something was moving on the eastern horizon.

No . . . the entire eastern horizon was moving. Even closer were a pair of riders. Persian scouts. They circled on their mounts, pointing at Pavo, then wheeled around and melted back into the crawling horizon.

'Sir,' Pavo spoke hoarsely, then cleared his throat. 'Sir!' he

cried this time, head snapping this way and that to locate Gallus.

A crunching of rocks sounded from further up the riverbank, and Gallus appeared over the top of one tall, jutting rock, before sliding down its face. The look on the tribunus' face told him two things: he had not slept at all and he had seen exactly what was coming for them.

'On your horses – move!' Gallus cried.



Tamur lofted the golden lion standard in the air, the veins in his

arms bulging at the weight. 'Onwards, to crush the lie!' he bellowed. The reply came like a guttural roar of giants as more than ten thousand warriors echoed their spahbad's rallying call. The Savaran riders swept across the land like a plague of locusts, kicking up a wall of dust in their wake. On the river adjacent to their route, sturdy rafts carried the Median spearmen and some two thousand wretched, chained paighan downriver with them.

At the mouth of the Gulf, the fleet of the Persis Satrapy would be waiting to take Tamur and his army

across the Persian Gulf. Upriver, they could then strike out across the desert and fall upon Roman Syria like a plague. Perhaps then the blackened ruin of his palace would seem insignificant. He shuddered with rage as he remembered the last thing he had seen before mounting to leave and lead the Savaran; his treasure vault, wrenched open and emptied by the people who were supposed to fear and respect him. The image brought flickering fire to his every thought. While his agents back in the city would deal with the perpetrators, he would have the

pleasure of dealing with the five Romans who had started the blaze. They would suffer like dogs. They would plead for the relief of death.

‘Noble Spahbad Tamur,’ a voice spoke beside him.

He swung his scowl round to see his pushtigban-salar, the leader of his bodyguard.

The man lifted his gilt iron facemask to reveal narrow eyes and an eager grin. ‘The Romans have been sighted.’

‘As I knew they would,’ Tamur replied flatly.

‘We will be upon them within the hour. They are headed for the

coast.'

'Excellent,' he purred. 'This will serve as a fine exercise in battlefield formations. Have our ranks form an arc – we will herd these five towards the shores like cattle. And have the paighan on the rafts disembark nearer the coast then join our right flank.'

'A fine plan, Noble Spahbad,' the pushtigban-salar nodded as he backed away then kicked his mount into a trot to convey the order.

Tamur sneered at the sycophantic dog as he departed. The man's family had long coveted the seat of the House of Aspaphet.

When Tamur was a boy, he remembered the cur and his father's frequent visits to the palace, their brazen attempts to dictate policy. Only Ramak's presence by Tamur's side had staved off their push for power. But Ramak was gone. Not for the first time since the archimagus' death, Tamur felt an odd curdling of hubris and self-doubt. While he relished this new found autonomy, he also longed to have another to consult, another to prompt him. Sibilant voices whispered in his head and he snatched at each, wondering if they were his own thoughts or those of

Ramak, nestled in his mind like some demon. He closed his eyes and grappled on his reins until his knuckles whitened and his hands shook. The voices fell silent, and he saw what he had to do.

The narrow-eyed pushtigban-salar would not return home from this campaign, he affirmed with a half-grin. The man's death would be a fine treat. First though, the Roman dogs would serve as a pleasant appetiser. He squinted ahead, seeing the tiny dust plume of the five Roman riders fleeing in vain for the western horizon. When the plume disappeared over the

distant grassy sandbanks, Tamur's eyes narrowed. 'There is nowhere left to run now, Roman dogs . . . '



The blood pounded in Pavo's ears as his mare galloped over the grassy sandbanks and down onto the soft, white-sand shores of the Persian Gulf. Waves crashed rhythmically onto the shore, throwing up a wall of foaming white surf, and hazy turquoise waters stretched out beyond. Overhead, gulls and cormorants shrieked as they swooped and circled. The hot, early morning air was spiced with a

salty tang. He slowed by the water's edge, the others stopping beside him. Wordlessly, they gazed out across the waves. Then they glanced just a mile or so up the shoreline to the north, where the Euphrates estuary flowed into the Gulf. There, through the haze of heat and salt-spray, they saw a mass of ships bobbing on the waves, sails billowing. The Persian fleet, Pavo guessed. The Savaran were coming for them from the east, and this fleet would ensnare them from the north. He glanced to the south: only open, sandy flats for miles – nowhere to hide.

Zosimus said it first; 'We're trapped.'

'No,' Gallus said flatly as he heeled his mount into the shallows. His lips were cracked and his skin glistened with sweat and salt spray. He trotted back and forth through the waterline, nostrils flared, spatha drawn, his battered intercisa glinting in the sun, the plume and the ragged robe he wore fluttering in the sea breeze – like a battered remnant of Rome in this far-flung land. Finally, his gaze seemed to narrow upon the approaching fleet.

'Sir, we can't win this one,' Quadratus said gravely.

‘The five of us? No, we can’t,’ Gallus cocked an eyebrow, heeling his mount round to face them. ‘But we’re not alone.’

‘Sir?’ Pavo said. Then, when Gallus pointed to the fleet, he understood.

The fleet was close enough now to discern. The ships were not Persian. Twelve triremes. Each of the white sails bore a silver Chi-Rho emblem. The decks were awash with armoured men and a figure on the foremost vessel carried a silver eagle banner.



The triremes crunched onto the shore, and a chorus of splashing and drumming boots followed. In moments, the shallows were thick with dark-blue shields emblazoned with silver Chi-Rhos, gleaming intercisa helms and spear tips. First one cohort, then another two. The XVI Flavia Firma – the rest of Carbo's legion. Some fifteen hundred men. With them was a pack of some three hundred funditores – Armenian slingers dressed in tunics with small bull-hide shields strapped to their biceps and axes dangling from their belts. Like a wave of steel, they splashed

forward from the shallows, then onto the sand, rushing to form up.

Gallus dismounted, slapping his exhausted mount on the flanks to send it cantering from the beach. Then he sought out the red-bearded officer to the right of the first cohort. 'Tribunus Varius of the XVI Flavia Firma!' the man saluted as he approached.

'Tribunus Gallus of the XI Claudia Pia Fidelis,' Gallus barked in reply.

'It is you,' Varius' face widened in disbelief and he clasped Gallus' shoulders. 'The last of the emperor's vexillatio?'

Gallus frowned. 'Aye,' he replied guardedly. 'What do you know of my men and I?'

Varius held his gaze with an earnest look. 'A messenger came to Antioch, bringing news of your enslavement.'

'A messenger?' Gallus' eyes narrowed.

Varius nodded. 'A desert warrior. A Maratocupreni chieftain. A woman.'

'Izodora?' Pavo gasped from nearby.

'Aye,' Varius replied, 'A beauty with a tongue like a whip! She spoke to Emperor Valens like a

scolding mother. But he listened, he hung on her every word. He heard of your capture and his shoulders slumped, but then his eyes sparkled when he realised you had been taken alive to the Satrapy of Persis. After that he sent his advisors from the room and they talked alone. Afterwards, when she had gone, his eyes were red-rimmed and his face sullen. It was then that he came to me. I assumed it was to finalise my orders to take my men to Thracia with the last of the few legions stationed in Syria – even the barely-trained city garrisons are being loaded onto ships and sent

west. But no, he told me that I was instead to take my legion east, to patrol these waters, to seek you out. He insisted that while there was hope that you and your men still lived, then there was hope for the empire's eastern frontier. His advisors argued that it was folly not to send us to Thracia. But the emperor was adamant. Think of those who call this land home, he glared at them, those who cannot simply turn and flee to some country villa in Anatolia or Africa! Their protests soon fell silent,' Varius grinned dryly, then his voice dropped to a hoarse whisper; 'Tell

me you found Jovian's scroll, Tribuneus.'

'Aye, we have it,' Gallus cocked an eyebrow, patting the flank of his robe, 'but it won't save the empire.'

Varius' frowned as if to reply, then his face paled and his jaw dropped, his eyes widening as he looked over Gallus' shoulder to the top of the beach.

Gallus twisted to look up to the grassy dunes. A thick dust plume billowed just beyond. Moments later, myriad vivid drafsh banners bobbed into view, as if rising from the dunes. Then the

silvery mass of the Savaran came into full view; a vast and deep line of near ten thousand Persian riders. Their centre was a thick line of steel cataphractii, encased in scale aprons and crowned with pointed helms, balled-plumes whipping in the coastal breeze. The plate-armoured, masked clibanarii lingered close behind and the flanks were composed of broad gunds of archer-cavalry. On the Persian right flank, a drafsh of one hundred Median spearmen led the wretched paighan mass – some two thousand men – into place, and a dozen war elephants lumbered up beside

them.

Gallus grasped Varius by the shoulders. 'The scroll will not save the empire and it certainly won't save us now. Hurry, we must put to sea at once,' he said, gesturing towards the nearest trireme.

But Varius shook his head. 'We cannot, Tribunus.' He stabbed a finger towards the mouth of the Euphrates. There, another fleet had drifted into view. Hundreds upon hundreds of galleys. This time, the fleet was unmistakably Persian. Myriad purple, green and red sails adorned with gold-threaded winged Faravahar motifs, spilling from the

mouth of the river and down the Gulf coast, only a few miles away.

‘Tamur’s fleet!’ Gallus gasped in horror.

‘We were ready to end our mission,’ Varius continued, struggling to control the panic in his voice, ‘to return to Emperor Valens and tell him you were lost. After so many weeks of searching, what else were we to do?’ he shrugged. ‘But as we rowed back upriver, we sighted this Persian fleet coming downstream. Our only option was to turn and flee. It has taken all of our strength just to outrun them. But now our advantage is gone; if

we put to sea they will surround and crush us.'

'And if we stay here then we will also be crushed,' Gallus glared at the Savaran – they had halted momentarily atop the dunes. 'We should form a defensive line along the shore, then your ships and the waters will protect our rear.'

'But we cannot hope to win?' Varius said, wide-eyed as he glanced over the Romans – some eighteen hundred men – and then the ten thousand strong Savaran.

Gallus gazed at him, unflinching. 'No, but we can die as heroes, and take swathes of these

whoresons with us.'



Tamur crested the grassy dune and then halted, his gleeful grin transforming into a grimace as he beheld the Roman ships and the nest of shields and spears on the waterline. Five men had become nearly two thousand. He snatched at his reins and halted his army with a raised hand.

'What is this?' he snarled.

The narrow-eyed pushtigban-salar scanned the Roman lines. 'A Roman legion. A single eagle. Not enough to repel your army,

Spahbad.' Then he pointed to the Persian fleet at the Euphrates estuary. 'And your ships will be at the shores within a short while.'

Tamur noticed the man's eyes narrow a fraction more as he said this. He frowned, hearing distrustful whispers dance in his mind. But he shook his head clear of the thoughts and scanned the Romans who faced his vast army. 'So we must stamp upon this cluster of legionaries before we continue to Syria? So be it.'

Then he turned to his lead war drummer, beckoning him. The drummer jogged forward, licking his

lips in anticipation of battle. He was a wild-eyed, hairless man dressed in only a loincloth. His head and body were painted in gold, his eyes were ringed with kohl and huge, bronze hoops dangled from his stretched earlobes.

Tamur pointed to the Roman lines. 'Begin.'

The drummer grinned and nodded eagerly.



The legionary line hugged the shore, a wall of shields facing inland with the Flavia Firma triremes lining their rear. The surf crashed down

behind Pavo, soaking him in salt spray and washing chill waves around his ankles as he hurriedly strapped a sword belt around the waist of his scale armour vest. Tribunus Varius' men had swiftly brought them this armour along with helms, shields, spears and swords. Now he, Gallus, Zosimus, Quadratus and Sura pressed together near the left flank of the Flavia Firma line, with the Armenian slingers knee deep in water behind them. All eyes were fixed upon the eerily still and silent Savaran line thronging the grassy dunes at the top of the beach. Only the

occasional snorting of mounts and the steady crashing of waves sounded across the shore. Pavo glanced from Tamur at their centre to the war elephants on the Persian right; he saw the glinting tusks and the maddened eyes of the spiked-cane wielding mahouts saddled on the creatures' necks. The sight brought a shiver across every inch of his skin. Indeed, since that day in the dunes, he had prayed he would never set eyes upon such beasts again. Hubris and terror battled in his gut. The soldier's curse swelled his bladder and drained his mouth of moisture.

‘Why are we always on the bloody left?’ Sura cursed through chattering teeth, breaking the silence.

‘Because that’s where the limitanei fight,’ Quadratus grunted, buckling on his intercisa helm – too small for the big Gaul’s head and causing his face to redden more than usual.

‘Because that’s where the XI Claudia fight,’ Pavo added.

Zosimus and Quadratus offered narrowed eyes and wry grins at this.

Suddenly, from the Persian centre, war horns keened like angry

raptors and war drums crashed and throbbed like a titan's heartbeat. Pavo saw a shaven, gold-painted Persian drummer run ahead of the Savaran ranks to thunder on the drum skins, his stretched earlobes jangling with every strike, his eyes bulging and his teeth bared behind a zealous grin.

'That little bastard's getting it if I can get close enough,' Quadratus growled, rubbing his temples. 'My head's killing me!'

As if in defiance, the drummer's arms became a blur, the rhythm throbbing faster and faster. In the Persian centre, Tamur raised

both arms, eyes trained on the Roman line, his teeth gnashing. 'Advance!' His cry echoed across the beach as he chopped both arms down like blades.

At once, the mass of riders let out a unified war cry, raising myriad spears and swords overhead. The golden lion banner was pumped in the air and hundreds of smaller drafshs were hefted likewise. The two gunds of cataphractii riders at the centre – some two thousand men – lowered in their saddles and broke forward at a gallop, down the dunes and across the beach, sand churning up in their wake. A gund of

archer cavalry charged on either flank.

Varius cried out to rally his men, and the Flavia Firma braced.

Gallus turned to his four. 'Think of all we have lost, think of all they have taken from us,' he boomed.

Pavo's comrades pressed their shoulders to his. He knew Father's shade stood with them.

'Show them your ire!' Gallus lifted his spatha from his scabbard and gazed along the blade, the reflected sunlight dancing across his face and conjuring a grimace. 'Show them with sharpened steel! XI

Claudia, ready!' he roared, smashing the hilt on his shield boss. 'For the empire!'

'For the empire!' Pavo roared in reply with his comrades.

As the Roman cry faded, the Persian archer cavalry on the flanks stretched their bows skywards. Pavo's gut knotted – seeing the strategy play out in his mind. This volley would scatter the Roman ranks, allowing the cataphractii to cut through the gaps. But he noticed something; the towering puffs of salt-spray were drifting across the shore, soaking the riders as they charged. Many of the

archers fumbled, fingers slipping on their dampened weapons.

Thousands of bows twanged, but instead of an ordered storm of arrows arcing up and into the sky, chaos erupted and arrows shot off in every direction. A chorus of pained cries and thwacking of arrowheads into flesh sounded as some punched straight into the riders before them. Crimson puffs of blood leapt into the air, horses whinnied, rearing and bucking, some setting off on a panicked charge back through their own ranks, arrows bristling from their flanks. In disarray, the gunds of

archer cavalry on either flank fell away. Only a fraction of their hail fell upon the Roman ranks, and merely a handful of legionaries were struck.

Sura exhaled in relief. 'What in Hades?'

'The bows are useless! The fletching and sinew are damp from the salt spray,' a legionary nearby gasped.

Realisation dawned on Pavo as he recalled the pirate skirmish near Rhodos. His heart soared.

He glanced to the side to see Gallus whispering skywards. Thank you, Mithras.

The cataphractii continued at a full charge, unaware of the chaos on their flanks, fully expecting the arrow volley to scatter the tight Roman spear line before them.

Pavo grappled his spear shaft and looked the nearest rider square in the eye. His mouth was agape in a war cry, dark moustache splayed, the red wetness at the back of his throat and the whites of his eyes betraying his battle-rage. The mount gnashed, its hooves throwing up great clumps of sand and its wild eyes rolling behind the bronze mesh baskets that protected them. The rider grappled his lance

two handed and the chain tying the ends of the spear to the mount's coat of armour stretched taut.

'Dig your spears in, stand firm . . . ' he heard Gallus bellow.

For even the bravest horse will never charge a nest of spears, Pavo mouthed the rest of the iron tribunus' words.

At that instant, the cataphractii seemed to realise their archers had failed. The man directly in front of Pavo lost his expression of hubris, his jaw falling slack as he saw the wall of Roman spears unmoved. At the last, his mount skidded to a halt and he was

catapulted through the air like slingshot, one leg snapping as it was wrenched through the curved horn front of his saddle. Pavo braced behind his spear as the man flailed towards him. With a weighty punch and a shower of hot blood across his face, his spear arm shuddered as the cataphractus landed upon the lance-tip. The man stared at Pavo in confusion as the death rattle tumbled from his lips and he slid from the spear. Nearly every horse on the cataphractii front had foundered likewise, the bodies of the riders cast to the ground or up in the air and onto the

Roman spear tips. The second and third ranks of riders had charged into the rear of their stricken comrades, trampling them or tumbling themselves. Many of the riders that remained saddled and had made it to the Roman spear line were quickly hacked down by legionaries leaping forth, skewering man and mount. Within moments, the lapping waves underfoot were stained red and the screeching gulls were joined by a thick, dark pack of vultures, eyeing the reddening shoreline. The remaining Persian riders scattered and the legionaries fell back into line, panting. The first

blood had been let and it had all come from this mighty Persian war machine.

By Pavo's side, Sura grinned as he looked over the thrashing mass of riders. Those who had broken away reformed on the flanks, but of the four gunds in the first wave of attack, nearly half had been felled. 'Invincible? Mithras' arse they are!' he cooed.

Pavo pushed closer to his friend. 'Aye, but the clibanarii have yet to have their say.' He pointed his gore-encrusted spear out to the next wave of riders, cantering down from the grassy dunes. Another two

gunds, in plate-armour and iron facemasks etched with an inhuman rictus. Behind them on the dunes, he saw Tamur, snarling, barking at his men, enraged at their self-destruction so far.

‘Hold the line and they will not charge us – we know this!’ Gallus barked, Varius echoing the words. ‘Now, bows may be useless here, but our darts care little for a touch of spray in the air. Ready plumbatae!’ At once the Roman line became a foot taller, twelve hundred arms hefting weighted darts overhead.

The war drums picked up and

the clibanarii built up to a canter.

Pavo trained his dart on the clibanarius coming for him. A few hundred feet became a hundred in moments. Then two of Tamur's banners swung down in a chopping motion, one to either side. On the flanks, the remainder of the cataphractii had reformed. Now they hared round to splash into the shallows, then raced along the shoreline towards the Roman flanks.

'Form square!' Gallus cried, eyes bulging as he saw the manoeuvre.

The plumbatae were dropped,

unloosed as the lines scrambled to protect the flanks and rear. But they were too slow. The cataphractii plunged into the barely protected Roman flanks. They barged through the unprepared lines, sending groups sprawling, trampling and cutting down men. In moments, the legionary line had disintegrated into pockets. Pavo stumbled forward, the blood of some comrade in the rear ranks showering his back. He righted himself and rushed over to Sura, Quadratus, Zosimus and Gallus. They quickly clustered together with a handful of Flavia Firma men,

swiping their spears this way and that.

The *clibanarii* swooped on this disorder, their mounts racing into the gaps between the clusters of legionaries, lancing and swiping, felling men like wheat. The cries of dying legionaries grew deafening. Pavo leapt back as one *clibanarius*' lance scored across his scale vest, tearing the scales from it and stinging the skin of his chest. He saw the rider thunder onwards to burst the chests of two less fortunate legionaries, the smattering of *plumbatae* and spears hurled at the rider bouncing from

the man's armour. Then the all-iron riders swept out of the fray, circling further up the beach, readying to swoop in again. There was no time for the Roman lines to reform, but if they remained in clusters like this, they would be cut down. Pavo's eyes darted. Something nagged at the depths of his mind. Something Khaled had once told him.

The *clibanarii* are invincible? I thought so too, once. The finest blades – lances and swords – all will blunt on their plate-armour. Then I saw a shepherd's boy fell one of them with his sling.

Pavo snatched a glance to the

water; there, the slingers had fled out into the waves, standing waist deep now. He roared to Gallus. 'Sir, the funditores – have them fire on the clibanarii, at close range!' he called to Gallus. Gallus looked at him with a scowl, as if he had been torn from a nightmare. 'It's something I heard in the mines – it might work.' The tribunus frowned, then cried over the melee to where Varius braced with a hundred or so of his men.

The Flavia Firma standards swiped through the air and orders were barked to the slingers. In moments, a burring of slings picked

up. In way of reply, Tamur's battle cry sailed over the beach and the war drums thrashed in a frenzy. The clibanarii swooped for the legionary clusters.

Pavo braced, fingers flexing on his spear. 'Come on, come on!' he cried, glancing to the slingers and then to the clibanarius lancer coming for him. But the rider's spear was upon him. It was too late. He heard his own battle cry as though from a great distance as he swept his spear up to parry, but the tip of the clibanarius' lance punctured the flesh of his shoulder and blood burst into the air. The

rider then tore out his shamshir blade and hefted it to cut through Pavo's neck.

'Loose!' the cry rang out at last from Varius. Three-hundred slings spat forth into the clibanarii front. A chorus of clattering iron filled the air as the shot thwacked into the plate-armour and facemasks. Muffled screams echoed from within. The rider hovering over Pavo seemed frozen, sword arm raised. A neat, dark hole in the forehead of his iron mask had appeared. Then a gout of black blood leapt from the hole, followed by more from the eye and mouth

slits. The rider fell from the saddle with a crash of armour and the sound echoed along the clibanarii lines. The seemingly infallible plate-armour had been beaten, pierced by the shot or crumpling and crushing the bones of the riders within. The slings burred again and another volley sent hundreds more of the riders to the sand.

‘Slaughter those slingers!’ Tamur’s booming command sounded over the cacophony of battle. At once, the cataphractii gathered to charge back into the shallows, this time at the small pack of slingers.

'Get them on the boats!' Gallus cried out immediately. The funditores swiftly ceased their next volley and scrambled to the ropes dangling from the sides of the triremes. Many were too slow, cut down by the blades of the cataphractii. Fewer than half of the slingers made it up and onboard the vessels. The tide reddened with every heartbeat.

Meanwhile, the clibanarii had reformed and built up into a charge once more. A pack of twelve of them thundered for Pavo and the handful of legionaries clustered with him. This time, two lances were

trained upon him. He hefted his shield at the last, and the impact swept his spear from his hands and nearly jolted his arm from its socket. He staggered back, struggling to stay on his feet, crimson water splashing around his shins and a tide of silver riders washing past him on either side. Nearby he saw legionaries disappear under hooves, bodies punched back on the end of Persian lances, heads struck from shoulders with Savaran blades until the sea was opaque with blood. Another charge swept past nearby and he heard Zosimus cry out in pain.

When he twisted to see what had happened, another charge hit them from the side. A trailing hoof dashed against his helm and he fell from the cluster, blinded momentarily.

He shook the lights from his eyes and found himself prone on the sand, surrounded by the torn and broken bodies of Flavia Firma legionaries and Persian horsemen. A fervent war cry sounded from behind, and Pavo felt the sand shudder – hooves only feet away, coming for him. He scrambled round and to his feet to face the clibanarius racing for him, lance

trained on his heart. Pavo yanked his shield round to deflect the blow, knowing only the iron shield boss would be able to absorb the momentum of the chained, two-handed spear. As soon as the lance tip skated off the boss, Pavo threw down his shield and grappled the chain, yanking it and pulling the lance from the rider's grip. The clibanarius lost his balance and flailed to grapple the reins, but Pavo swung the stolen spear up to barge the man into the gory, churning sand and surf before despatching him with a sharp thrust to the throat. He leapt up onto the

saddle but struggled to control the panicked mount. The stallion kicked, thrashed and bit at all nearby, Roman or Persian, one stray hoof dashing the helmet from an unsaddled Persian and the next smashing his skull and spraying his brains into the foaming waters.

Pavo steadied the mount just enough to take in what had happened. All around him was a maelstrom of swiping blades, thrusting spears, spraying blood and surf, whinnying horses and screaming men. The Savaran masses were swarming all around the beleaguered pockets of

legionary resistance. The remaining slingers on the decks of the triremes did all they could to support their comrades, but it was too little. Legionary bodies littered the sand and bobbed in the surf. In the shallows, he saw Gallus' plume whipping around in the fray, blood rising in gouts from all who took him on. He saw Tamur up on the marram grass dunes, mounted, safely withdrawn from the battle and watching on with a macabre grin – as if this was another bout of blood games. Moments, he realised, was all they had. And further up the coast, the Persian fleet was now

drawing in to the shore, no doubt to land thousands of fresh riders and spearmen.

Pavo heeled the stallion around, ready to strike down another, ready to die, his dark locks plastered to his face with saltwater and blood. Then he glimpsed Sura in the fray, crimson-masked. His friend grimaced and hurled a plumbata. Pavo gawped as the dart soared straight for him. Sura was mouthing something. Down?

Pavo ducked at the last, the dart hissing over his helm and punching into something only inches behind. He twisted to see a

cataphractus, sword raised and ready to cut down at him, the plumbata wedged in the rider's cheek, dark blood pumping from the wound.

Sura barged through the melee, then shouldered the dead rider from the saddle and took his place. 'Come with me!' he beckoned hoarsely, then heeled his mount towards the fringes of the battle.

Pavo followed suit, kicking his mount then parrying and ducking as the battle thinned and the din fell away. 'Sura?' He cried out as they broke free.

Sura guided his mount to the

south, then wheeled round up the beach, headed for the marram grass dunes behind those where Tamur, the pushtigban and the unused Savaran watched the battle. He flashed Pavo a grin. 'Don't worry, I have a plan . . . '



Crouching behind the grassy dunes, Pavo glanced up at the swishing tails of the twelve colossal war elephants. Terror swam in his guts. 'Steal an elephant? That's not a plan, Sura.'

'We're dead, all of us, unless we do something,' Sura said,

nodding to the bloodstained shoreline beyond the elephants where the Roman resistance was fading, fast.

‘If we take one step towards those things, they’ll spot us,’ Pavo hissed, pointing to Tamur and the cluster of pushtigban around him, then to the Persian archers perched in the howdah cabins atop the elephants’ backs. All had their backs turned, looking down upon the battle, but every so often one of the pushtigban would look over their shoulder, as if sensing something was wrong.

‘Then we find a distraction.

How's about those poor bastards?' he pointed to the paighan, sitting or kneeling to the right of the war elephants, their shackled ankles raw and bloodied, their heads bowed. 'If they're given a chance of freedom, do you think they'd take it?'

Pavo looked to the haggard peasant-soldiers. There were some two thousand men there, chained and weary. Men drawn from their farms and families to fight to the death or act as human blockades against Persia's enemies. He thought of poor Khaled, forced to fight like this. He glanced at the

elephants once more, then heard the tortured scream as a legionary on the shore was ripped asunder by a pair of *clibanarii* lances. 'Aye, but we must be swift.'

They flitted round behind the elephants and Tamur, ducking to stay concealed behind the grassy dunes until they came to the rear of the paighan mass. 'We break the chains of the nearest, then we arm them,' Pavo said, nodding to the nearby wagons loaded with spears. Two Median spearmen stood guard before these, backs turned on Pavo and Sura, both of them utterly transfixed on the battle. Sura

nodded. They set down their shields and helms, carrying just their spathas and protected only by their scale vests. The pair stole round to the rear of the wagon, then crept around an edge each. Pavo lined up to grapple the Median nearest to him. He felt his heart thunder as if trying to give him away. At the last, he stepped on a piece of dry reed, which cracked. The Median swung round, but before he could bring his spear to bear, Pavo unleashed a fierce right hook. The man's jaw cracked and Pavo had to stifle a cry as his knuckles did likewise. The Median crumpled. Alerted by the

muted sound of scuffling, the second Median spun to gawp at Pavo in alarm, only for Sura to emerge behind him and smack the flat of his spatha over the man's head. His eyes rolled and he too was grounded. Pavo and Sura grappled a handful of spears each, then crouched and flitted across the open ground to the rearmost paighan ranks.

The nearest of them turned and saw the pair approaching. A jabbering broke out and more heads turned. Pavo's flesh crept as he saw Tamur and the pushtigban turn away from the battle to the

disturbance. 'Down!' he hissed, pulling Sura to the sand.

'Shut your mouths, dogs, or we will march you into the water to drown,' a Median spearman near the front of the paighan mass shouted. In an instant, they fell silent. Pavo saw Tamur scowl at the chained men for a moment longer, then look back to the battle.

Nearest Pavo was a flat-nosed paighan wearing an off-white robe and a dark-brown felt cap. He gawped down at the prone Pavo. 'Roman?' he said in jagged Greek.

'Aye, but not your enemy,' Pavo replied in broken Parsi. 'We

come to free you.' He held up his spatha and motioned towards the chains that bound him to the next malnourished wretch. The pair and those nearby looked to one another, doubtful.

'And arm you,' Sura added, lifting the pile of spears in his grasp.

At this, the flat-nosed man's weary features bent into a smile. He held up his chains. Pavo lined up his spatha and hacked down. A thick iron clink accompanied it. Pavo ducked down and held his breath, waiting to see if the guards up front had heard. Nothing. Sura

hacked at the chain on the other side of the man. Again, nothing. But the flat-nosed man, suddenly realising he was free, threw his arms in the air and made to cry out in joy. Pavo shot up a hand and clamped it over the man's mouth.

'Not a sound,' he pressed a finger to his lips, 'or we all die.'

The flat-nosed man nodded, then turned a disapproving look on his comrades, wagging a finger at them as if they were to blame. One by one, Pavo and Sura freed the paighan, handing them spears until thirty or more were crouched, ready to act.

‘Free the others,’ Pavo said, handing spears to those furthest forward. ‘Now, does anyone here know how to ride those beasts?’ he nodded towards the war elephants.

The flat-nosed man held his hands out wide with a grin, and a handful of others shuffled a little closer, nodding.

‘Come with us,’ Pavo beckoned them. They stole away from the rear of the paighan and back into the grassy dip in the dunes behind the elephants. Pavo eyed the nearest beast at the rear of the herd. An enormous bull. Its tusks were bronze-coated and serrated

on the outside. A plate iron mask was fastened to its face. An iron scale apron, vast enough to cover a house, shrouded its body, masking many of the battle scars this animal had been subjected to. A mahout sat astride its neck holding a spiked cane ready, waiting on the order from Tamur to drive the creature into the battle. The crenelated howdah cabin on its back was packed with four archers, one at each edge, bows nocked and eager to enter the fray. A knotted rope dangled from one side of the cabin, the end swinging near the ground.

Sura stroked the matted tufts

of his beard as if studying some legal scroll. 'We climb up, we gut the bastards in the cabin, then we . . .'

Just then, a cry went up from the Median spearmen guarding the paighan and a raucous chorus of reply sounded from the freed men. Pavo looked over his shoulder to see the majority of the paighan rushing their captors, spearing with a vigour that told of their hatred. At this, Tamur spun to the disturbance, nostrils flaring in outrage.

'Insolent dogs! At them!' he cried, waving his pushtigban and

the war elephants towards the rebelling paighan. The ground shuddered under the great beasts' footsteps.

'Bollocks! That makes it a bit harder,' Sura spat as the nearest elephant thundered past at the back of the herd, the knotted rope jangling.

'There's no time. No other choice. Come on!' Pavo wrenched Sura up from the grassy dip, waving the flat-nosed man and the others with him. The ground jostled before him as he ran, from his own stride and the mighty footsteps of the elephants. The rope danced

violently as the elephants picked up pace. He reached out and snatched at it, the tether lifting him from the ground with a jolt. He shinned up the rope, his palms burning on the fibres. Halfway up, he looked down to see that Sura and the flat-nosed man had grappled the rope too. They were crying out to him, but a ferocious trumpeting from the beast drowned out their words. He glanced up to see the source of their alarm – an archer leaning over the side of the cabin, winking behind his nocked bow. He pressed flat against the elephant's midriff, feeling a whoosh of air as the arrow

zipped past him and punched into the sand. The archer fumbled to nock his next arrow and Pavo hauled himself up the last few feet. As the archer stretched his bowstring, ready to loose, Pavo clutched the edge of the cabin with one hand and reached up with the other to bat the bow out of line, the arrow falling from the string. The archer's cry to his comrades perched at the other edges of the cabin never left his throat, as Pavo grasped at the man's windpipe then hauled him over the edge of the cabin. A dull crack of bones sounded as he landed on the

ground headfirst.

Pavo pulled himself into the cabin, immediately tearing his spatha from his scabbard. The other three archers were oblivious to the fate of their fourth colleague, too busy firing down upon the fleeing swarm of paighan. Pavo plunged his blade into the ribs of one and the other two spun at the guttural, gurgling roar the man emitted. The two gawped, then saw that Pavo wrenched desperately at his spatha blade, stuck fast in the dead archer's ribs. The pair grinned, drawing long, curved blades from their belts. In the next heartbeat,

Sura leapt into the cabin, bringing his spatha scything down on the nearest man's forearm. With a crack of bone and a howl, the archer toppled to the floor of the howdah where Sura despatched him with a sharp downwards thrust to the heart. The flat-nosed paighan thumped into the cabin at this point, and the last Persian archer gawped at the three who glared back at him. Then he cast a quick glance over the edge and leapt with a shrill cry.

At this, the mahout sitting astride the elephant's neck glanced over his shoulder, first with an

irritated frown, then, on seeing the three unexpected faces there, with bulging eyes. He called out in alarm to the riders on the elephants ahead, but none heard – for the nearest three creatures were also now crawling with paighan, fighting desperately to seize control of the howdah cabins.

Pavo grappled the flat-nosed man by the shoulders. 'We'll deal with the mahout,' he gestured to the man on the elephant's neck, 'but you must be ready to take the reins, yes?'

The flat-nosed man shrugged, smiled and nodded as if such an act

was trivial.

Pavo nodded to Sura. 'Ready?'

'Never more so,' Sura replied.

Pavo crept forwards, out of the cabin, Sura following close behind. The elephant's shoulders rolled as it charged, and there was little to grip onto bar its furrowed flesh. He slipped and grasped out, inches from falling to the ground and under the beast's stride.

'I can't get any purchase!' Sura cried behind him.

The mahout, hoarse in his cries of alarm, twisted round again. This time his face drained of colour, seeing Pavo and Sura coming for

him, albeit haphazardly. Immediately, he started thrashing at the top of the elephant's skull with the iron hook-tipped cane. The beast trumpeted in fury, thrashing its head from side to side. Pavo felt the world shake as the beast thrashed, emitting a pained roar that seemed to shake him to his bones.

'He's trying to throw us off!' Pavo cried, finding a modicum of purchase with one foot on the lip of the elephant's iron plate mask.

'Romans!' A cry sounded from the cabin.

Pavo and Sura twisted.

‘Wait,’ the flat-nosed man said, ‘don’t move, just wait!’

Pavo frowned, then looked forward to see sweat leaping from the mahout as he lined up to thrash at the elephant’s skull once more. This blow gouged chunks of skin and bloodied flesh from the poor beast’s head, and this time it started to rear up. Pavo felt his grip weaken. His gut tightened as he readied to fall. The mahout twisted in his rope saddle, grinning. ‘Now, you will be cast to the ground!’ the man hissed.

The words had no sooner left his lips than the elephant stopped

rising, sunk back down, reached up with its trunk, snatched the mahout from his saddle and hurled him groundwards like a rock. The creature then rushed forward to trample the mahout. A chorus of grinding, bursting and popping sounded, then the man was little more than a crimson patch of gristle in the creature's wake.

Pavo panted, sharing a relieved glance with Sura. Shorn of its rider, the beast seemed to calm a little. The flat-nosed man scrambled past them, along the elephant's neck to sit in the saddle. The beast tensed at first, but the

man stroked around its wounds, speaking in soothing tones as he did so, then threw down the hooked stick as a gesture of goodwill. With a quick squeeze of his left thigh, he had the elephant turning at his behest. The three elephants ahead had been seized by the paighan likewise, while the Persian crew of the other beasts carried on ahead, fighting the paighan on the ground and unaware of the fate of these four colossal creatures.

The flat-nosed man looked back over his shoulder, his face still etched with that easy smile. 'And now we go to battle, yes?'

Pavo inched back into the howdah cabin, finally pulling his spatha clear of the archer corpse. Sura stood beside him. The pair looked to the filthy crimson stain on the shoreline. Thousands of corpses, Persian and Roman, now floated in the sea or lay draped on the sand, a carpet of dead surrounding the ferocious battle on the waterline. But so very few intercisa helms still stood amidst the storm of Persian steel.

‘Aye, to war,’ Pavo cried, ‘and make haste!’



Gallus wondered if he had died back in Bishapur, if the constant battle and bloodshed since then was simply his place in Hades. Blinking barely cleared the hot blood from his eyes, and every breath brought with it a mouthful of crimson spray and that familiar metallic tang. He heard the rasping of his own breath, the hammering of his heart upon his ribs, and little else. The Persian warriors came at him like demons. Many of them had dismounted now to finish the last handfuls of Romans off. Pushtigban warriors had forced their way to the front, sensing imminent victory and

eager for a share of the glory. Gallus struck the flat of his spatha across the neck of one of them. The warrior stumbled, winded. Gallus ripped the facemask away and thrust his blade into the man's eye socket. With a gout of dark blood and chunky matter, the warrior fell to Gallus' feet, piled there with so many others.

Is that enough glory for you, whoreson?

Another pair rushed for him, and he knew he could kill only one of them. The other would take his life at last. An animal growl tumbled through his gritted teeth.

He sought out Olivia and Marcus in his mind's eye as he hefted his spatha back for the last time. But he halted, blade overhead, as two spears punched up and under the arms of the approaching pair. Blood erupted from the iron mask eyeholes and mouth slits. Zosimus and Quadratus roared as they pulled their spears free.

Not yet, he realised, the image of his loved ones fading, but soon.

Quadratus and Zosimus pushed up either side of him. The last of his kind, it seemed. He raised his shield with theirs and the

Persian blades hammered down on them with a rhythm akin to the relentless war drums.

'Are you ready for this, sir?' Zosimus cried by his side, his face caked in strips of skin and blood.

'For what?' he panted.

'For that,' Quadratus pointed a finger; over the thrashing mass of Savaran that clamoured to slay them, something was coming. Four colossal shapes silhouetted by the morning sun. While the rest of the war elephants circled up on the grassy dunes where some disturbance had broken out amongst the paighan, these four

beasts had charged down onto the beach. The creatures' every stride threw up great clods of wet sand and the sun sparkled on their serrated tusks.

Now this is surely the end, he realised, knowing shield and spatha would be useless against these creatures. The lead beast thundered up behind the gold-painted Persian war drummer, who looked on at the last throes of Roman resistance excitedly, his arms thrashing as he upped the beat a little more. Then he slowed, looking over his shoulder in realisation, then up at the massive

creature about to trample him. At the last, the drummer ducked out of the way.

Gallus frowned, then squinted up to the cabin on the lead creature's back. Two figures stood there. They held Roman spathas. A desert-dry grin stretched across his features and his sword arm tingled with a new lease of life.



The panicked squeal of the drummer faded as the war elephants thundered onwards, the drumbeat striking up again moments later.

Pavo leant from the edge of the cabin, willing the lead creature not to draw up short. Ahead of it lay the majority of the Savaran. This close to victory, the Persian ranks were in disorder, thousands of them dismounted and fighting as infantry. But when the lead elephant trumpeted with all its might, many Persian heads turned, eyes bulging, mouths agape. At once, they broke out in a roar of panic. They scrambled to get clear, but weighed down with iron plate and ring armour, they were cumbersome and slow. Suddenly, the cabin juddered as if the elephant was

charging over rocky ground, but the crunch of iron, bone and the screaming of men below told a different story. The other three elephants fanned out either side, ploughing a similar gory furrow through the Savaran ranks. Then the flat-nosed paighan guiding the lead elephant uttered some jagged command, patting at the side of the creature's head. Without hesitation, the elephant scooped down with its tusks, tearing the serrated bronze tips through a throng of clibanarii, tossing pockets of them into the air. Their armour crumpled from the strike. Limbs were shattered, flesh

torn asunder and brains gouged from skulls. The other three beasts followed suit soon after, swiping scores of men aside with every swish of their tusks. In moments, the tight pack of flashing swords and spears around the Roman pocket had disintegrated, men fleeing in every direction. Of the *clibanarii* and *pushtigban* who waded out to sea to escape the elephants' wrath, many stumbled, falling into the water. Despite being prone in just a few feet of water, these men found the weight of their armour anchored them to the seabed and many drowned, their

faces only inches under the surface.

As the great creatures wreaked havoc through the Savaran masses, the flat-nosed paighan guiding the lead beast cried out in unintelligible Parsi. He punched the air, his air of serenity gone at last as he no doubt unleashed his anger over years of marching in chains.

Pavo felt an ember of hope in his heart.

'They're still alive,' Sura grasped his shoulder, pointing down to the shallows.

Pavo followed his friend's outstretched finger over the edge of the cabin. Down on the crimson

shoreline, while the Savaran scattered, a ragged band of legionaries stood there. Barely a century of them, still poised and ready for the Savaran to return. Gallus, Zosimus and Quadratus still stood. He looked this way and that. Perhaps there could be a way out. Perhaps they could survive after all.

Then his eyes snagged on the activity a mile or so up the beach, where the vast Persian fleet was disembarking. Tens of thousands of fresh riders and spearmen fanned out, blades piercing the skyline like an iron grin.



Saddled on his white stallion on the grassy dunes, Tamur's head pounded with the goings-on, a handful of neatly oiled locks falling free of his ponytail to whip across his face. He shot a gaze over his shoulder. There, the paighan masses fought in vain against eight of his dozen war elephants. That battle was as good as won. Then he looked right, northwards and up the beach: the fleet had landed just as he had expected. That meant the invasion of Roman Syria would go ahead as planned. There was something about those vessels that

made him uneasy though, the number of bodies spilling from the decks was more than he expected, far more than just the crew of the galleys.

Is that . . . no, surely not?

He raked his fingers across his scalp, pulling more hair free of the knot, then pinched the top of his nose and blinked away the doubts. No, he asserted, the real source of consternation was dead ahead; the four rogue elephants ploughing through the melee. With victory and a Roman eagle in the palm of his hand, these confounded creatures had split from the herd, turned and

run amok through his tightly-packed Savaran. Thousands of his best horsemen were dead from this encounter already, and the elephants looked set to kill hundreds more. This would be costly, he realised, seeing his precious cataphractii and clibanarii tossed up in the air like toys by the sweeping tusks. He would have to hire many more mercenaries than he had planned to cover these losses. But the image of the rich trading cities of Syria crept into his mind.

Mercenaries will be queuing up to serve in my armies. And when

my ranks are swollen, I will turn them upon Shapur himself. All Persia will be mine. The House of Aspaphet will take its rightful place once more!

‘Have our archers take javelins to those creatures,’ he spat to the nearest of his bodyguards, waving a hand towards the four rogue elephants. ‘They have done enough damage already. When they have been slain, set them about finishing the dregs of Roman resistance. I have wasted enough riders on them today.’

At once, the three pushtigban saddled by his side set off to give

the orders. Tamur was alone with just his narrow-eyed pushtigban-salar.

'Tell me,' he said, leaning in closer to the leader of his bodyguard and pointing a finger to the north, 'do my eyes deceive me or is that an army disembarking from our fleet?'

The pushtigban-salar nodded. 'It is, Spahbad.'

Tamur frowned, the heat haze falling away to reveal the iron wall of Persian troops forming up there. He gripped his reins and leant forward in the saddle, a nausea growing in his gut. This was just

like before, when Ramak had commissioned the new gunds of riders. Was the archimagus still clinging onto power, even after death? He snatched glances around him, maddened. 'Reinforcements? I did not arrange this.'

'No, you did not. But I did,' the pushtigban-salar replied.

'You did this without my perm - ' his words trailed off as he felt a cold iron dagger blade resting on his jugular. He looked at his man with bulging eyes.

'The king of kings comes to curtail your ambitions, Spahbad,' the pushtigban-salar spoke calmly.

Tamur's heart froze. He looked north to see the army approaching. At least fifteen thousand fresh and well equipped cataphractii and Median spearmen moved like an iron serpent across the sands. Pointed, plumed helms, spear tips, swishing manes and vibrant drafsh banners jostled overhead. At their heart, the Drafsh Kavian standard bobbed, the purple banner and blazing golden star upon it larger than any other. Underneath, he saw the unmistakable outline of the rider who led this army. A man adorned with a gilded ram's skull and skin

atop his head. A man in a green and purple silken cloak. This was Shapur. King of kings. The Shahanshah of all Persia. The man he had set out to defy.

The pushtigban-salar purred in his ear, digging the blade a little further into his skin. 'I will inherit the House of Aspaphet. The reward for my loyalty to the shahanshah. You,' he said, pausing to let Tamur's imagination cripple him, 'will live as long as the torturers can keep you alive.'

Tamur's breath quickened and icy cold sweat washed from his every pore. His bowels turned over

and he felt their contents press down, desperate for release. The rumours of the shahanshah's wrath were legendary. A fair man to those loyal to him. A demon to those who dared cross him. At that moment, an image flickered through his mind: the skin of Emperor Valerian, but not quite. This time, it was his own tortured and torn features stretched across the frame.

‘What should I do, Archimagus . . . what should I do?’ Tamur called out to the ether in a panic.

At this, the pushtigban-salar roared with laughter, pressing the dagger blade tighter to Tamur's

skin. 'Ramak is dead, you fool. Nobody will protect you now!'

With those words, Tamur's mind was made up. He thrust his throat against the pushtigban-salar's blade. A moment of resistance was followed by a dull, grating sensation. The searing pain was followed by a warm wetness that instantly soaked his chest and a salty, metallic stench permeated his nostrils and throat. The strength drained from his limbs in moments. He toppled from the saddle and onto the dune, thrashing, pink bubbles burgeoning from the haemorrhaging wound. He tried to

trace his fingers across the lion motif on his breast, but they were already numb.

The pushtigban-salar glared down at him, shaking his head, sheathing his blade. 'You will live for eternity in the torment of Ahriman,' the man said. 'A torment like no other.'

As Tamur fell into blackness, terror seemed to come with him.



Pavo gawped as the pushtigban-salar, still coated in Tamur's blood, rode down from the grassy dune and waved Tamur's wing of Savaran

back from the fray. The din of battle fell away as they withdrew, forming up on the beach a few hundred paces south of the tattered band of Roman survivors. Then he looked up the shoreline to the north, where Shapur's army descended towards them.

The lead war elephant calmed quickly at the soothing words and touches from the flat-nosed paighan. 'The war is over?' the man called back over his shoulder.

'Far from it,' Pavo said, before climbing from the howdah cabin to slide down the rope, his arms trembling with fatigue. He landed

with a thud on the bloody mire that had earlier been a pristine white-sand beach. Sura landed beside him. The pair stumbled over to stand with their comrades. Weak, scarred and bleeding hands patted their shoulders. Quadratus made to congratulate them likewise, but stopped, looking past Pavo and frowning. Pavo turned to see the source of the Gaul's concern; despite the rest of Tamur's Savaran having withdrawn, the gold-painted war drummer had remained only feet from the legionaries, thumping on his instrument unimpeded. His arms swung wildly, eyes bulging as

if in some kind of trance, grinning maniacally, his tongue lolling in fervour.

Suddenly, Quadratus frowned, strode forward and ripped his spatha across the straps of the drum. The instrument fell from the drummer's chest and crashed to the sand. Quadratus put his bloodied boot through the skin, wrecking the instrument. 'Battle's over, you little turd!' The enthusiasm drained from the drummer's face to be replaced by a look of confusion and then a nascent terror. Quadratus growled and lifted his sword again, sending the man scurrying across the sand

like a kicked dog.

‘That thing’s been doing my bloody head in all morning,’ Quadratus said, booting the wrecked drum away. Satisfied, he rolled his head on his shoulders, sheathed his sword, then stepped back into line with his comrades. Pavo saluted the big centurion, then came to Gallus, crimson-stained and glaring. ‘You might be sick of this question, sir, but what now?’

Gallus looked up the beach to the approaching Shapur. ‘That is for the shahanshah to decide.’

Pavo’s mind reeled. He looked to big Zosimus and Quadratus –

ragged, torn apparitions of their former selves. He looked to Sura – the unofficial King of Adrianople had no more fight left in him. Tribunus Varius and the clutch of Flavia Firma legionaries likewise were wounded, stunned and cowed by the sight of the fresh Persian army approaching.

The shahanshah rode forward from the vast column he led, the archers in his ranks lifting nocked bows – thousands of them. He was surrounded by pushtigban riders wearing armour that was itself a treasure, gilded and bejewelled. The narrow-eyed pushtigban-salar

from Tamur's ranks rode forward, dismounting to prostrate himself before Shapur. He spoke in even tones, pointing to the figure of Tamur lying in a pool of blood on the grassy verge. Shapur gazed at the corpse for what seemed like an eternity, the sea breeze lifting his pure-white locks and richly-oiled beard.

Finally, the shahanshah turned away and trotted onwards, towards the bloodied legionaries. When they came to a halt, the serene sounds of nature carried on around them as if oblivious to the tumult of moments ago: the crashing of

waves, the screeching of gulls and contented munching of the feasting carrion birds.

This close, Pavo saw that Shapur was old. His skin was mottled and deeply lined and he wore a dog-tired expression. But most of all, his eyes betrayed his years. They were weary, almost sickened of life.

'I tire of the sight of blood,' he said, his gaze fixed on the rolling crimson waves around the legionaries' feet. 'Our empires have spilled oceans of it in my time. And now it seems that I will spend my final years spilling the blood of

those within my own lands. Those who seek to seize my throne.' His gaze grew distant once more, until the narrow-eyed pushtigban-salar approached him, muttering in his ear, pointing to the Romans.

Shapur looked up and beheld them. Then he raised his hand. Pavo's blood iced. One flick of the finger and it would all be over. Death, torture or a return to the mines. He sensed his comrades brace likewise by his side.

But Shapur pointed to the Roman triremes.

'Leave, Romans.'

With that, he heeled his

mount round, and waved his riders
with him.

Epilogue



Pavo sat cross-legged on the deck of the trireme as the small Roman fleet made its way up the Euphrates. The sail cast him in blessed shade and gulls echoed overhead. He tilted his head back, closed his eyes, and breathed. It was late August, just two days since Shapur had let them leave in peace. They were many miles from that bloodied beach. But it all still

felt so raw, so close.

He opened his eyes and looked across the deck. Zosimus sat there in the shade of the trireme side, scraping a sharpened dagger over his oil-soaked scalp. The last of his matted locks fell to the deck of the vessel and left him with his distinctive dark crop once more. 'Mithras, the breeze on my scalp feels good,' the big Thracian chuckled, then moved the blade to his brush-like beard, angling another well-polished dagger to see his reflection.

All of a sudden, Pavo felt his own overgrown locks and beard

itchier than ever, the heat of the afternoon sun prickling on his skin. Yesterday, they had stopped off at a fishing village to bathe and wash off the worst of the battle-gore, but his hair was still matted with blood in places. He patted at his belt and cursed the absence of a dagger of his own.

Zosimus hesitated and looked up, as if hearing his thoughts. 'You'll get your turn,' he frowned, then winked.

Pavo snorted. 'It'll be blunt by then.'

Just then, big Quadratus emerged from below deck, washed

and with his jaw clean-shaven and his blonde moustache carefully groomed. He carried two cups and a half-loaf of bread underarm.

‘Ah, have we opened a fresh barrel of water?’ Pavo asked.

Quadratus snorted; ‘This isn’t water, lad!’

Pavo saw the frothy head on the drinks.

‘Haven’t had a drop in months – it’s going to taste sweet as honey!’ the big Gaul grinned, strolling over to sit by Zosimus, handing his fellow centurion a cup. Zosimus – still half-bearded – set down his shaving dagger at this and

tore into the bread then gulped at the ale. In moments, Quadratus began recounting a tale from happier times; the day he had walked in on Felix, asleep in the barracks, mid-dream, groping and pelvic-thrusting at his pillow. Zosimus' gruff laughter came with a spray of breadcrumbs. Then the pair fell silent, before raising their cups to their fallen friend, clashing them together then drinking more.

'There's more – a barrel-load, in fact,' Quadratus called over to Pavo, nodding to the steps leading below deck. 'Have one for Felix.'

Pavo nodded with a doleful

smile. He stood and strolled along the deck towards the steps leading below deck. He stopped there, seeing Gallus standing alone at the prow, fingers working over the idol of Mithras as ever, his plumed intercisa held underarm. He thought to speak with the tribunus, but saw the white knuckles on the hand clutching the idol.

Every man needs time alone, he surmised.

He turned away then slipped below decks, pouring two generous cups of the ale. When he emerged back into the sunlight, he spotted Sura. His friend's gaze hung on the

pastel-blue skies and the gold and green banks of the river. Palms and brush clung to the water's edge. Lowing camels, donkeys, carts and families traipsed along the pathways there, and the Persian villages were frequent, some open, others with basic fortifications and Median spearmen upon the battlements. But the lone Persian at the prow of the lead vessel called out as the fleet passed, announcing Shapur's will to see the Roman ships go unharmed.

'He could have had us killed there, or even now, at any point on this river,' Sura muttered.

Pavo sat by his side, handing him a cup. 'Shapur? Aye, he could have.'

Sura looked to him, his usual cheeky grin absent. 'But we live on. Makes you wonder, doesn't it? We won't die as old men, Pavo. One day we will perish like so many of our comrades have in these last years.'

Pavo held his gaze, seeing the first hint of tears in his friend's eyes. This man was as close to a brother as he had ever known. For all the world he longed to embrace Sura, but a gruff chorus of laughter from Zosimus and Quadratus

nearby ruled that out.

He looked to the hazy eastern horizon, slipping away as they voyaged upriver. He traced the leather bracelet Father had given him and recalled his dream from last night; Father in his prime, standing tall and bull-shouldered upon the green plains of Thracia, grinning broadly, happiness dancing in his eyes. A tear came to his eye now, too. He batted away the maudlin thoughts and grinned as his father had done.

‘Drink, Sura,’ he said, nudging his friend, ‘for tomorrow awaits us.’

Sura’s pensive air lifted, and

he grinned from ear to ear, laughing aloud. He lifted his cup and clacked it to Pavo's, then the pair gulped on the cool, sweet ale.



At the prow, Gallus' thoughts swung this way and that. Behind closed eyes, he saw the grey, solemn faces of the hundreds who had died on this mission marching past him, gazing at him, their lifeless eyes asking him the same tacit question. Why do you live on?

His fingers worked the idol of Mithras, trembling, the knuckles white as he saw Felix march in their

ranks. He clenched his eyes closed even tighter, seeking to be rid of the vision. Then he saw the one thing that was worse. Olivia and Marcus, pale, gaunt, reaching out to him. He reached out in reply, a faint warmth touching his heart. Their lips moved, over and over.

Why did you let us die?

The words were like a blade to his heart. The vision evaporated and he saw just the tumbling waters of the Euphrates ahead. His mind was blank, utterly blank for just a few heartbeats. Then he thought of Carbo's portentous words.

Eventually, we all must face our past.



When night fell on the tenth day of the voyage upriver, they disembarked at an unguarded, rundown timber jetty on the western riverbank, some eighty miles due west of Antioch. Two filthy limitanei without helms or mail waited there to welcome them back into the empire. These two advised that a turma of equites would rendezvous with them thirty miles inland to escort them back to Antioch. The pair also offered the

returning legionaries some pungent, grey and greasy-looking stew from a pot bubbling over a fire, but the offer was not taken up. Instead, the party set off across the dusty plain at once, their legs fresh after many days on the triremes.

Tribunus Varius and the sixty-eight surviving men of the Flavia Firma marched out ahead in a column. The five men of the XI Claudia followed, forming the sparsest of rearguards. Pavo, scalp and jaw freshly shorn, marched alongside Zosimus. Sura and Quadratus marched behind, and Gallus walked alone just ahead.

'How far is the rendezvous, sir?' Quadratus asked.

'We'll reach them by morning,' Gallus called over his shoulder.

As the night wore on, Zosimus, Quadratus and Sura sparked some heated debate about who had cheated whom at dice the previous day.

Gallus barely broke his relentless stride as he cast an eye over his shoulder at this play-quarrel.

'It seems they tire of peace already, sir,' Pavo offered with a half-grin.

Gallus did not reply. Pavo

frowned. The tribunos had cut a laconic figure in these last days, and seemed even more restless than usual. He strode forward to walk level, steadying his nerves. 'Sir, we are back in the empire now,' he nodded back over his shoulder. 'The Persians, the Savaran – they are no threat to us here.'

At this, Gallus slowed a little, and his intense glower softened just a fraction. 'The Savaran are the least of my concerns now.'

Pavo. 'Sir?'

Gallus pursed his lips as if in consideration, then looked to him,

the moonlight glinting in his eyes. 'You found your father, Pavo, against all the odds. But in doing so, you lost him. Had we not set out to the east, he might have lived on.'

'That is true. But it was worth everything,' Pavo blurted out. The answer came straight from the heart. 'Every step through the burning sands. Every lash of the whip in those mines. Every blade that scored my flesh. Father died saving me. He died a free man, knowing his son had walked the world to save him.' A tear darted down his cheek before he could

stop it. 'I faced the past. The nightmares are gone.'

Gallus' gaze grew intense. 'You faced the past and you found your father. Carbo faced his past and found some form of atonement in saving us. And that is what spurs me on, lad. The past. That is why I know where my next destination must be.'

'Sir?' Pavo frowned.

Gallus beheld him earnestly for a moment. Words seemed to play on his lips.

Then a shout pierced the night air.

'The riders!'

Gallus and Pavo looked up. A cloud of dust approached from the west, ethereal in the moonlight. This was more than just a turma of equites. Another three turmae rode with them, wearing white tunics, bearing gilded spears.

'Candidati?' Gallus gasped, stepping forward.

'Aye, and equites sagitarii outriders too,' Pavo frowned, seeing the scale-clad Roman cavalry archers riding wide of the main party to screen them from any ambush.

The candidati slowed before the returning legionaries. The riders

parted to reveal Emperor Valens, saddled on a black stallion. He was dressed in white, his shoulders wrapped in a purple cloak and he wore a battle helm crested with a magnificent purple plume. His expression was grave.

‘Tribunus Gallus,’ Valens barked.

‘Emperor!’ Gallus saluted.

‘The outrider you despatched reached me some days ago. Is it true? The scroll cannot save us?’ Valens asked.

Gallus drew the scroll from his robe and handed it to Valens. ‘Regrettably so, Emperor.’

Valens' brow knitted as he scanned the scroll, then his eyes glazed over as he reached the last lines. 'Then the east is at the mercy of Shapur.'

'No, Emperor. I bear no treaty to confirm this, but I suspect Shapur will not encroach upon imperial lands in the coming years,' Gallus offered. 'He has enough troubles in his own realm.'

Valens frowned. 'You know this, how?'

Gallus opened his mouth to speak, then glanced to Quadratus, Zosimus and Sura behind him, then finally to Pavo. 'It is a long story,

Emperor.'

Valens' mount shuffled in impatience and the emperor nodded, noting the condition of these men he had sent out east, months ago. 'You will tell me about it as we ride back to Antioch and then when we set sail for Constantinople at haste.' He clapped his hands and the candidate led forward a pack of five riderless mounts.

Pavo noticed the tension in Valens' words.

'There is trouble in Thracia, Emperor?' Gallus asked.

'Aye, Tribunus,' he said, his

gaze darkening. 'The Gothic War rages like never before. The barbarian tribes are pouring over the River Danubius unchecked . . . and the Huns come in their thousands. Our defences are creaking. Thracia and Dalmatia are on the brink. If those provinces collapse, then Constantinople itself is under threat.'

A chill danced across Pavo's skin. He glanced to Sura, Quadratus and Zosimus – each of them with families dotted around Thracia. He thought of Felicia, alone in Constantinople. As one, they looked to their tribunos.

Gallus' steely-blue eyes glinted in the moonlight. 'XI Claudia, mount!' he said, then cast a stern gaze to the moon. 'Mithras, spirit us west at haste!'

They journeyed throughout the night without rest. Pavo rode in silence, sadness lacing his blood as he felt Father slipping away into his memories. It was near dawn when he glanced down to the leather bracelet one more time. At that moment, he realised it was tied inside out. With a dry chuckle, he looped his mount's reins around one arm, undid and inverted the

bracelet and made to tie it on again. His fingers froze though, and his mount slowed, falling behind the pack.

‘Pavo?’ Sura hissed over his shoulder, slowing too.

Pavo barely heard his friend. His heart crashed as if readying for battle as he read the faded words etched into the leather again and again. Father’s words.

Numerius Vitellius Pavo,
Hostus Vitellius Dexion. Every beat
of my heart is for you, my sons.



The End



Author's Note

The latest of Pavo's adventures took me on something of a research odyssey, one of the most pleasurable aspects of writing a novel. However, Sassanid Persia is not as richly chronicled as it deserves to be, so there were a fair few challenges in piecing together 'Land of the Sacred Fire' and blending the events of antiquity into the tale. Thus, there are a few aspects of the story that I think are

worth clarifying.

It could be said that the Roman Empire made a big mistake in the 2nd century AD. After decades of military exertions, they fatally crippled Arsacid Persia (also known as the Parthian Empire), and this left something of a power vacuum in the east. The Sassanid Dynasty rose to capitalise on this, and soon set about reforming the Persian Empire into a well-drilled, militaristic force. They disbanded the crumbling feudal structure and replaced it with something much more akin to the Roman model, with military regions, standing

armies and levies, all answering through a chain of command to the Shahanshah. From Rome's perspective, this was the worst possible outcome – as this reinvigorated Persia was a far greater threat than the one the empire had worked so hard to extinguish.

Indeed, by 377 AD, times were desperate indeed on Rome's eastern frontier and Sassanid Persia was strong. Emperor Valens frantically sought to conclude a peace with the Persians in order to safely withdraw the praesental army from Persia and despatch

them to Thracia to deal with the Gothic War. The lost scroll of Jovian and Shapur is a fictional premise but such a thing would have been the perfect answer to Valens' problems. While the lost scroll is this author's imagining, the treaty of 363 AD is very much historical fact.

In the space of just a few days in June that year, Emperor Julian's brash bid to conquer Sassanid Persia collapsed. Having crossed the Tigris, burning his fleet behind him lest it fall into Persian hands, he then marched upon the Sassanid capital of Ctesiphon. The siege was

a disaster. The Savaran appeared unexpectedly to relieve the besieged city, then harried and harassed Julian and his army all the way back to the banks of the Tigris. There, the Roman legions were surrounded and crushed, with Julian slain in the fighting. Within days, Jovian (the head of Julian's household guard) was raised to the purple and his first act was to negotiate with Shapur. Unsurprisingly, Shapur started those negotiations with the upper hand, demanding the concession of Roman Mesopotamia – effectively stripping Rome's eastern borders

away – and it seems that Jovian was swift to concede. Crucially though, there also appears to have been some aspect of a lasting truce discussed, but the exact detail of the truce is shrouded in the mists of history. The 4th century historian, Ammianus Marcellinus, claims that a peace of thirty years was agreed. Modern historians are uncertain exactly what was agreed – Noel Lenski states that; ‘What the treaty did not officially sanction, it tacitly allowed through its ambiguities’. Geoffrey Greatrex claims; ‘The precise terms of the agreement of 363 ... are unknown, and were

clearly interpreted differently by Shapur and the Romans.' What is certain is that Jovian should be commended for what he did achieve that day. From an almost impossible position, he managed to secure the safe release of his army and press Shapur into some form of truce. Even Jovian's greatest detractors (such as Marcellinus) offer him grudging respect for this.

In these negotiations, I have portrayed Shahanshah Shapur II as a fierce yet noble and wise leader, somewhat weary of bloodshed and political intrigue – crowned in utero, the man would have seen plenty of

both. He was fifty-four on the day of the 363 negotiations, and I expect by then he would have grown tired of some of the strident and ruthless actions of his early reign, of which there were plenty. For example, although strife between the Roman Empire and Persia generally centred on the lands of Armenia and Mesopotamia, Shapur is thought to have once boldly demanded that Rome concede to Persia all lands east of the Strymon River in Macedonia! Also, in his early years as shahanshah, Shapur ordered that Arab warriors captured in battle

should have their shoulders pierced, and ropes fed through the wounds so they could be led across the desert in the utmost misery. This is likely to be invective from Roman or rival Persian sources, but the imagery is certainly somewhat striking. Indeed, I was tempted to have the XI Claudia subjected to such misery in the scene after the desert battle when they are chained and forced to march into Persia. However, I resisted this temptation on the advice of my editor (who rightly pointed out that this would probably have rendered them incapable of lifting a sword or shield

ever again).

As for my portrayal of Emperor Valerian's fate after his capture by Shapur I in 260 AD, it is almost certainly true that he remained in captivity in Bishapur whilst his legionaries were forced to build the new Persian city around him. The rumours of his grisly end – some say he was skinned, some say he was stuffed, others claim he was forced to swallow molten gold – come primarily from the eccentric Lactantius, a chronicler and imperial advisor born in the 3rd century AD. They may be apocryphal, borne of Lactantius' disdain for the Persians'

virulently anti-Christian stance, but we will never know for sure. Certainly though, history has taught me never to underestimate just what dark deeds man is capable of.

Concerning religion; Zoroastrianism is the proud, noble and ancient – perhaps the oldest of all – monotheistic religion of old Persia. In Sassanid times, the individual holding the position of archimagus would have been venerated almost as highly as the shahanshah himself. The archimagus and his magi were seen as an almost divine caste in Persian society. They saw to running the

fire temples, leading the faith as descendants of Zoroaster himself and providing a guiding civic hand to Persian society – running trials and setting up courts and schools. However, as with any faith that lofts men into pseudo-monarchic posts, abuse of power is always a valid concern and one I have explored in my portrayal of the fictional Archimagus Ramak. I trust that the good-hearted Zoroastrians Pavo and his comrades meet along the way provide some balance in this respect.

Regarding slavery; the Persian attitude to this was one of mild

aversion. They had household slaves, but they also had a code of conduct: slaves were not to be beaten, they had 'days off' and they could aspire to freedom. However, theory and practice are seldom in harmony, and it is unlikely that those condemned to the depths of the salt mines would have been afforded these relative luxuries enjoyed by slaves on the surface. The mines of Dalaki are fictional, but a number of Sassanid-era salt mines have been identified around Persia, and it is likely that such mines would have existed in the salt flats near the Persian Gulf and

at the hem of the Zagros Mountains where salt glaciers are abundant. It is thought that Roman prisoners of war were typically sent to these mines, despatched to work the land or put to building cities for their Persian masters.

Concerning my depiction of the city of Bishapur, I feel I should point out that, although the fire temple and palace do sit adjacent (as can be seen in the aerial shots of the ruins), there was no discernable acropolis mount on which they sat. I have added this to aid dramatic tension and symbolise Ramak and Tamur's air of aloofness

over their subjects.

Finally, some readers have questioned my portrayal of Emperor Valens as a sharp-thinking and studious man, particularly given the ill-light in which he is cast by some primary sources (primarily Marcellinus) who describe him as loathsome, cruel, boorish, bandy-legged and with a terrible stammer. I tend to cast a critical eye upon these accounts, most of which seem overly personal and less than constructive. Also, the majority of these were written after the catastrophic Battle of Adrianople in which Valens died and a grievous

portion of the eastern legions were lost. Few chroniclers would have found favour in championing the dead emperor in light of this disaster, and I suspect a more accurate portrayal of Valens became buried under this unfortunate legacy. That is not to say that I believe Valens is all-virtuous – not by any means. He certainly displayed a propensity for warmongering and ruthlessness, as the brutal burnings of the Maratocupreni give testament to.

There is much more I could discuss here (the first draft of this note was nearer fifteen pages

long), but I hope this gives a flavour of the facts behind the fiction. If I have piqued your curiosity to read more of the history, all the better!

So, with the Persian Frontier slipping into the sunset, the men of the XI Claudia must now turn their attentions back to the strife in Thracia. And Pavo and Gallus have more than just the Gothic war to think about. I hope you will be back to read the next volume in the series and I cannot wait to get started researching, planning and writing it! Until then, please feel free to visit my website where you

can find out more about me and my work.

Yours faithfully,
Gordon Doherty

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Glossary

Acetum; A vinegar-like fluid, used for cleaning and sterilising wounds.

Ahriman; The Zoroastrian dark spirit and antithesis of Ahura Mazda. Ahriman symbolises all that is evil, known in Zoroastrianism as 'the lie'.

Ahura Mazda; The lord of light and wisdom, Ahura Mazda is the highest divinity of Zoroastrianism and

represents all that is good, known in Zoroastrianism as 'the truth'.

Ala (pl. alae); A unit of Roman cavalry, numbering anywhere between a few hundred and a thousand.

Aquilifer; Senior eagle standard bearer of a Roman legion.

Ballista (pl. ballistae); Roman bolt-throwing artillery that was primarily employed as an anti-personnel weapon on the battlefield.

Beneficiarius; Naval officer

responsible for administrative duties on a ship.

Buccina; The ancestor of the trumpet and the trombone, this instrument was used for the announcement of night watches and various other purposes in the legionary camp.

Candidatus (pl. candidati); The candidati were the hand-chosen, personal bodyguard of the Roman Emperor and successors to the old Praetorian Guard.

Cataphractus (pl. cataphractii); The

flexible heavy cavalry of the Sassanid Persian Empire. These riders wore tall, plumed helms and scale armour, their mounts wearing scale aprons and headpieces likewise. Some riders are also thought to have worn ring armour on their limbs. They either charged with lances chained to their mounts' armour (for momentum and stability in the pre-stirrup era) or harried from afar as archer cavalry. In the fourth century, Rome employed many such riders in the imperial ranks.

Chi-Rho; The Chi Rho is one of the

earliest forms of Christogram, and was used by the early Christian Roman Empire. It is formed by superimposing the first two letters in the Greek spelling of the word Christ, chi = ch and rho = r, in such a way to produce the following monogram;



Clibanarius (pl. clibanarii); The ultra-heavy shock cavalry of the Sassanid Persian Empire. Rider and mount were encased in iron, with

vital areas double-protected with iron plate-armour (clibanarius literally means 'metallic furnace'). They also wore distinctive iron face masks, greaves and gauntlets. While these riders could only fight for a short time owing to the weight of their armour and the heat inside it, when they were on the battlefield they could often decide the day, tearing enemy ranks to pieces. Their primary weapon was the chained lance.

Comitatensis (pl. comitatenses); The comitatenses were the Roman field armies. A 'floating' central

reserve of legions, ready to move swiftly to tackle border breaches. These legions were considered the cream of the late Roman army.

Comes Domesticorum; The head of the Roman Emperor's household guard.

Contubernium (pl. contubernia); A grouping of eight legionaries (ten contubernia per century). These soldiers would share a tent and would receive disciplinary action or reward as a unit.

Decurion; Leader of a turma of

Roman cavalry.

Dirham; A silver coin of the Persian Empire. Long after Roman coinage had been significantly debased, the dirham remained pure silver – an indication of the changing fortunes of both powers.

Dromedarius (pl. dromedarii); Swift and hardy lightly armoured Roman camel scout cavalry, used primarily in desert regions such as Syria and Egypt. These riders were commonly recruited from the native populace of those regions.

Drafsh; The military standards carried by the Sassanid Persian armies. Groups of one hundred men would march or ride under each banner – each unit referred to as a drafsh also. Comparable to a Roman eagle standard, a drafsh was typically crested by a winged Faravahar and had a vivid banner hanging from the crossbar bearing an image of some fierce creature. The Drafsh Kavian was the Sassanid royal standard, bearing the image of a golden star bursting across a purple background. This was carried before the Persian armies when the shahanshah

himself marched to war.

Eques (pl. equites); Roman light cavalry, used for scouting ahead and covering the flanks of a marching legionary column.

Eques Sagittarius (pl. equites sagittarii); Roman horse archers usually well armoured in mail.

Fabrica (pl. fabricae); The workshop of a Roman legion located within the legionary fort or camp. Skilled artisans and craftsmen such as engineers, carpenters, masons, wagon-makers,

blacksmiths, painters and other artificers worked in the fabrica, using devices such as smelting furnaces and water cisterns to produce arms and equipment for the legionaries.

Falcata; A curved blade used for slashing down over enemy shields.

Faravahar; The winged guardian angel is the symbol of Zoroastrianism, considered by many to be the oldest monotheistic religion. In Sassanid Persia, the symbol was closely aligned to the royal throne and the power of the

shahanshah.



Follis (pl. folles); A large bronze coin introduced in about 294 AD with the coinage reform of Diocletian.

Funditor (pl. funditores); Unarmoured Roman slingers who would take part in the skirmishing before a battle.

Gatha; Sacred hymns of Zoroastrianism. Seventeen of these are thought to have been composed by Zoroaster himself.

Gund; A division of one thousand Persian warriors.

Harpax; A naval catapult-shot grappling hook first used in the late Roman Republic. This would allow imperial galleys to snare fast-moving enemy vessels and draw them in for boarding.

Horreum (pl. horrea); The Roman granary and storehouse for other

consumables such as wine and olive oil.

Howdah; A carriage/cabin strapped to an elephants back.

Imperator; Title of the Roman Emperor.

Intercisa; Iron helmet constructed of two halves with a distinctive fin-like ridge joining them together and large cheek guards offering good protection to the face. The illustration on the cover provides a good example of this style of helm.

Jashan of Shahrevar; The Zoroastrian Festival of Iron, celebrating minerals and metals, celebrated on the 4th day of the 6 month (21st August in the Gregorian calendar).

Kathisma; A box overlooking an arena, usually reserved for royalty or esteemed dignitaries.

Liburnian; A small, swift and nimble galley with just a single bank of oars.

Limes (pl. limites); The Roman frontiers, studded with forts,

military roads, choke points and walls. These borders would be manned by the limitanei legions.

Limes Arabicus; Rome's eastern frontier, bordering on Armenia, Persia and the Syrian Desert. This limes incorporated the Strata Diocletiana and ran north-south from Syria all the way to Arabia.

Limitaneus (pl. limitanei); The limitanei were the frontier soldiers, light infantry spearmen who would serve in the legions posted along the empire's borders.

Median; The Median dynasty once ruled all Persia, but by the late 4th century, their lands were but another satrapy of the Sassanid Empire. However, they continued to supply the Sassanid armies with a finely armed and skilled wing of spear-infantry.

Mahout; An elephant rider, seated on the beast's neck to drive it with a series of vocal commands and an iron-tipped cane.

Mithras; A pagan deity particularly loved by the legions – probably something to do with the belief that

Mithras was born with a sword in his hand! In the late 4th century AD, Christianity had taken hold in most of the major imperial population centres and it was only in remote areas like the limites that the last worshippers of Mithras were to be found. The cult of Mithras is thought to have evolved from the Persian Mithra, the Persian god of light and wisdom.

Optio; Second-in-command of a Roman century. Hand-chosen by the centurion.

Paighan; These peasant-

infantrymen were the dregs of the Persian army, used mainly to swell numbers on the battlefield or to act as a cluster of spears around which the Savaran could drive an enemy. They were afforded no armour, fighting with just cane shields and spears. It is thought that some of the paighan were even shackled as they marched to war with the armies.

Phalera (pl. phalerae); A gold, silver or bronze sculpted disk worn on the breastplate during parades by Roman soldiers who had been awarded it as a kind of medal.

Plumbata (pl. plumbatae); A lead-weighted throwing dart carried by Roman legionaries, approximately half a metre in length. Each legionary would carry three of these clipped in behind his shield. They would launch them, overhand or underhand, at their enemy prior to sword or spear engagement. They required some skill to throw accurately, but had a tremendous range of nearly ninety feet.

Primus Pilus; The chief centurion of a legion. So called, as his own century would line up in the first file

(pilus) of the first cohort (primus).

Propontus; The modern Sea of Marmara.

Principia; Situated in the centre of a Roman fort or marching camp, the principia served as the headquarters. In a standing fort, the principia would be laid out as a square, with three wings enclosing a parade area. The legionary standards, wage chest and religious shrines were housed inside the wings along with various administrative offices.

Pushtigban; The cream of the Savaran riders were selected to serve as the personal bodyguard of the Persian Shahanshah and his spahbads. These men would be armoured like *clibanarii*, and wore distinctive winged helms.

Quadriburgium (pl. quadriburgia); Sturdy, square Roman forts that became prevalent towards the end of the 4th century AD. Characterised by their protruding corner towers, these structures indicated the increasingly defensive stance of the empire in these times.

Savaran; This mighty cavalry force was the beating heart of the Sassanid Persian army. It is thought to have comprised four divisions of over ten thousand riders, each division commanded by a spahbad. The strength of the Savaran was in the diversity of its riders, including light, speedy scouts, nimble and skilled horse-archers, ironclad and powerful cataphractii archer/lancers and the near-invincible clibanarii shock cavalry.

Shahanshah; Literally, the 'King of Kings'. This was the title of the Persian emperors, signifying their

dominion over all Persia, including the various satrapies and client states.

Shamshir; The Persian straight sword up to one metre long – not unlike the Roman spatha.

Spatha; The Roman straight sword up to one metre long, favoured by the Roman infantry and cavalry.

Speculatore (pl. speculatore); A shadowy secret police employed throughout the Roman Republic and Empire. They tended to focus on internal affairs and domestic

threats, carrying coded messages, spying, and assassinating on command.

Strata Diocletiana; Rome's eastern frontier was marked by a great desert road sweeping north to south through Syria, built in the time of Emperor Diocletian. The road marked the end of the empire and the beginning of the treacherous no man's land that was the Syrian Desert. The road was studded with quadriburgia forts every twenty miles or so. The once-great desert trading city of Palmyra also sat on this road, although by

the late 4th century AD it was a shadow of its former self and served mainly as a headquarters for the eastern comitatenses legions.

Tesserarius; Each legionary century had one man who served as a tesserarius. They would be answerable to the optio and their chief responsibilities were organising night watch and protecting watchwords.

Thermae;	Roman	bathhouse,
comprising	a	dressing room
(apodyterium),	cold	room
(frigidarium),	warm	room

(tepidarium) and hot room (caldarium).

Tribunus (pl. tribuni); The senior officer of a legion. In the late 4th century AD, a tribunus was usually in charge of one or more legions of limitanei or comitatenses.

Turma (pl. turmae); The smallest unit of Roman cavalry, numbering thirty riders.

Valetudinarium; A medical building in a Roman camp or fort.

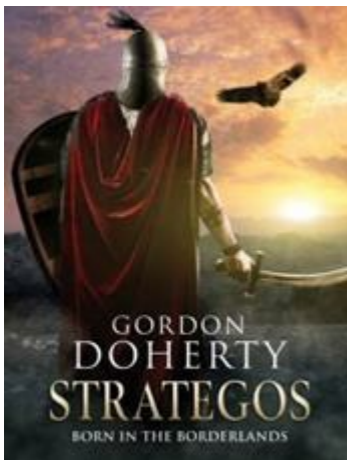
Vexillatio (pl. vexillationes); A

detachment of a Roman legion formed as a temporary task force.

Via Egnatia; The highway constructed in the 2nd century BC running from Dyrrachium on the Adriatic Sea, all the way through Thrace to Constantinople.

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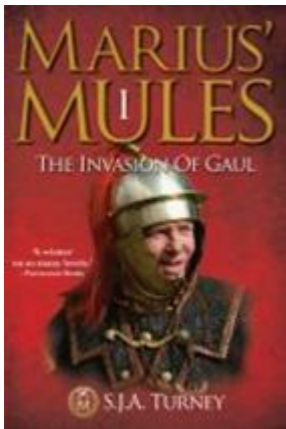


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