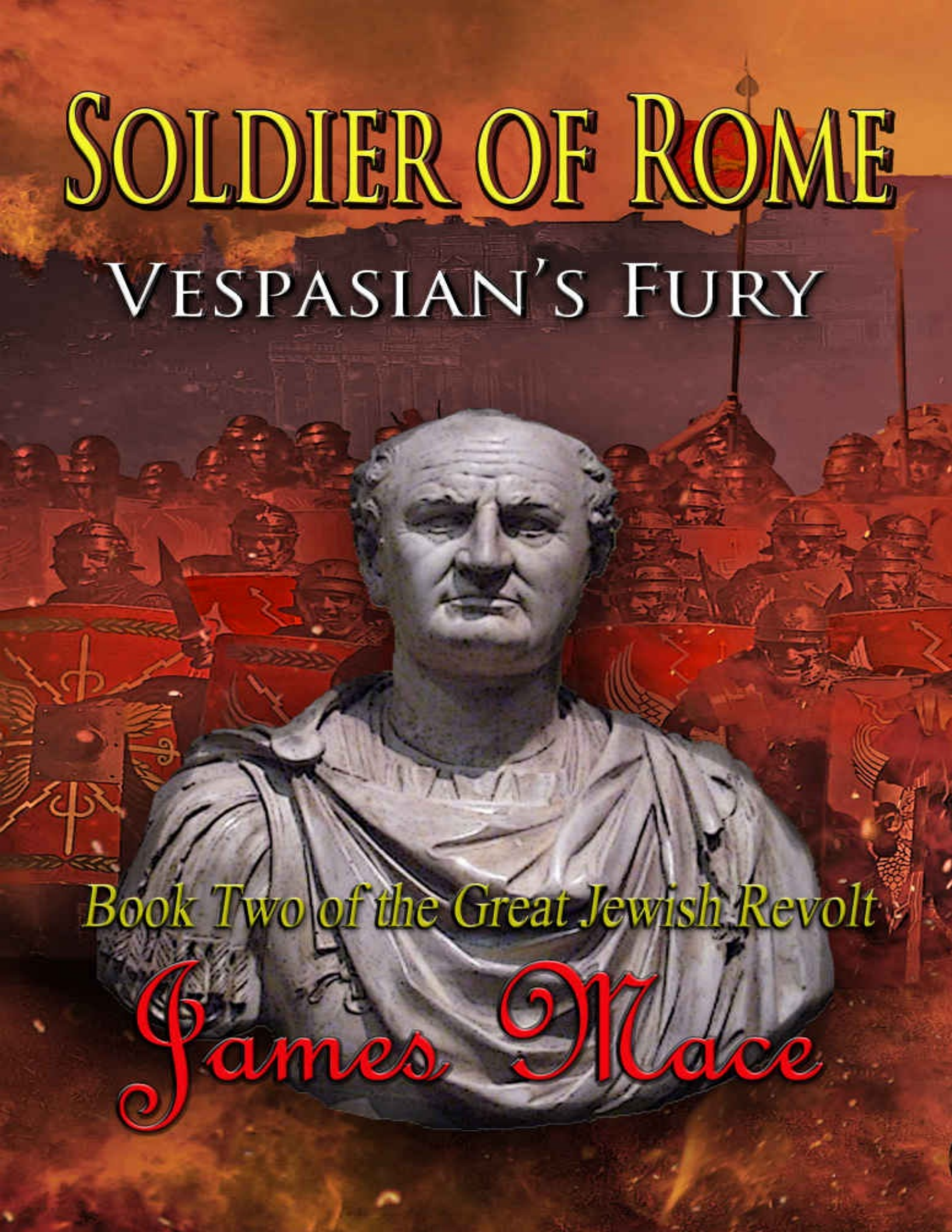
Soldier of Rome

Vespasian's Fury



Book Two of the Great Jewish Revolt

James Mace

Soldier of Rome

Vespasian’s Fury

Book Two of The Great Jewish Revolt

James Mace

Electronic Edition Copyright © 2014 by James Mace

All rights reserved as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Characters and events portrayed in this book are based on actual persons and events, but are used fictitiously.

Legionary Books
Meridian, Idaho 83642, USA
http://www.legionarybooks.net

First eBook Edition: 2014

Published in the United States of America
Legionary Books

Image for front and back covers, *Roman Legion Standard*, licensed for use through Alamy Stock Photos, copyright © 2014. All other images are either author's personal photos, public domain, or licensed through applicable copyright holders.

Don’t cry for mercy, for you know there will be none.
There in your darkness, you’ve been blinded by the sun.

- David DeFeis
‘Rising Unchained’

The Works of James Mace

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

The Artorian Chronicles

Soldier of Rome: The Legionary
Soldier of Rome: The Sacrovir Revolt
Soldier of Rome: Heir to Rebellion
Soldier of Rome: The Centurion
*Empire Betrayed: The Fall of Sejanus
Soldier of Rome: Journey to Judea
Soldier of Rome: The Last Campaign
*Centurion Valens and the Empress of Death
*Slaves of Fear: A Land Unconquered

The Great Jewish Revolt and Year of the Four Emperors

Soldier of Rome: Rebellion in Judea
Soldier of Rome: Vespasian's Fury
Soldier of Rome: Reign of the Tyrants
Soldier of Rome: Rise of the Flavians
Soldier of Rome: The Fall of Jerusalem

Napoleonic Era

Forlorn Hope: The Storming of Badajoz
I Stood With Wellington
Courage, Marshal Ney

The Anglo-Zulu War

Brutal Valour: The Tragedy of Isandlwana

* Stand-alone novel or novella

Table of Contents

Preface
Chapter I: Messenger from God
Chapter II: Departure from Desolation
Chapter III: Return to Ptolemais
Chapter IV: Scourging of the Pirates
Chapter V: Of Kings and Martyrs
Chapter VI: Stratagems and Slaves
Chapter VII: On the Sea of Galilee
Chapter VIII: Sowing the Seeds of Discord
Chapter IX: Lost Souls
Chapter X: Skirmish by the Sea
Chapter XI: Murder by Conquest
Chapter XII: Vespasian's Judgment
Chapter XIII: From Martyr to Traitor
Chapter XIV: The Last Stronghold in Galilee
Chapter XV: A Hellish Siege
Chapter XVI: Engines of War
Chapter XVII: Doom of the Gods
Chapter XVIII: Mountain of Power
Chapter XIX: Ingenuity and Bravery
Chapter XX: Titus' Retribution
Chapter XXI: Giscala's Deceits
Chapter XXII: The Fall of Galilee
Chapter XXIII: A Sinister Interlude
Chapter XXIV: Dark Alliances
Chapter XXV: Temple under Siege
Chapter XXVI: The Murder of all Hope
Chapter XXVII: The New Order
Chapter XXVIII: Justice Blinded
Chapter XXIX: The Invasion of Perea
Chapter XXX: Drowning in Fury
Chapter XXXI: End of a Dynasty
Appendix A: Full Text of Hanan's Speech
Appendix B: Full Text of Yeshua's Speech

Appendix C: Roman Military Ranks
A Note of Thanks from the Author

Preface

It is July of 67 A.D. The brutal, forty-seven day siege of the rebel stronghold of Jotapata, in Galilee, has ended. The Roman armies of Vespasian destroyed the city and captured the leader of the resistance, Josephus ben Matthias. While being interrogated by the Roman commanding general, Josephus makes a bold prediction; Nero's reign grows short and, in time, Vespasian himself will rise to become emperor. Intrigued, while also viewing the Jewish general as a great source of intelligence, Vespasian spares his life. He then unleashes a hell storm of fury upon the rest of Galilee and into Judea itself.

In Jerusalem, the fall of Jotapata is a tragic loss, with Josephus presumed dead and venerated as a martyr. The moderate government under Hanan ben Hanan is greatly weakened as a result of the defeat, with the various extremists seeking to install their own leaders as head of the Jewish State. The rival zealot factions soon become embroiled in a bitter and extremely violent civil war, oblivious or uncaring about the common enemy that is laying waste to the land.

Three thousand miles away, Rome is in a constant state of political turmoil. Vespasian attempts to stay above the fray, intent on finishing off the rebellious zealots, yet with Josephus' prophetic words ever-echoing in his mind.

Cast of Characters

Romans:

Flavius Vespasian – Full name: Titus Flavius Vespasianus, and more commonly known as Vespasian, he was appointed by Emperor Nero to crush the Jewish Revolt.
Titus – Sharing the same full name as his father, he is the son of Vespasian and Commanding Legate of the Fifteenth Legion
Marcus Ulpius Trajan – Commanding Legate of the Tenth Legion
Sextus Vettulenus Cerealis – Commanding Legate of the Fifth Legion
Lucius Vetutius Placidus – Commander of Vespasian's auxiliary corps
Claudius Nicanor – A centurion within the Tenth Legion's Fifth Cohort
Gaius Artorius Armiger – An optio, serving under Centurion Nicanor. His grandfather served with Vespasian during the Invasion of Britannia.

Jews:

Hanan ben Hanan – Former high priest, now leader of the Jewish resistance to Rome
Josephus ben Matthias – Commander of the Jewish garrison at Jotapata, he now seeks to find ways to end the war, following his capture by the Romans
Simon bar Giora – Zealot leader, he has established a fiefdom out of the fortress at Masada. He recognizes neither the moderate government, nor the Romans
John of Giscala – Zealot leader and hated rival of Simon bar Giora. He has aspirations beyond that of merely a Judean general within the resistance
Levi – A former deputy of Josephus, he has now become one of John's most loyal allies
Marcus Julius Agrippa II – Client King, commonly called Herod Agrippa II, he is the son of the original Herod Agrippa and great-grandson of Herod the Great
Julia Berenice – Client Queen of part of Judea and sister of Agrippa

Part III

Vespasian’s relentless onslaught after the fall of Jotapata

The ancient Kingdoms of Judah and Israel, circa 6th century B.C.

Chapter I: Messenger from God

Jotapata, Galilee
24 June 67 A.D.
***

"Pointless, isn't it?" Vespasian asked. Four days had passed since the ending of the Siege of Jotapata, and the rebel commander, Josephus ben Matthias, had finally been captured. Since the Roman onslaught of Galilee began five months before, every city they had come up against had either immediately capitulated, or else fallen during the first assaults. Jotapata, on the other hand, had been an extremely brutal struggle that had taken Rome's best siege master forty-seven days to subdue. The defenders had used every stratagem and trickery they could conceive to hamper the Romans' efforts, from building the walls higher, to conducting nighttime raids against the imperial siege engines, to using boiling oil to thwart an assault on a breach created by battering rams.

Countless battles were fought both on and in front of the wall, with hundreds killed on both sides. It was only when General Titus, the commanding legate of the Fifteenth Legion, led a sneak attack on an unprotected section of the wall, that the legions finally breached the defenses. Forty thousand Jews were subsequently killed in the ensuing massacre, with less than two thousand women and children captured to be sold as slaves.

For Josephus, it marked the bitter end of a harrowing ordeal. Almost all of his closest friends and brothers-in-arms, who had stood beside him despite the fearsome odds, were either killed, died of wounds, or perished slowly from disease over the past six weeks. By the time Titus' attack breached the walls, most of the surviving defenders were so weakened by illness and malnutrition that the Romans butchered them with relative ease. Though deeply saddened by the loss he'd suffered, Josephus was, in a way, glad the siege was over. Now, he came face-to-face with the very man who'd finally bested him.

As the Roman general apprised his opponent, he did not know whether to admire or despise him. In all of his campaigns, in Britannia, North Africa, and now Judea, Vespasian had yet to face an enemy as resourceful and

difficult to subdue as the young man who stood across from him. He had fought numerous adversaries who were both brave and well-skilled in the art of war, yet they had not a fraction of the inventiveness shown by this Jew.

What was particularly maddening was that Josephus wasn't even a soldier, but a scholar! The Roman general reckoned, perhaps that was why defeating him was so difficult. The warriors in Britannia, and to a lesser extent the Judean rebels Vespasian had faced thus far, had been fanatically brave and exceptional fighters. They were also extremely overzealous, particularly in Britannia, where the tribal warlords relied on brute strength and sheer numbers of fighting men to win their battles. They had, therefore, often attacked the Romans out in the open, where legionaries excelled. This brash behavior had given Vespasian victory after victory, with casualties so lopsided that it left his surviving foes both defeated and utterly humiliated.

Josephus had known better; he understood that his fighters stood little to no chance against Vespasian's professional soldiers in a pitched battle. Instead, he used cunning and guile to make war against the imperial juggernaut, likening his forces to the legendary David versus the Roman Goliath.

As Vespasian began his interrogation, his son, Titus, stood behind him, as did Trajan, the commanding legate of the Tenth Legion. General Placidus, Commander of the auxilia corps, stood behind Josephus, along with a centurion from the Tenth Legion named Nicanor. It was Nicanor, a childhood friend of Josephus, who had compelled the Jewish leader to finally surrender himself. A pair of legionaries stood on either side of Josephus, hands resting on the pommels of their gladii.

"You rebel against Rome, and look what happens," Vespasian continued. "How many thousands died in Jotapata alone? And how many more before this affair is done and those foolish bastards in Jerusalem come crawling to us, begging for peace? Rome gave your people a nice, easy life, and you threw it all away. And for what? There is nothing for you now, except slavery, torture…death. You must be mad."

"I did my duty," Josephus finally said, "as a Jew."

At this, Vespasian's previously composed demeanor turned red with anger. He slammed his hand onto the table and stood. "Judea is *Roman!*" he snapped. "Your *duty* was to Rome and to the emperor! And if I send you to the emperor, you know exactly how he will treat your betrayal, your failure to

do your duty."

Josephus bowed his head for a moment. "If I am to be sent to the emperor," he said slowly, raising his head, "then I need go no further than this tent."

Vespasian did not appear to hear him, but simply turned and waved his hand, signaling the soldiers to take Josephus away. As the legionaries grabbed the rebel leader by each shoulder, it was Titus who held up his hand, staying them.

"Hold on," he said. He then addressed Josephus. "What did you just say?"

"I come not as a captive adversary, but as a messenger from God." There was a change in the Jew's expression. His eyes were fixed on the Roman commander-in-chief, his face hard and determined. "It is by the grace of God that Rome rules the world, and the world needs a strong leader. Emperor Nero's power fades…"

"Oh, piss on this!" Vespasian snapped. "Emperors do not come from outside of the imperial family, so do not try and flatter me, Jew. You are talking treason."

"I foretold how long the siege would last," Josephus rebuked. "And I'm right about this."

Though he would not admit it, Vespasian actually admired that this Jewish rebel had the audacity to stand up to him so boldly. He had seen the bravest barbarian war chiefs come crawling on their stomachs, begging for mercy, after they were thoroughly beaten. And yet after the destruction of his stronghold, with all of his warriors dead, this Jew, this Jewish *scholar*, dared to remain bold.

"A prophet now, are you?" Vespasian asked. His face was stern, though the harshness of his tone had been slightly tempered. He was at least partially intrigued by what Josephus had to say. If nothing else, his valor and prowess in battle had earned him the Roman commander's grudging respect. Vespasian leaned over the table, resting his hands on top, while assessing this man, who had the audacity to remain defiant in the face of certain annihilation.

"No," Josephus replied, shaking his head. "I am no prophet, but I do bring a message from the Almighty. *The Beast will fall, and strongest-of-the-strong will rise*. Within a year, maybe two, Nero's reign will come crashing down. His heirs will not sit on the imperial throne for long. The world needs a strong leader, and it is God Himself, who has decreed that Flavius Vespasian

is the strongest of them all."

Vespasian said nothing, but simply stood with his hands clasped behind his back, while he stared at the enigmatic Jew. It was Titus who leaned over and spoke to his father.

"He was right about the siege, general," he said quietly. "Who knows? He could prove very useful to us."

"Send me to Nero if you wish," Josephus spoke up. "But remember what I have said."

"Take him away," Vespasian said, his voice now very calm, "but do not chain him. Make sure he is housed, fed, and protected…for now."

The legionaries saluted, and each took the Jewish leader by the arm and escorted him from the tent. Nicanor made to follow them, when the commanding general called to him. "Centurion Nicanor."

"Sir?" the officer asked, coming to attention.

"This man is your friend," Vespasian noted, "and therefore he may be more likely to speak plainly with you. Find out everything you can. I don't care about his damn prophesies, but he likely has a trove of actionable intelligence we can use."

"Very good, sir." Nicanor did not leave immediately, but paused awkwardly as he knew there was one more matter he had to discuss. "There was one other thing, sir. We captured a second rebel with Josephus."

"What of him?" Vespasian asked. "Hang him on a cross and be done with it."

"About that," the centurion said. "When they were down in the well, I promised Josephus that no harm would come to his friend if they would surrender. I also swore to do all I could to have the young man set at liberty."

"Did you now?" The commanding general folded his arms across his chest.

Titus' face twitched.

Surprisingly, it was Placidus who spoke up. "It was the only the way to get the Jewish general to surrender. I, at first, berated the centurion for exceeding his authority. However, since the rest of the rebel leadership had already taken their own lives, it was a small price to pay to ensure capturing Josephus alive."

"Also, if we crucify his friend, Josephus is unlikely to talk to anyone, even his friends," Nicanor reasoned.

"Who is he, this second prisoner?" Titus asked.

“I don’t know his name,” the centurion replied, “but he is young, too young to be of much importance or to have knowledge of the inner workings of the rebel government.”

Vespasian gave an almost imperceptible nod in reply. “Very well. Have this man give his oath not to take up arms against Rome; not that I expect him to keep it. I suppose if we show at least a little clemency, perhaps these damned Jews will come to their senses before we have to kill or enslave the entire damned province.”

Nicanor saluted and left the tent, following the soldiers as they took Josephus to a stockade they had established for enemy prisoners.

“So,” Trajan said, once the three legates were left alone, “this Jewish rebel predicts you will soon become *Emperor* Vespasian.”

This brought a nervous laugh from both Trajan and Titus, though their commanding general was not smiling. A scowl creased his face as he sat with his chin resting in his hand.

“Such talk is dangerous,” Vespasian said at last. “We have a long, difficult road still ahead of us. The last thing we need is talk of treason spreading amongst the ranks.”

“The lads won’t take much from the words of a captured Jewish rebel,” Titus reckoned, though his father was far from convinced.

“Even if we order them to keep silent, the soldiers who overheard Josephus will no doubt talk to their friends at some point,” Trajan said. “We cannot concern ourselves with the ravings of one mad Jew, who was likely making such bold predictions in the hopes of saving his own ass. Still, one cannot help but be intrigued by the possibilities.”

There was a pause for a moment, before Titus spoke up. While their captive’s ‘prophecy’ was enthralling, he sensed his father’s discomfort at continuing with such speculation. “Do you think our enemies will continue to put up as much of a fight as they did here?” the young legate asked.

“Josephus was the governor-general of Galilee,” Vespasian replied. “From what we have seen, his control over his coalition was frail at best. No doubt many of the fanatics will continue to resist, though we can rest easy in the knowledge that they are divided and leaderless.”

“And those who know they cannot make a stand against us here, will likely head south towards Jerusalem,” Trajan added.

“We cannot pursue them until we conquer the rest of Galilee,” Vespasian said. “Perhaps some will see reason, once they hear that even their most

defensible stronghold fell to us. And perhaps releasing our worthy foe's young friend will work to our advantage. He can spread the word about the horrors of fighting against Rome far better than any propaganda we may generate."

As Josephus was led from Vespasian's tent, he was filled with conflicting feelings of both relief and sorrow. The overwhelming weight of responsibility for the defense of Galilee was now lifted, even if it was in defeat. He and his men had fought well; even the Roman generals had acknowledged that. And yet, all their stratagems, valor, and extreme tenacity had been for naught. Aside from Yaakov, every last fighting man within Jotapata was now dead. Though most he'd only known for a short time, they had become his brothers, brought together in the crucible of war, fighting for the very survival of their people.

Even more tragic was the sheer number of women, children, and other innocents who also perished. Josephus and his men had battled the Romans from the walls of Jotapata in order to protect the people, and they had failed. At least half of the forty thousand who had been killed within the city were neither warrior nor zealot. They had simply been citizens, fleeing from the rampage of Vespasian's fury. Now there was nothing to stop the Romans from unleashing a firestorm on the remainder of Galilee, and even into lower Judea.

The soldiers who escorted Josephus said nothing, and while their weapons remained sheathed, their hands instinctively clasped the pommels of their gladii. Nicanor, rather than leading the men, walked behind them, eyes fixed on his friend and now former adversary. The centurion was one of the few who, besides Josephus, felt the full magnitude of tragedy that had befallen the land. To most of the soldiers, the Jewish rebels were vermin to be exterminated, yet Nicanor, having been raised in the east, still managed to see his enemies as people. Every last one of them who died on legionary blades had been a father, husband, or son. And many had had their families slain along with them. Tragic as it was, the centurion knew it was the brutal reality of the world they lived in, for the Judean rebels would have shown no mercy had they emerged victorious.

As they made their way through the camp, night had fallen, and only a handful of soldiers were seen strolling about. Torches cast a pale light, accented by the half moon and starlit sky. Josephus saw a squad of auxiliary infantry dragging a woman through the camp towards where the remainder of the prisoners were kept. Her clothes were ripped and barely hanging off her badly beaten body. It was an added humiliation that her breasts were completely exposed, as her garments had been practically torn from her. Her body was slippery with blood, and as the soldiers lost their grip on her, she collapsed onto the ground. Her head was turned towards the group as they walked towards them. Despite only having the light of torches plus her disheveled hair hanging in her face, Josephus still recognized her.

"Dear God," he whispered. "Devorah!"

He sprinted away from his guards, who called out for him to stop as they drew their swords. Josephus ran over and fell to his knees next to the young woman. His eyes were wet with tears as he saw the horrifying gashes scoured all across her back, covered in coagulated blood. As the legionaries raced over to him, the auxiliaries who had been dragging the woman turned their spears on Josephus.

"Try running again and I'll lop your fucking cock off!" a legionary spat as he grabbed Josephus by the hair and jabbed him in the back with the point of his gladius.

"Take it easy!" Nicanor said, as he rushed over. He placed a hand on the legionary's shoulder, who released Josephus. "He's not trying to run off."

Josephus was oblivious to the men, instead consumed with sadness at Devorah's pitiful state. The gashes across her back, brought on by Roman whips as she was tortured, were wide and cut deep.

"I'm sorry," she whispered hoarsely. "I could not take the pain…I told them where you were. Please forgive me…I betrayed you."

"No," Josephus tried to console her, yet he dared not touch her, lest he cause even greater agony. He then looked up at the centurion. "Nicanor, please. This woman needs help!"

"Oh, fuck her!" a legionary spat, cuffing Josephus across the ear. This brought a rebuking smack on the chest from Nicanor's vine stick.

"Enough," he growled to the soldier. He looked to the other legionary. "Go find a medic."

"Sir?" the man started to ask.

"At the double, damn you!" Nicanor snapped. He then asked Josephus,

“Who is she?”

“The most innocent of souls,” Josephus replied. He leaned in close to Devorah’s ear and whispered, “Take heart, dear one, for Yaakov lives and has been set free by the Romans.”

“Praise be to God,” she managed to say, before she passed out from the pain and fatigue once more.

“I don’t know why we even bothered with this little bitch,” one of the auxiliary troopers grunted. “She’s as good as dead anyway. Not even worth getting a good shag out of her.”

“Have her wounds cleaned and stitched up,” Nicanor ordered the soldiers. “And find something to properly cover her with before you imprison her with the others.” He then grabbed Josephus under the arm. “Come on, there is nothing more you can do for her.”

“Thank you,” the Jewish leader said, bowing his head as he allowed himself to be taken once more.

The legionaries were rougher with him now, pinning his hands behind his back and binding his hands with a cord.

“This is what we get for not being allowed to chain this filthy shit,” one of the soldiers growled, smacking Josephus across the head once more.

“Keep him segregated from the other prisoners,” Nicanor told the men. “If they see that he lives, it could give them false hope and possibly incite them out of their defeated docility.”

“Yes, sir,” a legionary replied with a nod. He then grabbed Josephus under the arm. “Come on, you insolent twat!”

As he was led away, Josephus chanced a glance over his shoulder and saw the Roman medic, along with an assistant who carried an oil lamp, kneeling over Devorah with a wet rag as he started to clean her back off. She winced at the pain of her fearsome injuries being touched, but at least she still had life left in her. For Josephus, that was enough. His own life was spared, for the time being, and he quietly prayed that God would show greater mercy to both Devorah and to Yaakov in this world.

The sky was clear, with stars casting their faint light upon the ground as Yaakov was escorted through the ruined streets of Jotapata. The buildings had mostly been demolished into piles of rubble, with thousands of corpses

strewn everywhere. The Romans left their slain adversaries where they fell, with wild dogs and other animals making a feast of the carnage.

Several days had passed since the slaughter ended, and in the summer heat the bodies had turned black and started to bloat. There was an added sense of relief for the Roman army that with the capture of Josephus they could finally leave Jotapata. The stench of so many dead, many of which were burned within the charred remains of their houses, was quickly becoming a vile pestilence. It was a practical respite to their officers as well, for they knew that festering diseases would now flourish amongst the tens-of-thousands of corpses, and they wished to prevent any such illnesses from infecting their soldiers.

As for the young Jewish rebel, he could not fathom why he was still alive. After the hateful and arduous siege that had left a number of their friends dead or badly maimed, the Romans had been without mercy once they did breach the walls of Jotapata. A small number of women and children had been captured to be sold into slavery, yet these were a very small minority. Most of the rest had been slaughtered, along with every man and boy of fighting age.

Since they left Jerusalem, earlier in the year, Yaakov had led his general's personal guard of six hundred men. All had become like brothers to him, and every last one now lay dead, their guts splayed open. The few who had gone into hiding with Josephus and Yaakov had committed mutual suicide rather than face the crucifix. And then there was Devorah…

"Alright, here we are then," Optio Gaius Artorius, the Roman officer who led the escorting soldiers, said. The young man did not even recognize the place; only the remains of a crumbled section of the defensive wall told him where he was. The small hill in front of the city had been leveled by the Romans to create platforms for their siege engines, and all of the city and outer wall had been razed to the ground over the past few days. By God, but the Romans were efficient in the art of destruction! The legions had since carted off their catapults and ballistae, and all was left desolate. The moon rose bright, adding an ethereal feel to the devastation.

"I…I am free to go?" Yaakov asked, amazed. "I thought I was being taken away to be crucified."

"Don't tempt me, Jew," Gaius grumbled. "I'd just as soon leave your rotting carcass for the carrion birds, like the rest of the scum of this damned

place. But, orders are orders." He took a small canvas sack and tossed it to Yaakov. "There's bread and enough water to last you a few days."

"Where should I go?" The question was one the young Jew was asking himself, though the Roman decided to answer for him.

"How the bleeding fuck should I know? And why in hades would I give a damn?" The optio sighed, and in that moment almost took pity upon the wretched young man. "I wouldn't go to Jaffa, there's nothing left there, except another ten thousand rotting carcasses and a pile of ash. If you're lucky, perhaps the citizens of loyal Sepphoris will show a trace of mercy on a rebellious shit like you, though I doubt it."

Yaakov nodded and started to walk away, his head bowed and the sack clutched close to his chest.

The Roman officer grabbed him roughly by the shoulder. "There is one thing before we let you go."

"What is it?" Yaakov asked.

"Not that I think the oath of a filthy Jew, who betrayed Rome, is worth a vat of piss," Gaius replied, "but General Vespasian said we are to release you only after you have given your solemn word to never again take up arms against the Empire."

"I swear," Yaakov said, raising his right hand, "by the divine Jehovah, by the blood of my ancestors…and by Devorah, the woman I love more than life itself, never more will this hand be used to bring war against Rome."

"Off with you, then, before General Vespasian changes his mind." The Roman nodded his head towards the northwest, away from the city.

With the sack now slung over his shoulder, Yaakov started the slow trek away from Jotapata. He was surely a wretched sight; having not washed nor changed his tunic in over six weeks. Unable to grow a full beard, his face was scraggly and covered in filth. He did not know where he was going, nor what he should do when he got there. More than anything, he wished for death, to have died honorably with his friends. And yet, he knew that he could not take his own life now without committing a horrible sacrilege against God.

As he walked past the large hill where the Roman army was still encamped, he hoped that perhaps he would be mercifully cut down by one of their patrols. What baffled him was when he was, in fact, spotted by both a group of cavalrymen, as well as a squad of infantry who were patrolling the road. Yet neither group of soldiers so much as acknowledged his presence. At one point, though, a legionary knocked him off the road with his shield with a

grumble of, “Out of the way, bloody Jewish scum!”

Yaakov thought to perhaps provoke the soldier, in hopes that he would draw his blade and end his misery. His body and mind were too numb from fatigue to as much as spout off a rebuking insult. It felt as if the Romans allowed him to live simply so he could continue to suffer. The entire hill was covered in tents of the vast army’s camp. It was lit up with torches along the ramparts, which were covered in palisade stakes, like the wicked teeth of some unholy beast.

It was after midnight by the time he was well away from the enemy’s enormous encampment. He stood at a crossroads and tried to determine where he should go. Jaffa, according to the Roman officer who’d released him, was destroyed. Sepphoris had remained loyal to Rome, and Yaakov had no way of knowing where the remaining cities’ loyalties lay, or if they had been destroyed as well. He stared up at the full moon, his eyes wet with tears.

“Why?” he asked. “Why hast thou let me live, when all that I love is now lost?”

He collapsed to his knees and let loose all the sorrows and frustrations that had built up over the past months. He knew not that Devorah lived, and he further could not fathom what would happen with Josephus. What sort of deal had he struck with the Romans that spared their lives? If Josephus thought his friend had been shown mercy by their enemies, he was sorely mistaken. Yaakov’s very soul felt as if it were now condemned to the hell of continued mortal existence.

An hour passed, and when there were no more tears to shed, Yaakov slowly rose. Exhausted, his mind numb with shock from his harrowing ordeals of the last six weeks, he decided to first make his way to Nazareth. Despite its proximity to Jaffa, Yaakov hoped it had not been destroyed during the Romans’ rampage of destruction. There was little there, as Nazareth was but a squalid community of a few peasant farmers, yet it was preferable to dying slowly of exposure and thirst in the wilderness. Eventually, he would attempt to reach Jericho, in the far south, where he had some family and friends. Though he knew not why his life had been spared, all he had left was the hint of faith that God had saved him for some other purpose in this world.

Chapter II: Departure from Desolation

Jotapata
2 July 67 A.D.
***

It was with both relief and a sense of urgency that the Roman army under Vespasian made ready to depart the ruins of Jotapata. The commanding general had decided to first return to Ptolemais to refit and reorganize after the arduous siege. The city they had staged the invasion from was only a day and a half's trek, and Vespasian hoped to have word from Mucianus, the governor of Syria, regarding replacements for many of his dead and wounded soldiers. While most of the assaults on the walled cities of Galilee had been one-sided massacres, the defenders of Jotapata made a far more stalwart defense, with Vespasian's army suffering far greater losses there than all the other battles combined.

During the siege, supply and artillery wagons had been unloaded to cart off casualties. Over the past six weeks, a steady stream of badly wounded legionaries and auxilia troopers had poured into Ptolemais. The recovery of these wagons had been part of the reason for their delay in leaving the ruins of Jotapata.

"I'll be glad to leave this festering shithole behind me," Vespasian said to Titus, as they both stood atop the large hill overlooking the broken remains of the city.

"You and the rest of the army," his son noted. "After we rally back at Ptolemais, what are your plans?"

"I need to get a strategic update from Mucianus," the commanding general answered. "And the sooner we can get the Twelfth Legion reconstituted and back in the fight, the better."

"We could use some replacements for our legions here, too," Titus observed. "Those cohorts savaged with scalding oil when we attacked the breach are well understrength now. Many of their wounded suffered such severe burns that, even if they didn't succumb to infection, they are no longer of any use to us."

"And how is our noble 'guest'?" the commanding general asked.

"Centurion Nicanor is going to pay him a visit this afternoon," Titus

replied. “Per your instructions, we found some new clothes for him. Good thing too, he looked more like a beggar from the gutter than the enemy general who damn near bested us.”

Vespasian turned towards his son and raised an eyebrow at his last remark. Few wanted to admit that the imperial army had been close to vacating the siege and returning to Ptolemais in defeat.

“Let’s not kid ourselves, general,” Titus replied to his father’s expression. “You and I were both fearing the worst towards the end. They put up a strong front, never letting on that they were wasting away and nearly broken well before we even got into the city. Still, I doubt most of the remaining rebel leaders have half the strategic savvy that our new friend has.”

“Let us hope so,” Vespasian replied.

The commander-in-chief was relieved to have crushed the rebels’ most formidable stronghold, as well as capturing the leader of the resistance in Galilee. He was also wise and experienced enough to know that as enemy leaders fell, others would rise up in their place. And with the Judean factions in a constant state of strife with each other, there was no shortage of candidates who felt they should be leading the fight against Rome. Though where Josephus at least attempted to be a unifier of the peoples in the northern region of Galilee, his successors would just as likely fall into fighting each other once more.

Since his capture, Josephus had been placed in a wheeled cage used for transporting prisoners. There were many other cages filled with women and children, who had survived the siege and would now be sold as slaves. Most, however, would have to walk all the way to Ptolemais, chained together in long lines. Josephus was kept in his own cell, well away from any of the other survivors. He had been given food and water and, unlike the other prisoners, when nature called he was escorted to a latrine trench. Clearly his captors were more concerned about his health than they were the others.

He was constantly consumed by a multitude of conflicting thoughts, for all he had time to do now was think. Doubt assailed him. Had he truly done all he could to defend Jotapata? Would his failure weaken Hanan and the moderates’ hold upon Judea? Would the Romans treat him fairly, and by this, hope to sway more of the rebellious regions to capitulate? Above all, his

mind was wrought by lamentations for his wife and family. If the fanatics were emboldened and managed to take control of Jerusalem, how would they treat Judith and his parents?

The rattling of the key working the lock on his cell brought him out of his reminiscing. As the cage door opened, he tried to force a smile when he saw Nicanor crawl in and kneel down next to him.

"How are you, old friend?" the centurion asked.

"How do you think I am?" Josephus replied, gazing away. It wasn't that he was unhappy to see Nicanor, but he also understood that the Romans were attempting to use their friendship to their advantage.

Nicanor was here foremost as a soldier of Rome, rather than his friend. Still, Josephus reckoned that with Jotapata fallen, unless Hanan managed to hold onto power in Jerusalem, then all would likely be lost, regardless of whether he collaborated with the Romans. He had done his duty, and now it would be time to try and help put an end to this meaningless slaughter.

"You're to come with me," Nicanor said, ignoring the Jew's retort. "I'm taking you out of this cell."

As Josephus crawled out of the cage, he stood and used his hand to shield his eyes from the sun. He gazed back towards the ruins of what had once been Jotapata. He saw that aside from the soldier who had opened the lock, there was only one other man with Nicanor. Both the centurion and his companion wore only their red tunics, belted around the middle, with their gladii hanging off their sword baldrics.

"This is my optio, Gaius Artorius Armiger," Nicanor said, by way of introduction.

Josephus simply nodded to the optio.

"Your friend has been released," Gaius stated. "I saw to it personally. We gave him some food and water and sent him on his way. Our patrols were under strict orders from General Vespasian not to harm him."

"Where will he have gone, I wonder?" Josephus asked. He was grateful the Romans had kept their word, though he now worried about his young friend, who was completely alone.

"I told him not to bother travelling to Jaffa," Gaius replied.

"So that city has fallen as well," Josephus said quietly, shaking his head.

"Their commander was not nearly as tactically proficient as you," Nicanor said. "We took its double walls within two days, and with a fraction of the force we have here. That the other enemy strongholds fell so quickly,

while you resolutely held for so long, I think only added to Vespasian's admiration for you."

"What will happen to the woman, Devorah?" Josephus asked, pulling his gaze from the scorched ruins of the city and looking his friend in the face once more.

"The medics stitched up her wounds," Nicanor explained. "Provided she doesn't yield to sickness or infection, she'll be sold into slavery like the rest."

Josephus grimaced slightly, which brought a rebuke from Gaius.

"Vespasian may respect you, but that does not mean he is inclined to granting personal favors. You're lucky her throat wasn't cut to put her out of her misery!"

Though he did respect Josephus' ability as a leader of fighting men, Gaius did not share his centurion's familiar past, nor his affections, with their captured enemy. Their captive was still an enemy combatant as far as he was concerned.

"Forgive me," Josephus replied. "I only wish to help put an end to the ceaseless killing in this pointless war."

"And that is why Vespasian let you live," Nicanor explained. "It is also why he has not yet sent you to Emperor Nero."

"Emphasis on the *yet*," Gaius added. "Prove useful to us and Vespasian will treat you well. Play us false, or if you simply prove worthless, then you'll likely be sent to the emperor, as a prize for him to dispose of as he likes."

Josephus glanced over to Nicanor, who gave a subtle nod confirming his optio's veiled threat. He understood. If he wished to continue living, he had to win over his enemies. And like Vespasian, he knew what information he did have would only be of use for a short time. No doubt the political situation in Jerusalem had changed considerably since they had been under siege. Josephus had heard nothing from Hanan in several weeks, which was a lifetime in the volatile world of Judean politics, especially during such times of chaos and strife.

"I thought, perhaps, it was my little prediction that swayed General Vespasian," Josephus said with a sarcastic chuckle.

"He's decided you should live," the centurion replied, deflecting the remark, "and that you are to be treated as not just a captive, but as a guest who has proven himself a worthy adversary. But first thing's first, you need to wash in the worst way."

“You stink like a fucking cesspit,” Gaius added with a trace of disdain.

The two officers walked on either side of their charge as they made their way through the enormous camp. Vespasian had directed General Trajan to take control of their prized prisoner for the time being, as this gave Centurion Nicanor more ready access to him. Should Josephus prove to be a viable asset, no doubt the commander-in-chief would want to keep him much closer.

As they walked past various encampments, soldiers ceased in their duties and simply stared in silence, as they watched Josephus being led by the centurion and optio. Their feelings were a conflicting mix of both loathing and respect. They hated Josephus for the suffering and death inflicted upon their friends, and yet, they found they could not help but admire an antagonist who had fought so well against them.

Near the legion’s principia was a large barrel. Its top was cut off, and it was filled with water. Josephus stripped out of his filthy rags and eagerly lowered himself into the makeshift bath. A pair of slaves stood nearby with a fresh tunic and sandals. Another carried a small, curved strigil, which he then used to scrape the grime from Josephus’ body.

“If you wish, you can have a shave, too,” Nicanor said. He then laughed, “I almost did not recognize you under all that scruff on your face.”

“I sometimes allow myself a beard,” Josephus replied as he leaned forward, allowing the slave to scrape off his back. His skin was raw and the metal instrument felt as if it would rip the flesh from his body. “Still, I would feel much better with a shave. If nothing else, at least it will clean away the filth.”

Josephus spent another twenty minutes in the cramped barrel as slaves scraped away the dirt, as well as shaved his face clean. His body was stiff as he stood in the now filthy water. His skin was red from the scraping, and covered in various cuts and bruises received during the weeks of battle. He stepped into the sandals and took the tunic from one of the servants. A section of rope was used to belt it around the waist.

“You look like a new man,” Nicanor said with a grin.

“I feel like it,” Josephus replied with a tired smile of his own. “I confess, it’s been months since I had a proper wash. Back to the cage then, is it?”

“No,” the centurion said, shaking his head. He nodded towards a series of tents behind the principia. “Over there is where the tribunes and senior-ranking centurions are billeted. We have procured you a tent, much smaller than theirs, mind you.”

“Still preferable to rotting in a cage,” Gaius remarked. He then added disdainfully, “Hell, you’re getting better living quarters than my legionaries.”

“Guards will be placed,” Nicanor stated, “Although, this will be as much for your protection, as to keep you from getting away. All General Vespasian wants is your solemn oath that you will not attempt to escape.”

“And where exactly would I go?” Josephus said with a mirthless chuckle. “I will do you one better. I swear, not just by my honor, but by our friendship, that at no time will I attempt to escape from the custody of General Vespasian and the Roman army.”

Nicanor nodded in reply and, after dismissing his optio, he led Josephus over to his tent. It was far smaller than the ones that housed the senior officers. However, it was still preferable to sharing a tent with seven other men, as the legionaries were billeted. Inside the tent was a wooden cot that sat low to the ground, as well as a small camp table and a single chair. A clay jug sat in the corner.

“Welcome to your new home,” Nicanor said, as Josephus sat upon the cot. The centurion took a seat upon the camp stool across from him. “When in camp, you will stay near your tent at all times, in case Vespasian or the other officers need you. The only other unaccompanied access you are granted is to the latrine pit, as well as to the water wagon to refill your jug. Food will be brought to you twice daily.”

“Fair enough,” Josephus acknowledged. He then noted, “I think your optio would cut my throat, if he were given the chance.”

“Like all of us, Gaius has lost friends in this war,” Nicanor observed. “He respects you, though you must understand, none of the other soldiers in this army share the lifelong familial bond that you and I have. However, you must know that our past friendship will gain you no special favors. Any magnanimous treatment you’ve received comes strictly from the orders of General Vespasian, not Centurion Nicanor.”

“And I suspect I will be spending a lot of time with the ‘Siege Master’.”

Nicanor chuckled. “I did not know you were aware of the general’s nickname, given he earned it in Britannia over twenty years ago.”

“His reputation preceded him,” Josephus replied. “I suppose I should take pride in the fact that my forces lasted so long against him.”

“Well, no one else has even come close,” Nicanor observed. “Neither Briton, African, nor Jew has been able to withstand his fury for any length of time. And if I were a gambling man, I would bet that none ever will. But he

also knows that it was not just Jotapata which you helped fortify; that was simply the place we managed to finally corner you. I have no doubt that you helped build up the defenses of those cities in Galilee that are still holding out against Rome."

"And you want me to divulge all I know about them," Josephus stated.

"If you don't, Vespasian won't hesitate in sending you to Nero," the centurion said. "And the emperor's accommodations for you will be slightly less comfortable than a cot inside a humble soldier's tent."

Josephus simply nodded. He felt as if he should be fighting harder against the attempts by his captors to gain intelligence from him. And yet, he was almost glad to be helping them, especially if it could help bring an end to the fighting.

Nicanor seemed to read his thoughts. "This war is now unwinnable for your people," he said. "You *know* this. And it's not as if you ever had much of a chance in the first place. A tiny province with nothing but unskilled and ill-equipped militias, taking on an entire empire of professional soldiers. Betrayal and rebellion against Rome does not go unpunished."

"Have the people not suffered enough?" Josephus said, shaking his head sadly. It was barely a year since the rebellion began and already tens-of-thousands had been brutally slain, with similar numbers enslaved. Much of Galilee, aside from those cities which he had failed to compel to join the resistance, now lay in ruins.

"And how much more suffering will there be, if your people continue to resist?" Nicanor retorted. "Most of the towns and cities we come across are given the chance to repent of their crimes. If this audacity continues, I promise you, Vespasian will not even bother with attempting to coerce a surrender. He will simply order us to destroy everything and everyone within all of Judea. Your 'Promised Land' will be left a barren desert. You have the chance to help prevent this from happening, through whatever knowledge you can pass on, as well as possibly mediating with some of the leaders amongst the seditionists. Perhaps you can compel them to see reason."

Josephus did not reply, for he knew his friend spoke the truth. He then contemplated that perhaps this was God's purpose for him, to help end the war and the misery of his people.

Their conversation was interrupted as the tent flap was pulled open by a legionary. Titus entered along with a clerk, who carried a basket full of scrolls and writing implements.

“General, sir,” Nicanor said, as he stood in respect.

Josephus remained seated on his cot.

“At ease,” Titus said. He pointed to the table, where the clerk deposited his basket.

“What is this?” Josephus asked.

“Think of it as a chance to tell your people’s story,” the legate explained. “Your primary task now, aside from when General Vespasian or one of the legates needs you, is to write an account of everything that has transpired since before the war began.”

“Look at it this way, you have the best chance of giving the Jewish perspective of the war,” Nicanor observed.

“Very well,” Josephus replied, finally electing to stand. “If it pleases General Vespasian, then I will act as his historical scribe.”

“I will be checking on you frequently,” Titus said. “I suggest you be thorough, as well as candid. The commander-in-chief detests flowering words and false flattery.” He then nodded to Nicanor. “Carry on, centurion.”

The legate left, and Nicanor took his seat once more.

“From scholar, to general, to scholar again,” he remarked.

“If I am to no longer play an active role in this war, then at least let me be its historian,” Josephus replied, taking up a quill and turning it over in his hand.

Unbeknownst to Josephus, he and Yaakov were not the only fighters to survive the Siege of Jotapata. A zealot named Levi, who had one time betrayed Josephus to the fanatics only to later save him and repent of his crimes, had also escaped the slaughter.

Just prior to the city’s fall, the Judean commander had sent four men, including Levi, out of the city via a secret path that led down the treacherous cliffs and out of the chasm that surrounded most of the city. Two were killed by a Roman mounted patrol, a third taken to Vespasian who had him crucified after being interrogated. The fourth, Levi, was thought to be slain, as a cavalry trooper had smashed him with his shield, sending him over the side of the cliff. He had landed in a thicket, where he lingered for a day, battered and unconscious, recovering only to hear the unrelenting screams in the distance as the citizens of Jotapata were butchered like sheep by the

rampaging legions.

The sun was high on the day which the city fell, when he managed to crawl out of the canyon. The faint sounds of horror were still echoing in his ears as he grabbed a large rock, and with all his diminished strength, pulled himself out of the chasm. His body was badly bruised and covered in numerous cuts and gashes. He reached down and felt his side, which was painful to the touch and made breathing difficult. His left eye was swollen nearly shut, as well.

He staggered over to where the bodies of two of his fallen companions lay. The Romans had taken anything of value. Thankfully, they'd left their water bladders. This came as a huge relief to Levi, for his own drinking source had been punctured when he fell into the gorge and landed in the thicket. He climbed up the hill to his right, and about halfway up, he sat upon a large rock and gazed across the chasm towards Jotapata. The mass of buildings obstructed most of his view, and he could see that some of them were now burning. He could also make out the faint shapes of people fleeing towards the cliffs, only to be cut down by pursuing legionaries. After more than six weeks under siege, the people of Jotapata were greatly weakened by malnourishment and disease. Because of this, the Romans easily overpowered their adversaries once they breached the walls. Still, Levi could not help but be filled with doubts.

"The day after I leave the city, Josephus hands it over to our enemies," he growled through his bloodied and swollen lips. His feelings of sorrow at the rampant butchery going on within Jotapata was replaced by utter hatred; not for the Romans, for it was plain they were the Jews' enemies. No, Levi's contempt was saved for the very man who was supposed to defend Galilee from the invaders. He then resolved to find the man who he should have served from the beginning. If Judea was to be saved, it would take strong men, men devoid of fear.

Chapter III: Return to Ptolemais

Ptolemais
4 July 67 A.D.
***

The column of imperial soldiers was vast, extending for miles as sixty thousand fighting men, along with their logistics wagons, pack mules, and siege trains, made its way to Ptolemais. Outside the city, the road was lined with thousands of onlookers, extending several miles. Many cheered as the Roman army of Vespasian marched past. Others stood in somber silence. Some of these more muted citizens had family members or friends who had fled to Jotapata and were now missing. Some boldly shed their tears of sorrow as they saw the forlorn faces of loved ones peering through the wheeled cages, or who marched in chains behind, all en route to the slave traders who lustily gathered in droves at Ptolemais. Yet for most, there would be no news at all, and they could only assume their friends had perished during the brutal siege.

Those wrought by anguish were surrounded by many who lauded the legions for destroying the rebel stronghold. Such contrast in feelings emphasized the vast differences in loyalties for many of the people, serving as yet another example that common ethnicity and religious faith was not enough to unite the peoples of Judea. Like the Jews in Rome, most of the people of Ptolemais were very much ‘Romanized’, sharing a similar affinity for their imperial overlords as well as the client king, Agrippa II.

Like most corners of the empire, the common people cared little for the political and social machinations of whoever was in charge. All they wanted was to be left alone, in peace. Whether they answered to a Jewish king or Roman emperor meant nothing to them. That the zealots and seditionists brought continuous war and pointless slaughter had turned substantial numbers of the people against them. Their contempt for the fanatics was further incensed by their use of the Jewish religion as a weapon for hatred. The greatest fear, for those who attempted to stay above the fray, was that the Romans would eventually come to view all Jews as troublemakers, thereby bringing persecution down upon even those who were loyal citizens of the empire.

As the army established its old camp outside the city, Vespasian and his senior commanders made their way to the city council where Mucianus was to meet them. Along with his legionary legates, Titus, Trajan, and Cerealis, he was joined by the auxilia corps commander, Placidus, along with several of his senior regimental commanders. A column of legionaries marched ahead of the contingent of officers, clearing a path through the crowds that gathered to see the returning conquerors.

"People love a victor," Titus observed with a grin as he rode beside his father, who snorted in reply.

"Their adulation is one part love and one part fear," Vespasian noted.

"I suspect that any with rebellious thoughts here will think twice before taking up arms against Rome," Trajan added, as he joined his peers.

"I wonder," the commander-in-chief said, as he scanned the crowd. "Something tells me the enemy's stalwart defense of Jotapata might embolden some. Although, I suspect that any who did wish to openly fight us will have abandoned Ptolemais already."

The building that served as the house of government for Ptolemais was of Greek design, though understandably much smaller than those seen in the major metropolises. Stone columns, painted in white and red, lined the top of the short flight of steps which led into the double doors of the building.

Mucianus stood at the base of the steps, wearing his best toga with its broad purple stripe that denoted his status as a member of the senatorial class. A few years older than Vespasian, his hair was thinning on top and mostly gray. A veteran of the Armenian campaign, who had acquitted himself well in battle, he had served a term as consul before replacing the disgraced Cestius Gallus as governor of Syria.

"Vespasian!" he said, with a nod of approval as the commanding general dismounted and handed the reins of his horse to a servant. "It is good to see these troublesome Jews have not handed you the same ignominious fate as Gallus."

"It wasn't for lack of bravery or resolve," the commander-in-chief said, giving a rare nod of respect to his enemies. As they made their way into the atrium of the council building, towards the meeting hall where servants were filling wine goblets and bringing plates of delicacies, Vespasian came right to the point.

"I need replacements. My legions were not exactly at full strength when

we departed on this little expedition, and the rebels put up quite the resistance at Jotapata."

"My dear, I wish I had the soldiers to give you," Mucianus said, as the men took their seats around the table.

Vespasian hated being called 'dear', namely because Mucianus' homosexuality was no secret to anyone. He tolerated it because he knew it was simply the way the governor spoke. The two men had not always gotten along, for that very reason. Indeed, Vespasian had even gone so far as to once tell Mucianus, 'At least I am a man'. It was, perhaps, for this reason the governor still called him 'dear'. Still, there were no inappropriate insinuations from Mucianus towards Vespasian, who had always made it abundantly clear that his preference was for women.

"How can you not have replacements for us?" Titus asked, a trace of irritation in his voice. "Have you not been receiving new recruits this entire time?"

"Indeed, we have," the governor consented. "However, you need to remember my immediate priority must be to the Twelfth Legion, given the catastrophic losses they suffered last year. And I do not say that as a matter of bias, simply because it is a legion under my direct command."

"The Twelfth did get rather badly savaged," Trajan admitted. "Lost their eagle, too."

"More than a thousand dead," Mucianus emphasized, "with a disproportionate number of casualties amongst the officers. I've had to practically beg for replacements amongst the lost tribunes and centurions, and I have yet to receive a new chief tribune. Like your legions, the Twelfth was not at full strength last campaign season. We lost not just the thousand killed during Gallus' horrid debacle, but a similar number who were so badly wounded they will never see active service again. Recruiting officers have been scouring the region, and I have sent word to various governors, and even to Rome, imploring them to send new recruits to us. Thus far, we have received, perhaps, three hundred and fifty soldiers into our ranks."

"Is that all?" Vespasian asked.

"Neither the emperor nor senate have even considered authorizing conscription," Mucianus remarked. "As long as they insist on leaving the army as an all-volunteer force, we cannot compel young men to throw away their lives in Judea. This sentiment is shared by many of our best potential recruits."

“Hopefully, our victories in Galilee will reinvigorate their confidence,” Vespasian said. “Nothing like seeing their mates coming home, laden with plunder, to inspire young lads into joining the ranks.”

“Let us hope so,” the governor remarked. “Still, while raising auxiliaries is fairly painless, the training of legionaries takes months.”

“So you have nothing for us, then?” Titus persisted.

Mucianus took a deep breath and sighed in contemplation. “Give me a few months,” he said at last. “The ‘propaganda machine’ has been running nonstop since your victory at Jotapata. We’ve left out some of the rather unpleasant details, such as the number of casualties you sustained. That alone should help us bring in more recruits. Of course, it takes time for the news to spread. I sent word via the imperial post, once I received your conformation reports regarding your victory. Unfortunately, the imperial naval vessel harbored here for such purposes had already departed with my monthly reports for the senate. I had to wait two days before our messengers could commandeer a merchant vessel that was bound for Ostia. They only just left this morning.”

“So about a week, maybe two, before it reaches Rome, depending on how the seas are,” Vespasian observed. “Meaning we’re looking at a month or more before we receive any word back from the senate.” While travel by land from Judea to Rome could take months, journeying straight through the Mediterranean by ship cut this time down tremendously. It was still rather tedious, making any attempts at communicating with the imperial capital. By the time information was received, it was often so old as to not be of any use. The seas could also be rather treacherous, particularly during the winter months, meaning some dispatches never made it to their destination at all.

“Give me until winter,” Mucianus continued, “to get the Twelfth Legion as much up to combat-ready strength as I can. After that, I’ll start sending as many replacements your way as I can. Also, once the Twelfth is fully capable of campaigning again, I will dispatch the entire legion to you. How is that for replacements?”

“I would say that is more than fair,” Vespasian replied. “No doubt the survivors of the Beth Horon disaster are anxious for a taste of revenge.”

His professional relationship with Mucianus was unusual, for as Governor-General of Syria, Mucianus should have been in overall command of the war in Judea. However, capable as he was, the governor grudgingly admitted that Vespasian was by far the better strategist and tactician and, as

such, he left the prosecution of the war entirely up to him.

The commanding general then changed the topic of conversation from replacements to the next phase of the campaign.

"As soon as we've refitted, I will make for Caesarea," Vespasian said. "Titus, you will bring the Fifteenth Legion, along with detachments from Placidus' auxilia corps. Cerealis and Trajan, you will take the Fifth and Tenth Legions to Scythopolis. Caesarea will be hard pressed enough, dealing with supplying and handling one legion, let alone three."

"Understood," Cerealis replied. "Do you want us to stage for winter quarters there as well?"

"Yes," the commanding general answered. "Just make certain you are ready to react to any contingencies that arise. The campaign season is far from over, but I do want to make certain we can billet the entire army within Roman held territory. Scythopolis is located on a plain, not far from the Sea of Galilee. It is stifling hot during the summer but rather warm and pleasant during the winter months."

"I recommend you first send troops to secure the coast," Mucianus spoke up.

"None of the port cities have fallen, I hope," Vespasian remarked with a trace of alarm.

"Not 'fallen' per se," the governor replied. "Caesarea is protected simply by the strong Greek population, whose enmity of the Jews has only grown more volatile since the war began. And the rebels have also not dared attempt another assault on Ascalon, after the disaster that destroyed most of their standing army. However, Joppa has fallen to pirates."

"Joppa?" Titus asked. "I thought Gallus destroyed that place."

"So he did," Mucianus confirmed. "He also leveled many of the cities and towns while laying waste to the region. Many of the seditionists, those who choose to recognize neither Rome nor the current government in Jerusalem, have fled to Joppa and repaired much of the city, to include its port. I've received reports from both Egypt and Phoenicia that pirates coming from Joppa have rendered much of the seas unnavigable."

"Damn it all," Vespasian swore. He then looked to Titus. "We'll stop over briefly in Caesarea, after which we make for Joppa and deal with these pirates once and for all. Placidus, I want you to dispatch two regiments of cavalry to conduct a reconnaissance in force."

"I need two days to rest and refit my horses," the auxilia commander

replied.

Vespasian nodded affirmatively, and the men then refocused their energies on the rather lavish meal that Mucianus had prepared for them. Beginning with various olives, figs, and other fruits, they were soon treated to baskets of Mediterranean fish, as well as platters of poultry. Dormice, a delicacy favored by the upper class, were also consumed. The most popular condiment, fish sauce, seemed to be splattered on just about everything. All of this was consumed with copious amounts of wine. Vespasian ate and drank in moderation, partly because he found it unbecoming to dine so lavishly while the rest of the army worked to establish their marching camp, while supping on humble military rations of bread, pork, and cabbage, after. His other reason was more prudent, in that he wanted to discuss a few matters with the governor-general away from his other senior officers. As the early evening sun glared into the western windows of the dining hall, he signaled for Mucianus to join him in the atrium.

"Forgive me for dragging you away from this excellent feast," Vespasian said, once he saw the two men were out of earshot. Musicians and entertainers had arrived, and the assembled officers were enjoying their first bit of revelry in months.

"You want to know if I have any viable intelligence from Rome," Mucianus stated. He, too, had tempered his wine consumption, knowing Vespasian would wish to speak with him about certain political matters that need not be heard by their fellow legates. Mucianus and Vespasian may not have been friends in the personal sense, but they were both astute enough to recognize that each was a powerful political ally.

"I received a letter from my brother, Sabinus, not long ago," Vespasian explained.

"Did he speak of the emperor's further descent into madness?"

"You could say that," the general replied.

"I'll speak plainly." Mucianus said. "Rome is at risk of going bankrupt. The common people, especially those within the provinces, are completely unaware of just how close Nero has taken the empire to the brink of oblivion. Hence, there have been no calls to rebellion, nor even any real seditious talk coming from the plebs. There have been food shortages in the imperial city itself, with the working class blaming the patricians who, in turn, are having their fortunes taken rather forcibly by the emperor."

"That is what Sabinus said," Vespasian added. "Yet the riches Nero takes

from the senatorial class go not to help the masses, but to allow him to continue in his excessive and indulgent lifestyle."

"And the people are oblivious to this," Mucianus said. "In fact, most of the plebeians love the emperor, as does much of the army. Nero's little tour of some of the eastern provinces, including Greece, cost the imperial treasury a fortune, yet they endeared him amongst our Greek provincials."

"Yes, I was there for a good portion of that little trip," Vespasian said with a scowl.

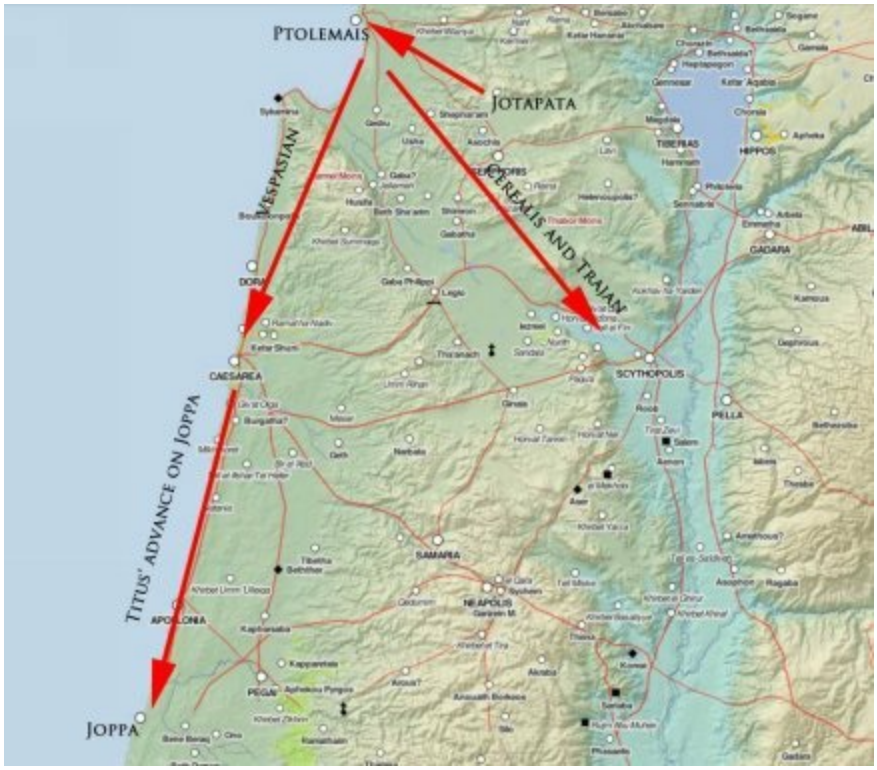
"Being exiled for falling asleep during one of Nero's poetry recitals may have saved your life in the end," Mucianus conjectured. "You were in a position to become useful once Gallus made a complete mess of the Judean campaign."

"The war also keeps us away from Rome," Vespasian remarked. "Who would have thought I'd actually wish to stay far from my home? I suppose there is little we can do, except watch and wait."

He thought for a moment to tell Mucianus about the prediction their Jewish captive had made. He immediately thought better of it. Though the governor may very well have heard about Josephus' prophetic 'vision', Vespasian did not wish to engage in any talk that could be construed as treasonous by unfriendly ears.

"I suppose there is little we could do, even if we were in Rome," the commanding general stated. "We're better off here, securing Rome's frontiers and quelling this capricious rebellion. I only hope the empire doesn't bankrupt itself in the coming months."

In the end, Vespasian's journey back to Ptolemais had been a disappointment. He had no reinforcements or replacements, there had been nothing new from Rome, and the only actionable intelligence he'd received was that one of the coastal cities was now taken over by pirates.



Vespasian’s army leaves Jotapata, Titus advances on Joppa, while Cerealis and Trajan head for Scythopolis

Chapter IV: Scourging of the Pirates

Joppa, Coast of Judea
10 July 67 A.D.
***

"There it is," a trooper said as he pointed towards the long cluster of buildings that dotted the coast in the distance.

Vespasian had given Placidus three days to rest and refit his horses before dispatching two regiments to recon the pirate stronghold, as well as act as an early warning buffer against any large bodies of insurgents. The ride along the coast, which was also called the *Plain of Sharon*, had taken the horsemen another three days. General Titus, along with the Fifteenth Legion, was spending a day camped outside of Caesarea, before making the final twenty-five mile trek to Joppa.

"And no sign of the rebels," another cavalryman noted. The Roman horsemen kept their distance from the city, lest the residents sound the alarm. Though their commanders surmised that the port was controlled by a seditionist faction, rather than the central Judean leadership, they did not wish to risk causing battle before the arrival of the Fifteenth. If, in fact, the council of Jerusalem controlled Joppa, they could very well have a sizeable garrison posted within the port.

"Alright, lads," one of their officers said as he rode over to them. "There's a small hill formation to the east that we can camp behind tonight. We'll send a few scouts to ascertain the size and disposition of the enemy force in Joppa. After which, we will hold in place and wait for the legion to arrive."

A river ran east to west, with a village lining each bank. These appeared to be deserted. Either the people had fled at the approach of the imperial soldiers or they had been driven away by the pirates. The cavalrymen searched some of the buildings, yet they found nothing of value. Their officers established a temporary headquarters in one of the dilapidated abandoned shops. In the distance, they could see some activity coming from the port, though it was difficult to tell if there were large numbers of ships in the harbor.

Around the time that the Roman horsemen laid eyes on the port of Joppa, far to the north, Levi had finally arrived in Giscala. He had first spent a few days in Gabara, where he met a few friends of the resistance, who had gone into hiding since Jotapata came under siege. They had treated his wounds, as best as they were able, and fed and clothed him in fresh garments.

It had taken him another day and a half to walk the twelve miles that lay between the town and Giscala. The first thing Levi noticed was that the walls had been repaired since his last visit. During that time, he had accompanied John with amphorae of oil, with which to sell to raise funds for the city's defense. While repaired, he did note a lack of towers, nor had the wall been raised any higher than its previously trifling height of about ten feet.

A large number of armed men occupied the wall, and there were at least ten or so guarding the half open gate. That none wore armor, and were only equipped with whatever weapons they had brought with them, told Levi that these were neither Roman auxiliaries nor were they soldiers of King Agrippa. And while most of the citizens coming and going from the city tried to avoid these men, who were inspecting carts and pack mules, Levi made straight for them.

"I come to see your leader, known as John of Giscala," he said boldly.

While there were certainly a large number of men from Giscala by that name, there would be no mistaking who he intended to find; for John commanded thousands of loyal followers.

"Is that so?" one of the men, who leaned upon a spear and carried a metal buckler, asked. "He is a busy man, so who in the bloody piss should I tell him you are?"

"Tell him it is Levi, from the garrison of Jotapata. Trust me, he will know who I am."

The men on the gate immediately perked up when they heard the name 'Jotapata'. Being just a few day's trek from Giscala, the people had been anxious to hear if the city still held, or if the worst had befallen the defenders. Yet Levi said nothing while he waited for the warriors to find their leader. It took nearly half an hour, but soon John emerged, walking very briskly, with a demeanor that showed he was anxious for news from the besieged stronghold.

"Levi, my friend," he said, extending his hand, then embracing his fellow

zealot. John apprised him. “I take it by your presence that Jotapata has fallen.”

Levi nodded in reply. “It is as you suspected,” he said. “I was sent from the city under the notion of finding reinforcements to try and break the siege. The very next morning, Jotapata fell. I cannot say for certain whether or not Josephus betrayed our warriors to the Romans, but I have my suspicions.”

“Come,” John said, placing a hand on his shoulder. “I want to hear all that transpired. We have heard nothing for more than six weeks. We lost a number of spies, who most likely wandered too close to the Roman fortifications.”

It was late afternoon, and John invited Levi to supper, as well as offering him a place to stay within his own house. As the two ate a humble meal of lamb stew and bread, Levi proceeded to relay to John the heroic defense of Jotapata. He was rather candid in most of his tale, for John was a shrewd man who would sense any falsehoods.

“I will give Josephus his due,” John said at last, after Levi had spoken for over an hour. “The building up of the wall and using animal hides to repel the Roman missiles were sound tactics. The repelling of the enemy assault with the use of boiling oil was brilliant, I confess. If only I hadn’t sold all the amphorae I compelled him to send to us!” The two men shared a short laugh before John asked, “Do you think the garrison could have held much longer? You admitted that many of those not dead already were sick and emaciated from hunger.”

“It is difficult to say,” Levi said. “Josephus was my friend and brother-in-arms. I trusted in him, even going as far as to save him from your stratagems to overthrow him.” He paused and looked down at his bowl, feeling ashamed.

“My friend, I do not fault you for standing by him,” John said, placing a reassuring hand upon his shoulder. “He was, after all, duly appointed by the governing council in Jerusalem, no matter how misplaced it might have been. But now he is gone, either killed or gone over to the Romans. And if the nation’s council of elders cannot bring themselves to find their resolve, then they must be compelled to do so. They need to appoint a strong leader, one who will not capitulate so readily to the Romans.”

“And if they do not?” Levi asked.

It was a baited question, though John decided candor was his best approach with his companion, who was clearly in a weakened mental state, after all the horrors he’d endured recently.

“If Hanan and the others will not bring themselves to appoint real leaders to fight the Romans, then they have betrayed the people to a foreign occupier. I’ll speak plainly; Hanan is beloved by the people, many of whom view him as a father who cares for them. But when it comes to leading a nation in war, he is absolutely worthless. There can be no negotiating with the Romans, you *know* this. Only when the imperial army is driven from our lands forever, will we at last be free. And any who stand in our way, be they Roman, Jew, Samaritan, or Greek will be met with merciless retribution. Are you with us, then?”

Levi did not even hesitate. He quickly stood and extended his hand to John. “By my right hand, I pledge myself to the cause of freeing the Kingdom of Judah from those who would see us enslaved. Neither Roman nor traitorous Jew will stand in our way!”

John was ecstatic at having Levi by his side. His feelings did not stem from any sense of friendship, but rather from the political leverage this man now offered him. After all, Levi was the only known survivor of the Jotapata siege. If he could be convinced that Josephus betrayed them, it would shake the power base of Hanan and the moderate faction in Jerusalem. Josephus would be mourned, but then, over time, they could slowly plant the seeds of doubt as to where his loyalties had lain. And since the now-deceased governor-general of Galilee could no longer defend himself, it would be easy to slander his name.

Once he lorded over the holy city, John could then deal with all of his rivals; the Romans, the zealots under Simon bar Giora, the Edomites, Samaritans, and any who dared defy him. The Kingdoms of Judah and Israel would find their way back to the true faith, even if they first had to drown in a sea of blood.

Titus arrived a few hours ahead of his legion. After meeting with the officers from the cavalry regiments, he did a personal reconnaissance around the port city. Though he could ascertain very little, he wasted no time in deciding to lead an open assault against Joppa. A few barricades had been erected by the denizens of the city, yet there were no organized defenses in place. The pirates were likely little more than renegades with no central leadership.

There had been no masking the approach of the legion, and so they set up camp on the plain, about two miles from the port. Cavalry patrols were sent out to see if the people would attempt to flee or fight. Strangely enough, there had been no mass exodus of people, nor did it appear that anyone was bothering to build up the defenses. From what the Romans could see, it appeared that the people of Joppa were going about their daily affairs.

That evening, Titus stood atop a small atoll and scanned the port, where hundreds of torches, lamps, and small fires reflected off the waters of the harbor. It was as if the port was simply going about its business, with no worries about the destructive force nearby that sought their annihilation.

"A blight upon the land," the legate said, "like a festering scab that needs to be burned away."

"Hard to believe the people of Joppa have made no attempts to defend themselves," his chief tribune, Domitius, thought aloud.

"If the Judean leaders controlled the port, they would not have left it so badly undefended," Titus observed. "Their pathetic state tells me that these are simply brigands and thieves. We are but forty miles from Jerusalem, and a port city would give them access to the Mediterranean, alleviating the trade and food blockades we've established. And yet, the Jewish council have done nothing to take the city for themselves. That tells me their central government is weak and likely fractured."

"Agreed," the chief tribune replied. "Why would they not try and gain the port, given their nation is currently land-locked, unless they lacked the means to do so?"

"We do not know what is transpiring in Jerusalem," Titus remarked. "But I'll hazard a guess that their leaders have far more pressing troubles than the nearest harbor being overrun by pirates. Come the morrow, we will purge ourselves of these vermin and deny either side access to the seas."

From his headquarters in Caesarea, Vespasian was in a position to readily deploy his forces wherever needed. He did not intend to leave the Fifth and Tenth Legions in Scythopolis for long. Once he knew where he next needed to unleash his forces, he would consolidate them. From Scythopolis, Cerealis and Trajan were centrally located, and could react to any crisis in relatively short order. Approximately one quarter Placidus' corps of auxiliaries were

spread throughout the pacified cities, with infantry and cavalry regiments supplementing the indigenous garrisons. The rest were, for the time being, attached to the divisions under the command of Vespasian, Titus, and Trajan.

Despite his brash, and sometimes reckless behavior, Placidus had proven himself invaluable. Though each auxiliary regiment operated as an independent entity, the general had been tasked with coordinating all of them, leaving him with far more soldiers under his charge than most of his peers combined. Only the commander-in-chief had more direct responsibilities laid upon him.

The day Titus left with the Fifteenth Legion, the commander-in-chief was reviewing the latest reports, compiled from the various auxilia garrisons, when he received an envoy from King Agrippa II.

"Noble Vespasian," the messenger said with a bow. "His highness invites you to come at once to Caesarea Philippi, where you can rest and properly refresh yourselves."

Though not very keen to leave his centralized location until he knew better the enemy's current disposition, Vespasian recognized an opportunity to collaborate both politically and militarily with his closest ally in the east.

"It would be impolite of us to refuse the king's hospitality," he noted. "Return our compliments, and let him know that we would be delighted to meet with him."

He then sent a dispatch to Cerealis and Trajan, ordering them to leave their infantry at Scythopolis and return to Caesarea at once. So while Vespasian contemplated the next political phase, his son was making ready to bloody Roman blades once more.

The next morning, the Fifteenth Legion was arrayed in battle formation with five assault cohorts in front, the remainder in reserve. Master Centurion Ralla and the elite First Cohort occupied the center, with Titus astride his horse just behind them, and the aquilifer standing next to him. Mounted staff officers and tribunes stayed close to the commanding legate, ready to relay messages and orders as needed. Placidus' cavalry regiments, along with the legion's indigenous cavalry, protected the flanks of the army, with the remaining auxiliary infantry cohorts holding in a ready reserve behind the

assault force.

"Not a sign of any resistance," Chief Tribune Domitius said, as he rode up to his commander and saluted. "I took a dozen cavalry and rode within a hundred meters of the city. They all appear to have fled."

"We would have seen them had they attempted to make their way inland," Titus observed.

"Only one way they could have gone, sir," the master centurion said, as he joined the other two senior officers.

Titus agreed. "The legion will advance through the city," he ordered. "Let us see what our friends here are on about." He took a deep breath, his eyes narrowing slightly as his face twisted into a menacing grin. After a short pause, he nodded to the cornicen who sounded three long notes on his horn. The aquilifer then lowered the eagle, signaling the advance.

Legionaries maintained their good order and discipline, marching in cadence with the beating of the war drums. Though they moved quickly, strict formation was maintained, lest they find themselves walking into a trap. They speedily passed through the dilapidated shacks and other structures that dotted the otherwise barren landscape that led towards the sea. Most of the buildings had been reconstructed using the remnants of stone and lumber from when the army under Cestius Gallus had destroyed Joppa.

There were signs of life; freshly butchered sheep carcasses hung from a shop, while the oven of a bakery still glowed from recent use. Washing hung from clotheslines, and the stench of stale wine and other spirits came from a tavern near the docks. Despite the abject squalor of most of the buildings, it was clear the city was very much inhabited. As the first ranks of soldiers stepped past a row of ramshackle warehouses, a legionary shouted, "There they are, sir!"

Titus rode forward, and as he gazed out onto the water, he could see a fleet of ships in the harbor.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said.

"They're out of range of the catapults," Domitius said, as he joined Titus. "What do you recommend we do, sir?"

"Absolutely nothing," the legate replied. In response to his chief tribune's puzzled look, he nodded towards the harbor. "The sea is no safe haven for these renegades. Black clouds and increasing winds show a storm is coming in from the north, and if you look out there you can see a number of large and

jagged rocks protruding from the water. It would be a challenge to navigate in good weather, but with hundreds of ships clustered together, they will dash each other to pieces." He turned to the master centurion. "Order the legion to begin ransacking the city. Plunder whatever they will, and then demolish every single building. I want the docks burned as well. Meantime, we will watch and wait."

"What's to say they won't simply sail away from here?" Domitius asked.

"And where can they possibly go?" Titus countered. "Every port city within the Mediterranean belongs to Rome. They fled aboard those ships with all of their people, to include their women and children. It is likely they had no time to refit with food and supplies. No, I suspect they will take their chances with the hope that we will depart in a day or so."

"I'll have men left along the shore, in case any should lose heart and attempt to surrender," the chief tribune added.

"We're not taking prisoners," Titus remarked, as he glared at the mass of ships that rocked upon the choppy waves of the harbor. "The penalty for piracy is death, and by dragging their families out onto the water with them, they have sentenced them to the same fate. There will be no merciful enslavements here."

"Very good, sir."

And so, while most of the legion, along with their auxilia attachments, set about destroying the city, two cohorts were positioned along the beach. They set up their camps in a long line, with their tents facing towards the water. Soldiers stacked their arms in front of their tents in such a manner that from the distant ships it would look as if there were thousands of soldiers waiting for them on the beach. As sentries patrolled the expanse of sand into the night, the glow of burning buildings reflected off the water. All the while, the large flotilla of ships remained trapped in the enclave.

The Romans did not have long to wait. Joppa possessed a very rough shore, with two ends that extended out onto the sea and angled back towards each other. Covered in deep precipices, with massive stones jutting out into the sea, it was said to be the place where Andromeda was chained, to be sacrificed to the Kraken, in the ancient Greek myth. The great gales from the north, known as 'the black north wind' by sailors, fell upon the large flotilla

with extreme violence as the storm blew in the following morning.

Legionary tents were nearly upended as the channel of strong gusts threatened to pull their anchoring stakes up from the soft ground just off the beach. Soldiers leaned into the wind as they struggled to tie the cords that connected the banded plates of armor across their chests, while synching down the chin ties on their helmets to keep them from blowing away. Campfires would prove impossible to light, leaving the men forced to eat their breakfast cold. The scorched remains of the smoldering buildings created a layer of dust and ash that blew about in great whirlwinds.

And yet, the irritation and discomfort of the assembled soldiers was soon turned to morbid fascination as they watched the havoc being played out upon the sea. Towering waves tossed the ships about, and being so clustered together, they smashed into each other with chaotic fury.

“Bugger me, look at that one!” a legionary said, excitedly pointing with his javelin towards where the prow of one ship slammed into the side of another, splitting it open like a battering ram. The people who were clustered aboard both ships where violently thrown about, with many going over the side, to be swallowed up in Neptune’s rage.

As the winds howled even more furiously, with waves cresting over and dashing across the ships’ decks, sending even more people into their watery grave, soldiers from the main camp made their way down to the beach to watch the spectacle. Legionaries cheered as they saw one vessel completely upended, disgorging its passengers before crashing into the sea upside down. Being ever the gambling types, the men started placing wagers amongst each other as to which ship would be the next one sunk, as the vessels continued to smash into each other, while also breaking apart amongst the large rocks that jutted up through the sea.

Titus strolled along the beach, forgoing his helmet as his cloak whipped around beside him in the furious squall. He could not help but smirk as he watched their hapless enemies tormented and destroyed by the furious seas. He watched as some of the vessels attempted to make their way back towards the shore, reckoning they would fare better against the Romans than the gods. Most of these were swamped by the enormous swells, though the legate could see a large number of bodies swimming towards the shore. He then tapped his master centurion on the shoulder, who simply nodded and gave a few orders to the cohort commanders.

A long line of legionaries stood upon the beach, gladii drawn. None

bothered with their shields, as the fierce winds threatened to pull them away. And besides, their foes were unarmed and in a fearful state. The first few clawed their way onto the beach, vomiting sea water from their lungs while whispering words of thanks to their god. The first of these men stumbled to his feet, his hands held up in surrender as he staggered over towards the line of soldiers. A legionary quickly plunged his gladius into the man's stomach, whose eyes threatened to bulge out of his head as spittle and blood sprayed from his mouth. His companions cried out in dismay as the soldiers descended upon them, killing all without pity. None had the strength to defend themselves, and so were viciously slaughtered like cattle.

As others, who had thus far survived the torments of the sea, saw their friends butchered by the soldiers, they attempted to swim away. The surges and great waves either engulfed them or smashed their bodies against the protruding rocks. Satisfied by their adversaries' demise, Titus left the beach and made his way to the auxilia camp to meet with General Placidus. In contrast to the galling winds that tore the enemy flotilla to pieces, the breeze was fairly calm away from the sea. Titus found the auxilia corps commander meeting with his two senior cavalry officers.

"The pirates won't be causing us any more trouble," Titus said, as he approached the men.

"The gods have finished what Rome started," Placidus noted, nodding towards the crashing seas.

"We should leave a residual force here," the legate added. "Joppa was destroyed once before, and I would hate for the rebels to rebuild it a third time."

"For once, Titus, I agree with you," Placidus replied. "I'll leave a regiment of cavalry, along with one cohort of infantry in support. They can encamp on the old Joppa citadel and provide security." He then turned to the tribune who commanded one of the mounted units. "You will conduct raids from here and spoil the countryside. Destroy every village and town within fifteen miles. I want this entire place left desolate!"

"Sir," the tribune replied with a salute.

"We'll spend a day helping the residual force erect a defensible camp," Titus said. "After which, we will return to Caesarea and see what missions our commanding general has for us."

Placidus simply nodded and went about his business. The two had shared a pretty heated rivalry for a time, tempered only by Vespasian's stern rebukes

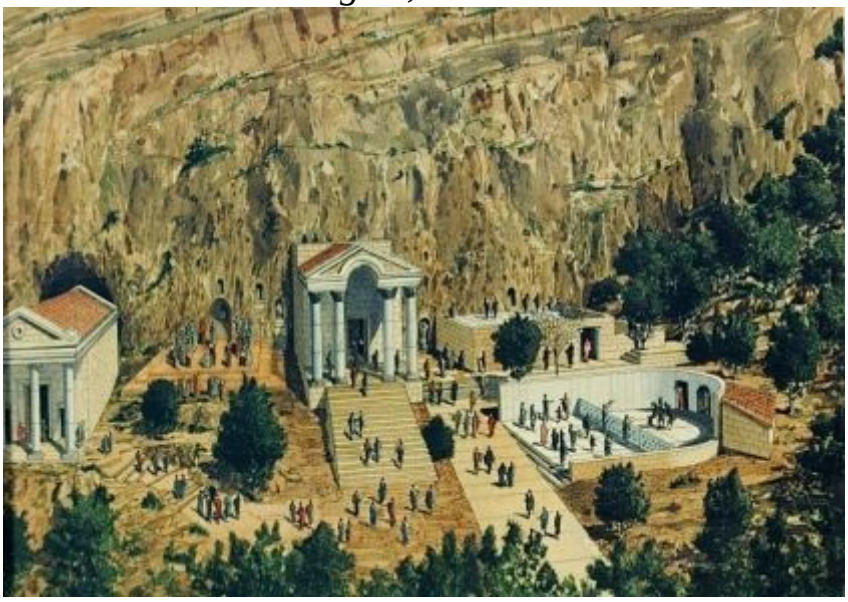
of both men. Though their demeanor had calmed considerably, especially after each had fought with distinction at Jotapata, there were still numerous differences in both personality and conduct that prevented the two from ever establishing what one would consider friendship. In order to not bruise any egos, Vespasian had left each man in independent command of their respective units, without appointing one as senior to the other. This could have proven a foolish mistake, had the two come to a serious disagreement regarding how to prosecute the attack on Joppa. As it was, both Titus and Placidus were professional soldiers, and each understood how to best employ their soldiers in order to meet the commanding general's intent.

Throughout the remainder of the day and all through the next, the army set about building a semi-permanent camp for the force being left behind. A few months prior, they would not have contemplated leaving such an understrength unit of a few hundred infantry and cavalry on its own, within a few days' march of Jerusalem. And yet, after the overwhelming Roman victory at Ascalon, along with the numerous successful sieges throughout Galilee, the Jewish rebels were now completely on the defensive. As the senior officers noted the night before sacking the port city, had the Jewish resistance still been in possession of a large, professional army, they would have taken the port and expelled the pirates themselves.

Two days after arriving, the Fifteenth Legion, along with the supporting auxilia cohorts, left the ruins of Joppa and began the coastal journey back to Caesarea. The rebel forces in Judea were once more cut off from the sea.

Chapter V: Of Kings and Martyrs

Caesarea Philippi, Kingdom of Agrippa
August, 67 A.D.



Temples and amphitheater at Caesarea Philippi

"Well, would you look at that?" Trajan observed, as the senior officers and their mounted escorts crested the short rise that looked down upon the city of Caesarea Philippi.

In a land filled with squalid clay buildings, with a few traces of Egyptian and Persian-influenced architecture throughout, this city looked distinctly Roman. White stucco homes and flats, with properly tiled roofs, lay in orderly rows behind the city's protective wall. In the distance, near a short waterfall, sat a pair of temples, as well as an open-air theater.

"A touch of civilization in this shithole of a land," Vespasian replied with a grin. Though anxious to continue the campaign, the commander-in-chief knew it would be wise to accept the invite extended to him by King Agrippa. Not only was it politically and diplomatically correct, especially as the king had supplied Vespasian with many of his best mounted troops, but also because Agrippa would likely have more actionable intelligence for them. After all, northern Judea was his kingdom, and he had eyes and ears all over the region, from Alexandria to Tarsus.

Vespasian had left the majority of his auxilia corps at Caesarea, with the

Fifth and Tenth Legions at Scythopolis. Not wishing to be impeded by slow-marching infantry, he'd taken two regiments of cavalry as escorts for him and his senior officers. He'd also sent a messenger to Joppa, directing Titus and Placidus to join him, provided they had finished the destruction of the port city.

The palace of King Agrippa was resplendent, and while belonging to a Jewish monarch, it was decidedly Roman in design. The city of Caesarea Philippi had been founded as the administrative capital of the large tetrarchy belonging to Agrippa's great-uncle, Philip II, who gave his name to the city in order to distinguish it from the Roman provincial capital of Caesarea.

"Welcome, noble Vespasian," King Agrippa said with a short bow, as the entourage of Roman soldiers made their way up the stone steps into his palace near the springs. Though ethnically a Jew, the Roman-born Agrippa bore little resemblance to those citizens of the kingdom he attempted to rule over. He was clean shaven, and on this particular day wore a Roman toga that was accented with green and gold trappings. A practitioner of what was known as *Hellenistic Judaism*, the king worshipped the same God as his people, yet he also took pains to make his beliefs compatible with that of Rome. His views on such things as idolatry differed sharply from the more conservative Jews in lower Judea. Many of them viewed his having statues of both himself, as well as his family, as blasphemous. Yet the king dismissed these notions as the ramblings of bitter old men.

"We thank you, honorable ally," Vespasian replied, returning the bow of courtesy. The formalities were only for the courtiers and watchful citizens who came to see the Roman soldiers who were fighting in the savage war not far from their city. Agrippa and Vespasian were, in the very least, friendly acquaintances, and each was rather informal with the other when not in a public setting.

The officers were led into an ornate dining hall with Roman style couches and tables. Indeed, one would almost assume they were at the home of a senator within the imperial city itself. The king had procured musicians and dancers to entertain his guests while they feasted with him. Wine and numerous courses of delicacies were consumed as the Romans kept their attention fixed upon the entertainers.

It was only after three courses, when the king sent the dancers away and told the musicians to play softly, that the conversation turned to the status of the war.

“With the fall of Jotapata, the rebellion’s hold on Galilee has been crushed,” Trajan asserted.

“And yet, I fear there will always be others,” King Agrippa noted.

“Undoubtedly,” Vespasian said. “But for now, the rebels are leaderless and left to fighting each other. And what of the cities within your own kingdom?”

“When I said ‘there will always be others’, I did not just mean in future generations,” the king replied. “Tiberias, the very jewel of my kingdom on the Sea of Galilee, has been infiltrated by seditionists. Their governor and councilmen have asked for aid, lest the entire city be lost.”

“The sight of the legions at their gates will sort that out,” Vespasian observed. “Tiberias is not nearly as well defended as Jotapata, and the people there must have heard about the other cities we’ve taken with rather contemptuous ease.”

“Yes, we received word rather quickly about the battering of Jaffa,” the king remarked. He then addressed Trajan. “A splendid and well-disciplined assault by your men.”

“The stupid bastards were daft enough to fight us in the open,” the legate observed. “Once Titus arrived with reinforcements, taking the walls was a mere formality.”

“And how is your son?” the king asked Vespasian. “I have heard he has acquitted himself well thus far, but I do not see him at our table.”

“He is in Joppa,” the commander-in-chief explained. “He’s taken the Fifteenth Legion, along with detachments from Placidus’ auxilia corps, to destroy the pirates who have infested the ruined port. I have sent a messenger to him; if they’ve been successful, then he and Placidus should arrive here within a week.”

“Very good,” Agrippa said. “My dear sister, Queen Julian Berenice, will be joining us as well around the same time. It would be nice to acquaint the two of them.”

He then took another pull off his wine. He was clearly vexed about what he had to say to his allies, for it filled him with shame that he must confess to having lost control of some of the larger cities within his kingdom.

“There will still be some heavy fighting to do before Galilee is truly pacified,” he added. “Taricheae, which is just south of Tiberias, is unstable, even during the best of times. And then there is the issue with Gamala.”

“The old fortress city east of the Sea of Galilee?” Cerealis asked.

“That would be it,” the king nodded. “It would seem that our former adversary, Josephus, took the time to greatly fortify its defenses. It is also situated high up on a hill, surrounded by steep ravines. The terrain is extremely difficult to circumnavigate. It is also firmly in the hands of the seditionists. Two men, named Joseph and Chares, command the garrison there. It does not have a large number of troops. However, like I said, the terrain makes any assault extremely difficult. My own forces have attempted several times to recapture the city over the last seven months.”

“Perhaps after we sort out the cities on the western edge of the Sea of Galilee, those in the east will finally see reason,” Vespasian conjectured, though his voice betrayed his inner doubts.

“We can always hope,” Agrippa replied. “I would normally say that I will pray over the matter. However, since our enemies and I both pray to the same God, I know not whose side He is on. I suppose I should have to borrow some of your formidable deities.”

It was a weak attempt at humor, though the Romans gave a courteous chuckle in reply. Despite the general air of levity within the king’s banquet hall, the mood became rather sober amongst the Roman officers. Already this war had cost them dearly, and not just the ignominious defeat of Cestius Gallus at Beth Horon that nearly destroyed the Twelfth Legion. Hundreds of legionaries and auxiliary troopers had already been killed during the current campaign, with a far greater number suffering various wounds and injuries. Though all hoped that, with the fall of Jotapata, the worst was now over, each secretly wondered just how much fight their adversaries had left in them. How many more Romans would die before the Judean resistance was crushed for good? And for King Agrippa, he could not help but wonder what terrible costs his people would endure.

In Jerusalem, there was an uneasy calm over the city, as all waited to hear some word, for good or ill, from Jotapata. As the Jewish forces in Galilee and Judea did not have a messenger service like the imperial army, the governing body in Jerusalem was left completely blind as to the events surrounding the fall of the stronghold, nearly a month prior. In fact, none had yet so much as heard a word from Josephus since the early days of the Roman siege. Both the moderate government, as well as the leaders of the more fanatical

factions, could do little but wait. A defeat would come as a double blow for the Judean government, for it would not only lead to the loss of Galilee, but also embolden those rival leaders who felt they should be in command of the resistance. Galilee was also the richest province in Judea. Its loss would be a crippling blow economically, even as the newly installed government attempted to maintain some sense of stability, all the while scouring for precious metals to continue minting their own coins. Though the people were loath to still see the images of Caesar within their nation, many continued to use Roman coins to conduct their business, especially when dealing with foreign merchants. And yet, foreign merchants were starting to become scarce. With each Roman victory, the Jewish state became more and more isolated, with traders prohibited from entering the province.

On a more personal level, Hanan was anxious for word from his young friend and protégé. He had been assailed with doubts when he sent Josephus into what he knew was the proverbial *Lions' Den*. Thus far, however, he had conducted himself well. His valor was matched by his strategic thinking, which had caused the Romans much mischief. That Josephus had been cornered at Jotapata brought with it great risk, though it also gave him and his army the best chance of winning a decisive victory over the venerable General Vespasian.

More than two months had now passed with no word coming from Galilee. Hanan had thought to perhaps send another party of scouts to try and ascertain whether the city stood or had fallen. Yet it would be from Josephus' wife, Judith, and his father, Matthias, that the chief priest and leader of the Jewish governing body would learn of the disaster. Matthias had sent a message to the temple, telling Hanan they needed to meet as soon as possible. The high priest, therefore, invited the family of Josephus to his home.

"Welcome, my friends," he said, as he ushered them into the dining hall. Matthias had sent the message to him earlier that afternoon, when Hanan was conducting a meeting of the Judean high council on the possibility of opening trade relations with Arabia, and perhaps Mesopotamia. The urgency of the message had compelled Hanan to end his work early that evening, sending an invite to Matthias and his family to dine with him.

The high priest was a widower, and his only son had been killed by Sicarii bandits years before. The people of Judea had become Hanan's children, his devotion to them absolute. It was this genuine compassion, along with his strategic savvy and administrative talents that had led to his

being appointed as head of the Jewish state. Though the people longed for a renewed rise of the Kingdoms of Judah and Israel, Hanan was adamant that he was no king. Several pretenders had already tried to install themselves as King of the Jews after the rebellion broke. Each had met a bloody and ignominious end. Hanan viewed himself simply as protector of the people, as well as their representative before God.

"It is with much sorrow that we have come," Matthias replied. His eyes were red, though he tried to maintain his stoic demeanor. His wife had her head resting on Judith's shoulder, both women's faces streaked with tears. Matthias swallowed hard, trying to prevent his voice from cracking as he blurted out, "Jotapata has fallen."

Hanan closed his eyes and bowed his head. He then mumbled a quick prayer under his breath before asking, "Are you certain? I dispatched scouts weeks ago, but have yet to hear from them. I fear they have either been killed, captured, or gone over to the fanatics. This very morning, I was in deliberations with our military leadership over whether we should send another band to the north."

"My sister lives in Sepphoris," Judith explained. The largest city in Galilee remained loyal to Rome, and thus had been spared from Vespasian's wrath. "Ten days ago, her husband and son went to Jotapata to see the siege for themselves. When they arrived, the city was in ruins and the Romans gone. As they reached what was left of the city, all they saw were bodies being savaged by wild beasts…"

She broke into fresh sobs once more as her mother-in-law held her close. Hanan put a consoling hand on her shoulder and guided her to a long couch. His own face was wrought with emotion, for Josephus had been like a son to him. Servants entered with trays bearing wine and delicacies, yet none had a stomach for food this evening.

"There's more," Matthias said. "Jaffa has been destroyed as well. The double walls have been brought down, and all that remains of the city is a pile of rubble."

"My heart breaks for you," the high priest said earnestly. In truth, his despair went much deeper, for the number of dead and enslaved between those two cities was beyond the measure of grief. Only God knew what other towns and cities had been reduced in the Roman onslaught.

"My husband died so others may live free," Judith forced herself to say through her tears. "I beg you, do not let his death be in vain."

“If the zealots or any of their allies seize power, then Josephus will have died for nothing,” Matthias added. “It is you, Hanan, who can restore sanity and order to the people. And sooner or later the masses will hear about the fall of Galilee’s greatest stronghold. Please do not allow the radicals to use this to undo all that my son fought for.”

“I promise,” Hanan said, nodding slowly. “I pledge my life before God to continue what Josephus and the other martyrs died to protect. The zealots will not take Judea as long as my lungs draw breath.”

His vow was genuine, though the high priest had serious doubts as to his ability to fulfill it. The fall of Jotapata, along with the death of Josephus, was just the latest in a string of calamities that had befallen Judea since the Roman army’s return. For a time, the people had been filled with hope, following their repelling of the imperial forces under Cestius Gallus. Judean fighters had ambushed and shattered his army at Beth Horon during the Romans’ humiliating retreat. Since then, the standing army of professional soldiers raised by the Judean government had been completely destroyed during an abortive assault on the port city of Ascalon. Two of their greatest generals had perished during the two-day battle, with a third cast out in disgrace.

The arrival of an even larger Roman army, under the command of the fearsome general, Flavius Vespasian, was further compounded by the inability of the various factions in Judea to unite under one banner. Had the zealot leaders, such as John of Giscala, united with Josephus, the Galileans alone could have mustered well over a hundred thousand fighting men with which to combat the Romans. It was not to be, as most of the fanatics preferred death to aligning themselves with those they viewed as traitors. And yet, while espousing to be defenders of the ‘true faith’, one could scarcely tell what that even meant anymore. Debates over philosophical and dogmatic differences were not done through scholarly debate, but at the point of the sword. Stubborn and divided, each faction soon had to face the harsh reality of facing the venerable legions alone.

That Josephus had held as long as he had was, in itself, nothing short of a miracle. Hanan also knew that he had to suppress his own personal feelings of sorrow over the loss of his friend, for as Matthias and Judith both said, the people would need a unifying leader more than ever. It was an overwhelming burden, yet one the high priest readily accepted. He spent the remainder of the evening in prayer with Josephus’ family, asking God to welcome him into

the gates of paradise, along with all who had seen such a violent and unfortunate end to this life.

In the coming weeks, people fleeing south from the Roman ferocity brought their own accounts of Jotapata's destruction. The magnitude of the calamity was such that at first it was not believed, for there were no survivors from Jotapata to deliver the news. As witnesses from surrounding cities gave their own accounts as to how the city lay in ruins, littered with tens-of-thousands of corpses, it added validity to the truth behind the claims of great catastrophe.

News of the fall of Jotapata, along with the slaying of the entire garrison, brought cries of sorrow and great lamentations from the people of Jerusalem. There were many households within the city that had sent loved ones to the defense of Galilee, and it seemed as if there was not a home within the city that did not privately mourn the loss of a friend or family member. There was the added wringing of hands in frustration at the unknown, for people simply did not know who among Josephus' warriors had actually been at Jotapata. The Jews had no messenger service, and so those fighters who had not taken part in the siege, but instead been posted throughout Galilee, had no way of communicating with families that they lived. Instead, they were mostly scattered, left abandoned and leaderless. Those that could, would take up arms with another faction, while others would be hunted down by marauding Roman forces.

It was for the garrison commander, Josephus that the lamentations were made most publicly. His defense of Galilee and all of Judea was esteemed along the lines of the legendary King David. Judith was revered as the widow of a great hero, with Josephus' parents being given similar reverence. The people had compelled Hanan to declare a period of mourning that was to last thirty days. Professional mourners were brought in from around the region, with pipes playing dirges at every sunrise and sunset. For the fanatics, this proved to be a setback to their ambitions, for though Josephus was assumed dead, his martyrdom had united many of the people, thereby strengthening the position of Hanan and the Judean governing council. The radicals would simply have to wait for another opportunity to arise.

It was on the seventeenth day of games that Titus and Placidus arrived in Caesarea Philippi. Those fortunate enough to act as escorts for the army's senior officers were enjoying much in the way of leisure and entertainment provided by their host, King Agrippa. Vespasian would have liked to indulge his entire army. However, with the war far from won, to say nothing of the logistical issues of posting sixty thousand men at such a small city, even short term, it was simply not practical.

Like his peers, Titus was taken aback by the modern cleanliness and overall 'Roman' feel to the city. One would have thought he had arrived at a town in Sicilia, rather than remote Judea. The streets were paved and mostly devoid of refuse, while the people dressed in Greek / Hellenistic attire, similar to the Roman tunic and toga, rather than Jewish robes.

It was at the gladiator matches that he found his father, along with the king and a few others. The arena at Caesarea Philippi was quite small, with only enough seats for perhaps a thousand patrons. The floor was covered in a thin layer of sand and was just large enough for a single pair of gladiators to compete.

"Ah, Titus!" Vespasian said, standing and embracing his son. "I take it the pirates at Joppa will cause us no more troubles."

"We took the city without having to draw our blades," the young legate replied. "The damned fools tried hiding amongst their ships in the water and were destroyed by a storm. We erected a camp at the citadel, with a few companies of infantry as guards. Placidus detached a regiment of cavalry to raid and spoil the region."

"Very good." The commanding general nodded in approval. He then turned back to the match; a Thracian with a shield and gladius against a black African armed with trident and net. "You know, the quality of these combatants is quite good; a pity they have such a paltry arena with which to showcase their skills."

"Perhaps one day you will build an arena worthy of great spectacle," King Agrippa spoke up with a laugh.

"Perhaps," Vespasian echoed, with a grin. "The Circus Maximus provides the best in chariot racing in the whole of the empire, yet even Rome is lacking in a proper venue to showcase man's most basic skills of killing one another."

As the match progressed, an aide to Agrippa crept up the steps leading to the royal box, which was a small enclosure that did little more than keep the

king and his guests separated from the masses. He whispered a few words into the king's ear just as the crowd erupted in cheers. The African had tied up the Thracian's legs and had him on his back, trident over his heart. His face now full of vexation, Agrippa stood and quickly pointed his thumb down; the sign that literally meant, 'leave him on earth', therefore allowing the defeated gladiator to live. It was a widespread myth that the 'thumbs down' was the sign for death, when in fact the opposite was true. If one wished a fallen gladiator to be slain, they either gave the 'thumbs up', which meant 'send him to the gods', or they ran their thumb across the neck.

Vespasian, who thought the Thracian had fought poorly and should have been killed, quickly noted the pale expression on the king's face and stood to follow him out of the box.

"Taricheae has declared for the rebellion," Agrippa said, as they walked down the steps leading out of the arena.

"It is scarcely ten miles from Tiberias," Titus observed. "If it has fallen, then what's to say they won't try and claim the greater prize?"

"We need to move fast then," Vespasian said, his face grim with resolve. He turned to the king. "Tiberias is an important city, both to your kingdom and to Rome. We won't destroy it unless given no other option."

"And for that I am grateful," Agrippa replied. "But as for Taricheae, they must be punished!"

"I do not wish to waste a lot of lives conducting assaults if we don't have to," Vespasian said, now addressing Titus. "Tiberias we can take through negotiation and guile. Likely we can do the same for Taricheae, though they will find us far less merciful."

"I'll leave at once for Caesarea," Titus replied. "My legion will have arrived there and had time to rest and refit."

"Very good," his father replied. "I'll dispatch Trajan and Cerealis to Scythopolis to bring up their legions."

"There's an open plain four miles west of Tiberias," the king added. "It is large enough to stage the army. I will send two of my own cavalry regiments ahead to reconnoiter and establish the camp."

"It will take at least a week for the entire army to rally at Tiberias," Vespasian observed. "Let us hope the people see reason and do not condemn themselves to the same pending fate as Taricheae."

Though his imperial guests were anxious to be on their way, it was already midafternoon, and the king felt it would be in needless haste if they

departed this day.

"Please, my friends," Agrippa said, "at least allow me to entertain you as my guests one last night. My sister, Queen Julia Berenice, has only just arrived. As my co-ruler of this kingdom, it is only fitting that she formally pay her respects to our allies."

Vespasian nodded in reply. "We will make ready to depart, though as it is already afternoon, we should wait until the morrow before venturing out once again. Tell the queen we are honored to be her guests this evening."

King Agrippa put every resource available into making the evening banquet the most resplendent feast imaginable, not just for his Roman guests but also for his sister. As it was she who was playing host to the Romans, the magnificence of the banquet reflected upon her splendor, as well as her authority as co-regent.

Vespasian and his legates wore their formal togas, although Titus begrudgingly had to borrow a spare from his father, as all his baggage was with the Fifteenth Legion. He was slightly embarrassed, though thankful that he and Vespasian were similar in height and build and that his father actually carried a spare toga with him. For Titus, the whole idea of having to play political niceties in the middle of a war, with their armies encamped under austere conditions, was absurd. Still, like his father had told him many times, a little diplomacy was sometimes of greater strategic importance than brute force.

As they entered the banquet hall, they were greeted by the king's chamberlain, who escorted them to their tables. Vespasian and Titus were seated at the head table, next to where the king and queen would sit, once they made their appearance. Also at this table was General Jacimus, commander-in-chief of King Agrippa's army. An older warrior in his late sixties, his detached regiments of cavalry and mounted archers had already acquitted themselves well under Vespasian's command. The Roman general said as much as the men took their seats.

"It pleases me to hear my men have performed to a standard worthy of our allies," Jacimus said. He was vexed that he could not take an active role in the campaign. King Agrippa had made it clear that his services were needed in maintaining the peace and security within the kingdom.

“They are disciplined enough to follow orders without question,” Vespasian replied, “while possessing enough independence of thought to take the initiative in bringing the fight to the enemy, in the absence of orders. Your mounted archers have proven instrumental on numerous occasions. Our adversaries have yet to devise a viable stratagem to counter them.”

Jacimus nodded appreciatively. He took great pride in his mounted archers, for theirs was a special skill rarely seen within the empire. Still he appeared troubled, and he stared at the table for a few moments, formulating his words.

“For all your success, I am grateful,” he said, “but there is a personal issue that grieves me deeply. It is one that has brought shame upon my house, but I feel that as our allied commander, you have a right to know. My own son, Philip, has betrayed his king and gone over to the rebels.”

“I am sorry for your loss,” Vespasian replied. He attempted to appear sympathetic, though his words regrettably sounded hollow.

“Yes,” the Jewish general nodded. “It is never easy losing a son, especially when that loss comes from his betrayal of his king and country. I have two granddaughters, young women who should be here at the king’s court. Instead, they were taken by their father to the enemy stronghold of Gamala. We have attempted several sorties against its walls ever since they threw off their allegiance to us, yet it is far too well protected for my forces. Given its positioning in the mountains, I reckon that even your mighty legions will be hard pressed to capture its walls.”

“I am aware of Gamala’s treachery,” Vespasian replied. “As their forces appear to be confined to the city, we will deal with them after we have finished our business in Tiberias and Taricheae.”

“Of course,” Jacimus said. “I only tell you this to relay to you my fear regarding my granddaughters. Philip made his decision, and I damn him for it. If fate leads him to the crucifix, so be it. It is Maya and Zorah whose safety and wellbeing I fear for.”

There was little more he could say. After all, he could scarcely expect Vespasian to try to find and safeguard the women. Thousands were being killed or enslaved with each Roman assault, and it would be impossible for the Roman general to try and guarantee that Jacimus’ granddaughters could be spared. Vespasian’s next words said as much.

“For your sake, I hope they can escape from their prison at Gamala well before my legions arrive.”

An awkward silence followed, though this was quickly broken up as the chamberlain beat his long staff into the polished stone floor three times.

"Their royal highnesses," he said, his voice echoing throughout the hall, "King Marcus Julius Agrippa II and Queen Julia Berenice of Judea!"

All stood, and a trumpeter let out a series of fanfare notes as Agrippa entered, his sister on his arm. Both were dressed in their most resplendent robes, each wearing a crown upon their head.

Agrippa normally dressed far more modestly, and he detested the crown as both uncomfortable and needlessly pretentious. However, on formal state occasions, he relented to looking the part as a king.

It was Queen Julia Berenice who caught young Titus' attention. He smiled with a rather lustful glint in his eye, at his first glimpse of the Jewish queen. Her smooth, olive skin concealed her age, for she was eleven years older than the Roman legate. Her elegant gown was pulled in at the middle, accentuating her shapely figure. Her hair had, at one time, reached most of the way down her back. However, she had cut it all off in an act of supplication before God, not long before the province erupted in rebellion. It had since grown down to her shoulders, though she now kept it up and curled in a fashion made popular in Rome.

"My friends!" Agrippa said with enthusiasm, as he joined the Roman officers, along with General Jacimus, at the head table.

Much to Titus' delight, Berenice sat next to him with her brother, along with Vespasian and Jacimus on the other side. A pair of the king's ministers sat to Titus' left, although he paid them little attention. The noise of the musicians echoed loudly, combined with the loud voices of people trying to talk over the sound, leaving it difficult for him to converse with the queen. Still, he found his gaze fixated on her for most of the night, and hers on him.

It was well after midnight, with all of the guests in various states of inebriation, when Berenice signaled for Titus to follow her. Though he'd drank his share of vintage, he had made certain to keep his wits about him, in no small part because he did not wish to ride out the following morning with a splitting headache from too much drink.

"So the mighty conqueror has come to our realm at last," Berenice said playfully, as they walked through the garden.

There was a path that led down to the river, where the sounds of a short waterfall splashed nearby. The sky was clear, the moon and stars casting a bright glow.

“My reputation precedes me then?” Titus laughed as he walked beside the queen.

“The king speaks very highly of both you and your father,” she replied. She turned her gaze towards him. The sparkle in her eyes enraptured Titus. He wasn’t sure if this was brought on by the pale moon light, or too much time since he’d felt a woman’s embrace. He couldn’t have cared less either way.

“I’ll be honest, I was expecting someone much older,” Berenice continued.

Titus shrugged. “It is true, I am younger than most of my peers,” he acknowledged. “And yet, Alexander the Great was but a few years older than I when he conquered his empire. If I recall, he was even younger when he became King of Asia, Persia, and Pharaoh of Egypt.”

“Another Alexander, are you?” Berenice teased.

“Not hardly,” Titus said, shaking his head. “I am but a solider. I have no delusions about becoming a king or emperor.”

“Well, the Empire of Alexander paled in size to that of Rome, and it did not last. Perhaps you are destined for even greater things?”

“You flatter me,” Titus remarked.

“Do you have any children?” she asked, changing the subject.

“A daughter,” Titus confirmed. “Her name is Julia Flavia. She will be three in a couple months.”

“Ah, so she and I share the same first name,” the queen replied. “My sons are a bit older, twenty-one and twenty to be exact.”

It seemed a bit strange to Titus that he was but six years older than her eldest son. And yet, this realization did nothing to quell his growing lust. He was also heady with wine, which made him even bolder. They continued to walk in the garden for some time, making small talk, yet both fully aware of that which they longed for.

What a conquest, he thought to himself, *if I should bed a queen!*

“If it is not improper for me to ask,” he said audaciously, “how long has it been since you’ve been with a man?”

While such a question was considered neither rude nor disrespectful within the more sexually liberal Roman culture, he was uncertain as to how this foreign queen would react. As the urging of his loins intensified, he hoped that her Roman upbringing would override any sense of potential Jewish modestly.

“Too long,” she hissed, her tongue running across her pearly white teeth.

Emboldened by this gesture, Titus stepped forward, placing his hands on her hips. He then roughly pulled her body against his, kissing her deeply and passionately. Her arms were immediately around his neck, her tongue exploring his mouth, with traces of wine still on his lips.

Not wishing to be seen in the gardens, Berenice took the Roman by the hand and guided him to her rooms. A pair of oil lamps hung from the ceiling, and the walls were decorated in eastern tapestries, as well as Greco-Roman friezes. Her bed was large and comfortable, and as Titus laid her down, his lips still embracing hers, he was able for the briefest of moments to allow himself to forget about the hellish war that was destroying the land.

Despite his night of ecstasy in the arms of the Jewish queen, for Titus, the intended respite was cut short. Just after dawn, he and Placidus mounted up once more to return to their units. A three-day ride awaited them, as they first made their way to Tyrus, on the coast of the Mediterranean, then down to Ptolemais, and finally Caesarea.

For Cerealis and Trajan, their journey would be much shorter. Scythopolis was located south of the Sea of Galilee, just west of the River Jordan, and was perhaps a day-and-a-half’s march from Tiberias. Vespasian ordered his legates and their escorts to take the road that ran along the eastern edge of the Sea, so as to avoid contact with any enemy forces that may have been roaming along the western edge. The Fifteenth Legion, which had just arrived in Caesarea, would take a few more days to arrive, once Titus and Placidus returned. The commander-in-chief himself remained in Caesarea Philippi one additional day, as King Agrippa had replaced one of his cavalry regiments, which had suffered heavy losses during the campaign, with fresh troops who would accompany the Roman general to Tiberias.

Their brief hiatus now over, the Roman army of Vespasian made ready to bring war to the rebellious Jews once more.

Chapter VI: Stratagems and Slaves

Giscala, Northern Judea
Mid-August, 67 A.D.

Marcus Antonius Primus

A council of war had been called by John of Giscala, for he knew the Roman reprieve would not last. There were still at least three months left in the campaign season; plenty of time for their enemies to wreak havoc upon the remaining holdouts in Galilee. There was also the matter of what to do about the city of Giscala itself.

“Every day, the mayor and the city council pressure us to leave Giscala,” John said. He had assembled around a dozen of his senior leaders and close confidants. For Levi, this was his first such meeting. As the only known survivor of Jotapata, he was treated with great respect by John’s followers.

“They would give the keys of the city to the Romans!” one of his men spat. “Are there no men of courage left in Galilee?”

“Let the Romans have Giscala,” Levi said, as a dozen sets of eyes bore into him. He then explained, “The Romans come with heavy machines. These walls are neither high nor strong. Their catapults and battering rams will level them within a day.”

There were numerous grumblings from amongst the men, though none dared to rebuke him openly. Instead, they looked to their leader.

“Our friend, Levi, is correct,” John said quickly, before any could shout an abusive retort towards him. “The terrain around the city is flat and open. The Roman army is huge; they could simply envelop us and smash us to pieces with their siege engines. No, my friends, it is not here where we will make our stand against Rome. Though it pains me to see the people of my home city become lapdogs of Caesar, their cowardice renders them unworthy of our protection.”

“Where then?” a zealot asked. “Where shall we go?”

“Jerusalem,” John said, with a sinister grin.

“You must be mad!” another man scoffed. “It would take an enormous army to take the holy city. Even the Romans have balked at attempting it.”

“I do not propose taking the city by force,” John replied, “at least not entirely. Final victory for us, both over the Romans as well as the traitors, will take a lot more than just violent action. It is our brains that we must use. Cunning and guile is worth more than an entire legion of soldiers. When the time is right, we will march to Jerusalem. They will embrace us as friends and allies, welcoming us into the very heart of the holy temple.”

“When?” the first zealot asked. “When will it be time?”

“The Romans have not set their eyes on Giscala just yet,” John explained. “And unless they come to us sooner, we will wait, while they batter themselves against the remaining rebellious cities of Galilee. And before the winter rains come, they will have returned to their camps. During this interlude, we will make our move.”

Levi spoke up. “And while they remain dormant, awaiting the coming of spring, we will conquer Jerusalem from within.”

This brought a series of cheers and beating of fists upon the table. John grinned and nodded to his friend. Levi was very astute and far more intelligent than most of the zealot’s followers. He was both loyal, while still possessing a mind of his own, which made him invaluable. That John had snared him in a moment of weakness and doubt, when he became convinced that his dearest friend, Josephus, had betrayed them, gave the zealot leader complete control over him.

John had plenty of expendable men to carry out the bloody tasks that lay ahead of them. What he lacked were men of intellect, who could be used to undermine their enemies within the Jewish state. Until he found more such men, Levi would be kept extremely busy over the coming months.

“I have a special tasking for you, my friend,” John said, soon after the

meeting broke up.

"Wherever you need me," Levi asserted.

"Jerusalem," John replied. "I need eyes in Jerusalem as soon as possible. And as one who actually survived Jotapata, it will be you who the people seek answers from. You will be our voice within the holy city."

"I don't have all the answers the people will seek," Levi stated. He noticed the trace of disappointment in his new leader's face. "But not to worry. Whatever I did not personally witness, I will fill in with conjecture. To the people, it will all be the same."

"Good," John said. "I will send twenty men with you. Think of them as your personal bodyguards. With their help, you will begin to sow the seeds of what will become our takeover of both Jerusalem, and all of Judea."

"It will be done."

Hundreds of miles to the north, the Roman governor of Syria, Gaius Licinius Mucianus, went about the daily business of running one of Rome's larger and most far flung provinces.

For Mucianus, the war in Judea may have been the most substantial issue facing him, though it certainly was not the only one. After all, he still had an entire region to manage, as well as all of the diplomatic duties that came from governing the easternmost edge of the Roman Empire. And with Vespasian commanding the actual prosecution of the campaign, there was very little Mucianus could do other than attempting to rally reinforcements while offering political support to his ally. In addition, he needed to make certain that none of the provincials in the east took it upon themselves to follow the Jews' lead, and attempt to break away from Rome. As such, he was planning a tour of Syria within a month, just prior to the harvest.

Grain was a primary staple of the region, particularly within the farming communities around Sura, near the Euphrates River. Mucianus decided to join his taxmen as they surveyed the fields to ascertain just how much would be collected in taxes come fall. He also wished to visit the city of Palmyra, which was one of the first to proclaim the deification of the Divine Augustus Caesar. That this happened during his lifetime had made Augustus very uneasy, though it since led to the practice of provincials deifying emperors while they still lived.

As he made some notes in his itinerary, Mucianus chuckled. He thought about the absurdity of it all; that an empire which prided itself on science, engineering, and great advancements in civilization still cowered beneath the yoke of mythology and ridiculous superstition. A knock at his study door interrupted his thoughts.

"Come!" he shouted, as the door was opened by his freedman.

"Excuse the intrusion, excellency," the man said with a bow, "but the noble senator Marcus Antonius Primus has arrived and demands to see you."

"Does he now?" Mucianus asked, standing from his chair just as Primus forced his way past the servant, laughing and extending his hand, which the governor readily accepted.

At thirty-seven years of age, taller than most, with a lean build, Marcus Antonius Primus also possessed a distinct aquiline nose and a thick head of curly black hair. A complex individual with more than his share of political liability, he was also a highly competent soldier who had won many victories for Rome during his time as a legionary legate. He was also a fiercely loyal friend and one-time protégé of Vespasian.

"Primus, old man," Mucianus said. "What brings you into these parts? I thought you were living in exile."

"In a manner of speaking," Primus replied, taking a chair across from the governor. "After I was foolish enough to try helping my old friend, Fabianus, in convincing his aged relative, Domitius Balbus, to sign a will we had 'adjusted', the senate expelled me from its ranks and banished me from the city. No particular place of exile; the senate simply said, 'Get the fuck out of Rome!' That was five years ago, but I still cannot return home. I can, however, go wherever else I please within our illustrious empire."

"Primus, my friend," Mucianus chuckled, "you are without a doubt in peace a bad citizen, yet in war an ally not to be despised."

"Thank you…I think," Primus said, with furrowed brow. He then shrugged. "I'll not apologize for my many flaws, for I know them well. Vespasian once told me that while he trusted me with his life and would give me command of an entire army without question, he would never leave me alone with either a single sesterce or his daughter."

"Something I would not mention, should you see the general again," Mucianus said, suddenly rather somber.

"Yes, I heard," Primus acknowledged. "The imperial messenger who arrived this morning told me." Both men were referring to the recent death of

Vespasian's only daughter, Domitilla, who had succumbed to an unknown illness at the age of twenty-two.

"I'm assuming he doesn't know yet," Primus guessed.

"I am waiting until I receive my next dispatch from him before forwarding the news on," Mucianus replied. "Which will be at least a couple of weeks, barring any unforeseen events. I received a message from him just yesterday, stating he had accepted the hospitality of King Agrippa and would be in Caesarea Philippi for twenty days. The dispatch was dated four days ago. But tell me, Primus, why have you come all the way to Syria?"

"Why, to see old friends, of course," the senator joked, glad for the change of subject. "And to put my services at either yours or the good general's disposal."

"Bored with vineyards are you?"

"I have three near Ephesus in Asia Minor," Primus stated. "And I am looking at possibly acquiring two more here in Syria. Since I have been exiled from Rome and from my place in the senate for the past five years, I have to find ways of passing the time. But yes, I am bored with growing grapes. And to think, those fat bastards in the senate, who deny me access to the imperial city, are only too happy to suck down the vintage I supply them. Only the other day, that pompous ass, Silius Italicus, sent me a message saying he is standing for consular election for this next year, and if he wins, he'd like ten casks of my finest!"

"And what did you tell him?" Mucianus asked.

"I told him that since I'm exiled from the city, I'll have to charge him an extra talent in gold, as a tariff."

The two men shared a laugh for a moment, before Mucianus was serious once more. Primus, it seemed, was never stoic or somber, even under the direst situations.

"And what service do you think you can perform for me?" Mucianus asked, leaning back in his chair and folding his hands on his chest.

"Well, not *that* kind of service!" Primus chortled loudly. "My love for you is purely fraternal, I assure you!"

"And you flatter yourself if you think you are the type of man I take into my bed," Mucianus retorted with a laugh of his own.

"Look," Primus said, putting aside his boisterous façade. "We both know that despite how much we fool the public, especially in the provinces, Rome stands on the brink. Nero's hold on the empire, as well as his own sanity, is

fragile at best."

"You tread in dangerous waters," Mucianus cautioned.

"I'm no traitor," Primus replied defensively. "Do not think I am plotting anything sinister. For me, it is a simple matter of survival for both me and my family. And our survival in the coming years may well hinge on making it known to my friends that, should the worst happen, I am always at their service."

"They say," the governor spoke slowly, "to keep ones friends close and their enemies closer."

"And how close will you keep me?" Primus asked with an eyebrow raised.

"Like Vespasian, I would not trust you with a single denarius, yet I do trust you with my life. Without the senate's official sanction, there is little I can do for you in the way of giving you an official posting. And I daresay that none of Vespasian's legates are likely to give up their billets, so long as there are fortunes to be made in plunder and the sale of slaves in Judea. However, I shall keep you close."

"That's good enough for me." The senator slapped the top of Mucianus' desk and stood quickly. "I'll be in Antioch for a few days. I hear there is a lot of fresh stock at the slave market, all straight out of Judea. Clearly, our friend Vespasian has been rather productive."

"That he has," Mucianus noted. "Nothing like a bit of war and endless suffering to make some real money."

Primus returned to his resplendent manor house along the Aegean Sea, a week after his meeting with Mucianus in Antioch. He had made several rather exotic purchases, which he was anxious to share with his wife.

Though her husband's exile from Rome had at first brought great shame and embarrassment to Davina, this was tempered greatly soon after they settled in Ephesus. First settled by the Greek Attic and Ionian colonists more than a thousand years before, it thrived as a major metropolis of the east. It was also home of the magnificent Temple of Artemis, known to the Romans as the Temple of Diana. Being one of the most visited tourist spots in the known world, it brought in copious amounts of coinage from all corners of the empire and beyond. As such, Ephesus was rivalled in wealth and prestige

only by the Eternal City itself.

And despite his public disgrace, Primus was still a very rich man and had built for him and his family a massive terraced house not far from the temple. Davina came to love Ephesus, stating that it had all of the wonders and comforts of Rome, while at the same time being far removed from the strains and political cutthroat machinations of the imperial government. And though she felt her husband was sometimes knavish, she had grown to love him over the years. Their son, Antonius, would soon be reaching the age of maturity, and both his parents were anxious for him to begin the *cursus honorum*, the career progression of a member of the patrician class. Their daughter, Antonia, was nearly twelve, and already a very pretty and rather precocious young woman.

"Come, wife!" Primus said, as he stepped into the open air garden just inside the gates of their manor house. "Come see what I bring for you!"

Davina's maidservant rushed to find her mistress, while her master laughed and guided the young woman he brought with him by the hand. The lady of the house was shocked to see Primus with the young, olive-skinned woman, who appeared nervous and uncertain as to what she should do.

"What is this?" Davina asked.

"A gift, for both you and our daughter," her husband answered. "While in Antioch visiting our dear friend, Mucianus, I elected to peruse the fresh stock at the slave market. As you know, with the war in Judea ongoing, Vespasian has sent droves of young women and children into the arms of the slave drivers. Such an abundance has naturally driven the price down, and so I found a maidservant for both you and our dear Antonia."

"Indeed," Davina replied, her head cocked to one side. "She's a Jew then, is she? They're always trouble, especially the ones who were not born in captivity."

"A Jew she may be, but she's been no trouble," Primus assured her. "And she happens to speak our tongue."

Davina did not say anything more, but instead walked around the young woman, apprising her thoroughly. She grabbed her under the chin and opened her mouth, looking over her teeth for any signs of decay or disease. Satisfied, she placed her hand on the slave's back and undid her tunic. Her eyebrows raised when she saw the fearful scars that lined the woman's back.

"What is this?" she asked. "A runaway who was caught and flogged, was she?"

“I don’t think so,” Primus replied. “Although, I did get the trader to drop his price by a hundred denarii for the merchandise being so hideously marked. Still, nothing a closed-back tunic won’t cover up.”

“Perhaps.” Davina then stepped around the front of the woman and asked, “What is your name?”

“Devorah, domina,” she answered.

“And where were you taken?”

“Jotapata, domina.” This revelation raised the eyebrow of both Davina and her husband.

“You didn’t ask where they got her from?” she asked, looking over at her husband, incredulously. News of that rather brutal siege had already spread throughout the east, as Mucianus had been quick to send word about Vespasian’s greatest triumph thus far in the Judean war.

“Does it matter?” Primus replied defensively. “She’s young, fit, has all her teeth, no signs of disease or other deformity. Aside from those rather nasty scars on her back, she’s perfectly suited for our needs. And at two hundred denarii, she cost less than half what we paid for our last serving girl.”

“Jotapata,” Davina said again, shaking her head. She then looked at the scars on the woman’s back once more. “She was no runaway. Most likely she knew something the army wanted to know, and so they tortured her until she talked. That is what happened, isn’t it?”

Her last words were directed at Devorah, who could only look down and nod almost imperceptibly. Davina firmly placed a hand under her chin, forcing Devorah to look her in the eye.

“Work well,” she said. “Do your duties as I or my husband see fit, and you will be treated well. Cause us trouble, and I’ll sell you to the arena. Oh, yes, women gladiators are quite the attraction in this province. A beauty such as you, who clearly possesses a measure of strength, would be quite the attraction. Am I making myself clear?”

“Yes, domina.”

Davina then snapped her fingers, which summoned her maidservant. “Take this young slave and start familiarizing her with the household,” she directed, her eyes still fixed on Devorah. “You will then train her on what it means to be a Roman lady’s personal maidservant. We’ll see if she doesn’t make a good birthday present for our Antonia.”

Primus said nothing as he watched his wife take possession of their

newest human possession. Given Davina's somewhat hostile demeanor, he thought perhaps purchasing the young woman had been a mistake.

"Are you displeased with the new slave girl?" he later asked, as they reclined on their dinner couches that evening.

"To tell the truth, husband, I'm fascinated by her," Davina replied. "Just from what the gossips have whispered about Jotapata, she has surely seen much."

"And the gossips don't know the half of it," her husband replied. "I talked with Mucianus in depth. From Vespasian's own rather candid dispatches, which the governor was good enough to censor the less than flattering pieces before forwarding it on to the emperor, it nearly bested him. Vespasian is a master of the siege, and given how hard pressed he was, I suspect than any lesser man would have failed. And now I cannot help but wonder what our new servant saw there, and what it was she knew that caused Vespasian's men to lash her so cruelly."

"I inspected her thoroughly," Davina remarked. "Her gashes are so numerous that she should have died from them. However, they were clearly stitched up, seeing as how the scars are narrower than one would expect after being flogged. Someone showed her at least some compassion."

Devorah, who stood along the wall with the chief maidservant, could hear the entire conversation. As a slave, her thoughts and feelings mattered not. And so for her new masters to speak about her with her in the room was no different than if they were discussing a horse or a newly purchased draught animal in its presence.

For the young Jewish woman, life as she knew it was over. Though grateful to have survived the hell fires that consumed her home, all that she knew and loved was now destroyed. Every last member of her family had perished, with all of her friends either dead or sold off as slaves like she was. The only shred of hope she had was when Josephus told her that her lover, Yaakov, still lived. If his words were true, then the Romans had set him free. Why they would do so, she could not begin to understand. Still, every morning when she woke and every night before sleep, she gave thanks to God for his survival, while also praying for his safekeeping.

After the master and mistress had finished their evening meal, Devorah was shown to her quarters. The chief maidservant, a Greek woman named Kori, escorted her down the narrow corridor beneath the stairs.

“This will be your room,” Kori said, opening the door. The room was very small, scarcely large enough for a crude bed and a single end table. The ceiling was also rather low, and Devorah suddenly felt claustrophobic.

“Thank you,” she managed to say.

“Servants’ toilets are at the end of the hall,” Kori added.

“Our doors aren’t locked at night?” the young Jewish woman asked. Kori gave a short laugh in reply.

“There is a difference between being a slave and being a prisoner,” she explained. “Slaves in this house come and go through all hours of the day. But do not think you can go as you please. You will only leave this manor when I have a specific tasking for you. And do not even think about trying to escape. There may be no bars on your door or window, but know that escaped slaves are almost always caught. And when they are, the penalties are severe.”

“Believe me, the thought has not crossed my mind,” Devorah reassured her. She glanced around the tiny room. “And if it did, I would not even begin to know where I would go.”

“Our master and mistress are fair people,” Kori said. “I have been in their service for nearly twenty years.” When Devorah turned and gave her a puzzled expression, Kori explained. “I was a wedding present from our domina’s mother.”

“Strange, that people should be given as gifts to other people,” Devorah replied.

“Get used to it, my dear,” Kori replied, her voice firm. “Unlike you, I was born a slave. I have always known my lot in life, and I accept it. You will learn to do the same. We are the property of our master and mistress. Anything they demand of us, we give them. And yes, that means *anything*.”

Such realizations should not have come as any kind of shock to Devorah, although she had not expected to hear it stated so plainly.

“Have you…?” she started to asked.

Kori gave a sad smile. “I am ten years older than the master,” she replied, “so they do not use me for my sensual talents as often as they used to. But yes, in my younger years, I was frequently in the bed of both the master and mistress, sometimes at the same time. It is simply another one of our duties, my dear, much like scrubbing the crockery or hanging out the laundry. You may not have your freedom anymore, but at least you have a roof over your head, a bed to sleep on, and food to eat. How many of your fellow Jews will

be able to say the same, once the Romans are finished with them?”

It was a harsh thing to say, yet Devorah knew it was true. She simply nodded in reply, and the Greek woman left her.

The only light to see by had been the oil lamp Kori carried with her, and when she left, Devorah was left in utter blackness. She felt around in the dark, hitting her shin on the crude bedframe, which creaked loudly as she laid down and pulled the single wool blanket over her. The bed was surprisingly comfortable, although this simply could have been because it was a change from sleeping on the ground or in a wheeled cage, as she had during the journey from Jotapata to Antioch. She had never so much as set foot outside of Galilee, and the month it took to reach Antioch, and the additional week it had taken to reach Ephesus by sea, had overawed her with just how large the Roman Empire was.

Her eyes soon became heavy from staring into the endless dark, and sleep overcame her. As she drifted off, she made sure to say her evening prayer of thanks, and to implore God to protect her beloved. Though she knew she would never see him again in this life, she hoped that in the fullness of time, they would be reunited in paradise.

Levi left Giscala with his mounted armed escort and began the long trek down towards Jerusalem. His injuries still troubled him, and he wondered if the pain in his side would ever dissipate. Still, he was thankful to be alive, and now more determined than ever to continue the fight against the Romans and all who sought to enslave the free Jewish state. His friend from Giscala had given him something to believe in once more; doubt was replaced by resolve.

On the second day of their journey, they rode along the western edge of the Sea of Galilee, past numerous small villages, as well as the major cities of Tiberias and Taricheae. The Roman armies had yet to leave their billets at Caesarea and Scythopolis, and so all appeared peaceful for the time being.

As they reached the southernmost town along the sea, Levi noted a young man peddling fish along the road. His face was scarred, and his clothes ragged. He had clearly had a very hard life, despite his lack of years. There was also something familiar about him that Levi could not place. His eyes grew wide when the fish seller called out his name.

“Levi!” the young man said. “You live, thanks be to God!”

“Yaakov?” the older warrior replied in confusion. The sight of Josephus’ former guards’ commander was a pitiful one. “How did you survive? I thought the Romans killed everyone in Jotapata.”

“A few of us hid in a well,” Yaakov explained. “It was three days after the city fell when we were discovered. Rather than surrender, we made a pact to commit mutual suicide, rather than face the crucifix. Josephus and I were the last two to remain…”

“Josephus!” Levi interrupted. “Do not tell me he lives as well!”

“He does,” Yaakov confirmed. “After our friends were dead, and only he and I remained, he refused to slay me, saying he could not kill a friend. I dared not take my own life and risk offending God so grievously. He negotiated with the Romans, surrendering to them only after they pledged to set me free.”

“Better if you had died at Jotapata,” Levi observed.

“Do you think I don’t know that?” Yaakov snapped at him. “Every breath I take fills me with shame, that I live while so many of our friends lie dead. But what of you, Levi? How is it *you* still live?”

“I did my duty,” the warrior replied, haughtily. “Not long after we were sent from Jotapata to find reinforcements we were ambushed by Roman cavalry. The others were killed or captured. Once Jotapata fell, and I assumed our brave commander had met an honorable end, I made my way to Giscala. And now my heart is heavy, knowing that the man who I placed all of my faith in, who should have led us to victory against the Romans, has instead gone over to them.”

“Josephus is no traitor!” Yaakov retorted, although his words lacked conviction. As the man who he had once stood with on the walls of Jotapata stared at him, he looked down, as if shamed by his own words.

“The very fact that he lives tells me enough,” Levi retorted. “You had a pact that all should die, and yet at the end he balked. He no doubt saved you to the last, knowing that as his friend he could persuade you to live and to not kill him when he decided to surrender.”

Yaakov looked up at him accusingly. Levi quickly raised a hand. “I’m not faulting you, my friend. It cannot be easy, to be betrayed by your friend and mentor at the very last. And like you said, you could not very well take your own life and risk offending God. I am truly sorry, Yaakov, but it would seem that, out of all of us, Josephus betrayed you most of all.”

The young man looked despondent, his eyes red and distant. He shook his head, uncertain as to what he should do. Levi pitied him, not in the least because it appeared that Josephus had deceived him, and now Yaakov was in a nightmarish limbo; living still, when he should be dead and standing before God as a defender of the faith.

"You should come with us," Levi said. "We are heading south, seeking allies, as well as gathering what information we can about the political situation in Jerusalem. We intend to rally all who will fight for our cause to continue in the fight against Rome, as well as those who have betrayed the people."

Yaakov slowly shook his head. "No," he replied. "I am done fighting. Whatever fate awaits me, I pray I never draw a sword again."

"Then God go with you," Levi said before turning his mount back towards the road. He chanced a glance over his shoulder and saw Yaakov walking the other direction, his head slumped and eyes on the dirt road. Levi then caught up to his men, one of whom appeared to be grinning.

"Splendid," Levi said with wicked glee.

"How so?" one of his men asked.

"With Jotapata fallen, the people will assume Josephus slain," the zealot explained. "As such, he becomes a martyr to be displayed before the public by that weak-minded fool, Hanan, as a symbol of courage and defiance. But we know better."

"Do you think he was telling the truth?" his escort asked.

"Does it matter?" Levi questioned back. "I care not about the circumstances regarding their survival; what matters is that Josephus is now more useful to us alive than dead. We must first allow the people time to sorrow at the loss of their great 'hero'. Then we will allow rumors to slip out that he, in fact, lives. Once it becomes common knowledge that the defender of Jotapata and Governor-General of Galilee has gone over to the Romans, Hanan and his supporters will be greatly weakened. It will then be just a matter of time before a new leader is selected; one who will not be so feeble in steadfastness."

As they continued to ride south, Levi's mind was filled with confusion. While he had spoken rather harshly to Yaakov regarding Josephus, he himself was filled with conflicting thoughts about his friend and former commander. Before seeing Yaakov, Levi had assumed Josephus perished with the others. Whatever his faults may have been, at least that way he died

with honor. Hearing that he lived, and was in the custody of the Romans, filled his mind with all manner of unpleasant thoughts. If Josephus was so anxious to save his own life that he would betray a pact to die with his brothers, what was to say he would not completely change sides and end up working for the murderous invaders?

Chapter VII: On the Sea of Galilee

Tiberias, Sea of Galilee
27 August 67 A.D.
***

While there had been a sense of relief for the soldiers of the Tenth Legion, following the fall of Jotapata, their reprieve soon turned to tedium. Anxious to finish the Judean rebels once and for all, the next two months had become nothing but endless marches with the establishment of camps each night. It seemed as if the will of the seditionists had been broken, for not one hostile action was taken against them as they made their way to Scythopolis. However, no sooner had they and the Fifth Legion established themselves, they were called up to march once more, this time for Tiberias.

The greatest concern for Centurion Nicanor and Optio Gaius Artorius was not that the legion was on the move again, but that their depleted ranks had seen nothing in the way of replacements. A century at full strength was allotted eighty legionaries and decanii, along with the four principal officers.

"To be fair, we were nowhere near our full complement when we marched into Judea," Nicanor said, as he and his senior officers met on the evening before they would finish their trek to Tiberias. The port city along the Sea of Galilee was a mere twenty miles from where Vespasian's massive army was now converging, and the commanding general intended to give the citizens an overwhelming display of Roman military power the following day.

"Four of our lads are dead," Julius, the tesserarius spoke up, "with another dozen so badly injured they had to be evacuated to Ptolemais. Even if they survive their wounds, I doubt we'll be seeing most of them again."

"And during the Jotapata siege, I would say at least twenty received minor wounds that they've since recovered from," the signifier, a man named Aurelian, said. He shook his head. "A bitter contest that was."

"I don't think any of us walked away from that place unscarred," Gaius added.

"Just so you know," the centurion said, "we're losing seven more of our lads to the Fourth Cohort as replacements for their casualties."

Though they did not like it, no one complained. After all, it was the Fourth Cohort that had borne the brunt of the defenders' brutal strategy of utilizing boiling oil while they attempted to undermine the walls during an assault on a breach. Many of those not killed outright had later perished from infection brought on by the horrific burns, while others who did manage to survive were rendered unfit to continue service in the legions. And with what few recruits there were in the region all being sent to reconstitute the shattered Twelfth Legion, the soldiers of Vespasian's army were finding themselves having to perform their duties with fewer men and resources.

"I'll get with the decanii and see about reorganizing the squads," Gaius said. "Including the four of us, we now have fifty-two men within the century that are fit for duty."

"Other armies have made due with proportionally a lot less," Nicanor said. "Be sure the decanii emphasize this to the lads."

While the century was thirty-two men short of its authorized strength, the other officers knew their centurion was correct. And while the men would complain, which soldiers were always known for, their reduced numbers would have the residual effect of bringing the men closer to their mates and hopefully causing them to fight even harder when the time came.

Adding to the tension, the disposition of the people of Tiberias was unknown to the men in the ranks. For all they knew, the coming weeks could bring even more bloody assaults against every town and city they came across. There was a newfound respect for their adversaries, although it was always difficult to know how stalwart their foes were at each stronghold they attacked. While Jotapata had been a murderous bloodbath, other cities, such as Jaffa, had fallen rather quickly, with relatively few losses amongst the legions. Yet even after so many sieges and savage battles, the overall strategic situation was still unknown. The Jewish rebels could collectively fall within a matter of weeks or stubbornly hold for a period of years. Nicanor and Gaius were always quick to remind their soldiers that it was up to the commanding general to concern himself with the larger, strategic situation. For them, their focus was on the task at hand, one battle at a time.

Accompanying Vespasian's army was King Agrippa, along with a large contingent of Judean mounted archers and lancers. As Tiberias was one of the

key economic and strategic cities within his realm, the king was hopeful that it could be spared from annihilation.

"That all depends on the citizens themselves," Vespasian surmised. He was holding a strategic meeting with his senior officers over a late supper that night. And while he, too, wished to spare Tiberias from destruction, his motives had less to do with feelings of mercy and more to do with not wishing to see Rome lose such a viable revenue and taxation source.

"I have no doubt that the seditionists have infested the city," the king admitted. "However, I feel it crucial that we cut the scourge away, and not destroy the city that Emperor Tiberius gave his name to. It is also one of the most important commercial hubs within my kingdom. If you must destroy one of the seditious cities, then let it be Taricheae. It is of less importance and is populated by the most mutinous brigands."

"If they capitulate and hand over the leaders of the rebellion, then there won't be any need to burn either city," Vespasian asserted. He then looked to his assembled legates. "I know your soldiers are ever anxious for plunder. However, we must show at least some restraint, especially when dealing with the cities of our allies."

"We'll know the disposition of Tiberias soon enough," Placidus remarked, "and whether or not we can all them 'allies'. I tasked one of my regimental commanders, Valerian, with taking fifty men to the city gates on the morrow and seeing just how they intend to receive us."

As the generals, along with the king, continued in their discussion, Vespasian noted that his son, Titus, was surprisingly quiet. His face was pale, and he simply stared at his plate of food, only taking the occasional bite. Thinking perhaps the young man was ill, the commander-in-chief was eager to end their dinner, seeing as how the orders for the morrow had already been discussed and acknowledged.

Upon dismissing his senior leaders, they all stood and saluted with a unanimous chant of, *'Ave, Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, protector of the empire!'* as was customary for patrician officers on campaign. As the other generals left the principia tent, Titus remained. It was then Vespasian noticed the scroll clutched in his left hand.

"Are you not well, son?" he asked. "Is the message in that scroll the source of your vexation?"

"This came with the imperial post," Titus said, swallowing hard. "It is from Quintus."

The name he referred to was his brother-in-law, Quintus Petillius Cerealis, a prominent legate, and also a distant cousin of General Cerealis of the Fifth Legion. Quintus had commanded the Ninth Legion in Britannia and, like Titus, had taken part in the defeat of the Iceni Rebellion under Boudicca.

As was often the case when it came to personal correspondence, Titus was mistaken as the intended recipient of messages meant for his father, since both men shared the same name. Vespasian took the long scroll from his son, and as he read, his heart felt as if it had been stabbed with a dozen knives.

Dear Father and Noble General, Titus Flavius Vespasian,

These are difficult times we live in, and now I regret that I must bear news of an even greater sorrow for our family. Your daughter, my beloved Domitilla, fell ill with a summer chill two weeks ago. I do not wish to add to what I know will be a broken heart, with the details of her rapid descent. Within a day of her having a fainting spell, she succumbed to her illness, and now rests in the arms of the gods.

Please know that your granddaughter is well, though she continues to cry for her mother. Our grief is only matched by that of your son, Domitian, who has despaired greatly since the death of his beloved sister.

I lament that I cannot be there to share in the grief you and Titus must be feeling. Your troubles are countless enough as it is, and I implore your forgiveness for having added to your distress.

Your ever loyal son,

Quintus Petillius Cerealis

"This letter is dated six weeks ago," Vespasian observed quietly. "That means my daughter has been dead these last two months."

He then bit into his knuckles, trying desperately to hold back his tears. Titus stood with his hands behind his back, his head bowed as he let his own tears fall.

"I…I will send a letter to Quintus as soon as we've taken Tiberias and Taricheae," Vespasian said, after taking a minute to compose himself. "There

will be a time to mourn your sister, Titus. But for now, we have our duty to perform. There are too many lives at stake for us to allow even the greatest of personal tragedies to cloud our resolve."

Titus was in awe at his father's courage. His face was ashen, yet stoic. It was a true testament to his iron will that he could still focus on duty, while inside his heart was shattered.

"Yes, sir," Titus said. He came to attention and quickly left the tent. He was thankful that night had long since fallen, for his stoicism paled when compared to his father's.

His vision was obscured with tears as he made his way through the dimly lit camp to his tent. As he sat on his cot, he resolved to release his sorrows this night, for in the morning, his soldiers would need their legate once more. For the generals who commanded Rome's legions, there was no time for personal tragedy. That was the price they paid. A Roman general's true purpose was to serve and care for his soldiers; all else became meaningless, even the loss of those they loved most.

Within the city of Tiberias, the mayor and council were practically held hostage by the horde of zealots who had taken over the port. These armed brigands were indigenous to both Tiberias, as well as other places within the Kingdom of Agrippa. Their leader was a renegade named Jesus bar Shaphat. Separate from the factions of John of Giscala and Simon bar Giora, they had no aspirations for establishing themselves as rulers within Jerusalem, which most of them had never set foot within fifty miles of. Rather, they were simply fanatics who were rebelling against the rule of King Agrippa, whom they viewed as little more than a Roman slave.

Taking advantage of the province-wide revolt, Jesus and his followers had set about establishing themselves first in Tiberias, with the intent of perhaps conquering rival Taricheae. There was also another faction who had taken control of the fortress city of Gamala, which Jesus hoped to bring into their fold. Gamala was far too well protected to be taken by force. However, Jesus understood that whoever controlled Tiberias controlled the entire region. The leaders of Gamala, Joseph and Chares, would be compelled to join them, lest their isolated people eventually starve to death.

"We don't ask for much," Jesus said, as he, the governor of Tiberias, and

several of his companions walked along the large main road that led to the western gate. “All we want is to be free, left to live in peace as we see fit, not as slaves to a foreign emperor or his puppet king.”

“And just how free do my people feel with you and your zealots essentially holding them hostage?” the governor, also named Jesus, countered.

Before bar Shaphat could answer, a sentry sounded the alert.

“A company of Roman horsemen approaches!” the warrior shouted down.

This filled the governor with dismay, for he feared that the zealots would provoke Vespasian into destroying the entire city, and all within.

“If riders approach, then the legions cannot be far behind!” he implored. “You have but two or three thousand of your brigands within these walls. If you fight the Romans, you will condemn every person within Tiberias to share your despicable fate!”

His chastising was met with a hard slap across the face from Jesus bar Shaphat. The humiliation hurt far worse than the blow, and the mayor could only hang his head, for he and his councilors were unarmed and could not readily defend themselves.

“Filthy coward!” bar Shaphat snarled. “We will stand up against the oppressors, and then you will see the people rise! We will *not* return in docile submission to the pretender, Agrippa, nor his whoreson master, Nero!”

A score of zealots escorted the governor away. Jesus bar Shaphat had to be careful not to imprison the mayor or his councilmen, lest it incite the people into rising up against him. At the same time, he could not allow the governor to readily undermine him this way. Once rid of the Roman and Herodian influence, the zealot leader hoped to allow the city and provisional governors to keep their positions, provided they complied with rule of law under bar Shaphat. But first, there were some pesky horsemen who needed to be swatted away like flies.

The company of Roman cavalrymen were arrayed in a long line, maintaining a wide interval. This served to thwart any possible attacks by enemy archers, as well as to make their numbers seem greater. At their head rode Commander Valerian, an experienced cavalry officer who had served in

the Armenian war, as well as Britannia during Boudicca's revolt.

As they approached, they saw no people outside the walls, which were swarming with men armed for battle. Most carried small shields and either spears or short swords. He also noted a large number of archers and slingers interspersed amongst them. Because of this, he halted his men while they were still beyond the range of their enemies' missile weapons.

"They can't be seriously thinking about standing against us," a centurion said, with disdain.

"We will find out soon enough," Valerian replied. He then nodded towards the gates, which were being opened from the inside.

A large number of Judean warriors accompanied a man, who while dressed in humble garb of tunic and sandals, the Romans assumed was their leader. The cavalry officer waved for five of his men to ride forward with him.

"Keep on line, ready to advance if we get into trouble," Valerian said to the centurion. He rode his horse forward, to where the Judean delegation waited for them, just beyond the wall.

"Welcome, noble Romans," the Jewish man said. "I am Jesus bar Shaphat, Commander of the Garrison of Tiberias."

"You command far more than a garrison," Valerian noted, as he signaled for his escorts to dismount. He did not wish to appear the aggressor and hoped to negotiate entry into the city. He then gazed at the ramparts. "What I see here is a rabble that is armed for war, not security of the city. And where is the mayor and city council? It is they who should greet us, not a self-appointed militia leader."

His contemptuous tone told the Jews that he knew Jesus and his armed men held no legitimacy within Tiberias.

"It is we who control the city now," the rebel leader said contemptuously. "If your General Vespasian wishes to enter Tiberias, he must receive our permission to do so. Otherwise, he can try to seize the walls from us!"

"Impudent fools," Valerian said, shaking his head. "You have no idea what you are up against. I come here to parlay for the safety of the people, which can only be done when fealty is sworn to your rightful king, Marcus Julius Agrippa II, and to Emperor Nero."

Jesus gave a sigh, as if he were bored by the conversation.

"I'm afraid we cannot do that," he replied. "But now, we will seize something of the emperor's!"

He snapped his fingers and twenty of his men rushed towards the dismounted Roman horsemen. Unable to remount their horses in time, Valerian and his men fled on foot towards the remainder of their men. The centurion quickly ordered the company into two ranks, with lance and spatha ready to strike. The rebels did not pursue the Roman officer any further, but instead shouted in glee as Jesus bar Shaphat and several of his men climbed atop the captured horses, which they rode about in circles, while shouting profane insults towards the cavalrymen.

"Bastards will pay for this outrage!" Valerian snarled as he ran up to his centurion.

"Our numbers are too few to deal with this mob," the centurion observed.

"Yes," the commander acknowledged, containing his temper as he looked back at the celebrating mob. "We'll let them enjoy this little victory, for it will not last."

As the rebels celebrated the embarrassing insult they had inflicted upon the Romans, another group of men on horseback forced their way through the mob. It was Jesus, governor of Tiberias, along with six of his councilmen. Neither bar Shaphat nor any of his men attempted to stop them, so caught up with having stolen a Roman commander's horse. The mayor and councilmen followed the company of imperial cavalry back to the camp. Valerian and his men who'd lost their mounts were forced to double up and ride back with some of their companions, which served as an added source of embarrassment as the contingent reached the army's camp. Infantrymen laughed at their plight and shouted up insults to their rather embarrassed companions.

Vespasian, King Agrippa, Titus, and the other legates stood at the camp's gate, having witnessed the entire spectacle from a distance. It was only when he saw Commander Valerian riding on the back of a horse with his centurion, did the commanding general understand what had just transpired.

"Damn them," Vespasian swore. "I will see the entire city crucified for this!"

"My lord, please wait!" Jesus, the mayor, pleaded as he rode up and almost fell from his horse as he quickly dismounted.

Legionaries quickly surrounded the governor and his councilmen, their gladii drawn.

"And you are?" the commanding general asked, his arms folded and a

stern countenance upon his face.

"I am the governor of Tiberias," Jesus replied quickly. "Please understand, our city is essentially held hostage by these fanatics, but their numbers are only a couple thousand. Believe me when I say that they do not represent the disposition of our people."

"It is as I suspected," Agrippa said.

Jesus then noticed the king for the first time. "Sire," he said with a deep bow. "I beg your forgiveness, for I have failed to maintain the good order of your city." He then addressed Vespasian, "I implore our noble allies to destroy these renegades, but spare our city. Do not let the madness of a few bring so many to suffer. I offer you our right hands in submission."

When the Roman general said nothing, Agrippa remarked, "Vespasian, I must ask you to allow me to try and rectify the situation before you unleash your legions. Tiberias is a wealthy trading port, and it does neither my kingdom nor Rome any good if we destroy it."

"Very well," the commander-in-chief said. He glared hard at the governor. "I give you until the morrow to sort this matter out. If the gates of Tiberias are not opened to my army, then all will be rendered to a pile of ash and crucified corpses."

"I swear, it will be done," the governor replied. He bowed to his king once more. "I pledge by my life to return Tiberias to your sovereign rule, sire."

The council of Tiberias all bowed before their king, and with more than a little trepidation, mounted their horses and at a slow trot made their way back towards the port city.

"Order the men to stand down," Vespasian told his generals. "We will give these people one more day to come to their senses."

"Awfully merciful of you, sir," Trajan scoffed.

"Mercy has nothing to do with it," the commander-in-chief replied. "This place is simply too wealthy for us to wantonly destroy, unless we have no other choice."

He understood all too well just how important Tiberias was to both King Agrippa and to Rome. The amount of taxation and tribute it brought every year to the empire would be an insufferable loss, should he raze the city to the ground. It would take years to rebuild, at great expense, and Vespasian knew that neither the senate nor Emperor Nero would look too kindly on the loss of so much taxable revenue. In the end, it was not compassion which

stayed Vespasian from ordering his army to unleash its full fury, but a pragmatic matter of economics.

"My concern now is that we may not be able to catch the perpetrators here," Agrippa remarked as the entourage made its way back into the Roman camp.

"Such is the trouble with trying to besiege a port city," Titus added. "Still, the Sea of Galilee is really little more than an oversized lake. And with most of the surrounding regions firmly under our control, there is really only one place these thieves can run to."

"Taricheae," Agrippa stated. He shook his head. "The disposition of the people there is unknown to me, though as hated rivals of Tiberias, I can only assume that if one city proves loyal, the other will be more apt to fall to the seditionists; even if only out of spite."

Vespasian looked back and apprised the city, which the king had called the jewel of his kingdom. It really was an impressive sight. Most of the buildings were of Greco-Roman design, and the harbor was lined with numerous fishing and small merchant vessels. Only the scourge of seditionists added a blight to what was otherwise a pristine example of what could be had by those who willingly submitted to the rule of Rome.

It was evening when Jesus bar Shaphat received word that the governor and council were meeting in the city forum, imploring the people to join them. He and his men had celebrated their snubbing of the Romans with much drink and debauchery, yet he was now driven sober by the understanding that the city's leaders had had enough of the seditionists. Fear of the imperial army was far greater than fear of the zealots within their walls.

Lighting the way with torches, he and nearly a hundred of his men forced their way through the streets and into the large forum. The mayor stood atop a large dais, from which he addressed the confused mob.

"People of Tiberias," he said. "We have been held hostage by those who would call upon us to betray our king…"

"Traitor!" bar Shaphat shouted, raising his fist. "It is you who has betrayed the people! We offer them liberty, you will only bring further subjugation!"

“It is peace which we bring!” the governor retorted. “You offer nothing, except death! You speak of subjugation, yet it is by your brigands that you would rule through intimidation, rather than compassion or justice.”

“Look outside the walls!” a councilman added. “Do you really think your mob of thieves and murderers can stand up to that? And if you think God will protect you, then you are a fool.”

“Citizens of Tiberias, hear me, I implore you!” the governor continued with haste. “Jesus bar Shaphat may be one of us, but he has turned his back on all of you. He and his kind are no longer welcome within our city. And if they will not depart voluntarily, then we will force them to leave!”

As the crowd started to shout hostile insults towards him and his men, bar Shaphat knew he could not possibly stand against them, even though most of the mob was unarmed. He slowly started to back away, quietly telling his men to rally all of their followers at the docks.

“And if you fear their weapons,” the governor continued, attempting to reassure his people, “then think on this. Would you rather face a couple thousand thieves, armed only with the crudest of weapons, or would you attempt to fight against sixty thousand Roman soldiers? But let not fear compel you, rather let loyalty and love of your king and nation guide you. Join me now in expelling these hateful murderers from our beloved city!”

The crowd roared with approval, shouting and raising their fists in the air. The followers of Jesus bar Shaphat were known to all, and as the mob dispersed, bands of them sought out the renegades, that they might make a gift of them to King Agrippa and General Vespasian.

At the docks, there was little activity, as merchants and fishermen had gone home for the night. There were only a few city watchmen present, although these men fled in terror at the sight of bar Shaphat and his horde of followers, who numbered over two thousand.

“The people have betrayed us,” he explained to his leaders, who had arrived gathered on the jetty. “We cannot possibly make a stand against the Romans here, whilst the traitors wait to knife us in the back. We will take every vessel we can muster and make for Taricheae. The people there may be our rivals, but they have more of a stomach for a fight against the imperial oppressors than these cowards!”

The sounds of shouting and the flicker of torches alerted them. A half mile up the main thoroughfare, the enraged people, who had been stirred up

by the governor, were making their way towards the docks. Many now carried weapons and torches, while shouting for the villains' blood. They knew that the only means of escape for the rebels was via the sea, and they would attempt to prevent the theft of their boats.

As Tiberias was a fishing port, along with a commercial hub for the region, the docks were vast and full of hundreds of vessels. Jesus bar Shaphat quickly ordered his men aboard, and as the mob bore down on them, several dozen ships were quickly cast off and out onto the vast lake. Not all of his men managed to get aboard in time, and many of them were beaten to death by the people, who were doubly incensed by the theft of their boats. In return, those citizens who tried to board the ships and prevent their theft were hacked to pieces by the fleeing zealots.

As they made their way safely out onto the sea, Jesus was troubled that Taricheae was their only viable place of sanctuary at the moment. The region to the south was too volatile for his men to establish themselves anywhere. Despite sharing a common enemy in Rome, neither the government in Jerusalem, nor the Idumeans, or Sicarii would welcome his men. All they could do now was attempt to make a stand at the closest city, and hope to embarrass the king enough that he agreed to their demands for independence.

Dawn broke the next day, and Vespasian decided he would personally confront the people of Tiberias. He took with him General Trajan, along with the cavalry contingent from the Tenth Legion. In a move that puzzled his men, he'd ordered one of the battering rams assembled, but not the catapults or ballistae.

As the contingent approached the walls, with legionaries groaning about the weight of the enormous battering ram, they noticed a handful of sentries, but nothing like the mob that had greeted Commander Valerian and his horsemen. The rising sun shone brightly in Vespasian's face, and he shielded his eyes from the glare as they boldly rode closer.

"Think anyone will take a shot at you, like at Jotapata?" Trajan asked with mirthless chuckle.

The commanding general snorted in reply, his foot still aching from where a rebel archer had struck him during the siege.

"If they do, they'd best hope they're more accurate than the last man who

tried to take me down," he remarked.

When they were within fifty feet of the city, the narrow gates were opened, and Jesus, the governor of Tiberias, walked out, along with his entire council. He was wearing his ceremonial robes of state, complete with green and gold trappings.

"Hail, Vespasian!" he said, with both hands raised in supplication. "We welcome you to the City of Tiberias, as both our savior and benefactor!"

"The seditionists have been dealt with?" the Roman general asked.

"When the people rose up against them, they fled like cowards," Jesus replied. "They stole many of our fishing boats and merchant vessels. We did, however, manage to capture fifty of those who failed to escape. The people bludgeoned to death an equal number who were not quick enough to board their stolen vessels in time."

"I see," Vespasian replied. He then looked over at the wall, as well as the gates. "Your gates here are very narrow; too small for my army to march through. As a sign of your submission, one of our battering rams will dismantle a portion of the wall, and my entire army will parade through the streets. Rest assured, they will neither pillage nor treat your citizens poorly. And tonight you will host a feast of celebration, for both your king, as well as my senior officers."

"It will be an honor," the mayor replied with a bow.

Vespasian nodded and then turned to Trajan.

"Have the battering ram brought forward. We will create a breach large enough for the army to march through. Pass the word to all commanders; any soldiers caught mistreating or stealing from the people will be flogged and deducted a month's pay."

"Yes, sir," the legate acknowledged.

While Jesus and his council did not exactly like the idea of the Romans smashing a large hole in the wall of their city, he knew it was preferable to what had almost happened to Tiberias. Stories of the unholy slaughter wrought by Vespasian's forces against every city that had so much as raised a single blade against them had reached the city. Whether their loyalty to the king and to the emperor was genuine or feigned simply out of fear, all counted themselves fortunate to have escaped the fate of places such as Jotapata and Jaffa.

The blows of the battering ram, which took half an hour to wheel forward into position, at first filled the people with fear. Even all the way across the

city, towards the docks, the thunderous pounding of the monstrous weapon filled the people with ominous trepidation. The city council had sent criers around the city to reassure people that the Romans were not about to sack the city.

By late afternoon the wall was breached, and several dozen soldiers had been detailed as a labor party to clear the crumbled remains away from the breach. It had been a long, tedious tasking, yet it still took far less time than if they had tried to march sixty thousand men through the narrow gates.

As the cornicens trumpeted and the drummers beat the marching cadence, the three legions led the way into Tiberias, where tens-of-thousands of cheering spectators greeted them. The Fifth Legion marched to the left, once they were clear of the breach, followed by the Tenth, along with ten auxiliary infantry cohorts and six regiments of cavalry. The Fifteenth Legion, along with the remaining auxiliary infantry and cavalry, broke off to the right. The legionary cavalry, along with Vespasian, King Agrippa, and all the legates paraded up the center. It took more than an hour for the entire army to enter the city, and when the lead elements converged at the docks, the columns of soldiers stretched for miles along the streets, all the way back to the gate and the breach.

Vespasian and his entourage arrived at the city council, where the mayor and all the magistrates awaited them. The general dismounted his horse and the trumpeters played a loud fanfare to signal his arrival. He then nodded back towards Agrippa.

“If you would do the honor of leading us in,” Vespasian said. “After all, it is your city.”

The king smiled and nodded, appreciative of the respectful gesture given to him by his Roman ally.

For Josephus, the entire spectacle felt strange, for Tiberias had been a city under his charge when he was governor-general of Galilee. He’d also had some rather treacherous dealings with both its citizens, as well as those of Taricheae. As such, he was feeling rather conflicted by the act of clemency shown by Vespasian.

“You expect these acts of kindness will win the people over,” he said to Titus, who had come to see him later that evening. He shook his head. “It

won’t work, you know.”

Along with the senior officers, Josephus had been given quarters within the royal palace, albeit his was little more than a small servant’s room. A single legionary stood guard outside, ostensibly as his jailer, though really more for the former rebel leader’s protection.

“We shall see,” the legate replied. He then took a seat on the small stool in the corner and asked a question that had been bothering him for some time. “When you made your little prophecy to my father, you said ‘the Beast will fall’. Why did you use that term? I know it is something that subversive Greeks have used to call the emperor, though I did not know the Jews used this affront.”

“I believe it comes from a book, written by a man called John of Patmos,” Josephus explained. “He was a follower of a prophet from Nazareth, Jesus ben Joseph, who was called ‘Christ’ by his followers.”

“Never heard of him,” Titus replied. “But then, prophets spring up out of the ground in this land, like weeds or locusts.”

“This Christ was different,” Josephus said. “He was executed by the procurator, Pontius Pilate, thirty-four years ago. Though the procurator found no fault in this Nazarene, his courage failed him and he submitted to the incessant haranguing of the Sanhedrin ordering the man’s crucifixion. His followers believed him to be the son of God…”

“Ah yes, I am familiar with this cult,” Titus interrupted, suddenly remembering where he’d heard the stories before. The followers of Christ were few in number, though they had spread their influence far beyond the borders of Judea. “Yet another sect of your people; it’s no wonder you’re all so damned divided!”

“I’ll not argue that,” Josephus consented. “His followers were different, though. Unlike the violent zealot sects, such as the Sicarii, he preached peace and to love one’s neighbors, as well as their enemies.”

“No wonder the Jewish leaders wanted him dead,” Titus scoffed. “Now what of this book?”

He was not really overly concerned about Judean prophets, who were so numerous it seemed every city and township had at least one or more. His interests lay in Josephus’ supposed prophecy. Did their Jewish captive actually foretell of things to come, or was he simply a smooth speaker who had made such bold predictions in order to save himself, and perhaps gain favor with his Roman captors? His father wasn’t necessarily looking to start a

rebellion against Nero, yet he was certainly not blindly loyal to the despot either.

"The book is called the *Revelation of John*, or simply *Revelations*," Josephus answered. "Supposedly, he received a series of visions and messages directly from God. It is very cryptic, and a lot of it doesn't make any sense, at least not the segments I've read."

"A popular book then, is it?"

"Hardly," Josephus replied. "It was only written within the last couple of years. But like any true scholar, I keep my mind open, and I question everything. I have a couple of friends who call themselves Christians, and through them I managed to read copies of some of the chapters. A lot of appears to be gibberish, though I think this was done deliberately. There are those who believe it is about the end of the world, but I don't think so. I believe it was written cryptically for a reason, especially the part about Emperor Nero."

"It mentions him by name?" Titus asked.

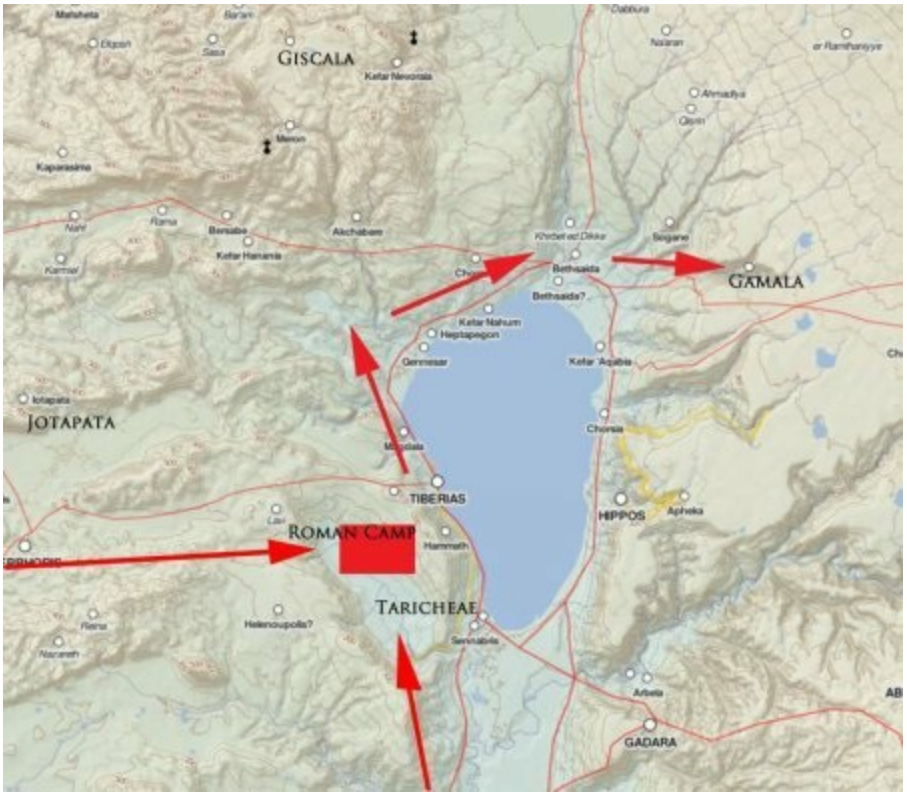
"Not exactly. It refers to a mark, or number, that denotes 'the Beast'. Some think this refers to the devil, yet it specifically states that the number is a man's name. The number is 666, or in a lesser-known Greek variant, 616. I could not make any sense of it, but my friends explained that it is numeric cipher that spells out the name of Nero Caesar. Mind you, this book was written about three years ago, just prior to the rebellion."

"So your god told you that 'the Beast' from this book will fall, and my father will rise up in his place?" Titus asked incredulously.

"Well, I certainly cannot vouch for any authenticity of John's book of Revelations," Josephus said. "I only saw fragments of it, and of course these were secondhand copies. Nor do I pretend to know if their leader, the Christ, was the son of God, as they claim. What I do know, is that the voice who spoke to me said that the Beast would fall, and the strongest-of-the-strong would rule the world. I've only had one other such vision, and that was before the siege, when I was told by the same voice, that I would face the strongest-of-the-strong for forty-seven days."

"Incredible," Titus said, as he stood. "Josephus, you are either a true prophet of the divine, or else the greatest political gamesman known to mankind."

"Only time will tell," Josephus replied with a tired smile.



The Sea of Galilee Campaign
Vespasian and Titus approach from the west, Cerealis and Trajan from the south
Note the location of Giscala, to the northwest

Chapter VIII: Sowing the Seeds of Discord

Jerusalem
3 September 67 A.D.
***

As the only known survivor of Jotapata, Levi was greeted as a hero as he rode through the gates of Jerusalem. None knew of his previous betrayal of Josephus, nor that his allegiance now belonged to John of Giscala and the Galilean zealots. Indeed, the only people who had known of his conflicts with the fallen defender of Jotapata were rotting corpses within the desolation of the citadel. Levi had departed Jerusalem that spring as one of Josephus' senior captains and closest confidants, and that is how the people remembered him.

'Son of Israel' is how the people greeted Levi, as he and his escorts rode through the streets towards the temple.

Word quickly reached the governing council, and Hanan called for all the priests and officials to greet the heroic survivor at the temple. The way was lined with soldiers, those loyal to the moderate government. All wore Herodian armor and carried long spears and shields. It was meant to give a show of military strength to reassure the people, as well as to dissuade those who would seek to undermine the Judean government. Levi knew it was all a façade, however. If Hanan had an army, he would have surely dispatched it to reinforce Josephus in Galilee. As it was, what soldiers they did have were too preoccupied with the fanatics who wished to oust Hanan and the council. Perhaps one in every hundred of Hanan's loyalists were equipped like the royal guardsmen, the rest made due with similar humble armament as the zealot warriors.

"Levi," the chief priest said, spreading his hands and bowing as Levi dismounted his horse and walked up the steps. "Your return to us is welcomed by the grace of God."

"It is indeed by the Lord's divine will that I have returned," Levi replied, bowing in return. He was rather somber in his demeanor. "I bring grave news to the people of Judea."

"We know of the fall of Jotapata," Hanan's co-ruler, Joseph ben Gorion said, "and of the destruction of Jaffa. We mourn the great loss of life within

both cities, as well as the death of Josephus, the defender of Galilee."

"It is about our dear friend that I bring the most grievous news," Levi remarked. There was an uncomfortable silence before Hanan finally decided to bring the matter inside.

"Come," he said. "We have food and drink awaiting you. A sacrifice will be made in thanks for your safe return."

"You humble me with this honor," Levi said.

There was a large measure of tension within the temple. Priests and their aides went about their daily duties, yet all appeared to have nerves that were greatly frayed and faces wrought with trepidation. Greater pressure was being exerted every day from the seditionist factions, and as word of Josephus' defeat spread, it emboldened them further. These difficulties were compounded by trying to conduct the daily administration of the new nation, which could be arduous even in the absence of war.

A table was laid out with day-old lamb, as well as loaves of bread and some baskets of fish. Levi sat and ate ravenously, allowing the awkward silence to set the tone for his meeting.

"Now, what news do you have of Josephus?" Joseph asked, as the elders sat across from Levi. "We understood he was killed by the Romans. What graver news could you possibly bring regarding him?"

"Josephus lives," Levi answered, through a mouthful of bread, bringing a round of relieved sighs from the collected elders. His cold expression quickly stifled these as he added, "Even if his soul is dead."

"Explain yourself," Hanan said, his brow furrowed and voice rising in anger at the harsh statement regarding his friend who, until this moment, he assumed was deceased and martyred.

"Josephus," Levi began, pausing for effect before finishing, "has gone over to the Romans."

"Never!" Joseph snapped, standing and slamming his fist on the table. The other elders shouted profane words towards Levi and were only silenced by Hanan raising his hand.

"You return to Jerusalem, which is in mourning following the loss of our greatest stronghold in Galilee, and you defile the name of its greatest protector?" Hanan's face was red with anger, though he fought to keep his voice calm. Levi could not help but smirk at the high priest.

"It is not I who defiled Josephus' name," he retorted. "If you doubt me, send out your scouts to Galilee and see for yourself."

He then proceeded to tell the tale that he and John of Giscala had rehearsed; a perverse amalgamation of both fact and fiction, all with the expressed purpose of defaming Josephus and undermining the authority of Hanan and the current ruling council.

“We held the Romans for forty-seven days,” Levi said, as the councilmen sat and listened, though their expressions remained hard. “On the forty-sixth night, the enemy was no closer to breaching the walls of the city than they were on the first day, and yet Josephus was already speaking of defeat and surrender. It was only after the bravest of his captains protested loudly that we could not betray the people by surrendering while we still had fight left in us, that he finally relented in his treasonous talk.

“Four of us he then sent from the city under the cover of darkness, under the assumption that we were to find reinforcements with which to attack the Roman camp. The four whom he sent were those who most voraciously opposed any capitulation to the Romans, especially as we still held the walls. I’ll not speculate as to whether or not I think Josephus betrayed us, but what I do know is the path we departed from was secret, known only to a handful. It led through the chasm and away from the city. When we reached the other side the following morning, the Romans were waiting for us. Only I survived, and that was because a cavalryman had knocked me back into the chasm and thought I’d fallen to my death.”

He opened his tunic and showed them his scars, the largest of which were still red with inflammation. The bruising on his arms and torso had only recently turned a mix of yellow and faded purple.

“Even if we had not been ambushed, the plan was still in vain,” he continued. “For when I reached the nearest city of Jaffa, which Josephus had emphasized would have a sizeable number of warriors, all that remained was a pile of rubble and charred corpses. Did Josephus know that Jaffa had been destroyed? I cannot say. It would be rather presumptuous of me to think that he was already collaborating with the Romans, but who is to say? On the darkest nights, it would have been a simple matter for one to slip out through one of the breaches the Romans had smashed in the walls. And since Josephus personally saw to the guard rosters, it would have been easy enough to arrange the postings so he’d be able to slip out and never be missed.”

“Now you go too far,” Hanan admonished. “You speak of treasonous acts, which by your own admission you did not witness, all born of speculation as to why Jotapata fell. Would it be too much to assume that the

Romans were simply too powerful and overwhelmed the defenses?"

"Forgive me if I spoke out of line," Levi replied with a short bow of supplication. "I know Josephus was your protégé and friend, so this is hard for you. But please understand how difficult this is for me. Josephus was my friend, and I was one of his loyal captains. You loved him like a son, as I loved him like a brother. Do I speculate much? Of course. But then, I was there at Jotapata, and I saw every Roman attack repelled over the course of forty-six days. Can you therefore fault my assumptions, given the calamity that befell our brethren, as well as the citizens who looked to us for their safekeeping?"

Levi stopped and took a drink of wine and a bite off the bread loaf on his plate while he let his words sink in. The expressions of the councilmen told him all he needed to know. His allegations sounded outlandish. Yet, by maintaining an air of love and friendship toward Josephus and sounding reluctant to make such harsh accusations, he served to fill the elders with doubt. Even Hanan's expression was one of internal conflict regarding his young charge.

"But then, if you were out of the city, how could you know Josephus went over to the Romans?" a councilman finally asked. "How do you know he was not killed along with the others?"

Levi took a drink of water and a deep breath before speaking again.

"I cannot say what happened within Jotapata after I left," he said, which was at least true. "Nor will we ever know, since all the defenders are dead. What I do know is that our resistance was as strong as ever on the forty-sixth night, and on the forty-seventh morning the city fell with scarcely a struggle. As for Josephus, I saw him two weeks later."

"Where?" Joseph asked.

While Joseph and the council questioned Levi, Hanan sat silent, deep in thought as the warrior told his story. His heart was glad at news that his friend lived, yet wrought with confusion and doubt.

"On the road from Ptolemais, heading towards Tiberias. I understood that the port city, along with Taricheae, was looking to throw off the yoke of the pretender, King Agrippa, and his Roman lackeys. I'll not be surprised if the enemy burns them both to the ground, for that is all they know; desolation under the guise of peace."

"But what of Josephus!" Hanan finally said.

Levi had to force himself not to grin. "I saw him with my own eyes," he

lied, concocting his own story and making no mention of having seen the guard's commander, Yaakov. "Our friend, John of Giscala, who kindly nursed me back to health, dispatched me to ascertain the status of the imperial army. I sat beside the road, dressed as a beggar, while their legions marched past. The defender of Galilee was with them, but not in chains. No, he rode a horse as a member of Vespasian's entourage. He was washed, and shaved, and wore fine clothes given to him by our enemies. No Roman adversary, regardless of how well he may be respected, has ever been treated with such dignity. Julius Caesar sang the praises of his Gallic nemesis, Vercingetorix, yet even he was brought to Rome in a wicker cage and then strangled before the mob.

"I can only present to you these facts; that Josephus lives, that Jotapata fell only after he sent me away, and he now rides with the Romans on a horse and garbed as one of them. If you doubt me, then ride north to Galilee and see for yourselves. And before you accuse me of being played false by my eyes, he rode within a few feet of where I sat. Remember, he was my dear friend and brother, so there was no mistaking his face."

He then stood, finished his wine, and gazed upon the faces of the Jewish governing council. There was much confusion in their expressions, especially among those who were friends of Josephus and who could not fathom his betraying them.

"Traitor!" one man shouted, beating his fist into his hand.

Levi smiled, for the outburst was not directed towards him. Others shouted similar disparaging insults, now mentioning Josephus by name. It enraged them that one whose loss they had so bitterly mourned had proven to be the greatest turncoat of all time.

"My friends, please!" Hanan said, standing and holding up his hands in an attempt to quell the anger of his fellow officials. "We cannot allow our emotions to get the better of us, especially as we do not know all the facts."

There were a few voices who echoed the high priest's words.

"We know enough!" one elder spat, pointing an accusing finger at Hanan. "If Josephus lives and has gone over to the Romans, what else is he but the greatest deserter in our people's history?"

As the now-divided councilmen started to shout and berate each other, Levi made his way quietly to the door, where a pair of guards stood in shock at the sudden vitriolic behavior being exuded by Judea's rulers.

The zealot and former friend of Josephus smiled and turned back to face

the elders. With one final parting shot, he would leave them.

"It is not Josephus who you should concern yourself with," he said loudly, causing the men to cease in their arguing for a moment. "At least there is the knowledge that he is a defector and can be dealt with accordingly. What you should fear now are those amongst your friends and allies who will support him, despite his heinous crimes against the people. Ask yourselves then, if you will trust those who defend traitors. You now have one friend left in Galilee, who you snubbed in favor of Josephus."

"You speak of John of Giscala," Joseph said, with a trace of disdain in his voice.

"My friends," Levi implored, "it is time we put aside petty differences and embraced those still loyal to the cause of liberty from Roman tyranny."

He said no more, not wishing to come across as too enthusiastic of a supporter for John of Giscala. Any further talk would sound like he had a personal stake in John's rise in power and could be interpreted as disingenuous. His mission was to sow the seeds of doubt, and he had done that. The bickering amongst the Jewish high council members would do the work of undermining their own power for him.

Hanan left the temple in a state of both shock and dismay. His heart refused to believe Levi's abominable allegations, yet his mind was filled with suspicion.

"No," he said, defiantly shaking his head. "If Josephus surrendered to the Romans, it was because he had no choice."

Hanan then remembered the instructions he had given him prior to his departure. Both had known that defeating Vespasian would be all but impossible. Therefore, Josephus' mission was to delay the Romans, while making their conquest of Galilee as costly as possible. The high priest knew that a negotiated end to the hostilities was the only favorable outcome for their people. The more seditious factions would insist on total expulsion of the armies of Caesar, yet Hanan and a few of the Jewish elders knew this was impossible. The Roman Empire was simply too large and far too powerful to be defeated by any force the Judeans could muster, especially when they were still fiercely divided, with the various sects unwilling to stand together.

With these thoughts vexing him, Hanan met with Josephus' father,

Matthias. The high priest wanted to get word to Josephus' family before the rumors did. Like him, they would be filled with conflicting emotions. More importantly, though, Hanan wanted to ensure their safety. A simple whispered word that Josephus had survived the slaughter at Jotapata would cause many, who up to this point had mourned him as a slain martyr, to defile his name and call him 'traitor'. This would further lead to repercussions against his family, who could expect to go from being treated with sympathy to abject scorn.

"To think Josephus would be branded a deserter, simply because he lives," Matthias sighed. "But I know my son, and he is no traitor. If he has gone over to the Romans, there must be a reason for it. What should I tell my wife and Judith?"

"Tell them the truth," Hanan replied. "They will soon have to deal with the rumors and gossips, and it is best they know the truth right away. But know, regardless of what the slanderers may say, you and your family will always have me for both a friend and benefactor. If I can clear your son's name, and eventually see him returned home, I will."

Levi avoided the temple, as well as most public places, over the next few days. His men, who were unknown to Hanan and the Jewish council, mingled about, with of his fighters keeping a close watch on the temple itself. The daily business of the temple was always frenetic, so it was difficult to tell if anything was amiss. What they could tell was that people were constantly talking about the disaster in Galilee. Not only were they horrified at the losses they'd already suffered, but there was now a very real fear that the entire region could be lost. And with their greatest stronghold destroyed, and the time of mourning passed, they looked for someone to shoulder the blame.

"The seeds of unrest are sown," one of the men said, as they met in Levi's room in a small inn near the eastern gate of the city.

"One cannot walk the streets without hearing Josephus' name," another said. "Many people are confused, while others are already expressing their anger."

"It has only been a few days since the formal period of mourning ended," Levi observed. "Barely a week ago, they beat the drums and cried out to God to bless their fallen hero."

“And soon they will realize the depths of his treachery and cry out for his blood,” the first man grinned.

“We have done well,” Levi asserted. “Tomorrow, before dawn, we will leave for Giscala. I’ll leave some of you here, to keep an eye on the political situation, and to continue to stir the embers of discontent as needed. But do not be overly brazen about it. Whispered rumors and fear will drive the people’s imaginations to turn completely against Josephus. When we return with John of Giscala at our head, he will be welcomed back as a general and potential savior for Judea.”

Dismissing his men, he settled in for the night, rising well before dawn and taking half his men with him on the long journey back to Galilee.

There was nothing left for Levi to do in Jerusalem for the time being. His face was too well known, and his continued presence would only make him a mark for the supporters of Josephus. Despite the chaos his allegation was causing, his former friend still had many supporters who would accuse Levi of spreading lies to cause sedition.

The council would unwittingly do his work for him now, for it would prove impossible to keep secret the word that Josephus lived. Levi had no doubt that riders would be sent from Jerusalem to ascertain the truth behind his claims. But whether they saw the traitor riding with the Romans or not, his job was now done. The coalition government had always been fragile at best. The destruction of their army at Ascalon had weakened them greatly, and now there was no one to keep the fanatics in line. And while the fall of Jotapata left Galilee virtually unprotected, it opened the door to the possibility of newfound allies amongst the zealots.

Though it had pained him to once again betray a man he viewed as a friend, he knew he had to put his personal feelings aside. Whether he was a traitor or not, Josephus had proven himself to be weak in resolve, and therefore a liability to the resistance. Levi had heard him on numerous occasions talk about compelling the Romans to negotiate a truce. One of the few things John and his hated rival, Simon bar Giora, agreed upon was that such talk was inexcusable. There was no point in fighting, if the desired result was any sort of return to the bondage of the Caesars. Victory could only be had once the last imperial soldier was either killed or expelled from the ancient Kingdoms of Judah and Israel.

Levi had no grand ambitions of power for himself. He viewed himself simply as a Jewish warrior, doing his part to restore freedom to his people.

He also now knew that John of Giscala was the rightful leader, not just of Galilee but of all Judea. He would lead the Jews to liberty or die fighting against the foreign tyrants. What they would no longer accept was weakness or the slightest hint of capitulation, not even from their closest friends or family.

Chapter IX: Lost Souls

Taricheae, Sea of Galilee
5 September 67 A.D.

Roman auxilia infantryman

Though their legionaries had grumbled about the lost opportunities for plunder, both Nicanor and Gaius understood the greater strategic situation far better. Tiberias was an important city to both King Agrippa and to Rome. It would be an economic disaster for the allied king if the city were destroyed which, in turn, would cost Rome in trade revenue as well as tribute. Taricheae, conversely, had shown no inclination to recant their seditious ways but instead appeared ready to wage war, despite the fearsome reputation of Vespasian's army.

The city lay at the base of a mountain with its back to the Sea of Galilee, which was known as the *Lake of Gennesareth* by the indigenous peoples. Though the walls were not nearly as high nor steady as those at Tiberias, the rebels had taken the opportunity of using the funds given to them by Josephus to fortify themselves against a pending assault. They had also acquired a large number of ships, including those stolen from Tiberias. These lay anchored at the ready, in case they should be defeated on land by Vespasian's forces. Jesus bar Shaphat, who had fled Tiberias with the majority of his followers, was now in command of the resistance at Taricheae. The ranks of

his fighters had grown, with many of the young men readily joining his cause. That Tiberias had repented and begged Agrippa and the Romans for forgiveness only incensed them to join the seditionists.

"He's a tricky one, Jesus bar Shaphat," Josephus said, as he and Titus walked along the edge of the Roman camp, where auxiliary troopers were beginning construction on a siege wall to blockade the city from land. "But he is also hot-headed and easily goaded into a fight. You saw that when he stole those horses from your cavalrymen."

"You know him well, then?" the Roman legate asked.

"A passing acquaintance," Josephus corrected. "He called for my arrest and execution as a traitor one moment, and then sang my praises the next for giving the city funds to build up their defenses. It took all I could muster to prevent him from leading every fighting man within twenty miles in a headlong attack against your army."

"A pity you didn't let him go," Titus said, with a trace of macabre humor. "We could have slaughtered the lot of them and been done with it."

"Yes, well, my intent at that time was not to lead people needlessly to slaughter. That, at least, has not changed."

"You never cease to fascinate me," Titus said, as he turned and faced Josephus, his arms folded across his chest. "General Vespasian has kept you unchained, given you quarters within the camp, and left you with only a small guard. I find it intriguing that you could simply walk away from this camp, unmolested by my soldiers, and yet you won't."

"Vespasian has not technically set me free," Josephus observed. "Rather, he has treated me kindly, more like a guest than a prisoner. And besides, the Jews cannot hope to win this war; I understand this now. Hanan and the governing council directed me to defend Jotapata until it was no longer feasible. At no time were my orders to fight to the death, unlike the fanatics. That your soldiers went ahead and slaughtered all within has nothing to do with my charge or intent. And after all that's happened, where now can I go? Those who still fight against Rome have doubtless named me a defector and Roman collaborator, if for no other reason than my failure to martyr myself with the others."

"Oh, yes, but then it was your god who had other plans for you." There was a touch of sarcasm in Titus' voice, though he did not intend to sound overly cynical.

After all, the former Judean governor-general for Galilee had already

proven himself to be quite useful. He hoped to end the war as quickly and bloodlessly as possible, even if it meant aiding his enemies. Titus privately reckoned that the absolute stubbornness of the seditionists would render most of Josephus' efforts in vain.

"I do not pretend to understand what God's intention for me is," Josephus replied. "Whether it is to help end this pointless and destructive war or to simply chronicle the calamities of my people, I know not."

"Yes, you've already made an impressive start to your written history of this war," the Roman general remarked. "And I suspect you will have plenty more calamities to write about."

As he returned his focus to their immediate task at hand, Titus inwardly felt a little uneasy about their situation. He had two regiments of cavalry and three cohorts of auxiliary light infantry. The rest of the army, to include all three legions, was still encamped about half a day's march away, near Tiberias.

Titus cursed himself for thinking he could negotiate the surrender of Taricheae with such a small force. He had compelled his father to allow him to take this detachment forward, before the rest of the army was ready to move. Sensing the city would not fall without a fight, the legate had subsequently sent word back to Vespasian, asking for more troops. In the very least he needed a legion along with some siege engines.

"Look at them," Jesus bar Shaphat, the new leader of the rebels at Taricheae scoffed. "The Romans are so bald-faced that they attempt to lay siege with a few hundred cavalry and a sparse number of light infantry. Pathetic!"

"The rest of their army cannot be far behind them," one of his men replied. "And our walls are not nearly as tall or well-built as those at Tiberias."

"Yes, well, the traitors of that festering hole have proven weak in their resolve," the zealot leader conceded.

It was impossible to say for certain just how loyal the citizens of Tiberias were to King Agrippa and Emperor Nero. What was clear, though, was no matter what resentment the people may have for the emperor and his puppet king, they were far more willing to accept imperial tyranny than ally

themselves with their hated adversaries at Taricheae.

The intense rivalry between the people of Tiberias and Taricheae had failed to diminish, even as the Romans laid waste to all of Galilee. Thankfully for Jesus, the seditionists who now practically ruled over the city were from different parts of Galilee, some even coming from lower Judea. The citizens of Taricheae were also far more easily cowed into joining the resistance. A number of them joined the ranks of the rebels simply out of spite for the people of Tiberias.

Josephus' harrowing defense of Jotapata had given the various rebel factions a sense of hope that the venerable General Vespasian could be beaten. Had the Judean general succeeded, perhaps rivalries would have been put aside for the moment as they attempted to finish off the Roman invaders. However, with the city's fall and Josephus' perceived demise, the remnants of his army were now scattered throughout Galilee and left leaderless. Men like Jesus bar Shaphat and John of Giscala, along with a host of others, vied to fill the power vacuum left in the wake of Josephus' defeat.

"We have an advantage here," Jesus emphasized, "for we can fight by both land and sea. We have plenty of archers and skirmishers with which to man our ships. And let us not forget the catapults we seized from Simon bar Giora."

The other warrior grinned at the recollection. Their rival had captured the entire siege train of the Twelfth Legion during the ambush at Beth Horon; however, many of these he'd been forced to leave behind in Jerusalem. Three onager catapults and about a dozen scorpion bolt throwers had been salvaged, only to be spirited away during a raid by Jesus' men. He had since armed his ships accordingly; and while the vast majority of his vessels would only have archers for missile troops, three now had a single onager on the prow, with six others armed with a pair of scorpions.

"How ironic, that we should use the Romans' own siege weapons against them," another of his men said with a laugh.

"Make ready to assault their earthworks," Jesus ordered one of his men. "They'll not cut off the city so easily."

It was late afternoon, and the falling sun shone through the open flap in Titus' tent as an imperial messenger arrived and saluted. The legate

wordlessly took the message. It was simply a short note, letting him know the army was on the march and he would have reinforcements by morning.

"Let us hope the rebels don't try anything too brash between now and then," Josephus remarked.

"Here they come, sir!" a lookout shouted, alerting both Titus and Josephus.

"Sounds like I spoke too soon," Josephus said with a trace of macabre humor.

While the soldiers had made good their own encampment, the earthworks and wall they were starting to build to cut the city off had only been partially completed and was only modestly defended by auxilia infantry.

A great cry came from the city gates, as what appeared to be several thousand Judean fighters spilled forth. Though only lightly equipped with short swords, hand axes, and spears, with no armor to be seen, they did possess a significant number of skirmishers and missile troops. Sling stones and short throwing darts flew in a deluge upon the sentries protecting the builders. While the auxiliary infantry dropped down behind their shields, with stones and short spears bouncing off, a number were struck down. One soldier took a two-foot dart into the side of the neck, and he fell to the ground, his face contorted in agony during the few seconds it took for his life's blood to gush forth from the hideous wound. Others were struck in the shins and forearms by sling stones that broke bones and sent them sprawling to the ground, crying out in pain. These were quickly overwhelmed by the Jewish rebels and brutally slain, their slit throats creating a pool of blood beneath the twitching bodies. The remainder of the sentries bolted towards their camps, abandoning the workers who now fled for their lives as well.

"Damn it all," Titus swore under his breath. He blamed himself for not posting more guards. Yet, he simply did not have the manpower necessary to both build the wall and defend their entire frontage.

To their credit, auxilia officers were rallying their infantry and starting to spill forth from their camps as the rebels continued to dismantle the short stone wall and earthworks. Titus mounted his horse and nodded to his cornicen to sound the general alarm. Around two hundred of his mounted troops were kept in ready-reserve, where they stayed in full armor with their horses kitted up and ready to ride at a moment's notice. These men were seen riding in small groups towards their commander as the auxiliary infantry clashed with the Judean warriors. Though professional soldiers, who were far

better trained and armed than their foes, the numbers of Jewish fighters left them at very serious risk of being overwhelmed.

As his small contingent of cavalry formed up, Titus said to the cornicen, *“Sound the advance!”*

The trumpet blasts alerted the rebels, many of whom turned to face this new threat. Titus and his cavalrymen spurred their horses to a gallop as they crashed into the mob. Spatha swords smashed into skulls and split enemy warriors open, while others were skewered by lances or trampled underfoot. Titus thrust his sword down and into the neck of one seditionist who, as he fell thrashing violently and spurting gouts of blood, almost tore the weapon from the legate’s hand. A few shouted orders from the Jewish leaders, and they quickly fled back towards the safety of the city’s walls. Others made their way towards the shore, where a number of small ships were beaching themselves. One of the cavalry companies pursued this lot, trampling and cutting down several before coming within range of the ships’ archers and onboard siege weaponry. A salvo of arrows flew from the assembled missile troops on the decks, where men and horses cried out as they were impaled.

A stone from an onager aboard one of the vessels flew in a long arc towards the auxiliary cavalry. And though the horsemen were able to scatter away from the poorly aimed missile, it still added to their sense of demoralization as it spewed up gouts of dirt before it bounced to a halt. What added even greater insult to injury was when half a dozen scorpions fired their bolts into the wall of cavalrymen. One trooper was struck in the hip as the bolt pinned him to his now-stricken horse.

Upon shouted orders from their officers, the cavalry wheeled about and sprinted away, as the rebels clambered aboard the ships that were now pulling away from the beach. The Judean fighters on both land and water shouted in malicious glee at the havoc they had unleashed upon the Romans. Despite leaving dozens of their companions dead or badly maimed, the rebels had dealt a hard blow to the morale of their adversaries. Being so few in number, Titus dared not pursue any further, despite the angry protestations of his horsemen.

“Sound recall,” the legate ordered. He was soon joined by the two regimental commanders of cavalry. “We’ll have to abandon any efforts to blockade the city until more of the army arrives. Keep half your men ready to ride at all times, in case those bastards decide to have another go at us.”

Cries of badly wounded men and horses echoed from the plain. And

despite the Judeans' initial elation at having disrupted the Romans' siege works, the horrid screams of anguish and pain of both friend and foe unnerved them. With both armies now engaged in a standoff, neither side was in any position to retrieve their wounded. Those who were able, attempted to crawl back to safety, while those so badly stricken they were unable to move, could only groan in continuous agony and torment.

It was now early evening, with the Jewish fighters still gathered on the plain in front of the city, when lookouts spotted cavalry coming from the north. Titus let out a sigh of relief when he saw General Trajan at the head of the contingent of indigenous cavalry from the Tenth Legion. Auxiliary troopers cheered as the legate and his horsemen rode into the camp. Trajan dismounted as soon as he found his fellow legate.

"The wall of the city is lined with archers," Titus said to his fellow legate, as he pointed towards the ramparts with his spatha, which he had just finished wiping down and re-sharpening. He looked over to the left of the wall, which ran up against a large hilltop.

"We cannot gain access to the city there," Trajan noted, following his gaze. "The side sloping downward is much too steep."

"True," Titus conceded. "However, if we can get our own archers up there, they will have a distinct advantage that will negate the rebels' missile troops on the wall."

"I have three regiments of auxilia and allied archers on the march," Trajan replied. "Nearly two thousand bows total. They will arrive with the rest of my legion in the next few hours. General Vespasian is bringing up your own legion, along with most of the auxilia infantry."

"I get tasked out so much I end up neglecting my own legionaries," Titus observed with a sigh.

"Well, at least young Domitius is getting lots of command experience," Trajan chuckled.

"He's done well, I'll give him that," Titus said. He looked back towards the city wall. "I doubt the enemy will attempt another sortie this day. They want to goad us into attacking them, so they can punish us with salvos from their archers on the walls."

Profane shouts continued to come from the enemy ranks, as they beat their weapons against their shields. The Roman auxiliaries, though heartened by the arrival of General Trajan and his horsemen, knew they were still badly

outnumbered. If the rebels were feeling rather impetuous, it would make for a very bad ending to their day.

“We should keep your cohorts encamped behind this hill,” Titus said, turning his attention back to his plan of attack.

Trajan looked back along the plain, then to the hill, and finally back to the city itself. “It appears any numbers we bring up will be shielded from the enemy’s view.”

“Precisely,” Titus replied. “When tomorrow comes, let the rebels think they still have us outnumbered, and that they only face a handful of horsemen and auxilia infantry.”

“Yes, five thousand legionaries will make for a nasty surprise,” Trajan agreed.

It was after midnight when the cohorts of the Tenth Legion arrived at Taricheae. Cavalrymen had been tasked by General Trajan with designating the camping sites for the legionaries. These were kept just north of the city, where they would be masked by the large hill.

“We’re to hold here until morning,” Centurion Galeo explained to the leadership of the Fifth Cohort. “General Trajan has ordered no campfires, and torchlight is to be kept to a minimum. Archers are taking up positions on the hill to our front. They will provide flank support, as well as lookouts. With any luck, the rebels will not know that General Titus now has legionaries, in addition to his cavalry detachments.”

The cohorts of the Tenth Legion had been on the march since early afternoon and had not made time to have their evening meal. Unable to build cooking fires, the men settled for mixing their wheat rations with water and eating it as a cold porridge. While this was certainly not how they wished to replenish themselves, all were hungry enough that they ate with a minimal amount of grumbling.

“Sounds like the rebels made a valiant show of it today,” Julius said as he joined Gaius, who sat with his back against the side of the hill, eating a bowl of porridge and some dried meat.

Even in the dark, Gaius could always tell the tesserarius due to his naturally loud voice. Being hard of hearing, Julius tended to speak much louder than necessary.

“One cannot say they lack in bravery,” the optio admitted, wiping his mouth on his forearm. “Have the men been given the watchword, with sentries posted?”

“Minerva, Bellona,” the tesserarius replied, stating the watchwords of the night. He then sat next to Gaius, his arms wrapped around his knees.

Even in the faint light, the optio could tell there was something the tesserarius needed to speak to him about.

“You know,” Julius said, speaking slowly, “I thought for certain after we lost Centurion Marius, the optio’s staff was mine for the taking.”

“I never politicked for it, if that’s what you’re insinuating,” Gaius replied. When he’d been a decanus, in charge of a squad of legionaries, he had had to report to the tesserarius whenever his men were tasked with a detail or to retrieve the watchword. Julius was also substantially older than Gaius. And yet, the younger man’s promotion to optio meant he had been bypassed in rank by a former subordinate.

“That’s not what I was referring to,” the tesserarius corrected. “However, I would not have faulted you, even if you had. If there’s one thing I’ve learned during all my years in the ranks, it’s that politics and who you know, plays an even greater role than leadership ability and experience when it comes time for promotion. But no, I understand why Nicanor selected you, and it wasn’t political. Part of the reason for my being passed over has to do with my afflictions.”

“Nobody’s ever doubted your leadership potential or abilities,” Gaius remarked.

“True. But during battle I’m always on the line near the centurion, for no other reason than the gods have cursed me with a hearing deficiency, and I am of no use to anyone, except as another blade on the line. It’s not as noticeable in garrison or during work details, but once battle commences, I can’t hear a fucking thing. It wasn’t always this way, mind you. After a swim in a damned Dacian pond, I got an infection in both ears that led to a burning fever which almost did me in. The doctors say only being left half deaf, I should count myself fortunate.”

“And do you?” Gaius asked.

Julius shrugged. “I guess so. I also have to accept that I will never carry the optio’s staff. I am fortunate to have maintained my current rank, or to still be considered fit for duty at all. What I wanted to tell you, though, is that Nicanor was right to choose you. You’re young, but you don’t lack for

experience, and you've always sought ways to improve yourself as a leader. It would not surprise me if you found yourself on the accelerated path to centurion."

"Well, I'm not thinking that far ahead," Gaius replied with a grin in the dark. "After all, I have only been optio for five months, plus I am nowhere near the minimum age requirement for centurion."

"That may be," Julius said, "but I have watched you ever since you joined the ranks, back when I was still a decanus and long before the cursed Dacian waters ruined my hearing. You showed great potential even then."

"I'm the fourth generation of my family to serve in the ranks of the legions," Gaius explained. "My great-grandfather was wounded during the Pannonian conquest. My grandfather and great-uncle both fought in the Germanic wars. Grandfather was killed at Teutoburger Wald. And years later, his brother adopted his son, my father. In which case, my great-uncle became my grandfather by adoption. He and my father both fought in Frisia, as well as the Conquest of Britannia. Though prior to Britannia, they served in Judea during the procuratorship of Pontius Pilate. Grandfather ended his tenure as Centurion Primus Pilus of Legio XX."

"That's quite the history," Julius noted.

"And with my older brother going into politics," Gaius continued, "that left me to carry on what I suppose is a tradition for the Artorian line."

"I'm the third of my family," Julius noted. "Though I am the first to rise above legionary. Neither my father nor grandfather were literate, so it was deemed crucial that I be…but enough of that. What I came to tell you is that for what it's worth, I am truly proud of the soldier and leader you have become. My desire for the optio's staff was one driven by purely selfish motives. That Nicanor chose you showed he put the best interests of the men first."

"Thank you, Julius. That means a lot, coming from you."

Gaius stood and extended his hand, which the tesserarius clasped firmly. Julius then left him to finish his supper of thick porridge, which he was only able to swallow with copious amounts of water. He then leaned back and looked up at the stars. There were few clouds this night. Gaius allowed himself to be taken in by the apparent infinity of the heavens; something that one could never truly appreciate during the daytime. He did not recall drifting off to sleep.

Chapter X: Skirmish by the Sea

Taricheae, Sea of Galilee
6 September 67 A.D.
***

When Jesus bar Shaphat and his flotilla had arrived at Taricheae, he was greeted with both praise and loathing. That the resistance groups within the city were divided and essentially leaderless, had allowed him the opportunity to assert himself as a unifying force within Galilee. However, as evening fell after the first day of battle, that unity quickly began to unravel. The bodies of the slain, and the still tormented wounded, foretold of the horrors that awaited them.

Within Taricheae there was great tumult, despite the modest successes the rebels had enjoyed that day. For while there were various faction who either supported or opposed the Romans to varying degrees, the vast majority of the seditionists came from outside the city's walls. As such, they were viewed as 'foreign' by many city residents. Even amongst those willing to fight the Romans, there was a serious amount of resentment at the usurpation of authority by outsiders from rival Tiberias. And there were the continuous cries of the wounded…

"The people are imploring us to send a sortie out to retrieve our fallen," one of his men said, as he joined his commander on the wall.

The glow of the moon caste its pale light on the plain below, which was littered with bodies. The rebel leader suspected many of those he could see were still alive, yet he could also make out the torches of the Roman camp, which was unnervingly close to the battleground.

"If we send men out into that," Jesus said with a nod towards the carnage, "we will have nothing to show for it, except more dead and dying men. We'll launch another assault at dawn; that is, if we can rouse these cowards and shirkers within Taricheae to fight!"

As he descended the stone steps, he was greeted by a large mob of angry people. A number of councilmen, escorted by bodyguards bearing torches, stood at the front.

"You couldn't bring yourselves to face the Romans within your own territory, so you bring them here to destroy ours!" an elder named Ezekiel

snapped at Jesus.

The city council, upon the loud protestations of the people, had taken it upon themselves to confront the radicals who now controlled their city.

Jesus immediately retorted, “If you think Rome would have spared you, then you are a blind fool. Or perhaps you are a traitor who would collaborate with the invaders?”

“There is no dealing with the Romans!” one of his men shouted.

This led to a series of insults and shoves being exchanged between Jesus’ fighters and the mob.

“Enough!” he snapped. He grabbed Ezekiel by his robes, prompting his guards to draw their swords.

The zealot then spoke very calmly, “Kill me if you wish, but it will not stop the Romans from burning this city to the ground. After what happened today, there is no going back. Betray us, and it still won’t save you. If you want Taricheae to be protected, then you will draw your swords and stand with my men.”

He released the elder with a contemptuous shove. Jesus looked to the mob. They were but a few hundred in number, and he had no way of reckoning just where the people stood in their loyalties.

“That goes for all of you!” he said emphatically. “If you will not fight with us against the imperial vermin, it will be the cross for all of you. Will you fight with me?”

There were a few uncertain mumblings from the mass of people, most of whom simply looked at the ground, uncertain as to what they should do. Jesus shook his head and spat on the ground in front of Ezekiel. He knew he had placed doubt in the minds of at least some of the people. When they saw the Romans attacking their city, they would have no choice but to stand up and fight. And if the enemy force was still paltry in number, like it had been this day, his fighters would sweep them from the field and shame the leaders of Taricheae for their cowardice. Then he knew the people would finally rise up together.

As dawn broke the next morning, the defenses of Taricheae appeared both sound and imposing to the outside observer. The walls were manned by archers and slingers, with a long line of ships ready to deploy towards the

beach in support of the large army that was now arrayed in front of the walls. Word of Jesus bar Shaphat's spat with the elders had spread, and within the large city a number of brash young men had grabbed whatever arms they had and joined his horde in defense of their city.

Knowing they could not possibly contain the populace in the event of a siege, the rebel leaders had elected to make a great showing of defiance by provoking the Romans into attacking them. That they were being so brazen led both Titus and Trajan to suspect the resolve of the people of Taricheae.

"Clearly they do not want to risk a siege," Trajan noted. "Otherwise they would wait for us behind the walls."

"Taricheae falls within the Kingdom of Agrippa. The people are likely divided in their loyalties," Titus remarked. "The fanatics are willing to risk facing us in the open, rather than waiting for the loyalists to find their courage and overthrow them from within."

"And yet by fighting us this way, they've essentially condemned the entire populace," Trajan observed with a humorless grin. "Judging by their numbers, they have compelled at least some of the more impressionable and seditious to join them."

"Those who refuse to stand with Rome will face her wrath," Titus remarked. "We gave the people of Tiberias a choice, and they came to their senses. This little demonstration by the seditionists shows that the citizens of Taricheae have failed in their loyalties."

He nodded toward their right, where carts bearing a dozen onagers, along with four heavy siege ballistae, were posted. "I've tasked one of the auxiliary infantry cohorts to protect our heavy weapons. We'll post them near the shore once the cavalry advances. Let us hope those amateurs aboard their ships are foolish enough to attempt an artillery duel with our lads."

"There are two thousand archers waiting behind the reverse slope of the hill," Trajan added. "They'll more than suppress the defenders on the walls. Once they unleash, my legionaries will attack in support of the cavalry."

Titus nodded and took a deep breath as he went over the battle plan one more time in his mind. He would make a show of force with his cavalry, while dispersing them at wider intervals, in order to make their numbers appear greater. His horsemen alone, however, would not be enough to carry the field. If the rebels, for even a moment, suspected how few in number they were, they might anticipate a trap and fall back behind the city wall.

Titus had found that his eagerness and natural ingenuity, combined with

Trajan's pragmatism and vast experience, complimented each other well. Of all the legates and senior officers within the army, Titus found he worked best with the commander of the Tenth Legion. They had always shared a measure of professional respect, which only grew stronger during their joint assault on the city of Jaffa. Each man most certainly possessed a vast amount of self-confidence, common in every patrician given the privilege of leading the legions into battle. However, they understood that victory depended on working together and putting their collective egos aside. Vespasian made it plain from the first day he met his commanders in Ptolemais that he would tolerate no one who thought he could win this war by himself.

From the perspective of Jesus bar Shaphat and his warriors, it looked as if the Roman force was still greatly understrength, despite the appearance of a handful of reinforcements. A large number of young men from within Taricheae had taken up arms beside them, which brought a sense of relief and confidence that they would liberate the city this day.

"The imperial scum are hesitant and uncertain," the rebel leader sneered. While devoid of armor, he did at least have an oblong shield with which to protect himself, as did his warriors in the first two ranks.

He had conscripted some of the local smiths and metal workers to begin work on shields and protective equipment for his fighters. They had worked ceaselessly since the arrival of the zealots, and while they had only churned out a few dozen shields, Jesus hoped within a month or so he could have at least rudimentary armor available for his men. While raw ore was scarce, his warriors had pilfered much in the way of various metals from the populace, many of whom were far wealthier than their fellow Jews scattered throughout the region.

But for the moment, there was the minor irritant of dealing with the Romans, who had audaciously attempted to seal off the city and lay siege to it.

"We'll tease them a bit," Jesus said to his assembled leaders. "Send our fastest skirmishers forward to prod their cavalry into attacking us once more. Let them fall in the storm of our archers and ships' weapons." His face darkened, and he spoke his next words with venom. "I intend to succeed where that incompetent bastard, Josephus, failed!"

There were mutterings of consent from his warriors. Most of these men could not fathom how the defenders of Jotapata had failed, when their defensive position and garrison strength far exceeded that of Taricheae. Like the rest of his warriors, Jesus bar Shaphat had no knowledge of what transpired at Jotapata, nor the various stratagems of Josephus that had frustrated Rome's renowned siege master for over a month. What he also did not realize, and what would have filled him with rage if he had, was that Josephus not only lived, but at that moment was watching them from the safety of the Roman camp.

"Skirmishers are advancing, sir!" a cavalryman said, as he rode up to Titus and Trajan.

Along with their senior staff officers rode a couple of centurions; one being the master centurion of the Tenth Legion, the other was in command of the artillery detachment.

Josephus, who was also mounted, was with them. A pair of auxiliary cavalrymen rode beside him, to protect him from any rebels who breached the camp, as well as any Roman soldiers who may have wished to avenge themselves for the loss of friends who died at Jotapata.

"Is the rest of their army holding in place?" the legate asked.

"They are, sir," the trooper replied.

"Their tactics are so painfully obvious," Titus scoffed. "Well, we'd best not disappoint them. General Trajan, if you'd be so good as to return to your men, sir."

"Very good, sir," the legate of the Tenth nodded. "I'll signal for the archers to unleash as soon as my legionaries begin the advance."

The mutual addressing of each other as 'sir' was a public means of showing respect. It was a far better rapport than Titus' was with General Placidus; though they had since learned to appreciate each other's talents and abilities, they were still more likely to tell the other to 'piss off' rather than address each other with any real measure of respect.

As Trajan and his senior-ranking centurion turned their mounts about and rode towards their awaiting cohorts, Titus looked to the remaining centurion. "Are the artillery wagons ready?"

"They are, sir," the officer replied. "During the night, we dug a trench and

filled it with pitch. Their ships will have a nasty surprise waiting for them, should they try and advance towards the beach."

Titus looked to Josephus. "Are you alright with seeing us destroy more of your people this day? You know you don't have to stay here and watch." His tone was surprising, in that it was almost friendly in nature. While this may have seemed strange, given the two had been mortal enemies scarcely two months prior, Titus privately admitted he was rather fond of the enigmatic Jew. He also appreciated the former rebel leader's pragmatism and candor.

"The people of Tiberias have seen what happens when one is beaten and accepts the magnanimity of Rome," Josephus replied. He then nodded towards the rebel army on plain before them. "Those of Taricheae will be given the brutal lesson of continued resistance that they failed to learn after my army was defeated in Galilee. Besides, I cannot say it breaks my heart to know that those who once tried to lynch me will now be punished for their transgressions."

His words sounded almost pandering, and Titus wondered if his charge was full of false flattery, or if he really did feel the people of Taricheae were getting the fate they deserved. Given the animosity so many of the factions and tribes had for each other, neither would have surprised him.

Dawn had come too quickly for the cohorts of the Tenth Legion hidden behind the large hill, just north of Taricheae. The cloudless day, the sun already beating down upon them and reflecting off their armor, promised a hot day for Gaius Artorius and his soldiers. As his men leaned against their shields, javelins resting against them, Gaius walked up and down the line, making any last minute checks and observations. While this was a way for him to keep a watchful eye on the legionaries, in reality he was simply bored, and the endless standing was causing his legs to stiffen up.

As he made his way towards the far right of their line, he could see Nicanor talking with Galeo and the other centurions, over by the center of the cohort. Whether discussing strategy or just bantering to pass the time, it was hard to say. The sight of General Trajan, along with the master centurion, riding towards them alerted the men. Galeo dismissed his subordinate commanders to return to their centuries. With a nod from Nicanor, Gaius quickly turned about and made his way back to his position on their far left.

“We ready to advance, sir?” a decanus towards the end of the formation asked Gaius, as he took up his place.

“It looks that way,” the optio replied. “Stand ready, lads!”

“Hopefully we can end this before I completely bake,” a legionary from Gaul muttered, as he vigorously adjusted the collar plates of his armor.

Though most soldiers in the ranks were recruited as locally as possible, the need for citizen-soldiers in the legions meant recruits had to sometimes come from further within the empire. Gaius had spent most of his childhood in Britannia, so he was able to sympathize with those legionaries who had originally come from more temperate climates. Soldiers whose ancestry was Gallic, German, or Britannic were always easy to spot; many were fair-haired, with almost all varying in skin tone between pale white and burning red, depending on the season.

“Better you sweat a bit in your armor than take a Jewish blade to the guts,” another soldier said, as he hefted his shield and rested his javelin on his opposite shoulder.

Gaius smiled inwardly at the exchange, which his legionaries thought he could not hear. A little banter was actually good for the men, as it kept their minds occupied. Better that a soldier complained about overheating in his armor, rather than express apprehension or fear regarding their adversaries, whom they had yet to see.

Gaius remembered his father and grandfather telling him that courage was not being unafraid, but being able to perform one’s duty despite being wrought with terror. Regardless of personal bravery or how much bravado they exuded, every last man would feel the grip of fear before they closed with the enemy this day. The optio knew that any distractions the men found would delay this until the moment they were given the order to advance. They would not have much longer to wait.

“I’ll keep our cavalry off to the right and prevent the rebels from flanking you,” Trajan said to his master centurion, who had dismounted his horse and taken up his position with the elite First Cohort.

“Very good, sir,” the primus pilus replied. He then nodded to his signifier, who raised the standard up high to order the cohorts to make ready. It took less than a minute for the return signal to be sent back.

In the distance, a long, deep blast sounded from Titus' cornicen; the signal for the cavalry to advance and the artillery to move into position. Trajan signaled to his own trumpeter, who gave three short blows off his horn. Almost forgotten by the legionaries below them, the mass of two thousand archers rose up from where they rested in the shadows along the slope of the hill, quickly racing the short remaining distance towards the top.

A single subsequent note from the cornicen gave the order to Trajan's infantry.

"*Cohort!"* the pilus priors shouted.

"*Century!"* their subordinate centurions bellowed over their shoulders.

"Advance!"

At this final command, the men stepped off together, marching quickly into the unfolding chaos of battle. Their footfalls created their own cadence, keeping the men in step with each other. The Gallic legionary near Gaius quietly prayed for a stiff breeze coming off the water, as they rounded the large hill and entered the fray.

Chapter XI: Murder by Conquest

Taricheae, Sea of Galilee
8 September 67 A.D.
***

Jesus bar Shaphat smirked at what he thought was the Romans' continued caution. Their cavalry were not advancing on his skirmishers, but rather were riding off to the Judean army's left while still maintaining their distance. Only their auxiliary infantry remained in the center, and these men had formed up in close order, defensively behind their shields.

"It would seem our enemy has no stomach for this fight," a warrior sneered, spitting on the ground in contempt. "They dance like Persian whores, thrusting about while trying to prod us into playing with their slippery twats."

The sounds from the Roman horns meant nothing to the men, and with the raucous shouts of their warriors, they could not hear the cornicen in the distance behind the hill. Nor were any of the fighters on the ground, or up on the wall of the city, aware of the swarm of archers that suddenly appeared atop the hill. The height of the knoll, with its steep cliff face where the wall ran against it, made it unusable as an avenue into Taricheae. However, it did provide the perfect platform for the Roman archers, who could utilize the great height to dramatically increase their range. And while the distance impeded the accuracy of individual archers, the intense volleys of two thousand men would cast a pall over the sun.

The first salvo sounded almost like a swarming of locusts to the Judean missile troops on the wall. Trajan had ordered the archers to concentrate their fire on the wall, in order to deprive the defenders of Taricheae from utilizing their bowmen and slingers.

A few puzzled faces glanced about, unsure of the sounds' origin as the sky grew dark, as if a cloud were passing in front of the sun. Suddenly, a deluge of arrows landed amongst them, with cries of pain and disbelief coming from the rampart as so many were struck down. Most were impaled

by numerous arrows, simply due to the sheer volume that landed. By the second rapidly-loosed volley, every last man within the first hundred feet of the wall lay dead or dying, the wall slick with blood from the bodies that looked like bloodied porcupines from a distance.

The officers commanding the archers on the hill ordered their men to elevate their bows and unleash further down the wall. Though accuracy was diminished at this range, a number of Judean archers fell in screaming heaps from the wall, with the survivors quickly fleeing to the perceived safety within the city.

Due to their cacophony of battle cries, Jesus and his fighters on the plain were oblivious to the havoc being wreaked behind them, and it was only when the Roman cavalry wheeled about to advance on them that the rebel leader looked back to see why his archers were not engaging.

“Damn it all,” he swore quietly, as he saw a number of bodies hanging from the wall, along with thousands of spent arrows. He chanced a glance off to his far right, grimacing as he saw the black and gold shields of the Tenth Legion; the armor of legionaries gleaming in the late morning sun. Gritting his teeth, he drew his sword and gave a loud shout, pointing his blade towards the advancing wall of armored soldiers.

Recognizing the heavy infantry to be the more immediate threat, the majority of his army turned to face them, breaking into a sprint as they attempted to close the distance quickly. Upon shouted commands by the Roman officers, volleys of heavy javelins impaled large numbers of warriors, sending their companions scattering as they tried to avoid the storm of death. The young fighters from Taricheae had never faced such a fearsome enemy, and their courage soon floundered as a wall of armored soldiers smashed into them with fury.

For Titus and his contingent of horsemen, the glare of the sun impeded their vision. None were able to see the destruction wrought by the archers on the hill, nor could they make out the advancing cohorts of legionaries. And yet, his mounted troopers were clamoring for battle as the legate rode his horse in front of the wall of cavalry.

“My brave Romans!” he shouted, raising his sword high. “None of our enemies in all the habitable earth have been able to escape our hands. Yet,

these Jewish rebels do not understand that they are already beaten! Our enemy is both brave and a despiser of death, yet they are a disorderly mob, unskillful in war, with passion being their armor against our weapons and discipline. These Jews fight for liberty, yet they have spurned the liberty given them by Rome. You, my brothers, fight for glory and for your emperor. *Who will ride with me?"*

At this, a loud cry erupted from the massed ranks of Roman horsemen, troopers brandishing both lance and spatha.

Titus then turned his horse about, shouting over his shoulder to the regimental commanders, *"Wedge formation…on me!"*

In an example first made by his father, Titus spurred his horse into a canter, feeling utterly contemptuous of death. Fear of failure was greater to him than the dread of being killed or maimed. And so, with his heart pounding in his chest, he gave a loud battle cry and kicked his mount in a full sprint. *"Roman victrix!"*

Though fifteen hundred horsemen rode with him, having placed himself at the apex of the massive wedge, it felt to the legate as if he were charging the enemy alone. He attempted to discern individual shapes in the mass of enemy fighters, then settling upon one, he raised his sword and brought it down in a hard chop, smashing the man's skull. So deep did Titus' weapon bury itself that it was nearly wrenched from his hand, chips of bone and blood spraying off as he jerked his weapon free. In his peripheral vision on his left, he saw the lance of one of his men plunge into the guts of another warrior, as the horsemen trampled through the horde of zealots. All was chaos around him as he and his riders smashed like a crashing wave against the mass of zealot warriors.

The majority of their enemies had broken off to face the infantry cohorts of the Tenth Legion, yet there were still a large number facing down Titus and his cavalry. Though greatly outmatched, the zealots fought with exceptional bravery, stabbing and chopping away at both men and horses as their charge gradually lost its momentum. The hamata chainmail worn by most of the cavalry troopers did give them some added protection; however, it also became an encumbrance whenever they were unhorsed or had their mounts slain under them. Titus quickly recognized his men were in trouble as more were cut down, along with the mounts.

"Come about!" he shouted, waving his sword in a circle over his head.

His nearby trumpeter started to relay the order when a spear was driven

into the small of his back. His arms flailed out to the sides, his face wrought with agony as he fell from his mount. With a series of ferocious chops, a Judean swordsman cleaved his head from his shoulders.

Gritting his teeth, Titus rode back through the mass of cavalry, circling his sword, as troopers and their officers visually relayed the order. Despite losing their trumpeter, the regiments of horses soon turned about and rode away from the chaos. Once his men were a good distance from their foes, Titus reined his horse in and turned once again.

"Reform!" he directed, holding his spatha high.

As troopers fell in on either side of him, the legate assessed their enemies once more. A large number were dead or wounded. The survivors were in a convoluted state of both dismay at the deaths of so many, as well as euphoric at thinking they had repelled the latest Roman assault. Those cavalrymen unable to escape were being slaughtered by the enraged mob.

Titus shook his head in consternation, yet he knew it was the risk all accepted when they went into battle. He glanced to his left and right, making certain his regiments were reformed before lowering his sword and riding his horse back into the storm of death once again. He could only hope the battle was progressing well for Trajan's legionaries from the Tenth.

"Gladius…draw!"

The order was echoed down the line of legionaries as all four ranks of the century drew their blades. To their front, scores of enemy fighters lay killed or badly injured by the volleys of heavy pila.

The advance of the cohorts was rapid though measured. Moving at more of a fast jog rather than a sprint, the wall of shields smashed into their enemy like a slow moving, albeit relentless and unstoppable, hammer. Gaius tilted his shield and slammed the bottom edge into the stomach of one of the fighters, who had been uncertain as to what he should now do. The bloodied bodies of their friends from the javelin storm had unnerved many, who only moments before had been gleefully anticipating the routing of Titus' apparently undersized contingent of auxiliaries. Now they were being completely mauled by both cavalryman and legionary, with no support coming from their archers on the wall, most of whom lay dead or horribly maimed in a slick wash of blood and gore.

The attacks of individual legionaries were deliberate, as well as highly aggressive. Possessing a level of discipline unknown to their adversaries, soldiers would remain in formation, even after crippling an enemy warrior with either a shield strike or gladius thrust. The lightly-armed Jewish rebels had no answer to the wall of men and metal that smashed into them repeatedly, blades flashing like thousands of teeth on a gigantic beast. Within minutes, soon after the first passage-of-lines, the lopsided struggle would be decided.

On the far right, near the water's edge, the third prong of Titus' division was emplacing itself.

"Get those catapults off the carts!" the centurion in command of the artillery shouted.

Crews, having rehearsed the drill so many times before, took up their positions as they hefted the siege engines from the wagons. Auxiliary infantry, who had been tasked with providing security, also aided the men with carrying the large weapons towards the shore. Carts carrying the pots full of oil and combustibles were arrayed in a long line behind the formation, brought forward as the wagons that carried the onagers were ushered away. Only the four heavy siege ballistae would be using solid shot; the catapults would be engaging their foes with fire.

"Ignite the fire line," the centurion ordered.

The narrow trench behind the engines soon flickered with the short wall of flames that would be used to light the onager munitions.

"Their ships are coming right for us," a crewman observed, as they finished setting the catapults and ballistae in place.

They were spread out in a long line, so as to not give their enemy a clustered target to aim for. And while the elevation of being aboard ship would give the rebels a slight range advantage, the Romans were counting on the enemy sailors being inexperienced amateurs to be their undoing. It was likely that the seditionists had never so much as test shot a scorpion or onager. There was also no sign of fires on the enemy vessels, which told the centurion they were only using solid shot and archers.

"Set for maximum elevation!" he ordered.

While the ballistae had a longer effective range than the onagers, he

wanted his weapons to fire their first salvoes by volley, utilizing psychological and well as physical impact.

A nearby splash startled the onager crews, although it brought a grin to the centurion's face. The rebels had no idea what the effective range was on their weapons, nor how to set them properly. Doubtless they were afraid to synch down the throwing arms too far, for fear they, or the support ropes, would break apart. While a valid concern, every catapult and ballista on the Roman line had been thoroughly inspected, with necessary repairs made, well before this action.

On the orders of their section leaders, the crews ignited the fire pots in the onagers.

"Wait," the centurion said quietly, as the line of enemy ships grew closer. "Wait…*now!*"

"Fire!" shouted the section leaders.

Just as another shot from the ships slammed into the beach, a dozen onagers and four siege ballistae unleashed a long wave of fire and heavy stones in a long arc towards their adversaries. While a number of the fire bombs landed past the ships or sailed wide, several smashed onto the decks, bursting into flames. At least one of the ballista shots had found its mark, as the stern of one small ship splintered.

"Reload!"

With precision brought on by endless hours of drill, the crews set about prepping their engines to unleash once again. Two to four men manned the levers that cranked the throwing arms back, while others brought ammunition forward. Section leaders helped to aim the massive weapons, estimating range to the enemy vessels.

Though rattling nerves and causing some damage, flames aboard the rebel ships had not proven catastrophic. As oarsmen continued to row towards the shoreline, fellow mariners sought to put the fires out.

They were almost within range of the seaborne scorpions and archers when the command was given on the Roman line to unleash once more. This time several shots sailed too high, as the moving vessels forced them to keep adjusting the range; however, three more found their marks. One flaming shot smashed into a cluster of archers, sending burning men into the sea as they cried out in torment. Another landed amongst the flames of an already burning vessel, causing the oarsmen to halt their efforts as the entire ship threatened to be consumed in fire.

“All engines, fire at will!” the centurion shouted. “Ballistae, aim for the waterlines!”

“Sir!” section leaders acknowledged.

The crews aboard the rebel ships did not have a shred of the same discipline as the Romans. And, as such, their formation quickly fell apart, with some ships going too far forward, while others ceased their advance well before they could effectively employ their archers.

Training took over for the Roman artillerymen, their actions coming instinctively, as crewmen cranked down the throwing arms once more, while others hefted another round of the heavy clay pots into the baskets, with still others igniting the shot. Section leaders guided the men, ordering many to reduce elevation to account for the changes in range to their targets. All the while, large stones flung from the ships landed around the crews, though what was becoming distressing was the far greater and more accurate scorpion bolts that were flying from the decks, along with volleys of arrows. One section leader took a bolt through the chest just as he was helping his men align their catapult, others falling with arrows protruding from their bodies and various limbs.

“Steady lads!” the centurion said, as he walked the line. Off to his left, a ballista unleashed its heavy stone ball. At first it looked as if it had landed short; however, within the minute it took for the crew to reload, the ship they had aimed for suddenly lurched forward, its back end flung up out of the water.

Since these were hastily made single deck or refitted fishing boats, the ships paled in size to even the smallest military vessels. Hence, when the timbers split just below the waterline, it did not take long for the ships to fill with water and begin to sink. All of them having ceased their advance, and the Roman onagers were able to engage them with greater accuracy. Despite the casualties they had suffered, with one catapult taking a direct hit from an enemy onager that shattered the throwing arm and killed two crewmen, they still maintained their discipline and training. Three enemy vessels had been sunk by ballistae, their sterns barely protruding above the waves, while seven more burned. There were at least twelve more rebel ships, though these were mostly carrying archers, as the Romans had concentrated their efforts on those that carried the captured siege engines once belonging to the Twelfth Legion.

Seeing half their boats either burning or sunk, with surviving mariners

taking their chances in the sea, the remaining ships decided they'd had enough and started to make their way to the back side of the city. They would dock and meet with the rebel leaders to decide their next plan of attack. Although their duel with the Roman artillery had ended in disaster, from what they could see, the imperial army was still no closer to breaching the walls of Taricheae.

Judean fighters from the stricken vessels either attempted to swim the great distance around the city, or made their way to shore in hopes of surrendering to the Romans. The auxiliary infantry were unmerciful, and as waterlogged and bedraggled rebel mariners clawed their way ashore, the Romans fell on them with spear and gladius. Soon the beach was littered with corpses, the water running red as the remnants of the enemy flotilla slowly floated out of range of the Roman siege engines.

"Cease fire!" the centurion shouted, with crews shouting in triumph. This was soon tempered as they soon became more aware of their own losses. A handful of crewmen were dead, with at least twenty or more bearing various painful injuries. For the centurion, who was a hardened veteran with more than twenty years in the ranks, the aftermath of battle was always far worse than the actual fighting.

Titus and his cavalrymen renewed their assault for a third charge as the rebel army fled towards the safety of the city wall. The combined attacks of cavalry and legionary were proving too much, and the seditionists' courage failed them. Troopers were enraged at the audacity of their already-beaten foe, to say nothing of the bloodlust brought on by watching a number of their friends killed or badly maimed. Enemy warriors rushed for either the gates or the sea, where they hoped to swim around to the back of the city.

For the legionaries of the Tenth, watching their badly mauled foes flee towards the city gates was reminiscent of the attack on Jaffa a few months prior, albeit on a much smaller scale. There would be no enemy missiles raining down on them from the city wall this time, due to the rather savage and overwhelming suppression brought on by their own archers.

Pursuing the running mob, Titus pulled up on the reins of his horse, as the gates were quickly slammed and barred. The last of the unfortunate rebels, who were unable to reach the safety within, were massacred by his vengeful

troopers. As the legate dismounted his horse, he heard what sounded like voracious arguments coming from within the city.

“Titus, what the hell’s happening in there?” Trajan asked as he rode up, quickly dismounting.

His fellow legate had his ear against the gate. “I’ll be damned” the young general replied. “I cannot make out most of it, as I don’t speak their caustic tongue, but it sounds like they are arguing amongst each other. Bring up Centurion Nicanor, or anyone else who speaks their frightful language!”

“By your impudence, you have damned the entire city to destruction!” the elder named Ezekiel spat at Jesus bar Shaphat and his warrior leaders.

The men were all beaten and haggard, and it seemed as if the chief zealot had lost all control of his men. Many were fleeing through the town for the perceived safety of their ships. Others were looting shops and houses as they went, beating, or in some cases killing, those who resisted.

The city wall, as well as the street below, was littered with bodies and looked as if it had been painted with buckets of blood. Jesus was practically numb with shock and dismay, and he now cursed himself for not taking a bold chance and leading a nighttime assault upon the enemy fortifications. Had the arriving legions been greeted with a destroyed camp and a thousand dead Romans, surely they would have thought twice before attacking the city!

The enraged elder slapped Jesus hard across the face, bringing him out of his stupor.

“Vile bastard!” another city councilman shouted.

Already beaten and mournful at the loss of so many of his men, the zealot leader grabbed the old man by the hair and slashed his short sword across his throat. The elder’s eyes grew wide, blood gushing and spurting from his severed windpipe. The councilmen, rather than being cowed by the horrific display, flew into a rage and attacked Jesus and his zealots with their fists.

“Kill the traitor!” Ezekiel shouted as he grabbed a stone and flung it at the man who had brought death to his city.

Jesus still had a number of warriors with him, and these fell upon the councilmen with spear and sword, killing a handful and driving the rest to flee for their lives. It was madness. Just moments after having fought a bitter

engagement against the Romans, they were now in a violent brawl with the citizens of their own city.

“We cannot hold the wall,” Jesus said, regaining his composure. “Not with their damned archers up on the hill.”

“What can we do?” one of his fighters asked.

“If we cannot beat them on land, we shall fight them on the seas.”

It was bedlam within Taricheae, and as Jesus and his most loyal fighters made for the ships, the fighting had become fierce between the zealots and the incensed citizens. Then, from atop one of the houses, a large rock smashed the fanatics’ leader, sending him sprawling to the ground, blood dripping from a terrible gash. Thinking their commander slain, his men continued their rush to the boats.

“I’ll be buggered,” Titus said, grinning in disbelief as Nicanor translated the shouted words from within as best as he was able.

“It’s as you suspected, they’ve broken into a brawl amongst each other, sir,” the centurion remarked. “Some are shouting ‘murderer’. I believe the zealots have turned their blades on the people.” He paused as the chatter died down on the other side.

“Anything else?” Titus asked.

Nicanor shook his head. “I could not make out the rest,” he replied. “It sounds as if they are withdrawing from the walls, though. And if, as it sounds, the zealots have turned their weapons on the people, then we can probably march right in.”

“All-too-easy,” the legate noted as he mounted his horse once more. He then addressed the assembled officers and men. “Fellow soldiers, now is our time! Listen to what noise these people make. Those that escaped our wrath are in an uproar against each other! Infantry, make ready to breach the gates! Cavalry, with me!”

Titus turned his horse about and rode south along the wall towards the lake. For Trajan and the Tenth Legion, there was little they could do for the moment except wait, for they had brought neither siege ladders nor battering ram with them.

As he watched Titus splash his horse out onto the water, the older legate understood his peer’s intent. “First Cohort, stand ready to assault!”

The water was deep, to the point that Titus had to dismount and swim his horse along; his heavy armor threatening to pull him under. He secretly prayed the water was not so deep that, should he lose his grip and sink, he'd never rise again. Part of the wall jutted back at a right angle, out onto the lake, in order to prevent unwanted persons from simply slipping around the defenses. It was topped with a guard tower, and Titus realized that a single bowman could easily bring him and his closest horsemen down. He further understood that if so much as a single company of enemy warriors waited for them on the shore, their attack would prove costly and in vain. And yet, he accepted the danger. He was counting on the burst of infighting amongst the populace to make them unprepared, or unwilling, to face the Romans once they were inside. The taking of Taricheae had already taken longer and cost more lives than the legate found acceptable, and he was ready to bring the short siege to a close.

As he swam his horse around the watchtower, he could hear the grunts and splashing of his cavalrymen behind him. Upon seeing the far shore, Titus observed the chaos as citizens and zealots fought with each other. It was not exactly a pitched battle, more of a rioting brawl. The populace was not as well armed as the rebels. However, knowing the seditionists had likely condemned Taricheae to extermination, they attacked the rebels with the courage brought on by the extreme anguish of the damned. A woman's scream at the sight of the approaching horsemen caused an even greater panic to erupt. Titus, at first, reckoned the zealots would be emboldened to attack him and his men in their vulnerable state. Instead, they fled in terror.

Once he found his footing in the soft sand beneath the splashing waves, the legate quickly remounted his horse, drawing his sword as he made his way along the inside of the city wall. People fled at the sight of the Romans, with lancers skewering unwitting citizens at random as they rode towards the gate. The further north along the wall they rode, the more they saw bodies on the ramparts, which were slick with blood. It was a macabre sight. The inner walls were streaked red, and the ground and rampart littered with thousands of arrows.

As Titus reached the gate, a band of zealots found their courage and charged into the ranks of his cavalry. Several men were pulled from their horses and hacked to pieces by the enraged seditionists. Another took a spear to the chest, the long blade puncturing his hamata chainmail. On the close-quarters streets, the rebels had an advantage over their mounted adversaries,

which compelled the legate to dismount and sprint on foot the remaining distance to the gate. He knocked the brace loose, grabbed the rusted iron ring, and pulled with all his strength. Sensing the movement from within, legionaries on the other side pressed their shoulders into the gate, forcing it open.

"On me!" the master centurion shouted, as he waved his gladius forward.

The once-emboldened zealots suddenly lost heart as the narrow lane by the city wall was soon swarming with legionaries. The ranks of cavalry parted as they gladly let the heavy infantry rush past them and into the fray.

The fighting lasted but a few minutes, before the sheer numbers of legionaries simply overwhelmed what resistance the rebels were able to muster. The citizens of Taricheae, in an effort to save their own lives, threw down what weapons they had and attempted to surrender to the rampaging soldiers. The Roman infantrymen were driven by bloodlust, and soon they began to smash in houses and shops, killing all they came across.

Titus was joined by Trajan and his contingent of cavalry. The horsemen rode along the wide main road that dissected the city. Many citizens attempted to flee, others holding their hands up piteously, begging for clemency. Lance and spatha cut down many of these, for the soldiers had not received any orders to cease in the killing.

Feeling a trace of pity for the people being brutally savaged by his men, Titus turned to his cornicen.

"Sound recall," he ordered. He then addressed his fellow legate. "We should push through and secure the docks."

"Agreed," Trajan replied. "I'll have word sent back to General Vespasian. We'll let him decide what to do with these people."

It was midafternoon when the commander-in-chief rode through the bloodied gates of Taricheae. He was joined by Placidus and Cerealis, along with a regiment of cavalry. The Fifth and Fifteenth Legions were still a few hours away, though the commanding general had ridden quickly to the city, once he heard of its fall.

The butchery had ceased, though the people mostly hid within their homes, cowering in abject terror. Vespasian knew there was the matter of the miscellanies of the seditionists to dispose of before he could deal with the

citizens of Taricheae. He rode through the city, arriving at the docks, where he joined his legates. They were watching the remnants of the enemy flotilla out on the lake, and Vespasian made a rather brazen decision.

"Take whatever vessels remain," he said, "and build enough rafts to support at least a cohort of infantry. Tear down whatever structures you need to, in order to find timber."

"Understood," Placidus replied. He then relayed the order to one of his cavalry officers before asking his commander-in-chief, "You intend to go out there after them?"

"We already destroyed whatever ships that had our captured siege weapons on board," Vespasian answered. "I don't plan on waiting here for a week, while they decide if they're going to stay and fight or attempt to slip down the River Jordan into southern Judea."

"The fact that they haven't already is quite telling," Placidus noted. "If the rebels were in any sense united, I have no doubt this lot would have buggered off as soon as our lads breached the gate."

"Precisely," Vespasian grinned. "Their inaction gives us more intelligence than they realize. It tells me that if they were to head south, they would receive just as warm a welcome from their rivals as they will from us."

While details of men set about building makeshift rafts that afternoon and well into the night, two cohorts of the Tenth Legion had been tasked with overseeing the holding of the city's elders and councilmen. They were confined to the large governor's palace, with soldiers posted on every known exit. They were not bound, nor locked in any rooms at the moment, although their constant berating was trying the patience of their guards. With Nicanor meeting with the cohort commander to decide what to do with these people, Optio Gaius Artorius was left to deal with some of the elders, who were rather indignant that their city had been assaulted by legionaries.

"I demand we be allowed to speak with General Vespasian!" an elder shouted crossly.

"General Vespasian is indisposed," Gaius replied, for what he felt was the hundredth time.

"And what of the people?" the elder, Ezekiel, said. "Thirty thousand reside within these walls, what will become of them? Or have you already

slaughtered them all? I demand to know…"

Feeling rather incensed, brought on by having slept very little over the past two days and fighting a bloody skirmish that day, Gaius was in no mood for arguing with the leaders of a rebellious city. He took his optio's staff and forcefully shoved the end under the man's chin.

"You are in no position to demand anything, *Jew*," Gaius snarled, shoving the man away with his staff. He then looked to one of his soldiers. "Sergeant Quintus, confine these men to a single room and place a guard on the door. Flog them if they become unruly."

"Sir." The decanus, along with a squad of legionaries, dragged the elders away. As if to emphasize the optio's order, one of the soldiers clubbed an elder across the head with the pommel of his gladius when the man started to protest.

"We've put the prisoners in one of the bedrooms," Quintus said, returning to his optio a couple minutes later. "Trust me, we made certain they'll keep quiet."

"Very good, sergeant," Gaius acknowledged.

He then gave a tired grin and shook his head. The soldiers who had led the prisoners away were, in fact, the men from his former squad. He served as their decanus for several years, before his recent promotion to optio. In just a few short months, it seemed as if everything had changed.

"I look into the faces of your men," the optio added, "and while I still see overgrown boys, their eyes tell a different story."

Those who had served under his charge, prior to his promotion, were newer soldiers. All had less than two years in the legions when the rebellion erupted. Now, each was a hardened veteran; the harrowing Battle of Ascalon giving them all a thorough baptism in blood, with the constant grind and savagery of the campaign forging their souls like iron. He said as much to the decanus.

"To be honest, sir, I thought we were all dead that day in Ascalon," Quintus replied. "And don't take this as false flattery, but while I was about to piss myself, you looked steady as a rock."

Gaius gave a short laugh. "I should have been an actor then," he replied. "I may have appeared steady, but when I saw the rebel horde, who outnumbered us so profoundly…well, let's just say I'm surprised I didn't shit my loincloth."

Quintus gave a hearty laugh and exhaled audibly. "Well, at least I wasn't

the only one. Still, the lads performed downright heroically, and I was honored when Centurion Nicanor selected me to lead them."

Because of their young ages and lack of experience, Sergeant Quintus had been moved over from a different section to replace Gaius. And during the last reorganization, Legionary Decius, the youngest of them all, had been laterally moved to a different squad.

"This is going to be a long war, isn't it?" Quintus asked, his face creased in concern.

Since the optio interacted with the decanii on a daily basis more than the centurion, it was he they went to most often with questions. As he pondered his answer, Gaius suddenly realized the two of them were very close in age. In fact, he reckoned the decanus might actually be a year or two older.

"I would say so," he replied. "Our enemies' lack of centralized leadership is both a blessing and a curse. It means they cannot mass their numbers against us, although I venture it would be far better if they did. In Armenia, one decisive victory cowed the enemy generals and essentially ended the war. Here, we may have destroyed the rebels' most viable forces under Josephus, yet there are a dozen more leaders like him, all with their own private armies. And many of these are utter fanatics, who will likely fight us to the death."

"And we will have to smash each one in turn." The decanus shook his head. "It just seems strange, that Judea is such a small province, yet suppressing this rebellion could take years. Make no mistake, sir, the lads are all anxious for plunder and slaves. It just seems strange, that a region that is only a fraction of our total empire is proving so difficult to subdue."

"Our enemies are both brave and tenacious," Gaius asserted. "But yes, the lads will get plenty more in the way of plunder." He paused. "At least those who survive."

It was probably not the most appropriate thing to say. However, both optio and decanus understood that by the time the Jewish revolt was crushed, a number of their soldiers would lie dead. And, of course, there was the very real possibility that they themselves would be amongst the slain. After all, Gaius had only gained his promotion when their original centurion was killed. Their cohort commander had also been the last Roman to die at Jotapata. With their distinctive crests, officers holding the rank of tesserarius and above were always specifically targeted by enemy warriors, and so, casualties among them were always disproportionately high.

"It's the harsh reality of a Roman soldier's life," Quintus stated,

“especially during wartime. It does explain why so many turn to excessive drink and whoring...ah, here we are then!”

A Jewish servant girl was escorted into the chamber by a pair of legionaries who carried a large cask of wine. The girl bore a tray with a number of cups stacked precariously.

“I promised this little twat that if she showed us where the good vintage was, I’d be gentle with her later,” one of the soldiers said, with a malicious cackle.

The young woman looked terrified, and Gaius wondered if she spoke Latin and knew what the legionary had said.

“I think it was Centurion Titus Pullo who once said, *‘I’m going to drink all the wine, smoke all the smoke, and fuck every whore in the city’*,” Quintus said with a grin.

“A hundred years on and the legendary Pullo is still quoted by all the piss-drunk rankers in the legions,” Gaius remarked with a chuckle.

The man they referred to had been a centurion in Legio XI during the Conquest of Gaul. He was made immortal by Julius Caesar, who mentioned his extreme bravery in his *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*, or *Commentaries on the Gallic War*. Though Centurion Pullo, while later serving with Legio XXIV, sided with Pompey Magnus during the civil war against Caesar, this did not prevent his valor from still being recalled by the triumphant Roman dictator years later. In fact, Caesar later exhorted the bravery of Pullo in defending Pompey’s camp, just prior to the final battle of the war at Pharsalus. Yet, while his extreme valor may have compelled his former commander to mention him in his most famous work, it was his less than savory reputation, as well as a slew of memorable quotes, that made him an eternal legend to the men in the ranks, even a hundred years later.

“The guard shifts are posted, sir,” a decanus said. Then nodding towards the cask, “Do you mind if the lads indulge themselves a bit?”

Knowing that his duty was finished, at least for the time being, Gaius helped himself to one of the cups of wine that was offered by his legionaries.

“I take it none of you are scheduled to be on duty this night,” he noted sternly.

“Not till tomorrow, sir,” one of the legionaries stated.

“And even then, all we get to do is watch the little naval squabble out on the lake,” another muttered.

“Consider yourselves fortunate that General Vespasian is leaving this

matter to the light auxilia," Sergeant Quintus said. "Fall off a boat and I'd like to see any of you try swimming in all that armor."

As they finished their first chalices of vintage, one of the legionaries grabbed the young woman by the arm.

"Time for a little fun," he said with a deviant grin. He then winked at his mates. "I'll be sure to make the divine Pullo proud!"

Gaius gazed at the woman's face, her expression mostly of vacant inconsequence. Perhaps she was a willing participant in the soldier's lecherous endeavors or, more likely, she understood there was nothing she could do, and so she simply accepted her fate. The optio's face twitched. It was not that he felt any sense of pity or remorse over what his legionary was about to do; there was something familiar about the woman's face. He took a deep breath, his mind taken back to another time and place. He shook his head, not wishing to have his mind distracted by a sad chapter from his past.

Chapter XII: Vespasian's Judgment

Taricheae, Sea of Galilee
8 September 67 A.D.
***

The following morning, Vespasian returned at the head of a large column of auxiliary infantry, as well as three cohorts from Titus' own Fifteenth Legion. Along the shoreline, more than a dozen large rafts were being constructed. Fearing that the heavier onagers would make them unbalanced, their commanding officers decided to only mount scorpions.

"We have also acquired ten fishing boats, general," Titus said, walking up from the beach. He wore only his tunic, belted around the middle. And far from simply overseeing the raft construction, his face was covered with the sweat of exertion, his hands and tunic filthy from dragging lumber. "These rafts here will be used to flank the enemy and prevent them from escaping down the river to the south."

"Planning to lead this assault personally?" the commanding general asked with a half grin.

"Unless you tell me otherwise," Titus acknowledged. "These rafts will carry mostly archers and scorpions. Our intent will be to drive them into the ships coming at them from the city. Those will be manned by auxiliary infantry, along with some dismounted cavalry. Their lances will give them a decisive reach advantage."

"Very good," Vespasian acknowledged. He looked out onto the vast lake. There were perhaps twenty or so enemy vessels still upon the water. "I'm going to meet with the other legates. Let me know when you've finished with this pathetic lot."

That he wasn't going to watch the seaborne skirmish told of the level of contempt Vespasian had for what remained of their adversaries. Besides, he trusted Titus, as well as the subordinate officers, to oversee the destruction of the enemy remnants.

Later that morning, Titus, along with thirty auxiliary troopers, shoved their large raft out onto the Sea of Galilee. Standing up to their waists in the cool water refreshed them after their exertions. Using long poles and

makeshift paddles to steer, they formed a line that wheeled about in a long arc towards their waiting foes. Legionaries manned the scorpions, with two ranks of archers behind them. And as they slowly rounded the back of the city, keeping about a mile out from the docks, the remainder of the attack flotilla set sail, heading straight for the rebel ships.

The Romans, having been able to construct so many vessels, even humble rafts, in less than a day unnerved the rebels. The seditionists had also lost all of their siege weapons the previous day, and their archers paled in comparison to both range and accuracy of those in the Roman auxilia.

From his raft, Titus watched as waves of scorpion bolts flew into the rebel ships, skewering a number of hapless victims. These were soon followed up with salvos of arrows. With little in the way of shields, and no place aboard their ships that offered any sort of protection, the rebels were completely exposed and slaughtered in vast numbers.

"Cease fire!" Titus shouted, raising his hand as their attack ships soon closed with the bloodied and beaten renegades.

There was little resistance left in them, except for the occasional volley of arrows from their surviving archers. Aboard the Roman vessels, auxiliary infantrymen created a wall of shields to protect the lancers and light assault troops. There was the added risk involved of leaving their armor on shore, and this cost a few of them dearly. Their oblong shields could not cover them completely, and as they closed in, a number of auxiliary troopers were felled by well-placed shots of desperate Judean archers.

As the ships crashed together, the light auxilia clambered aboard, blades flashing as their numbers quickly overwhelmed the rebels who had survived the storm of arrows and scorpion bolts.

"Rather anticlimactic," a centurion aboard Titus' vessel said. "We spent half the night and a good part of the morning building up our makeshift fleet, only to slaughter these bastards in less than an hour."

"Would you rather they had proven stalwart and left us with hundreds of dead?" Titus asked, glancing over at the officer.

"Not at all, sir. Just making an observation is all."

"Once we finish here, we'll return to Taricheae," the legate said. "And we'll see what General Vespasian has in mind for the rebellious citizens of this city."

While Titus was finishing off the remnants of the rebel resistance, the commanding general sat at the head of the long table within the banquet hall of the mayor's palace. The tribunal consisted of legates and chief tribunes, the officers of senatorial rank. Servants brought wine along with their supper, for Vespasian intended to resolve the matter of what to do with Taricheae that evening.

"What the fuck is this?" Placidus scowled after drinking from his wine cup.

"Acquired from the local cellars," Trajan replied. "Our own stocks are still back with the baggage train at the main camp, so we're making do with what the locals have."

"I would have thought the people of Agrippa's kingdom would have better vintage than this," the auxilia corps commander grumbled. "I'd be better off drinking chilled ram's piss!"

This got a collective chuckle from his fellow generals, though even Vespasian, who fancied himself able to quaff just about anything, grimaced as he took a drink from the cup offered him by a slave. He quietly wondered if the legionaries drank all the good wine the night before.

"Where is our friend, the king?" Cerealis asked. "I thought he would want to be here for this."

"He's staying at Tiberias," Vespasian said. "He remained there to maintain order and says he will trust our judgment here. Now, to determine what fate lies in store for the people of Taricheae."

"Wipe them out!" Placidus spoke up. "It matters not if most of the rebel fighters were foreign, the people allowed their city to be taken over, needlessly costing good Roman lives in its retaking."

"I already gave my word that their lives would be spared," Vespasian retorted. "I cannot go back on that without disrupting the entire region."

"That may be," Cerealis replied, "but there is also the very practical matter of what these people will now do. Many homes were destroyed, both by the zealots as well as us. What practical option will they have but to fight against us once we depart?"

"Agreed," Placidus persisted. "If we let these pathetic peasants go, they'll simply be absorbed into the nearest rebel army as soon as we leave, and we'll have to fight them all over again."

"And yet if we butcher them all now, it will create great unrest,"

Vespasian remarked. “It would likely sway a number of neutral tribes to turn against the empire. The word of Rome will become useless, and cities which may have before willingly capitulated will now have to be taken by force. And how many lives will that cost us?”

“What then?” Cerealis asked. “We cannot allow them to go free, and we cannot slaughter them all. Do we just enslave them?”

“We could,” Titus said, walking into the hall. He grabbed a chalice of wine from a passing servant. “Forgive my lateness, general. I wanted you to know that the rebel flotilla has been wiped out.”

He then sat next to Trajan, who had thus far sat in silent contemplation.

The commanding legate of the Tenth Legion finally added, “You promised to spare their lives, but you did not say they could go free.”

“We should rid ourselves of the old and infirm,” Cerealis added. “They’re completely worthless, and they cannot exactly be sold for slaves.”

“Very well,” Vespasian conceded with a tired sigh. While he had hoped to demonstrate at least a partial measure of clemency, he grew tired of arguing with his rather persistent legates. “We will march this lot to Tiberias. If we dispose of these people here, it may cause further dissent in area. The arena in Tiberias is quite large and can be used to sort the prisoners. The old and useless we’ll kill. I also want six thousand of the strongest young men sent to the emperor; our little present to him. The rest we will sort out after we arrive in Tiberias. I also want King Agrippa involved. Having their judgment passed not just by Rome, but by their rightful king, will add legitimacy to their sentence, as well as prevent any further uprisings.”

The following morning, every last citizen within Taricheae was forcibly rounded up and marched out of the city. There were forty thousand in all, and their somber column stretched for more than three miles. All of which was surrounded by Roman soldiers. Cavalry rode out on the plain, ready to run down any who attempted to flee. Vespasian made it known that the people were being taken to Tiberias, in order to hear the king’s judgment. This gave the citizens hope for mercy.

About a mile south of the city, Yaakov witnessed the sad procession. He had come up from the small town of Philoteria, where he now managed to

make a meager living selling fish. He managed to save a few shekels and hoped to find a place to stay within the city, while looking for work with one of the larger fishing boats. He had delayed his plans to travel south, for he lacked the resources necessary to make such a journey. He was also filled with trepidation, regarding the unrest that had surely erupted after the fall of Jotapata.

His curiosity getting the best of him, he wandered in closer to the now empty city. The gates were left open, and a handful of auxiliary infantry were seen milling about.

"Halt!" one of them shouted, lowering his spear as Yaakov approached. "What business brings you to this desolate place?"

"I came here looking for work," the young man replied.

This elicited a fit of laughter from the soldiers.

"Good luck finding any work here!" the trooper remarked with a trace of malicious glee.

Like many of the Roman auxilia, he appeared to be a Samaritan, who were among the Jews' most hated enemies. It was no small wonder these particular soldiers found the depopulation of an entire city much to their amusement.

"What happened here?" Yaakov persisted.

The troopers seemed a bit bemused by his boldness. They had no way of knowing that just a short time before, he had been a soldier, fighting for what he believed in. Yaakov had faced the cold brutality of death in battle many times, and he was not about to be cowed by a handful of Samaritan lapdogs of Rome.

"These weak-willed twats allowed a band of rebels to take control of their city," a second auxiliary soldier explained. His face twisted into a grin. "And now the whole lot will get what's coming to them. I suggest you shove off and go back to where you came from, unless you want to share in their fate."

Yaakov wished to throttle the man for his cruel speak, yet he was unarmed and outnumbered. So he simply nodded and somberly made his way back down the road towards Philotera. He was at a loss as to what he should do or where he could go. Anywhere within Judea, not already reclaimed by the Romans, would sooner or later come under siege from Vespasian's massive army. Any other place he could conceivably travel to was still within Roman lands, for their empire had spread far beyond Yaakov's ability to comprehend. And there was little for him in the east beyond the borders of

the empire, for he did not speak the language of the Parthians or other eastern peoples.

As he walked along the edge of the sea, noting the wreckage of numerous vessels out upon its waters, he thought perhaps Levi had been right, that he should head south towards Jerusalem. But what would he do then? Surely he would be called upon to fight once more, yet he had given the Romans his word that he would never again take up arms against them. Though he despised the foreign occupiers and their twisted cults, his word was still sacred to him.

Perhaps Hanan would know what to do. Yaakov still trusted in the old high priest, who had sent them to Galilee in the first place. It would take some time for Yaakov to travel all the way to Jerusalem, for he would need sufficient coin to purchase food and water along the way. He then decided to return to Philotera, make what he could from working for the local fishermen, and eventually return to the holy city. From there he would find the purpose God had for sparing him at Jotapata.

Though the journey was only ten miles, it took the better part of the day for the army of Vespasian to escort the forty thousand prisoners up the coast of the sea to the city of Tiberias. The sick and elderly slowed the entire march to nearly a crawl, yet the commanding general did not wish to dispose of them before they reached the city arena. The soldiers were compelled to show temperance when prodding them along, for they did not wish to incite a riot along the road, which would give many of the prisoners the opportunity to escape. The citizens of Taricheae had their hands bound, though few complained, for they felt that once they reached Tiberias, King Agrippa would show mercy on them, despite their folly.

Approximately half a mile from Tiberias, the road was lined with citizens of the city, who had come out to witness the sad procession of their vanquished rivals. Many shouted profane insults, with some even hurling rocks at the prisoners.

“A chance to spit on their enemies while attempting to feign loyalty to Rome,” Nicanor observed, as he rode his horse next to Gaius. The optio was still feeling out his new mount which kept wanting to bolt, as well as fighting against his commands with the reins.

“I had to pick one that wasn’t fully broken in,” Gaius grumbled, ignoring his centurion’s observation, even as a stone flew in front of his horse and struck an old man on the shoulder.

“Here, knock that shit off!” Nicanor shouted at the man, riding over and kicking him in the chest.

The stone thrower’s friends laughed as he was knocked over by the centurion’s foot. Even he guffawed as he stood again, for the plight of the Taricheaens was a profound source of amusement to the mob. Nicanor rode back over to Gaius, who was looking down at the old man who’d been hit with the rock. He was clutching his shoulder and being helped along by a very young woman that the Roman surmised was his granddaughter.

“Old bastard will be dead soon anyway,” Gaius said quietly, as he turned to his friend.

“At least we won’t have to dispose of them,” Nicanor replied. “Vespasian’s going to let some of the Samaritan auxiliaries handle that little detail. No doubt they will enjoy it.”

“Samaritans and Jews may be age-old enemies,” Gaius noted, “but there is no ecstasy to be had in the slaughter of unarmed old men and women.”

It wasn’t that Gaius was troubled by the pending fate of the people of Taricheae. Like every Roman soldier in Vespasian’s army, he understood the necessity for handing down harsh punishments upon those who rebelled against the empire. He also knew the old and infirm would have to be put down, like one would do to broken livestock. It wasn’t done out of malice, but rather the harsh reality of the world they lived in. Yet for Gaius and his legionaries, this was simple duty, nothing more. To take delight in the destruction of the old was both perverse and unmanly to the young optio.

Trumpets announced the arrival of General Vespasian, who rode at the head of the long procession. King Agrippa, dressed in green and gold robes, sat atop a magnificent Arabian mare, awaiting them. His chamberlain and numerous councilors stood on either side of him. Only General Jacimus was mounted.

As he eyed the official party waiting for them, Titus had hoped to see Queen Julia Berenice amongst them. It was not to be. It appeared she had remained in Caesarea Philippi.

“Probably for the best,” he muttered to himself.

“What was that?” Trajan asked, having overheard him.

“Oh, just that the queen is not here with her brother.”

“Ah.” Trajan then grinned broadly, causing his younger peer to raise an eyebrow. “Oh, come off it, Titus. Your little fling with the Jewish queen has been the worst-kept secret since we left Caesarea Philippi. Not that I blame you, of course, as she is rather striking and far more preferable to empty your loins in than the local whores. Still, do you think it’s true, all the rumors about her having an incestuous relationship with the king?”

“That was not exactly at the top of my list of things to ask her,” Titus replied, forcing a chuckle.

The truth was, he rather liked Berenice, even though their time together had been brief. The unsavory rumors did not sit well with him, and so he hoped Trajan would let the matter be.

“Given her age and experience, I daresay you probably learned a few new tricks off her,” Trajan persisted with a laugh, which Titus could not help but return.

“That I did,” he concurred with a sigh.

Ahead of the entourage, Vespasian rode over to the king. “I’m having these prisoners transported to the arena,” the Roman general explained. “From there, we will pass our collective judgment on them.”

“Very good,” the king replied. He then said to General Jacimus, “Have the road to the arena cleared of any pedestrians or other traffic. I also want every available soldier on hand to keep the crowds away.”

The Jewish general simply nodded and rode into the city gates.

It took several hours to guide forty thousand hapless prisoners along the narrow streets to the arena, which was more than a mile beyond the gates. And though Jacimus’ soldiers had kept the streets clear, this did not stop onlookers from gathering on the rooftops or hanging out of the windows of houses and shops. Rocks and rotten vegetables were flung at the prisoners. Some of it accidentally pelted the Roman soldiers, who could only hunker down behind their shields and helmets.

As they arrived at the rather large arena, which served the entire region of

Agrippa's kingdom with games and gladiatorial fights, soldiers began to sort the prisoners into different groups. Cries of family members were met with the blows of clubs and sword pommels as the old and weak were drug away. The young women were kept with their children, although their husbands and fathers were also forcibly separated from them. Those young men who appeared healthy and able to do hard labor were sorted into another group.

Walls of legionaries with their weapons drawn separated the various groups. Many were in their fighting stances, gladii ready to cut down any who attempted to resist. Both Nicanor and Gaius had their blades drawn, as they stood on either end of their century. The large mob they faced were those who, it had been determined, were the citizens of King Agrippa's kingdom. These were by far the most numerous of all those captured.

Watching over the spectacle from the imperial box sat Vespasian and his generals, along with King Agrippa and his senior councilors. The first group brought before them were the youngest and strongest men, regardless of nationality or citizenship. Many of these had been among the foreign seditionists, and even those of Taricheae that had sided with and fought alongside the rebels. As such, there was neither pity nor remorse to be had. What the Romans did not know, was the rebel leader, Jesus bar Shaphat, was among them. His face was forlorn and full of hatred.

"Six thousand of the young and strong," Master Centurion Ralla said, as he stood before this first mob, his drawn gladius pointing towards them.

They were arrayed in a large formation, like a legion on parade. The difference was all had their hands bound, with the bonds tied to the men on their left and right.

"What would you have of them?"

Vespasian stood and formally addressed both the soldiers and the rebels. *"The young and the strong have to a man taken up arms against Rome. The crucifix should be their punishment. However, Rome is feeling merciful. These men will all be sent to the emperor and, by his pleasure, their sentence will be to dig out the Isthmus of Corinth."*

A collective groan resonated from the mob, for the attempts at digging a canal to connect the Gulf of Corinth with the Aegean Sea had been attempted numerous times over the past seven hundred years. Even Julius Caesar had abandoned his attempts at this astronomical feat. During this latest attempt, Emperor Nero had struck the first pickaxe blows and dug up the first basket

of earth, to commemorate the start of the project. This had taken place during his tour of the Greek provinces earlier in the year. Cutting through the long isthmus would be hazardous work, likely resulting in the deaths of many slaves. So while the young and strong of Taricheae had been spared death on the cross, many would perish in Nero's attempts at cutting through four miles of earth and rock.

Bound as they were, the young men could make little resistance as they were led away. Shouts and curses were met with blows from clubs or the lash of the whip. Jesus bar Shaphat secretly hoped to lead a resistance effort amongst the slaves, though within a few weeks, the lash had broken his resolve. And three months after his capture, a large falling boulder would smash his legs from his body, leaving him to die in horrific anguish.

"King Agrippa," Vespasian said, addressing the Jewish monarch as the last of the younger prisoners were forcibly removed from the arena. "In light of your loyalty to the emperor and to Rome, I present you with every subject of your kingdom that was captured at Taricheae."

The king stood as rows of men, women, and children were led into the arena. The shouts of the young men still echoed, along with the slap of whips, which greatly unnerved this new mass of prisoners. Children cried in fear and clutched their mothers closely. The arena was crowded to near overflowing, as eight thousand of the king's subjects were crammed into the pit. Agrippa gazed down upon them, all looking up at him piteously, in hopes that their sovereign might show mercy upon them.

"Citizens of our great kingdom," Agrippa began. His voice and countenance were stern, filling the people with terror. *"You who lived and worked within Taricheae have failed in your duties to your king and nation. By either taking an active part in this rebellion, or in the very least by your failure to suppress it, you have betrayed the trust between our kingdom and the Roman Empire. For as your king is a loyal ally to Caesar, so too were you allies of Rome. It is with heavy heart that either by your direct actions, or feeble inaction, you have forced my hand. I can neither pardon nor parole so many stained by the scourge of rebellion. Therefore, all of you have forfeited your liberty and sentenced yourselves to a life of bondage. Know that this is by your doing, and not your king's."*

Screams of dismay and pleas for mercy resonated into a deafening cry from the mob. Those closest to the arena exits were dragged away, either by

their bonds, clothing, or hair in some cases. The clubs and whips beat into submission those who protested loudest.

Despite being tied to their fellows, there were a few who sought to fight against the soldiers. In response, several legionaries dropped their clubs and drew their gladii. The most violent were quickly slain, as were a few random prisoners, as a means of quelling the anguished crowd. Those stabbed through the heart or throat died mercifully quickly, whereas others were impaled through their guts, leaving them thrashing about in horrific pain as they were dragged away. The prisoners who were bound to the slain were forced to lug the corpses, with the flowing of blood leaving horrid streaks along the arena floor.

"Do you plan on making such a display of the rest of the citizens of Taricheae?" Titus asked his father. "There are over thirty thousand of them, and they could cause us a lot of trouble if we try and parade them all through the arena."

Instead of answering his son directly, Vespasian turned to his auxilia corps commander. "Placidus, have the old and useless brought into the arena."

"Yes, sir," the general acknowledged. "Each regiment has already assigned volunteers to sort this lot out."

"A little bloody sport for them," Trajan noted with a twisted grin. He then asked, "What do you want done with the rest of the prisoners?"

"For now, nothing," the commander-in-chief replied. "I've already sent word for the slave drivers to come to Tiberias with all haste. No doubt those from our friend, Agrippa's, kingdom will be lusting after some fresh stock. I've even sent messages to slave traders in Parthia."

"Past hostilities can't be allowed to interfere with trade and business," Titus replied with a sense of twisted logic. "Still, I suppose we could charge the foreign slavers an added tariff for taking imperial property out of the empire."

"And that, my friend, is why you will make an excellent provincial governor someday," Trajan said.

Vespasian smiled and nodded in approval, for the legate's words echoed his own thoughts. The commanding general was loathe to show any sort of favoritism or nepotism, hence, he only rarely praised his son publicly.

The sounds of groaning, accompanied by berating shouts from the auxiliary troopers turned their collective attention back to what was

transpiring in the arena. The numbers of sick and elderly was small when compared to the masses they had just disposed of. Only twelve hundred souls managed to walk or hobble into the pit to await judgment. For many, either their advanced age or sickness made death seem preferable to continued subjugation. Few made any sort of protests as they were forcibly led towards the imperial box. Arrayed in long lines, most stood with their heads bowed. An auxilia soldier stood behind each, his gladius drawn. Placidus had ordered his regimental commanders to ensure their men were expedient in dispatching the poor wretches, which made the grim task rather disappointing for those who, in their racial hatred, wished to make sport of the mass execution.

There would be no speeches pronouncing judgment, and so Vespasian rose and slowly walked out the back of the imperial box, his generals following. King Agrippa and his entourage joined them as well. Only Placidus remained. He stood and gestured with his thumb towards his neck; the signal used in gladiatorial fights that ordered the victor to vanquish his defeated foe. The auxilia corps commander left the box as the first blades of his men slashed open the arteries on the necks of their victims. A few groans and cries of pain followed, and within a minute over a thousand of Taricheae’s poorest citizens lay in a mass of pooling blood on the sandy floor of the arena. In many ways, they were the fortunate ones.

Chapter XIII: From Martyr to Traitor

Jerusalem
20 September 67 A.D.
***

Rumors surrounding Josephus' survival had quickly spread all throughout Jerusalem. Levi and his men had begun these in the inns and public houses of the city, as well as the outlying districts, even before he went before the governing council. Josephus' wife and parents had remained in virtual hiding ever since they heard about the fall of Jotapata. At first, this could be assumed as simply being in mourning, though as the slanderous words spread, they now feared for their very safety. This was punctuated by an incident involving Josephus' elder brother, who bore the same name as their father, Matthias.

Though he lived in Jericho with his wife and two young children, the younger Matthias often came to Jerusalem to visit his parents. During this latest visit, he brought a cart loaded with figs and other fresh fruits to sell at the market. He decided to visit a local tavern before going to visit his parents. He also felt the need to pay his respects to his widowed sister-in-law. The vendors, to whom he sold his cart of produce, had seemed rather cold and standoffish, though they said nothing. As the word about his brother's survival had not yet reached Jericho, Matthias was unaware of the spiteful talk directed towards Josephus.

It was late afternoon when he entered the tavern. There were only a few people sitting at tables, mostly merchants from outside the city, like himself. A few locals sat around a large table near the back of the dimly lit room, glaring at him. Matthias thought nothing of it, and after a long day of travel and haggling for the best price with which to sell his wares, he was tired and hungry. He purchased a leg of lamb and a cup of watered down wine and had just sat down to eat, when one of the angry men stood and walked over to him, placing both hands on the table.

"We don't welcome the kin of traitors here," he snarled.

Matthias calmly finished chewing and took a drink off his wine before answering.

"Clearly you have me mistaken for someone else," he said. "My brother

gave his life in defense of this land, hardly the actions of a traitor. And so I would kindly ask you to take your hands off my table and go fuck yourself!”

The man simply started to laugh sinisterly, grinning through stained teeth. He leaned in close, so Matthias could smell his rank breath and sweaty body odor.

“Your brother is Josephus,” he replied coldly. He was a big man, and he gruffly grabbed Matthias around either side of his mouth. “There is no mistake! Josephus not only lives, he has betrayed us to the filthy Romans!”

His rage at this grievous insult erupted in fury, and Matthias smashed his fist into the man’s groin, doubling him over with a loud groan. He had just enough to time get to his feet, before he was attacked by the man’s companions. A blow to the temple knocked him to the floor, his vision growing black as he was kicked and beaten incessantly.

“Get that disgusting traitor out of here!” the owner of the tavern shouted. It was difficult to tell if he felt the same animosity towards the family of Josephus, or if he was simply trying to save both himself and his establishment from being destroyed in a potential riot.

Matthias was barely conscious, blood and slobber dripping from his swollen mouth, as he was dragged up the short steps and tossed out onto the street. He lay their all through the night, unable to protect himself from the numerous thieves who searched him and pilfered all of his belongings. That no one cut his throat was, perhaps, the only thing that could be considered miraculous.

For Josephus himself, he was completely oblivious to the hardships his family now endured. Although he rightly suspected if any of his enemies knew he lived, his wife and parents would be treated most cruelly. He had not seen or spoken to his brother since before his appointment as governor-general of Galilee, and he hoped Matthias and his family were at least safe in Jericho.

These concerns about his loved ones interrupted him in his writings one night. He had, thus far, been very meticulous and thorough in his chronicling of the rebellion, though his reasoning had less to do with being ordered to do so by the Romans and more because he felt he owed it to posterity for the truth to be told; or at least the truth as he saw it. That much of what he wrote

came from events he had personally witnessed or taken part in, was both a blessing and a curse.

"No scholar or historian has ever written without being influenced by their own inherent biases," he reasoned. Still, in order to alleviate this, or at least the perception thereof, he had decided to write everything in the third-person. Even events that he had personally taken part in, such as the defense of Jotapata, were devoid of any first-person references to himself or his inner feelings.

The army was still encamped just outside of Tiberias while Vespasian and his commanders decided where next to proceed. This gave the Jewish scholar more time to commit to his work. As he sat in silence, the glow of the oil lamp causing his eyes to strain upon the parchment, he set his quill down, rested his chin in his hands, and closed his eyes.

"Not interrupting your work, I hope," Titus said, as he lifted the tent flap.

"Even if you are, it is well within your rights," Josephus replied, his eyes still closed. He then leaned back on his stool as the legate grabbed one of the completed scrolls from a bin on the desk.

"I've read some of this, and I confess it is quite thorough," Titus said. "The brutal affair with Procurator Florus is rather telling."

"Normally, one would assume that if we'd been given a governor with more temperance and genuine goodwill, we may have prevented the rebellion altogether," Josephus mused. "However, given the state of affairs within the newly 'liberated' Jewish state, that's probably a rather short-sighted viewpoint. There have been various sects and different ethnic groups who've been fighting each other in this part of the world since time began. The ousting of imperial troops from Judea was simply an opportunity for them to try and settle grievances, most of which are so old no one can recall what brought them on in the first place."

"Divided peoples are more easily beaten," Titus reasoned.

"In individual battles, perhaps," Josephus remarked. "But then, if the people in Galilee had been united, you could have ended the entire war in the north once I was captured. It's now almost three months later, and you still find yourselves having to lay siege to various cities, even those belonging to your supposed allies."

He expected a biting rebuke from Titus for this insult directed towards King Agrippa, but the Roman legate maintained his silence.

Josephus sighed. "I fear greatly what will happen if Hanan should lose

control of the Judean government," the Jewish scholar added. "Believe me, if he falls, it will bode ill for the Jews, as well as Rome."

"Tell me more about this man, Hanan," Titus said, taking a seat across from Josephus, his arms folded across his chest. "You speak of him often, and from what you have said he sounds like a pragmatic man. But why, then, has he not sent emissaries to sue for terms? Surely he has to know by now that this rebellion stands no chance of succeeding!"

"I have not seen Hanan in months," Josephus replied, "not since I was sent north into Galilee. Even before then, and despite the success we'd had when dealing with Cestius Gallus, he knew that a long war would be costly and fruitless. He told me as much just before I left. I think, though, that he divulged this to only a few of his closest confidants. After your previous forces were routed at Beth Horon, any mention of negotiating with the Romans became politically toxic. And to speak of compromise would mean one's downfall, if not worse."

"So Hanan will not try and negotiate a peace with Rome, because he feels it would ruin him," Titus observed.

"Not just him but the entire government of the Jewish state," Josephus emphasized.

"His hold on power must indeed be quite tenuous," the legate remarked.

Josephus nodded solemnly. "It is," he replied. "The reinforcements that were meant to aid me were wiped out when they tried to take the port of Ascalon. And since those damned renegades under John of Giscala outright refused to stand with us, what forces I did have were compelled to face your army alone."

"And yet, you came closest to besting us," the legate mused. "We never knew how close you were to breaking. When I led that small band of soldiers to sneak into the city, we thought for certain we risked being overwhelmed. Instead, you were already finished, we just didn't know it."

"Psychology is a powerful tool," the Jewish scholar said with a half grin. "If one thinks they are beaten, then they've already lost." He sighed again, his countenance darkening.

It was difficult, talking so casually about events where so many people had perished. Over half of the forty thousand killed at Jotapata had been noncombatants; women, children, the elderly. All had looked to Josephus for protection, and he had failed them. He said as much to Titus.

"If you knew you could not win, then why did you not try and negotiate a

surrender with us?" Titus asked.

"Firstly, because it is common knowledge that once a siege commences, the Roman army shows no mercy to the defenders," Josephus countered. "And secondly, there were times when I did want to take that chance; that vain hope that General Vespasian would show clemency, rather than the far greater certainty that all would be killed or enslaved once your soldiers breached the walls. And yet, I could not, for the very same reasons why I think Hanan cannot even attempt to come to terms with you now."

"Because your more fanatical followers compelled you to keep fighting," Titus said, finishing Josephus' thought.

"Precisely. And let us be fair, were the roles reversed, I doubt even the great General Vespasian could convince his soldiers to surrender, if any of them still had some fight left in them."

Titus nodded appreciatively at this assessment. "Yes, Romans have never handled the whole concept of 'surrender' very well." He stood and made ready to leave Josephus to his work.

"Let us hope," the legate said, "for the sake of your people, that Hanan is able to bring the various factions to their senses. Because if he does not… well, you've already seen what happens to those who continue to violate the peace of Rome."

During the short interlude that followed the disposal of the citizens of Taricheae, Vespasian had sent word to the mayors and governors of loyalist cities to meet with him for a council on the situation in Galilee. He needed the help of those Jews who still pledged their allegiance to Caesar, for they understood the political, economic, and humanitarian effects of the war on the greater populace far better than he did.

And while the pacification of Tiberias and the destruction of Taricheae had placated the districts to the west and southwest of the Sea of Galilee, Vespasian's onslaught through the province had left hundreds of thousands of refugees in its wake. With loyalist cities, such as Sepphoris, closing their gates to those they viewed contemptuously as traitors, the people fled to as yet unconquered cities, such as Giscala and Gamala.

"We've turned away thousands who have sought our protection," the governor of Sepphoris stated emphatically. "Believe me when I say we did so

with heavy hearts, for we pity the innocents who have been caught up in this great struggle that was not of their making. However, I have my own people's safety and well-being to care for. Many seditionists hide amongst the refugees, waiting to cause chaos and bring a pall of fear over the people, and I will not have it. And, regrettably, it is also a simple matter of practicality. We simply cannot afford to feed and house all who flee from your army's approach."

"There is a great danger in all of this," the mayor of a smaller township, called Magdala, added. "The more the people starve and are wrought with hardship, the chance increases that their fear will be overwhelmed by anger. Many of those who now flee, may yet return armed for battle."

"That is a risk we accepted when we invaded Galilee," Vespasian remarked. "Whether the seditionists flee or fight matters little to me. What matters is that Rome does right by her loyal subjects. We already have a garrison of auxiliary soldiers posted to Sepphoris. If any of your cities are under threat of the rebels, we need to know."

"There are only two places left in Galilee for any to flee to," the governor of Sepphoris said. "Giscala is much larger than Gamala, but it is only lightly defended. I suspect that those wishing to escape the violence will flee south towards Jerusalem. Those who stay are more likely fanatics, who will be looking to continue to fight."

"And a fight we shall give them," the Roman commanding general emphasized. He then thanked the men for their loyalty and promised them Rome would be there to protect them, should they come under threat from the rebels. He then dismissed the men, who would remain in Tiberias as imperial guests for the next two days.

"It is Gamala where we must now direct our attention," Vespasian said to his gathered officers later that evening.

King Agrippa was entertaining the senior officers of the Roman forces at his palace in Tiberias, while the army itself remained in camp outside the city. There would be another elaborate feast this evening, as Agrippa thought that it may be his last chance to host his allies for some time. But first, there were practical matters to attend to.

Vespasian stood on one side of a long table with Agrippa standing to his right. All of his legates and chief tribunes stood across from him. The commanding general then pointed to a crudely drawn map, showing

Gamala's location east of the northern tip of the Sea of Galilee.

"It is a border city, near the edge of my kingdom," the king explained. "They were at one time loyal; I fear the flood of refugees has turned them against us."

"No doubt many of these are survivors of your army," Vespasian said to Josephus, who stood across the table from the commanding general, Cerealis and Titus on either side of him.

Along with the Roman and allied Jewish officers, Vespasian had insisted their old adversary join them. Regardless of his motivations, which the Romans were still uncertain of, the former rebel general continued to prove his worth. The intelligence he possessed regarding terrain, defenses of the cities, as well as what he knew about the composition of rebel forces, made Vespasian glad he spared him. Had he sent his formal adversary to Nero, he would simply be another dead Jew amongst the numerous thousands already slain. And while the commander-in-chief was fierce in his loyalty to Rome, he was not exactly disposed to granting personal favors to the emperor, who had once threatened to have him strangled for falling asleep during one of his poetry recitals.

He had taken an additional chance when he directed Josephus not be chained, and kept in his own tent with only a minimal guard. Granted, as the Jewish general had told him, with the fanatics slowly gaining control within the Judean government, he would be labeled a traitor with his life now forfeit. Vespasian had also reckoned that Josephus would be more cooperative if he were treated like a free man who stayed with the Romans by choice. Of course the commanding general had not officially granted Josephus his freedom, and deliberately would not for some time to come.

"I do not know what happened to most of my army after we became trapped at Jotapata," Josephus replied. "Taking into account those who either perished with us or at Jaffa, I reckon there were about thirty thousand who still remained at liberty. They will have either gone into hiding or, most likely, joined up with one of the various rebel factions still operating in the region."

"At least they are not a unified army," Cerealis observed.

"If I may speak plainly," Josephus said, "my senior captains and I were the only reason our army was ever united in the first place. And even then, we had more than our share of mass defections, including amongst my own personal guard. And the best of my captains fell by the hands of their fellows

when we were trapped in that damned well, after the stronghold fell."

That Josephus spoke so openly and without emotion about the deaths of his fellows, as well as the harrowing circumstances of what he'd gone through during the forty-seven day siege, was curious to Vespasian. From the tone of his voice, one would think Josephus was giving an academic lecture on the war in Judea, rather than relaying his personal experiences. Whether he was a master of his emotions and was able to hide them from his imperial hosts, or he simply did not care about his dead companions, the Roman general could not say for certain.

"Well, without doubt, some of your former warriors are now holed up in Gamala," Vespasian said. "Otherwise, I cannot imagine the city defecting. What can you tell us about the city itself and its defenses?"

"It will be very difficult to assail," Josephus replied. "In some ways, even more so than Jotapata."

"The defenders will rely on the arduous terrain to protect them," Agrippa added. "Which I guess is why they have remained with the seditionists, even though most of the neighboring cities have maintained their fealty to both my kingdom and to Rome."

"It is situated upon a rough ridge of a high mountain, with a kind of neck in the middle," Josephus continued. "Where it begins to ascend, it lengthens itself, and declines as much downward before as behind. It looks almost like a camel from the distance, which is where it gathers its name, 'Gamala', being a derivative of the word 'camel' in our tongue. Both on the side and the face there are abrupt parts divided from the rest and ending in vast deep valleys. The parts behind, where they are joined to the mountain, are easier to ascend. However, the defenders have cut an oblique ditch as an obstacle. On its acclivity, which is straight, houses are built, and those very thick and close to one another. The city also hangs so strangely that it looks as if it would fall down upon itself, so sharp is it at the top. It is exposed to the south and its southern mount, which reaches to an immense height, much like a citadel. Above that is a precipice of great depth. As this is sheer and cannot be climbed except by the surest of mountaineers, there is no defensive wall on this portion of the city. There was also a spring of water within the wall, at the utmost limits of the city."

The Romans were impressed by the extreme level of detail Josephus was giving them, with scribes quickly trying to write down all the various descriptions Josephus gave them.

“All of this means we most likely cannot simply wait them out,” Titus remarked.

“Before General Vespasian came into Galilee, I visited Gamala,” Josephus said. “This is why I know its defenses so well. They had yet to determine their loyalties, especially in light of Gallus’ ignominious defeat during the first invasion. I, therefore, gave them money and resources with which to build a defensive wall around the city. There are also ditches and underground mines. It is, however, much smaller than Jotapata, and so I doubt its garrison will be nearly as large. Even with an indigenous spring, they still require food, and their warehouses and silos are much smaller than what my army had.”

“All the same, it sounds like the terrain and defense works alone will prove the more formidable adversary,” Vespasian said, with a sigh of resignation. He had hoped that Jotapata would prove to be the worst of the sieges he would have to undertake in Judea, yet it was beginning to sound like Gamala would attempt to seize this distinction.

In Jerusalem, Josephus’ family was now dealing with the first of many incidents that came in the aftermath of the rumors regarding his survival and defection. The loud banging on their door alerted the elder Matthias, who lit an oil lamp and carefully walked down the stairs, a small axe in his other hand. After Hanan’s warning, he feared harassment or outright assault from those who now slandered his youngest son. He cracked open the door and recognizing one of the young men on the other side, quickly opened it all the way. He gasped when he saw they carried his eldest son, who was barely conscious. It had been friends of Josephus who carried the badly injured Matthias through the streets of Jerusalem to their parents’ home late that night. Thieves had stolen all of his money, and even his sandals, while he’d lain unconscious in the gutter.

“What happened?” he asked in alarm.

“Found him in the gutter,” one of the men explained. “At first we thought it was a homeless beggar, but then we recognized his face. Not sure what happened, exactly, as he hasn’t been awake enough to tell us.”

“Robbers, most likely,” the other man thought aloud.

“Not…robbers,” the younger Matthias said, slurring through his swollen

lips.

They helped him up onto the table, where they laid him out so they could check the extent of his injuries. His once immaculate clothes were torn, his bruised ribs clearly visible. His nose was smashed, and his lip split, with both eyes nearly swollen shut.

A loud gasp came from the top of the stairs where his mother and sister-in-law now stood.

“Dear God,” his mother said, her eyes wet with tears. She immediately rushed to his side, taking his left hand in hers.

“What happened to you, son?” his father asked. “Who did this to you?”

“Men who called me a traitor.” The younger Matthias was having trouble speaking, and Judith brought him some water, which he eagerly tried to drink, though most seemed to spill everywhere. “They said Josephus lives, and that he has betrayed us. I cannot believe this to be true.”

“The fanatics will label all of us as traitors now,” Judith said darkly.

“I will speak with Hanan,” her father-in-law replied. He shook his head in trepidation, as well as disgust. Matthias the elder was beginning to fear Jerusalem may no longer be safe for his family. And yet, with marauding bands of robbers roaming the countryside, to say nothing of the rampaging imperial army, remaining in their home was still preferable to taking their chances outside the holy city. He only hoped that Hanan would be able to talk some sense into the people, who were becoming worse in their seditious speak.

Chapter XIV: The Last Stronghold in Galilee

Tiberias, the Sea of Galilee
3 October 67 A.D.
***

Encamped outside the city of Tiberias, the army of Vespasian had been able to enjoy its stay, positioned at a place known as Emmaus, which means ‘a warm bath’. The location of a natural hot spring, legionaries and auxiliary troopers took full advantage of the water’s healing properties. And like every time an army of this size remained in one place for more than a few days, the notorious ‘camp followers’ soon swarmed the region. Consisting mostly of merchants and prostitutes, their combined tent cities were almost as large as the army’s vast camp. Soldiers found themselves anxious to trade much of their plunder for coin, goods, or special favors, with the merchants and whores all-too-eager to oblige them.

Gaius had just spent a night of pleasure with one of the more exotic ladies of pleasure, when he stepped out into the early morning dawn. He felt rejuvenated, and as the sun warmed the earth, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, for a brief moment almost forgetting the hellish war they were engaged in.

“Nothing like a little release of the loins to make one feel alive again!” Julius said, as he came out of another private tent nearby.

“It is amazing how hard soldiers will continue to fight when they know they can have a steaming twat to shove their manhood into when it’s all over,” the optio observed. “I’m just glad they’ve brought some fresh stock. The whores that follow the legions are usually so worn out within a month that even the nastiest of the barbarian auxiliaries won’t go near them.”

“A lot of the whores that are slaves are fresh from our conquests,” Julius remarked. He paused for a moment in contemplation. “Funny thing, we capture these strumpets after slaughtering their menfolk. We then sell them to the slave drivers, who in turn sell them to brothel owners, who then rent them out back to us. Many of the lads will spend all of the shares in coin they’ve received for acquiring fresh slaves, on a night of pleasure with the very harlots they captured in the first place.”

Both men shared a laugh at the absurdity of it all.

"Well, my lady friend was freeborn," Gaius said. "She referred to herself as a professional woman. A little more expensive than a slave, perhaps, but a lot more enjoyable."

Their revelry was interrupted by the approach of Centurion Nicanor. He had a grim look about him, his vine stick clutched tightly in his right hand.

"I'm glad I found you both," he said, as he quickly walked over to his two subordinate officers. "We've just received our orders and will be moving out within a day."

"Where to?" Gaius asked, his own demeanor suddenly sober.

"A place called Gamala," the centurion replied. "I've never been there, as I spent most of my youth in and around Caesarea, but I have heard of it."

"Anything we should be made aware of?" Julius asked.

Nicanor nodded somberly. "We can expect a rather hellish siege ahead of us."

Soon after the fall of Taricheae, a lone rider made his way through the narrow valley and up the steep path that lead into Gamala. A pair of sentries stood atop the wall, one of them shouting over his shoulder for the gate to be opened. The man dismounted as soon as he entered the city.

His name was Joseph ben Joshua. A former spice merchant, he had recently dedicated himself, along with most of his personal fortune, towards gaining independence for Gamala from the Herodian kings. He was also a former member of the sect under Simon bar Giora, and while he no longer played an active role within their organization, he still considered the zealot leader to be a close friend.

"What news?" a warrior asked, noting the concern on Joseph's face.

"Taricheae has been overrun, and Tiberias is cowering in its supplication to Rome," he replied. He then started to make his way up the main street that led towards the citadel. "I must speak to Chares at once!"

Though the various rebel factions had little in the way of reconnaissance, it was only logical for the garrison at Gamala that they would be among the next marks for Vespasian's fury. They had thrown off the rule of King Agrippa, something the Romans would take as a personal insult. Agrippa's army had thus far only made halfhearted attempts at retaking the city. The

terrain and their lack of siege equipment rendered any assaults impossible. Joseph, who commanded the garrison at Gamala, had been dispatched by its governor, Chares, to ascertain the Romans' next move after they left their encampments at Caesarea and Scythopolis.

Joseph found the governor in his study towards the top floor of the citadel. The single window was open with the light of midday sun casting its glow and warmth upon the room.

"Have the Romans finished with the cities of Tiberias and Taricheae?" he asked, not looking up from his writings.

"They have," Joseph nodded. "Most of their army is still encamped at the Plain of Emmaus, but I suspect they will soon be moving on us here."

"Yes, well that incestuous lapdog, Agrippa, will no doubt be pestering his imperial masters to give him back our little city," Chares noted, his face twisted in a grim snarl.

Chares was in his early sixties, though a brutally hard life made him seem much older and had left him nearly crippled by this point. As one who had watched his father crucified by the Romans when he was a young boy, he dedicated his life to eradicating their presence from the old Kingdom of Israel.

More than thirty years prior, he had taken part in an ill-fated uprising, led by a thief and brigand named Jesus bar Abbas. Chares had been shot in the leg by an imperial archer during an assault on the Antonia Fortress in Jerusalem. The painful, and at the time crippling, injury had in fact saved his life, for the Romans had gotten word about the attack and laid an ambush within the fortress. Almost all of Chares' friends and fellow conspirators were killed in the subsequent slaughter. He himself was later captured, when former friends betrayed him, though he was spared the crucifix and instead sent to the silver mines in Cilicia. Five years later, down in darkness, with nary a glimpse of the sun, he escaped and eventually returned to his home in Gamala. He'd since lived as one who was revered by all who secretly wished to rid themselves of the tyranny of Caesar and Agrippa. When the city declared its independence, he was named governor by nearly universal acclamation.

"Agrippa was with the Romans in Tiberias," Joseph added. "That much I know for certain. And their army is vast; three legions, plus at least twice as many auxiliaries and allied forces, probably more. Our garrison will not be able to hold them for long, even with the advantage the terrain gives us."

“I am well aware of that,” Chares replied, handing Joseph the scroll he’d been writing on. “That is why we must find allies where we can.”

“This is addressed to John of Giscala,” Joseph said, as he read the message, shaking his head. “He’ll never align himself to us.”

“You have past histories with him,” Chares observed. “And he commands the loyalty of more fighters than any man in Galilee.”

“We did a few trade agreements, years ago,” Joseph replied. “But I also know that he and Simon are hated rivals, and he bears no love for your friends amongst the Sicarii. He wouldn’t even stand with Josephus, who had the greatest chance of defeating the Romans.”

“John also had a personal feud with Josephus,” Chares countered. “He has none with us, regardless of who we associated with in the past. And besides, he has to know by now that he is running out of places with which to make a stand. His home of Giscala is situated on a flat, open plain. The Romans would capture its walls within a day. The steep slopes and jagged ravines here will make it that much harder for them to overcome us, but we cannot do this alone.”

Joseph looked past his friend and gazed out the window. Below the citadel, the city went about its day. Merchants sold their wares, butchers and bakers made food, while children played in the streets. Gamala was full of life and hope…like every other city within Galilee, just before the Romans left them a desolate pile of ash and rubble.

“There is no one else,” he remarked somberly.

“Our friend, Simon bar Giora, is confined to his little fiefdom around Masada,” Chares noted. “His forces match those of John of Giscala, yet as long as the council in Jerusalem declares him an outlaw, he cannot venture far. And besides, even if he could muster his forces to come to our aid, he’s a hundred and fifty miles from here. It would take at least two weeks for any reinforcements to arrive.”

“And the Romans can be here within two days,” Joseph added, letting out a sigh of resignation. He turned back to Chares, privately noting just how tired the old man looked. Despite this, there was an air of fierce determination about him.

“Very well,” Joseph said. “I will go to Giscala. I pray that John will see reason and unite his forces with us against the common enemy.”

Knowing that time was not a luxury he had, Joseph understood he had to leave that afternoon. He did take the time to see his wife and five young

children; three boys and two girls, all under the age of ten. Though they wept openly at the quick departure of their father, who they had not seen in over a month, their mother knew the urgency of his mission. If he could not compel John of Giscala to come to their aid, none of them would be leaving Gamala alive.

According to Josephus, as well as King Agrippa, the terrain around Gamala was so restrictive it would prevent the entire army from encamping in its vicinity.

"Avenues of approach for any assault elements are also greatly restricted," the king said. "However, the city's defenders are much fewer than what you faced at Jotapata; five, maybe ten thousand at most."

"No sense in uprooting the entire army," Vespasian thought aloud. He then turned to his generals. "We'll detach four cohorts from each of the legions, that way every eagle can share in the glory and spoils. Ten cohorts of auxiliary infantry will be in support, as well as to provide escorts for the siege trains. I also want at least a thousand archers. Those who fought at Taricheae performed admirably."

"Who do you want in overall command?" Trajan asked.

"I will be," the commanding general asserted. "You've all done well, but I feel I must personally oversee this little venture. And if anything goes wrong…well, let's just say if you're going to lose your commander-in-chief, he'd best be on hand to make certain any disasters are his own doing."

This small attempt at humor brought a short laugh from the senior officers gathered. It was actually a relief for them that Vespasian was commanding this particular assault. After all, he had far more siege experience than all of them put together, and he had a history of breaking even the most impenetrable of strongholds.

Given the extreme difficulties they expected to encounter, Vespasian had every siege engine, as well as all of the army's engineering assets, sent with the assault force.

Only a single regiment of cavalry would be accompanying the division, as the terrain was unsuitable for mounted warfare. These men would act primarily as reconnaissance and messengers during the march. The indigenous cavalry assigned to each legion was left at the main camp and

tasked with keeping a vigorous presence along the roads between Tiberias and the surrounding towns and villages. Despite all of the precautions taken to avoid upsetting the populace as a whole, Vespasian knew the rather brutal handling of the people of Taricheae would unsettle many.

Trajan accompanied Vespasian, with Cerealis left in overall command of the camp at Emmaus. King Agrippa was also part of Vespasian's entourage, as he hoped to negotiate a peaceful surrender and save the lives of many of his citizens. Placidus was leaving for Sepphoris for a few days, where he had a strong rapport with the city's elders. His troopers, being the most mobile assets in the army, would likely be needed to quash a few seditious villages in the region. That only left Titus, who had a different task assigned to him.

"I am sorry not to be accompanying you, general," the young legate said, as his father walked with him to where his horse and groomsman awaited. Two hundred cavalrymen from the legions stood by their mounts, ready to escort the legate.

"If Gamala is half as difficult to subdue as our Jewish friends have told us, then no doubt there will still be plenty for you to do once you return," Vespasian replied, patting him on the shoulder. "But right now, I need you to play a little political theater with Mucianus. It would be a poor strategic decision if I left the war to do so, and none of the other legates have your gift for oratory and persuasion. Right now I need to know not only the entire political situation in Rome that might pertain to us, but I also need those damned reinforcements. Mucianus and I have our differences, but he is loyal, and I believe he has the right intentions. However, he is so single-mindedly focused on replenishing the ranks of the Twelfth, that he's forgotten the other legions, who were not only understrength at the start of the campaign, but who have been fighting relentlessly these past six months and have suffered numerous casualties of their own."

"I understand," Titus said, as he mounted his horse. "I should reach Antioch in about five or six days. I figure two to three days to find out all I can, and another five or six to return."

"When you do return, head for Gamala," Vespasian directed. "I have a feeling we may still be engaged there. And if not, then return to Tiberias, where I will have further instructions awaiting you."

Titus mounted his horse and saluted before turning about and riding out of the camp towards the crossroads. There were multiple roads to Antioch, although the safest was most certainly following the coast from Ptolemais all

the way up to Laodicea, before turning inland and heading northeast to the Syrian provincial capital.

In truth, he was rather discouraged to be leaving the campaign, especially with what appeared to be a major siege soon to be underway. Titus was a man of action, who preferred leading men into battle rather than playing the game of politics that permeated almost every aspect of a Roman patrician's life. That being said, he was also very shrewd when it came to negotiations, as well as the forging of political alliances. Vespasian had often told him that words were just as powerful as the sword, and he was well on his way to mastering both.

As he departed the vast camp, the legionary and auxilia cohorts of the assault force were packing their tents and equipment, making ready for the long march ahead of them. Their companions, who were to remain in Emmaus, were a bit envious at their heading back into the fray with greater opportunities for plunder and glory.

While the army of Vespasian began the next phase of their rampage through Galilee, the family of Josephus came to further grief, following the cowardly attack upon his brother. Judith's prediction had regrettably proven true, as the entire family of Josephus was slowly ostracized by the people of Jerusalem. Those not outright hostile, were still distant and shunning towards them.

"Fear," the younger Matthias said one evening. "Those who once called you all 'friend' are now too afraid of upsetting the fanatics, and thereby being branded as turncoats themselves."

He had stayed with his family in Jerusalem, while recovering from his injuries. His eyes had reopened, and the swelling had subsided on his lip, though his body was still bruised in many places, and his injured ribs made it hard to breathe properly.

"It's all just rumor!" Judith protested in exacerbation. "We don't even know if Josephus is still alive. All we have is the hearsay of a few who swear a friend of theirs saw him. I cannot begin to tell you how much it tears me up inside, not knowing. But worse, is to be in one moment treated with respect and adoration as the wife of a martyr, and in the next be subjected to shame and cruelty, simply because my husband may yet live!"

“The world is a very cruel place, dear sister,” Matthias said, placing an arm around her as she fought against the fresh tears of frustration.

“I have spoken with Hanan,” his father remarked. “And though he and the council have condemned the attack on you, while also imploring the people to follow reason rather than emotion, it has not put an end to the seditious talk against Josephus. There are simply too many who are convinced he has turned against the people and now serves the Romans.”

“It is because the whole state is falling apart, and they look for a scapegoat to take the blame,” Matthias replied with a scowl. “None of those who defame him were at Jotapata, and from what we can tell, he held out against Vespasian far longer than anyone else. The Romans turned Jaffa into ruins within a day, yet Josephus lasted more than a month. I damn any who would call him coward or traitor!”

The family sat in silence for a few moments. There was a constant air of tension, and the vented frustrations of Matthias the younger were felt by all.

“I cannot stay here,” he said, after a few minutes. “I must return to my own family in Jericho, who likely now fear the worst has happened to me. I ask that you come with me, it will be safer there.”

“No,” his father said, shaking his head. “Despite the troubles we may encounter, our place is here. I still have my duties to perform at the Temple, and it would be a betrayal of Hanan and the others if I were to run away.”

“Then let me at least take Mother and Judith with me,” Matthias asked.

“My place is with your father,” his mother said, shaking her head while placing a hand on her husband’s.

“And I must remain here for them,” Judith added.

“Besides,” his father said, “If the Romans venture south, and you know they will, Jericho will not stand for long against their machines. Jerusalem is still the safest place in all of Judea.”

With little else he could do, Matthias the younger soon left to return to Jericho. His father had given him some money to make up for his losses after being robbed of his earnings. It was degrading for the young man, though he knew he had no choice but to accept if he wanted to be able to provide for his family. He was further frustrated that his parents and sister-in-law refused to return with him, though at the same time he respected their collective sense of duty. He also understood that Jericho was a city of mixed loyalties, with a sizeable minority who would actually welcome the return of the imperial legions. With so many factions fighting against each other, as well as the

Romans, it was difficult to say who, in the end, the righteous truly were.

Joseph rode through the night, and as the road passed along the northern edge of the Sea of Galilee, he feared that he would come across the advancing Roman army at any moment. It was after dark when he reached the crossroads at Bethsaida. Here it split in numerous directions. To the east was Gamala, where Joseph had just come from. Due north led into Roman Syria, while the road west came to a small town called Bersabe, from where he would have to travel a few more miles north, over a series of hills towards Giscala. In that moment, though, it was the remaining path to the southwest that drew his attention. Circling around the west side of the Sea of Galilee, the road went through the towns of Kefar Nahum, Heptapegon, Gennesar, Magdala, and finally to the much larger cities of Tiberias and Taricheae.

Joseph's heart was pounding hard in his chest. He expected to hear the ominous cadence of war drums, with long lines of torches in the distance, silhouetting legionaries on the march towards Gamala. Yet all he saw was blackness, as his eyes strained to see past the few dozen feet illuminated by the moon and stars this night. Oil lamps still burned in the windows of a few dwellings within Bethsaida, though all else was mercifully dark. It seemed the armies of Vespasian would spare them for one more night.

Even if the Romans were not headed next for Gamala, Joseph knew it was only a matter of time. As he spurred his horse into a canter, he silently prayed, for what must have been the hundredth time, that John of Giscala would send reinforcements to save his people.

It was an hour before sunrise when guards awoke John from a fitful slumber. Like the defenders of Gamala, he too had received word of the Roman sacking of Taricheae. However, unlike those who now looked to stand against Vespasian from their city walls, John had no intention of remaining in Galilee any longer than necessary. Though an uncompromising fanatic, he would not allow his hatred to blind him to the realities of the region's pending downfall. Still, he kept these thoughts to himself, as he groggily made his way down the stone steps within his house to where two of

his warriors stood with Joseph ben Joshua.

"Joseph," John said, wiping away the sleep from his eyes. "It has been a long time, my friend."

"Forgive my intrusion at this early hour," Joseph replied. "But know that I come to you as one allied Jew to another."

"Do you now?" The zealot leader crossed his arms and sat upon a chair.

Joseph remained standing. "We both seek to expel the Romans from our holy lands," he said, choosing his words carefully. "The armies of Vespasian will soon be coming to Gamala, as it is one of the few strongholds left in Galilee."

"Indeed," John said with a nod. He apprised this man for a moment, wondering just how desperate he was and if, in fact, there was something the people of Gamala could do that would be of some use to him. He then asked, "What help do you expect from me, seeing as how Gamala is not within our lands, but in the Herodian Kingdom of Agrippa? And how can I trust a man who once followed Simon bar Giora?"

The rebuke angered Joseph, but he kept his resentful feelings in check. He knew John would not be a willing ally, despite their mutual antipathy towards both Rome and Agrippa.

"The imperial armies have unleashed hell itself upon Galilee," he answered. "Surely you know this already. Untold numbers of our people, tens-of-thousands, have already been killed with thousands more enslaved. The Romans care nothing for the rivalries between our respective tribes and factions. They will destroy all unless we stand together. And while I did at one time follow your enemy, Simon bar Giora, I come to you now as my own man, in the spirit of friendship and mutual salvation." He let his words sink in for a moment, and it seemed as if John was weighing his options carefully.

"It is said," Joseph continued, "that you command the loyalty of over fifty thousand men. Bring them to Gamala, and while my garrison ties them down in a bloody siege, your fighters can envelope them on the high ground and cut them to pieces."

He first thought to mention the similarity with the ambush at Beth Horon, which had seen the previous Roman invasion force nearly destroyed. However, since Simon bar Giora had played such a prominent role in that particular battle, Joseph felt it prudent to not say anything more.

"Commanding loyalties and marshaling an army are not the same thing, my friend," John replied. His voice was full of compassion and

understanding, while at the same time rather direct in letting his potential ally understand his position. “I have men scattered throughout all of the northern Jewish lands, from Tyrus down to Nazareth. My eyes and ears are everywhere, and I know the Roman army’s movements almost as soon as they do. That being said, I cannot simply snap my fingers and have an army ready to face the empire in battle. And even if I did, to fight them out in the open would be suicidal, as you should know.”

“I am not asking you to fight them in the open,” Joseph retorted, becoming exacerbated. He did not wish to fall into an argument with the Giscalan, especially if his whole reason for coming was proven to be in vain. He then produced the message from Chares. “Here, take this. It is from Chares of Gamala, a man who has been fighting for a free Judea since before you or I were even born.”

“Yes, I know his reputation well,” John replied, reading the note. It was a well-written plea for assistance, while avoiding the irritating habit so many had of either being overly flattering or prostrating themselves with undignified begging.

“Chares has pledged his life since he was old enough to carry a sword, to free all Jews from oppression, not just those of Gamala.” Joseph’s words were passionate, and even Levi and the gathered warriors found themselves moved by his implorations. “Can you not spare any help for my people?”

“I never said I wouldn’t help,” John replied smoothly, as he rolled up the scroll and set it on the table. “I merely stated the impossibility of my rallying an entire army. As you know, I must also look to the defenses of my own city, but I will confess that your plan does have merit. A decisive victory over the Romans will bring freedom to all our peoples, as well as raising the stock greatly of those who lead them.”

“So you will help us then?” Joseph’s demeanor had quickly changed from one of despair to one of hope.

John slowly nodded. “I will do all that I can,” he said, rising up from his chair. “I cannot muster an army, but I know that I can have up to ten thousand fighters ready for battle within a few days. Think you can keep Vespasian at bay for that long?”

“I rode all through the night to get here,” Joseph replied, “and from what I could see, their army is not on the move yet. I ask that you keep an eye on Gamala. When their legions attack our walls, I pray you will be there to attack them from the hills.” He extended his hand, which John readily

accepted. This tepid show of support was more than Joseph had anticipated, and he did not wish to press his good fortune any further.

"You are clearly exhausted and should rest a day or two," John noted.

"I admit, I have not slept in nearly three days," Joseph replied. "I will accept your offer of rest, but I must return to Gamala by this evening."

His body and mind completely spent, the commander of the Gamala garrison allowed himself to be escorted out of John's house by a pair of warriors, who led him to an inn near the city gates. John, meantime, returned to his seat, folded his arms, and started to chuckle quietly to himself.

"What would you have of us?" Levi asked, not knowing his leader's intentions. "Shall we start mustering our forces to reinforce Gamala?"

"No," John answered, shaking his head. He then noted Levi's puzzled expression. "You must understand," he explained, "Joseph ben Joshua is still a follower of our enemy, Simon bar Giora. As such, he is no friend to us, regardless of our mutual enmity with the Romans. Were the roles reversed, and I asked him to send warriors to help defend Giscala, he would laugh cruelly in my face and say that our destruction was the will of God."

"So what do we do, then?" Levi asked, trying his best to understand John's rationale.

"For now, nothing. These people, who come begging for help now, will just as soon knife us in the back as soon as the Romans have left Judea."

"But supposing Gamala succeeds against Vespasian?" Levi persisted. "Will they not gather their allies to exact their revenge on us for not coming to their aid?"

"Levi, my friend," John replied consolingly, "you understand even better than I do the destructive power of Vespasian's army. Do you really think Joseph and Chares' miserable little garrison can possibly withstand their onslaught? Oh, I have no doubt they'll make a brave showing of it, and good on them. Roman soldiers will die taking their walls, but when it's all over, Gamala will lay in ruins, and we'll have one less rival to concern ourselves with."

"It's just like Jesus bar Shaphat," Levi added with a nod of understanding.

"Precisely," John replied. "I don't know whether that incompetent bastard was killed or enslaved when Taricheae fell, and I really don't care. What I do know is he is no longer a threat to us. And once the Romans take Gamala, our nemesis, Simon bar Giora, will be deprived of some of his closest allies in

Galilee and northern Judea.”

Levi knew it was a wicked misrepresentation, to send Joseph back to Gamala under the false pretense of reinforcements coming from Giscala. He also suspected his leader’s words to be true; the rebels of Gamala would not be nearly so charitable, should Giscala come under siege first.

He also knew that John was, in fact, attempting to rally an army to Giscala, though not for the defense of the city. Both men knew it would be utterly futile to try and hold against the legions. The battle for liberty would not be decided in Galilee, but far to the south. John of Giscala had done a masterful job of allowing the other zealot factions to bleed, while his forces remained mostly unscathed. There would be much bloodletting for his forces in the coming year, though not against the Romans just yet. Rather, there would be a violent purging of those who stood in the way of his rightful place as the leader of free Judea.

Chapter XV: A Hellish Siege

Gamala, on the Golan Heights
5 October 67 A.D.

Ruins of Gamala

As the siege detachment made its way along the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, Optio Gaius Artorius noted the change in terrain on the trek east, towards Gamala. The barren, arid hills gave way to lush fields fed by numerous streams and tributaries. The lands around the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee were mostly green and lush; the hills covered with shrubs, sagebrush, and tall grass. It was also much steeper than what they'd previously come through, the amount of undergrowth forcing the army into a single column along the road that wound its way gradually east.

The road was wide enough for perhaps six legionaries to walk abreast, although the siege wagons had to march single file. And while it was only a portion of their total force, Vespasian still had over ten thousand infantrymen, along with the army's entire train of catapults and ballistae. The more restrictive terrain confined them mostly to the roads and made their march column extremely long, stretching over three miles from end to end. The steepness of the hills was quickly becoming a great hindrance, slowing their pace to a virtual crawl. While a legion could typically march twenty to twenty-five miles in a day, depending on the terrain and roads, the division

headed for Gamala barely covered half that.

Gaius rode at the back of his century. While he normally would ride up and down the column, as would Centurion Nicanor, the fact that the army was so compressed on the road made this impossible. And as the squads for their century were all understrength, each managed to march with all of their soldiers abreast. The pack animal for each squad walked behind them, led by servants. Though imperial soldiers tended to be well-muscled and in phenomenal physical condition, the constant climbing up and down the large hills had many grumbling about the burning in their legs, with all drenched in sweat within the first mile.

As the signifier marched up front with the centurion, Tesserarius Julius had elected to walk at the back of the formation near the optio. Due to the nature of their respective duty positions, both Julius and Gaius were compelled to work in closer proximity to each other on a daily basis. As such, they had gotten to know one another far better than when Gaius was still a decanus. He had been relieved to find that his concerns about potential jealousy or animosity from the tesserarius, regarding his selecting for promotion to optio over him, had proven to be unfounded. Subsequently, he had not only formed a stronger working bond with Julius, but in some ways he was beginning to regard the old soldier as a friend. Due to the tesserarius' hearing difficulties, combined with Gaius taking advantage of the privilege offered to his rank of riding a horse, the two were unable to converse much during the long trek.

Two days later the ground leveled out some, and the marching soldiers felt a brief sense of reprieve. The sounds of rushing water alerted Vespasian and his command staff, who rode just behind one of the lead cohorts.

"Nehar haYarden," Josephus said, as the wide river came into view.

"The River Jordan," King Agrippa translated.

Vespasian nodded, having also recognized it from his maps. They were within a day's trek of Gamala, and the commanding general was anxious to take the fight to the rebels once again.

Josephus and the king had said little to each other, and each felt a little awkward being in the other's presence. Josephus knew Agrippa viewed him as a traitor, who felt that his turning against the rebellion meant neither side

could trust him. In turn, Agrippa understood that the former rebel general viewed him as a phony king, who was little more than a puppet of the Roman Empire. This would not have made Agrippa uncomfortable were it not for the fact that, in many ways, he privately concurred with this unflattering assessment. Still, while he did not trust Josephus in the slightest, for he seemed almost too eager to help the Romans, the intelligence he provided had proven accurate thus far. He knew much about the inner defenses of each city that the king did not.

As the army approached a narrow bridge that spanned the wide river flowing into the Sea of Galilee, Vespasian and his entourage crossed and then took advantage of an open grassy field that allowed them to get off the road and observe the army as it crossed.

The general was a little concerned as to the bridge holding up under the weight of the siege train, particularly the overloaded wagons carrying heavy ballistae stones.

“My brother once transported a large wagon full of amphorae of olive oil across this bridge, on his way to Giscala,” Josephus noted. “Of course, that was ten years ago. Still, I am confident the bridge will hold.”

“All the same, I’m ordering the escorts to hand carry at least half the ammunition across,” the commanding general replied.

It would slow the column down considerably, and the soldiers tasked with carrying a twenty to forty pound stone would undoubtedly complain voraciously. Still, Vespasian was not taking any chances. He had already decided to camp on the plain just across the river, with the division finishing its journey the following morning. He said as much, and then dismissed Josephus, who was escorted by a pair of cavalrymen to where his tent would be erected that evening.

“We’ve sent riders ahead to scout the road leading to the city,” Trajan said, as he rode over to his commanding general. “What word do we have on the enemy’s strength at Gamala?”

“According to Josephus,” Vespasian replied, causing King Agrippa’s face to twitch, “the garrison has between three and five thousand fighters and probably another five to ten thousand citizens and refugees.”

“That was our assessment, as well,” the king acknowledged with a sigh of reluctant concurrence.

“I understand your mistrust of our new charge,” Vespasian remarked, picking up on the subtle resignation in Agrippa’s tone. “He has not led us

astray yet, and if he does, he knows that scourging and the crucifix awaits him. Whatever his motives, I doubt he would have worked so diligently to outwit the others who committed suicide in that well, only to betray us later."

"Perhaps I mistrust him because I have only seen him a few times," Agrippa said. "And he seems almost too anxious to prove his usefulness to us. But there is much about the Jewish people I do not understand." He noted Vespasian's puzzled expression. "Come now, your centurion, what's his name…"

"Nicanor," Trajan answered.

"Yes," Agrippa nodded. "He knows the Judeans far better than I do, for at least he was raised around them. Like you, I grew up in Rome. It is no small wonder that many in this land view me as a foreign king."

Vespasian said nothing, but turned his attention back to watching his army make its slow trek across the river. Engineers and surveyors had already set out markers, designating the unit placements within the camp. Each cohort and century was escorted to their position, down to where individual legionaries and auxiliary troopers knew exactly where they were supposed to be. The layout of a Roman marching camp was almost always the same, though of course terrain dictated much. In this case, the army's encampment was more linear, due to the restrictive undergrowth and slopes of hills. The lead elements were positioned more than two miles east of the river. Lookouts were posted on the hills to prevent their forces from being assailed from the heights.

Soldiers, as soon as they grounded their packs, immediately began digging the required trench, using the earth to build the subsequent palisade around the camp. Given the fertility of the plain, the ground was easy to dig up. However, it was also very wet, and when those on the western side had dug less than two feet down they found the water table. Knowing there was nothing for it, they continued to dig, while standing in an ever-growing trench full of water. By the time they finished, those tasked with entrenchment were covered in sticky mud. Thankfully, with the river close by, they could wash themselves, as well as their tunics and equipment.

At the same time as the trench digging and palisade building, other soldiers within each century were being directed by their decanii where to erect their tents. Still others were detailed to dig the latrine pits for each cohort; for even during a single night's stay, ten thousand men would generate a vast amount of human waste.

Whether legionary or auxilia, the Roman army moved and operated like a well-oiled machine, and Vespasian loved every aspect of it. There were many days when he would assist in the setting up of the principia tent, or even take a pickaxe and basket from a legionary and spend a couple of hours getting filthy while building the fortifications. Such actions not only made the men feel like their commanding general was one of them, but in truth, Vespasian rather enjoyed the grittier and more physically laborious tasks demanded of his soldiers. It had become a form of reprieve, which allowed the man upon whom all responsibility for the success or failure of the war fell, to let his mind relax in the monotony of physical toil.

Joseph ben Joshua had arrived in Gamala barely a day ahead of Vespasian's army. He immediately summoned the senior captains within the garrison, and all met in the antechamber at the citadel, where Chares joined them.

"What news from Giscala?" one of the captains asked nervously. "Will John send fighters to help us?"

"Or will he cower and let others die for him, like he's always done?" another asked angrily. None, least of all Joseph, trusted John of Giscala.

"He gave me his word that he would send what aid he can," the garrison commander replied. "And, in all honesty, that is the best we can hope for."

"I took the liberty of sending a pair of riders south," Chares spoke up. "I gave much thought to the words you spoke before you left, and though any attempt to garner assistance from Simon bar Giora may prove futile, at least he is a loyal ally."

"When did you dispatch them?" Joseph asked.

"The day after you departed for Giscala," the governor answered. "I have prayed fervently that God delivers them safely into the hands of our friends, and that we may be able to withstand the Roman onslaught long enough for at least some help to arrive."

Joseph addressed one of his captains. "How much food and water do we have available? How long can we last?"

"The number of refugees is stretching our resources to the limit," the man replied. "Mind you, the numbers that have fled here are much fewer than places like Jotapata. However, Gamala is not a large city, nor was it ever

meant to house so many."

"The local population is only around three to four thousand," another added. "Between our warriors and those who have fled to the safety of these walls, there are as many as fifteen thousand crammed within the city. Even with the natural spring, our water resources will dry out within a couple of weeks; a month at the most, if we ration the water carefully."

"And food is not much better," the first captain observed. "We've foraged as much as we can in the way of grain, but it will not last a prolonged siege."

"If we can hold against the Romans' initial assaults and drag them into a siege, it should be enough until help arrives," Joseph remarked.

As the men continued to discuss their overall strategy and tactics, a guardsman burst into the hall, disheveled and out of breath.

"The Romans approach from the west!" he said quickly.

"Sound the call to arms," Joseph directed one of his captains. He then spoke to the guard. "Let us have a look at our approaching adversaries."

It was a short, albeit steep, walk down from the citadel to the western wall. As Joseph stood atop, from which he could see three sides of the lower valley, he watched as the Roman army approached. Only the steep cliffs to the east could not be seen from his position, though it did not matter. They were sheer and could not be climbed except by the most adept of mountaineers.

The imperial war machine approached from various directions, and rather than being arrayed in battle formations, the rugged hills and spurs channeled them into the lower ravines. They were, therefore, compelled to remain in column formations until they reached the valley floor, just below the main hill where Gamala sat. Joseph privately lamented that he did not have any fighters up on the hills with which to harry the approaching legions. He knew that any he did send out of the city would be hard pressed to make their way back, and in reality, he needed every warrior he could muster to defend the walls. If either John or Simon could bring even a couple thousand fighters, they would make the pending siege extremely difficult for the Romans.

Though their numbers were vast, it was plain to the defenders on the walls that Vespasian had only brought a fraction of his total fighting force with him. What concerned Joseph most was not the large numbers of armored soldiers, but the wagons that rolled their way awkwardly along the rough dirt road.

"He's only brought a portion of his infantry," the garrison commander

thought aloud, “but he has every damn siege engine in his entire army with him.”

“The ground is steep and unforgiving,” one of his men said. “How do they intend to get those monstrosities in range of our walls? Do they intend to simply drag them uphill and into position?”

“Knowing their stubborn perseverance, that is exactly what they intend to do,” Joseph replied.

Three of his senior captains soon joined him, and all were filled with trepidation at the sight of the imperial soldiers as they filed into the valley. Some began digging the earthworks, while others erected tents, and still more fanned out into the ravines and trenches that encircled the hill. Joseph’s eyes were still fixed on the long column of wagons that bore catapults and scorpions, along with many more that carried troves of ammunition for the monstrous weapons.

“My intent was to not face the Romans beyond these walls,” he muttered. “But I fear we must, if we stand any chance of stopping them from bringing their hellish machines to bear against us.”

Vespasian had arrayed the legions with the Fifteenth to the east, facing towards the highest tower of the city. The Fifth Legion commanded the front that faced towards the middle of the city, with the cohorts from the Tenth filling in the ditches and valleys.

“Here we are, then,” Nicanor said, as he rode down the line of soldiers to where he found Gaius and Julius at the end of the century. The centurion nodded towards the imposing hilltop. “Two steep sides and a third that is completely impassible, with a bloody wall surrounding the defenses.”

“Getting in there is going to be a fucking nightmare,” Julius muttered, as he eyed the defenses.

The city of Gamala primarily covered one side of the hill, and as it was built on such a steep slope, many of the buildings leading up to the peak were visible even from the valley floor. The walls appeared to stand about fifteen feet high, although this was compounded by the grade of the hill. There were also round towers about every fifty to one hundred feet.

“Nicanor!” Centurion Galeo shouted, as he rode up on his horse. “I’m placing you on the extreme left of the cohort. You’ll anchor off the right of

the Seventh Cohort, the rest of our lads falling in to your right."

"Yes, sir," Nicanor acknowledged with a salute.

"I'll start emplacing the lads," his optio added, as he turned to find the Seventh Cohort.

"This is shit!" Gaius heard a legionary complain a few minutes later, as he walked along the sandy floor of one of the long trenches.

"Seventh Cohort?" the optio asked, loud enough to startle the soldiers who were standing in the trench, trying to figure a way to see over the edge.

"Yes, sir," the grumbling legionary said, snapping to attention.

Before they could say any more, Gaius noted a centurion walking towards him, and he gave a quick salute to the officer.

"Optio Artorius, Fifth Cohort, sir," he explained. "My pilus prior has ordered us to anchor off your extreme right."

"We're still extending our line out," the centurion replied. He pointed to a short mound about fifty feet behind Gaius. "We'll go as far as that rise in the ground, you can start your line there."

"Very good, sir."

"Also, let your cohort commander know that General Vespasian wants a thorough report of each sector with any possible ways out of the city," the centurion added.

Gaius nodded in reply, and while he was certain Centurion Galeo was already well aware of this, he confirmed to the officer from the Seventh Cohort that he would remind him. He turned to see that several of the decanii had followed him, including Sergeant Quintus.

"Emplace your squad just on the other side of the rise," Gaius ordered. "We'll establish the palisade on the upper side, towards the city."

"Understood," Quintus replied. "Centurion Nicanor has directed that we also have roving guards walking the trench at all times. We'll coordinate this with the tesserarius."

Gaius nodded, told the decanus to carry on, and walked back towards the center of the cohort's line. He sometimes had to remind himself that it was no longer his place to direct the actions of individual legionaries; that was up to their decanii to ensure all followed their orders and met the commander's intent. In fact, outside of coordinating with the unit on their left and directing where the century's sector began, Gaius had no further direct responsibilities to attend to. All work details were supervised by both the decanii, who in turn reported to Tesserarius Julius.

As he walked out of the trench, which led to another short rise and down into a low lying valley, Gaius quietly observed the scores of legionaries who went about their duties in establishing the camp. Given that the terrain precluded them from setting up a normal, well-organized marching camp, the soldiers were having to improvise as best as they were able. And while the ground they had dug the night before had been muddy, here it was the more familiar dry dirt and sand, which filled the air with a light cloud of dust as the soldiers dug out the necessary fortifications. The camp was haphazard, but at least it encircled the entire mountain Gamala sat perched upon.

Near the center of the Fifteenth Legion's encampment, Vespasian gathered the officers who would coordinate the pending assault upon Gamala. In addition to General Trajan, Chief Tribune Domitius was present, as was the master centurion from the Fifth Legion.

"It is going to be very difficult to get our siege engines close enough," Trajan noted, as they scanned the hill that was near vertical in places. "Any missile troops they have will enjoy a decided range advantage while we try and emplace them."

"Which is why we will use a stratagem I first employed twenty-four years ago," Vespasian replied. "It will be slow going, extremely labor-intensive, and difficult to coordinate. However, it is the only option I can see to get our catapults and ballistae into position without incurring unnecessary losses amongst men and machines." He then looked to King Agrippa. "But first, our good friend, the king, will give these people one last chance to avoid annihilation."

"I will do all I can," Agrippa asserted. "Let us hope they have not been entirely corrupted by the seditionists and robbers."

Josephus watched the encirclement of Gamala from near the entrance of his tent, just a few dozen feet behind where Vespasian and his entourage gathered. He scanned the heights and assessed the viability of the defenses. His arms were folded across his chest, and he was taking in all he could, before he started back on his writings that evening. While he spent some time working on the early histories between Rome and Judea, he was mostly scribbling notes every night as to the actual events as they transpired

throughout the campaign.

"It is a good position," he said, as he saw Nicanor walking towards him, out of the corner of his eye.

"That it is," the centurion concurred, gazing up the hill towards the wall. "Think they can hold us for long?"

"They lack the resources to survive a long siege," Josephus noted. "That is, unless their foraging expeditions have paid greater dividends than anything I was able to manage in all of Galilee."

"Well, time is not exactly on our side, either," Nicanor observed. "If we do not take those heights by the time the winter rains come in another month or so, we'll be flooded out of this place."

"Let us hope they listen to the king's entreaties," the former Jewish rebel stated. "While they do not have the manpower or resources to defeat you, should you be forced to attack those heights you can expect a lot of your soldiers to die before the citadel falls."

It was a somber assessment for Nicanor, for as a centurion, he would be directly leading his men in any assault upon the city's defenses. The letters he'd been compelled to write to the families of his soldiers who were slain in battle had been mercifully few so far.

"Do you think they'll listen to reason?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," Josephus replied, after pausing for a moment in contemplation. "Their numbers are fewer than what I had at Jotapata, yet they may still view the terrain as enough of an advantage over your forces. I also know that the people of Gamala are far more restless and anxious for liberty from the rule of the Herodians. Therefore, I doubt that Agrippa will get much sympathy from the defenders. Our best hope is they realize that unless they surrender, death awaits them all."

Chapter XVI: Engines of War

Gamala, on the Golan Heights
6 October 67 A.D.
***

The blaring of trumpets echoed off the hills surrounding Gamala, announcing the presence of King Agrippa II. Accompanied by General Jacimus and twenty of his personal guard, the king started to make his way up the road towards the western gate of the city. Vespasian and Trajan followed, escorted by a century of legionaries. They remained about twenty meters back from the king's entourage, both out of deference and as a matter of safety, should the rebels decide to launch a surprise attack against their rightful monarch. Josephus also stood with the Romans, namely to act as interpreter, since the king and those within Gamala would undoubtedly be speaking to each other in Hebrew or Aramaic, which none of the Romans spoke. The general had thought to bring Nicanor with them, though as Trajan noted, the centurion had numerous duties to attend to already as commander of a century, while Vespasian had his own translator readily available in Josephus.

For General Jacimus, his stomach turned in knots, as his mind was consumed by the thought of his granddaughters trapped within that infernal place. He said nothing of his tribulations to either the king or the Romans, for he would garner a small measure of sympathy and a large amount of suspicion. The Jewish general was extremely loyal to his king and nation, yet he could not help but be deeply vexed with worry for his beloved grandchildren.

At the sounding of the trumpets, the walls were soon swarming with warriors from the garrison. Though there were only a handful of archers, there were many who carried slings in addition to their melee weapons.

"People of Gamala!" Agrippa called up to the walls. *"It is your king who stands before you. Do you know me?"*

"Roman scum!" a voice shouted down from the wall. "You dress and talk like them, you were raised in their court, and yet you pretend to be a Jew! Piss on you, Marcus Julius Agrippa, the self-proclaimed King of the Jews, who doesn't even bear a Jewish name!"

“I know you,” the king said, maintaining his composure. “You are the one called Chares, a zealot and disciple of the murderer, Jesus bar Abbas.”

“At least I acknowledge who and what I am!” Chares spat back at him. “I paid for my crimes, yet you continue to lavish yourself with gifts of the oppressors, the scraps of their tables, while your soul wallows in the filth of corruption. It is by the will of God that I now lead the people of Gamala to a new age of freedom, one devoid of foreign emperors and pretender kings!”

“It is the name of the Lord which you defile with your insolence,” Agrippa retorted. “I, like my father who you all adored, was raised in Rome. Yet I am still of the line of Herod and, therefore, your rightful king. And it is by my authority, anointed by God, that I offer you a chance for clemency and peace; this, despite your previous blasphemies and assaults upon my soldiers.”

“I defy you, pretender king!” Chares shouted back. “Try and dislodge us from these walls, and we shall see who God favors.”

“If you force the hand of our Roman allies, there will be no mercy,” the king emphasized. “Every man, woman, and child will either be killed or sold into bondage. Gamala will simply cease to exist. You *know* the destruction their machines are capable of! How can you sentence our people to such a fate while claiming to be doing God’s will?”

“Be gone, demons from hell!” Chares shouted, signaling to his men on the wall. “Back into the pit with you!”

A barrage of sling stones was loosed from the wall, along with a spattering of arrows. Jacimus grabbed his king by the shoulder and pulled him behind the wall of infantrymen, who had quickly raised their shields up protectively. A stone smashed into Agrippa’s elbow, causing him to double over and clutch his arm. Upon subsequent orders from the Judean general, the king’s guard slowly withdrew, rocks and the occasional arrow deflecting off their shields, while insults and shouts of defiance rained down from above.

“Well, that settles it,” Vespasian said calmly, before Josephus had finished translating the rebels’ last shouts of defiance. “Time to teach these people a lesson they will not live long enough to profit from.”

Legionaries and artillery crews stood by the catapults and ballistae. Those from the Fifteenth Legion were at least partially able to see the display taking

place near the western gate. As the king and his entourage withdrew, the ominous sounding of two long trumpet blasts was echoed throughout the valley.

"It would seem negotiations have failed," Nicanor noted to his principle officers, who had not been able to see what transpired from their position. He then addressed the entire century. *"Stand by to advance!"*

About half the century was tasked with assisting the artillery crews, the rest providing security and protection from enemy skirmishers. The number of men required to advance the siege engines proved cumbersome, though the ever-grumbling soldiers admitted it was preferable to attack uphill over open ground, than to attempt to scale the high walls while under bombardment from the defenders, without any kind of artillery support.

Normally, a two-man scorpion crew could carry both weapon and stand, along with a large basket of bolts, by themselves. Advancing up the slopes towards Gamala, two men were required to carry each scorpion, with another pair hefting the support stand. Two more hauled the baskets of bolts, which were cumbersome, especially when scaling up the steep, unstable ground. For the onager catapult crews, it was even worse. As Vespasian had ordered the heavy weapons to be ready to fire at any moment, they were taken down from their wagons and carried, or in most cases dragged, by a dozen sets of hands up the hill. Ammunition wagons followed closely behind, with additional soldiers walking beside to ferry the large stones forward, as needed. In many cases, the draught animals simply could not pull the wagons past the various holes and large stands of sagebrush, which required even more soldiers to get behind the heavy carts and push them through. For this phase of the assault, there was little in the way of strategy or finesse. This required simple brute force.

As Vespasian rode his horse along the line of his advancing army, it appeared that half of his men were tasked with hauling the artillery forward. Only the large siege ballistae were left at camp, as they were simply too massive to move up the sheer climb. The old general then thought back to the siege where he'd first employed this tactic, of advancing the artillery simultaneously with infantry. It was in Britannia, during the initial conquest, when the then-commanding legate of the Second Legion had required both ingenuity and brawn from his soldiers during a siege. The hill fort there was known to the locals as Mai Dun and had been similar in steepness to Gamala. However, Mai Dun had only wooden barricades at the top, and the

surrounding terrain was mostly open grassland. Conversely, trees and large sagebrush stands dominated the slopes of Gamala, along with deep holes and gouges in the mountainside, greatly impeding the progress of his forces.

And while legionaries normally advanced in silence, the scene below—for Vespasian had ridden to the ridge of a large hill that dominated the valley—was a cacophony of chaotic noise. Orders were shouted by officers as they guided the artillery crews and supporting legionaries over and around the various obstacles they encountered. It was brutally toilsome work, yet the commander-in-chief knew his men would be relieved, once the siege engines were in position to unleash hell upon the defiant rebels within Gamala.

Despite his status as an optio, Gaius had taken up a position on one of the onagers and was helping his men carry it up the hill. All legionaries who were directly assisting artillery crewmen had placed their shields on the ammunition wagon, enabling them to defend the machines at a moment's notice. Skirmishers and archers walked ahead of them, supported by additional squads of legionaries.

The going was slow, with the sun starting to crest the eastern hills. Despite it being early fall, the temperature would soon become sweltering for the soldiers in their metal armor. The men with Gaius were jarred as the onager smashed into a large sagebrush stand. With grunts and a few choice words of profanity, they hefted the machine up on their shoulders and heaved the catapult over the obstacle. They quickly set it down for a moment, panting with the extreme exertion. The optio allowed the men a brief moment to drink some water and catch their collective breaths.

"Here they come!" a soldier shouted, just as Gaius and his team made ready to heft the onager once more.

The optio looked up, sweat already dripping into his eyes, as hundreds of Judean fighters swarmed down the hill. Archers, of their own volition, quickly notched arrows and started to bring down individual warriors. With the terrain scattering the Roman skirmishers and missile troops, there was no means of bringing concentrated volleys against their assailants.

"Down!" shouted the onager section leader, as the team quickly dropped the catapult. Gaius and his legionaries, their arms and backs stiff from the exertion, lumbered over to the wagon to retrieve their shields.

Sling stones and short throwing spears rained down from the enemy skirmishers, pelting the legionaries and the artillery crews. While most were deflected harmlessly off their armor, one man screamed in pain as a sling stone smashed into his face. Several archers, who were less protected than the heavy infantry, were felled by darts and sling stones.

Many of the Jewish fighters carried hand axes and large hammers with which they intended to break apart the Roman siege machines. One warrior brought his axe down in a hard chop on the front cross brace of an onager, just as a legionary stepped around and plunged his pilum into the man's stomach. Unable to retrieve the javelin, the soldier quickly drew his gladius as a number of his companions let loose their pila, bringing down several warriors before joining the fray.

"Form up on me!" Gaius shouted, as he held his gladius high. Twenty legionaries quickly aligned themselves into two ranks off to the optio's left. About half had already thrown their javelins, and the rest did so as a mass of Jewish warriors swarmed them. The high ground gave the defenders a decisive advantage, though this was negated by the superior armor and skill of the Romans. Swords, axes, and clubs smashed against the shield wall, with legionaries attempting to find enemy flesh with their gladii.

After a few minutes, a stalemate ensued, with neither side able to gain advantage over the other. The Romans had prevented the rebels from breaking their siege engines; however, with their infantry committed to defending the heavy machines and the rebels firmly in control of the high ground, they could not advance any further. Then Vespasian's plan was put into action, artillery section leaders having been briefed before the advance.

"Set elevation to one quarter!" an onager section leader ordered. He looked over his shoulder. *"Advance the stone!"*

As a pair of crewmen cranked the levers that pulled back the throwing arm, another carried a twenty pound stone from the cart.

"Elevation set!" a crewman shouted.

With the throwing arm still mostly raised, it took three men to heft the stone into the basket.

"Adjust left," the section leader directed. His men shifted the catapult, dragging up gouts of dirt and sand until it faced towards a large mass of fighters that were engaging a number of legionaries and auxilia infantry. He made a few mental calculations. "Give the elevation two more clicks. I don't

want to risk hitting our own lads."

Pry bars cranked the throwing arm back until the gear clicked twice more.

"That should do it…*Fire!"*

With a loud slap, the throwing arm slammed into the support beam, sending the heavy stone flying in a high arc. Since they had only pulled the arm back to a quarter of its potential, there was a measure of apprehension that the stone would not go far enough, as it wobbled in the air. This proved unfounded. It landed just past the band of rebels, sending up clods of dirt and shards of rock. Still, this startled the already frayed nerves of the enemy fighters. Other onager crews took the initiative and unleashed their own payloads in the direction of their adversaries. Solid shot and stones meant to batter walls were practically useless during a melee, especially at such close range, unless they managed to score a precise hit amongst a mass of fighters. However, the psychological effects were immediately felt, especially as one large stone smashed into the head of a Judean rebel, decapitating him in a spray of blood, brain, and bone.

In the midst of the chaos, Gaius continued his fight against a Jewish fighter that had been ongoing for the last several minutes. His adversary carried a large hammer, which he beat against the optio's shield repeatedly, trying to brain him. For his part, Gaius could only block the attempts at smashing his head in, while trying to scale the slope and get his enemy within reach of his gladius. The Jewish rebel had a decisive advantage of high ground and was light on his feet, keeping the Roman at bay, while backing up slowly.

As Gaius' frustration mounted, the warrior suddenly screamed and dropped his hammer. At first the optio could not see what had happened. Then, as blood soaked the man's tunic, Gaius saw the scorpion bolt protruding from his stomach. With eyes full of sorrow and trickles of blood streaming from the corners of his mouth, the rebel fell face first onto the scrub-covered hill.

All along the Roman axis of attack, crews had set up their scorpions. While unable to wreak the same amount of destruction as an onager when it came to assailing an enemy stronghold, at close range against melee troops they were a fearsome weapon. The auxiliary archers had been driven back by the Jewish skirmishers and infantry, but were now reforming under the berating of their officers. Groups of men took up positions around the scorpions, sending volleys of arrows over the heads of the legionaries and

into the bands of enemy warriors.

The tide soon turned, and bands of zealots started to scamper back up the slope, all the while being harangued by archer and scorpion alike. Scores lay dead, and over a hundred badly wounded were left to the mercy of the Romans.

At approximately two hundred meters from the wall, the order was passed along for the catapults to emplace and earthworks be thrown up. Legionaries, who had helped carry the heavy machines, now had to set about digging the long entrenchment and palisade that would create a new siege line around the accessible points of the city. Artillery crews, in turn, set about building stable platforms out of the dirt and rock, which would provide stability, as well as leveling their catapults to improve range and accuracy.

"Three men from each squad will return to camp and bring up their entrenching equipment," Gaius ordered. "The rest will provide security."

Archers and light skirmishers were now able to form up into a more organized line, in support of the machines and legionaries. Scorpions, which did not require platforms to shoot from, were quickly brought forward and emplaced at wide intervals all along the designated siege line. As the decisive advantage given to the defenders by the high ground negated the scorpions' superior range, they were unable to fire upon the walls themselves but were simply there in support, should the enemy attempt to send out additional sorties.

With onagers and scorpions emplaced, somewhat haphazardly, around the accessible slopes of Gamala, the citizens could do little but attempt to find shelter within their homes as the bombardment soon commenced. Screams of terror echoed off the hills as the first wave of catapult rocks smashed into the ramparts with a menacing crash.

"A hard slog that was," Gaius said, as he took a long drink off his near-empty water bladder. He removed his helmet and ran his sweaty forearm across his equally dampened brow. He then gave a sniff. "Damn, but I stink!"

"At least we got the catapults in place," Julius replied, nodding towards the nearest machine, where the crew had just finished loading a heavy stone into the throwing sling.

"Fire!" shouted the section leader. With a loud slap, the boulder flew in a

high arc, smashing into the upper rampart of the wall in a spray of rock, mortar, and dust.

"We're scattered all along this hill," Gaius said, as he scanned to their left and right. Legionaries and auxiliary archers had formed up in small groups around the heavy weapons in order to protect them from any further sorties by the defenders, while others returned in small groups with their pickaxes and other entrenching tools.

The optio turned to his tesserarius. "Stay here and get accountability on our lads. I'll find Centurion Nicanor and see if he has any further orders for us."

"Understood," Julius replied. He then added, "Once I find enough of our soldiers, I'm going to dispatch teams back to the camp to restock on water and bring some dry rations forward. We haven't eaten since breakfast, and no doubt everyone is almost out of water."

Gaius nodded and then set out to find his centurion, who he'd last seen somewhere off to his right, near a section of scorpions. He hated the unorganized confusion of it all! The nature of their mission, combined with the unrelenting terrain, had compelled units to cross paths. Now elements from various cohorts were mingled together, with officers trying to sort their men out from each other. Complicating this was the fact that in full armor with helmets donned, legionaries tended to look alike from a distance. Gaius could only attempt to spot the different signums of the various centuries scattered about.

The hillside was literally covered with small groups of legionaries, ammunition wagons, and artillery crews, along with scores of dead and wounded. Many of these were Jewish rebels, although their skirmishers had inflicted a toll on their Roman adversaries as well. One of the more hateful tasks for legionaries was the sorting of the dead from the wounded amongst their friends.

"Optio Artorius!" The voice of his signifier startled him. Gaius saw Aurelian walking up the slope, the signum still draped over his shoulder.

"Still amongst the living," Gaius noted with a trace of dark humor.

"I'd rather have carried a shield and gladius than this damn thing," the signifier muttered.

Though he never said anything in front of the men, Aurelian detested being the signifier when it came time for battle. He'd only been promoted when their late centurion, Marius, discovered he was quite keen on

mathematics and that his father had been a banker. Aurelian enjoyed his daily duties as both administrative clerk and pay master for the century. His wages were also more than double that of a legionary, plus his rank placed him as third-in-command of the century. However, when it came time to fight, he was relegated to carrying the standard and relaying visual signals instead of fighting on the line with his mates.

"Where's Centurion Nicanor?" Gaius asked, ignoring the signifier's grumbling.

"He's just a little ways up the line," Aurelian replied with a nod to his right. "He sent me to come find you. He's got a few of the men handling some rebel prisoners and needs us to establish a rally point for the rest of the century. The overall siege line has been designated…sort of. It's damned difficult to know exactly who is supposed to be where in this fucking mess."

Gaius pointed back the way he came. "You'll find Julius and about a third of our lads up that way," he said. "I've got them bringing up their entrenching equipment now, along with some food and water."

About a hundred meters from where he'd found the signifier, on the other side of a small spur jutting out from the hill, Gaius finally found Nicanor and about twenty of their legionaries. Three badly injured rebels lay face down on the ground, their hands bound behind their backs. A fourth was being severely beaten by a legionary, who was using the pommel of his gladius to smash the man's face and head.

"By Juno's cunt, the son of a bitch bit me!" the soldier exclaimed as he stood and spat on the bloodied and battered Jewish warrior.

Through his mangled face and broken teeth, the man looked up and smiled at the legionary, who was holding the bleeding gash on his calf. "Mars knows what filthy diseases this fucking heathen is carrying!"

"Well if your leg rots off, we'll know," another soldier chuckled.

"Poor bastard likely knows he's for the crucifix and thought he'd make a good show beforehand," Gaius reckoned.

"Go see the medics and get that thing cleaned and stitched," Nicanor ordered the soldier, who saluted and limped his way down the hill towards the main camp, spewing harsh profanities the entire way.

"Any other casualties?" Gaius asked, as he joined the men.

Soldiers were dragging away the prisoners, including the badly bludgeoned biter, with one legionary stating, "This bloody twat will not get off easy with a quick death!"

“A few injuries brought on by their skirmishers,” Nicanor replied to his optio. “One of the boys has a broken nose, but that’s about the worst of it. We got off fairly lucky.” He nodded towards the body of a dead scorpion crewman, who had a throwing spear protruding from his chest, to emphasize this.

“We were escorting three scorpions, when one of the gunners took a throwing dart right through the heart just as they were setting up,” the centurion explained. “I’m a little out of practice, not having shot a scorpion in probably ten years. However, as I was closest, I manned the weapon and had the decanii bring their men in close enough to keep those zealot bastards off us.” He shrugged nonchalantly. “I did manage to shoot down two of them and got a third right through the thigh bone. His mates drug him off, but I imagine he won’t be long for this world with that badly mangled limb.”

Gaius let out a quiet sigh of relief, glad as he was that they had not taken it any worse during the chaotic slog up the hill. Since his promotion to optio, the level of stress he placed upon himself had increased substantially. Before every engagement, he silently prayed to whatever gods may be listening that his lads would be spared the torments of death or maiming in battle. In a way it was hypocritical, for the purpose of legionaries was to inflict death upon Rome’s enemies, and each soldier who joined the ranks understood the extreme risks they took. No doubt the deities of their enemies heard equally fervent prayers from their warriors. The optio could not help but wonder if, at the end of the day, the gods simply allowed men to kill each other without showing divine bias or even concern. Whether a man was a pious believer or nihilistic atheist, the fates cared little who died gruesomely in battle, or who the victors were when it was all over.

“Do we have any additional orders?” Gaius asked.

“Just to hold in place for now,” the centurion answered. “Since we have three possible avenues of approach into the city, Vespasian wants three battering rams made ready. Right now, we only have one, so I imagine it will be at least a day or so before the other two are ready. Meantime, we’ll improve the palisades at the main camp, as well as the defensive works for the siege engines. Centurion Galeo is coordinating with the pilus priors on our left and right flanks, trying to sort out their legionaries from ours.”

“It looks like a giant cluster fuck at the moment,” Gaius chuckled. “Yet, when it’s all said and done, the Roman army at its most disorganized is still far better managed than those we fight.”

Nicanor gave an appreciative grin. So far, their foes had made no further attempts at attacking their machines, which were now unleashing a continuous, punishing bombardment upon the city. He hoped they would break soon.

A warrior wrapped a rag around Joseph's upper right arm. A scorpion bolt had grazed him, and while it was painful, the wound was only superficial; far better than the poor man who'd been standing too close to their commander and taken the bolt through the lung. It had taken the stricken fighter several minutes to die, during which he cried out both prayers and curses, along with sobs of lamentation, that he would never see his beloved wife or children again. It was sad and pathetic to watch, yet all knew that even the bravest were rendered to such pitiful wrecks when such a death came in all of its brutal misery.

"The Romans have us completely encircled," one of his captains observed. "The valley floor, just beneath the cliff face, is the only place not completely blockaded. And we all know it is nearly impossible to scale, up or down."

"We'll not run from the Romans," Joseph said, grimacing as the bandage was tightened around his arm. "But it will take more than just our fighters if we are to have any success against them. Their machines may hammer our walls, but they will have to enter the city sooner rather than later."

"What are you proposing?" the captain asked.

"We must mobilize the entire city," his commander said. "Every man, woman, and yes…child, needs to be armed for battle. If our women wish to live free, rather than as whores in imperial chains, then they must join us in this struggle for our very existence."

"They won't be properly armed," the captain noted. "But then again, neither are most of our warriors."

"Gardening tools can be made into instruments of war," Joseph noted. "Clubs and spears fashioned from timber and stone. The city sits on a steep hill, and the streets are narrow. Let the Romans come into Gamala, and let the streets run red with the blood of their soldiers!"

Over the following day, the Roman catapults continued their ceaseless bombardment of the walls. The ramparts were left in ruins, littered with the smashed and bloodied corpses of those who were either brave or foolish enough to attempt to man them.

Joseph soon ordered his men to stay away from the walls, even though it was maddening not being able to see what the Romans were doing. The citadel gave the best vantage, though it offered only a sufficient view of the western wall. Chares watched from above as the large battering ram was moved into position. Scorpions and archers had advanced forward enough to provide support, should the rebel garrison man the walls once more. Catapults had unleashed such a fury upon the city that nearly every building within twenty feet of each wall was reduced to rubble and smashed timbers.

As Chares watched the ram, which was still about a hundred feet from the wall, he heard the ominous boom coming from the south wall.

“The Romans have brought up more than one battering ram,” Joseph said, joining him at the window. “It won’t be long now.”

“I think,” Chares replied, “it is time I spoke to the people.”

Chapter XVII: Doom of the Gods

Gamala, on the Golan Heights
8 October 67 A.D.
***

It was late afternoon. The sky was mercifully thick with grey clouds, as the assault cohorts from three legions made ready to storm into the breaches being created by the battering rams. Archers and scorpions kept the defenders away from the walls, giving the illusion that the city was already broken. Many of the Romans reckoned they would simply march in and slaughter what was left of the garrison.

With Titus still away, Vespasian had elected to personally lead the assault of the Fifteenth Legion. In a brazen display of valor, much like what he had done during the attack on Mai Dun in Britannia, he carried a legionary's shield and placed himself on the battle line. It was a case of extreme bravery that bordered on madness. And yet, when the centurion leading the attack on the breach protested, the commander-in-chief simply stated, "There are times when a commanding general's life does not matter."

The rams continued to pound the walls. Each successive blow echoing off the surrounding hills. It would not be much longer.

"Fellow citizens of Gamala!" Chares spoke, his hands held high. A sword was clutched in his right hand, and his voice echoed much louder than one would think the old man capable. "My friends! The Romans come today to bring death and bondage to our people. But it is they who will bleed, for our protector is the great Jehovah, who gave our people this land thousands of years ago. But God will not save us if we do not fight for that which He has given us. Every one of us must take up the sword that we may smite those who offer death and enslavement, while daring to call it peace. *Will you fight with me?"*

A loud cheer of defiance erupted from the mass of people gathered outside the citadel. Chares and Joseph had determined that they would not make the same mistakes as Josephus, who had allowed the people of Jotapata

to become so weakened by starvation that the Romans simply walked over them, once they breached the city. The only way to fight Vespasian was to entrap his soldiers and then assail them with overwhelming force. And with the help of God, the people of Gamala would overcome the impossible. As David had slain the formidable Goliath, so too would they bring down the mighty Vespasian!

On the southern slope, Nicanor and Gaius stood ready with their century and the rest of the Fifth Cohort. The Ninth Cohort was to their front, and it would be they who first stormed into the breach, with the Fifth pressing through behind them. The blows of the ram continued to smash into the wall; great cracks formed, as stones from the palisade fell from the crumbling defenses.

“Let us hope we crush these bastards in time to be back for supper,” a legionary in front of Gaius said nervously.

The thundering of the ram slamming home again caused the soldiers to jump slightly. There was a deep gouge in the wall, and they knew it would soon come crashing down.

With the century formed up in a column, Gaius was placed at the rear of his men with Nicanor in front. If the closeness of buildings and congestion of the streets prevented the century from fighting as a single entity, then each would take charge of half their men. Julius and the decanii taking further independent command of their troops as needed. The tesserarius was in the very center of the century. He would direct which way individual squads went, once through the breach.

“If you need to piss, you’d better do so now,” the optio said as the ram smashed home once more. None of his legionaries moved; their nerves keeping them rigidly in place.

For reasons none of them could explain, every last one of them had secret forebodings about the pending assault. As this was not the first combat action for any of them, this dark sense of dread baffled them greatly. Indeed, all had taken part in the attack on Gadara, the storming of Jaffa, as well as the hellish siege of Jotapata. Even the youngest among them were now hardened veterans.

The loud crashing of stones, as the ram blasted a sizeable breach in the

wall, came as a relief to the young optio. The longer they had to reminisce and think about the pending attack, the more it weighed on everyone's nerves. With the wall shattered, and the ram being withdrawn from the gap it created, there was no more time to think; it was time to fight!

A centurion's whistle blew at the front of the Ninth Cohort and with a unified battle cry, the legionaries stormed into the cloud of billowing dust and over the great obstacle of crumbled wall in the breach.

The soldiers of the Fifth Cohort moved at a more measured pace, allowing the Ninth room to maneuver as they scrambled over the destruction wrought by the battering ram. Shields were used to balance themselves as they stumbled over the piles of jagged stone and shattered blocks.

"Cohort!" Centurion Galeo shouted, raising his gladius high as the lead elements of the Fifth clawed their way through the breach. *"Action left!"*

While the Ninth Cohort made its way straight up the long road leading towards the citadel, the Fifth advanced along the wide lane that angled off to the east. The slowly setting sun shone brightly off their armor and shield bosses. This, combined with the obscuration brought on by the still settling clouds of dust, greatly impeded their vision. They saw little in the way of people, and it wasn't until the entire cohort was spread thin, in a long column that reached all the way back to the first crossroad, that Galeo realized he had led his men into a trap.

With cries of rage and desperation, throngs of Gamala's citizens spilled forth from every building and alleyway, swarming the legionaries from all sides. While the warriors carried swords and spears, the rest of the populace wielded whatever they could find within their homes. Hand axes, butchers' cleavers, meat hooks, and a variety of clubs, carpentry and gardening tools were used to batter the Roman shield wall.

As Gaius and his legionaries towards the rear of their century faced out in either direction to repel the assault, he noticed there seemed to be an equal number of woman and men attacking them. While he could not help but respect the fact that these women were willing to fight for their survival, rather than succumbing once the men were slain, it still meant that his soldiers now had twice as many combatants to face. And whether it was a woman or a man who attempted to jam a sword into one's throat, you were as equally dead if they succeeded.

"There's too fucking many of them!" one legionary shouted, as he tried to hurl his javelin into the mob and draw his gladius.

The terribly confined space did not give any of the soldiers enough room to effectively throw their pila, so most either thrust them into the crowd or simply dropped them before drawing their blades.

As an older man smashed his rusted axe against Gaius' shield, the optio smashed the boss into his face, and then tried to make a quick assessment of their tactical situation. It appeared as if the entire column was compressed into two lines which stood back-to-back, while urgently trying to keep the mob at bay. Legionaries thrust and chopped away with their gladii, plunging their weapons into the guts of their attackers and hewing off limbs at random. Though primarily a stabbing weapon, a sharpened gladius was heavy enough that it could cleave through arm and leg bone alike.

Rather than cowing the people, the screams of pain from the maimed brought even more desperate rage, and they pressed in ever harder. Any soldiers who were unfortunate enough to lose their footing were bludgeoned or stabbed to death by the mob. As legionaries tried to keep their assailants at bay, so great were their numbers that every soldier was taking numerous blows to his helmet and armor while trying to keep his exposed face, neck, and groin from being impaled.

In battle, the Roman army was used to being outnumbered, yet when formed up into multiple ranks, those in front could rely on the support of their mates behind them. There was also the knowledge that they would be relieved every few minutes by fresh troops from the subsequent ranks. Yet, for the hapless legionaries of the Fifth Cohort, they stood on the brink of being overwhelmed by the tide of humans which engulfed them. Standing back-to-back, there simply was no way for the two lines to mutually support each other.

The column was slowly being broken apart in the desperate struggle, and Gaius watched as a number of legionaries, led by Sergeant Quintus, managed to smash in the door of a rickety house. What the optio did not know was that one of the follow-on cohorts behind them was also being overwhelmed. Its soldiers were attempting to save themselves in a similar matter. With the mass of the mob breaking up what remained of the formation, the optio found himself being forced back down the street from which they came. His soldiers slew many, yet still their attackers continued to press forward.

"Fall back!" he shouted.

Soldiers formed ranks as best as they were able while the crowd continued to press against them. Much to Gaius' dismay, the century was

now effectively split in two. Centurion Nicanor and about thirty legionaries were completely cut off and surrounded. Five to ten men were trapped with Quintus in the Jewish house, although for the moment, they appeared to have the best defensible positon. Gaius and the remaining twenty to twenty-five legionaries slowly backed down the street, battling intensely and trying to regain the initiative. Gamala's citizens were being butchered by his men, yet on they still came!

He then turned back to see the rest of the cohort engaged in a similar struggle with a number of frantic legionaries also smashing in the doors to shops and houses. These were pursued by large numbers of the enraged mob. From the rooftops, the soldiers felt they stood a far better chance. Up the street, Gaius could see Sergeant Quintus and his men standing on a roof, having formed into two ranks. They were smashing their shields into any who attempted to come up the steps, with one rebel taking the blow from a shield boss and being sent screaming over the ledge.

A loud snap sounded, which echoed all along the road, causing both Roman and Jew alike to cease for a moment in their brawling. This was followed by a loud series of groans coming from the very buildings themselves.

"By Diana, no!" Gaius said in a harsh whisper. He gritted his teeth and meant to shout a warning to his soldiers, but it was too late.

While many of the buildings in Judea were made of brick and stucco, a large number of those within Gamala were wood structures, with rooftops not meant to hold the weight of so many fighting men in full armor. The large number of attackers trying to get at the soldiers added to the strain on the buildings, stressing the structural supports to their breaking point.

Almost simultaneously, the roofs of many of the buildings came apart and collapsed in a loud crashing of men and timber. People screamed in astonishment and quickly fled back up the roads. The legionaries were also in complete disarray, horrified at the brutal fate of their friends, in what had quickly devolved into an outright catastrophe.

"Century, on me!" Centurion Nicanor shouted, from up the street.

Gaius breathed a sigh of relief that his friend and commanding officer lived, yet he was almost paralyzed with shock at what he'd just witnessed. The disaster had driven the rebels back, though only for a moment, which gave the surviving legionaries enough time to regroup.

"Fall back to the breach," Nicanor ordered Gaius. His face was covered in

dirt and streaks of blood, and was full of strain. For a moment, the optio thought he saw a tear running down his centurion's cheek.

Few, if any, could have survived the horrific falls, with the entire structures collapsing around them. And as the soldiers of the Fifth Cohort attempted to regain their good order and discipline, while pulling back towards the breach, Jewish rebels were now swarming the ruins. They allowed the retreating legionaries to depart, instead venting their rage by stabbing away at any exposed bodies amongst the wreckage.

With four cohorts of the Tenth Legion crammed into the narrow streets, it took the extreme discipline and levelheaded courage of their centurions to withdraw their soldiers through the breach and back down the slope towards their camp. Since the rebel hordes were consumed with mauling those poor souls who remained trapped within the collapsed buildings, the survivors managed to escape the city unmolested.

Before allowing the emotional trauma of the catastrophe to set in, centurions and options ordered all squad leaders to get a full accountability of their men. It was readily accepted that any missing were presumed dead. As Gaius and Nicanor collected the tallies from their subordinate leaders, it quickly became apparent that eight of their soldiers were lost and assumed killed.

It was now dark, and back at the camp, the dejected survivors went about their duties, if for no other reason than to keep their minds occupied. Legionaries cleaned and serviced their arms, while others took up their positions on sentry duty. There was a viable concern that the rebels would attempt a counterattack. Thankfully, for the Romans, none ever materialized.

Gaius found a spot along the ramparts, away from his men, where he sat in silence with his back against the palisade mound. His battered helmet lay next to him, and he stared blankly into the ground at his feet.

"They're gone, sir…all of them."

He looked up to see Legionary Decius standing over him. The young soldier's face was ashen, and a lump in his throat made it difficult for him to speak. As he had been reassigned to another squad during the century's most recent reorganization, he was not with those ill-fated soldiers who had fallen with Sergeant Quintus. It then dawned upon Gaius that Decius was the only member of his former squad still alive.

He slowly stood, immense sorrow overwhelming his military bearing and

discipline. He placed a hand on the young legionary's shoulder, who in turn embraced him hard as both men wept openly. There was nothing unprofessional or unmanly about their conduct, for their friends had died heroically, as soldiers of Rome. That tragedy should befall almost every soldier Gaius had sworn to protect during his years as their decanus and later as their optio, proved too much for even the stoutest of hearts.

After a few minutes he released Decius, his face grim and determined once more. The legionary, who had yet to turn twenty, now appeared hard-edged and somehow much older. It was the crucible of war and extreme combat that turned young boys into old men. Gaius had come to realize this during the Armenian campaign. The hellish war in Judea had forged an unbreakable soul in every last soldier who survived its torments.

"Return to your duties," the optio ordered. "Keep driving forward no matter what happens, and I promise you, we shall avenge our brothers."

Provided they survived the war, the legionaries would have the rest of their lives to mourn their fallen comrades. But for now, they needed to find their resolve, lest this disaster should lead them down the same path as the armies of Cestius Gallus.

In all his years of leading fighting men, Vespasian had never faced such a disaster as this. It was dumb luck that had repelled this first assault, not the prowess or courage of their adversaries. Of course, he was certain their enemies would drum it up to the will of their god. Still, they had faced numerous reversals during the siege of Jotapata, and he was determined to not let one setback, no matter how horrific, defeat him or his legionaries.

Knowing he desperately needed to console his dejected soldiers, especially in light of the severe casualties they had suffered, the commander-in-chief summoned as many of his soldiers as possible into a mass formation. Vespasian stood atop the ramparts of the camp, where he removed his helmet and held his bloodied gladius high. His booming voice carried along the camp, seeking to bring solace for their losses while exuding confidence of ultimate victory.

"We ought to bear manfully what usually falls out in war!" he said, rather bluntly. "All of us knew that conquest cannot be had without bloodshed amongst our ranks. Fortune has demanded that while we have killed so many

tens-of-thousands of the Jews, we must now pay our share of the reckoning of the fates. He is the strongest who is of a sober mind under misfortunes, that he may continue on and recover what has been lost. Know that it was neither tenacity, nor to the valor of the Jews, but the difficulty of this place that brought them reprieve, and our bereavement. Many of you would storm back into the breach, full of valor and lust for vengeance. But this incautiousness in war, and this madness of zeal, is not a Roman maxim. We are legionaries, not mindless barbarians! We must therefore return to our virtues as soldiers of Rome; using both our cunning, as well as brutal power, to subjugate these people. I promise you this, my brothers, that every subsequent action we take upon these walls, I will be the first into the breach, and the last to leave!"

His words had the intended effect, and a renewed battle cry was shouted from the assembled host of soldiers, who raised their weapons in the air. No doubt, these could be heard by many of the defenders of Gamala, and it would confuse them greatly. For while it was they who still held the city, the shouts of the Romans sounded almost like cries of victory, rather than an army that had suffered such a savage reversal. Such brazen defiance in the face of disaster would prove unnerving to the rebel garrison and the citizens who fought beside them.

In the days following the assault, continuous bombardment wreaked havoc upon the defenders of Gamala. Not wishing to risk another great misfortune, Vespasian decided to punish the people with relentless assaults from his catapults, all the while hoping that starvation and thirst would soon be setting in.

Despite the unexpected success the people of Gamala had achieved, all now understood that it was, at best, a fleeting victory. The large number of refugees had greatly depleted their water and food, with the vast numbers of wounded straining resources even further. There was also the matter of disposing of the dead, both Judean and Roman. The streets did, indeed, run red with blood, though much of it was Jewish, and the citizens had paid a terrible price for holding the walls. Flies now swarmed the streets, feasting on the dried blood and gory remains.

Over the course of the following week with the Romans looking to

simply wait them out, death by disease and starvation appeared imminent. Chares, the brave old priest whose words had motivated the people to profound acts of valor, now found himself enfeebled by illness and unable to leave his bed. Only Joseph remained to lead the defenses of the city.

"We repelled them from our gates, and yet they appear stronger in both body and spirit than we," a warrior complained to Joseph, as he stood on a balcony within the citadel.

The towers along the walls were the only other places where his warriors could readily keep their eyes on the Romans, and yet this was still fraught with peril. The onslaught of Vespasian's siege engines had been relentless, and the garrison commander could not help but wonder just how much ammunition they had left.

"They will have to attack us again," he replied. "The season grows late, and if they delay too long, God will wash them away in a deluge of the winter rains."

"And what of reinforcements?" the warrior persisted. "Can we trust Giscala or Simon to send help?"

Joseph gazed off into the south, past the long rows of Roman tents which dotted the hills. Simon bar Giora would be hard pressed to send any fighters at all, and even if he did, they would still be at least a week's journey away. He did not bother looking to the west, for he knew in his heart that John of Giscala had failed to put aside their petty differences and was leaving the people of Gamala to be destroyed.

"We must trust in each other," he said, at last. "Our courage has thus far kept the Romans out of our fair city. And if our friends should fail us, may God damn them for their cowardice!"

Three days prior, a pair of horsemen approached the steep cliffs of the fortress known as Masada. It had taken them several days of hard riding to reach the stronghold of Simon bar Giora, for they had to avoid not just the Romans, but also hostile Jewish sects. The area along the western edge of the Dead Sea between Jerusalem and the Herodian fortress had fallen into chaos, as the central Judean government slowly lost control of the region to the various zealot factions. It was near the town of Engaddai, just north of Masada, that the riders were stopped by an armed mob of fighters. Noting

their leaders were equipped with Herodian armor and all carried ornate shields and long swords, the riders assumed they were Simon's men.

"We come from Galilee," one of the riders spoke, "with a message for Simon bar Giora."

"Is that so?" one of the warriors asked, his voice clearly expressing his doubts. "And who from so far up north could possibly have words for my master?"

"It is Joseph ben Joshua of Gamala," the rider answered.

"I know not this man, nor do I give a pile of pig shit about Gamala," the warrior sneered.

One of his leaders then walked up behind him and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Hold," he said. "I know Joseph. He is a friend to both Simon and to the Sicarii, though we have not seen his face in some time. And if these men bear news from Galilee, it may be important to us. Check them for weapons, and then we will escort them to Simon."

It was ten miles to Masada, though the well-traveled road along the Dead Sea meant the journey only took three to four hours. The riders from Galilee had never seen the fortress of Herod before, and they were awestruck as they gazed up at the formidable cliffs upon which it stood. The mountain was very steep, with the last fifty to a hundred feet completely unassailable. The top was excavated flat and covered with numerous buildings, as well as the king's palace and armory. A wall surrounded the complex, adding to its sense of impenetrability.

"There is only one way into Masada," the leader of the warriors stated.

It was a narrow path, scarcely wide enough for a single ox cart, that serpentined its way up the side of the mountain. At the top, it leveled off onto a short path that led to the main gate. The view from above was impressive, while at the same time rather desolate. Masada was little more than a giant rock, with nothing but dirt and sand visible for miles. No brush or grass broke up the landscape, for all was utterly barren. Only the view of the Dead Sea to the east contrasted the rather grim view.

Once inside, the messengers noted the rather haggard appearance of many of the zealots and Sicarii fighters, despite the fact that they were far better armed and equipped than most of the rebel factions. It had only been recently that they had accepted Simon as a guest amongst their ranks. Their leader, Eleazar ben Yair, had mistrusted the zealot greatly and for the longest time made Simon and his followers' camp within the open courtyards of the

fortress. Only recently had their relationship become more amicable, even though ben Yair still had his misgivings.

"So you men are friends of Joseph ben Joshua?" a voice spoke behind them, as they gazed out towards the sea.

They turned to see Simon bar Giora, dressed in a simple brown tunic and sandals. His hair was combed back, though his face was marred by the intense sunlight, as well as the rough existence of living in such a desolate place. Only the ornate curved long sword, which was belted to his hip, denoted his status.

Seeing that they were taken aback by his appearance, the zealot leader smiled and opened his arms wide. "Welcome, to the last refuge of freedom in all of Judea!"

"There is one other that still holds," one of the messengers said. "For that is why we have come."

"We have not heard from our friend, Joseph, in many months," Simon noted. "As he was one I could scarcely think would betray the true faith, we assumed he was slain by either the Romans or the numerous traitors."

"He lives," the messenger asserted. "Most of Galilee has fallen, yet he still stands strong in the face of tyranny. He leads our warriors, while the city itself is now governed by a man named Chares."

At this mention, Simon's eyes grew wide.

"I know *his* name well!" he said. "His defiance against Rome during the time of Pontius Pilate was an inspiration to the movement. That he managed to escape the death that is slavery, only continues to bring hope to the people. What is it they would have of me?"

"Reinforcements," the messenger replied. "When we left, Taricheae and Tiberias had just fallen. It is only a matter of time before the Romans lay siege to Gamala. The terrain and defenses make it a difficult siege for them, but our numbers are few. We cannot hope to hold for longer than a couple of weeks."

"My friends," Simon sighed, his countenance falling in resignation. "I only wish I had the fighters to give you. A handful may be able to hold Masada indefinitely, but the rest of Judea requires a strong man and many warriors. Right now, we control the lands south to En Thamar and as far west as Elousa and Beer Sheva. Every day we deal with incursions from the Idumeans, as well as the so-called 'army' of the Jerusalem government who have branded us as outlaws. And every day there is a skirmish, raid, or

thievery on the roads. I'm surprised you managed to make it all this way from Galilee without being assailed by robbers!"

It was more than a little hypocritical for Simon to speak of robbers, for the very reason he'd been expelled from Jerusalem and branded a criminal was because he and his men had taken to plunder. Still, the messengers from Gamala were either oblivious to this or simply did not care. He then looked over his shoulder, to make certain none of the Sicarii were close enough to hear him.

"And I must tell you, my friends, that our hosts here have proven extremely difficult to convince to join the greater cause. Eleazar ben Yair is content, for the moment, to let the Romans bleed the kingdoms dry."

"Is there no help you can offer us, then?" the second man asked.

"Even lightly equipped, it will still take at least a week, probably more, for any of my men to reach Gamala," Simon noted. "And that's if they can avoid being ambushed by bands of Roman soldiers or traitorous Jews. Still, I will see what I can do. Tomorrow we will go to Engaddai, and we will ask for volunteers to make the journey. Given the extreme hazards, as well as risk of failure, I do not feel I can rightly order my warriors to Gamala. However, Joseph is a friend, and Chares one who all the true believers revere."

The following day, after a long and passionate speech from Simon, the two messengers left Engaddai with a hundred volunteers; men who tired of fighting their fellow Jews and wished for the chance to spill Roman blood. It was a rather pathetic display, one that almost made the men think an outright rejection would have been more dignified. Still, they reasoned there was a chance they could gather more reinforcements on the journey back into Galilee. As such, on the fifth day of their trek, they stopped just outside of Scythopolis.

"We should head northwest," one of the fighters suggested. "There is a stronghold at Mount Tabor. If Galilee is being overrun by the Romans, then no doubt we will find friends there."

Chapter XVIII: Mountain of Power

Mount Tabor
Twenty-two miles southwest of Tiberias
19 October 67 A.D.

Mount Tabor

Far from the hellish onslaught of Gamala, General Placidus led two of his regiments towards the camp of the seditionists at Mount Tabor. Located to the southwest of Tiberias, it was one of the few remaining holdouts in Galilee. In all, the auxilia corps commander had just six hundred total horsemen, about thirty of whom were Judean mounted archers. Along with these, he also had two cohorts of auxiliary infantrymen, consisting of roughly eight hundred combined soldiers between them. It was only a fraction of the total force under Placidus' command; however, Vespasian was acting on the intelligence coming from Josephus that highlighted the drastic weaknesses of this stronghold.

"The hill is extremely large," a scout reported, "and the top is surrounded by a wall approximately ten feet high. The north side is also completely unassailable, due to the steepness and being covered in loose shale and rock."

"I do not plan to assault the heights," Placidus replied. "If the intelligence given to us by our newfound friend, Josephus, proves accurate, these bastards have good defenses, but little in the way of food and water. If we deprive

them of their ability to forage, they will have to either sue for peace or perish of thirst, like those idiotic bastards at Mount Gerizim."

The place he referred to had been surrounded by the Fifth Legion during the siege of Jotapata. The holdouts there, who refused to surrender, either died from the heat and lack of water or were so weakened the Romans simply walked in and slaughtered them all. And while Placidus was a brash and sometimes reckless commander, he had learned too many harsh lessons when it came to being aggressive to the point of rashness.

"What are your orders, sir?" the commanding tribune of one of his regiments asked.

"Our infantry are still about a half day's march away," the general replied. "We'll establish camp here. It is a good defilade, which cannot be seen from the mountain and so will mask our numbers, should those bastards choose to fight."

Scouts were sent out to patrol around the mountain, while the rest of the taskforce set about establishing camp. It would be early evening before the infantry arrived, and Placidus told their centurions they would be kept in reserve, behind the defilade.

"These people are desperate," the general said. "So I suspect you will get your chance to fight soon enough."

The fighters from Engaddai had received a cordial welcome from those holding up at Mount Tabor, although the resistance leaders there stressed that they could not stay for long. Food and water was scarce enough as it was.

"We do not plan to stay for long," one of the messengers from Gamala assured them. "Rather, we are looking for fighters who would make a stand against the Romans, instead of cowering behind these walls."

"A bold statement for one who has but a hundred warriors with him," the leader of the Mount Tabor rebels said, crossing his arms in disbelief. "Your pitiful force intends to fight the Romans. How?"

"We came originally from Galilee," the messenger said. "These men have joined us from Engaddai. We go to liberate the city of Gamala, which is bravely holding against the Roman onslaught."

"Are they now?"

"We know you thirst and are in need of food," the second messenger

noted. “If you help us to free Gamala, there will be plenty for you, as well as a stronger and more viable haven to make a stand from.”

It was a blatant falsehood to make it seem as if the people of Gamala had plenty in the way of food and water, when in fact their resources were running dangerously low. However, the messengers were desperate to find allies; plus, however depleted Gamala was, those holding Mount Tabor were in an even worse state. Before their leaders could so much as deliberate the proposal, though, one of the lookouts sounded the alarm.

“A contingent of Roman horsemen approaches!”

“Then we must see what they want,” the Tabor leader stated, his eyes still fixed on the messengers.

All made their way to the wall. Down below, they could see a Roman officer and about a dozen cavalry troopers. In the valley, they saw a handful of horsemen, although their numbers appeared to be just a couple hundred total.

“That’s close enough, Roman!” the rebel leader said, as the imperial soldiers led by General Placidus rode towards the wall. “Why have you returned to our lands? Do you not know that you are unwelcome here?”

“Judea is Roman!” Placidus retorted. “Your ancient kingdoms of Judah and Israel are no more. You are subjects of the emperor, and therefore subject to his justice. By your armed defiance, you have condemned yourselves to the crucifix. However, Caesar is willing to show benevolence to those who would repent of their crimes. We know you hunger and thirst, so if you do not surrender now, all we need do is wait a few days until you are all dead. Or you can live and know that Rome is both just and merciful. What say you?”

The rebels knew the Roman’s words were true, for they had struggled much to forage for food, and they had relied almost solely on the rains for water, which had been absent these past few weeks.

“Let me talk to the people,” the rebel leader said.

“To hell with these imperial bastards!” one of the messengers from Gamala quickly spat. “Between your warriors and ours, we can easily overwhelm their pitiful numbers!”

“We must make a stand soon,” a fighter who’d spent the last month on Mount Tabor spoke up. “If not now, then when?”

Their leader grinned and gave his consent. He would deceive the Romans, only to slaughter them when they thought the people of Mount Tabor had

capitulated.

“We will meet your terms, if you will offer us your right hand in safety!” a voice called down from above.

“Well, this is too easy,” a tribune mounted next to Placidus said.

“They’re not surrendering,” the general replied. “Were they this anxious to sue for peace, they never would have walled themselves up on this mountain. No, they mean to trick us into thinking they’re surrendering, only to lure us into a trap. Fortunately for us, they have no idea as to our true numbers.”

Soon the warriors from Mount Tabor began to spill forth from the rickety gate. All told, there were approximately three thousand amongst their ranks, though Placidus could only scoff at their pitiful condition. Exposed to the sun and elements with no means of storing either food or water, and with a wall that would not hold ten minutes against a determined assault, the mountain was among the worst places the seditionists could have chosen for a stronghold.

“Watch how they fan out,” Placidus said quietly to the tribune, as the enemy fighters formed a wide frontage, those on the wings looking to envelope the Roman general and his small contingent. He then shouted to the Judeans, *“Throw down your weapons before you come any closer; that is if you still wish for peace!”*

“We wish for your blood, Roman filth!” a warrior shouted in reply.

At that, the masses charged down the slope towards Placidus and his escorts.

Trumpets quickly sounded, and the Judean mounted archers, who had come with Placidus’ small task force, immediately galloped towards the commotion, forming a long line as their commanding general and his escorts sprinted their horses towards them. A volley of arrows were unleashed, felling a handful of enemy warriors.

The tribune who commanded one of the regiments broke off to the left with a dozen men. Placidus and the rest split off to the right, heading into the ravine where the auxiliary infantry lay waiting behind the camp’s defilade.

Despite taking several more casualties from a subsequent volley of mounted archers, the seditionists were emboldened by the sudden fleeing of

the Roman cavalry. The majority elected to pursue Placidus, with many skirting along the hillside, until it dropped off completely into the ravine. The Romans rode at a modest canter, enticing their foes into continue the pursuit. At the defilade, they wheeled hard to their left. A trumpet then alerted the infantry to attack.

The rebels were taken by surprise when eight hundred auxiliary troopers suddenly scrambled over the mound, formed up into ranks, and charged. A frenzied brawl immediately ensued, with the horsemen forgotten by the seditionists. The soldiers, with their oblong shields and stabbing spears, began to cut down swaths of the enemy warriors, who were now being driven back. The battle wasn't completely one-sided, though, as the large numbers of fighters managed to regroup and assail the auxiliaries with a vengeance. Several were wrenched away from the safety of their battle line, where they were subsequently torn to pieces.

Placidus, meanwhile, had taken his small detachment and formed up about a hundred meters from the frenzy.

"Sound the attack," he ordered his cornicen.

Several quick trumpet blasts alerted the cavalry tribune, who led the majority of both regiments out from a stand of trees. They gave a great shout, riding along the base of the hill, and preventing any fighters from retreating up its slopes.

"Roma victrix!" the tribune shouted, his spatha raised high.

The rebels immediately recognized their peril and, with their only path of escape leading south, away from the mountain, the majority began to flee. Cavalrymen trampled down those not quick enough to escape, slaying many in their wake. The auxilia infantry renewed their assault, butchering those trapped between their ranks and the rampaging mass of horsemen. Mounted archers conducted a pursuit as far as the next hill formation, though as their numbers were few, they soon turned back to rejoin their companions.

"Now that these flies have been swatted away," Placidus said, "let us take this mountain."

It was a long climb to the top, and this time the general was accompanied by an entire cavalry regiment and one of his infantry cohorts. The remainder of his troops were tasked with tending to their dead and wounded, as well as dispatching any foes still breathing. Placidus ordered them to find at least twenty to keep alive, to be used as a demonstration against the people.

They met with no resistance as they reached the crest of the mountain,

where the gate remained open. A middle-aged man and two women greeted them.

"Thank God you have beaten away these fanatics," the man said, with a bow. "Many of us fled to this mountain, not to hide from the Romans, but from our own countrymen who've gone completely mad with power and bloodlust."

"Did you, now?" Placidus replied, clearly unconvinced. He dismounted his horse and stood with his face just inches from the man's. "And tell me this, *Jew*, why should I believe you? The very fact that you hide behind these walls, instead of heading to those places still loyal to Rome, is enough justification for me to nail you to a cross."

"I gladly offer my life, even with so painful a death, if you would but show mercy to the people who've been trapped on this mountain."

"We thirst and hunger," one of the women spoke. "Those armed men who came here promised us protection, yet they were little more than bandits and thieves. We humbly beg the emperor's forgiveness, that he not judge us based on the actions of those who imprisoned us here."

"It would be well within my rights to slay every last one of you or sell you all into slavery," Placidus replied sternly. He let out a sigh of feigned resignation. "As it is, I do not have the resources necessary to press you all into bondage, as we need to move quickly from here. And I think the sword arms of my men are worn out from slaughtering these bandits. Therefore, know that Rome has chosen to be merciful, and you are free to leave this place."

"We thank you for your magnanimity," the older man said, though Placidus paid no attention to him and, in fact, shoved him aside as he walked into the compound.

The camp was very large and dotted with hundreds of very small tents. Those who did not have tents were compelled to sleep out on the open ground. The whole place stunk horribly, and the Roman general realized that despite the fact that approximately ten thousand were enclosed behind the walls, there had been little to no effort to establish proper sanitation and waste disposal. And with little enough water for drinking, let alone washing, the smell brought on by so many unwashed bodies was overpowering.

"To Hades with this," Placidus grumbled, immediately turning around and quickly walking out the gate once more.

"Do you want us to dismantle the walls of the camp, sir?" a centurion

asked, quickly noting the look of disgust on the general's face.

"No," Placidus replied, shaking his head. "This place is full of pestilence. Any who seek to use it as a stronghold will die of disease, if the heat doesn't finish them."

"We managed to get about fifteen viable survivors from the seditionists," the centurion added. "Yet we could not find any timber with which to make crosses."

"Fuck it," the general said impatiently. "Drag them up to the gate, cut their throats in front of the people, and then let us leave this place."

The people coming from Mount Tabor were a rather grim sight, and the Romans reckoned that disease, thirst, and malnourishment would spell the end for many of them. Some of the more pitiful begged the soldiers for either water or some food, though this was met with profane shouts and the occasional blow from spear butt or sword pommel.

The sad procession from the compound was interrupted by the arrival of the auxiliary infantrymen, who were dragging the hapless wounded prisoners with them. A couple of women called out the names of the men, though they were quickly silenced by their companions. They feared the Romans would suspect the people were more than just unwilling detainees of the rebels, and put them to the sword for conspiring. Instead, the soldiers were as anxious as their commander to be finished with the ordeal and return to their camps.

"You have been given imperial mercy," Placidus said, addressing the humble throng. He turned to the captured fighters who were on their knees with their hands bound behind their backs. "Now you will see imperial justice meted out!"

He nodded to the officer in charge of the detail. Gladii were drawn, and in a series of quick slashes, the throats of all fifteen men were cut open. Blood gushed forth from the horrific gashes and from their open mouths, as they gasped their final breaths in anguish. This led to a few renewed cries of sorrow from those within the crowd who could not be stifled by their friends and family. In their anger, a squad of infantrymen forced their way into the crowd until they found four sobbing women, holding each other close. As if to make an even more brutal example, the soldiers plunged their blades into them, causing the mob to back away in terror, though no other sounds were heard from them.

"Go," Placidus said to the people, nodding his head down the mountain.

“Away with you! And let all know what happens to those who choose to repent their crimes against the empire, or who steadfastly choose death!”

The soldiers stood on top of the mountain, watching for some time as the sad procession made its way into the valley below. Some groups argued with each other, while many simply wandered aimlessly in the direction of their home cities. Many would succumb in the coming days, though for the ones who survived, they would have fearful stories to tell of the horrors they’d endured. Placidus reasoned that a small dose of Roman clemency was the best form of propaganda they could muster, though so far, all efforts to bring about an end to the war had proven futile.

Chapter XIX: Ingenuity and Bravery

Gamala
21 October 67 A.D.
***

The siege had come to a standstill, with the Roman army still looking up at Gamala from its various camps scattered throughout the valley. The month was growing late, and Vespasian was quickly becoming impatient with the situation. He had resolved to finish the affairs in Galilee before the winter rains came, yet the defenders of Gamala still held the heights.

"Beg your pardon, sir," Chief Tribune Domitius said one evening, as the commander-in-chief was leaving the principia tent.

"What is it?" Vespasian asked.

"Some of my men have come to me with a plan for undermining the rebel defenses," the chief tribune explained.

Vespasian noted the three legionaries with him.

"And what is it you propose?" the commander-in-chief asked.

"Well, sir," one of the men spoke up, "it's the tower on the western wall, nearest the gate. The other day, while on sentry duty, we noticed there were pronounced gaps between the large support blocks at the base; so much so, that we could spot them clearly from down in our camp."

"The ground up there is also very soft, sir," a second soldier added. "With our entrenching tools, I would say the three of us could readily dislodge enough of the base stones that the whole tower would collapse."

Vespasian said nothing, but simply stood staring at the men, his arms folded. It was rather unnerving for the young legionaries, for they had only seen their commanding general from a distance, and to address him directly with such a brash plan was far more intimidating than assailing the enemy ramparts.

"I found it a sound idea, sir," Domitius spoke up. "Forgive me if these men have wasted your time."

"Did I say they wasted my time?" Vespasian replied, calmly but curtly. He looked at the legionaries. "You do realize the risk you accept, should you go through with this."

"Yes, sir," all three spoke together.

“And you know that you will be completely unsupported,” the commanding general emphasized. “If you are spotted by the enemy, you will be killed, or else captured and tortured to death. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

Vespasian allowed himself a partial smile. “Very well. Two things I admire most are ingenuity and bravery. We shall see if this plan of yours has the proper balance of both. Bring that tower down, return to us alive and unscarred, and I will see you handsomely rewarded.”

“Yes, sir!” The chance of garnering the approval, as well as promise of reward, from their commander-in-chief far surpassed any fear or trepidation the three soldiers had over their pending mission.

“Inform your centurion and stand by for further orders,” Domitius ordered the men, who came to attention and saluted before returning to their century. He turned his attention back to his commanding general.

“Titus said you were a man of initiative,” Vespasian noted. “I am pleased to see such traits are also found amongst your legionaries. Place two cohorts on ready reserve.”

“Yes, sir. Are we to assault then, should the lads prove successful?”

“No.” Vespasian shook his head, his answer confusing the young officer. “I’ll not risk another disaster, not just yet. However, I do know that if we bring down the tower, the enemy will flood the breach with fighters. They’ll be clustered together and easy targets for your javelins. I’ll have a company of archers and a section of four scorpions attached to you. You will punish our enemies, and emphasize that death awaits every last one of them.”

“Understood,” Domitius replied. The chief tribune hoped intently that his soldiers’ plan had merit, for like all of them, he was anxious to exact retribution for their fallen comrades.

Chares had fallen gravely ill during the past week, and with fever clouding his mind, Joseph was left to manage the city’s defenses alone. He cursed the harsh reality that he did not have more able captains under him. While his warriors were certainly vigorous and stalwart in their courage, few showed any real leadership potential. Those he did appoint as subordinate leaders were simply older fighters whom the men respected. Yet, he feared none could fill the void were he and Chares to both perish.

“God has preserved us thus far,” he reasoned, as he gazed out the citadel high window looking down upon the western wall. “The matter is in His hands.”

The feeling of elation at having repelled the first Roman attack had long since faded. The imperial soldiers had not come again, but were simply waiting for the people to starve. Morale was falling rapidly amongst his warriors, the more brazen of whom felt they should launch sorties against the Roman camp. Joseph had underscored the folly in this. If they were to attack the imperial lines, they would be hard pressed to make their way back up the slopes and into the city. The Roman camp was also surrounded by trenches full of traps and mounds topped with palisade stakes. Their enemies had them substantially outnumbered and could bring far more troops to bear against him, all better equipped and trained than his warriors.

He had further admonished his men from speaking too openly about the possibility of reinforcements. Such talk only inspired false hope, and even greater sorrow and disappointment with each passing day when no help arrived. With the siege nearing the end of its second week, Joseph knew that John of Giscala was aware of the city’s plight, and that he had abandoned them. As for his messengers to Simon bar Giora, Joseph knew they went on a fool’s errand. He could only hope they had escaped to safety. Little did he know, one messenger lay killed by the Roman horsemen, along with many of those who Simon did send to their aid, while the other had his throat cut in front of the people of Mount Tabor.

It was a cloudy night, and all was completely black as the legionaries quietly made their way over the ramparts of their camp. Devoid of armor and carrying only their entrenching pickaxes, the three brave soldiers of the Fifteenth Legion crept out of their camp under the cover of darkness. Despite the overcast night, they were still able to see traces of the outline of the tall tower. As they skulked quietly up the slope, each one feared being spotted by sentries along the walls. After one of the legionaries walked straight into a rather large sagebrush stand, eliciting stifled chuckles from his friends. Then soldiers then reasoned that, given the extreme difficulty they had finding their way up the hill, there was little to no chance of them being seen by enemy lookouts.

As they reached the base of the tower, they had to feel around for the compromised stones. The base support blocks were quite large, and they knew it would take extreme effort to dislodge them. Each took his pickaxe and began to dig away at the earth around each block. They could only scrape, as trying to chip at the ground would create too much noise. The dirt was indeed very soft dirt, with only the occasional rock buried beneath.

Nervous, they frequently looked up to see if any rebel defenders were watching. The very fact that they could not see anyone at all only reassured them. Still, they could hear the hushed voices of guards above them. One of the soldiers gave a macabre smirk at the thought of their enemies tumbling down from the heights, once they brought the tall tower down.

As two of the men dug beneath the stones, the third scraped away at the remnants of the mortar that had crumbled. As they did so, they had two predominant concerns. The first was that their plan would not work at all, and the tower would still stand, despite their efforts. Their other was that they would prove too effective, and the tower would collapse on top of them before they could escape. Still they continued to dig, their pickaxes burrowing well under the base blocks.

Their sense of urgency increased as the faint glow of predawn vastly improved their ability to see. It was still at least another hour before the sun rose; however, they wanted to make certain they finished their mission and were away well before any of the defenders could spot them. In all, five of the supporting blocks had been compromised, and they carefully worked a rope around the first, through the large cracks in the mortar. Despite its weight, the legionaries were surprised at how easily it was pulled from its foundation, having cut away a good foot of dirt from underneath it.

As the stone slid a few feet down the hill, the soldiers immediately placed their backs against the wall, watching for movement up above. Whatever sentries there may have been were now either asleep or otherwise blind to their mischief. Soon they pulled away two of the other stones in similar manner, leaving the remaining two for the moment. One of the legionaries then waved his pickaxe back and forth.

“There’s the signal,” Chief Tribune Domitius said. In the absence of Legate Titus, he was now in temporary command of the legion, and he was

determined to make the best showing possible. Two cohorts of legionaries stood ready to exploit the potential chaos.

"Just remember," Vespasian said quietly, having joined the chief tribune to observe the action, "you are not to assault through any breaches created. Make them suffer under the barrage of your missiles, and then withdraw."

Domitius nodded. In truth, he did not need the commander-in-chief to remind him of the previous disaster. After all, he had barely escaped with his own life! As for Vespasian, he marveled at the creative initiative shown by his soldiers, and whatever transpired over the next hour or so, he was immensely proud of his men.

"Here they come, sir," a legionary said quietly.

The rest of the soldiers rose up and hefted their shields and javelins. Their three companions were now bounding down the hill as fast as they could. Surprised shouts came from the walls, though the enemy sentries were too slow and too surprised to impede their escape.

An audible scraping and groaning sound echoed along the hillside, bringing an excited look to Domitius' face. A loud snap followed, as the mortar that held the tower to the main wall broke, and with surprised cries from the unfortunate ones atop, the whole mass came crashing down the hill. The sentries who'd manned its top were dashed to bloody pieces as their bodies were thrown onto the rocks and earth below.

A loud cheer echoed throughout the valley, as the soldiers of the Fifteenth Legion quickly advanced up the hill. A pair of scorpions covered each of the extreme flanks, with a company of fifty archers following in support. The clouds of dust and shattered stone added a haze to the soft predawn glow. Legionaries advanced quickly, as the rise of the sun threatened to blind them, if they delayed too long.

Much of the tower had collapsed into rubble, the bodies of the sentries smashed and mutilated. Chief Tribune Domitius led one of the cohorts around the right of the wreckage, the other advanced on the left. As they marched up the slope, archers loosed a volley of arrows towards the few stalwarts who remained on the wall. Two of the scorpion crews had clambered onto the ruins, emplacing their bolt throwers in a position to where they could fire over the heads of the advancing legionaries.

As the original breach was near the fallen tower, two centuries of legionaries split off and reformed into four ranks, facing where they feared an enemy counterattack would assail them, yet it never came. There was chaos

within the city, though none of the rebels dared venture out from behind the perceived safety of the wall.

"Javelins ready!" a centurion shouted, his legionaries hefting their heavy pila up to throwing position, as they watched and waited.

Unable to sleep, Joseph had returned to the balcony overlooking the western wall. He heard the loud groan from the scraping of stones, followed by the breaking of brick and mortar as the tall tower collapsed. He then watched in horror as the bodies of several of his men were literally flung from its top, as it crashed onto the mountainside. He could just make out the glint of metal, his eyes straining to see the advancing ranks of legionaries.

"What's happened?" a bleary-eyed captain asked, as he stumbled into Joseph's room.

"The tower has collapsed," his commander quickly explained. "The Romans are coming, sound the alarm!"

He was near panic as he led his men towards the crumbled remains of the tower. Whatever trickery the Romans had used to bring it down, none of them knew. Some cried out that it was magic or the curse of God, bringing down the walls like He did in Jericho, all those years ago.

The clouds of dust from the falling tower made it impossible to see, yet Joseph knew that within moments there would be dozens, if not hundreds, of Roman soldiers storming through the remains.

"God has abandoned us!" one of his warriors cried out in anguish, as Joseph attempted to restore order in the chaos.

"No!" the rebel leader admonished. "God calls upon us to find our strength, that we may repel the hated invaders. He has saved us before, and He will do so again!" He looked into the faces of his disbelieving warriors, and with a hard grimace he said words that seemed almost blasphemous. "And if God has abandoned us, then we must look to each other for salvation. *With me!*"

Joseph then raised his sword high and rushed into the cloud of dust, over the mass of rubble from the ruined base of the destroyed tower. Whether from courage, or simply despair, a number of fighters gave a loud battle cry and rallied to their leader. And yet, no soldiers came through the breach.

"Where are they?" a warrior said, as he tried to see through the acrid

cloud that was finally starting to settle.

"There they are!" Joseph shouted, pointing towards a wall of legionaries that had advanced towards the ruins.

With shouted orders from their officers, a salvo of javelins flew at the rebels with nearly a dozen men killed or badly injured. Joseph himself had started to back away from the storm of missiles, when a scorpion bolt smashed into his sternum, ripping through his heart and bursting out his back. It had struck him down so quickly that he was unaware of what happened, as his vision clouded. The soul of the leader of the Gamala garrison departed his broken body before it hit the ground.

"We've driven the rebels from the breach," a centurion reported to Domitius. "We're ready to storm the city!"

"Hold in place," the chief tribune replied, shaking his head.

This was met with incredulous looks from the soldiers nearest him.

He quickly explained, "Our orders from General Vespasian are to harangue the rebels, but to not enter the city again. Stand fast, repel any counterattacks that come, but be prepared to withdraw back to camp. The destruction of their tallest tower was to demoralize our enemies. And the quicker their morale falls, the sooner we can take this city without needless casualties."

The soldiers did not like the orders they were given, for all of them were anxious to end this hateful siege that had seen many of their friends and fellow soldiers die. The centurions, at least, understood the rationale behind their senior officer's words, and their legionaries would follow their orders or face the vine stick.

A second volley of pila was unleashed into the breach, felling dozens more of the now terrified rebels. Neither Domitius nor his legionaries knew that they had killed the commander of the garrison, and that his men were now in complete disarray. Instead, they settled for goading the seditionists to attack them, while scorpions continued to pick off the occasional warrior with well-placed fire. After twenty minutes, with the dust finally settled, no more zealots appeared in the killing zone of the breach.

"We've done enough for this day," the chief tribune said, turning to his cornicen. "Sound recall. *Archers…advance!* Cover the withdrawal!"

It was baffling to both warrior and legionary alike, that after such a catastrophic blow, the Romans were now pulling back to their camp. However, Vespasian was taking no unnecessary chances. The rebels would see this as his toying with them, letting them know he could undermine their defenses and kill their fighters at will.

Later in the day, the commander-in-chief paraded his forces in full view of the city. In a formal ceremony, in front of their peers, as well as their enemies, Vespasian decorated the three legionaries who brought down the tower with the *Silver Torque for Valor*. He further gave each man an additional bounty of two hundred denarii from his own coffers, which amounted to nearly a year's wages for each soldier.

"Such bravery and creative thought is what separates us from mindless barbarians!" Vespasian told the assembled mass of legionaries. "A legionary is both clever, as well as valiant. He is steadfast in his discipline and utterly relentless in battle. And yet, he is also a soldier who uses his mind as a weapon…the *ultimate* weapon. Our enemies here are near breaking, and I promise you, soon you will all enjoy the spoils of this city!"

The city of Gamala was filled with silence and gloom as night came once more. The bodies of the dead had been dragged away by their loved ones throughout the day. There was little that could be done for the numerous wounded. The injuries caused by the Roman javelins were especially fearful. The heavy missiles had smashed through arms and legs, splintering bones while rupturing muscle and tissue. Those impaled through the hip or stomach lingered in extreme agony, knowing death was imminent Their loved ones could do little, except pray with them and try to provide what little comfort they could.

It was also this night when Chares' fever consumed him, and with a sputtering of incoherent words, he gave up his ghost, leaving the city now completely devoid of leadership or hope.

It was one of the guard captain's wives, and a pair of young girls, who found him. "And as he dies, so too does all hope for Gamala," the woman said. Her husband had also been killed during the last Roman assault. The two girls, whose names were Zorah and Maya, were uncertain if they should

lament or rejoice at the old zealot's passing. Having been left at Gamala by their father, who had not been seen or heard from in weeks, they were kept under the close watch of Chares, who appointed the captain's wife to look after them. As their grandfather was General Jacimus of King Agrippa's army, the rebels had hoped, perhaps, they could be used for bargaining with the king.

The arrival of the Roman army had ended any such hopes. They would only accept unconditional surrender, and they cared little if Jacimus' granddaughters were slain by either the rebels or their own soldiers.

"This man was named our guardian by our father," said Zorah, who was fifteen, yet experienced well beyond her years. "With him now gone and our father still missing, should we not be returned to our grandfather?"

The woman said nothing, for she was still numb with the despair of finding her husband brutally killed less than a day prior. She simply took both girls by the hand and led them from the room. A doctor was coming down the hall to check up on his charge, though he stopped for a moment when the woman subtly shook her head. He gave a nod of understanding and proceeded to Chares' chambers.

"I don't want to die," thirteen-year old Maya said, rather absently. Her words were cold, almost distant. It was strange, hearing the young girl state something as a mere matter of fact, rather than conveying the emotion of extreme fear she most certainly felt.

The woman took them to the ruins of an abandoned building not far from the eastern wall. There appeared to be nothing remaining except broken stone and shattered timber.

"There is a basement in this building," she explained, pointing to a small opening in the rubble. "Through there, you will find your way down below. When the Romans breach the walls, it is there you must go."

"Will you be coming with us?" Maya asked.

The sad woman shook her head. "My husband died defending this city," she replied. "And like all good citizens, I will give my life in its preservation. But you, your place is out there with your own people." Zorah understood. She simply took her sister by the hand, as they sought out provisions with which to sustain themselves should they find themselves having to hide from the Romans.

Chapter XX: Titus' Retribution

Gamala
23 October 67 A.D.
***

For Titus, the time spent in Antioch had produced none of the quantifiable results his father was looking for. Mucianus had promised him that reinforcements would be sent to Galilee within a few weeks, although he confessed their numbers were fewer than he would have liked. There was further discussion about the political situation in Rome. While Titus would publicly state it was simply the cutthroat and overtly hostile nature of politics in the senate, he knew there was something more sinister underlying. He had brought back a number of letters from prominent senators, such as Suetonius Paulinus, along with Vespasian's brother, Sabinus, and another prominent patrician named Marcus Cocceius Nerva. Mucianus and Antonius Primus, who was spending more time in Antioch as of late, were attempting to sift the facts from all of the cryptic speak.

There had also been a letter waiting for Titus, from his younger brother, Domitian. The youngest child of Vespasian had just turned sixteen, and was looking forward anxiously to beginning the political career path of the *Cursus Honorum.* A rather substantial portion of his letter was devoted to mourning the loss of their sister, Domitilla. She and Domitian had been far closer than either had been with their eldest brother, and so the young man was taking her loss extremely hard. In his message, he swore that if he were emperor, he would have their dear sister deified. Such talk was rather unbecoming, not to mention it could be construed as treasonous, should the wrong person choose to misinterpret his words.

Still, Titus was willing to forgive the young man's poor choice in words. Twelve years separated him and Domitian, and the two had never been close. As the middle child, six years had separated Domitilla from each of her brothers. Their mother died many years prior, and with his father and eldest brother constantly away, it was little wonder that Domitian felt such a close bond to his older sister. His only other close relative was his uncle, Sabinus, in whose care he had been placed when Vespasian first left for the east.

Titus knew, given the vast difference in both age and experience, he and

Domitian were almost nothing alike. Still, as he rode south, back into war-torn Galilee, he knew he had far more pressing matters to attend to than his brother's mourning of their sister and potential entry into the Cursus Honorum.

It was midmorning when he returned to the siege camp at Gamala. He marveled at the destruction wreaked upon the outer walls, which was clearly visible even from the valley floor. Most profound was the fallen tower near the upper city. Yet for all that, the legate could not figure why the army occupied the valley floor and the rebels still held the heights.

"The city still stands?" Titus asked a legionary on sentry duty, as he dismounted his horse near the principia tent of Vespasian.

"It's been a hard go, sir," the soldier replied. "We thought we had them the first day…" He shook his head, sorrowful memories of that ill-fated assault still fresh in the young legionary's mind.

Titus removed his helmet as a servant took his horse. He then entered the large tent to find his father just sitting down to his morning meal. Despite his status as a senatorial legate, not to mention commanding general of all Roman forces in the east, Vespasian still insisted on maintaining a level of humility. This included, for the most part, eating the same humble rations as his legionaries.

"Ah, Titus!" the old general said, waving him over. "You're just in time to join me for breakfast.

"Wheat porridge today?" the young legate asked with a chuckle.

"Cooked with a little pig fat, it's actually rather tasty," Vespasian replied as his son sat across from him. "It's also quite nourishing. Once we acquire some fresh fruit and vegetables for the lads, I'll be able to change things up a bit during my mealtimes."

"You do realize, general, that the men in the ranks have no knowledge that you eat the same bland rations as them," Titus observed.

"I know that," his father replied, taking in another mouthful. "But by sharing in some of the same hardships, it keeps me honest. Come, eat. You look famished."

A slave brought a bowl for Titus. Though not a fan of bland legionary porridge like his father, his stomach was growling from his all-night ride, and he hungrily ate.

"What word from Mucianus?" Vespasian asked. "Does he have

reinforcements for me? Gods know we need them after the disasters we've met here." He quickly explained all that had transpired since Titus left for Antioch.

"Damn it all," the young legate said, shaking his head. "When will these bloody Jews know they're beaten?"

"They've been in a perpetual state of war for thousands of years," the commanding general replied. "And I daresay they always will be. I admire their tenacity and bravery, yet I confess, it is trying my patience."

"Well, despite the disasters we've been plagued with here," Titus replied, "the Twelfth Legion is still far more understrength than any of our legions. Still, I did manage to compel Mucianus to give us a draft of two hundred and fifty legionaries. They're mostly new recruits, although there are about twenty to thirty veterans amongst them. They are on the march for Tiberias and should arrive within a week."

"Better than nothing, I suppose," Vespasian replied. "I dispatched Placidus with a small detachment from Tiberias to sort out the rebels at Mount Tabor. It's a fortified position, yet our friend, Josephus, insists they lack water and rations. So hopefully they do not give Placidus too much grief. Once we finish dealing with Gamala, the last rebel stronghold is at Giscala. We're running out of time, and I want all of Galilee subdued before winter."

"How much longer do you think they'll hold out here?" Titus asked.

"They're close to breaking," his father noted. "We've taken some prisoners; a few women with their children, who prefer slavery to death. Despite having its own natural spring, the number of refugees within Gamala have nearly depleted all of their food and water. And in another bit of good news, provided its accurate intelligence, both their garrison commander and the city governor are dead. One was killed by a scorpion after the tower was brought down. The other died of some 'mysterious illness', which probably means he shit himself to death."

"Yes, a bit of ingenuity, bringing that tower down," Titus added. "I'm glad to see the legionaries responsible were sufficiently rewarded."

"Quite. And since the city's governor has perished, it would seem no one has come forward to replace either of these men, and so our enemy here is now leaderless."

"It is growing late in the campaign season," Titus observed, repeating his father's assessment. "If we are to finish the rebels off in Galilee, we need to make an end of this siege very soon. With your permission, general, I would

like to lead a night attack on the city."

"Tonight?" his father asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I'll go catch a few hours' sleep," Titus replied with a shrug. "But yes, tonight. I'll take a select number of men and come in from the south. The moon wanes, and the darkness will help conceal our numbers creating a sense of panic."

"And I will personally bring the remainder in through the breaches nearest the citadel," Vespasian said. His countenance darkened, which his son was quick to pick up on. "Titus, I want to make an example of Gamala. There will be no mercy, no prisoners taken. I want every last inhabitant of this city dead, be they men, women, or children. Those who do not capitulate to Roman power will bear the full weight of my fury!"

Vespasian later called for a meeting of his senior officers and outlined his plan for the night's attack.

"Titus, along with his select troops, will enter the city from the south," the commanding general said. "The Fifth Legion's cohorts will advance behind them. I will take the remainder of the Fifteenth Legion in from the west. The Tenth will be in support, covering any possible avenues of escape they may try."

"About damn time we finish this place off!" the master centurion from the Fifth Legion grumbled.

"Inform your men there is to be no mercy," Vespasian added, ignoring the remark. "Every man, woman, and child within Gamala will die this night. I want the city burned and the army ready to depart by tomorrow."

The rest of the day was spent disseminating information to each unit, with centuries and cohorts reviewing and rehearsing their roles in the upcoming assault. It was reckoned the people would be in a far more weakened state than the last time they assaulted the heights, a couple of weeks prior. And, as there had been no counterattacks or sorties from the defenders following the western tower's fall, it made Vespasian all the more certain the city was ripe for the taking.

As the entire taskforce was convinced of their pending success, a number of preliminary measures were taken to begin preparations for the breaking down of camp and the return march to Tiberias. Tents remained up, though soldiers had sorted and made their packs ready for the pending march. They also attempted to get a few hours of sleep, since they figured that between the night attack, looting and burning of the city, as well as the tearing down of

camp and marching off, none of them would be getting any sleep over the next couple of days. And in order to preserve the ruse that the army intended to extend the siege, all of the catapults and ballistae were left in position, rather than being loaded onto their transport wagons.

Once the attack commenced, there would be no turning back. As he gazed up at the defiant walls, Titus quietly wondered if the people even suspected that they had witnessed their last dawn.

The days following the first assault had been of numbing shock to Gaius. Nicanor had given him a day of reprieve to spend alone, mourning the loss of his friends from his former squad. When at last there were no more tears to shed, the young optio had returned, resolute to continue in the performance of his duties. This had involved doing yet another reorganization within the century, with the destroyed squad being reconstituted with a newly-promoted decanus and three legionaries.

“Wars always ensure the fastest path to promotion,” the new sergeant had said, when Nicanor informed him of his advancement. The centurion could only nod in understanding, for both he and Gaius had received their current billets through attrition.

With the memory of the disaster still fresh in all of their minds, the soldiers of the Tenth Legion were, to a man, anxious to exact retribution. Therefore it came as a crushing blow, when word was passed down that it would be cohorts from the Fifth and Fifteenth Legions that would be taking part in the evening assault on Gamala.

“Someone has to remain in reserve,” Nicanor said to the assembled meeting of the century’s decanii and senior officers that afternoon. “It will be up to us to make certain no one escapes from the city.”

“Our century will be on the north side near the cliff face,” Gaius explained, his arms folded across his chest. “It is the only way out of the city. And though it looks impassible, those with decent climbing skills could conceivably negotiate their way down. It will be up to us to make certain that none who manage to do so live to talk about it.”

While the optio, probably even more so than any of his men, was anxious for revenge, he knew it was crucial that he maintain a stoic demeanor, lest it lead to lapses in discipline amongst the ranks. It pained him to see just how

few in number the century now was. Only thirty-three men, including decanii and principle officers, marched under their standard. There were another ten amongst the wounded, who'd been evacuated to Ptolemais following Jotapata, that he thought might return to the ranks. The rest were either so badly injured they'd never wield a gladius in battle again, or they had succumbed to the same fate as Sergeant Quintus and were now in Elysium, where the souls of the valiant were taken into the afterlife.

Night had fallen, and a single cohort of legionaries from the Fifteenth Legion accompanied Titus as he made his way up the dirt road that led into the destroyed southern gate of the city. They maintained their silence, for they did not wish for their presence to be known until they were inside the walls. A gentle breeze blew in from the north, assailing their senses with the stench of death that came from within Gamala. The corpses of those buried beneath the rubble had been left where they fell. Given the hard, rocky earth, it had proven almost impossible for the Judeans to properly dispose of their own dead. Sickness brought on by their weakened state of near starvation had rendered many of the city's defenders nearly impotent. At least that is what Titus and his soldiers hoped!

When they were within approximately a hundred meters of the breach, Titus held up his fist, stopping his detachment. He knelt down and took a moment to scan their immediate front. The left hand rampart was relatively intact, and he could easily see a pair of torches atop. There was also little in the way of concealment between their current position and the breach. He turned to the nearest centurion.

"We'll advance at the double-time," he said. "Take your men and clear the left rampart. The right is a crumbled mess, and I doubt they have any sentries posted there."

"Understood," the centurion whispered.

Titus drew his gladius and stood. He took a deep breath, exhaled audibly, and started to slowly jog up the road. When they were just a few dozen feet from the breach, a loud voice shouted in alarm from the rampart.

"Let's go!" the centurion shouted, waving his men forward.

The soldiers scrambled over the ruins of the wall and immediately made for the stone steps. All the while, Titus and the remainder of his detachment

stormed into the city.

A voice of one of the sentries screamed from up on the steps, as a legionary gladius plunged into his guts. His thrashing and bloodied body tumbled over the side. The attacking soldiers made short work of the man's companions who, in their weakened state and lacking proper arms and training, stood no chance against them. Legionaries claimed the slain sentries' torches before making their way down the steps and rejoining the developing fray.

"Cohort, battle formation!" Titus shouted, holding his sword high as he turned and faced his men.

They had just cleared through the rubble left by the battering ram. In the open square near the southernmost gate, there was just enough room for the centuries to array themselves into a viable formation of four to six ranks.

As soldiers coming down from the wall set fire to the nearest building, a series of cries and shouts of both panic and rage came from up the street. The flames kicked up on the cloth overhang of what appeared to be a shop, illuminating the mob of maddened Jewish rebels that rushed towards them. Flames glinted off the helmets, armor, and shield bosses of the legionaries, as they set into their fighting stances. Volleys of javelins were unleashed, impaling a large number of their assailants and causing them to suddenly panic. This was compounded by the blaring of Roman battle trumpets in the distance.

Titus sneered in lustful vengeance. His father's assumptions about the frailty of the defenders and their depleted strength and courage were proving well-founded. During the initial assaults, the people had fought steadfastly by the tenacity brought on by despair, as well as extreme valor. But now, the weeks of starvation and killing had sapped their ability, and in fact their very will to resist further.

"On me!" The legate waved his weapon forward as his men stormed up the street, killing as they went. Mobs of terrified denizens were seen fleeing from their homes and rushing towards the perceived safety of the citadel at the apex of the city.

Zorah heard the sounds of the panicking citizens well before she could see them. She stepped onto the street just outside the citadel, with only a

single torch providing any light with which to see by.

"Come, sister!" she said, quickly taking Maya's hand.

The two girls raced along a side street, towards the shelter the captain's wife had shown them. They pulled aside the large stone and crawled in amongst the wreckage before pulling the rock back into place. Both of the girls were partially claustrophobic, and it was maddening as they crawled into the utter blackness of the destroyed building. As one of the few that had a basement, it appeared to be the only place they might find salvation. The building, at one time a shop with three levels of flats above, now had much of the basement filled with wreckage. From the outside, one would not know it had existed in the first place. For this very reason Zorah and her sister were told to hide there.

It was both rough and terrifying as they made their way, completely blind, into the depths. Their arms and legs were soon covered with bloody scrapes and bruises, and more than once they struck their heads on stone and fallen timbers.

They knew they had made it to their hiding place, well beneath the chaos above, when Zorah's hand found the water jug and sack of bread they'd hidden there. She sat with her back against a stone block and pulled her sister in close.

Out on the street, they could hear the screams of terror as the people attempted to flee from the imperial onslaught. All the girls could do now was pray that God would deliver them from this hell storm the armies of Caesar had unleashed.

There was little in the way of organized resistance as Vespasian led the cohorts of the Fifth Legion into the pair of breaches brought on by the battering ram, as well as the fallen tower. The depleted strength of the defenders had been permanently broken with the deaths of both their leaders, for none within had the courage or governance qualities of either Chares or Joseph.

"Take two cohorts and make for the citadel," Vespasian ordered the master centurion. "I'll take the rest and attempt to blockade the roads."

"Yes, sir!" The primus pilus then turned and ordered his men to follow him at a sprint the remaining distance to the citadel.

What the advancing cohorts found towards the top of the city, was that the tall tower of the citadel was poorly defended, with no barricades or other defensive measures taken. The upper levels of the large building were in ruins, having taken a relentless bombardment from the Roman catapults.

The master centurion also saw that most of the people were not, in fact, fleeing for the citadel, but instead heading for the steep cliffs beyond.

“Take your men and clear the citadel,” the primus pilus ordered one of his subordinate centurions. He turned to another. “Follow me, and we’ll drive these cowards over the ledge!”

Near the cliffs, the ground opened up. And given its steepness, it was the only side of the city that was devoid of a protective wall. A large mob had gathered here, many trying to find their way down to the perceived safety of the valley floor below.

“On line, four ranks!”

At the primus pilus’ order, the legionaries quickly fell into battle formation, at close intervals with shields forward and gladii ready to strike. The utter contempt and hatred felt by the soldiers practically radiated off them, in an aura of utter wrath. The futile defiance of Gamala’s populace, combined with the recent memories of their friends killed during the initial assault, only incensed them further.

“Cohort!” the pilus prior shouted.

“Century!” the subsequent centurions echoed.

“Advance!”

The throng that had once fought the legions with such barefaced tenacity was now completely broken and cowering in terror, as the wall of armored soldiers marched quickly towards them. At the last, the legionaries gave a shout of rage and ran the final few dozen feet, smashing their shields into their hapless victims. There was a certain reckless abandon, and though the legionaries maintained formation, they hacked away with their swords even more than they would in battle. They were not just killing the people of Gamala, they were punishing them savagely for their impudence.

For the people, who had neither the means nor strength to fight, the jaws of death closed upon them. Whether by legionary blades or falling off the cliffs, there was no escape. Many grabbed their children, and with quick prayers which begged God’s forgiveness, they jumped to their doom. Others actually tried to climb down the vertical rocks. Those met a similar end, for the drop off would have been nearly impossible to scale down even in

daylight.

There was a rather dejected feeling amongst the soldiers of the Tenth Legion's Fifth Cohort, as they milled about in the ravine below the tall cliff. The echoing calls from the cornicens' horns seemed to mock them, in that others would get their taste of revenge and plunder this night, but not them.

Gaius walked down the line behind his legionaries, most of whom leaned against their shields and javelins, wracked with boredom, as they listened to the maddening chaos coming from within Gamala.

"Sir, what's that up there?" a decanus asked, nodding towards the top of the cliff. From a distance, and under the faint glow of the new moon, it looked like a swarm of ants.

"It would seem the people of Gamala would rather fall to their death than die by our hands," the optio replied.

As an emphasis to his words, a loud scream pierced the night, as one hapless rebel lost his footing and fell the near hundred feet, smashing his body on the rocks with a sickening crash.

"I don't see how anyone can climb down that," the sergeant added, shaking his head.

"Well, if any do, you will 'reward' them with death by your swords and javelins," Gaius said, continuing to walk down the line of his men.

He found Nicanor a short ways down the line, leaning against a tree. He was talking with Centurion Galeo, just as a series of screams, of both men and women, pierced the night.

"Ah, Gaius," Nicanor said. "It would seem the fun has begun…at least for the boys of the Fifth and Fifteenth Legions."

"Our lads don't like it, but at least they're keeping their grumblings mostly to themselves," the optio observed.

"It would appear that our siege of this damnable place is finally at an end," their cohort commander remarked. "I thought we had Galilee subdued when we took Jotapata. Still, it was bad luck that set us back here, not the valor of our foes."

Gaius' face twitched in the dark. The deaths of almost his entire former squad felt cheapened when referred to as 'a setback'. Still, he knew in the large scheme of the war, that is exactly what it was.

The officers were alerted by a series of screams as several more, who attempted to make their way down the cliff face, were smashed to pieces as they fell. Down the line, legionaries instinctively stepped back, as those Jews who had elected to jump to their deaths landed with a series of sickening splatters near the line.

“This is going to get really ugly,” Galeo thought aloud.

“The ground will be saturated with bloody corpses by dawn,” Gaius remarked under his breath.

The doomed people were now falling in even greater numbers, many being shoved or even thrown over the ledge by the attacking legionaries. And though Gaius certainly had no pity for the damned, he wondered if he’d ever get the shrill screams out of his mind.

There was no order to be had amongst Gamala’s populace. The brave hordes that had overwhelmed the Romans during the early days of the siege now ran about in panic. Few even attempted to fight back against the rampaging legionaries.

So great was the soldiers’ fury that very few even attempted to rape the women they struck down. Instead, many subjected the people to immense cruelty, bludgeoning them to death with stone, club, and the pommels of their swords.

Vespasian’s forces had essentially cut the city into three segments. The southern districts were being pressed northwards by Titus’ soldiers from the Fifteenth Legion. These, in turn, were finding their paths blocked by walls of legionaries from the Fifth, personally led by Vespasian. Those that made it towards the citadel were either being slaughtered by the soldiers led by the Fifth Legion’s primus pilus or taking their chances with the cliffs. In almost every case, this meant falling to a ghastly death. Those who attempted to surrender were immediately killed, for Vespasian was allowing no quarter to be given. In a horrific display of brutality, the children and babies were torn from their mothers’ arms by enraged soldiers and cast over the edge into the abyss. Wails and lamentations accompanied the relentless massacre, deafening the legionaries who carried out their barbaric orders.

“Set fire to the buildings,” Vespasian ordered, as he joined the leaders of the Fifth Legion. Those citizens who had been driven out by Titus had all

been slain by his men or those in the commanding general's blockading force. The legionaries from the Fifth were slowly completing their grisly task of finishing off the crowd that huddled in fear at the top of the cliff. Barely an hour had passed since Titus first led his men into the breach, and now the city of Gamala was a wasteland of death.

"Hardly the brave mob that attacked us just a couple weeks before," the master centurion observed, as he watched his soldiers butcher the hapless citizens with methodical fury.

"Starvation and the deaths of ones friends and family will weaken the resolve of most," Vespasian remarked. "We'll knock down most of the walls tomorrow. Gamala will never again be used as a stronghold against the might of Rome."

The following morning, as auxiliaries leveled what remained of the defensive walls, the city itself was overcast by a cloud of black and pungent smoke. Legionaries broke down their camp like they would on any other day. Their tasks were routine, though devoid of the usual banter for which soldiers were known. Most worked in silence, lost in inner contemplations. All felt that justice and retribution had been satisfied, yet there was no joy to be had in their grim slaughter of the entire city.

"Fall in!" Centurion Nicanor shouted, his legionaries quickly hefting their packs and forming into a column of six men across.

From his position at the back of the century, Gaius assessed the deportment of his soldiers. All were tired from lack of sleep, and they knew, although Vespasian had said they would only march ten miles this day, the terrain was steep and difficult. It would be late afternoon, at the earliest, before they halted to establish camp.

A single low trumpet blast sounded, and the task force began the long trek away from the smoking ruins of Gamala. Vespasian had sent messengers ahead to Tiberias, ordering the rest of the army to break camp and meet them at Bethsaida. There was one last rebel city to deal with before the pacification of Galilee could be called a success.

The commanding general knew it would be some time before he could get a message to Rome, for in the late fall and winter months, the seas became rough and practically unnavigable. This meant the only practical way

to send dispatches was by land, which could take weeks, or even months. He decided that after he was finished in Galilee, he would send his reports to Mucianus and let him decide what needed to be passed on to Rome. Vespasian was in no mood for dealing with the ever-growing instability between the emperor and senate. He had a mission to complete, and he would let others deal with the political side of the war.

It was two days after the Romans set fire to and left Gamala, when the granddaughters of Jacimus finally emerged from hiding. Between ten and fifteen thousand had been butchered in the imperial army's rampage, with no mercy shown to either sex or age. Nearly half the bodies lay strewn about the rocks along the cliffs and piled in gory heaps in the valley below. These were the hapless souls who had tried to escape death, or in desperation took their own lives, despite Judaism's prohibition of suicide.

As the two girls surveyed the utter destruction all around them, they could not help but wonder how they were the only survivors. The Romans had been thorough in the slaughter of Gamala's citizenry. However, they had not gone to the trouble of overturning every stone within, like they had at Jotapata.

"Where shall we go?" Maya asked her older sister.

Zorah could only shake her head, her mind now numbed with sorrow. "Our father has betrayed his father," she said quietly, nodding towards the scene of death and destruction before them. "And this is the price that was demanded. It is by God's grace that we live. We must return to now our grandfather, and pray that the king will show mercy upon us. If we remain in Galilee, I don't know that we can expect any such clemency from the Romans."

Chapter XXI: Giscala's Deceits

Bethsaida, Northern Galilee
November 67 A.D.
***

With the destruction of Gamala, only one city within all of Galilee remained, as yet, untamed. Giscala, which lay about fifteen miles to the northwest of the Sea of Galilee, paled in size to the major cities, such as Sepphoris or Tiberias. Its location, out in the open and easily accessible, gave Vespasian the added confidence that it would fall readily enough, should the people not come to their senses. Even though it was home to one of the most notorious zealot leaders of the rebellion, it was populated by a people whose passion was cultivation of the land, rather than making war. Because of this knowledge, the commanding general's confidence was high. All of Galilee would be Rome's once again, before the month was out!

Vespasian led his task force from the ruins of Gamala to the town of Bethsaida, just north of the Sea of Galilee. Within a day, they were joined by the remainder of the army, that had come up from Tiberias. General Placidus, who had also recently returned, reported his good tidings to the commander-in-chief. From the rally point at Bethsaida, they would determine their next course of action. Vespasian called for a council of war, which he also ordered Josephus to attend.

"Only one city within your former district still stands," Vespasian said.

Josephus simply nodded. He had personal reasons for wanting Giscala to fall quickly, though he kept these to himself. His mastery over his outward displays of emotion, which had become hardened ever since the fall of Jotapata, would have impressed even the most steadfast of the stoics.

"Giscala is only modestly defended," he explained to his Roman hosts. "During my time as governor-general of Galilee, I was conned into providing oil and other trade resources to a seditionist named John. He swore they were to be sold, in order to build up the city's defensive walls. Yet, he only plugged a few gaps and made cosmetic improvements. He knows the city will not stand with him against Rome, despite his being one of their native sons. He, therefore, stole most of the funds to increase his own wealth, as well as to pay for his own private army."

“Most of the seditionists are fleeing towards Jerusalem,” Placidus noted. “At least that’s the intelligence my scouts have been reporting. Those who escaped from the cities we destroyed will reckon there is nowhere else that will be safe for them. If this John is building an army, and he does not intend to face us at Giscala, then no doubt that is where he is headed.”

“A large number of the young fanatics from amongst the loyal cities have also fled south,” Titus stated. “With so many different rival factions, the more we eliminate, the stronger others become, as they draw in the surviving fighting men and resources.”

“That can’t be helped,” Vespasian noted, as the men studied a rough map of the region.

A circle was marked around those cities within Galilee that had remained loyal to Rome with an ‘X’ over those forcibly subjugated or destroyed. And though Giscala was their next target, Vespasian’s gaze was focused on Jerusalem.

“That place is a damned fortress,” the commanding general muttered. “Yet after the horrific casualties suffered by their standing army at Ascalon, as well as the loss of Galilee, their central government is frail.”

“The loss of Galilee will prove devastating to the resistance, for it is the richest province in all of Judea,” Josephus added. “And should the central government become too weakened, all the factions of robbers and murderers will become emboldened. Soon, many factions will be vying for control of the Jewish state.”

These last words sat uneasy with him, and he was suddenly filled with trepidation. He quietly admitted that he had had less personal ties and compassion for the people of Galilee, outside of his friends who perished at Jotapata. Jerusalem was a different matter entirely. He had been born and raised there; and while he was far more well-travelled than most of his countrymen, it was still the place that was most dear to him. In addition to the holy shrines, as well as the sacred temple, it was also the home of his beloved wife and family. What would happen to Judith, should the fanatics take control of the city?

“Hanan and the council do not want endless war with Rome,” he spoke up. “He wants to protect the people, not see them destroyed, which is what will happen should one of the robber factions seize power.”

“Then you’d best hope that saner heads prevail,” Vespasian remarked. “And if he should fail to keep the people united, then all we need to do is

watch the various sects destroy each other."

It was a brutal reality for Josephus. While the Romans had treated him well, they were most certainly not his friends, and they cared nothing for the fate of individual Jews. Vespasian wanted order and supplication restored, and that was all. Josephus was soon dismissed and escorted back to his tent, while the Roman generals deliberated their next move.

"Titus," Vespasian said, "you will take a thousand men and head to Giscala. Let them know we come as friends, and that they need not fear us, provided they expel all zealots and those who would cause sedition. Only if they rebuff you will we return with the army. In which case, Giscala will meet the same fate as Jotapata, Jaffa, Taricheae, and Gamala. I'm tired of playing fucking nice with these damned Judeans."

"Yes, sir," Titus replied.

The commanding general then addressed the remainder of his officers. "Trajan, once Titus returns, you will take the Tenth Legion and head for Scythopolis. Cerealis, you will accompany me to Caesarea, along with the Fifth and Fifteenth Legions. Placidus, you will encamp your corps between Tiberias, Sepphoris, as well as Scythopolis and Caesarea. Once we control Giscala, we can consider Galilee properly subdued and our soldiers will have earned a well-deserved rest through the winter months. After which, we will watch and wait."

"Should the moderates in Jerusalem maintain control, perhaps they will come to terms once they see that Galilee is lost," Trajan observed.

"And if not, then all we do is sit back and watch the zealots make war upon themselves," Placidus added coldly. "We then simply clean up the mess when they're done bleeding each other."

"Either course of action suits me," Vespasian remarked darkly.

There had been a burning rage within Vespasian, demonstrated by the added cruelty to which he had subjected the peoples of the last two cities they'd subdued. All of Taricheae was now enslaved, with the exception of the old and infirm whom Vespasian ordered a mass execution of, while those within Gamala were not even given the chance to live as slaves. It seemed wasteful to Titus, the killing of young women and children, for they all fetched a fair price from the slave traders. Every woman or child slain, rather than sold to the slavers, was money taken from their soldiers, as well as their own coffers.

Over the past few months, Titus had noted a subtle change in his father

that the other legates had not. Granted, Vespasian had always been a hard and determined soldier. Yet, after some of the recent sieges, there was now a darker side to him, one Titus had not seen before. While he respected those enemies who fought well against him, such as Josephus, he held those who refused to capitulate when all was lost with utter contempt. The garrison of Gamala knew they could not last against the power of Rome, yet they had readily accepted death over subjugation. That they so willingly sacrificed their wives and children to such a brutal fate filled the commanding general with an extra degree of contempt.

Vespasian could have been more dismissive towards such madness, were it not for the fact that every futile action by their maddened foes still cost Roman lives. And while in the end, the death toll of the people of Gamala exceeded that of dead legionaries by at least twenty fold, the imperial army's losses had been far greater than anticipated. It was pointless, and Vespasian took the Jewish resistance in such cases, along with his dead soldiers, as a personal insult. After the other senior officers were dismissed, Titus decided to ask his father about this.

"I do take the needless loss of Roman lives personally," Vespasian confessed. "Perhaps that is one of my weaknesses. And yes, all of our soldiers are volunteers who knew the risks when they joined the ranks. I understand that. Many died at Jotapata, yet my rage was tempered by the respect I had for our enemies there. They fought us with various stratagems and almost had us bested a few times. The rest of these filthy bastards are nothing more than vermin who are too fucking stupid to know when they've been beaten. I have no doubt that when those buildings collapsed at Gamala, killing scores of our men, they chalked it up to the will of their god. Well, where was their god two weeks later, when we walked right in and slaughtered them all anyway?"

"Pointless," Titus concurred. "Let us hope those within the last holdout in Galilee have a little more sense."

"If we spare Giscala, it will not be out of mercy," Vespasian noted darkly. "Personally, I could give a bucket of piss if you slaughtered the whole damned lot of them."

"Well, live subjects generate more taxes than dead rebels," Titus said with a grin.

This actually got a chuckle out of his father, which came as a relief to the young legate. "I'm very proud of you, son," Vespasian said with a smile,

changing the subject. “You remind me a lot of myself, when I was a young legate. I confess, I sometimes wish you had not inherited my rather brash tendency of leading from the front.”

“Someone I know recently said, *‘there are times when a commanding general’s life does not count’*,” Titus countered.

“That is true,” his father admitted. “I have always made certain the men know that I have never viewed my own life as holding any more value than even the lowliest amongst them. And because I have always been willing to stand on the battle line whenever necessary, I think it is crucial to have worthy successors that are able to take the lead, should I fall.”

“And I have done the same,” Titus noted. “Domitius is a good officer, and he has proven himself worthy of command. Let us just make certain we aren’t both killed during the same battle.”

Vespasian allowed himself a chuckle at this rather macabre, if somewhat humorous, remark. The war had taken its toll on them, yet Titus was relieved to see that his father still had the ability to laugh, even if it was at a jest regarding his own possible demise.

“I may not always be here,” Vespasian said, becoming serious once more. “You have already proven yourself worthy of commanding a legion. You do the family honor, and I think in time you will be ready for command of an entire army.”

It was with both a sense of confidence and haste, that Titus departed for Giscala. The skies were growing darker, and the days shorter. The last thing he or any of his fellow legates wanted was for their legions to have to march to their winter quarters under the coming torrential rains. The sooner this last holdout capitulated, the sooner they could declare the war in Galilee won.

John of Giscala’s scouts soon reported to him about the fall of Gamala, as well as the remainder of Vespasian’s army approaching from Tiberias. He knew then that Giscala was their objective, and so he set the events in motion that would allow him and his fighters to make their way south. Soon before the Romans’ arrival, he met with Levi, over one of the last dinners he would ever hold within his home.

“The people grow restive,” Levi said, as one of their men brought bowls

of stew to them.

They sat at a table in John's house, and though it was still light outside, the shutters were closed, and it was rather dim and gloomy within.

"They are filthy cowards…all of them," John growled with much irritation in his voice. Some of their more trusted companions soon joined them for supper this evening. Scouts had reported the massing of the Roman army at Bethsaida, which told them Gamala had fallen.

While John had struggled to maintain control over the populace of Giscala, the Roman diversion at Gamala gave him more time to rally followers and additional warriors to his cause.

"If the Romans send their whole army against us, we cannot possibly hold," said Levi. "These walls will be smashed within a day, for I have seen what their siege engines are capable of." He shook his head in emphasis, recalling the relentless barrages from the Roman catapults at Jotapata. He remembered with particular horror the poor woman, eight months pregnant, who took a precise hit from a catapult stone, which tore her child from her body.

"And to say nothing of the fact that my own people have essentially betrayed me," John quickly added with spite. "They would rather suck off the Roman cock, while begging for scraps, than make a stand for their own freedom. If we stay here, there won't be any siege, or even so much as a skirmish. The people will simply open the gates to the invaders and present my balls on a silver platter to Vespasian. We have many fighters, but it will not do to have to face the Romans outside the walls while suffering traitors within."

"What, then?" one of his men asked.

"There are still good men within Giscala, and indeed all of Galilee," John said. "Young men, men of courage, men of honor. They are willing to join us, but we must not risk them losing their courage at the sight of the coming Roman army. We must, therefore, head for Jerusalem very soon."

"Jerusalem," Levi said, with a contented sigh. "I long for the day when we can restore the true faith to the Kingdom of Judah."

"There will be many traitors to deal with first," John noted. "The Sicarii, the Edomites, that treacherous dog, Simon bar Giora, and of course the insufferable Hanan, who would have us groveling back to Caesar."

"Thankfully, the Romans will cease their campaign over the winter months, which will buy us time," Levi noted.

“And before they can commence their barbarism once more, we will have disposed of the old order in Jerusalem,” John said, his eyes filled with menace, and his face twisted in a wicked grin. He then told his assembled friends, “We will send word immediately to all who seek to fight for liberty. I want fighters sent to Ephraim, Beth Horon Katotera, Gazara, Bethlehem, and Qumran. Once they are established, Jerusalem will be enveloped by our warriors. Yet, those fools amongst the high priests and council will be completely blind to our ambitions.”

“Qumran is within Simon bar Giora’s territory,” one of his men observed. “Surely his men will recognize ours.”

“And that is why we will engage him there,” John explained. “Simon has been named an outlaw by the Judean hierarchy, so any mischief we can visit upon him will be viewed favorably by the Jerusalem council. Let them think we are friends of the old order. My friends, we will overthrow these ancient and feeble traitors from within. They will welcome us with arms still open, even as we cut their throats and toss their rotting corpses out for the dogs!”

The following morning, messengers were sent out to the places within Galilee where John of Giscala had the largest concentrations of warriors. As horses were scarce, only a handful of riders could be dispatched. These men headed for the farthest reaches within Galilee and lower Judea, and any other place where loyal fighters could be gathered.

As his men had no logistics capabilities or experience, they could not march their forces as a single army. This actually suited John, for he did not want anyone to realize his intentions, least of all the Romans. With hundreds-of-thousands of refugees fleeing south, his warriors interspersing themselves amongst the throngs would make them virtually invisible.

In the coming days, fifty thousand fighting men loyal to John began the journey towards Jerusalem. Their numbers would grow as more and more young seditionists joined their ranks, swearing to liberate the Kingdoms of Judah and Israel or die as martyrs.

Speed was key for Titus’ trek to Giscala. And since his orders precluded him from engaging enemy forces in open battle, he took only a thousand cavalry as his escorts, one regiment from Placidus’ corps, plus detachments from all three legions’ assigned horsemen. They departed later in the

morning, soon arriving at a town called Akchabare, at the base of the mountain pass that led towards Giscala. The people here were mostly loyalists and greeted the Romans with waves and cheers. In a sign of good faith, Titus halted the lead elements of his detachment near a fruit stand, where he purchased some apples for his horse. It was a subtle gesture, one that would tell the people, as well as his own soldiers, that the Roman army would treat loyal citizens with both dignity and respect. Too often, Roman soldiers turned their own citizens and allies against them by their often brutish behavior, and Titus sought to remedy this.

"When Julius Caesar arrived in Alexandria for the first time, it was during their busiest market day," he explained to one of the regimental commanders. "His officers wanted his soldiers to force their way through to the royal palace. Instead, Caesar told his men to put away their swords and take out their money pouches. They 'bought' their way through the mob, one vendor at a time. Such a simple gesture endeared him to the people and set the stage for eventual annexation by Rome."

They soon turned towards the path to the north, which led out of the town. It paralleled a narrow stream that led through a valley for about six miles, after which it opened up onto a large plain. The terrain was semi-arid, with a small lake in the middle. Trees and sagebrush dotted the landscape. It was now mid-afternoon, and the city of Giscala came into view. The sun was bearing down on them, its light gleaming off the armor and lance points of the Roman horsemen. And even from a distance of a couple miles, it was clear that the walls were heavily manned with armed warriors.

"Seems we have the welcoming committee awaiting us," the tribune in command of the auxilia regiment said, with a touch of sarcasm.

"If we had but two cohorts of infantry, we could clear those walls in an hour," Titus replied with disdain. "They are perhaps ten feet high and lacking in protective ramparts. Still, if what Josephus says is true, then we gain little by slaughtering the entire populace."

The tribune gave him a puzzled look.

The legate was quick to explain. "I've seen enough mindless killing for one campaign season. There are plenty of moments when I despise these people and want to see every last one of them crucified. Other times, I find I actually pity them for their ignoble fate."

"Let us see, then, what the fates have in store for the citizens of Giscala," the tribune replied.

Titus nodded and kicked his horse into a full gallop, riding on ahead of his men. The cavalry officers had arranged their men in a long line, for even a thousand horse were far greater in number than all the mounted troops the rebels' combined armies could muster. With most of their available horses sent with riders to dispatch their warriors to Jerusalem, they had little way of knowing that they currently only faced Titus and his cavalry. For all they knew, there could be sixty thousand infantry a day's march behind this contingent of horsemen.

There was a commotion upon the wall as the Roman legate approached. Soon a lone figure emerged and stood atop the wall, one foot resting on the short rampart. What Titus did not know at the time was this was none other than the zealot leader, John of Giscala. The Roman general would later regret not having Josephus ride with his detachment, so he could readily identify their adversary.

"People of Giscala!" Titus said. He was being rather brash, riding so close to the wall, for he was well within range of any archers or slingers who wished to try and fell such a magnificent prize as a Roman general. Still, it was a risk he accepted, for he wished the people to see that he did not fear them. "You dare shut your gates in the face of his imperial highness, Emperor Nero's forces? What manner of corrupt men are you who dare to keep out the imperial legions?"

"We are men who would live free, not as slaves!" John retorted.

"If you are free, why then do you keep the people trapped within, as well as impeding those from without?" the legate remarked. "Are the people of Giscala truly free? Or is it only you and your lawless renegades who decide what liberty may be bestowed upon men?"

He did not give the rebels a chance to reply, but continued, "Know this, if you attempt to stand against Caesar, there can be no victory. A single cohort could carry your trivial defenses in less than an hour! And if we are obliged to unleash the legions upon Giscala, the city will be left a pile of ash. Every last one of you will die, with your wives and children sold off as slaves. But General Vespasian is merciful, and he offers you his right hand in peace and security. Your former insolence will be pardoned, and you will have hope of regaining your liberty. If you continue in this defiance, our machines will batter your walls into dust, proving once more that rebellious Galileans are no better than arrogant slaves!"

John gave pause, as if he were genuinely considering Titus' proposal. He

then gave his reply. “Your words have merit,” he said at last. “As for myself, I am content to hearken to your offer and am willing to persuade by either words or force any who may refuse it. But understand, today is the Holy Sabbath. Even Romans understand our sacred laws that forbid us from labor on the day of rest, which was given to us by God. Therefore I ask, in the spirit of cooperation and friendship, that you give us this day of rest, and on the morrow we may open the gates to the armies of Caesar, who we will gladly embrace once more as our sovereign.”

“Very well. My forces will retire this day to the village of Cydessa. At two hours past sunrise on the morrow, we will return. Play the emperor false, and our act of clemency this day will be met with the harshest of punishments.” With that, he turned his horse about and returned to his men, ordering them to retire to Cydessa, which lay just a few miles to the west of Giscala.

“Suppose it’s a trick?” the cavalry tribune asked, as they began the short ride.

“We have little to lose by delaying for a day,” Titus reasoned. “If we honor their holy day, then we can expect greater cooperation from the people of the city, who I suspect have been virtual prisoners of these insurgents. And if they play us false in any way, then we will destroy them utterly.”

Cydessa was a small hilltop stronghold that was heavily fortified with a high wall, surrounded by trench and palisades. Populated by a people known as the Tyrians, they were mortal enemies of the Jews, and therefore rather welcoming of the presence of Roman soldiers. The village was far too small to accommodate Titus’ troopers, and so they made camp just outside the walls, while the legate and his senior tribune and centurions enjoyed the hospitality of the mayor and his council.

“I fear they will have attempted some sort of trickery,” the mayor said, as he and his elders sat with Titus and his officers over a meal of lamb, bread, and watered down wine.

The meat was stringy, the bread stale, and the wine was rather pungent. Yet Titus still ate, for he understood the Tyrians to be a very poor people, and so he felt it necessary to show appreciation for their humble hospitality.

“If they attempt to fool us, we will crucify every last one of them,” he replied coldly.

“I would have you slay them all, and then my people could occupy their city that is a blemish on our lands like a boil.”

“Your lands are still Roman, and they belong to Caesar,” the legate reminded the man, gently but firmly. “Both your people, as well as those of Giscala, are all the emperor’s subjects. Know that Caesar thanks you for your loyalty, but understand that any justice against seditionists will be properly meted out by his legions, not vigilantes.”

After concluding his late afternoon meal, Titus thanked the mayor once more and decided to take a walk away from the village and his detachment’s camp. He strolled up a tall hill, just north of the settlement. The late fall evenings were quite pleasant, and a moderate breeze was blowing in over the mountaintops. As he gazed to the west, he could just make out the village of Elqosh, near a narrow river that stretched all the way to the Mediterranean Sea.

He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply through his nose, wishing he could breathe in the sea air that was perhaps twenty miles from where he stood. He calmed his mind, focusing on things other than the war. He smiled and shook his head as he found his mind occupied by thoughts of the Jewish queen, whose bed he’d shared during his last night in Caesarea Philippi.

For reasons he could not explain, Queen Julia Berenice completely enraptured the young legate. Their difference in age was actually appealing to him, as she was an experienced woman, and not some timid, young girl, like so many of those he’d taken to satisfy his carnal lusts over the years. Neither of his wives had had any experience when he first wed them, and he had found that trying to teach them the ways of sensuous pleasure to be rather tedious.

And yet, it was not just the queen’s supple body, and her ability to perform the most exquisite of erotic acts, that beguiled him. No, what captivated Titus even more was her mind. Educated in Rome, Berenice was multilingual, able to speak, as well as read and write, in at least four languages. Her political education had also begun at an early age, making her a monarch with both ability and knowledge, rather than simply a figurehead placed on the throne to placate the people. The fact that he could actually talk to her, and she had a mind of her own, intrigued him immensely. The fact that she was a Jewish queen, who’d been raised in Rome and even had a Roman name, gave her a welcomed aura that was exotic, and at the same time familiar.

Titus sighed in his pleasant reminiscing, before turning his gaze back towards where Giscala lay in the distance. He could just barely see the city,

as it was partially obscured by a hilltop. Just to the southeast was the small lake, which fed the rather fertile plain where the city sat. The legate could just barely see what looked like people coming and going, for even a brutal war did not stop the flow of commerce. And whether Giscala would remain a vibrant commercial hub for northern Galilee, or if it was to be reduced to ash, would be decided on the morrow.

Chapter XXII: The Fall of Galilee

Giscala, Northern Galilee
November 67 A.D.
***

The arrival of Roman cavalry caused a panic within Giscala. Though several thousand zealot fighters protected John and had, thus far, bullied the populace into allowing them to stay, the people knew they had to expel the fanatics soon or suffer the same fate as Gamala, Jotapata, and Jaffa. As John left the ramparts of the southern wall, he was greeted by both the mayor and the entire city council. Many of them had known John since he was a young boy, yet there were no familial feelings left for the zealot, whose continued presence threatened their very survival.

"It is time for you to leave," the mayor said bluntly. After weeks of feeling the smothering oppression of John and his zealots, the leaders of Giscala had at last found the courage to speak out.

"If you do not leave now, you will compel the Roman army to destroy our beloved city and everyone in it!" an elder spoke up.

John paused in contemplation, as if he were taking their words to heart and had not already made up his mind to depart the city at once.

"And so it is time for me to leave," he replied calmly. He then addressed the council, as well as the growing crowd. A master of theatrics, he managed to feign his feelings of hurt to the point many of the people actually took pity upon him.

"People of Giscala, my kin!" he said, with arms raised high in supplication. "It is with much grief that I must quit this noble place of my birth, which is dearer to me than even the holiest shrines in all of Judea. My heart is heavy at your wish to see me expelled from my very home, yet my love for you is such that I will not risk your falling to the swords of the tyrants. If, by my exile, I can save you from the wrath of Caesar, so be it. Only my warriors, who still believe in fighting for all of our freedoms, will accompany me. Goodbye then, my beloved home. May God smile upon Giscala, and all the lands of Israel and Judah!" John abruptly left, allowing his words to linger in the air. The crowd was silent, all eyes still fixed on him as he and his escorting guards departed from the market square.

Once they were out of sight, the mayor addressed the crowd. “Good people!” he said. “It was with no pleasure that we, your elders, expelled one of our own sons from the gates of our city. Know that we did so in order that we may all live in peace, protected from the scourge of war that scars so much of our land. ”

“And by protecting it, you mean surrender to the Romans?” a woman in the crowd asked.

“If it will save us from the slaughter, then yes,” the mayor replied firmly.

“The Romans have treated all of the loyal cities within Galilee with moderation,” an elder added, hoping to placate the more seditious within the growing throng.

“They enslave people and dare to call it ‘peace’!” the woman shouted back.

The mayor, who had mustered the courage to face down the zealots, was not about to be spat at by an angry woman, who he reckoned to be the wife of one of John’s fighters. Members of the crowd were heckling her, with those closest shoving and telling her to leave with the fanatics.

“Any who wish to leave our city, should do so at once,” the mayor spoke firmly. “We will tolerate no more seditious talk, nor will we risk having our city reduced to rubble, our women and children killed or sold into slavery. Giscala is Galilean, and Galilee is Roman. Those who cannot accept this will be banished from our city!”

That evening, the zealots made final preparations for their journey to Jerusalem. It would be a lengthy trek of at least two weeks by foot. They would have to take great care to avoid all of the major cities within Galilee, which now belonged to the Romans.

John was quite surprised, however, when he stepped out of his house and saw a large number of women and children awaiting him. He had sent his own wife and sons to stay with family in nearby Bar’am, and so they, at least, were safe.

“What is this?” he asked.

“Our husbands and sons go to Jerusalem,” a middle-aged woman explained. “We are not safe here, as we are scorned for our relations to those who continue in the battle against Roman oppression. We ask that we

accompany you to the safety of the holy city."

"With respect," one of his fighters said quietly to John. "It is a long journey to Jerusalem. Our fighting men will be hard pressed as it is, let alone trying to bring these women and infants."

John held up his hand, silencing the man. Secretly, he could not believe his good fortune, for he saw an opportunity to ensure his salvation in those innocent and hopeful faces. He would later state that it had been God who compelled them to join him, for they would ensure his safe passage to Jerusalem in ways they had yet to understand.

"Any who wish to breathe the air of liberty are welcome to join us," he said warmly. "But understand this; only those of stout heart and endurance should attempt this undertaking, for our pace will be swift and exhausting, and we cannot be slowed by the weak and infirm. Those most righteous, who God gives true strength to, will be able to endure the hardships. If you are of strong mind and spirit, then I welcome you into this venture that will usher in a new age of both glory and freedom to all the Jews!"

The women all exclaimed loudly in praise and thanksgiving, with many embracing John as 'their savior', and kissing him upon the face and head. Behind him, his warriors, at least those without family within Giscala, grinned sinisterly. For these nefarious fellows understood their leader's intent, and exactly why he was allowing what would be a vast entourage of nine thousand women and children to accompany them.

They departed without fanfare well after midnight. It had taken that long for the people to pack even their most humble of possessions for the journey. John told all to travel light, and that there would be food waiting for them at Nahf, ten miles to the southwest.

His plan was to head south from Nahf, skirting the ruins of Jotapata, while traveling cross-country, avoiding the traitorous cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias. From there, they would head southeast, past Scythopolis, while following the River Jordan all the way to Jericho, where they would finally turn west towards Jerusalem. As much of the terrain was mountainous, and they would be avoiding roads and major cities that were known to be loyal to Rome, John estimated it would take them at least two weeks to reach Jerusalem. Many of the people who accompanied his warriors had never ventured far from their homes, and almost half had never even been as far south as the Sea of Galilee. None of them could even begin to comprehend the harrowing and savage journey that awaited them. And if any had even the

faintest notion as to why John allowed them to come with him, they would have stayed in Giscala and pledged their loyalty, however reluctantly, to the Romans.

The rising sun shone into the faces of Titus and his contingent of horsemen as they rode at a brisk pace down from Cydessa and towards Giscala. He hoped this day to put an end to the conquest of Galilee and to inform his father that the war, at least in the north, was over. As they approached the city, they saw that the gates were open, and the people had flocked out onto the open plain to welcome them. Women clutched bundles of flowers to their chests, and children shouted and waved at the riders as they slowed their mounts to a walk. The city elders stood in the center of the road, the mayor bowing deeply as Titus dismounted.

"Hail, noble emissaries of Rome!" he said. "We thank you for driving off the wicked tyrants who would see our prosperity destroyed."

"I suspected Giscala was held hostage by renegades," the legate replied. "I am glad to see my suspicions were correct, and the innocent within your city were not obliged to share in the sentences of the guilty. Who was it that subjugated you, and where is he? It is he and his followers who must now face justice."

"Regrettably, they fled during the night," the mayor explained. "They played you false by asking for reprieve on the Sabbath. It was a ruse, so they could flee for the perceived safety of Jerusalem."

"We knew not where you and your men had taken shelter for the night," an elder tried to explain quickly. "And as they still held us practically hostage, right up to the time they left, there was no way for us to get a message to you."

"Fuck," Titus swore through gritted teeth. "How many have fled?"

"Six thousand fighting men did they take with them," the mayor answered, "along with nine thousand women and children. As for the man who leads them, his name is Yohanan ben Levi, more commonly known as John of Giscala. Though he is a Giscalan by birth, we no longer claim him as one of our sons."

Titus' ears perked up at the mention of the rebel leader's name. Of course, John, or *Yohanan*, as it was known in Hebrew, was among the most

common given names in all of Judea. There were certainly many men within Giscala who bore the same name. The general could not help but wonder if this was the same man Josephus had warned them about. He decided to put the question to the mayor.

"It is the same man that you seek," one of the councilors replied, causing Titus' face to turn red with anger. "He commands the loyalty of tens-of-thousands within Galilee."

"I have no doubt he will attempt to bring every robber and seditionist within the region to his cause," the mayor added. "He brings an army to Jerusalem; one among many who will now battle for control over the holy city."

Titus was seething with anger, and cursing himself for having allowed one of the most powerful rebel leaders remaining to have escaped.

In his fury, he turned to the auxilia tribune. "Take your regiment, along with the cavalry of the Fifth and Tenth Legions," he said quietly, fighting to control the absolute rage in his voice. "Find this John of Giscala, and bring me his head on a lance."

"Sir!" The tribune quickly saluted, remounted his horse, and signaled for his regiment to follow him. A cornicen's horn sounded, and five hundred horsemen were soon galloping down the dusty road that lead a hundred and fifty miles to Jerusalem.

"They left after midnight," the mayor said. "That has given them at least eight hours' head start, yet they will be greatly slowed by their women and children."

The legate said no more, but simply signaled for his remaining horsemen to continue through the gates, where the people were now cheering once more. Giscala was now in the hands of the Romans.

Titus was in a foul mood. Still enraged at having fallen for his enemy's trickery under the guise of clemency. He entered the city of Giscala under the shouts and adulations of the city's populace. There was much he needed to discuss with the city elders, while waiting for his cavalry to return from their mission. It would be a paradox of both good news and bad that he would bring to the commander-in-chief, when he finally returned to Bethsaida.

It was an hour into their ride before the Roman cavalry regiment saw any

sign of those who had fled the night before. The troopers had kept their horses at a modest canter, knowing they may have a number of miles to travel before they found their quarry, and their mounts needed to be fresh enough to do battle.

The regiment marched in a column six wide, with centurions riding near their tribune and standard bearer. They knew that if given a substantial head start, there was little chance of them catching the Giscalan and his men, even with horses. Most likely, if they felt threatened by pursuit, they would simply scatter to the four winds, never to be seen again.

There was also concern about the number of rebels John had taken with him. If, as the Jewish elders asserted, he had six thousand fighting men with him, the eight hundred horsemen who pursued them would be hard pressed to overcome such lopsided numbers. Despite their trepidations, the tribune and his centurions knew there was little they could do, except follow their orders. It was near the town of Akchabare, about eight miles south of Giscala, that they caught the first glimpses of their prey.

"Up ahead, sir," the standard bearer said, pointing with his signum. "What do you make of that?"

In the distance, it looked like a mass of locusts, near the ground and swarming about. The tribune knew right away it was people, a *lot* of people.

"The regiment will form up into wedge on me," the tribune ordered his centurions. He then addressed the officers of the legionary cavalry. "Have your men cover the wings. It looks like a scattered mob with many people far from the road. Envelope them and kill all that you find. My troopers will take the center and smash them into the dust!"

Roman cavalrymen, like their infantry brethren in the legions, were highly organized and disciplined. With a few quickly shouted commands, the legionary cavalry split off from the column forming a long echelon on either direction. Almost simultaneously, the auxilia regiment fanned out on either side into a large wedge formation directly behind their commanding tribune. From above, it almost looked like a giant 'W', that is until the troopers on the flanks broke into a full gallop, breaking away from the main axis of attack, as they sought to surround their scattered enemies.

As they increased their pace to a fast gallop, the tribune could not discern individual shapes or people and, therefore, could not tell which were women, children, or fighting men. Their numbers alone unnerved him. He hazarded it was greater than the six thousand he had anticipated. Speed and shock would

be necessary to break them, and he was not about to give his adversaries the opportunity to seize the initiative.

“Sound the charge!” he shouted to his cornicen.

The series of short blasts on the battle trumpet were met with shouts of rage as the regiment spurred their mounts into a sprint. There was no opposition to be had. Instead, it looked as if the people were simply fleeing for their lives. So many were compressed together along the road, that there simply was no time for them to evade the crashing wall of men and horses. Many were trampled outright, while others were struck down by both spatha and lance.

The tribune brought his sword down in a hard chop, cleaving through the shoulder of one victim who crumpled to the ground and was crushed by the torrent of horses. As he rode through the chaos, it seemed as if all of these people wore the long dresses and head scarves of women, with no men’s tunics in sight. Still, the horde of people was enormous, and he knew he could only see a small portion of their numbers within the fray. Besides, as had been witnessed at Gamala, women, if properly armed, were very much capable of inflicting death upon his troopers. And yet, the people they slaughtered appeared to all be completely unarmed. Almost effortlessly did his men smash through the mob, killing at their leisure.

For nearly thirty minutes the carnage ensued. The tribune’s arm ached from fatigue, as he swung his blade in a hard slash time and again. His weapon became embedded in the skull of his latest victim, who was killed almost instantly. Unable to pull his spatha free, the officer was wrenched from his horse, landing hard upon the dirt and pebbles of the road. His breath was knocked from his lungs momentarily, and he gasped for air as he tried to struggle to his feet, shakiness almost overcoming him.

Strangely enough, no one attacked him, yet countless people ran all around him in terror. As he jerked his weapon free from the skull of his slain adversary, he saw that it was no enemy warrior, but an elderly woman. He paused and looked all around, realizing there was not a single man to be found amongst those being savagely murdered. Countless women and children already lay dead, and the tribune realized that these people had been deliberately abandoned by John and his army, to be used as a diversion in order to aid in his escape.

“Damn those bastards to hades!” he spat as he found his horse and mounted once more. He signaled for his cornicen. “Sound recall!”

The echoing order from the war horn may have puzzled a number of the troopers, who despite their lengthy exertions were still in the frenzy of bloodlust, yet all eventually heeded the call and ceased in the killing. The ground was covered in dead and dying people, with many more screaming and crying. It was rather unnerving to the horsemen, who were now coming to the same realization as their tribune.

"A diversion!" the tribune shouted, as two of his centurions joined him. "This whole thing was nothing more than a fucking diversion!"

"Shall we finish this lot off?" one of the officers asked.

"No," their commander replied, shaking his head. "These people are now the property of Caesar. Kill any who are either useless or who refuse to follow. As for the rest, we will take them to Titus. The price gained from the slave traders will, perhaps, soften the blow of John of Giscala escaping from us."

The cruelty of the rebel leaders had exceeded even that of the Romans, for John knew that the women and children who had fled with him would be shown no mercy by their enemies. All the same, their deaths bought him even more time to make good on his escape. He consoled his men, who had lost family members to the Roman pursuers, telling them they had died in service to the greater cause.

"They gave their lives as martyrs to the true faith, and to freedom for Judea," he said to some of his senior leaders that night.

They were camped on the slopes of a tall hill that overlooked the village of Karmiel, a few miles north of the shattered ruins of Jotapata. John had forbidden campfires, as they did not wish to attract the attention of any Romans who might be roaming the hills.

"If you wish for retribution," he added, "seek it upon the imperial soldiers once Jerusalem is firmly under our control. We have many traitors to deal with before we get the chance to spill Roman blood. But hold true to the faith, my friends, and all of you who have suffered loss this day shall have your revenge."

Nothing else was said by any of his companions. Even Levi was rather quiet that evening. John wondered if it wasn't in part due to their proximity to where his friend had fought his last traumatic action against the Romans.

Come morning, most would go their own way, eventually rallying at Jerusalem. As they were not an army, John had ordered his fighters to scatter and avoid rousing suspicion from the traitors and Roman allies.

John, Levi, and around a dozen warriors continued their trek soon after sunrise. They followed a river south of Karmiel, which led them to a small valley. And while there was a viable pass directly south leading onto the large plain just north of Sepphoris, John wished to satisfy his curiosity. And so they instead wound their way through the deep ravine, emerging just north of the ruins of Jotapata.

The trenches that had surrounded the Roman camp were mostly filled in, and the small hillock they had excavated to make firing platforms for their siege engines looked as if the earth itself was left scarred and deformed. The remains of the city were particularly devastating. All that remained of the wall was a scattering of crushed stone. Levi scarcely recognized the place, though the sight of it caused him to shudder.

"The destruction left by a traitor," John observed. He then walked into the ruins, which were still covered in black soot and ash. Badly decayed bodies and parts of bodies were everywhere. The majority of their flesh had been devoured by wild beasts. What remained was covered in flies, and so the men did not go far beyond the ruined wall.

"We could have held," Levi said, a tear forming in his eye.

It was his first view of Jotapata since his departure the night prior to its fall. In his mind, he could not see the weakness and infirmity brought on by the weeks of being under siege. Nor could he recall that their numbers had been so greatly reduced by injuries and disease, that there had been almost no one left fit to fight when Josephus sent him to find reinforcements. All Levi saw was the ruins of what had once been the greatest stronghold in all of Galilee; the place for liberty to make its stand against vile oppression.

He suddenly unleashed a scream of rage and anguish, falling to his knees and grabbing at his hair. *"Why? Why, did you betray us? Why?"* Josephus, whom he had once loved like a brother, was now the focus of every bit of hatred and despair within the Judean zealot. Even John, whose heart was like stone, was moved by his friend's cries that erupted from deep inside his shattered heart. Whatever crimes he may have committed, at least they were in the pursuit of freedom for his people. Josephus had betrayed his own people, not for liberty, but to save his own neck. His name would forever be

linked with betrayal and disloyalty.

The slaughter of the families of the zealots had done little to improve Titus' temper, although he did console himself in the knowledge that he would be further enriched by this latest batch of prisoners, soon to be sold as slaves.

"It can't be helped," Vespasian reasoned, after Titus and his detachment returned to the army camp near Bethsaida. "John of Giscala is but one zealot leader among many. With any luck, his rivals will finish him off for us."

While the commander-in-chief was disappointed at John's escape, he was not about to let this setback diminish his good humor at having finally subdued all of Galilee, and brought an end to the war in the north.

"Galilee is Roman once more," he added, handing his son a cup of wine. "Here, I've been saving this for such an occasion. It comes from the Ephesus vineyards of our friend, Antonius Primus."

Titus took a long pull and let out a cough as soon as he'd finished.

"Strong stuff," he said appreciatively. "So what happens now, general?"

"Now, we wait," his father replied. "We have almost four months with which to regroup and, hopefully, get some more replacements for our dead and wounded. Those we did receive are completely raw and inexperienced. Their units need time to train them up properly. King Agrippa and a number of the loyalist cities have provided us with the basis for a rather in depth spy network. We will have eyes on both those cities which are Roman, as well as those under control of the various seditious factions. I also want to find out everything I can about what's happening in Jerusalem. So for now, we rest, we watch, and we wait."

The Roman army soon dispersed to their pre-designated camps for the winter. The Tenth Legion's billets at Scythopolis were quite comfortable, for the climate was decidedly warm and pleasant, broken up only by sporadic rains.

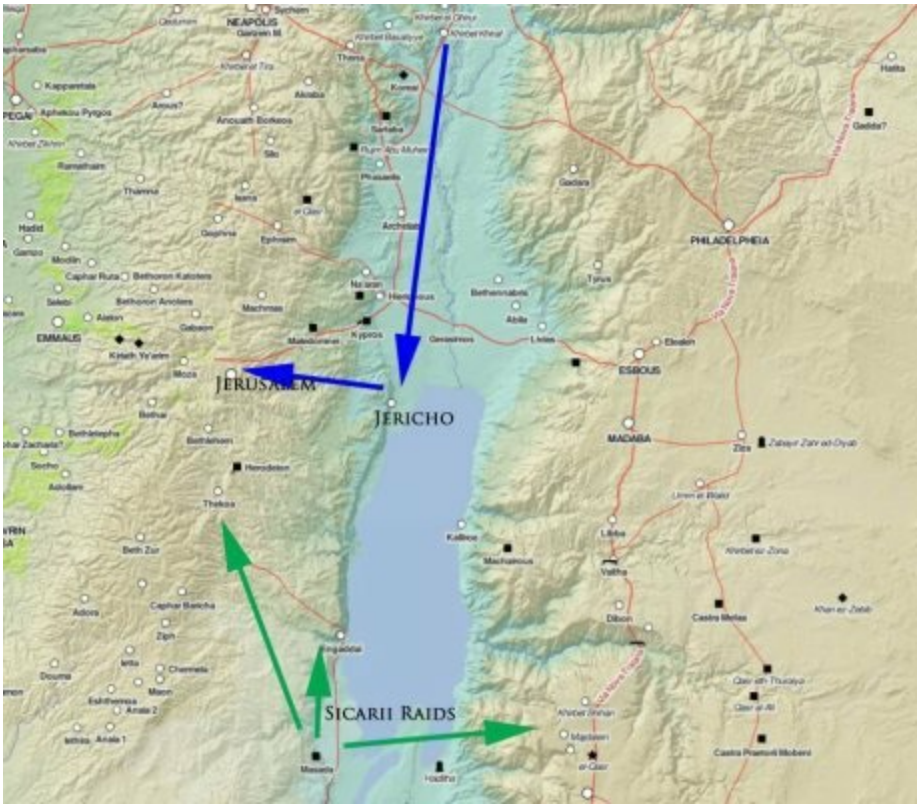
Nicanor and Gaius would spend the next few months working to reconstitute their decimated century. In addition to seven wounded who'd been returned to duty, they received ten fresh recruits. These particular soldiers had been volunteers, who though initially assigned to the Twelfth

Legion, were given the option of joining the army in Judea. Most of these legionaries were idealistic youths still in their late teens. Their greatest fear had been that the war would end before the Twelfth Legion was sent back into the fight. They had therefore asked to transfer to one of the other legions when Mucianus called up a draft of volunteers from among the newest recruits. The addition troops put the century at fifty-three total soldiers and officers. So while the new recruits and returning veterans were most certainly a welcome sight for their weary companions, it still left the century well under its authorized strength.

Still, the Tenth Legion was glad for the respite, after a brutal campaign season that had never seemed to end. The very fact that they had succeeded where Cestius Gallus had failed was a source of pride for the men in the ranks. It gave them some solace for the loss of their friends, who'd perished during the many brutal battles and hellish sieges. They had also increased their personal fortunes substantially, with the shares each had received from the sale of captives to the slave drivers.

As for Josephus, he accompanied Vespasian and Titus to Caesarea. Instead of a tent, he was given a small room within the governor's palace. Over the next few months, he would continue in his work chronicling the history of the Jewish revolt so far. When not writing, his evenings were mostly spent in contemplation. He feared greatly for his wife and family, especially with the growing instability within Jerusalem. Every morning began, and every evening ended, with prayers which begged God to safeguard both Judith and his parents. He also hoped that God would look after Hanan, for to Josephus, the high priest was the last real hope for the Jewish people's salvation.

John of Giscala’s flight south, and the short pursuit by Titus’ cavalry



John of Giscala's trek to Jerusalem
Sicarii winter raids from Masada, to the south

Part IV

The treachery of John of Giscala, and the downfall of all hope for the people of Judea

Chapter XXIII: A Sinister Interlude

Jerusalem
December 67 A.D.

Ancient Jerusalem

In the eighteen months since the province erupted into open rebellion, the war had evolved into far more than just seditious Jews attempting to liberate themselves from the rule of the Roman Empire. Various factions, many of which had previously been ignored as too weak and insignificant, were now emerging from the shadows with a vengeance. And with the central government now greatly weakened, the more violent and seditious of the zealot leaders were able to recruit heavily from among the young and disenfranchised.

What baffled their imperial adversaries the most was despite all of these factions sharing similar ethnicities, religion, and culture, they utterly hated each other. Too often, they were willfully oblivious to the wanton destruction being unleashed by the imperial legions, so intent they were on settling their ancient rivalries, which in light of the total and mutual destruction that was eminent, seemed petty at best.

"A Sicarii and an Edomite would rather cut each other's throats than stand together against their common enemy in Rome," Josephus had one time told his Roman hosts.

As for the vast majority of the citizens within Judea, they simply wished to live their humble lives in harmony with their neighbors. By the same token, they were easily swayed by passionate leaders and could be called upon to commit acts that would normally go against their conscience. Their God may have been one of justice and mercy, yet His most vocal followers

had unleashed a wave of violence and hatred against their fellow Jews that stunned even the savage Romans.

According to Josephus, High Priest Hanan ben Hanan was the only man the people of the various sects would listen to. However, after the utter destruction and humiliation of the Judean standing army at Ascalon, and now with the total loss of Galilee, Hanan and the Jewish council were beginning to lose their hold upon the rest of Judea.

It had been an arduous journey for Yaakov, but after several weeks of wandering his way south, he finally he arrived at the gates of the holy city. It had only been seven months since the young man had left at the head of Josephus' personal guard, and yet everything had changed. He thought back to when he'd left Jerusalem, brimming with confidence and hope that they would soundly defeat Vespasian, as they had Gallus. Over the next few months, he watched as Josephus attempted in vain to rally the various rebel factions in Galilee to unite with his forces. And when they did face the Romans, Vespasian's army had routed them time and again, until at last they were cornered at Jotapata.

"Is there a fate for our people, other than subjugation and death?" Yaakov quietly asked, as he gazed upon the massive temple complex.

The temple was the sacred heart of Judaism, for as long as it stood, so too did the people. The temple district, which included the outer wall, courtyard, and surrounding buildings, was quite large and encompassed a significant portion of the city. And while it was always alive with activity, Yaakov was disturbed to see just how many armed men he saw milling about. These were neither soldiers nor temple guards, yet they roved about in bands, equipped with swords, axes, spears, and slings. The actual temple guards appeared to be keeping their distance from these bands, who had them clearly outnumbered.

Yaakov approached the main gates, which were only partially opened. Six guards stood fully armed in Herodian scale armor and carrying long spears.

"Hold," one of them said, leveling his spear. "What business brings you to these sacred grounds?"

"I am here to see Hanan ben Hanan," the young man replied. "That is, if

he is still high priest and leader of the Judean governing council."

"And who shall we say is here to see him?" The guard's eyes were full of suspicion. With all of the armed gangs roaming about, Yaakov could scarcely blame him.

"Tell him it is Yaakov ben Yeshua. I was commander of the governor-general's guard in Galilee."

The guards were clearly surprised to hear this. One of them looked at Yaakov with his head slightly cocked to one side. "By God, I do know who you are. Come quickly, the council will have many questions for you!" Another man was dispatched to find Hanan, along with his co-ruler, Joseph ben Gorion. Yaakov was taken to a small chamber within the temple, where he was immediately brought food and water. He ate hungrily, for he had had little in the way of nourishment since he began his journey down from Galilee. Great fatigue, brought on by constant hunger, had been part of the reason for his taking so long to reach Jerusalem from Galilee.

"Yaakov!" Hanan said with passion, as he entered the room. "You live, thanks be to God!"

"It is God's preservation of me that I have yet to understand," the young man replied.

They were soon joined by Joseph and several other councilors. They allowed Yaakov to eat in silence, for they could readily see he was famished. Hanan pitied him, noting that Yaakov, who was never a big man to begin with, had lost a considerable amount of weight.

"How is it that you survived the fall of Jotapata?" Joseph asked at last.

"And is it true, what the rumors are saying about Josephus?" another councilor added impatiently.

Yaakov took another bite of bread and finished his third cup of water. He took a deep breath, collecting his thoughts.

"Josephus lives," he said. He went on to explain what transpired after the city fell, when he, Josephus, and a few others hid in a well. He told them about their suicide pact, where every third man would be slain by the warrior next to him, and how Josephus balked at killing him when they were the only ones remaining.

"Surely your survival was the will of God," Hanan emphasized. He still refused to believe that Josephus was capable of any acts of treachery. Thus far, the young guards' commander had said nothing that would make him think otherwise.

“Perhaps,” Yaakov replied, though his face was wrought with expressions of doubt. “As for the other accusations made by the gossips, I cannot readily answer much. I found Josephus fast asleep when the Romans captured the walls. He was so exhausted, I swear it was the only rest he had gotten in six weeks. So at least I know he did not let the Romans in. Then again, he rarely slept, and there is nothing to say he did not somehow sneak out of the city and cut a deal with Vespasian. And perhaps he was able to finally sleep because he knew the siege was over. But then, why hide in the well for three days instead of just turning himself in to the Romans? I cannot answer these questions. What I do know is that his still being alive is a liability, because it gives the seditious factions even more to use against you. A fallen martyr would be lauded as a hero, thereby strengthening the governing council. But, if the man who you appointed as governor-general of Galilee has become a Roman turncoat, the people will blame you for the fall of our richest province.”

“It is true,” Hanan lamented. “Sadly, the people are easily swayed, and as soon as the first whispers were heard that Josephus lived, many of the people went from mourning to seeking to avenge themselves upon his family.”

“By God,” Yaakov said, his eyes growing wide. “Judith…his parents… please tell me they are alright!”

“They are fine,” Hanan said, holding his hands up in emphasis. “I have placed guards on their house, and I have ensured that they are escorted throughout the city. But now we must look to how we can save the Jewish state, for as you can readily see, beyond these walls, the fanatics have become bold, and their numbers grow every day.”

“The fact that they still expend much of their energies fighting each other has brought us some reprieve,” Joseph added. “Still, we are facing a series of crises, not least of which will be the coming Roman onslaught next spring. With Galilee back under their rule, they will soon head south. And we must deal with the threats of insurgency from within our own communities as well.”

“And if we are to deal with the insurgents, we must find ways to make up for our economic losses,” Hanan said. He went on to explain, “The loss of Galilee goes beyond the cities that were destroyed and the people killed; though these have been tragic, and we heartily mourn them. The Romans are now blockading merchant traffic from the northern and western routes, as well as the sea. And any who attempt to leave Judea are having their goods

confiscated. Vespasian has also placed a moratorium on the export of any goods to our besieged Jewish state."

"All the silver shekels we've minted will become worthless if the people starve," an elder spoke up. "The Romans know this, and they will burn our crops and kill our livestock in order to ensure this."

"What would you have me do?" Yaakov asked.

"Assume command of a detachment of loyal soldiers," Hanan stated. "We need men of experience, and no one within our government has as much actual knowledge of fighting the Romans as you do."

The former guards' commander quickly shook his head. "I cannot," he said quickly. "A condition of my release was that I would never take up arms against Rome again. Believe me, I have more reason to hate Vespasian and his soldiers than any man here, yet my word is sacred to me…it is all that I have left." His voice trailed off with his last statement, and he looked down at the table, almost ashamed by what he had said.

"I would never ask you to break a solemn oath," Hanan replied, soothingly. "There is much work you can do here, and you can help spread the truth about what happened in Galilee. The people need to know the facts, rather than rumors and hearsay. Can you do that for us? I promise, you will have your own quarters within the temple district, and you will be given the honors due to one who has given so much in the defense of our people."

Yaakov thought for a moment, then gave a slow nod. He really did not have much of a choice. What little money he had, he'd spent just getting to Jerusalem. He had no family in the region, and most of his friends were now dead. His hope was that perhaps the preservation of the temple and the Jewish state were the reasons why God had spared him from ignominy and death.

Surprisingly, Yaakov arrived in Jerusalem well before John of Giscala. He and his army of followers had hidden away for a few days, making certain the Romans were not pursuing them further, before beginning the long trek to Jerusalem. Galilee was now completely lost to the empire, and all that remained was to reclaim the holy city from the blasphemers who had defiled it for so long.

"Does it bother you?" Levi asked, a few days later, when they were well

south of Scythopolis.

The region along the river was lush and green, standing in stark contrast to the more desolate areas, such as around Masada and the Dead Sea. The current was much slower here, the water a shade of green that almost matched the foliage. The sight of so much beauty contrasted sharply with Levi's dark thoughts.

"Does what still bother me?" the zealot leader asked.

"That we betrayed so many innocents to death or enslavement," Levi replied.

At first, he thought his candor might be met with a biting rebuke from his leader, but instead, John was rather calm, almost casual in his dismissal of the entire affair.

"Their fate is of little concern to me," he said. "I meant what I said, when I told the others that their families were martyred in the greater cause of liberating Judea. That none of them turned on me says either our fighters agree, or they are too apathetic to do otherwise. It was Roman blades that slew those women and children, not us. Their delaying of those imperial bastards was God's gift to us, so we might reach the holy city and liberate it from the usurpers and traitors."

Levi was uncertain as to how he should take these words, even though his own sense of compassion had died an ignominious death at Jotapata. He had already witnessed so many brutally slain, that life had all but ceased to have any value; even his own life was forfeit in his mind. Were he to die in battle, then it would either be in penance for his crimes, or as a martyr for the greater good of all the Jews. God could do what he wished with his soul, it mattered not to him.

At one time, John of Giscala had been a kinder and gentler soul. Years of strife, endless warfare, and the witnessing of so many murderously butchered during the incessant fighting had greatly hardened his heart and darkened his very soul. His wife and children were all but estranged from him, and after sending them away from Giscala, he paid them little mind. Levi had no family, for he idealistically wanted to have a wife and children only after the Promised Land was truly free.

John was now confident in his assumption that the Romans would not pursue them, nor would they even so much as raid into lower Judea before the spring. He had utilized almost every last horse available to him in order to send mounted spies out to all the major cities. They confirmed his suspicions.

Vespasian's army was encamped at various metropolises and appeared to be billeted for the winter. He would have a very real sense of relief that they'd stayed well to the east of Scythopolis during their journey, as he later learned an entire legion was now encamped just outside its walls.

And it wasn't that the winters in Judea were particularly cold. From November to March, the temperature was actually quite pleasant and very similar to that in Rome. What was different, though, was the rains. While Rome enjoyed modest rainfall throughout the year, the parching heat of the Judean summer gave way to near constant deluges in the winter months. By late November, one day in every three could expect rainfall, with that number increasing to one in two by January. And with few paved roads to speak of, the paths between the major cities became muddy swamps that impeded all but the lightest of merchant and foot traffic. For the Roman logistics and siege trains, which were substantially heavier than any mercantile wagons, the roads were utterly impassible. An ammunition cart laden with catapult shot would be sunk up to its axles in mud before it had gone half a mile.

An early December shower drenched the zealot forces, as if to announce the coming of winter, as the holy city at last came into view. It had been nearly three weeks since they abandoned Galilee, and they were anxious to end their journey and begin the monumental task of undermining, and later replacing, the Jewish governing council. A mounted escort of twenty men accompanied John and Levi. All of his remaining fighters who traveled by foot would, over the coming weeks, would seek to establish themselves amongst the cities surrounding Jerusalem. The strangulation rope was being tightened around the neck of Hanan and his minions, who were completely oblivious to their pending demise.

The River Jordan, south of Scythopolis

Despite their success in subduing Galilee, it was a time of sober contemplation for Vespasian and the armies of Rome. The campaign season was at an end, and the year had been one of both great triumph and immense tragedy for the imperial legions and their allied auxiliaries. At the palace in Caesarea, he summoned all of his legates, chief tribunes, and auxilia regimental commanders to feast with him and celebrate the conquest of Galilee. The wives of Trajan and Cerealis had sailed from Rome two months prior, in order to avoid the winter Mediterranean storms. Placidus was also married, though as his three children were all very young, his wife had elected to remain with them on their family estate on the Isle of Rhodes.

Vespasian himself was a widower who'd never remarried, and Titus had divorced his second wife just prior to his appointment as legate of the Fifteenth. The chief tribunes of the Fifth and Tenth Legions were married, though Titus' second-in-command, Domitius, was a bachelor. He was betrothed to the daughter of one of the Dolabella family, which Titus assured him was an excellent match.

The two officers stood together near the back of the banquet hall, where a pair of musicians strummed their lyres softly. Titus' mouth twisted at the sight of Trajan and his wife.

"What is it?" Domitius asked, picking up on his commander's expression. He looked to the legate and his wife being greeted by Vespasian. "Did an

issue arise between you and Trajan? I always thought the two of you were friends."

"My rapport with him is fine," Titus replied. "It is his wife who will no doubt be most offended by my presence."

Domitius raised an eyebrow at this last remark, but said nothing more.

"Marcia, my dear, you look divine this evening," Vespasian said to Trajan's wife, kissing her extended hand.

"You're too kind," she replied with a respectful bow.

It was a bit of an awkward meeting. Marcia's sister, Furnilla, had been Titus' second wife, who he immediately divorced upon discovery that she was related, and possibly indirectly implicated, in the Piso conspiracy against Nero. Trajan had been posted to the east when the scandal broke. And since his wife had accompanied him to Armenia, they'd been able to avoid any of the seditious rumors or accusations.

"It is good you have come," Vespasian added.

Marcia's face twitched, and she said, rather brazenly, "It is for my husband that I am here, not for you, and certainly not for your son."

She closed her eyes, immediately regretting her words as her husband clutched her hand, his face showing his embarrassment.

"My dear, this is the commanding general of all Roman forces in the eastern empire," Trajan said sharply. "Show him some respect!"

"Yes, but I am not the emperor," Vespasian replied consolingly. The last thing he wanted was a conflict between guests at what was supposed to be a celebratory banquet.

Marcia was surprised to see he was still smiling.

"I take no offense to one who has the courage to speak plainly to me," Vespasian continued. "What happened between your sister and my son is between them and, therefore, of no concern to me."

"If I may be so bold," Marcia said, clearly having one final thing she had needed to say for some time. "Any man who would keep his daughter from her own mother is both cruel and vindictive."

"I'll not argue that," Vespasian shrugged. "But as I said, what is between your sister and my son is their business, not mine."

"Cruel and vindictive often makes for the most effective generals," Trajan added with a laugh, attempting to break the awkwardness.

"I hope this war has not made you too malicious, my love," Marcia said

with a smile. She again spoke to Vespasian, “Or to you, sir. Forgive my impetuous words, for I spoke in haste.”

“I would have an honest person insult me to my face, rather than a false one flatter me,” Vespasian replied.

Despite the rather awkward introductions with Trajan’s wife, the commander-in-chief was still in a pleasant mood as the musicians began to play, while servants started serving those guests who had arrived. Though Vespasian was the most senior patrician present, he had felt it best to defer to the Judean procurator, Marcus Antonius Julianus, who was hosting the banquet. This also allowed Vespasian the opportunity to mingle more freely with those with whom he needed to speak. Among these was Mucianus, who had come down from Syria, as had Antonius Primus.

“I wondered if she would come,” Titus said, as he walked over to his father. Both men wore their best togas, accented with the broad purple stripe along the edge denoting their status as members of the senatorial class.

“She is the wife of one of our best generals,” Vespasian remarked. “It is very much her right to join her husband here.”

“You think I acted in haste, divorcing her sister,” Titus stated.

“Not my business,” his father replied. “Trajan may have fallen out of favor with Nero over his wife’s association with the Pisos, but it did not stop him from attaining command of a legion. Like the rest of us, Trajan is far safer here in the east, away from Rome.”

Despite the wounded feelings of his former sister-in-law, Titus still had an amicable, and almost friendly, relationship with her husband. The two had shared far too many experiences during the war for things to be otherwise. The sound of the porter’s staff on the floor brought a distraction to Titus and Vespasian.

“His Royal Highness, King Agrippa II of Judea!” the porter announced.

The king entered the hall wearing his formal crown, the one which he found so utterly abhorrent. His robes were of Roman, rather than Jewish, design. While it was certainly common that members of the nobility would dress in a manner similar to their hosts, in this case, Agrippa was emphasizing his loyalty and alliance to Rome.

“Her Royal Highness, Queen Julia Berenice of Judea!”

It was much to Titus’ delight that Queen Julia Berenice had accompanied her brother to Caesarea. He was grinning broadly as he witnessed her entering the hall wearing a resplendent Roman stola. With a wink to his

father he walked over to the monarchs, and taking Berenice by the hand, escorted her to her dining couch. The other guests were soon lounging and eating, all the while musicians played on, lyres and flutes adding an air of levity to the banquet.

"Though I am loathe to say this," Vespasian said to King Agrippa, who sat near him, "I cannot help but admire the fanatical bravery of your kinsmen. Tough bastards, all of them!"

"They are only my kinsmen by birth," the king responded. "Culturally, I am as much a Roman as you are."

It seemed that every time Agrippa was in the presence of Vespasian and his generals, he felt the need to emphasize his Roman upbringing, while attempting to distance himself from his ethnicity and heritage.

"Well, at least there will be no more troubles coming from Galilee or from our friend, Agrippa's, more rebellious subjects," Placidus stated.

"That is true," the commander-in-chief acknowledged. He then addressed Mucianus. "And I don't want to sound ungrateful, my friend, for the reinforcements you've sent me. You must understand that we have suffered far greater losses than even I had anticipated. A number of our legionary cohorts are at half strength or less, yet we continue to demand the same efforts of them."

"Neither the emperor nor the senate are willing to authorize conscription," the governor replied. "And even if they did, would your men really wish to trust their lives to unwilling soldiers, who are essentially little more than slaves? Men who are sent to die in battle, unwillingly, are prone to both treachery and desertion."

"I'll take fifty volunteers over a thousand conscripts any day," Trajan spoke up emphatically. His Tenth Legion had suffered an undue number of dead and wounded both at Jotapata and Gamala, with his legionaries feeling the strains of the continued brutal campaign. Still, he was one who understood that quality of fighting men was far more important than numbers alone.

"Finding sufficient volunteers is a challenge," Mucianus continued. "I mean, in an all-volunteer force, who in their right mind joins the legions?" He paused for a moment before answering his own rhetorical question, "Those with nothing else in this world but their names and citizenship."

"They may come to us as the poor dregs of Roman society," Vespasian remarked, "but we make them into something more. And for what it's worth,

those who come to us from the harshest of backgrounds are least likely to cause a fuss when we order them to wipe an entire city off the map and to kill everyone within. It's getting them to not rape and plunder the rest of the time that requires the harshest discipline."

"Hence, recruit training is so brutal," Titus added. "And also why punishments are just as savage as the rewards are rich. In Rome, a man may get flogged for stealing, in the legions he is wrapped in a sack full of snakes and tossed into the river. That is why legionaries can freely leave their personal belongings unsecured, and barracks doors are never locked. After all, not one of them has anything so worth stealing that a thief would risk such an inglorious death."

"A strange paradox" Agrippa said. "The greatest honor for a member of the patrician class is to command a legion. And yet, the very men who make up the ranks are those that Roman society has little to no use for."

"To be fair, we get all types," Titus observed. "They may not be landholders with a vested interest in the state, like the old legions of the early republic, but there are many good men who join the ranks."

"Well, hopefully I will have some better news for you, along with some more 'good men', over the next couple months," Mucianus said. "I've petitioned the senate to redirect a levy of recruits, originally bound for the Gallic and Germanic legions, to be sent here. I've also sent a similar request to the governor of North Africa. And, if all continues to go well, the Twelfth Legion should be ready to rejoin the campaign by spring or summer."

"Now that *is* excellent news!" Vespasian replied with a burst of enthusiasm, as he downed another cup of wine. "Will you still be in operational command?"

"Technically, yes," the governor answered. "Quite frankly, I find it impractical to be expected to manage the entire province of Syria while simultaneously commanding a legion in a war that is outside my provincial borders. Still, I feel I may not have much choice."

"And what about you, Primus?" the commanding general asked. "I heard a rather nasty rumor recently that you've been given command of a legion."

"Legio VI, Ferrata," Primus confirmed, raising his wine chalice in salute. "The 'Iron Legion'. We remember well our glorious history under Caesar, where the Sixth won the Battle of Zela for the Divine Julius. Yet, we try and forget our later ignoble association with Marc Antony."

"And how exactly did you, of all people, manage to secure an

appointment as a legate?" Trajan asked. His tone was not meant to sound insulting, though everyone present knew about Primus' exile from Rome.

"Despite my little misunderstandings with the senate," he explained, "our noble friends are more than happy to imbibe in my eastern vintage, which they find exotic. Quite honestly, I think it tastes like piss water."

This elicited a series of appreciative laughs from the other guests.

"In all seriousness," Primus continued, "I think they gave me the posting just to shut me up. The senate may have exiled me from Rome, but in doing so, they have left me free to wander the empire. They cannot confine me to the senate floor like they could when I was serving as an active member of that body, but by granting me a legion, I now have obligations. Plus they can keep a better eye on me, I suppose."

"Ah, Primus," Vespasian sighed, shaking his head and giving a short laugh. "I wouldn't trust you to sort out the finances of a cobbler, and yet, in battle you are one of the best field commanders I have ever known."

"I confess the very first order I gave, once assuming command, was to tell the aquilifer that at no time was I to be allowed anywhere near the legion's money chest." This bit of self-deprecation from Primus got an appreciative laugh from his peers. He then added, "For all my faults, which I confess are many, I take pride in that I am also extremely loyal to my friends."

"You said something to me recently that sounded rather cryptic," Mucianus said. "You said that Nero's hold on the empire is tenuous, and that should the worst happen…"

"Such talk is treasonous," Vespasian interrupted quickly. "We will have no more of that here. I don't have to tell you my own standing with the emperor is shaky at best, even with all the military successes we've enjoyed thus far. Honestly, I now question myself for sending those six thousand prisoners to work on Nero's canal, for he will now be expecting me to send him more."

After several hours of entertainment and the downing of multiple courses of delicacies and copious amounts of wine, most of the assembled guests were in a near stupor. It was then that Mucianus and Vespasian left the hall so they could speak privately.

"I apologize, if I spoke out of line," the governor said. "I know your history with the emperor is not exactly one of friendly camaraderie, and you wish to avoid being privy to any public statements that could be construed as disloyal."

“That, and I am also very much aware of just how frail Nero’s hold on power is,” Vespasian replied. He then produced the latest message from his brother. “Understand that you and Titus are the only ones who are aware of the contents of this letter. To be upfront, I was reluctant to share it with you at first. However, our friend, Primus, is correct. If the worst happens and Nero falls, we will need all the friends we can muster.”

“Yes,” Mucianus said, as he reread Sabinus’ words. “It would seem we face far greater threats than just those of rebellious Jews. How ironic that we are safer here in the east, with a war ongoing, than we are in Rome.”

“At first, I thought time was a commodity I did not have,” Vespasian mused. “However, given the unrest in the western provinces so much closer to Rome, I think the emperor has far more to concern himself with than the pace with which we destroy these Jewish rebels. For now, we must consolidate both militarily and politically. King Agrippa has plenty of spies with which to keep us abreast as to the power struggle within the various rebel factions. As for the rest of the empire, there is little we can do except watch and wait.”

“Not to indulge in treasonous talk again,” Mucianus said, “but if Nero falls and Rome plunges into civil war—gods help us, if it comes to that—then I predict the people will look for one of great strength to save them. There are many who feel they would make a better emperor than Nero, yet they are weak in resolve, every last one of them. They would seek the imperial laurel out of selfish motives, rather than any desire to serve Rome.”

“If you are suggesting I betray the emperor…” he began.

“Not at all,” Mucianus interrupted. “Look, I know we have not always seen eye-to-eye, and at no time have we ever been foolish enough to think we are friends. You sent Titus to deal with me, because there are times when you despise me; and trust me, the feelings have often been mutual. You do not approve of my lifestyle nor do I think well of you, some days. But all of that is irrelevant when it comes to serving that which we both hold most dear.”

“We have certainly had our differences,” Vespasian confessed. “Though by your honesty, you have been a better friend than most.”

“Well, even if our friendship, strange as it is, stems purely from our desire to do what is right for Rome, then that is enough,” Mucianus stressed. “All I am saying is that it will take a strong man, the strongest-of-the-strong, to save the empire should Rome fall into civil war. And if that should happen, know that you have my absolute loyalty, whatever course of action you may

decide upon."

Mucianus' talk immediately brought back memories of Josephus' prophetic words, that one day he would become Emperor. Vespasian said nothing of this, though he knew the former rebel general's predictions were known to many. There were even gossips who whispered that that was the very reason Vespasian had spared him. This was, of course, utter nonsense, since Josephus had provided a plethora of intelligence to the Romans, which Vespasian had exploited to great success.

The commander-in-chief decided it was prudent to say little else, and so he thanked Mucianus before retiring to his quarters. The current lull in the Jewish War left him with much time to contemplate the greater issues within the Roman Empire.

Emperor Nero was a mad despot, who brazenly had rivals, real or imagined, murdered in broad daylight. He stole whatever he wished, lived a life of debauched privilege, while the people risked starvation due to his squandering of the imperial treasury. And yet, were any of the elusive pretenders who sought to lay their own claim to the throne any better? Vespasian's family, the Flavians, were not of the old clans that had ruled Rome these past eight hundred years. In fact, they had only attained senatorial rank during his grandfather's life. And yet, despite his humble origins, Vespasian privately relished the possibility of making a name for the family, one that would echo throughout the ages. He was most certainly not a vain man, yet he could not help but wonder if in fact he was the proverbial 'strongest-of-the-strong'.

It had been under the guise of getting some fresh air that Titus and Berenice left the banquet. Though the virile young legate was anxious to take his royal lover to his bedchamber, he kept his lust contained as they walked through the gardens outside the palace.

"When I came down to Greece to see my father, I saw the statue that was erected to you in Athens," Titus said, in a way of making small talk.

"You actually saw that?" Berenice asked with a soft laugh.

"*The council of the Areopagus and the council of X and the people, to Julia Berenice, Great Queen, daughter of King Julius Agrippa and offspring of the Great Kings, benefactors of the city, through the foresight of the one*

who has charge of the city, Tiberius Claudius Theogenous Paianieos," Titus said, reciting the inscription upon the base of the statue.

"I'm impressed that you could recall all of that," Berenice replied. She eyed him coyly. "Were you enraptured by me, even then?"

"I had yet to place my eyes on you," he remarked. "I simply have an innate talent for memorization. I do recall you were referred to as *basilissa*, which is the proper title of a Hellenistic queen."

"Jewish law prohibits such monuments," the queen observed. "And yet, my father had statues made of all his children. He may have worshipped the same God as the rest of the Jews, yet he was also very Hellenistic socially and culturally."

"And do you worship this same deity?" Titus asked. "It cannot be easy to hear about how our legions have destroyed so many of your god's followers."

"Of course I do," she answered with a touch of surprise in her voice. "Just because I follow the teachings of God, does not mean I will stand by while others, who have perverted our faith, seek to destroy all that do not subscribe to their twisted beliefs. Remember, I was there when the rebellion first started. I witnessed, and was even subjected to the cruelties of the procurator, Decius Florus. Your charge, Josephus, was with me when Florus unleashed his soldiers on the people, unprovoked and done out of utter malice. Perhaps that is why I did not fault Josephus for siding with the rebels. My brother would have seen him nailed to a cross or stoned to death."

"I, too, first questioned my father for sparing him. Yet time has proven this to be a wise decision, for Josephus has willingly provided us with a trove of information that we've been since able to exploit."

"It is because he knows the true wickedness of the seditionists who are now coming into power," the queen said. "That is why I joined my brother in fully supporting our alliance with Rome, despite the iniquities inflicted on me by Florus. He is a man of pure evil, yet even his cruelties pale in comparison to what the zealots will subject the people to."

"Well, I did not take you from the bawdiness of the banquet to talk politics and war," Titus said, taking her hand in his.

"I know," Berenice replied, squeezing his hand. "But you must understand that ours is a political alliance. Though you may be my lover, overseeing the welfare of both our peoples takes precedence over any personal desires we may share."

"And now that we have addressed that welfare," the legate said, turning

the queen towards him and placing his hands on her hips, “I think we both deserve a long reprieve.”

He then kissed her deeply, and her will to resist him faded as she wrapped her arms around his neck. Titus’ feelings of lustful ecstasy were renewed with the vigor brought on by his relative youth, his physical conditioning, and that innate level of deviancy found in most soldiers of Rome.

Mucianus and Primus remained in Caesarea over the next week before they departed. Primus’ legion was still posted at Artaxata, in Armenia, where it was tasked with keeping the peace and ensuring the treaty with the Parthians held firm. The senior officers’ wives were invited to remain in Caesarea, as guests of Vespasian. This served as not only a courtesy, but also a practical matter for the commander-in-chief. If the political situation deteriorated further in Rome, he did not wish to have his commanders caught in the awkward position where their families could be used as political pawns or even hostages.

Trajan was especially fortunate, in that his daughter was grown and already married to a prominent senator, Gaius Saloninus. His son remained with relatives in their ancestral homeland of Hispania. He was close to finishing his formal education, and Trajan had corresponded in depth with the new commander of Legio VII in Moesia, who expressed much interest in finding a posting for the younger Trajan.

And much to the relief of both Titus and Berenice, the king had asked his sister to remain in Caesarea over the winter months as a royal liaison between their kingdom and Rome. Since the queen ruled in her own right as Agrippa’s coequal, she could have readily made this decision herself. However, it was more effective politically for the king to formally ask his sister. And it was no secret that Titus and Julia Berenice shared the same bed. King Agrippa actually encouraged this affair, for he knew that it only strengthened the bond between the Herodians and the Flavians. It was this bond that he hoped to gain much from, long after the wars against the rebellious Jews came to an end.

Chapter XXIV: Dark Alliances

Jerusalem
January 68 A.D.
***

It was a dark tavern, deep within the more seedy neighborhoods of Jerusalem, where John of Giscala found his allies. One man in particular that he was anxious to meet with was Eleazar ben Ananias, the former governor of the temple.

Eleazar was around the same age as John, in his early to mid-thirties. His father, Ananias, had once been high priest, though the chaos that followed the uprising had created an irreparable rift between the two. Eleazar had once supported the pretender to the monarchy, Manahem, though he repented soon after the fanatical madman's overthrow and public execution. It had proven too late for Ananias and his brother, both of whom were pulled from an aqueduct, where they had gone into hiding, and were subsequently slain by the enraged zealot mob.

Hanan and the moderates had accepted Eleazar back into the fold as his remorse had appeared genuine, but also because he still commanded a large following amongst the younger generation. Hanan had also warned Josephus before his departure to Galilee, that Eleazar would be among those eyeing his success or failure, and he would be looking for his own chance to seize additional power within the council. Little did they suspect that he would seek to overthrow the government altogether.

"Our chance to take what is rightfully ours draws nigh," John said, as a group of men sat at a table near the back of the tavern. "But we will need additional allies outside of Jerusalem."

"And what for?" asked a man named Zacharias who, along with Eleazar, commanded the largest segment of young warriors in the city. Zacharias also came from an extremely wealthy family, and so his personal fortune was of even greater value than his ability as a warrior. "We harangue the traitors in the temple, when we could just as easily overwhelm them, if we so choose."

"The reason we have not is because we are in need of a strong leader," Eleazar said. "The two of us can readily command fighting men, but we need

someone who can control the entire Jewish state; one who will not sell us out to the Romans."

"And if you will have me as your leader," John said, "then you must heed my advice. It is not Hanan or the moderates that I worry about. They will be readily disposed of when the time is right. But there are others who will seek to assume control of Judea, once he is dealt with."

"Simon bar Giora's power grows," Levi added. "He has carved out his own small kingdom from his base at Masada."

"Simon is essentially a pawn of the Sicarii at the moment," Zacharias noted. "They offer him protection, yet they are most certainly *not* allies. However, as long as he can hide within the walls of the Herodian fortress, he is unassailable."

"And his followers multiply daily," John continued. "His faction and ours likely have a similar number of fighting men. However, we cannot very well make a stand against the Romans, if we are too busy in a bloody stalemate with his forces. That is why we need allies, to make certain that our rise to power is quick and devoid of viable opposition. But it will take a bit of time, not to mention outthinking our opponents in the Judean governing council."

"What are you proposing, then?" Eleazar asked.

John gave a sinister grin and explained, "Tomorrow I go to the temple to offer my services to Hanan and the Jewish state. I'll be ever by his side, becoming one of his most trusted confidants. As he and the other councilors are no doubt regretting their choice in Josephus as governor-general of Galilee, they will look to me to help make matters right. And once I have their trust, you will wrest the temple from them by force."

"Excellent!" Zacharias said exuberantly, slamming his fist on the table. "I'll cut that vile bastard's throat myself!"

"Not yet," John said with a bored sigh. Were Zacharias not one of their primary sources of funding, John would have discarded the impudent and reckless man long ago. "If we simply kill the high priests and seize the temple, the people will view us as nothing more than usurpers, like they did Manahem. No, we must be cleverer than that. You will capture the temple, but then allow yourselves to be trapped within."

"What?" Zacharias was suddenly indignant, though Eleazar placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"Of course," he said. "We allow ourselves to become besieged, and then we can call upon our allies to 'liberate' both us and the temple."

“Precisely,” John remarked appreciatively. “Levi, you will head for Idumea, and there you will meet with their army’s leader, Jacob bar Sosias.”

“Of course,” Eleazar said. “Simon has been raiding the Idumean lands, and so he will find few friends amongst them. Whereas, once we settle matters here in Jerusalem, we can call upon them to help us defeat Simon and his treacherous villains.”

John then raised his cup. His fellows doing the same. “My friends,” he said, “Here is to the freedom of Judea and the destruction of all traitors!”

Of the reinforcements sent ahead by Mucianus, plus an additional handful of newly-trained recruits he managed to bring with him, approximately one hundred soldiers were sent to each legion. This meant only a couple of legionaries for each century, though as he briefed his newest men, Gaius reckoned it was still better than nothing. His century had been fortunate enough to have been given three new soldiers; baby-faced recruits who looked too young to shave, let alone serve in the imperial army.

“Men,” he said, as he paced in front of the new soldiers who all stood rigidly at attention, “my name is Optio Gaius Artorius Armiger. And you are volunteers who came to us from the Twelfth Legion. No doubt you are anxious to get in on the fighting.”

“Yes, sir!” the legionaries sounded off together.

“Let me drive my sword into the guts of those Jewish scum!” one of them added.

“Jewish scum,” Gaius echoed, walking over to the man. “That’s what they are to you, aren’t they?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Let me tell you something about the ‘Jewish scum’,” the optio said, his voice hard as he slapped his staff against the palm of his hand. “The Jew that I know, the Jewish *warrior*, is a hardened bastard. His people have been fighting for their very existence since two thousand years before Romulus and Remus were sucking the she-wolf’s tit on the Seven Hills! They have battled Babylonian kings, Egyptian pharaohs, and now the emperors of Rome. The Jewish warrior can go for days with almost no food or water, living exposed to the harsh elements, and still he will rush at your shield line, carrying only his blade and his courage. He will die by the thousands, if it

means killing you. And far from being a mindless barbarian, he is clever, and will employ the most deceitful of tactics to send you to an early grave."

His tone was harsh, and he let his words sink in to the young soldiers. He then stood nose-to-nose with the legionary who'd spoken out and said, "Your former legion was routed by these 'Jewish scum', and they have cost thousands of Roman lives already in this war. So hate your enemy all you want, but you *will* respect him! Am I clear?"

"Yes, sir!"

"I've sent for your decanii," the optio said, continuing his walk up and down in front of the men. "They will take you to your new billets and get you sorted. Any questions?"

When there were none, he dismissed the soldiers and directed them to wait outside the principia tent for their squad leaders. He then stepped out into the chill of the night, wrapping his cloak around him. The senior officers had all departed for Caesarea weeks earlier, essentially leaving the legion to its own devices. Rather than succumbing to drink and excess, the centurions had kept their soldiers busy with improving their marching camp, along with incessant drills. Soldiers were given liberty to go into Scythopolis, but only in small groups at a time. The last thing the officers wanted was five thousand drunken legionaries descending upon the city all at once.

Gaius had decided to take a walk around the century's billets that evening. He wished to see how their tasks had come along for the day, even though it was actually Julius' responsibility as tesserarius to oversee all work projects. Still, it helped clear the optio's mind, for he was a bit taken aback by his outburst towards the new soldiers. All that he said was true, yet it was not until that moment that he realized just how profound of an impact fighting the Jewish rebels had had on him.

He resolved to speak with Nicanor about his distresses the following day. One of the most significant drawbacks to his position was that the further up the ranks one went, the fewer friends one had to vent to. Since the inception of professional armies, it had always been understood that one complained or expressed their displeasure to either their peers or superiors. Grumbling to subordinates was expressly prohibited and could be devastating to both morale and discipline. And so, Gaius spent the remainder of his evening checking on the camp improvements to keep his thoughts occupied.

One practical measure that needed to be addressed was drainage. The legion could expect to spend at least the next three months encamped outside

Scythopolis, and with the torrential winter rains, flooding would become a very real nuisance. Therefore, every structure within the gigantic camp, from the individual squad tents all the way up to the principia, was encircled by a narrow trench, a few inches wide and about a foot deep. These, in turn, were connected by similar drainages, dug along the pathways between tents and along the main roads within the camp, finally leading out the south gate and towards the low ground away from the legion. Mud would still be an issue, and the drainages would pose an additional tripping hazard at night. However, it was still preferable to the entire camp flooding every few days. The master centurion had also ordered that all latrines would be dug to twice the regulation depth, in order to accommodate the length of their stay, as well as to ensure that sewage would not run into the camp in the event of flooding. The open plain between the city and the encampment now served as a massive drill field for the legion. Each cohort had measured off the areas where training stakes would be emplaced in the coming days, as well as designated lanes for javelin, archery, and scorpion practice. Cohort drills, legion drills, and parades would take place on the flat ground just a few hundred feet from the city's eastern wall. The ground was practical for such purposes, as well as giving the citizens of Scythopolis visual reminders as to the discipline and brutal power of the imperial legions.

Having checked the century's billets, Gaius decided to take a walk outside the camp. A section of four legionaries came to attention as the optio passed through the western gate of the camp. The wooden gatehouse was still under construction, though at least one of the towers was useable. There was a lot of foot traffic, as legionaries going on or coming off liberty went through the entrance. Soldiers going on liberty were checked to make certain they had a pass, signed by their centurion, that authorized them to leave the camp. Because of his rank, Gaius was allowed to come and go as he pleased.

He strolled along the road for about half a mile and was surprised when he saw Centurion Nicanor walking towards him.

"Ave, old friend," the optio said, saluting his commander. "What brings you out on this night?"

"The same thing as you, I'm certain," Nicanor replied. "My mind has not yet comprehended that we are no longer in hostile territory, and that I can allow myself to relax, if only a little."

"Give it a few days, and routine will set in once more," Gaius reasoned.

He then told his centurion about all that transpired between him and their new soldiers.

“Quite a rousing speech,” Nicanor noted. “You should give something similar to the rest of the century. Or perhaps General Trajan will employ you as his part-time speech writer.”

He was chuckling at this, yet he sobered up when he saw that his friend was not laughing.

“Is it difficult for you?” Gaius asked. “After all, you grew up in this part of the world. I was born in Britannia, and spent half my youth there, with the rest in Ostia. This land is still completely foreign to me, yet you actually know and understand these people.”

“I know them, but I would not say I understand them,” Nicanor corrected. “And to be quite honest, I don’t think they understand each other most days. If they did, they would not all be in a constant state of internal strife when they should be united.”

“Well, thank Mars and Victoria they are not!” Gaius underscored. “Imagine if we had to face a united army of a million warriors, instead of wiping them out, one pocket of resistance at a time.”

“True, our efforts to destroy the resistance have been difficult enough as it is,” the centurion conceded.

Though his words greatly underplayed the arduous and bloody nature of the war, Nicanor was not one to overly dramatize matters. He then returned to his friend’s original question. “You ask if this is difficult for me. The answer is, without a doubt, yes. Josephus was one of my closest friends when I was a young lad. That we fought so savagely against each other was not an easy thing for either of us. I am glad he survived, yet I fear that posterity will damn him.”

“How do you mean?” Gaius asked.

“As much as I love Josephus and am grateful for all he has done to help us, he is still a turncoat. That he survived Jotapata when almost all of his warriors were killed, will cause suspicion amongst their people. Those factions that were his rivals will use rumor and deceit to undermine his supporters within the Judean government.”

“I don’t necessarily see that as a bad thing,” the optio mused. “After all, if the rebels are kept divided, they remain weak and easier to conquer.”

“That may be,” Nicanor concurred. “However, imagine the sentiment amongst the Jews should they ever discover that he is aiding us? Even the

loyalists will find such actions to be abhorrent."

"I'll never understand these people," Gaius said, sighing and shaking his head.

"I didn't say I understood it," the centurion countered. "I only said that is what will happen. I know General Titus has tasked him with writing a history of the war. No doubt it has a far better chance of surviving down the generations than any Jewish histories not endorsed by the Roman Empire. However, I suspect his works will always be regarded with suspicion. I think there will always be doubt as to how impartial a historian can really be, when he has first fought for one side, then turned and sided with the other. I'm not saying it is right, but I do fear that down the ages, my friend's name will become synonymous with treachery."

Nicanor had not answered Gaius' question, and he had played off his optio's speech to their newest legionaries as inspired, rather than disturbing. Still, Gaius was glad to talk with his friend. It did not matter what about, just getting his mind off the war itself helped ease his mind.

John of Giscala, the man who had come to loathe Josephus the most, rode with much fanfare and spectacle into the temple square. He still wore a simple tunic, yet his entourage were all bathed and well groomed, adding an air of authority to their otherwise humble appearances. An enormous crowd of nearly ten thousand crowded along the way, all asking him fervent questions about the calamities he and his warriors had endured. They had heard of nothing but defeats coming out of Galilee, and all were fearful that the Romans would come to destroy Jerusalem.

"My friends!" John said, halting his horse and holding his right hand high. "Know that we did not flee from Galilee like whipped dogs. Rather, we came here willingly to Jerusalem, the pillar of our people's strength! Why would we throw away our lives, in such indefensible places, when we have already repelled the Romans from these walls? I come to fight for you, now will you fight for me?"

The shouts from the crowd were deafening, as they acclaimed John as their commanding general and savior. Still, there were those who saw through the façade, and who feared that since Giscala, and indeed all of Galilee, had fallen to the Romans, then there was little to stop Vespasian

from taking Jerusalem. John knew he would have to use all of his guile and powers of persuasion to compel the people to fight for him, but he was also supremely confident that he could sway the young men within the city.

"I tell you this," he added. "The Romans have not wings, and therefore will not be able to fly over the walls of Jerusalem. They met with great difficulty in taking even the smallest villages in Galilee with their siege engines breaking against the walls. Stand with me, and we will drive the imperial scourge from our lands forever!"

This was met with added cheers from many within the crowd, even though others looked incredulous. It mattered little, for John would coerce them to see reason either through persuasion or force.

As he and his men rode into the vast courtyard of the temple complex, Hanan and Joseph, along with the elder priests and councilmen, stood on the steps leading in to the inner temple itself. John raised his hand in salute and called to the men.

"Hail, noble Hanan, high priest and leader of the free Jewish state!" He then dismounted his horse, along with the twenty men from his entourage. Only Levi was absent, as John had dispatched him to Petra, to rally the Idumeans.

"We welcome you home, John of Giscala, general of free Jewish forces," Hanan replied with a courteous nod.

That the high priest acknowledged him as a general was significant. Firstly, it established an immediate rapport between the zealot leader and the Judean council. It also helped them distance themselves, however reluctantly for Hanan, from the poor choice they had made in appointing Josephus over John as governor-general of Galilee. Whether or not John could have made a stronger stand against the Romans, which Hanan doubted, was irrelevant. Josephus was gone, and John remained. And with the deaths of so many of their best military leaders, the central government was in desperate need of strong men to lead their unsystematic forces.

"I am honored to serve Judea once more," John said with a bow, as he ascended the temple steps.

Despite the cordial formalities, the zealot knew there was a certain level of mistrust from Hanan and the others towards him. Josephus had been one of the high priest's favorites, and he knew just how deep his young protégé's rivalry had been with the general from Giscala. Still, by way of his being welcomed into the fold, John had taken the first step towards fulfilling his

destiny as leader of the free Jewish state.

Chapter XXV: Temple under Siege

Jerusalem
January 68 A.D.

Layout of the inner courtyard and Temple

The trek to the Idumean capital of Petra had taken Levi nearly four days by horse. Perpetual rains left the roads muddy, slowing his mount to a modest trot. And as all the lands to the west of the Dead Sea were controlled by Simon bar Giora, he was obliged to go north, around the sea and down through Perea, until at last he reached the Idumean lands.

The Idumeans, also called the Edomites, occupied the lands south of the Dead Sea. The ancient Kingdom of Edom had bordered the southern edge of the old Jewish Kingdom of Judah. Like the kingdoms of Judah, Israel, and Moab, the power and influence of the Edomites had greatly waned over the past few hundred years. The expansion of the Roman Empire had all but obliterated Edomite authority within the region. As such, they were willing to find allies wherever they could.

Once Levi arrived, it had taken little convincing for him to compel the Idumeans to join John of Giscala's coalition. The constant raids by Simon's faction, along with his growing power base, had left Jacob bar Sosias with few options.

"If John's warriors can help us suppress Simon bar Giora and his Sicarii

friends, then we will gladly help you assume control of Jerusalem," Jacob said. "I have twenty thousand men that can be ready to march within a week."

"Bring them to Esbous as soon as you can," Levi recommended. "You can reach Jerusalem from there within a couple of days. John and Eleazar have formed an alliance, and once the governing council thinks they have the zealots trapped, we will send word to you."

All throughout southern Judea, the warriors loyal to John of Giscala set about stirring up those amongst the most seditious and violent young men. Bands of robbers were encouraged, and often bribed, to cause havoc amongst the many towns and communities within twenty miles of the holy city. They became further emboldened, when it became evident the governing council in Jerusalem lacked the means or the manpower to stop them. Lawlessness became rampant, and those who attempted to maintain order were beaten, extorted, or in a few cases, killed.

The murder of a rather wealthy, yet popular nobleman named Antipas, who had links to the royal family, sparked a panic within Jerusalem. Two other prominent persons named Levias and Sophas, who were also of noble blood and much loved by the people, were cut down in broad daylight. Their throats were slashed open as women screamed, and their twitching bodies were left in the street as their blood pooled between the cobblestones.

It was after this incident that John met once more with Eleazar and Zacharias. It was Zacharias' band of renegades who had committed these latest atrocities. Levi had also returned from Petra by this time and informed his conspirators that Jacob bar Sosias would soon be marching towards Jerusalem, with an army of twenty thousand men.

"Excellent!" Zacharias said maliciously. "Now is the time for us to storm the temple and take back what is ours!"

"Ready your men," John directed. "And be certain they bring plenty of provisions. I know there are food and water stores within the temple complex; however, these will not sustain several thousand warriors for long."

Throughout the remainder of the day, Eleazar, Zacharias, and their captains rallied their warriors to the various staging points around the temple district. As the sun set, each man gazed in sinister and unholy lust towards

that most sacred place in all of Judaism.

Later that night, hundreds of armed men swarmed the gates of the temple. The guards, fearful of such a large mob, threw down their weapons and fled. Those priests and workers within ran from the terrifying mob as they swarmed into the massive courtyard.

Eleazar then stood dominant at the top of the stairs, his sword held high as he shouted in triumph. “Secure the temple!” he ordered his men. Under the light of dozens of torches, his fighters flooded into the inner courtyard. A few priests and workers were found within, and these men were driven out on the points of swords and spears. Eleazar and Zacharias marveled at how easy it had been, reckoning they could have seized the temple months before with but a fraction of the warriors they had under their charge.

Dawn came, and Hanan, along with all of the priests and councilmen, hurried to the temple. Though they came with an armed escort, their numbers were too few to contend with the large numbers of zealots. With them was John of Giscala, who feigned the same outrage the high priest emulated as they stepped into the temple courtyard and saw it occupied by hundreds of zealot fighters.

“What is the meaning of this?” Hanan shouted. “This is a holy place!”

“Yes, for all the Jews, not just you!” Eleazar said, stepping out of the portcullis to the inner temple.

“Eleazar,” Hanan growled, his eyes narrowing. “So you have decided to betray us after all.” He then shook his head. “And to think we welcomed you back after you first swore allegiance to the pretender, Manahem. At whose table are you now the lapdog?”

“Piss on you and your false piety, Hanan!” the younger man snapped back. “You forget, I am governor of the temple, and at last I am using my authority to strip all of you of that which you have defiled all these years. I hereby disannul the hereditary succession of priests. It is we who now control our holy sanctum, who will now create a new order, one made up of and for the people.”

“You enter the sanctum with your polluted feet in defiance of God Himself!” Hanan shouted, his rage boiling over.

The crowds had grown and now numbered well into the hundreds on both sides. Supporters of the zealots were soon shoving and punching those who, like Hanan, were appalled by the heretical actions of the fanatics. Wishing to avoid further violence and bloodshed, Hanan reluctantly ordered the people to leave the temple courtyard, leaving Eleazar in control of the inner sanctum.

“Impudent defilers!” Hanan snarled, as he and the remaining priests left the temple grounds.

The gates were manned by armed militia to prevent the zealots from closing them, yet they numbered too few to retake the inner temple by force.

“Eleazar has committed a terrible blasphemy against God,” said an older priest, named Yeshua ben Gamalas.

“Despite this, I do not wish to risk unnecessary bloodshed,” Hanan stressed. “Enough people have already died in these pointless struggles against our fellow Jews. We must contain these blasphemers as much as possible, while summoning what allies we have remaining.”

Joseph’s face was suddenly pale, as what had previously been unthinkable suddenly pervaded his thoughts. “You cannot mean the Romans!” he said quickly, causing the other priests and elders to gasp and look at each other in confusion.

“Not yet,” Hanan said, shaking his head. “And it will only come to that if there is no other way to keep our sacred temple from being completely desecrated.”

“But we are at war with the Romans,” Yeshua underscored. “How could we even think about calling upon them for assistance when they are rampaging through our lands, murdering people by the thousands?”

“Again,” Hanan said, trying to maintain his composure, “we will only attempt to parlay with Vespasian if we have no other options. These extremists rule through violence and fear. It will be up to us to show the people they do not have to live in terror, but that we should stand together against all forms of tyranny.”

Though it sickened him to see the radicals in control of the temple, Hanan knew the fight for Jerusalem would not be decided within a few days, or even weeks. The zealots would attempt to assert their power over the people, with a propaganda war being played out by both sides. The high priest new that

winning the hearts and minds of the ever-impressionable populace would be far more important than skill with the sword.

“The temple is ours!” Zacharias said with glee.

Eleazar had called an assembly of his most trusted leaders, who now needed to decide what to do with the holiest shrine in all of Judaism.

In all, he had around a thousand men occupying the temple and a further five to six thousand in and around the surrounding neighborhoods. Their orders were to create as much mischief as possible, while attempting to drive away those most loyal to Hanan and the now-disposed moderates.

“And the temple needs a new order of priests,” Eleazar stated.

“That honor should be yours!” one of his men said with passion, raising his fist in the air.

“No,” Eleazar replied. “It will not be me. If I take the high priest’s vestments, I will be decried as a pretender king and struck down like Manahem. Instead, we will renew an ancient tradition, calling upon the pontifical tribe of the Eniachims. And we will select the new holy men by lots. We will let God decide who the true successors of the priesthood are!”

During the next few days, there was a pall of uncertainty over Jerusalem, as the fanatics controlled the temple with the courtyard and surrounding districts occupied by loyalist militias. These men were involved in frequent skirmishes with bands of Eleazar’s fighters, who struck at them from various points within the city. At first with fists, then with stones, and finally with throwing spears and swords did the loyalists melee with the zealots. Dozens were killed, with scores badly injured. The square around the temple was streaked with blood, and in an even greater affront to the sanctity of the holy shrine, the zealot wounded were dragged or limped into the inner sanctum. Their blood staining the floors in a heinous sacrilege.

Hanan had sent entreaties out to all of the outlying militias who thus far remained beyond the fray, and were intent on facing the Romans. The desecration of their holy shrines compelled them to action, and soon the number of loyalist warriors swelled by several thousand. Leading them were a prominent pair of Judean generals named Gorion, a distant kinsman of Josephus, and Symeon ben Gamaliel. Gorion had only recently come down

from Galilee, where he rallied a couple thousand of Josephus' warriors from those fortunate souls who had not been confined to the siege of Jotapata. Symeon was a survivor of Niger of Perea's ill-fated army that had attempted to take the port city of Ascalon. Though anxious to take the fight to the Romans once more, both men recognized the more immediate threat brought on by the radicals, and so they pledged their aid to Hanan and the rightful Judean government.

And despite the increasingly violent skirmishes, the people as a whole refrained from storming the temple grounds due to the superior armament of the fanatics. It would be the zealots' next act that drove the people to madness, which Gorion and Symeon would readily exploit.

At the top of the steps that led into the inner sanctum stood a humble and rather pitiful looking rustic of a man. His name was Phannias, son of Samuel. His hair was unkempt, his face and beard filthy. He was in awe of his surroundings, for not only had he never set foot within twenty miles of Jerusalem, he had no knowledge of what the high priest did, or even what he was supposed to be! Eleazar and Zacharias stood on either side of him. They, in turn, were flanked by nearly fifty of their warriors. Behind the spectacle were twenty other ruffians, who by random lottery had been appointed as lesser priests.

"Behold!" Eleazar spoke loudly. "By the divine lottery, which has placed the authority of the selection into the rightful hands of God Himself, we give you your new high priest, Phannias ben Samuel!"

The crowds near the gates stood in an appalled silence, while the zealots within cheered loudly. Phannias was adorned with the sacred vestments, his head anointed with oil. All the while, he stood in enraptured disbelief. Gorion, who had seen all he could bear to witness, forced his way to the front of the assembly.

"Good people of Judea!" he exhorted them. "You have borne the tyranny of these blasphemous pretenders long enough. They have been a plague upon your very freedoms, and now these rapists and murderers have seen fit to violate the most holy of our laws!"

"Shame upon you all for your sloth and apathy!" Hanan added, standing beside Gorion. He looked back at the horrid spectacle and with tears in his

eyes gave the most eloquent speech of his life.

"Certainly it had been good for me to die before I had seen the house of God full of so many abominations, filled with the feet of these blood-shedding villains! Yet do I, who am clothed with the vestments of the high priesthood, still live. I would give up my life, and that alone for God's sake, rather than see you, my beloved sons and daughters, undergo further misery. And yet, when you are beaten, you are silent! When the people are murdered, nobody dared so much as send out a groan openly! What bitter tyranny that we are under! We have witnessed such abominations that even the Romans themselves would have abstained from. These men, brought up in our customs, and called Jews, do walk about in the midst of the holy places, at the very time when their hands are still warm with the slaughter of their own countrymen. However, it is a right thing, if there should be any danger in the attempt, to die before these holy gates, and to spend our very lives, if not for the sake of our children and wives, yet for God's sake, and for the sake of his sanctuary. I will assist you both with my counsel and with my hand, for if the price of preserving the temple is this mortal body, then so be it!"

At this, the crowd shouted in rage, much to the surprise of Eleazar, Zacharias, and their numerous fighters, who were quickly forming ranks in front of the temple steps. They had, at first, thought appointing one from the humblest of origins would goad the people into fighting for their cause, yet it was not to be. Instead, it was taken as a vile sacrilege. Hanan, ever the brilliant orator, had undone the zealots and laid bare the horrific insults they had committed before God.

Eleazar's fighters, who thus far remained outside the temple, yet had come to witness the high priest appointing, rushed into the courtyard. Their numbers were great, and they were all far better armed than most of the populace. The militia of Gorion and Symeon were equally well equipped, though most only carried bucklers and either short swords or spears. Only the senior captains wore any sort of body armor, mostly chain mail. Around a hundred men had donned the scale armor that had been taken from the Herodian armory at Masada several months before. It was these men who formed the vanguard, as the two Judean generals led the mob into the temple courtyard.

The zealots were soon pressed back by the vastly superior numbers of the loyalist mob, and they fled up the steps and into the smaller inner courtyard around the inner sanctum itself. Those who could not flee fast enough, or

who had become trapped within the buildings that lined the outer courtyard, were drug into the square. In their rage, the mob cut their throats, shouting with glee as the dark crimson flowed onto the street and mingled with the black stains of those who had been slain in recent days.

The tide of the advancing horde was stopped by a wall of shields and spears at the top of the steps, where zealots lined the gate. With no other way into the inner courtyard, a stalemate ensued, both sides eyeing each other with rage. Eleazar's eyes were filled with hatred as he shoved his way past his fighters. A bloody sword hung from his hand, red stains covering both his tunic and face. His eyes were wide, and with mouth contorted with anger, he looked like a beast spawned from hell itself.

"I am governor of the temple!" he shrieked at the crowd. "It is by God's commandment that we have dissolved the old order. We look to take you to a new age of freedom, and this is how you welcome your liberators?"

"It is not God whose hand guides you," Hanan retorted, walking up next to Gorion, who with his sword leveled at Eleazar, stood in front of the mob. The high priest then shook his head and turned to the throng. "Is this what you are fighting the Romans for? Would you throw off the oppression of a foreign emperor, only so scum like this could desecrate your temple and rule through the yoke of fear?"

"No!" the people shouted in unison.

Hanan nodded in acknowledgement before shouting, "Surround the temple!"

"Filthy traitors!" Eleazar screamed. "I'll hang you with your own guts, you fucking whoreson!"

Thus did the Temple of Jerusalem fall under siege, not by the Romans, but by its own high priests, against those who had desecrated its sacred grounds. It was an utter abomination, that the Jews should battle each other in such a manner, with every drop of blood spilled within the temple grounds a bitter affront to God. Hanan feared that if the fanatics were not dealt with soon, the Almighty may abandon their people altogether for the outrages they had committed.

That night, in the meeting hall of one of the outlying buildings, Hanan

and the other loyalist leaders met to discuss the siege and its effects on the people of Jerusalem.

"Without the temple, and with so much of the city in disarray, Judea essentially has no government," Joseph lamented.

"And a siege will take time," John of Giscala observed. Having been accepted as a general of the Judean armies, he was brought to the council to act as one of its chief military advisors.

"And time is not something we have in great supply," Hanan added. "It may take weeks, or even months, to starve them out. By that time, the Romans will be on the march once more, while the entire Jewish state falls into chaos. If we cannot regain control of our sacred temple, then the people have no reason to trust us to rule them effectively. All will be lost in total anarchy."

"We also must prevent further pollution to the temple," Joseph said. "It would be a grievous sin if any of our people died within its walls. Eleazar and his zealots may be our enemies, but they are still fellow Jews. We must avoid any deaths within the inner sanctum, even theirs."

"Then we should try to negotiate a surrender with them," John said. The others looked at him incredulously. "That is, unless one of you foresees a better option."

"And will you do the negotiating?" Symeon asked.

"If the council asks me to do so, then I am at their service."

"You have been anxious to prove your loyalty," Hanan observed, "and for that we are grateful. However, we must have further reassurances of where you stand before we send you on what will most certainly be a treacherous undertaking."

"If I wished to stand with the zealots, I would be in the temple with them," John remarked. He then stood. "However, if this will please you, I offer you my right hand and solemn oath. I side with the people of free Judea, and I will betray neither your councils nor practices to our enemies. I will act as the people's messenger, seeking to sanctify once more that holy place which is God's alone."

The council and priests were clearly moved by his words, and they readily accepted his offer to act as their emissary. As dusk fell, John left the chambers and walked the short distance towards the steps into the inner courtyard.

"Halt!" a zealot guard shouted. "Who comes into the sanctum of God?"

“John of Giscala, as emissary of the governing council of the Jewish free state!” he replied loudly, so Hanan and the others could hear him as well. He drew his sword, which he handed to one of the guards.

As soon as he passed through the gate, another warrior sent for Eleazar. The zealot leader, along with Zacharias and a handful of others, soon came out from the inner sanctum.

“What pleasure is this?” Eleazar said with a grin, clasping John’s outstretched hand. “What news? Do the traitors intend to wait us out, or have they sent you to negotiate a truce?”

“After what we’ve done, there is no way they will let any of us live,” Zacharias conjectured. “To surrender now would be madness.”

“I agree,” John said. As he sought to play both sides against each other, and to fortify the resolve of the zealots, he proceeded to tell them a series of half-truths along with outright lies.

“Hanan’s treachery runs deeper than even I suspected,” he began. “He seeks not just to reclaim the temple, but to do so with the aid of Roman soldiers.”

“Bastard!” Zacharias spat in rage.

The others grumbled similar insults and threats of death towards the high priest.

John was gloating inside. Though an outright lie, the thought of a moderate like Hanan seeking to cut a deal with the Romans was certainly believable.

“I did not think even Hanan capable of such duplicity,” Eleazar said, shaking his head in disbelief.

“It’s not so farfetched when you think about it,” John reasoned. “And yes, he has prevailed upon the people to send ambassadors to Vespasian, inviting him to come and take the city. Hanan also intends to appoint a day of fasting, in an attempt to compel their way into the temple on religious grounds. Failing that, they will take these walls by force, with or without the aid of the Romans.”

“It’s a hundred miles to Caesarea,” Eleazar noted. “And the rains have turned the roads to mud. It will take at least a week for any messengers to reach Vespasian.”

“Do we really want to wait this out for three weeks, or a month, before Roman soldiers come and desecrate this place?” John asked, somewhat indignantly. “Hanan has the forces to overwhelm this place now. He is

simply choosing not to at this moment, in the hopes of not spilling any Jewish blood within the holy grounds." It was the only actual truth John had told thus far, yet he expounded upon it with another falsehood. "They will attempt to starve us, until you are so weak that you either surrender or they simply expel you by force. That he is seeking to cut a deal with Vespasian has less to do with the temple, and more to do with the fact that Hanan and the council have already surrendered their very souls to their imperial overlords."

"Then we must replace them all with a new governing council," Zacharias said. "The people turned on us when we attempted to give them a high priest from their own kind. We must make certain there are no dissenting voices left to lead them further astray."

"And for that we need the help of our allies," John emphasized. "My deputy, Levi, has negotiated with certain friends of ours. Twenty thousand men await the word from me just two days from here."

"I feel we are hurrying ourselves," Eleazar said, his brow furrowed in thought. He then nodded in understanding. "But as we have chosen you to lead us, then we must trust in your judgment."

"I have a pair of messengers from among my warriors," John said. "Both are named Ananias, and they will carry our message to our allies, ordering them to advance on the city."

Eleazar's face twitched. These men both had the same name as his late father, the high priest killed by the same Sicarii murderers Eleazar had once aligned himself with. At first he thought it may be an ill omen, but then dismissed such thoughts as nonsense.

"We will hold the temple until our friends arrive," he said with grim determination.

"How will they get into the city?" Zacharias asked. "If Hanan's people see them coming, they'll simply close the gates on them."

"Leave that to me," John replied, with a soft chuckle of malicious glee.

John later returned to the Jewish council, stating that the zealots were heavily armed and ready to withstand a prolonged siege. He made a great show of lamentation for his failure, before excusing himself and leaving the temple grounds. He then went to his two messengers, sending them away from the city to the army of the Idumeans, two days to the east.

"These are wicked times we live in," Levi said, as they watched the two messengers ride off towards the eastern gate of the city, "that our temple of

peace should become a place of war."

"This war against our own people was not of our making," John reasoned. "But it is one we will see to its conclusion. The Lord has decreed that the Temple of Jerusalem be purified by blood. Only then can the followers of the true faith purge our lands of both the foreign invaders, as well as all traitors who have so grievously defied God. Come, we must prepare to aid the Idumeans in gaining access to the city."

The two messengers found the Idumean army of Jacob bar Sosias encamped on the open plain, just south of Esbous. Traveling by horse, it had taken them less than a day to reach their allies, despite the already saturated roads.

The Idumean army was surprisingly well organized, compared to the chaotic rabbles the two Ananias' had witnessed. Though not nearly as well structured as the Romans, they were still equipped with tents and pack animals to carry food and necessities. Unlike the imperial army, though, they did not possess any artillery, and their missile troops were limited to mostly slingers and skirmishers with throwing darts. Most of their infantry wore a coat of large ring mail over a leather cuirass.

"It is time," one of the messengers said.

"The patriots have seized the temple," the other added, "but they are now trapped inside. The traitors have laid siege to the holy sanctum, while seeking to make a deal with the Romans."

"Then we must not waste any more time," Jacob said. "It is time we liberate the temple and its brave defenders."

He then summoned his generals and their senior captains.

"Storm clouds have made the eastern sky black," one of the generals named Simon bar Cathlas observed. "I hope this is not a poor omen from the divine."

"It rains in this part of the world during the winter months," Jacob said with a dismissive shrug. "We shall not be deterred by bad weather. Make ready our troops, we march at once!"

Though Hanan and the council knew nothing of John's treachery or his messengers, they did soon enough receive word about the approach of the Idumean army. They had been spotted crossing the River Jordan, an ordeal that took them the better part of a day, as the banks were overflowing and starting to wash over the bridge.

"If they have crossed the Jordan, they will be here within a day, maybe two," Hanan remarked. "We must close and bar the gates, for we cannot allow such numbers of fighting men under arms within these walls."

"Do we even know what their intentions are?" John asked, feigning ignorance.

"They march as an army," Gorion stated. "That can hardly mean their purposes are good."

"If they were offering their blades in service to our cause," Symeon added, "they would have sent emissaries to us, rather than simply marching twenty thousand soldiers towards our gates."

"We have six thousand of our best men surrounding the zealots," Joseph noted. "They won't be getting out without a great deal of assistance from outside. Could the Idumeans really be coming to their aid?"

"The Edomites, or Idumeans as they more often call themselves, have never been our friends," Hanan said. "And yet, they can hardly be considered allies of the zealots we have trapped within the temple."

"My militia guard the eastern gate," Symeon remarked. "Should the Idumeans prove hostile, they will not breach these walls. Like our friend, John of Giscala, has said, 'only those with wings could get into our beloved holy city'."

Chapter XXVI: The Murder of all Hope

Jerusalem
Late January 68 A.D.
***

With all of the loyalist militias committed to the temple siege, Jerusalem, and indeed all of Judea, was now left without any sort of governing body. Furthermore, the approach of the Idumean army filled the people with an added sense of uncertainty and dread.

The Idumeans were an impressive sight. Unlike the zealots and the majority of the Judean militias, these men were afforded body armor and better weapons. Each wore a conical helmet with a short chain mesh covering the neck. Their armor was mostly ring mail or small plates stitched into a leather cuirass, and in some cases hamata chain mail, similar to that worn by the Roman auxilia. While their leaders carried long swords, most of the infantrymen wielded large pole arms with a blade on the end and a small metal buckler strapped to the left forearm for added protection. They were the closest thing to a full scale professional army in all of Judea, yet their loyalties were questionable at best. That their numbers were few, the twenty thousand marching towards Jerusalem accounting for every fighting man in Idumea, was all that prevented them from playing a more substantial role within the greater conflict. Their greatest weakness was a complete lack of cavalry, for even most of their senior officers were compelled to walk. Only Jacob bar Sosias, Simon bar Cathlas, and a third general named Phineas rode horses.

Black clouds were rolling in from the east, as if to signal the ominous approach of the Idumean forces. A large number of loyalist militia guarded the wall, with many slingers and a few archers amongst them. Hanan, who had been checking the guard posts around the temple, rushed to the wall when he heard word of the army's approach. He was soon joined by Joseph ben Gorion and the old priest, Yeshua.

"Thankfully they don't have any siege engines or assault towers," the

guard's captain observed. "The look as if they expect to simply walk into the city."

Indeed the Idumeans, though heavily armed, were completely devoid of any siege equipment. Even ladders appeared to be absent from their ranks. The sky to the east was now completely black, and the wind had started to pick up considerably. As if trying to outrun the coming storm, the Idumeans marched at the quick step, almost a jog.

"I am familiar with these men, so I will talk to them," Yeshua asserted.

"Very good," Hanan said with a nod. "I must check the remainder of our posts. If the storm is even half as bad as it appears, we may need to stand down a number of the guards."

About twenty minutes after Hanan departed, the lead ranks of the Idumean army marched to within a hundred meters of the wall. The guards stood ready, yet did not raise their slings or bows, for they knew not whether this army was friend or foe. One of the Idumean leaders, Simon bar Cathlas, rode forward to speak his outrage at the gates being closed to them.

"Who is it that closes out their fellow countrymen from our holy city?" he demanded. "We demand that you open the gates and allow us into the sanctum that is as much ours as it is yours!"

Yeshua shook his head and spoke to the gathering.

"You come to this holy place, armed for war! Who is it you wish to arm yourselves against? Many troubles indeed have fallen upon this city, yet in none have I so much wondered at her fortune as now, for I see you are come to support the vilest of men against us! And this with so great alacrity, as you could hardly put on the like, in case our metropolis called you to her assistance against barbarians. But now for these men who have invited you, if you were to examine them one by one, every one of them would be found to have deserved ten thousand deaths, having madly plundered the neighboring villages and privately run together into this holy city. They are robbers, who by their prodigious wickedness have profaned this most sacred floor, and who are to be now seen drinking themselves drunk in the sanctuary, and expending the spoils of those whom they have slaughtered upon their insatiable bellies. We have also heard the slanders that we intend to betray the city to the Romans; for some of your men have lately made such accusations, and have said they are come to set their metropolis free. You ought to consider what sort of people they are that raise this calumny, and gather the truth of things, not by listening to fictitious speeches. For what occasion is

there for us to sell ourselves to the Romans, while it was in our power not to have revolted from them in the first place? As for myself, I should have preferred peace with them before death; but now we have once made war upon them and fought with them, I prefer death with reputation before living in captivity under them."

His impassioned speech, which should have moved even the stoutest of hearts, was met with derision by the Idumeans. They jeered him and shouted insults and profanities, the likes of which the old priest had never been so grievously affronted by.

Simon raised his hand, silencing his men, before he addressed the priest directly.

"I do not concern myself with those patriots who are shut up within the temple," he said, "when there are those who trap them within while closing the gates to this holy metropolis from their own countrymen! You call ten thousand deaths upon these brave men, yet you would condemn and execute without a legal trial. Who then are the true murderers? And yes, we do come with great haste to this city, to regretfully make war against our brethren. We do this so we may preserve that same liberty with which you would sell to the Romans. You have shut the gates of the holy city against your brothers, while subjugating and committing false accusations against those who you jail within our sacred temple. So here we will wait, armed and in our armor, until such time as either the Romans grow weary from waiting for you, or you become friends of liberty and repent your crimes against it."

"Put down your arms, and we will welcome you as friends and brothers," Yeshua answered. "Otherwise, be gone with you! You will not gain access to this metropolis so long as you are equipped like an invading army."

A flash of lightening lit the field ominously. And yet, Yeshua quickly noted that while the Idumeans had plenty of pack animals with food, they had brought neither tent nor other shelter to protect them from the storm. He smiled, reckoning the weather, by his estimation a gift from God, would drive this hostile force away from their walls.

As Simon rode back to his army, he looked to Jacob and simply shook his head. A series of grumbles and shouted profanities came sporadically from their men, who were within earshot of the exchange with Yeshua.

“We appear to have made a rather grievous error in trusting John of Giscala,” Simon noted. “He promised to have the gates open for us, and so we hastened, without packing shelter or proper kit, and now we are to be subjected to God’s fury outside the walls of our own city!”

“I’ll cut that fucking bastard’s heart out!” a nearby infantryman spat.

Jacob looked troubled by their dilemma, although not completely surprised. “The blame for our haste is mine alone,” he said, loud enough for those nearest to hear him. “I promise, my brothers, to make this right by you, by offering you all the plunder you can carry from the districts around the temple. The temple grounds themselves are not to be touched!”

“That’s a fine promise,” Simon said quietly, “but it does us little good if we cannot even get into Jerusalem.”

Rain splatters started to fall, adding to the brooding anger that had spread throughout the entire Idumean army. Many were superstitious and started to speak uneasily amongst themselves, stating that the coming storm was God’s judgment against them for daring to march on His holy city.

“We’ll occupy the high ground along the Mount of Olives,” Jacob directed. “And we will wait out this storm. If by tomorrow John of Giscala has not kept his word to us, then God damn him and all the zealots!”

As the army begrudgingly withdrew from the city’s wall, their demeanor became even darker, as the winds increased. Rain was now being blown into their faces, with the slopes of the Mount of Olives offering only scant protection from the wind. Even the generals did not have shelter, but could only huddle together near their mounts as the heavens opened with torrential rains upon them. Within a minute, the entire army was completely soaked. Men sat upon the sodden ground, back to back, heads bowed, and shoulders hunched, using their helmets and armor to try and protect them from the downpour. The deluge of rain was accompanied by seemingly endless crashes of thunder, with the sky continuously lit up by flashes of lightning. Given the sour mood of their soldiers, Jacob knew that if they were denied entry into Jerusalem, he would have to sate his men’s desire for plunder upon the town of Douka Hierichous, just east of Jerusalem. It was not his preferred course of action; however, he now had no choice but to wait out the hellish storm, and hope that the Giscalan was true to his word.

As the rains pummeled the city, and especially the Idumean army, John, Levi, and fifty of his zealots met at an abandoned house not far from the eastern gate. The roof was dilapidated and in danger of collapsing, and streams of rainwater began to flood the squalid structure. John and several of his men carried large saws, like those used for felling tall trees.

"The gate has been barred with a massive iron lock," he said, "in order to prevent unfriendly hands from opening it to our friends."

Two men, whom he had sent out as scouts, soon entered. They were completely drenched, despite the great cloaks each wore.

"Hanan has stood down most of the guard," one of the men said, through a set of broken and blackened teeth.

"Only a few volunteers remain," the other man added. "The rest have taken shelter in their nearest barracks."

"We'll let the Idumeans deal with them," Levi said. He then looked to his leader, whose face was grim and determined.

"My friends," John said. "Tonight we liberate both Jerusalem, and all of Judea, from the tyrannical clutches of the old order; those filthy whoresons who would see our entire race enslaved by the Romans. There must be no mercy shown, no pity for old friends who have chosen the wrong side. Are you with me?"

"Yes!" the men shouted in unison.

"The Idumeans will think this storm is God's judgment against them," John added, "but it is time we show them that it is, in fact, His means of salvation for us all. With me to glory!"

With hearts full of grim determination, the zealots rushed out into the storm. Their weapons were mostly concealed beneath their cloaks, yet there was nary a soul on the streets that stormy night who could have sounded the alarm. The flashes of lightening illuminated the scant number of guards that lined the eastern wall of the city. John stopped his men at the gate, then gave a nod to Levi.

"Follow me!" his friend shouted, drawing his blade and rushing up the nearby steps. About half the men followed, most of the rest taking the right hand steps.

John and the few who remained placed their saws on the large crossbeam, while another man with a hammer attempted to break the massive lock. The zealot leader was counting on a duplication of effort, in the hopes that one would prove faster than the others in breaching the gate. The beating of the

rain was so loud that none could even hear the smashing of the hammer upon the lock.

Up on the wall, Levi and his men set about dispatching their enemies. The first guard he came to was leaning over the rampart, his attention focused on something down in the plain below. Levi simply grabbed him by his ankles and upended him over the side. None of the man's friends could even hear his screams as he fell sixty feet to his death. Few of the others saw the zealots coming, with Levi plunging his sword into the neck of their next victim while the rest of his men rushed past him. Only a couple of the guards managed to see them coming, with one plunging his spear into the guts of a zealot who fell screaming from the wall, smashing his brains out on the road below. The numbers of seditionists soon overwhelmed these stalwart warriors.

Down on the gate, two of the men working one of the saws broke through. They pulled the cross brace away and heaved open the gate.

"Wait here for the others," John told his men. "Once our allies are in the city, we'll head for the temple."

He made his way out into the night, with only a couple of men accompanying him. It was completely black, and he stumbled repeatedly in the sloshing and uneven ground. Only the flashes of lightning gave him enough light to see by. It was ethereal in a sense, as he could just make out the vast shadow that was the Idumean army. It was upon the Mount of Olives that he saw them, which he felt was an even greater portend from God.

The sound of shouting voices alerted Jacob and his fellow generals. They quickly pulled themselves to their feet, just able to see their soldiers confronting a handful of men who had nearly walked right into their encampment. All were shivering in cold as the wind whipped mercilessly about them, with the rains unceasing.

"Who intrudes upon our camp?" one of the soldiers shouted over the cacophony of pounding rain, his spear brandished.

"John of Giscala!" a voice returned. "Follow me at once, and Jerusalem shall be yours!"

Jacob did not even wait to ask for questions, but instead ordered Simon and Phineas to rouse their soldiers. He walked down to the men, setting his gaze for the first time upon the man who had summoned his army to the holy

city.

"I apologize for my delay," John said, with a short bow. "We had to breach the gate from the inside. My men have dealt with those troublesome bastards up on the wall. Once inside, we'll show you the barracks, as well as where the guard posts are outside the temple."

Jacob simply nodded and mounted his horse. He then drew his sword, his rage warming him against the cold of the torrential rains. John and his men led them back towards the gates. The army moved at a slow jog, for the ground was full of pitfalls and slick with mud. Many crashed into each other as the slipped and tripped over the seemingly endless number of hazards and obstacles.

Both the zealot leader and Idumean general gave a nervous sigh of relief when they approached the city walls and saw the gate was still open. Levi and his band of volunteers were waiting for them just inside.

"Levi will guide you to the nearby barracks," John said to Jacob. "Many of the others are billeted at the Antonia Fortress."

"Phineas!" Jacob shouted. "Take your men and clear the barracks. Simon, send half your troops to clear the temple and release the besieged patriots. I will take the rest and secure the fortress."

The barracks that Levi led several thousand Idumeans towards was actually a series of old warehouses, now used to billet the volunteer militias who laid siege to the temple. All within had been grateful for a night of rest and had left no guards on the doors. These were quickly smashed in, as Idumean soldiers butchered those nearest the entrances. The Judean loyalists were so caught off guard, that there was little to no time for them to equip themselves for battle. Only a couple of oil lamps added any sort of light to the carnage. And even if there had been time to make a proper defense, the militias were too poorly armed for the task, as well as hopelessly outnumbered.

A few blocks away, near the high steps of the temple complex, Simon bar Cathlas gave a loud battle cry, which was echoed by his men as they formed into ranks and charged. Slingers and skirmishers unleashed a number of missiles towards their assailants, though these proved too feeble an attempt, with only a handful of soldiers being struck down. The guards of the temple were soon overwhelmed, long blades plunging into their guts. Others were knocked down the steps, where their throats were cut and bodies hacked to

bloody pieces.

A vicious melee ensued in the main courtyard, as it was swarmed with Idumean soldiers. The volunteers still blockading the zealots within the inner sanctum were now in a fight for their lives. The besieged within had posted lookouts who noted the fray, and soon they too emerged from their hiding places. The loyalist guards were now surrounded, and with no mercy being shown by either side, they bravely fought to the last. A number of zealots and Idumeans paid the price for their brash attack in lives and fearful injuries, yet the issue was never in doubt. Within a few minutes, not a single guardsman within the temple remained alive. The zealots, along with their leaders, Eleazar and Zacharias, gave loud cheers of lustful retribution.

"And now, to exact our revenge upon those who imprisoned us!" Eleazar shouted.

Zealots and their newfound allies soon fell upon the surrounding neighborhoods. Men, women, and children alike were pulled from their homes and brutally cut down in the streets. Anything of value was plundered by the rampaging mob, while those who caught sight of the chaos tried to flee from their wrath. There was no one to protect them, for most of the militias had been trapped within their barracks, and by the time Eleazar and his fighters emerged from the temple, every last loyalist fighter lay dead, or else had fled into the night. There was now just one final matter to settle, and John of Giscala was seeing to it personally.

The crashing of the storm masked the sounds of so many heavily armed men rampaging over the outer walls of the fortress. Hanan and Yeshua had remained within the vestibule, where the high priest's vestments were maintained. Foolishly, the portcullis had been left open, and the overwhelming numbers of Idumeans had little trouble dispatching the few guards within. And yet, the high priest and leader of the Jewish free state was oblivious to the carnage that had already seen so many slain.

"The storms deluge the city," Yeshua observed. A crash of lightening illuminated very briefly what he thought were the shapes of men outside.

"I fear an even greater calamity will break over us very soon…" Hanan's words were cut short as the door was smashed in. His eyes grew wide at the sight of twenty heavily armed Idumean soldiers. What was the greatest

tragedy was not the horde of reckless barbarians filled with bloodlust, but the sight of the man at the head of them.

"John," Hanan whispered, shaking his head in disbelief. "Josephus was right about you. You are nothing more than a thief and an opportunist. You could not make a stand with us in Galilee, yet now you seek to steal the Jewish state from the people like a tyrannical despot."

His eyes cold and distant, the man of Giscala, who had falsely professed his loyalty to the people and the governing council, calmly stepped towards the high priest, his sword drawn.

"No," he said, ice in his voice. "I come to liberate the people from your cowardice and false piety. You would sell us out to the Romans, like your lapdog, Josephus!"

The shouts and bloodcurdling screams of people fighting and being murdered in the streets just outside the doors was accented by a further crash of thunder.

"And by your barbarism you have condemned the people of Judea to destruction and death!" Hanan snapped. He then spat in John's face. "If the temple falls, it will be *you* who has to answer before God!"

John calmly wiped his face. Then, with only the slightest twitching of his mouth, he plunged his sword deep into Hanan's stomach. The high priest doubled over, his mouth agape as he fell to his knees in agony. Blood ran from the hideous wound as John jerked his weapon free. Hanan closed his eyes, his trembling mouth uttering the words of one of the Psalms, *'Blessed are those who do not walk in step with the wicked, or stand in the way that sinners take, or sit in the company of mockers'*.

As John grabbed him by the hair, placing the blade of his sword on his neck, Hanan quickly whispered his last words, a prayer to God, that He would show mercy on the people, that they should not be punished for the grievous sins of those who defiled His holy name. The zealot grimaced and slashed open the high priest's throat. Hanan's eyes opened wide, his last vision being that of the paving stones as John threw him face down onto the floor. His vision faded, as his gushing blood filled the cracks between the stones and streamed towards the door.

The bodies of Hanan, Joseph, Yeshua, and a score of priests and councilmen, all viciously murdered, were dragged to the steps that lead out of the temple. The militia leaders, Gorion and Symeon, had been among the ambushed, and had perished with their men.

From the temple steps, the bodies were cast down onto the pavement below. Their blood mingled with the pooling water from the incessant rains. A series of lightning crashes near the city startled the killers for a moment. While the storm had given them the cover necessary to allow the Idumeans into Jerusalem and to overwhelm their adversaries, it seemed in that moment as if God was cursing them for these terrible outrages against His servants. The zealots paid this no mind, intent as they were on their murderous rampage. By the thousands they and their Idumean allies swarmed the neighborhoods surrounding the temple. Innocence or guilt mattered little, all were consumed by vengeance and bloodlust.

While the rest of Jerusalem slept fitfully under the crashing thunderstorm, John of Giscala made his way into the inner sanctum of the temple. Upon the altar he set his bloodied sword, as if it were a sacrifice to the Almighty. He then closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He was now master of Jerusalem, as well as the entire Jewish state. He would later learn that eight thousand five hundred had perished that night. No mercy was shown to gender or age; all had been killed as traitors and conspirators. The vast number of corpses that now littered the streets would set a sinister example to all who would dare defy the new order that had taken over the state.

The storms eventually passed, and the sun rose upon a city unaware of its new masters. The sounds of screaming and high-pitched wails of lamentations soon pierced the morning air. Word quickly spread about the merciless killings that harkened back to the reign of terror the people had been subjected to under the pretender king, Manahem, two years prior.

Matthias, the father of Josephus, made his way to the temple early that day. He had heard about the storm of butchery that had come the night before, yet even he was in a state of astonished horror at the sight of so many slain bodies strewn all along the temple steps. The zealots and Idumeans had taken away their own dead, yet they had left the bodies of all others where they lay. And in total defiance of Jewish religion and law, armed Idumean soldiers were preventing families from taking away the bodies of their loved ones for burial. One poor elderly woman was accosted with a blow to the head from the butt of a soldier’s spear as she tried to drag away the bodies of her husband and son.

“These traitors are for the dogs!” the man spat.

One younger woman, whose sobs and shouts of anguish echoed throughout the square, refused to leave the body of her slain husband. Instead, she bit and swatted at the soldiers, maddened as she was by grief. One of the officers, in his disgust, kicked the woman hard in the stomach. As she gasped for breath, he grabbed her by the hair and slashed his dagger across her throat. This barbaric murder elicited further screams of rage and sorrow from the crowd of mourners.

“Return to your homes!” the officer shouted. “The new leaders of free Judea will issue their proclamations soon. These traitors are to be left where they were slain. Now go about your business, unless you wish to share their fate!”

Matthias was utterly repelled by the sight, yet he said nothing. He scanned the untold numbers of bodies that littered the ground from where he stood, all the way up to the temple steps. He then noticed an older man in white robes, still wearing the vestments of high priest. He was on his back, upside down with his feet up on the steps, and his arms sprawled out to his sides. His stomach was covered in blood, as was his throat. Even from a distance, and despite the gore and utter desecration the body had been subjected to, Matthias knew it to be Hanan. He quickly left, suddenly fearful of what would become of him and his family, for he did not yet know that it was John of Giscala who controlled Jerusalem. All anyone knew at that moment was that Idumean soldiers had somehow breached the city wall, overwhelmed the loyalist militias, and freed the zealots who had been under siege at the temple. The city held its collective breath, as they waited for word from their new masters.

Chapter XXVII: The New Order

Jerusalem
February 68 A.D.
***

"Jerusalem is ours," Jacob said casually, as he joined John and the others in the meeting hall within the inner temple. Levi, Eleazar, Zacharias, and a host of other senior zealot leaders were assembled there. The Idumean general stood in full armor, his helmet underneath his arm.

"Very good," John replied. "And your men have kept the people from retrieving the corpses of the traitors?"

"They have," the Idumean general acknowledged. "A bit of a macabre task. One of my captains was compelled to cut the throat of a young woman who refused to leave the body of her slain husband."

"More food for the carrion beasts," Levi said coldly.

"You can leave them for a couple of days," Jacob noted, "but after that, the bodies will bring a pestilence of flies into the temple."

"We'll let them lie for another day," John said. "We'll strip them naked, and then throw them outside the city walls. Archers will be posted on the walls with orders to shoot anyone who attempts to give these conspirators a proper burial. In the meantime, we need to strengthen our control over the city, as well as the rest of Judea."

Jacob set his helmet on the table and snapped his fingers, demanding wine and food.

"My men are only here as an allied force," he asserted. "Let us be clear about that. They do not answer to you, or to any of your newly-selected government. Idumea is to be treated as an independent state."

"But of course," John replied, as magnanimously as he was able.

In truth, his allies made him a little nervous. Though his fighters would be flooding into the city within the coming days and weeks, these soldiers were still far better trained and equipped than his men. If Jacob bar Sosias wished, he could readily make a grab at the throne of the ancient kingdoms. Thankfully, his ambitions appeared to be limited to a free Idumea, and he was content to help the zealots, so long as his men received ample plunder and coin in compensation.

Something John did not mention was what he perceived as an even greater threat to his power. Zacharias had, at first, appeared to be only a subordinate leader under Eleazar. Now that they controlled the city, he was already seeking to expand his power base. John resolved to talk with Eleazar later, to get his council on what should be done about their 'friend'. In the meantime, there was work to be done. Decrees had to be made, declaring the ending of the old regime and the establishment of a new government under John of Giscala. And then there were a few other things that needed to be dealt with, namely the family of that most hated of all the turncoats, Josephus.

"Hanan was a brave man," Matthias the elder said, as he sat with his family later that day.

All were horrified at the madness and slaughter that had transpired within the temple district. None dared venture forth, for they did not know who controlled the city, or if they would be next in the usurpers' murderous rampage.

"He foresaw that a long war against the Romans cannot be won by force of arms," Matthias continued. "Were he still alive and in control of the Jewish state, I daresay he could have negotiated a favorable end to hostilities with Rome."

"Josephus understood this," his son remarked, his face showing a sudden sense of realization. "It all makes sense now, why he allowed himself to be taken by the Romans. Through him, and with Hanan in power, they could have ended the destruction! Vespasian doesn't want to throw away lives any more than we do; and even in the most one-sided of battles, a good number of his soldiers still die. But it will not happen now. There is no hope left for our people." He shook his head in dismay at this last realization.

"John of Giscala is an uncompromising fanatic," his father added, rightly suspecting that it was he who had betrayed Hanan. "He will see the temple and the people destroyed long before he'd ever consider a truce with Rome. And now he controls the government…or rather, his brigands slew the previous government and have installed their own. I fear we now face a new reign of oppression, one far worse than even the corrupt Roman governors. As I left the temple grounds, the dead were being stripped naked, left as

fodder to dogs and other wild beasts."

"Virtue itself bemoans the senseless killings," the younger Matthias said somberly, "as she has been conquered by such wickedness."

As the two men spoke, both Judith and her mother-in-law remained silent. They were filled with sorrow at the unholy murder of their dear friend, Hanan. And as both knew many of the people who lived within the closest neighborhoods of the temple, they feared greatly that a number of their friends were now amongst those killed in John's campaign of death.

A loud banging on the front door startled them all. Matthias the elder slowly rose from his chair, his son following him towards the entrance. As he opened the door, he was shocked to see Levi, along with a dozen armed zealots, standing on the other side.

"Levi!" Matthias gasped. "You survived Jotapata."

The zealot simply nodded, his face showing no emotion. "I come as messenger from the new leader of free Judea," he said simply. "The old order is gone, and John of Giscala now controls the Jewish state."

"Giscala," the younger Matthias said, his voice full of venom. "I know that bastard well. What is it, then? Has he named himself king, like the usurper, Manahem?"

"Mind your tongue, friend," Levi replied smoothly. "John is no usurper. He has freed us from those who would sell us back into Roman bondage. And far from declaring himself king, he is simply the high protector and governor of Jerusalem. He is the people's champion, who will deliver them from the tyranny of imperial Rome."

"And what does he want of us?" Matthias the elder asked. He knew well the hated rivalry that had existed between his son and this arrogating opportunist from Giscala.

"John is feeling magnanimous towards the family of the great traitor," Levi answered. "And he also fears for your safety. Therefore, he has offered his personal protection…"

"Fuck John and his protection!" the younger Matthias snapped. "He has sent your brigands to act as our jailers!"

"If you wish to look at it that way," Levi said, his expression unchanged. "And even if you wish to refuse his offer, it is not yours to reject. Guards will remain outside your house at all times. You will attend to the governor whenever requested, for you are still a member of the priestly order, Matthias. Furthermore, no one will leave the premises without permission,

and even then, only under armed escort…for your safety, of course. Given the large number of people who would stone you as traitors, you should be thankful for our generosity. Good day."

Levi abruptly left before Matthias could say another word, though his guards remained. Five men positioned themselves just outside the front door, with three more in the alleyway in the back. For the family of Josephus, they were now prisoners of the new order. That John allowed them to live, while murdering countless others, was a strange happenstance. But then, by sparing the family of his hated rival, he could claim that he was both magnanimous, as well as brutal.

John of Giscala may have usurped control of Judea through violent force, yet he knew that he alone would not keep the public in line. And despite the thousands that had been slaughtered during the struggle, his charm and charisma would play as vital a role in maintaining control as would force of arms.

In the coming days, he gave many passionate speeches, imploring the people that he was but their servant, and even going so far as to render his garments as he fell to knees in pious supplication before the massive throngs that flocked to the temple. Similar displays had been given two years before, only then they were done by King Agrippa, in hopes the people would remain loyal subjects of Rome.

"Much can change in a couple of years," Levi said quietly to Eleazar during one of John's more fervent orations. "The king would have had the people remain supplicant to the emperor, whereas John calls upon them to fight the Romans to the death."

"The people risk much, and many will die," Eleazar noted, "but at least they will die free."

During each of his speeches, John spoke fervently to the young men of Jerusalem, asking them time and again, *"Will you fight for your own liberty?"* To which the answer was often a resounding *"Yes!"*

Many of the older and more moderate Jews viewed John with contempt, as both a murderer and usurper. Hanan had been beloved by the people, and while John attempted to distance himself from the high priest's death, many held him responsible. Publicly, he had lamented the old high priest's death,

stating it was not his intent, but that Hanan being struck down was the will of God. Privately, he wondered if there would be a full scale riot, should the masses ever discover it was he who stabbed Hanan in the stomach and then slashed his throat.

It seemed to matter little, for the ranks of his warriors grew almost daily, as young volunteers sought to take up arms in the greater cause of the free Jewish state. The Roman blockades of both the sea and land trade routes, as well as the recent loss of rich Galilee, had led to a crippling of the Judean economy. Tens-of-thousands of refugees, fleeing Vespasian's onslaught, had begun to flood into Jerusalem. And with so much of the region now under Roman control, food was in danger of becoming scarce. There was also little work for the younger men, who could not venture away from the Jewish homeland due to the Roman blockade. And so, with little else to do and few prospects available, they flocked willingly to John of Giscala's banner.

Despite the progress of his growing power, John still had great reason to fear threats from within his own circle. He had called a private meeting with both Eleazar and Levi one night, for they were the only two men that he trusted completely.

"It is Zacharias who worries me," John said bluntly. "He was once a prominent citizen amongst the people, who have seemed all too eager to forget that he fought as a zealot and was among those besieged in the temple."

"I am glad it is you who has brought this to our attention," Eleazar replied, "for I had feared that perhaps an accusation from me would sound like an attempt to avenge a personal grievance."

"Are there grievances between you and Zacharias?" Levi asked. "I was under the assumption that you two were close friends."

"Then you assume too much," the younger zealot retorted. "He was a friend of convenience, nothing more. And now that we have control of the city and state, I daresay he will use his former popularity and influence with the people to undermine us. His family is extremely wealthy, and if he suspects for a moment that we are weak, I daresay he will use his power and influence to crown himself king."

"We shall see what he does," John said. "I want him watched, along with

any others who we may have reason to suspect. I do not fear my enemies, for I know their intentions. It is those who would dare to call me ‘friend’, while seeking to stab me in the dark, that I despise.”

Simon bar Giora woke to yet another dawn from atop his uneasy sanctuary on Masada. Though the fortress of Herod was virtually impenetrable, it was also utterly desolate.

“A rock in the middle of a barren wasteland near a poisoned sea,” he lamented, as he gazed over the eastern wall towards the Dead Sea, ten miles in the distance.

“We may yet have an opportunity to return to Jerusalem,” one of his captains said. As his leader turned to face him, the man explained. “Our spies have returned from the holy city. The Idumeans have helped John of Giscala gain control of Jerusalem, as well as the entire Jewish state.”

“The Jewish state outside of our lands,” Simon corrected. “I assume he’s disposed of Hanan and the others?”

“Their corpses lay rotting outside the city walls, being feasted on by wild beasts,” the captain acknowledged.

The corner of Simon’s mouth turned up in a half grin. “Well, at least that cowardly bastard from Giscala has done something useful,” he scoffed. “While we were battling the Romans, chopping their army to pieces at Beth Horon and capturing their siege trains, he remained in Galilee, shitting himself in terror. He is nothing more than a cowardly opportunist; so Hanan’s power must have been greatly weakened for him to make such a bold move.”

“Undoubtedly,” the captain replied. He then asked, “What would you have of us? Shall we ready our forces to try and wrest control of the city from him?”

“No,” Simon replied. “As long as he has the Idumeans supporting him, they are far too powerful. Jacob bar Sosias will not dare attempt to start a war against us, yet if he is supporting John, their combined forces are too much for us at the moment. We will content ourselves, for the moment, with conducting raids of the lands around Jerusalem. We’ll make certain John knows it is our warriors who assail his people, and thereby we will goad him into launching sorties against us.”

“His support grows, but it is mostly young boys and untrained militia,”

the captain noted.

"Whereas we have had plenty of time to train our newer recruits," Simon remarked. "And we still have our veterans from the last campaign against the Romans. I am anxious to leave this hellish rock, and our Sicarii hosts would doubtless not mourn our departure. So I will personally lead a raid on the town of Thekoa. If that does not prompt a response, then we will move a little closer towards Jerusalem and devastate Bethlehem. John will not be able to ignore us any more after that."

The captain smirked maliciously and went to inform their men of the pending raid. Thekoa was at least thirty miles from Masada, a journey that, given the recent torrential rains, would take at least three to four days. Simon wished to strike at John immediately, lest his hated rival be allowed sufficient time to solidify his control on Judea. He only wished he could get the insufferably indecisive Eleazar ben Yair to commit his Sicarii to the cause!

A large band of warriors left the town of Engaddai three days after Simon received word about John's seizing of Jerusalem. Amongst them was one of the only men with a horse. He was a young warrior who arrived with a large contingent of fighters from up north. All had declared they would rather fight for Simon than John, who they viewed as a corrupt and weak-willed pretender.

The warrior's name was Emmanuel, and he claimed to have stolen his fine mount from a wealthy trader near Qumran. In reality, he was a soldier in the employ of King Agrippa, and a former mounted archer who fought for the Romans at Ascalon. A throwing spear to the shoulder had left him unable to aim or shoot his bow, though he found he could still ride very well.

It was General Jacimus who recommended to the king that Emmanuel could be of greater service to the kingdom as their eyes and ears in the south. And so he was sent to 'enlist' in Simon bar Giora's army, while several others remained in Jerusalem. Another such spy had been dispatched to Idumea, and one more to Perea. Emmanuel met with his contacts in Jerusalem, outside its walls every week, under the pretense of gathering information for Simon about the state of the city. In fact, it had been he who informed their captain about the fall of Jerusalem and the overthrow of Hanan and the governing council.

As horses were scarce, Emmanuel found himself being the lone reconnaissance man for Simon's band as they made their trek over the rain-soaked roads towards Thekoa. The zealot general also rode a horse, though he predominantly stayed with his men. Ten thousand select warriors, gathered from around his small fiefdom, would be taking part in this little blood-letting. He had both veterans and new recruits, all anxious to fight for the man they believed would lead them to both freedom and salvation. Simon had gone so far as to admonish his fighters from going too far in their praise of him, stating time and again that he was no messiah, but simply a warrior like them.

"There it is," Emmanuel said with a nod towards the small community. Thekoa was situated in the mountains and was made up mostly of sheep and cattle farmers. "A chance to replenish our livestock, as well as bleed the Giscalan pretender."

"You're a ruthless man," Simon noted with a wicked smirk. "I am glad to have you with me. Your ability to discover our enemy's intentions has proven vital. Were it not for your eyes in Jerusalem, it might have been weeks before we found out about the government's overthrow."

"I do what I can for the cause," the rider said with a casual shrug. "With your permission, I would like to ride ahead, so I can follow whatever refugees flee the onslaught…I am assuming you intend to let some of them live."

"Of course," Simon replied. "If I kill them all, who will let John know his lands are no longer safe? No, we will let a few escape. We may not even slaughter all who remain, just enough to make our presence felt while we acquire their livestock."

It was a cloudy day, and it looked like additional rains would fall later that afternoon. Emmanuel rode to the top of a tall hill overlooking the town. He dismounted and sat on a large rock, taking a small loaf of bread from his hip pouch. He took a bite just as the first cries of terror echoed from the village. There were, perhaps, a thousand total persons living in Thekoa, with ten thousand of Simon's warriors descending upon them and surrounding the town. A small wall surrounded the town, yet this was barely six feet high and was mainly used for penning in cattle and sheep when not grazing. Emmanuel continued to eat, while taking the occasional drink off his water bladder. He watched as the zealots stormed over the wall, killing any who

stood in their way. Men, women, children, all were mercilessly slain. About fifty citizens managed to flee the slaughter. They were racing north towards the town of Bethlehem, which was a few miles away, located down a wide valley.

"That's it, then," Emmanuel sighed as he stood and mounted his horse again.

Being a soldier of King Agrippa, he cared little for the internal quarrels between the peoples of southern Judea, yet to watch so many innocents brutally murdered disgusted him. He reckoned it was no worse than the savageries unleashed by his Roman allies, though it seemed rather perverse that these atrocities were committed by Jews against their own kinsmen.

He would not bother following the fleeing evacuees, for he knew where they were headed. Instead, he began his trek towards Jerusalem. The following day was his scheduled meeting with his fellow spies on the Mount of Olives. While Emmanuel had managed to gather a plethora of information, which he had no qualms about passing on to Simon, he never actually set foot inside the city. It was far too risky, as there was a chance that someone there might recognize him as one of King Agrippa's soldiers. He would instead gather his intelligence from his fellows, while passing on his own information to them. They, in turn, would spread rumors throughout the city, while also sending a rider to Caesarea in order to inform Vespasian. This way they kept their commanding general abreast of the strategic situation, while subtly goading the two largest rival factions of rebel zealots into continuing to battle each other.

Vespasian intended to allow his rivals to weaken each other through mutual bloodletting, and his intelligence network was now doing that work for him, while the legions rested and regrouped. It was an elaborate, yet strangely simple subterfuge that, for the time being at least, was proving far more effective than the brute force of ten thousand legionaries.

Chapter XXVIII: Justice Blinded

Jerusalem
February 68 A.D.
***

In the weeks since taking control of the Judean government, John found himself fighting more with his supposed allies than with those who openly proclaimed themselves his enemies. He knew he needed to respond to the raid on Thekoa, as the citizens of Bethlehem now feared a similar fate might await them.

"I will deal with Simon bar Giora soon enough," John reasoned. "Any news on the Romans yet?"

"All we can be certain of, is they haven't advanced on Neapolis or Lydda," Levi said. "So many of our spies are never seen or heard from again, that it is very difficult to know their movements."

"Well, the rains have all but ceased," John noted, "and the roads are beginning to dry up. Even now, they are navigable by donkey cart, so we can expect their armies to be on the offensive before long." He sat with his chin resting on his hand and pondered for a moment.

"The only trade route left open to us is east through Perea," John then conjectured. "So that is where the Romans will head next."

"If they cut off the roads east," Zacharias said, "and with Simon bar Giora controlling the south, we truly will be cut off."

"And yet Jerusalem is still ours," Eleazar remarked. "Let our enemies shatter themselves against our walls. God has chosen us as His defenders of the holy shrine!"

"Perhaps," Zacharias said. His brow was creased in doubt.

Eleazar cocked his head to the side, appraising him critically. "Not having second thoughts about our revolution, are you?"

"Like you, I represent the people of the free Jewish state," Zacharias replied indignantly. "And like you, I fought against the old order during the temple siege. I have no love for the Romans, yet I fail to see how we can prevent them from simply strangling Jerusalem. Their army is far too powerful…"

"*Filthy turncoat!*" Eleazar snapped, standing up and shoving Zacharias

hard on the shoulder. “What? Are you looking to cut a deal with Vespasian, so your precious fortune may be spared?”

Zacharias appeared horrified, and he looked to John who simply sat in silence, casually drinking a cup of wine. Eleazar shoved him again, prompting Zacharias to punch him across the face, sending his assailant sprawling to the floor.

“You dare to call *me* turncoat?” he snarled. “I serve the people, Eleazar, not you!” He then looked to John. “Will you stand for this? This man seeks to sow the seeds of discord within your own government, before it’s even been established for a month!”

John remained silent, but signaled for his guards who quickly grabbed Zacharias by each arm, while another disarmed him of his dagger.

“What is the meaning of this?” Zacharias shouted indignantly.

“I’ve had you watched for some time,” John said calmly. “Did you really think your plans to sell us out to the Romans would go unnoticed? How many messengers have you sent to Vespasian?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” the captive man protested.

“Cloaked riders have been seen heading along the northwestern road towards Caesarea,” the governor remarked. “I would capture and interrogate them myself, yet sadly we lack in horses, of which you seem to have plenty readily available. And who but the richest of men could afford such splendid mounts during these hard times?”

“You accuse me without proof!” Zacharias retorted. “Put me on trial, then, and see your accusations laid bare as the falsehoods they are!”

Eleazar stood, and while rubbing his jaw, he stepped in and punched his former friend hard in the stomach, doubling him over.

“Not so fast,” John said, raising a hand. “We will give this treacherous thief the trial he desires, and the people shall see how we deal with those who would betray us to the Romans.”

Eleazar was determined to make the trial of Zacharias as public as possible, and so they elected to utilize the old tribunal, the one once used by the Roman procurators to pass judgment. In order to make the ordeal appear as legitimate as possible, John had appointed seventy learned men to serve as judges of the proceedings. All were known to have sympathies towards the

new order, and it had been made abundantly clear to them what their verdict should be.

A crowd of several thousand thronged the square around the tribunal, anxious to see justice meted out. Many were friends or beneficiaries of the wealthy Zacharias, and so they prayed feverishly that the judges would see reason. In light of the brutish power displayed by the new order, all the people seemed able to do anymore was pray.

The stairs where the judges assembled was flanked by Idumean soldiers, while the rest of the tribunal was lined with zealot warriors. John of Giscala, along with Levi, Eleazar, and Jacob bar Sosias sat in chairs behind the rows of judges. They remained beneath the large overhang, allowing themselves to be seen, while at the same time remaining inconspicuous enough to give the appearance that the judges were in control of the court.

"Zacharias bar Baruch," one of the judges said, standing in front of his peers. "You stand accused of the crime of high treason; that you openly sought to negotiate with the Roman invaders, even going so far as to send messages to the enemy general, Vespasian. How do you plead?"

"Not guilty!" Zacharias said boldly.

"You must understand," the judge said, almost beseeching him. "If we try and convict you, you will be stoned to death. If you confess now, and lay bare your crimes, you can fully repent before God and petition this court for mercy."

"And what crimes can be attributed to me?" the accused man retorted. He then addressed the crowd, his arms outstretched. "Where is the proof? A few stray horsemen are seen leaving the city and all of the sudden they are agents of Rome, sent by me to parlay with Vespasian? Is *this* all the evidence you have? This court is a mockery, if I am even being tried on such paltry allegations!"

Recognizing the court for what it was, a sham with a predetermined verdict and sentence, Zacharias decided he had little left to lose. He greatly feared for his own life, as well as that of his family; and so he hoped he could sway the mass of people gathered, that they, too, would see the trial for what it was. He pointed an accusing finger towards the row of men seated behind the judges.

"If you want to try someone for treason," he said with a wicked grin of defiance, "then why do I stand here and not them? John of Giscala, murdering opportunist that he is, killed God's duly appointed high priest with

his own hands! He stole power from Jerusalem's lawful governors by murdering them all. The zealots unleashed a rampage of murder; killing man, woman, and child alike, without trial or even accusation. Even the lowliest criminals who are stoned to death or crucified are given a proper burial according to the laws of the Jews. Yet these sacrilegious renegades treated their murdered victims with the greatest of indignities, stripping them and casting their bodies out to be devoured by dogs; all the while ordering the death of any who attempted to follow the law and treat their murdered loved ones with a bit of dignity."

The zealots who lined the square grew restless, many ready to draw their swords. John and the others said nothing, but rather allowed the trial to proceed. They knew how it would all end, and in a few days, Zacharias' mad ravings would be forgotten. The accused man shook his head and threw his hands up in resignation.

"Condemn me if you wish, I don't care. But be prepared to answer before the Almighty for supporting the blasphemous usurpers, and for handing down the sentence of death to one who has not been proven guilty of any crime. Do as you will."

The judges appeared to be moved by his words, though he reckoned it could be little more than a farcical show to give the appearance of propriety to the crowd. The court was dismissed for an hour while the judges deliberated. Zacharias remained where he was, while the people talked in hushed voices amongst each other.

Finally, the seventy judges returned. All appeared somber, though to the last man, they knew what sentence they had been directed to hand down. Zacharias closed his eyes and tilted his head back slightly as the head judge rose.

"Zacharias bar Baruch," he said. "On the charges levied before you, this court finds you *not guilty*."

A thousand exclamations, of both joy and disgust, erupted from various peoples within the mob. The zealots were clearly enraged, with many drawing their swords. The head judge then turned and faced John, who stood red-faced in fury.

"We will not be used as pawns to condemn the innocent!" the elder man admonished. "If you wish to slay this man, then we will gladly meet death rather than defy God and justice!"

John snapped his fingers and pointed towards the judges. More than two

hundred of his warriors assailed them, swords drawn. But rather than slaying the men, the zealots beat them with the flats of their swords, treating them to a greater humiliation than if they were simply killed.

As for Zacharias, he stood wide-eyed, unable to believe he'd been acquitted. He had no time to feel any sense of relief, though, as a pair of zealots rushed towards him from both sides. They immediately plunged their blades into his sides, eliciting a cry of pain as Zacharias fell to his knees.

The men stabbed him repeatedly with contemptible hatred. One of them shouted, "You have our verdict! And this is your acquittal!"

Many of the crowd fled from the chaos, while others tried to make way as the zealots beat the hapless judges, treating them with abject scorn.

Up on the top of the tribunal, underneath the overhang, more of John's zealots stood near him, swords and clubs brandished. The Idumean soldiers were in shock over what had transpired, their general in a rage.

"Those old fools will be taught a lesson," Eleazar growled. "This court was made in jest! How could they turn on us like this?"

"They will now know they are but slaves to us," John added, his eyes narrowed as he watched the poor men being beaten by his warriors.

"What the hell is this?" Jacob's shouts of fury alarmed both John and his associates. The Idumean general was snarling at them, clutching hard his helmet beneath his arm. "Is *this* what you call justice? Is *this* what my soldiers fought and died for, so that a tyrannical despot could rule Jerusalem? You are no better than the fucking Roman dogs who seek to spill your guts!"

The zealot warriors closed ranks in front of their leader, as the Idumean soldiers formed a battle line on either side of their general. Jacob's reaction caught John completely by surprise. The last thing he expected was a potential brawl between his warriors and their allies.

"Easy, general!" John said quickly. "We are all friends here. Let us put away our weapons…"

"Piss on you!" Jacob spat. "I curse the day I heeded the call of your emissaries. The soldiers of Idumea do not align themselves with despots. Don't worry, you can have Jerusalem, but good luck keeping it!" He then shouted a series of orders to his soldiers, who formed two lines on either side of their general and quickly marched away from the tribunal. Among those witnessing the chaotic displays was one of the very horsemen who Zacharias had been accused of employing. And while the man was indeed a spy for Vespasian, the poor wretch who lay dead in a growing pool of blood had

never set eyes on him. Feeling that he had witnessed enough over the past two weeks, he reckoned it was time he left Jerusalem.

As for the Idumeans, they set about showing a last act of defiance towards John of Giscala and the new government. They went to the jails and freed several thousand who had been imprisoned on charges of treason. The zealots, being poorly armed, were powerless to stop the transgression. Jacob and his soldiers escorted the people from the city, directing them to head for the lands of Simon bar Giora, who would no doubt soon be making war upon their captors.

"They're doing *what?*" Vespasian asked, bemused, when the scout made his report three days later.

He had summoned his senior officers, as well as Josephus, to hear the messages from the spies dispatched by King Agrippa to Jerusalem.

"They're killing each other," the scout replied. "The entire district around the temple has been completely sacked. I'm not sure how many people they killed total, but I would have to venture at least eight thousand, maybe more."

"And John of Giscala now controls the city?" Vespasian asked. His eyes were filled with contemplation, as he attempted to digest all this new information about the strategic situation in Judea.

The scout nodded in reply.

"And what of Hanan?" Josephus asked. Though it was disrespectful to interrupt Vespasian, he had to know about his friend and mentor.

The scout shook his head sadly. "His body was left for the dogs, along with all of the priests and councilmen. John not only controls Jerusalem, but has installed himself as leader of the Jewish state."

"His hold is not absolute," the scout's companion added. "His mockery of a court, where they slew one of their own leaders, greatly upset his Idumean allies. They could have conceivably overthrown John, yet they simply left the city."

"So the only remotely professional troops he had have abandoned him," Vespasian observed, completely ignoring Josephus' interruption. He looked delighted and slammed his fist into his palm. "Excellent!"

"With Hanan dead, the city has fallen to the fanatics," Titus observed, echoing Josephus' thoughts.

Their Jewish charge stood ashen faced, fighting back his tears. The man who had been like a second father to him had met a reprehensible end. In some ways, he felt responsible. It was absurd, of course, yet Josephus could not help but think that, had he remained in Jerusalem, he could have somehow protected his old friend and mentor.

"Fuck them," Vespasian shrugged. "The Giscalan's best troops have abandoned him, and I have no doubt he will be fighting against numerous rivals in his attempt to maintain control of the state."

"That is true," the first scout concurred. "Simon bar Giora is John's most hated rival, and from his fiefdom near Masada, he has amassed a rather sizeable army of his own. We have another scout who is riding with him under the guise of providing reconnaissance. He told us of a raid by Simon's forces on the small town of Thekoa, which is populated by sheep and cattle farmers."

"If it was a livestock community, it could be just a raid of opportunity to seize food," Titus thought aloud. "Surely these Jews can't be so stubborn to not realize they must stand together or face certain annihilation."

"But that is exactly what happened in Galilee," Josephus said. He was having trouble speaking, the news of Hanan's slaying coming as a savage, though perhaps not unexpected, blow to him.

"I suspect he will fall to plundering the region around Jerusalem," the scout continued, "and that he and John will soon be embroiled in an all-out civil war. And they're not the only factions who may try to seize power. No doubt both Simon and John will attempt to rally as many factions to their cause as possible."

"And they will slowly tear each other apart." Vespasian could hardly contain his elation.

"Now would be the time for us to finish this," Trajan remarked. "Sooner or later, they may put aside their quarrels and leave us with the even greater threat of facing a unified adversary."

Titus and Placidus gave similar assessments, urging Vespasian to unleash his entire army on Jerusalem.

The commander-in-chief shook his head at this. "The God of the Jews is a far greater general than I," Vespasian said, in a way of admonishing his impatient legates and commanders. "He delivers up his own people to us, causing them to make war upon each other, thereby preserving Roman lives. Our enemies suffer the greatest of misfortunes, being destroyed by their own

hands. Let us, therefore, remain but spectators for the time being, as one watching a large-scale gladiatorial match. Only in this case, the victors will be sent to the afterlife on the blades of our legions."

Though anxious to prosecute the war, the assembled officers knew their commanding general was right. It would be foolish to rush back into the fray, only to risk the Jewish factions deciding to put their differences aside and unite against the imperial invaders. Better to let them bleed and wear each other down.

Vespasian had hoped to negotiate a truce with Hanan and the moderates, but if the fanatics were determined to destroy each other, it made his mission that much easier. There was still some fighting left to do before Jerusalem was completely contained, however.

"Placidus," the commander-in-chief said. "You have the most mobile troops in the entire army. I need you to take the capital of Perea, east of Jerusalem. It's about a week's march from here. If they have any sense, they will capitulate, provided we promise to show clemency. Make certain they know that. Should you have to return with the legions, every last one of them will die or be enslaved."

"Like the rest of these Jewish scum, they'll capitulate or I will break them!" Placidus' enmity towards their adversaries had only increased over the nearly two years of brutal conquest and continuous war.

"We must corral and contain all of the rebel factions to the Jerusalem district," Vespasian observed, placing his hand on a large map. It was well worn and scrawled with the various routes they had travelled, as well as a large 'X' drawn over each city they had destroyed.

"There are still a number of places we will have to take first," Titus noted. "The cities of Lydda and Emmaus are the two largest on the western road into Jerusalem."

"Even Gallus managed to handle those readily enough," Trajan remarked. He looked to his commanding general. "But if we isolate every rebel faction and militia within Jerusalem, they will have a hell of a garrison with which to fight us, should they eventually put their differences aside. Once contained, what is your plan?"

Vespasian looked over to Josephus and nodded his head towards the tent flap behind him. Their Jewish charge was glad to be dismissed, and quickly left even before his escorting guards.

After a few moments, the general finally spoke. "At that point, things

become complicated," he said. "And not just because we will have a massive rebel force holed up in the largest fortress in the east."

He produced a letter addressed to him and written by his brother, Sabinus, and another from the Roman consul, Silius Italicus.

"Julius Vindex, the governor of Gallia Lugdunensis, has openly rebelled against Emperor Nero," Vespasian explained.

The province of Roman Gaul had been divided into sub-provinces following the conquest by Julius Caesar. Gallia Lugdunensis was the Northern Province, extending from the Alpes Mountains, down to the sea. Its capital of Lugdunum was one of the richest and largest cities in the Western Empire, outside of Rome herself.

"That hardly comes as a surprise," Trajan noted, although all appeared grave. "Surely the senate saw something like this coming."

"Precisely," Vespasian replied. "So who knows? By now, the rebellion could be at an end. Silius was very dismissive of the whole affair, although if it's been ongoing since January, it can hardly be considered a minor uprising. And this letter from my brother tells of a far graver scenario playing out back home."

Titus took the letter from his uncle, Sabinus, while Trajan and Placidus both attempted to read the official message from Silius.

"Uncle Sabinus says that that Governor Galba has been ordered to attack Vindex from Hispania, but that he hasn't moved yet," Titus said, as he read through the letter.

"Servius Galba governs eastern Hispania," Vespasian remarked. "It could be that he's holding in place due to inclement weather. However, he does have two legions at his disposal, so perhaps he is seeing first what Vindex does. He may, in fact, side with the rebellion. Or he could be delaying his advance due to logistical issues. We do not know."

"In other words, we may not even have an emperor by the time we settle matters in Jerusalem," Trajan thought aloud.

"Oh, we'll have one," Vespasian emphasized. "It's just a matter of who. Just remember, our loyalty is to the emperor, regardless of who it may be. Nero may be a tyrannical despot, but it is he who the divine Claudius named as his successor. What we will not tolerate, though, is mutiny or usurpers. Think of the terrible precedence it will set, should the army find itself in a position to name an emperor of its own choosing."

"It would lead to anarchy," Titus said. "If even humble legionaries from

one legion manage to place an emperor on the throne, what's to stop others from attempting to do the same?"

"My point exactly," the commander-in-chief stated. "The emperor must know that he has the loyalty of the eastern legions, so that he may deal appropriately with the threats in the west. And the sooner we corner the seditionists here, the sooner we can be ready to react to whatever the fates have in store for Rome. Only after we know the final disposition of this little crisis, will we decide if we move to take Jerusalem. The last thing I will allow is for our army to become trapped in a two-front war. That is why containing the rebels is of paramount importance."

What none of the men said aloud, although all thought about it, was the enigmatic Jew's prediction regarding their commander-in-chief becoming emperor. Such talk was, of course, traitorous; however, each of the officers secretly wondered if Josephus' bold prediction may come to pass in the fullness of time.

As for the man who Hanan ben Hanan had once appointed as governor-general of Galilee, he quickly made his way to his quarters, with his guards following close behind. He closed the door to his tiny room, then abruptly fell onto his bed, his eyes clouded by tears. He prayed, hoping to hear from The Voice once again, something, anything, some sign of reassurance that God had not abandoned His people. And yet, all was left silent. If the people of Jerusalem had allowed Hanan and the other priests to be so savagely killed, then Josephus feared God would soon punish all of the Jews, using Vespasian and the Romans as the instrument of His divine vengeance. In the dark, with sorrow overcoming him, Josephus prayed once more for his family, that they not be judged along with the guilty.

Chapter XXIX: The Invasion of Perea

Gadara, Perea
March 68 A.D.
***

As Vespasian's army began to tighten the noose around Jerusalem, he sent Placidus into neighboring Perea to pacify the region. Located just east of the Dead Sea and River Jordan, its lands had once been part of the kingdoms of Moab, Israel, and Ammon. But before Placidus could invade the region, he needed infantry. Most of his auxiliaries were scattered throughout the re-conquered territories, leaving him with only his cavalry regiments. As such, Vespasian had sent him north to Scythopolis with supplementary orders for General Trajan's Tenth Legion.

For Nicanor and Gaius, the delay in the campaign season meant a longer stay at Scythopolis. While the climate had been decidedly pleasant during the winter months, the plain on which the city sat was known for its windiness and insufferably hot summers. As spring wore on and the temperatures rose, the two officers hoped orders would come down soon from higher command.

"The lads are anxious," Nicanor observed, as the two friends walked along the edge of the drill field, where decanii drilled their legionaries on the training stakes. "They look to me for answers on when we will leave this place, yet I am as much in the dark as they are."

"Such is one of the many burdens of command," Gaius remarked. "The power and access to information we possess is never even remotely close to what the men in the ranks think it is. At least the last few months have given us time to properly drill and assimilate our newest legionaries."

"That was fortunate," the centurion acknowledged. "A few of the wounded lads coming back into the ranks certainly helped."

"There were some I thought would never walk again, much less be declared fit for duty," his optio remarked. "Between their return, and the handful of volunteers from the Twelfth, we have exactly sixty men, including the officers."

"That still leaves us twenty-four short," Nicanor muttered. "Still, it is far better than where we were a few months ago."

“And while the younger lads hoped to remain with their friends, I’ve dispersed the new men amongst the veterans,” Gaius added.

“Very good,” Nicanor acknowledged. “Let us hope we don’t meet any more unforeseen disasters.”

The optio’s face twitched slightly at the subtle mention of the calamity they had suffered at Gamala. He continued to resolutely perform his duties as second-in-command of the century; however, he never stopped regretting the loss of his friends and former section mates.

“Nicanor!” Both men turned to see their cohort commander, Centurion Galeo.

“Any orders yet?” Nicanor asked.

“We’re moving out tomorrow.”

“Where to?”

“Perea,” the pilus prior replied. “General Placidus is leading an expedition to subdue the regions southeast of Jerusalem, and we’ve been designated to go as his infantry.”

“Excellent!” Gaius said eagerly. “The lads are ready for another brawl against these damned seditionists.”

“Well, they may or may not get it,” Galeo remarked. “The disposition of Perea is completely unknown. They may capitulate, or they may fight to the death, no one really knows for certain. At any rate, have your men start making ready. We march at first light.”

“Yes, sir,” Nicanor acknowledged, as both he and his optio rendered salutes to their cohort commander before Galeo went to inform his remaining centurions.

Despite the farce of Zacharias’ trial and execution, along with the unfortunate loss of their Idumean allies, John still maintained a firm grip on Jerusalem. His fighters now numbered in the tens-of-thousands, and he ordered all blacksmiths to set about making sufficient weapons for his warriors. A shortage of iron would make this difficult, plus the smiths of Jerusalem were more suited for making farm implements, rather than weapons of war. Armor would be even more difficult to come by. All that had been taken from the Herodian armory at Masada, along with that stolen from the slain Roman garrison two years prior and from the enemy dead at

Beth Horon, had been scattered amongst the various factions. Most of John's warriors would have to rely on their quickness and skill, rather than cumbersome armor like the Romans.

A sense of normalcy also slowly returned to the city. John, despite becoming far more autocratic in his authority, made certain the sensibilities of the people were respected. As such, the sacraments went on without interruption, and the new governor showed greater prudence when selecting priests to carry out the more holy traditions. What the new priests were denied, that their predecessors enjoyed, was any sense of political power. They were there to observe the sacraments, and that was all.

Despite the populace growing adapted to being ruled by the zealots, there were still plenty of feelings of resentment. Chief among those with umbrages was the former Judean general, Niger of Perea. Though exiled from Jerusalem by Eleazar after the defeat at Ascalon, Niger now had reason to fear the Roman incursion into his people's lands. As such, he returned to the Jewish capital in order to ask John and his warriors what aid the Pereans could expect.

John sat atop an ornate chair on a raised dais, a new addition to the assembly chambers within the temple. He also dressed in priestly robes lined with gold and purple thread. Eleazar, Levi, and several others sat on either side of him. At Niger's entrance, Eleazar, whose temper was always suspect, flew into a rage.

"You dare show your face here, traitor!" he snapped at the general, who wore the robes of an emissary, rather than the armor of a soldier.

"The Romans advance upon Perea," Niger replied, attempting to maintain his composure.

There was much bad blood still between the two men, and the general wished that Eleazar had perished during the temple siege. That the impudent young governor of the temple had dared to blame him, and subsequently order his exile, over the defeat at Ascalon was as humiliating as it was unjust.

He continued, "If they take our lands, then all trade routes to the east will be lost. Our freedom and survival are directly tied to yours. I suggest we put aside our past differences and unite against the common enemy, who threatens to swallow up all of the ancient kingdoms."

"You speak of putting aside differences," Eleazar sneered. "Yet, it was you who led the Jewish armies to destruction at Ascalon."

"I also led them during the fighting around Jerusalem and through Beth

Horon," Niger quickly interrupted.

"And yet your motives now come into question," John added, speaking more calmly than his colleague, though still with rebuke.

"What motives could I have other than the preservation of my people?" the Perean asked, perplexed at the reception he was given.

"Leading our men into a trap, perhaps," John conjectured, "like you did at Ascalon. After all, how is it that the other generals perished, along with ninety percent of your men, yet you survived? And such wanton destruction was wrought by scarcely a thousand Roman soldiers."

John shook his head. "You were once one of Judea's greatest generals, so I cannot believe such a disaster was brought on by mere incompetence. No, I believe it was treachery, and that you secretly plotted to see Judea handed back to the Romans. And now you shall see how we deal with such turncoats."

He then waved his hand towards Niger and six zealot guards quickly surrounded the indignant general. While they remained within Jerusalem, the Idumeans had managed to keep John and his zealots somewhat under control. Yet with their departure, there was nothing stopping the Judean usurper from unleashing the most terrible of cruelties upon those he viewed as dissenters.

Niger was led away, all the while shouting profane curses towards John and all of this governing council.

"Post a decree," the governor said. "The former general of Judea, Niger of Perea, has been found guilty of high treason and collaboration with the Romans. He will be executed tomorrow at sunrise."

The fact that there would not even be a trial, like there had been for Zacharias, was very telling. That he could order the death of one of Judea's most prominent military leaders made it clear, that according to the new order, John of Giscala was the law.

The following morning, with throngs of people lining the streets, Niger of Perea, the once great general of Judea, was dragged through the streets. His robes were torn, his face swollen and bloody. A bitter irony that he should be sentenced to death by the very people who he had once fought for. His only crime was one of asking for their help in return!

"People of Judea!" Niger shouted, shoving off his handlers as he was led into the execution square. He tore off his tunic, showing a well-muscled body that was marred by numerous scars. "Look upon me! These wounds I

received in my service to you, my brothers! How can you treat with such indignity one who has only fought and served you?"

"And by being one who once led the armies of Judea, that only makes your treachery more despicable!" a zealot retorted, as four men grabbed the general and forced him onto his knees.

A curved dagger, similar to those wielded by the Sicarii, was brandished for the crowd to see.

Niger, in his defiance, cried out, *"A curse upon you, kingdoms of Judah and Israel! May God smite you with the scourge of Roman blades, and may the empire leave this place a desolate kingdom of the damned!"*

Before more could be said, the executioner slashed the blade across Niger's neck. His eyes clouded, mouth drooping, as blood gushed from the severed arteries, red crimson flowing down his chest and saturating the ground. He was unceremoniously dropped to the earth, where his body twitched in the last throes of death. After being left for a day, it was cast out of the city to be left with the other 'traitors', whose corpses now rotted and were feasted on by flies and beasts.

The march south into Perea had proven relatively uneventful for the Tenth Legion and the accompanying auxiliary cavalry regiments. The road led south along the River Jordan, which legionaries used to wash and cool themselves off in during the evenings after each day of marching. At sunset on the third day, they reached a crossroads near a town called Koreai. One path led northwest towards Neapolis. To the southwest was the main road that would take them to Jerusalem, scarcely twenty miles away. However, it was the road east that most of the division would follow, which led into Perea and the old kingdom of Edom, now called Idumea.

"So close to Jerusalem," Gaius observed, as he nodded towards the road leading southwest. The sun glowed red between the mountains that lined either side of the road.

"And yet no sign of the enemy," Tesserarius Julius said, as he joined him. He had just tasked the decanii with the work details for their legionaries, and was now joining his optio for a few moments.

"Given that we've seen absolutely nothing over the past three days, one would scarcely believe there is a war ongoing," Gaius added, shaking his

head.

At the legion's principia tent, which was still being set up by a work detail of legionaries, Trajan met with both Placidus and his senior officers.

"Not everyone is going into Perea," the legate explained. "In addition to pacifying that particular region, General Vespasian wants us to further close the noose around the neck of Jerusalem. Ten miles to the south, the main road leads west into Jerusalem. The road to the southwest from there is the only viable route left for trade. The rest of the terrain is much too steep and rocky. We seal off this road, we close off the entire east of Jerusalem."

"Who do you wish to leave behind?" the master centurion asked. A pragmatic old soldier, his mind was already focused on the tasks ahead.

"We'll detach the Second, Third, Seventh, and Tenth Cohorts," Trajan answered. "We'll leave half the legion's indigenous cavalry, as well. I want two forts established, one on the road and one two miles north, where we can keep an eye on the road leading northwest towards Ephraim."

"Understood," the primus pilus replied.

Trajan then tasked one of his more experienced tribunes with commanding the detachment. "I suspect you will be dealing with a lot of refugees. Enemy fighters will likely avoid your checkpoints, preferring to go around or head south. Disarm any who come through there, and let our legionaries know they can take anything of value that they wish. That will keep them from becoming too disgruntled about missing out on possible plunder opportunities in Perea. They are not, however, to violate any of the Jewish women who are fleeing Jerusalem. Anyone caught raping a refugee will be subjected to thirty lashes."

Normally, Trajan did not care at all if his soldiers unleashed their pent up lust on the locals. However, he wanted the Jews to feel like they could flee from the tyranny of their new masters. If the Romans appeared to be at least somewhat merciful, then the people might be more inclined to capitulate. Most would settle for the loss of some personal property, rather than risk losing their lives by the false accusations of their zealot overlords.

Trajan addressed the assembled officers once more. "Once we settle matters in Perea, we will return, with the entire legion posting itself in this region. We will not, however, be occupying a single camp. Instead, detachments will be posted throughout the area, establishing a strong Roman presence, while denying the enemy access to any of the roads. But for now,

those of us going into Perea must make ready to either welcome new friends, or else unleash that type of hell which our soldiers excel at. Now, our first target will be the city of Gadara."

"Gadara?" his chief tribune asked. "Didn't we already deal with that place? And I thought it was north, near the Sea of Galilee."

"There is more than one city of that name in the region, sir," the primus pilus answered.

"This particular city of Gadara is fairly small," Trajan said. "We've sent scouts out to reconnoiter their defenses. What we do know is that it is situated atop a large hill, so bringing up siege engines may be difficult."

"I'll advance first with my cavalry," Placidus stated. "Let them see we are coming, and if they choose to come to agreeable terms, we can avoid the unpleasant ordeal of a siege."

"Agreed," Trajan nodded. "And if they refuse…well, we all know how to deal with those too blind, or too stupid, to accept the peace of Rome."

The city of Gadara was governed by a moderate named Dolesus. It was he who had beseeched Niger to return to Jerusalem to see what aid the central government of Judea could muster. And while the southern community of Bethennabris was far more seditious and warlike, the people of Gadara were more than prepared to come to terms with the Romans, should they assail their gates.

A few days after sending Niger to Jerusalem, a large force of around four thousand zealots had arrived at Gadara. Unbeknownst to Dolesus, these were not reinforcements sent by John of Giscala, but one of the many large bands of robbers who had taken to plunder, while attempting to establish their own independent fiefdoms. Their relationship with Dolesus and the city elders was strained, at best. While the people were, at first, glad to have some added protection within their walls, they soon learned these men were mere brigands, not warriors loyal to the citizens of the Jewish Free State.

The following day, lookouts spotted the contingent of Roman horsemen led by General Placidus. Dolesus was beside himself, and his people were terrified at the approach of imperial soldiers.

"Your kind are not welcome here amongst our lands!" Dolesus said

defiantly to the zealots. “If you wish to bring death upon your heads, so be it. But you will not sacrifice my people in doing so!”

“So be it,” the zealot leader sneered. He gruffly grabbed the mayor by the hair, his blade up by his throat. “You alone shall be their sacrifice!”

With a quick slash, Dolesus lay thrashing in a growing pool of his own blood, as the four thousand zealots fled out of the southern gate of the city. The northern gate was quickly thrown open, with the people calling to Placidus, begging him to come liberate their city. The Roman general was greeted with cries of sorrow, as the wife of the mayor clutched his still-warm body now covered in blood.

“Where have they gone?” Placidus asked.

“South,” a city elder said, trying to maintain his composure after the barbaric slaying of the mayor. “There is a town called Bethennabris a few miles from here. It is full of seditious fanatics. Please, kill those bastards who did this to us!”

The Roman general said no more, but simply nodded, before returning to his men.

“Send for General Trajan,” he ordered one of his troopers. “We may have some bloodletting to do yet.”

Chapter XXX: Drowning in Fury

Gadara, Perea
5 March 68 A.D.

The River Jordan, near the Dead Sea
During the spring of 68 A.D., the banks would have been completely flooded

The day after Gadara fell, Vespasian arrived with additional reinforcements for Placidus' division. While Trajan would be in overall command of the eastern theater, he would remain near the forts being established by his legionaries, while Placidus finished matters in Perea.

"There is a larger town called Bethennabris about ten miles to the southwest of here," Josephus said, confirming what the people had told Placidus. "It is at the base of the hills, just off a series of long spurs, with a small pond on its northeast side. There are many younger men living there, so I have no doubt that the zealots will attempt to make a stand."

"You don't think they'll simply break and run for it?" Placidus asked incredulously.

The Jewish man shook his head. "There is nowhere else for them to go. The banks of the Jordan are swollen from flooding, and even if they could make it to the bridges, the road way to Jerusalem is now closed."

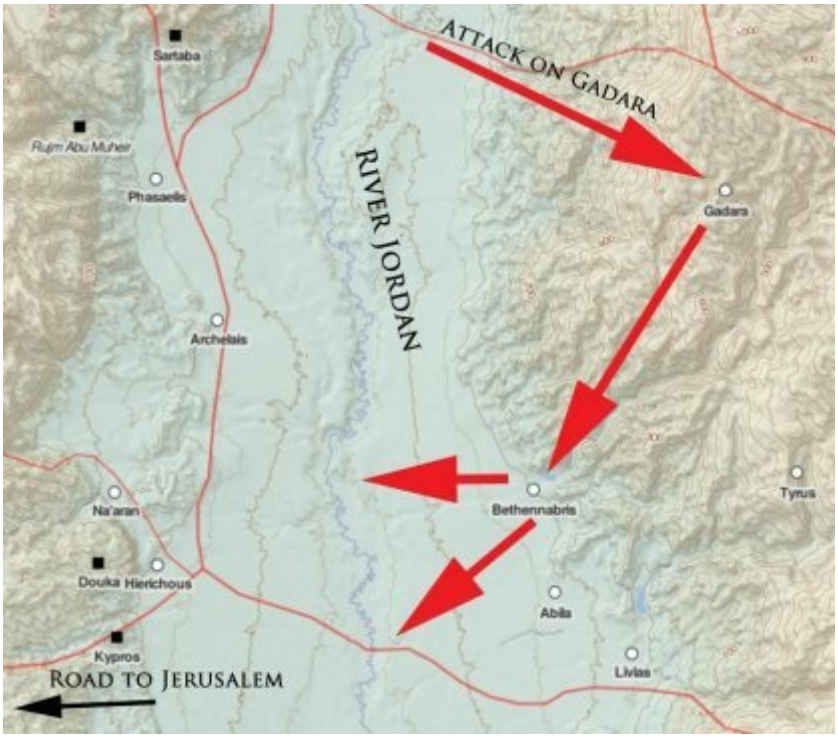
"And the struggles they went through at Gadara means they are not welcome in these lands," Trajan noted. He then asked Josephus, "What do

you know about the defenses of this town?"

"Maybe six foot walls," the former Judean general said. "I doubt they've been reinforced much. My district was Galilee, and little was said about the territory east of the River Jordan. It was assumed that all of the fighting would be done to the north and west. And with the chaos that's befallen the region over the past year, all emphasis has been on Jerusalem."

"We'll march at dawn tomorrow," Placidus said to Vespasian. "I will exterminate whatever remains of the resistance in this region."

"I suggest," Trajan spoke up, "that we utilize the terrain to our advantage."



Placidus' attack on Gadara and Bethennabris

The way from Gadara to Bethennabris had been rough going for the Tenth Legion's cohorts and supporting cavalry regiments. The path was narrow, and the terrain steeply dropped off into a series of ravines and valleys below. By midday, they were marching in a lone file down the long ravine that led directly to the town. Near the lake, the infantry cohorts were ordered to form up into battle formation, but then to lie down behind a long defilade.

It felt strange to Gaius and his legionaries, lying on their stomachs while hiding behind a low ridge. They were used to engaging the enemy out in the open, yet General Placidus had other intentions. His cavalry regiments rode down the nearest saddle between two hills, forming up into battle formation as they skirted the pond nearest the town. He had a single regiment, along with a company of mounted archers, about five hundred men total. That they would so boldly attack the town must have seemed absurd to the zealots defending it.

While his men lay on their shields, javelins beside them, Centurion Nicanor removed his helmet and knelt behind a large stand of sage. He was soon joined by his optio and tesserarius. They had a perfect view of Bethennabris, which lay approximately a mile from where their cohort was hidden.

“That wall doesn’t look too high,” Gaius observed, his vision being much keener than his companions. “I don’t even see any proper ramparts.”

“The defenders are probably just standing on boxes or carts on the other side,” Julius speculated.

The town appeared large enough to house several thousand people. There were also a number of small peasant farms dotting the surrounding area, though these appeared to be deserted. One could only guess what the fleeing zealots had told the populace, and so all were now holed up behind their pitiful walls.

“The bastards probably told the people we’re burning every town and murdering all within,” Gaius conjectured.

“In this case, it may prove true,” Nicanor replied. “If the people of Bethennabris don’t expel the zealots, and if they so much as raise a single weapon against us, Vespasian has ordered they be made an example of.”

At the head of his cavalry contingent, Placidus ordered his men into a large ‘V’ formation with mounted archers on the flanks. It was an unusual formation to use. However, the general had plans other than a simple attack upon the gates.

The zealots were massed behind the wall, deciding if they should defend from the walls or come out and attack the small contingent of imperial horsemen. While there were no bows to be seen, there were many slingers

who were whirling their weapons over their heads, waiting for the Romans to get within range.

"Archers!" Placidus shouted.

The thirty or so Judean mounted archers galloped to just in front of the regiment of lancers, raised their bows, and unleashed a volley towards the wall. Their bows had far greater reach than the zealot slings, and with the rebels so tightly packed, there was little they could do to protect themselves, except duck behind the wall. Men screamed in pain from fearful injuries as arrows imbedded themselves in their exposed flesh.

Another salvo quickly followed, then a third. Rage got the best of the rebels, and the rickety gate to the town was thrown open, with hundreds of fighters spilling out, screaming in fury. The gates on the east and west of the town were also opened with many more zealots joining the fight, anxious to spill Roman blood.

The Judean mounted archers loosed one final volley before withdrawing behind the wall of lancers. Placidus estimated the zealot numbers to be around four thousand, and he knew his lone regiment of cavalry could do little to contain them.

"Fall back!" he shouted over his shoulder, a cornicen echoing the order on his horn.

The 'V' formation allowed his horsemen greater maneuverability as they wheeled their mounts around and rode back towards the saddle near the pond. The terrain there was steep and not suitable for horses, and so the zealots hoped to trap the cavalrymen there. Placidus could not hide his excitement at knowing it was their enemies who were about to be trapped.

"Here they come," Nicanor said. He kept his voice calm, so as not to incite panic amongst his legionaries.

Gaius hunkered down low, quickly donning his helmet as he returned to his place on the left of the formation. The century, along with the rest of the Fifth Cohort, was arrayed in four ranks. While those in front were able to see a little of what was transpiring, their mates behind them were left completely blind. The rising hills on either side of them were swarming with legionaries from the other cohorts, who were using the terrain to mask their presence. While the Fifth Cohort would engage their foes from the front, the rest would

hit them from above and on the flanks. It was a brilliant tactic, although it did leave the men of the Fifth in the most precarious position. The zealots had them outnumbered, and their flanking cohorts would have to break them rather quickly, lest the Fifth be overwhelmed by sheer force of numbers.

"Stand ready!" Nicanor ordered. He remained down on one knee, but had put on his helmet.

His legionaries pulled themselves off the ground, kneeling behind their shields with their javelins resting on their shoulders. Those in front could now clearly see Placidus' cavalry racing towards them, several thousand enemy fighters in pursuit. As the shouting mass of rebels rushed past where the flank cohorts were hidden, the legionaries remained unmoving. They needed to wait just long enough for the Fifth to engage, while allowing the cavalry time to get away.

A series of blasts from the cornicen and the two wings of horsemen split off in each direction. They sprinted their mounts back out of the saddle, trampling zealot stragglers who stood in their way. A few of the mounted troopers were not quick enough, and these unfortunate ones were brought down by slingers and throwing darts.

"Cohort…up!" Centurion Galeo bellowed, just off to Nicanor's right.

The confused mass of zealots was barely thirty feet from them. Gaius and his men could see their looks of horror as they were suddenly confronted by a wall of legionary shields.

"Front rank…throw!"

Storms of javelins flew in a short arc to where the tightly-packed horde of seditionists were unable to protect themselves. Many were impaled or had their limbs ruptured by the heavy pila. Nicanor had drilled his men to unleash 'rolling volleys' of javelins, where after the front rank threw their first salvo, the second line would push through them, unleashing theirs, and so on. It got his men out of the defilade quickly, while suppressing the enemy with volleys of their throwing spears. Scores of zealots now lay dead or dying as they took a fearful punishing from the continuous javelin storm from the Fifth Cohort.

"Gladius…draw!" centurions shouted.

"Rah!"

Gladii flew from their scabbards as legionaries made ready to close with and destroy their hated adversaries. The time from when Centurion Galeo ordered his cohort up to when their blades flashed before their enemies was less than a minute, and already so many zealots lay in bloody heaps. On the

wings of the rebel force, salvoes of an even greater number of heavy javelins rained down upon them. In the distance, Placidus' cavalry had rejoined and was now blockading the way back into the town.

"Charge!" Nicanor snarled, his eyes fixed with rage.

His legionaries gave a unified battle cry, and as a single fearsome machine of death, they broke into a run. Their pace was slowed, however, by the carnage they'd already wrought. Hundreds of javelins littered the ground, many sticking up out of the ground, creating a series of obstacles. The scores of dead and badly maimed enemy fighters created an additional tripping hazard for the advancing legionaries. Swords were plunged into the bodies, finishing off many of the wounded, while ensuring that others stayed dead.

One zealot, whose guts were impaled by a pilum, cried out in agony, grabbing at Gaius' ankle as the optio negotiated his way through the butchery. With a sharp blow, he brought his shield down upon the man's head, smashing his skull around his eye. This brought further shrieks of unimaginable pain from the stricken man.

Once past the ranks of casualties they'd inflicted, the cohort reformed, pressing on towards their foes who were already starting to break and run. Legionaries on the flanks spilled down from the hills, enveloping the zealots on both sides. The Fifth Cohort, meanwhile, rushed the enemy, smashing into them with a wall of shields. Gladii pierced deep into flesh as the panicked zealots staggered backwards, attempting to fight back against the formidable wall of death.

Gaius slammed his shield boss into the stomach of one such adversary, knocking the wind from the enemy fighter. He then quickly thrust his weapon over the top of his shield. The point of the gladius struck the man in the forehead, with a sound like a metallic clink. Blood gushed from the painful wound as bone chips mingled in the bloody gash. The warrior screamed and stumbled backwards, hands over his forehead. He lost his footing as he was pressed on all sides by his fellows, and he fell right into the optio stabbing blade.

The battle quickly became a rout as the surviving zealots fled towards the town. The legionary cohorts quickly, yet methodically, formed into a single battle front on the open plain. Once out of the ravine, they advanced at the quick march, while catching their breath after their exertions. In the distance, a trumpet blast signaled the charge of the cavalry, who with lances leveled, crashed into the broken mob.

There was no attempt by the rebels at reforming and fighting against the tide of Roman horsemen. Instead, the zealots simply ran for their lives. The gate to the town was still opened, with citizens manning the wall. While a large number of zealots were caught out in the open and killed, at least half made it back behind the walls. Hundreds more fled south, towards the settlements between Bethennabris and the River Jordan.

"Those filthy bastards are sheltering the rebels," Placidus said, through gritted teeth. In his rage, he turned and pointed his bloody spatha towards the nearest centurion. *"Burn that fucking place and kill everyone within!"*

"Yes, sir!" the officer acknowledged.

With the enemy so gravely battered already, the Romans did not wish to lose the initiative. One of the flank cohorts broke off to the left, another to the right, with the rest of the task force advancing straight up the center. Placidus dispatched a hundred of his troopers to pursue the fleeing zealots, while leading the rest of his men around to the far side of the city, sealing it off any chance of escape.

"Close ranks!" Nicanor ordered, as they advanced at a slow jog towards the wall.

Soldiers tightened up their intervals until they stood shoulder-to-shoulder. The centurion had spotted the large number of slingers upon the wall and immediately recognized the danger. When they were about a fifty feet from the wall, a barrage of sling bullets was unleashed from the defenses.

"Testudo!" Nicanor shouted, the legionary behind him immediately raising his shield up to provide overhead cover to both himself and the centurion.

The century quickly halted. The legionaries in the front rank brought their shields up and close to their bodies, with the top edge covering the bottom half of their faces. Their companions in the subsequent ranks hefted theirs up and over their heads. A deluge of stones hammered down upon the canopy of shields like the falling of hail or heavy rains.

"Advance!"

Being so tightly compressed together required the soldiers to march in step, and their pace was slowed considerably. From their enemy's perspective, it was still a terrifying spectacle. For though they continued to fling relentless volleys of sling stones upon them, they simply bounced harmlessly off the cocoon of shields. The salvos slowed as the legionaries approached the wall and soon ceased altogether.

“Now!” the centurion bellowed.

Legionaries quickly lowered their shields and sprinted the remaining few feet to the wall. Though only about six feet high, the soldiers’ heavy armor impeded their agility, and so they were hoisted up and over it by their mates. It was a harrowing few seconds as the first men scrambled onto the wall.

Gaius had to duck his head quickly as a farmer’s pitchfork was thrust at his face. The rusty instrument struck his helmet, jarring his neck. As one of his men held his foot and lifted him up, the optio grabbed the pitchfork and punched its owner hard across the face. He landed on his stomach atop the wall. Rolling onto his back, he kicked another defender hard in the face with his hobnailed sandals, sending the man falling backwards off the row of crates they were using as a defensive platform.

Gaius then drew his gladius and saw that the person who had attempted to stab him in the face was actually a young woman. The hood on her cowl had been thrown back by his blow, and she lay on her side in a daze. The optio swung his gladius down in a hard smash, driving the blade deep into the side of her neck, which he then slashed open. Without giving further thought to what he’d done, he reached back over the wall and clasped the hand of one of his legionaries, helping the man over.

As legionaries climbed the wall, their shields were handed up to them, and soon they were able to reform into a viable battle line within the town. The townspeople and their zealot allies had attempted to take advantage of the Romans’ temporarily exposed weakness. The unruly brawl had left a handful of soldiers dead, with a much greater number wounded. Still, the legionaries’ armor gave them much needed protection from the blows of assailants, and soon the ferocity of their assaults proved too much for the defenders.

The fight soon turned into a slaughter as the Romans advanced through the town from three directions. Houses were rapidly looted and then set alight. Every last person inside each home was killed, with no discretion given to gender or age.

Many citizens now attempted to flee the city, only to find themselves forced to run the gauntlet of General Placidus and his cavalry. Mounted archers shot down individuals at random, while lancers rode about, trampling or stabbing at their victims. Several hundred did manage to escape, although the Roman general was unconcerned.

“We’ll finish this lot off in the morning,” he said.

It was late afternoon by the time the legionary cohorts finished setting fire to the town. Screams echoed from within, as many who'd been wounded or otherwise trapped, slowly burned to death. To the Romans, it was a fitting end for those who dared to defy their relentless power.

"People should know when they're conquered," Julius reasoned that night, as he and Gaius watched the glowing embers of the still burning town from their camp.

Legionaries and auxilia cavalrymen had spent the remainder of the afternoon, and well into the evening, building their camp for the night, while retrieving spent javelins and arrows, tending to their wounded, and sorting out the dead. Gaius felt a bit selfish in that he was glad none of the dead had come from his century. There had been a few wounded, though none of these were too serious. One of his men had taken a sling stone to the shin; though while this left a nasty bruise and made walking painful, the bone was not broken.

"Three days' light duty," his decanus had told him. He then said with much macabre humor, "A pity you'll miss out on all the fun tomorrow."

"The commanding general has ordered us to wipe out everything between here and the River Jordan," Nicanor said, as he and Aurelian joined the tesserarius and optio, who were assessing the gradually sloping ground to the southwest.

"This campaign is as much about Vespasian's fury, as it is about subduing the rebellious Jews," the signifier said.

"It is through his fury that we will subjugate this province," Gaius observed. "These stupid twats don't seem capable of understanding anything, except brutal force."

Nicanor took a deep breath but said nothing, as he contemplated his optio's harsh words. Though the centurion had grown up around the Jews, and had many friends amongst them, he knew there was some truth in Gaius' assessment. Of course, there were plenty of loyalists amongst the Jews, many of whom fought for the Romans as allied auxiliaries. And yet, even Josephus was becoming more severe in his speak towards their adversaries.

Though technically still a prisoner of war, the former governor-general of rebellious Galilee had, in all but name, switched sides in the conflict. This was partly personal. The men who now ruled the Jewish state were his hated enemies. They had murdered his close friend and mentor, and now held his

family prisoner. Right or wrong, Josephus had gone from fighting Vespasian's army—almost to the death—to becoming one of their greatest intelligence assets. The only thing he had not done was take up a sword and join the legions on the battle lines.

The following day, Placidus took his division, arrayed them in a wide frontage, and advanced towards the River Jordan, which lay about ten miles to the southwest. He sent wings of his cavalry out in each direction to cover the flanks, while dispatching a dozen riders ahead of the advance. Vespasian was on hand to witness the attack, though out of respect, he left the execution of the mission to Placidus.

The division marched at an easy pace. The ground was mostly farmland and livestock ranges, yet the numerous small settlements that dotted the region were all completely abandoned. The ground sloped gradually downwards, and at about two miles from the river, they caught their first glimpses of their quarry.

"The entire populace has fled this way," one of the scouts reported to Placidus and Vespasian.

The two generals rode just behind the advancing task force, where the high elevation allowed them to see for miles in each direction.

"How many?" Placidus asked.

"Hard to say, sir, but I would guess around twenty thousand," the trooper replied. "As I said, it would seem the entire population from this area is fleeing from our advance."

"They fear that if caught, we will wipe them out," Vespasian said, his expression stone-faced. He then said coldly, "We shall prove their fears to be well-founded."

Another rider soon came up to them, having ridden from the south. "It's as we suspected," he said. "The river is so badly flooded that even the bridge is now under water."

"And even if they could get across, Trajan has four cohorts blocking the road to Jerusalem," Placidus noted.

"There is nowhere for these people to run," Vespasian said to

Placidus. "Destroy them all, and let all who oppose us know that only death awaits them."

“Yes, sir.”

For Optio Gaius Artorius, the sight below was like that of an anthill that had been kicked over. The River Jordan had flooded well beyond its banks and was now impassible to all but the most proficient of swimmers. And with soldiers closing in on them from all sides, the people were in a terrible panic. While there were a few zealots and other fighters amongst them, these people were mostly women with their children, the elderly, and those otherwise unfit for battle. They had taken all of their possessions with them, to include livestock. Gaius noted thousands of sheep, pigs, goats, and even some cattle amongst the disordered mass.

No one said a word, the silence of the advancing legionaries adding a special level of terror to their victims. A single, ominous, blast from a trumpet was the only sound heard. The soldiers broke into a run, enclosing upon the people like the jaws of a lion on a helpless gazelle. Javelins were flung, with screams of anguish and horror echoing across the land, as legionaries drew their blades and unleashed hellish fury upon the people.

This was not a battle, but murder on a grand scale. Legionaries and cavalry troopers killed without mercy, saturating the ground with blood and corpses. When the people, who screamed in terror as their pleas went unheeded, realized there was no quarter to be given, they ran for the river. As they leapt into its swirling depths and deceptively fast currents, they reckoned it was better to take their chances with God, rather than the utterly merciless Romans.

The butchery lasted for the better part of an hour, and when it was over, fifteen thousand bodies lay strewn for several miles in each direction. Thousands more had taken their chances in the river, only to have their bloated bodies wash up on the shores over the coming weeks. Approximately two thousand prisoners, mostly young women and their children, were taken. This was not done out of any sense of mercy, but simply because the soldiers grew tired from the endless slaughter.

A few older men were also taken prisoner, and Vespasian had them taken down to the Dead Sea a few miles south. He had heard rumors about the buoyancy of the waters, and so he decided to test it out for himself. The prisoners’ hands and feet were bound, and they were tossed into the waters.

Much to the commanding general's surprise, the men floated atop the water, "as if the wind had forced them upward". The old men were worthless to him, and so with his curiosity satisfied, Vespasian ordered them slain soon after.

That night, as the division encamped a few miles east along the road leading into Perea, Nicanor was able to meet with his friend, Josephus. A pair of guards stood outside the scholar's tent, and they quickly came to attention as the centurion approached. As he opened the tent flap, Nicanor saw his friend sitting on a stool, his head resting on the small camp table. An oil lamp burned low, and a scroll with some notes scribbled on it lay on the ground.

"You should go to bed, old friend," Nicanor said with a chuckle, causing Josephus to bolt upright.

"Nicanor," he said, wiping the sleep from his eyes. "I must have dozed off." He fumbled around, picking the parchment up and blowing the dust off. "I was just making some notes on what I witnessed today."

"Can't be easy for you," the centurion remarked, taking a seat on the scholar's cot.

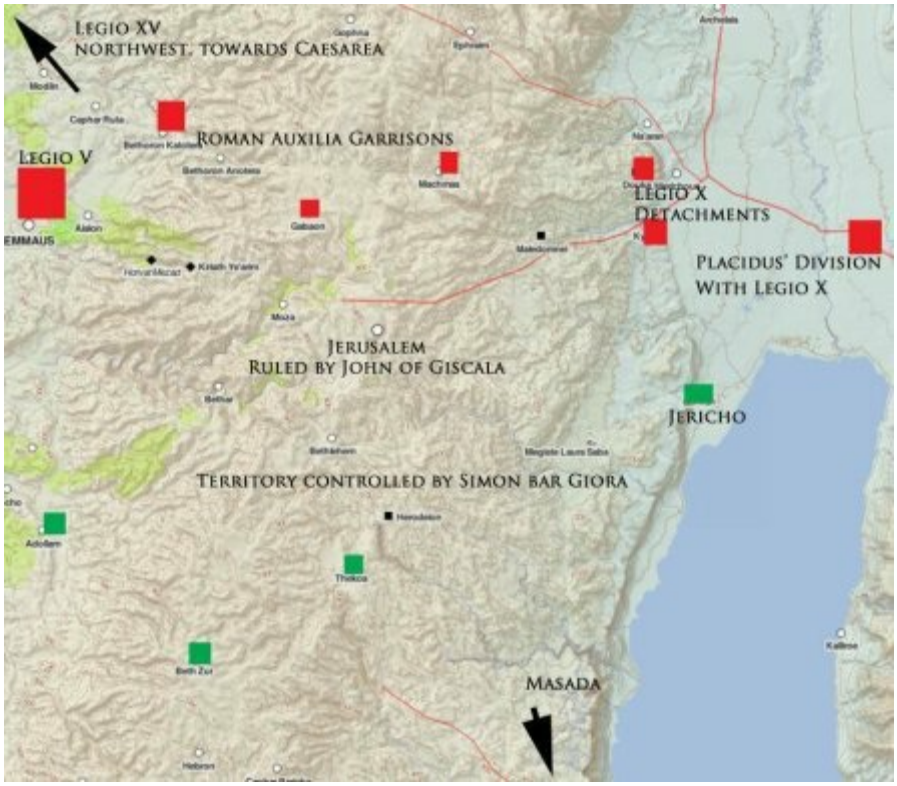
"I think I am becoming a hard bastard, like you," Josephus replied, with a mirthless grin. He shook his head. "I know this is wrong of me, but I no longer care. I knew that once I arrived in Galilee to take command, this war could never be won by the Jews. Even if it had been an organized rebellion, with a strong and united central government, it would have still been nearly impossible to withstand the power of your legions. We are a brave and venerable people, yet you have an entire empire's might behind you. That these fools insist on continuing to fight is nothing short of madness."

"Still, it must have been difficult, watching our legions slaughter all those people today."

Josephus merely shrugged. "Is it tragic? Yes. But is it any worse than all the other horrors I've already witnessed? No. And if I may be honest, it is nothing those bastards in Jerusalem aren't doing to the people on a daily basis. One expects enemy combatants to kill without mercy, but to be subjected to murder and desecration by your own people, that is unforgiveable. I may be a deserter, according to my enemies, but at least I do not kill my brethren while mockingly calling them 'free'."

It was an awkward conversation for Nicanor, though Josephus at least went on to reassure him that he felt enemy resistance in Perea would be minimal. The centurion said goodbye to his friend, whom he would not see again for many months. The task force of legionaries and cavalrymen under Placidus soon headed east into Perea, while Josephus departed with Vespasian the following day. The commander-in-chief had other uses for their Judean charge. In the meantime, he needed to secure the western borders surrounding Jerusalem.

After the destruction of Bethennabris, Vespasian took the Fifteenth Legion and, over the next few weeks, marched boldly across central Judea. He purposely avoided Jerusalem, preferring to allow the rebellious Jews to remain consumed by their own quarrels. The sight of Roman soldiers near their gates too soon might compel them to stand together. Instead, he marched northwest, arriving in two days at the city of Antipatris, also known as Pegai. With the Fifth and Fifteenth Legions, he quickly laid waste to the region between Antipatris and Lydda, the city which Cestius Gallus had taken without so much as a fight two years before. Ten thousand rebellious citizens were put to the sword, with several thousand more taken into slavery. Leaving the Fifteenth Legion temporarily at Antipatris, Vespasian ordered Cerealis and the Fifth Legion to establish a fortress at Emmaus, the largest city that was closest to Jerusalem. By the end of May, only the route to the south, right into the territory held by their rivals, remained open. The holy city was now completely cut off.



Overall strategic situation
June 68 A.D.

Chapter XXXI: End of a Dynasty

Masada
June 68 A.D.
***

Simon was growing tired of the indecisiveness of the Sicarii and their leader, Eleazar ben Yair. Aside from the raid on Engaddai, they had done little except the occasional plundering of the weaker towns within the region.

"I tire of living in this place, like little more than a bandit," Simon finally said to ben Yair. "My men are warriors, not simple thieves. I ask you once more to join us, so we may liberate Jerusalem from the usurpers and make the people ready for the final battle against Rome!"

Like every other time they had debated before, ben Yair was completely unmoved by the zealot's impassioned words.

"I care not who rules in Jerusalem," he said flatly. "My kingdom is here, at the old fortress of the Herodians. I detest the Romans, just as I loathed the old order under Hanan. And, like you, I refuse to recognize the pretender, John of Giscala. At the same time, you wish to assert yourself into his place. While you may have been our guest, I do not recognize your legitimacy to rule our people any more than his."

Simon, whose temper and penchant for cruelty surpassed even the most barbaric of John's zealots, was fuming with rage. He knew his time at Masada was nearing an end, for he could no longer tolerate such apathy and cowardice. Eleazar ben Yair and his 'dagger men' were nothing more than thieves and outlaws. They were not warriors, and their only source of power was that they held the impenetrable fortress of Masada.

"A pity that we could not continue to be stronger allies," Simon said slowly, choosing his words carefully.

"Know this," ben Yair said coldly, "if you leave Masada, you will never be welcomed back. You will be shut out as readily as if you were the armies of Vespasian."

"I understand," Simon said.

"Then God be with you in your quest," ben Yair said, his words surprising Simon.

He cursed himself that his own forces were spread all over the region.

The Sicarii numbered perhaps three thousand warriors at most, whereas Simon had nearly four times that number who were loyal to him. However, he had but a couple hundred fighters with him at the Herodian fortress, and so he elected to leave Masada to the ‘dagger men’. They were cowards, every last one of them, and he did not view them as any sort of viable threat to his control over the region south of Jerusalem.

His wife sat atop a donkey as he walked beside her, for the Sicarii had confiscated his horse as an added insult. He and his warriors made their way down the serpentine path and soon found themselves on the main road that led north, towards Engaddai and Jerusalem. There was also a narrow isthmus that led across the Dead Sea, and it was that path which Simon told his followers to take. His eyes were filled with rage, which filled his companions with a sense of foreboding.

“We will build an army,” he said, keeping his voice calm, albeit tense. “Ours will not be some ragtag band of robbers, but a well-drilled and professional fighting force. We will be as harsh in our discipline as we are to our adversaries. And when we unleash upon the kingdoms of Edom, Judah, and Israel, they will know that the maw of hell hath been opened upon this land!”

Even John of Giscala had exercised some temperance when dealing with his enemies, using his charm and charisma, along with savage force. For Simon bar Giora, violent power was his means of subjugating his rivals. There would be no mercy shown to any who stood in his way. And while he quietly condemned the Sicarii for their faintheartedness, the heart of his rage was directed towards John of Giscala.

It was now June, and Lydda was in Roman hands, with the Fifth Legion encamped at Emmaus, just a few miles from Jerusalem. Trajan and the Tenth Legion had cordoned off the east, just north of the Dead Sea. Vespasian had the Jewish holy city completely encircled, and Judea was now as much pacified as one could reasonably expect. Only the monstrous fortress that was Jerusalem still defied him. A new threat was also rising in the south, as the renegade general, Simon bar Giora was forming what refugees had told the commander-in-chief was a huge army. Despite this, Vespasian was now able to pause and catch his breath, while focusing his attention on matters outside

of Judea.

At Emmaus, Vespasian had assembled his legates and senior regimental commanders. Trajan and Titus had arrived, and as it was the camp of Cerealis' legion, he was of course present. Placidus was expected within a couple of days, as were the commanders from the various garrisons Vespasian had established throughout Judea.

Deserters had begun to flock towards Emmaus, fleeing what they called 'tyranny unleashed within the holy city'. According to almost every deserter they met, John of Giscala had declared martial law, confining most of the populace to the city. Any who attempted to leave, whom his warriors found suspicious, was immediately put to death, with their bodies tossed out onto the street outside the gates. The roads coming in and out of Jerusalem were now lined with rotting corpses. These were further desecrated by the governor's refusal to allow them a proper burial, in accordance to Jewish law.

Rumor also had it that only the wealthy were able to leave the city, as they had the means to bribe the guards. There appeared to be some truth to this, for a large number of evacuees were well-dressed and clearly people of means. What surprised Vespasian and the Romans the most was that the majority of the people stayed in Jerusalem willingly, accepting the rule of the Giscalan and his zealots.

"Blind sheep willingly led to the slaughter," Vespasian later said.

As June passed into early July, and the heat of summer bore down upon the province, a rather unusual deserter arrived at the Roman camp. He was a very old man, dressed in the robes of a Jewish rabbi. Vespasian, accompanied by Titus and Josephus, was walking towards the gate just as the old man entered, along with about twenty disciples.

"I know this man!" Josephus said excitedly.

"Who is he?" Titus asked.

"His name is Yohanan ben Zakki," the Jewish scholar answered. "He is the most dedicated scholar known to Judaism. Honestly, I did not know he was still alive."

"He looks to be a hundred!" Titus observed in disbelief.

"Ninety-eight to be exact," Yohanan called back to them.

It surprised the legate that the rabbi heard him, though it gave Josephus a chuckle. The old man's next words surprised them all, for he was not even looking at Titus or Josephus, but rather his gaze was fixed on Vespasian.

"Vive Dominus Imperator!" he shouted, raising his hands and his walking staff high. He then bowed low. "Lord Emperor, live forever!"

"Hold, friend!" Vespasian responded quickly, holding up his hand in protest. "It is Nero who is Emperor of Rome, not Vespasian. Do not refer to me as such again."

That there was such a large crowd gathered, who had all heard the rabbi's shouted words, unnerved the general a bit. He knew his reputation with the emperor hung by a thread, even on the best of days, and the last thing he wanted was to have rumors give Nero a reason to view him as disloyal. That most of Judea was now pacified, with Vespasian in command of a huge army, could easily lead the emperor to view him as a rival. In light of the uprising in Gaul, Nero was likely more paranoid than ever!

"Forgive me, if I seem impudent," the old man said, with another bow of respect. "But you must know, your coming was foretold by the ancient prophets who said the temple will only fall to a king. The book of Isaiah states, *'He shall cut down the thickets of the forest with iron, and Lebanon shall fall to the mighty one'*."

"Jewish folklore is not exactly my forte," Vespasian said, quickly escorting the rabbi away from the crowd. In truth, he was fascinated by this man's talk, yet he rightly feared what could happen if the wrong ears heard such treasonous speak. Once he, Titus, and Josephus had the man alone, they allowed him to continue.

"You must believe me, sire," Yohanan continued. "You *will* be a king… imperator, emperor…whatever you Romans choose to call he who lords over all. The Emperor Nero is not long for this world, and his immediate successors will not wear the crown for long."

"Your rabbi is full of bold predictions," Titus said quietly to Josephus.

"As God has spoken to you, my son," Yohanan said, with a nod towards the young Jewish scholar, "so too has The Voice addressed me regarding the ruler of the world."

"You heard about that?" Josephus asked, clearly amazed. Granted, his own prediction that Vespasian would become emperor had quickly spread, and it was indeed possible that even in Jerusalem it was known.

Yohanan nodded and addressed Vespasian once more. "Today is the First

of July by your calendar. I predict that, by the grace of God, one year from today you will be proclaimed Emperor." He paused for a moment, allowing his words to set in. He then bowed once more. "So forgive me if I was premature in my saluting you as imperator, but please allow me, in this private conversation, to say to you in your native tongue, *'Ave Caesar'*."

Vespasian thanked the man for his kind words before dismissing him, ordering his staff to make the rabbi comfortable, and that he be given food and shelter for the night. The commanding general ordered him to say no more about his predictions.

"He could be useful," Titus said, as he and his father supped that evening. In an unusual breach of protocol, they had invited Josephus to dine with them. Vespasian had left their Jewish charge to spend the day with the old rabbi, whom he respected immensely.

"He is the most scholarly astute man in all of Judaism," Josephus asserted. "Even John of Giscala would not dare harm him. It does not surprise me, then, that Yohanan was allowed to freely leave Jerusalem without having to pay a bribe."

"Such a well-respected member of your religion could indeed prove useful to us," Vespasian noted. "What does he want in return for his loyalty?"

"Nothing," Josephus replied. "He is a man of peace, who believes the zealots are responsible for all of the calamities suffered by our people. He is loyal to Rome, and to you especially, because he believes God has granted Rome the authority to rule over our people. Though he makes no demands, he respectfully asked that he be allowed to establish a rabbinical school near Jamnia."

"It is a coastal town where many refugees have been allowed to settle," Titus added. "They may be Roman loyalists, but they are still Jews. It might be wise to show a degree of tolerance towards their beliefs."

"Agreed," Vespasian replied. He then chuckled. "What is it with you Jews and your God, who seem to take such an interest in the affairs of Imperial Rome?"

"The affairs of Rome are the affairs of us all," Josephus observed. "All empires rise and fall by the will of God."

Three days after the rather intriguing events involving the old rabbi, Yohanan ben Zakki, Titus and Josephus strolled through the camp, which was being built up into an actual fort. Walls, complete with guard towers, were being constructed, and as they walked towards the western gate, they noted the scaffolds were already erected. A crude guardhouse would soon be added, as well as platforms above the gate, where a pair of scorpions would be mounted. Cerealis was inspecting and overseeing the construction of the eastern gate and was thus indisposed for the time being.

Scouts had reported the rather grim situation in Jerusalem, though none of them dared to enter the city itself anymore. The Judean loyalist spy, Emmanuel, had also recently returned with news about Simon and his growing army.

"Simon bar Giora is one of the men who led the attack upon the Twelfth Legion," Josephus explained, as he and Titus walked through the camp. "It was he who also captured most of their siege trains. He petitioned the council for a district governorship, or high-level army command, but was rebuffed. Hanan felt he was too volatile to be trusted with such responsibilities. He then fell into robbing and was pursued by our forces; that is, before the Battle of Ascalon. He has been in hiding at Masada over the last two years."

"And now he is forming his own army," Titus noted.

"The Sicarii hold Masada," Josephus explained. "Yet, they have taken almost no active role in the war. Honestly, I doubt they have any intention of doing so. Simon is ambitious, and was likely not content being the guest of the robber king, Eleazar ben Yair."

"Well, he appears not to be a threat to us at the moment," the legate reasoned.

"I don't think he intends to fight us at all," Josephus speculated. "His eye is fixed on Jerusalem. John of Giscala is his most hated enemy, and I think that with Hanan and the old governing council completely wiped out, John will become the sole focus of Simon's rage."

The two men stopped as they approached the north gate of the fort. A rider had just come through. As he dismounted, he reached into his satchel and pulled out a bundle of scrolls. Titus walked over to the man, who at first did not see him. He jumped, briefly startled, when the legate cleared his throat.

"Beg your pardon, sir," the messenger said, rendering a quick salute. His face was pale. He appeared to be more than a little nervous. "I have an urgent

dispatch from Rome for the noble General Titus Flavius Vespasian."

"You can give it to me," Titus said, extending his hand.

Though his message was meant for the commander-in-chief, the rider knew better than to argue with a legate, and so he handed the scroll to Titus, who noted the seal of the consul, Silius Italicus. He broke the wax and unrolled the scroll, his face turning ashen as he read. Josephus did not recognize the seal, but knew it had to be a grave message, given Titus' expression.

The legate raised his eyes from the scroll and looked at the messenger. "You are aware of the contents of this dispatch?"

"I am, sir," the man said nervously. "The consul himself placed the message in my hand. I sailed immediately from Ostia, arriving at Caesarea two weeks later. I've ridden two days to get here as quickly as possible."

"Did the consul give you any directives from the senate, regarding a reply from the commanding general?" Titus asked.

"He did, sir," the messenger confirmed. "He said the e…emperor awaits word of Vespasian's assured loyalty. All legionaries and auxiliaries are to reaffirm their oaths of allegiance at once."

"I see," Titus said. He shouted over his shoulder to a decanus who was marching his squad to relieve the guards on the gate. *"Sergeant!"*

The decanus halted his squad and quickly ran over to the legate, rendering a salute. "Sir?" he asked.

Titus nodded towards the imperial messenger. "Have quarters arranged for this man and have his horse taken to the stables. They will be staying with us for a while."

"Yes, sir." The decanus saluted and said a few words to his legionaries, who set about conducting their own relief of the sentries. He alerted the messenger to follow him.

The man who'd ridden all the way from Rome was clearly befuddled, for he had expected to wait perhaps a day for Vespasian's reply, before beginning his journey back to the Eternal City. Josephus, meanwhile, was completely perplexed by what he had just witnessed.

"What is going on?" he asked, catching up to Titus, who was walking very briskly towards Vespasian's principia tent.

"Return to your quarters," Titus directed, his gaze fixed straight ahead. "I'll come see you later and explain then."

“No rest for us, old friend,” Vespasian said, as he and Trajan each took a wine cup from a servant’s platter. “The problem is, being on the far end of the empire, we are essentially left blind as to what is going on in Rome. For all we know, the whole of the west could be embroiled in civil war, or the whole rebellion could have been crushed with hardly a blow struck. I’ll tell you, not knowing is the worst thing.”

“Well, at least we have mostly secured the eastern empire,” Trajan observed. “Most of the rebel factions have consolidated in Jerusalem where they continue to slaughter each other, essentially doing our dirty work for us.”

This brought a dark chuckle from the commander-in-chief. “As much as I am pleased to let our enemies murder each other, we are still in a state of war until this last stronghold falls,” Vespasian noted. “Still, we have the enemy contained and can react with a sizeable force should the empire have need of us.”

Trajan took a sip off his wine, noting that his commander emphasized the need to protect the empire, while never once mentioning Emperor Nero by name.

“Your term as commanding legate of the Tenth Legion will be over soon,” Vespasian noted.

Trajan shrugged dismissively. “If the unrest turns into an all-out crisis, it would be unwise for me to return home. The senate, most likely, has far more pressing matters to attend to than replacing a single legate in the east. No, I will extend for at least another year, until matters in Rome sort themselves out. That is, if you will have me.”

Vespasian smiled and gave an affirmative nod. As he had been appointed commander-in-chief of all forces in the east, for the duration of the Judean war he had final authority over who commanded his legions and auxiliary forces. It was a rare situation, where he did not need approval from the senate to appoint his senior officers. And between Trajan, Cerealis, Placidus, and now Antonius Primus with Legio VI, Vespasian had some of the most experienced generals within the whole of the empire. His son, Titus, had performed exceptionally well as legate of Legio XV, his experience far surpassing his age. Vespasian knew that nowhere else within the Roman world was there a stronger coalition, and he was determined to keep his best

commanders with him for as long as possible.

"Your service throughout this campaign has been invaluable," he emphasized. "If you could extend for a year, and thereby help us maintain a sense of stability and order in this end of the empire, I would be personally grateful."

Titus soon entered, carrying a handful of sealed scrolls.

"News from Rome?" Vespasian asked.

Titus said nothing. He simply handed the opened scroll to his father. He then sat next to Trajan, pouring himself a full chalice of wine, which he finished in a single gulp. He then refilled his cup, but remained silent.

The commanding general read the length of the dispatch while the two legates sat and waited to hear the news from Rome. Trajan knew it had to be serious, given Titus' demeanor. At last, Vespasian rolled the scroll up and leaned forward, resting his chin on his hand in deep contemplation.

"Ill news from Rome?" Trajan asked at last.

"I suppose…whether this news bodes for good or ill depends on one's point of view," Vespasian said, after an uncomfortable pause. His next words would change all three men forever.

"Nero is dead."

Appendix A: Full Text of Hanan's Speech

(The following text is taken directly from *The War of the Jews – Book Three*, by Flavius Josephus. It is his account of the speech Hanan ben Hanan gave, just prior to the Temple Siege.)

Certainly it had been good for me to die before I had seen the house of God full of so many abominations, or these sacred places, that ought not to be trodden upon at random, filled with the feet of these blood-shedding villains; yet do I, who am clothed with the vestments of the high priesthood, and am called by that most venerable name [of high priest], still live, and am but too fond of living, and cannot endure to undergo a death which would be the glory of my old age; and if I were the only person concerned, and as it were in a desert, I would give up my life, and that alone for God's sake; for to what purpose is it to live among a people insensible of their calamities, and where there is no notion remaining of any remedy for the miseries that are upon them? For when you are seized upon, you bear it! And when you are beaten, you are silent! And when the people are murdered, nobody dare so much as send out a groan openly! O bitter tyranny that we are under! But why do I complain of the tyrants? Was it not you, and your sufferance of them, that have nourished them? Was it not you that overlooked those that first of all got together, for they were then but a few, and by your silence made them grow to be many; and by conniving at them when they took arms, in effect armed them against yourselves? You ought to have then prevented their first attempts, when they fell a reproaching your relations; but by neglecting that care in time, you have encouraged these wretches to plunder men. When houses were pillaged, nobody said a word, which was the occasion why they carried off the owners of those houses; and when they were drawn through the midst of the city, nobody came to their assistance. They then proceeded to put those whom you have betrayed into their hands into bonds. I do not say how many and of what characters those men were whom they thus served; but certainly they were such as were accused by none, and condemned by none; and since nobody succored them when they were put into bonds, the consequence was, that you saw the same persons slain. We have seen this also; so that still the best of the herd of brute animals, as it were, have been

still led to be sacrificed, when yet nobody said one word, or moved his right hand for their preservation. Will you bear, therefore, will you bear to see your sanctuary trampled on? And will you lay steps for these profane wretches, upon which they may mount to higher degrees of insolence? Will not you pluck them down from their exaltation? For even by this time they had proceeded to higher enormities, if they had been able to overthrow anything greater than the sanctuary. They have seized upon the strongest place of the whole city; you may call it the temple, if you please, though it be like a citadel or fortress. Now, while you have tyranny in so great a degree walled in, and see your enemies over your heads, to what purpose is it to take counsel? And what have you to support your minds withal? Perhaps you wait for the Romans, that they may protect our holy places: are our matters then brought to that pass? And are we come to that degree of misery, that our enemies themselves are expected to pity us? O wretched creatures! Will not you rise up and turn upon those that strike you? Which you may observe in wild beasts themselves, that they will avenge themselves on those that strike them. Will you not call to mind, every one of you, the calamities you yourselves have suffered? Nor lay before your eyes what afflictions you yourselves have undergone? And will not such things sharpen your souls to revenge? Is therefore that most honorable and most natural of our passions utterly lost, I mean the desire of liberty? Truly we are in love with slavery, and in love with those that lord it over us, as if we had received that principle of subjection from our ancestors; yet did they undergo many and great wars for the sake of liberty, nor were they so far overcome by the power of the Egyptians, or the Medes, but that still they did what they thought fit, notwithstanding their commands to the contrary. And what occasion is there now for a war with the Romans? (I meddle not with determining whether it be an advantageous and profitable war or not.) What pretense is there for it? Is it not that we may enjoy our liberty? Besides, shall we not bear the lords of the habitable earth to be lords over us, and yet bear tyrants of our own country? Although I must say that submission to foreigners may be borne, because fortune hath already doomed us to it, while submission to wicked people of our own nation is too unmanly, and brought upon us by our own consent. However, since I have had occasion to mention the Romans, I will not conceal a thing that, as I am speaking, comes into my mind, and affects me considerably; it is this, that though we should be taken by them, (God forbid the event should be so!) yet can we undergo nothing that will be harder

to be borne than what these men have already brought upon us. How then can we avoid shedding of tears, when we see the Roman donations in our temple, while we withal see those of our own nation taking our spoils, and plundering our glorious metropolis, and slaughtering our men, from which enormities those Romans themselves would have abstained? to see those Romans never going beyond the bounds allotted to profane persons, nor venturing to break in upon any of our sacred customs; nay, having a horror on their minds when they view at a distance those sacred walls; while some that have been born in this very country, and brought up in our customs, and called Jews, do walk about in the midst of the holy places, at the very time when their hands are still warm with the slaughter of their own countrymen. Besides, can anyone be afraid of a war abroad, and that with such as will have comparatively much greater moderation than our own people have? For truly, if we may suit our words to the things they represent, it is probable one may hereafter find the Romans to be the supporters of our laws, and those within ourselves the subverts of them. And now I am persuaded that every one of you here comes satisfied before I speak that these over-throwers of our liberties deserve to be destroyed, and that nobody can so much as devise a punishment that they have not deserved by what they have done, and that you are all provoked against them by those their wicked actions, whence you have suffered so greatly. But perhaps many of you are affrighted at the multitude of those zealots, and at their audaciousness, as well as at the advantage they have over us in their being higher in place than we are; for these circumstances, as they have been occasioned by your negligence, so will they become still greater by being still longer neglected; for their multitude is every day augmented, by every ill man's running away to those that are like to themselves, and their audaciousness is therefore inflamed, because they meet with no obstruction to their designs. And for their higher place, they will make use of it for engines also, if we give them time to do so; but be assured of this, that if we go up to fight them, they will be made tamer by their own consciences, and what advantages they have in the height of their situation they will lose by the opposition of their reason; perhaps also God himself, who hath been affronted by them, will make what they throw at us return against themselves, and these impious wretches will be killed by their own darts: let us but make our appearance before them, and they will come to nothing. However, it is a right thing, if there should be any danger in the attempt, to die before these holy gates, and to spend our very lives, if not for the sake of our children and

wives, yet for God's sake, and for the sake of his sanctuary. I will assist you both with my counsel and with my hand; nor shall any sagacity of ours be wanting for your support; nor shall you see that I will be sparing of my body neither."

Josephus, Flavius (2011-03-17). Complete Works of Josephus, Flavius: Wars of the Jews, Antiquities of the Jews, Against Apion, Autobiography. Interlinked edition. Incl: maps, timelines, family trees, coinage (Mobi Classics) (Kindle Locations 4979-4991). MobileReference. Kindle Edition.

Appendix B: Full Text of Yeshua's Speech

(The following text is taken directly from *The War of the Jews – Book Three*, by Flavius Josephus. It is his account of the speech given by Yeshua to the Idumean army.)

"Many troubles indeed, and those of various kinds, have fallen upon this city, yet in none of them have I so much wondered at her fortune as now, when you are come to assist wicked men, and this after a manner very extraordinary; for I see that you are come to support the vilest of men against us, and this with so great alacrity, as you could hardly put on the like, in case our metropolis had called you to her assistance against barbarians. And if I had perceived that your army was composed of men like unto those who invited them, I had not deemed your attempt so absurd; for nothing does so much cement the minds of men together as the alliance there is between their manners. But now for these men who have invited you, if you were to examine them one by one, every one of them would be found to have deserved ten thousand deaths; for the very rascality and off-scouring of the whole country, who have spent in debauchery their own substance, and, by way of trial beforehand, have madly plundered the neighboring villages and cities, in the upshot of all, have privately run together into this holy city. They are robbers, who by their prodigious wickedness have profaned this most sacred floor, and who are to be now seen drinking themselves drunk in the sanctuary, and expending the spoils of those whom they have slaughtered upon their insatiable bellies. As for the multitude that is with you, one may see them so decently adorned in their armor, as it would become them to be had their metropolis called them to her assistance against foreigners. What can a man call this procedure of yours but the sport of fortune, when he sees a whole nation coming to protect a sink of wicked wretches? I have for a good while been in doubt what it could possibly be that should move you to do this so suddenly; because certainly you would not take on your armor on the behalf of robbers, and against a people of kin to you, without some very great cause for your so doing. But we have an item that the Romans are pretended, and that we are supposed to be going to betray this city to them; for some of your men have lately made a clamor about those matters, and have said they are come to set their metropolis free. Now we cannot but admire at these wretches in their devising such a lie as this against us; for they knew there

was no other way to irritate against us men that were naturally desirous of liberty, and on that account the best disposed to fight against foreign enemies, but by framing a tale as if we were going to betray that most desirable thing, liberty. But you ought to consider what sort of people they are that raise this calumny, and against what sort of people that calumny is raised, and to gather the truth of things, not by fictitious speeches, but out of the actions of both parties; for what occasion is there for us to sell ourselves to the Romans, while it was in our power not to have revolted from them at the first, or when we had once revolted, to have returned under their dominion again, and this while the neighboring countries were not yet laid waste? whereas it is not an easy thing to be reconciled to the Romans, if we were desirous of it, now they have subdued Galilee, and are thereby become proud and insolent; and to endeavor to please them at the time when they are so near us, would bring such a reproach upon us as were worse than death. As for myself, indeed, I should have preferred peace with them before death; but now we have once made war upon them, and fought with them, I prefer death, with reputation, before living in captivity under them. But further, whether do they pretend that we, who are the rulers of the people, have sent thus privately to the Romans, or hath it been done by the common suffrages of the people? If it be ourselves only that have done it, let them name those friends of ours that have been sent, as our servants, to manage this treachery. Hath anyone been caught as he went out on this errand, or seized upon as he came back? Are they in possession of our letters? How could we be concealed from such a vast number of our fellow citizens, among whom we are conversant every hour, while what is done privately in the country is, it seems, known by the zealots, who are but few in number, and under confinement also, and are not able to come out of the temple into the city. Is this the first time that they are become sensible how they ought to be punished for their insolent actions? For while these men were free from the fear they are now under, there was no suspicion raised that any of us were traitors. But if they lay this charge against the people, this must have been done at a public consultation, and not one of the people must have dissented from the rest of the assembly; in which case the public fame of this matter would have come to you sooner than any particular indication. But how could that be? Must there not then have been ambassadors sent to confirm the agreements? And let them tell us who this ambassador was that was ordained for that purpose. But this is no other than a pretense of such men as are loath to die, and are laboring to escape those

punishments that hang over them; for if fate had determined that this city was to be betrayed into its enemies' hands, no other than these men that accuse us falsely could have the impudence to do it, there being no wickedness wanting to complete their impudent practices but this only, that they become traitors. And now you Idumeans are come hither already with your arms, it is your duty, in the first place, to be assisting to your metropolis, and to join with us in cutting off those tyrants that have infringed the rules of our regular tribunals, that have trampled upon our laws, and made their swords the arbitrators of right and wrong; for they have seized upon men of great eminence, and under no accusation, as they stood in the midst of the market-place, and tortured them with putting them into bonds, and, without bearing to hear what they had to say, or what supplications they made, they destroyed them. You may, if you please, come into the city, though not in the way of war, and take a view of the marks still remaining of what I now say, and may see the houses that have been depopulated by their rapacious hands, with those wives and families that are in black, mourning for their slaughtered relations; as also you may hear their groans and lamentations all the city over; for there is nobody but hath tasted of the incursions of these profane wretches, who have proceeded to that degree of madness, as not only to have transferred their impudent robberies out of the country, and the remote cities, into this city, the very face and head of the whole nation, but out of the city into the temple also; for that is now made their receptacle and refuge, and the fountain-head whence their preparations are made against us. And this place, which is adored by the habitable world, and honored by such as only know it by report, as far as the ends of the earth, is trampled upon by these wild beasts born among ourselves. They now triumph in the desperate condition they are already in, when they hear that one people is going to fight against another people, and one city against another city, and that your nation hath gotten an army together against its own bowels. Instead of which procedure, it were highly fit and reasonable, as I said before, for you to join with us in cutting off these wretches, and in particular to be revenged on them for putting this very cheat upon you; I mean, for having the impudence to invite you to assist them, of whom they ought to have stood in fear, as ready to punish them. But if you have some regard to these men's invitation of you, yet may you lay aside your arms, and come into the city under the notion of our kindred, and take upon you a middle name between that of auxiliaries and of enemies, and so become judges in this case. However, consider what these

men will gain by being called into judgment before you, for such undeniable and such flagrant crimes, who would not vouchsafe to hear such as had no accusations laid against them to speak a word for themselves. However, let them gain this advantage by your coming. But still, if you will neither take our part in that indignation we have at these men, nor judge between us, the third thing I have to propose is this, that you let us both alone, and neither insult upon our calamities, nor abide with these plotters against their metropolis; for though you should have ever so great a suspicion that some of us have discoursed with the Romans, it is in your power to watch the passages into the city; and in case any thing that we have been accused of is brought to light, then to come and defend your metropolis, and to inflict punishment on those that are found guilty; for the enemy cannot prevent you who are so near to the city. But if, after all, none of these proposals seem acceptable and moderate, do not you wonder that the gates are shut against you, while you bear your arms about you."

Josephus, Flavius (2011-03-17). Complete Works of Josephus, Flavius: Wars of the Jews, Antiquities of the Jews, Against Apion, Autobiography. Interlinked edition. Incl: maps, timelines, family trees, coinage (Mobi Classics) (Kindle Locations 5124-5136). MobileReference. Kindle Edition.

Appendix C: Roman Military Ranks

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Centurion Primus Pilus – Also referred to as the *chief* or *master* centurion, this is the pinnacle of the career of a Roman soldier. Though socially subordinate to the tribunes, the centurion primus pilus possessed more power and influence than any and was, in fact, third-in-command of the entire legion. He was also the commander of the elite First Cohort in battle. Upon retirement, a centurion primus pilus (and possibly centurions of lesser ranks as well) was elevated into the patrician class of society. He could then stand for public office, and his sons would be eligible for appointments as tribunes. Even while still serving in the ranks, a centurion primus pilus was allowed to

wear the narrow purple stripe of a patrician on his toga; such was the respect Roman society held for them.

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

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

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

Legion Infantry Strength (estimated)

Legionaries – 3,780
First Cohort Legionaries – 700
Decanii – 610
Tesserarii – 59
Signifiers – 59
Options – 59
Aquilifer - 1
Centurions – 45 (approximately 80 men to a century)
Centurions Pilus Prior – 9
Centurions Primus Ordo – 4

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

A Note of Thanks from the Author

Thank you for taking the time to read ***Soldier of Rome: Vespasian's Fury***. We hear often about the Fall of Jerusalem, when the Temple of Solomon was destroyed, yet so often the events leading up to the brutal siege are overlooked. It was important that I be able to share these with you, and I am grateful for the time you allowed me to spend telling this story.

For up-to-date information about upcoming books, as well as important people and dates in history, please subscribe to my monthly Mailing List.

I enjoy hearing from fans and readers, and can be found on the following social media sites:
Facebook: www.facebook.com/legionarybooks
Twitter: https://twitter.com/LegionaryBooks
Official website: Legionary Books

If you enjoyed ***Vespasian's Fury***, I would be most grateful if you could post reviews on either Amazon or Goodreads. Reviews are crucial for independent authors. The more substantive and candid, the better, for it helps us improve our ability to write and tell stories.

To find more of my books, please visit my author's pages:
James Mace on Amazon.com
James Mace on Amazon U.K.

Thank you again for taking the time to read ***Vespasian's Fury***, and for allowing me to share stories from history with you.

In gratitude,

James

Before this story can be brought to a proper conclusion, the end of the Julio-Claudian Dynasty and the Roman Civil War that followed, must first be told:

Soldier of Rome: Reign of the Tyrants

Further Reading / Bibliography

Josephus, Flavius (author); Whiston, William (translator); Maier, Paul L. (commentary). *The New Complete Works of Josephus.* Grand Rapids: Kregel Publication, 1999.

Seward, Desmond. *Jerusalem's Traitor: Josephus, Masada, and the Fall of Judea*. Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2009.

Tacitus, Gaius Cornelius. *The Histories.* London: Penguin Books, 1995.

Find all of James Mace's books on his author's page on Amazon and Amazon U.K.

Official Website: www.legionarybooks.net
Facebook: http://www.facebook.com/legionarybooks
Blog: http://legionarybooks.blogspot.com/
Twitter: https://twitter.com/LegionaryBooks