Soldier of Rome

Rise of the Flavians

The Year of the Four Emperors

Part II



James Mace

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Dedicated in Memory of

Michael Craig Lower, Jr.
1976 – 2015

Reliqua in Pacem, Frater Meus
Donec nos surgere iterum

Rest in Peace, My brother
Until we rise again

After the darkest treason, rise again

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Chapter I: The Third Emperor

Rome
20 April 69 A.D.



Emperor Aulus Vitellius

“The emperor is dead,” Sabinus said, reading the dispatch. He looked up as he threw the scroll onto the table. “One grievous error, and now all is lost.”

“That’s putting it politely,” Nerva replied with a scowl. “He had two of Rome’s greatest generals leading his forces, yet instead he appears to have listened to his idiot brother. A lot of good that did him.”

It was a brutal yet accurate assessment, for a single terrible mistake that cost Marcus Salvius Otho the empire as well as his life. In Northern Italia, his leading generals, Marius Celsus and Suetonius Paulinus, had won a pair of decisive victories against the armies of the pretender, Aulus Vitellius. Furthermore, the Vitellians had also assailed the walls of the strategically vital city of Placentia, only to be driven off with terrible losses. With momentum clearly in their favor, the emperor did the inexplicable and replaced his two most experienced generals and named his own brother, Otho Titianus, as commander-in-chief. Paulinus and Celsus urged caution, arguing they should wait for the reinforcing legions from the Balkans to arrive before

engaging the enemy once more. The inexperienced and grossly incompetent Titianus ignored them. Their subsequent defeat at the hands of the combined Vitellian armies of Fabius Valens and Caecina Alienus became a foregone conclusion, with Paulinus and Celsus helpless to do little except watch as the entire campaign collapsed. In his last and perhaps noblest act as emperor, Otho committed suicide the following day in the hope of avoiding more needless loss of life.

Word reached Rome within just four days of Otho's death, yet it was met with complete indifference by the populace at large. His reign lasted just three months, and the people simply did not know him well enough to care about his demise one way or the other. In a far cry from the ages of Caesar and Pompey, or Octavian and Antony, neither Otho nor Vitellius inspired anything remotely resembling loyalty or praise. No citizens, be they plebeians, equites, or patricians, gave a damn about either claimant to the throne. Nor had anyone felt the slightest compulsion to make a sacrifice at one of the temples for the health and preservation of either claimant to the throne, while the war progressed.

As Prefect of the City of Rome, Flavius Sabinus would be compelled to administer the oath of allegiance to the urban cohorts and what few military forces remained in and around Rome. This would likely be met with only polite acclamation from both the soldiery and the senate. He and Nerva had been members of Otho's imperial council. However, the triumphant Vitellius would appoint his own councilors, so this was simply a private meeting between friends and political allies. Nerva looked to the much older Sabinus as both a friend and mentor, and on this particular day he needed his advice.

"For the time being, we have no emperor," Nerva then observed. A contingency neither Vitellius nor his senior generals had planned for, that Sabinus and Nerva would soon watch unfold, was the gaping power vacuum left by their victory. The two suffect consuls, Lucius Verginius and Lucius Pompeius, had both been among Otho's entourage. Flavius Sabinus was not slated to assume the consul's chair for another two weeks. Yet it was because he was the next designated suffect consul that the messenger from the north had come to him.

"Vitellius has shown no inclination to return to Rome in the near future," the younger senator continued. "Nor has he named a regent to act in his stead. And while the plebs are largely indifferent, it will be anarchy in the senate once word gets out about Otho's death."

“Normally, the consuls act on the emperor’s behalf,” Sabinus observed. “And yet, with no elected appointments for the full year term, we are only able to grant suffect consulships which change every two to three months. If Vitellius had any foresight, he would have dispatched a personal representative with the messenger, to both inform us of his intentions and to act as regent until he arrives.”

“And that could take months. Instead, both men who would most likely fit the position have traveled to Lugdunum, to celebrate their conquest in a drunken orgy. Caecina and Valens won Vitellius the empire, and yet they are now remiss in their duties to the state. The senate will fracture once more into its ageless factions. The old families and new will vie for power and influence. No doubt there are many who will claim they were Vitellius’ most ardent supporters since he first led his legions in rebellion on New Year’s Day.”

“Of course they will,” Sabinus concurred. “And if Vitellius had any sense, he would see right through the façade of false flattery.”

“Unfortunately,” Nerva sighed, “I think we both know Vitellius lacks this kind of sagacity. It was the false flattery of Caecina and Valens that led him to think he was somehow worthy of becoming ruler of the Roman Empire in the first place.”

“And unlike many of our colleagues, I happen to know Vitellius personally,” Sabinus said. “He was a few years behind me in the Cursus Honorum, and I always found him to be an affable fellow who certainly knew how to host a banquet. He was also not lacking in potential. Sadly, he seems to have wasted whatever talents he inherited from his noble father. His greatest weakness is he tries to please everyone, and is more concerned with his personal popularity than actually governing. Never did Rome find herself with an emperor so easy to manipulate. Those who manage to ingratiate their way into his inner circle will be the ones with real power. Our more astute colleagues are very much aware of this, and have doubtless been planning for this contingency.”

“In other words, we could find ourselves with another Nero whom the people love, yet whose incompetence leads the empire to ruin,” Nerva remarked. He gave a mirthless chuckle. “And you, my friend, will be trapped in the middle of the political fray over the next two months.”

Sabinus took a long drink of his wine. He had always viewed the consulship, even a short suffect term, as the greatest honor and service a

Roman patrician could perform. Twenty-two years had passed since he last sat in the coveted chair. And yet, he was facing this next term with a measure of great uncertainty.

Just as Sabinus predicted, news of Otho's death and the triumph of Vitellius were treated as almost a triviality by the plebeians. And while the masses went about their daily lives as if nothing had happened, within the senate there was confusion and the predictable political struggle. Vitellius' loyalist nobles had been with him in Germania and Gaul, leaving the majority of the senate in Rome to fight with each other for positions of prominence within the regime of a new emperor who few of them even knew. That such a nonentity was now emperor, who despite decades in the senate elicited neither admiration nor loathing from his peers, and was still very much an unknown should have been unnerving. Instead, the only issue any of them could agree upon was the hope that the civil wars were now over, and that Vitellius would at last bring some sense of stability to the empire. However, within days of the notification of Otho's death, still with no official word from the victor himself, it became apparent that Vitellius and his closest advisors lacked both foresight and attention to detail. And while there would soon follow many private conversations regarding his competence, did the senate really have any choice but to ratify Vitellius' claim to the imperial throne?



Couriers had ridden with all speed to Lugdunum to inform Vitellius that Otho was dead, and the empire was now his. The senate had yet to confirm him as emperor, but all knew this was a foregone conclusion. With no other living claimants to the imperial throne, who could they possibly attempt to name in his place? Even if the senate did balk at the thought of an *Emperor Vitellius*, he still had the most powerful army in the world backing his claim. The legions of Otho had been placated into docile submission, and the Balkan Legions dispatched back to their barracks.

For Rome's new master, it was a time for celebration. Vitellius, never one to miss the opportunity to throw a lavish festival complete with banquets and now a triumphal parade, had demanded Caecina and Valens return at once. He further decreed that the defeated Othonian generals were to take part in

the victory parade. The celebrations, complete with gladiatorial matches and chariot races, were expected to last a week. This, coupled with Vitellius' insistence on traveling afterwards to the battlefield so he could see the remnants of his defeated foes for himself, would significantly delay his return to Rome. Many of the senators, recently arrived from Northern Italia to congratulate their new ruler, feared this would create a power struggle in Rome much like after the death of Nero, before Galba's arrival in the capital. Vitellius was unmoved by their trepidations and was only too anxious for his triumph to be celebrated. Caecina and Valens were also in no hurry to return to Rome, lest other members of the presumptive emperor's entourage wrest control of Vitellius from them. The emperor was their puppet to control, and none of those decrepit fools in the senate would take that from them.

With most of their armies still in Northern Italia, the two commanding generals had suggested they use the forces that accompanied Vitellius for the victory parade, rather than waiting two or three weeks for their own soldiers to arrive from Cremona. Titianus and Celsus had accompanied Caecina and Valens from Bedriacum while, seemingly out of nowhere, Licinius Proculus and Suetonius Paulinus arrived in Lugdunum. The two disappeared soon after the Battle of Bedriacum and had not been heard from until their arrival in the Gallic capital. But, instead of being taken to Vitellius, they were escorted to a magistrate's villa recently commandeered by Valens as his military headquarters.

"General Paulinus, so good of you to join us," Valens said, scarcely hiding his sneer of gloating contempt. The Vitellian general took immense pleasure in reveling before the man previously lauded as Rome's greatest military leader of their generation. That Paulinus had been replaced, with all authority stripped by Otho before the battle, did little to hamper Valens' smug satisfaction at supposedly defeating Boudicca's conqueror.

"The war is over, and I await orders from our new emperor," Paulinus replied stoically. Though he did not say where he had been, he had taken the time to bathe, shave, and see to his armor and kit. And while it pained him to have fought on the losing side of the civil war, the venerable general kept reminding himself that Otho's defeat was not his doing.

"And your orders are to ride in the victory parade, two days from now," Valens stated.

He and Paulinus kept their gazes fixed on each other.

Licinius Proculus stood and fidgeted nervously, unsure if he should say

anything. His only military experience before the war had involved parading troops of the Praetorian Guard, and Valens regarded him as an insignificance. He felt a similar level of disdain towards Titianus, who had proven utterly inept and weak-willed and was only summoned to Lugdunum because he was Otho's brother. He promptly dismissed the two, grinning knowingly as Paulinus practically shoved his way past Licinius. And while Valens would never openly admit it, he was relieved Otho had made such a careless blunder in replacing his two best generals with popular, yet incompetent, sycophants.



Neither Paulinus nor any of the Othonian generals were heard from for two days, though all obediently turned out resplendently dressed on the day of the parade. Titianus and Licinius donned their legates' armor with brightly polished breastplates and plumed helmets. Celsus and Paulinus were more subdued, electing to wear their civilian togas. While they had yet to formally meet with Vitellius, all were ordered to ride at the head of the procession next to their Vitellian counterparts. Whether this was to humiliate them or, perhaps, show unity between the previously warring factions, no one was certain.

None of the legionaries or auxilia troopers in Lugdunum had taken part in the war. Yet here they were, marching in the emperor's first triumphal parade. For them, the march to war accompanying Vitellius had been more of a roaming carnival, and they were being given the laurels of victory without having struck a single blow for their emperor. The forces that had made up Vitellius' escort consisted of the entire Legio XXII, Fortuna Primigenia, otherwise known as *'Fortuna's Legion'*. There were also an additional eight thousand legionaries recently arrived from Britannia. These men had come from three of the legions that had spearheaded the conquest of the isle during the reign of Claudius; Legio II, Augusta, Legio IX, Hispania, and Legio XX, Valeria Victrix. This last legion had fought with Suetonius Paulinus against Boudicca and been given the moniker, *'Victrix'*, after their decisive victory over the Iceni.

Legio XIV, Gemina Martia Victrix, who fought beside the Valeria Legion against the Iceni, had fought for Otho during the civil war and was subsequently sent back to Britannia by Vitellius as a form of punishment. None of Vitellius' Britannic soldiers had taken part in the fighting, and there

had been much speculation as to whether or not they would have willingly made war against their former mates. It was rather fortunate for the Vitellians that the arrival of these particular legionaries had been greatly delayed, due to a rather heated conflict between the commanding legates and the Governor of Britannia, Trebellius Maximus. At Valens' urging, Vitellius immediately sacked Trebellius and replaced him with one of his own confidants, Marcus Vettius Bolanus. Bolanus was a capable administrator, soldier, and diplomat, as well as a personal friend of the emperor. Sending him to Britannia had the two-fold effect of maintaining stability in the still-volatile province, while removing his direct influence from Vitellius' inner circle.

Though the column of soldiers numbered in the thousands, the parade was still a much smaller affair than the triumphs witnessed in Rome, for there were no spoils or enemy prisoners to drag through the streets. It really became little more than a military procession of soldiers marching through the streets of Lugdunum, while being cheered by the mobs of curious citizens anxious to see the armies of this latest conquering Caesar. The people had no idea who the Othonian and Vitellian generals were and gave ovations of equal measure to all the legates and other senior officers.

Vitellius sat upon a large dais which acted as the reviewing stand. For the first time, he wore the purple and gold robes of an emperor, with a golden laurel crown atop his head. Various senators, as well as the governor of Lugdunum, sat on either side. It took almost an hour for the soldiers to march past the stand, with all drawing their weapons in salute. Vitellius was hoping to distance himself from the name 'Caesar', as it implied lineage to the Julio-Claudian Dynasty. Because of this, the soldiers were instructed to shout *'Ave Imperator'*, instead of the traditional *'Ave Caesar'*. By the time the last cohort saluted their new emperor, Vitellius was anxious to attend some of the games which would begin later the following afternoon. But before then he had some rather unpleasant formalities to attend to.



The day following the parade marked the first of games that were to last the next week. And with a celebration feast that night, Vitellius' advisors convinced him that now was the time to deal with the defeated enemy generals. Though none were chained, and in fact all had been treated like

honored guests since their arrival, there was little doubt that they were now prisoners to the man who was emperor in all but name. He had summoned them all to the large temporary throne room he'd established within the governor's palace.

Vitellius sat in his chair, his purple robes crumpled and unkempt, and failing to hide his protruding belly. He replaced the gold laurel crown, complaining it cut into his scalp, and instead wore one made of leaves. Caecina and Valens sat on either side just behind him. That both men were seated underscored their positions of prominence within the new order. Numerous senators, magistrates, and members of Vitellius' imperial court were on hand to witness his judgment.

"Licinius Proculus and Suetonius Paulinus!" the porter shouted, banging his staff on the tiled floor.

Both men stepped forward and while Proculus bowed, Paulinus simply nodded in acknowledgment.

"You both fought well," Vitellius began. "Especially you, General Paulinus. You caused my soldiers much grief during this conflict."

"I did my duty," the general replied stoically.

"I also have it on good authority that your loyalties to my predecessor may not have been as strong as he would have believed."

"It's true, Caesar," Proculus spoke quickly. "General Paulinus and I recognized the usurper's shortcomings, and therefore sought to undermine his armies when it came time for battle."

It was an absurd and cowardly statement, which many of the assembled entourage muttered was completely undignified coming from a noble Roman.

Vitellius clearly did not believe Proculus' statement, yet he persisted in asking, "General Paulinus, is there any truth to this?"

"I have won battles when outnumbered ten-to-one," the general asserted, his pride getting the best of him. He then attempted to deflect the question. "And I defeated General Caecina, rather soundly, just days before the climactic battle."

It was a non-answer, and Paulinus could not commit himself fully to the lie which Proculus spouted, that they had deliberately lost the battle. Nor could he publicly acknowledge the humiliating truth, that Otho had relieved him of his command immediately after his victory over Caecina. Caecina himself was incensed by this revelation, and he fought to hold his tongue as his face burned red in anger.

Whatever the truth, Vitellius was not interested. “You both bore and disappoint me,” he said. “I would have thought you, General Paulinus, would understand the dignity and honor of standing behind ones oath, no matter how misplaced. Neither of you are worth the hassle of trial or further punishment, so I acquit you both of loyalty to the usurper. Now out of my sight.”

As the two started to quickly leave the hall, Vitellius called out, “And Proculus! You understand, of course, that your services and those of your colleague, Plotius Firmus, are no longer needed within the Praetorian Guard.” It was obvious, since the death of Otho, that the prefects would be immediately sacked, yet Vitellius could not help but give Proculus this last biting insult.

“Lucius Salvius Otho Titianus!” the porter then called, banging his staff once more.

As he made his way across the floor, Titianus looked like a man who was completely lost. His brother was dead, and his decades-long political career completely undone. The only saving grace of the entire nightmare was that his son had, thus far, been spared from any retribution by Vitellius.

“Caesar…” Titianus started to say, while bowing.

“Shut…up,” Vitellius interrupted. “You were the elder brother of my late rival, and you were commander-in-chief of his armies. However, I feel I should grant you pardon, simply out of respect to your loyalty to your brother. That alone would normally not be enough to save you, were I to fear you as a threat. But as my generals have made it quite clear, you are the most pathetic excuse for a military leader within the last hundred years. The war between our factions was bitterly contested, and I lament the defeats suffered by my armies. It seemed for a time that Fortuna was favoring the usurper. But then, in one idiotic blunder, you handed me the imperial throne. I suppose I should thank you for this.”

It was a bitter piece of irony, and while Valens grinned broadly, Caecina appeared to be as uncomfortable as the humiliated Titianus. He felt as if the emperor were somehow scorning him as well, given it was he who was defeated by Paulinus in the engagements that led to the Battle of Bedriacum. That Valens’ division had been delayed and Caecina brazenly attacked without him gave the appearance to some that Valens had saved the day for the Vitellians.

“Ironic,” Vitellius continued, “that your complete and utter incompetence

has saved your neck from the noose. Now off with you, and not a word, unless you care to provoke us into rethinking our clemency."

Titianus, though unreservedly disgraced was, nonetheless, relieved to know his life was being spared. He bowed quickly and made due haste out of the hall. There was only one general left to deal with and for this, Vitellius sat upright and folded his hands in his lap.

"Publius Marius Celsus!" the porter called, banging his staff one last time.

Celsus boldly strode forward. He was perhaps the only one of Otho's former military leaders that appeared neither disgraced nor humbled by what had transpired. Unlike his defiant friend, Paulinus, his was almost an air of indifference.

"General Celsus," Vitellius said, with a nod of respect. "Of all my deceased rival's former commanders, you are the only man among them with any real sense of honor or integrity. Just as you served the tyrannical Galba with absolute fealty, so too did you give total devotion to his usurper. You are a man who gives his word and then keeps it, without hesitation or apology to anyone. I hear that you fought well at Ad Castores, as well as Bedriacum. You were a worthy enemy, but I would prefer to have you as an even nobler friend."

"If the senate confirms you as emperor I will be at your service, but not before," Celsus asserted.

This led to gasps from the assembly at the perceived impudence.

Vitellius simply smiled. "Ever noble to the last. You know, of course, the senate has little choice but to confirm me as your emperor. But I will respect your wishes, and not ask you to swear your allegiance until then. And the only punishment you will receive is really not a punishment at all, but rather an unfortunate administrative matter. You were slated to hold the suffect consulship from July through the end of September of this year."

"Yes, sir," Celsus confirmed, remaining cordial, while refusing for the moment to acknowledge Vitellius as emperor.

"You understand my desire, my compulsion if you will, to reward my loyal generals, Caecina and Valens," Vitellius continued. "The very least they deserve is a two-month suffect consulship for this year. Therefore, you will still receive your appointment, out of our respect for your pronounced loyalty and service to the empire; however, it will only be for the months of July and August. Caecina and Valens will assume the suffect consulship for

September and October."

"I thank you for your generosity," Celsus said. "And I hope that, once confirmed by the senate, you will be both fair and just in your rule."

These last words were almost an admonishment towards the emperor, yet Vitellius simply nodded and dismissed the general. His speech to all of the former Othonian commanders had been both forceful and well-spoken. Those with the most intimate knowledge of their new ruler surmised that they had not been his words at all, but rather written for him by his senior generals, who helped him rehearse them in depth prior to the meeting. Among the senators present, who many expected to get called before Vitellius was Galerius Trachalus, Otho's former advisor and speechwriter. But because his cousin, Galeria, was Vitellius' wife and empress consort, and because she had spoken strongly in his defense nothing more was ever said.

The formalities of dealing with the Othonian generals was now complete. Vitellius decided to bathe before the night's magnificent banquet, one the governor assured him would be worthy of an emperor.



Outside the palace, Marius Celsus found the bitter and disgraced Suetonius Paulinus saddling his horse, making ready to leave the city.

"Not staying for the celebration feast?" Celsus asked, with more than a trace of sarcasm.

Paulinus could not help but chuckle at the remark. "Vitellius will consume enough this night to feed an entire village." It was only a moderate exaggeration. He ceased packing his saddlebags for a moment and looked at his friend. "I probably should not say this, because it may get me the strangler's noose, but I predict our esteemed ruler will not last long upon the imperial throne."

"There is no one else to stand against him, at least not at the moment," Celsus noted.

"I think there will be," Paulinus said. He added cryptically, "One far stronger than any who has yet laid claim to the empire." Celsus suspected who he meant but chose not to ask further, so Paulinus asked him, "And what about you? Will you serve this third Caesar as well as the previous two?"

"If the senate confirms him, what choice do I have?" Celsus questioned back. "I will do my duty to the best of my abilities. However, I will not draw

my sword again, not for him. And if you are right, and a stronger claimant does come forward…well, I can only hope that Rome will not be subjected to the level of bloodshed we've already witnessed."

"Vitellius set a dangerous precedent by using the army to seize the throne," Paulinus noted. "I am in no way defending Otho, whose methods were scarcely better, but what is dangerous is that the unthinkable has happened; a third emperor has been crowned from outside the imperial family, only this time by means of a military coup. Before this year, no Roman legion would have ever dreamed of trying to make one of their own emperor. Until a year ago, never had a Caesar come from outside of the Julio-Claudian family. Now we have had three in a period of less than a year. If my suspicions are correct, and one does come forward to seize the imperial mantle, it will be because Vitellius has proven himself incapable of ruling. Mind you, I could be completely wrong, but I fear the strife brought on by the reign of the tyrants is far from over."



The weeklong celebration passed in a drunken blur for the new emperor. But before he could depart Lugdunum, Vitellius had a few loose ends he needed to attend to. While the Othonian legions had been given their orders, there was still the matter of what to do with the former emperor's praetorians. Despite casualties and natural attrition, there were still fifteen thousand armed men who were fiercely loyal to the man deposed by Vitellius.

"We cannot simply sack the lot of them," Caecina stressed. "And I doubt any of them would simply hand over their weapons, if we tried. Most likely, they would riot, and we could anticipate renewed bloodshed."

"We took the liberty of dispatching two of their cohorts to Turin," Valens noted. "And we have dispersed others to various locations, under the premise of keeping peace in Northern Italia, while the people await their new emperor."

"That is good," Vitellius confirmed. "But…while I have no issue with the dispersing of the legions, I know the praetorians were very eager to continue the fighting. I cannot expect the personal guard of the usurper to have a shred of the same loyalty towards me."

"This is true," Caecina conceded. "They are docile now but may cause trouble, once we depart the region. There is only one language universally

spoken amongst all of our armed forces, and that is money."

"What is the pension of a praetorian guardsman?" Vitellius asked.

"Roughly five thousand denarii, sire," Valens answered.

The emperor raised an eyebrow.

Vitellius was a walking contradiction in terms of fiscal conservatism. While he preached prudence and moderation in all areas of spending, the lavish banquets he insisted upon were nearly bankrupting every town and city he visited. Yet he cringed at the thought of the cost of retiring with full pension the entire Praetorian Guard.

"Offer them three," he said at last. "That should satisfy their lust for coin, especially the younger guardsmen. Once we return to Rome, we'll rebuild the Guard from the ranks of our own legions. It will mark a proper return to what Augustus intended for the Praetorian Guard in the first place."

"Very good, sire," Valens said, with a bow. "There is, however, the issue of what to do with the centurions and their subordinate officers, who most voraciously sought to continue the fight against you. I think all of us can agree it is not the tribunes, nor even the prefects, who command the men's loyalties. A charismatic centurion can compel his men to strike down their own emperor, as was exhibited by the fall of Galba. It was not the tribunes that brought about his violent end, but a handful of centurions, options, and other lower-level officers."

Caecina was clearly uneasy about this assertion by his colleague, though Vitellius did not seem to notice. Caecina knew what the older general had in mind and, while not as savage as Galba's acts of decimation, the principle was still the same. He did not like what Valens was insinuating.

"We can tolerate no threats to our person," Vitellius said thoughtfully. "Very well, the most voracious praetorian officers, holding the ranks of tesserarius to centurion pilus prior, will be brought before me to face imperial justice."

"And what of those praetorians still in Maritime Alpes?" Valens asked.

"The same applies to them," Vitellius replied. "Bring their more troublesome officers to me and pay off the rest."

It was a sizeable sum to cashier the entire Praetorian Guard, and Vitellius was still as impoverished as he had been when he left Rome, while being pursued by creditors. It was only due to the generosity of the governor, Junius Blaesus, that the new emperor even had the proper purple and gold trimmed robes. Vitellius was running up a great deal of debt with Blaesus and would

have to ask for yet another loan, in order to pay off the Guard. Yet the governor was confident he would be repaid, both monetarily and politically, once the emperor returned to Rome.



For Optio Proculus and the survivors of the praetorians' ill-fated maritime expedition, the past few weeks had been wrought with uncertainty. Terrible atrocities had been committed by his guardsmen during the initial landings at Albium Intimilium, for which the optio felt there would surely be a reckoning. And while they had won the initial clash with the Vitellian forces sent to subdue them, they were decisively routed a week later. At least half their men were either dead or missing. And with the death of Centurion Vetutius, Proculus was now in command of what remained of his century.

After their terrible defeat, the small taskforce, along with their ships, had retreated fifty miles east to Album Ingaunum. Such was the haste of their flight that their wounded, along with most of their supplies, had been abandoned. The port city had proven loyal to Otho, though ever since their arrival they had met with silence from the rest of the empire. They knew nothing of the battles in Northern Italia or the fate of their fellow guardsmen, including their prefect, who bore the same name as Proculus, but was in no way related.

"I still wonder who survived among our lads," a guardsman asked, for what seemed like the hundredth time.

A small number were keeping watch near the docks, which lay just off the road known as the Via Julia Augusta. They had established a checkpoint near the bridge, which crossed over a small river that ran into the sea. Until they received countermanding orders, or until they heard some word about how the war was progressing, there was little else for them to do. And, as Album Ingaunum was a loyalist city that spurned the Vitellians, the guardsmen treated its citizens marginally well, although they still took many liberties regarding drink and women.

"I'll bet Statius made it," another praetorian surmised. "I don't think even a thunderbolt from Jupiter could strike him down."

"You overestimate him," the first guardsman chastised. "Tiberius Statius was little more than a hired killer who would murder anyone, if the price was right. No doubt his years in the legions barbarized him."

There were many, especially within the Praetorian Guard, who viewed legionaries as less-than-civilized, though much of this stemmed from the inherent rivalry that had long existed between the two forces. Praetorians would assert that because legionaries spent their careers on the frontiers of the empire, they shared more in common with the barbarians they lived among than their own countrymen.

"The actions of the Guard during this campaign were anything but civilized," Proculus muttered to himself. The optio, who had come to the guard post to check on his men, had kept quiet so far. There had been a somber change in his demeanor, even more than the rest of the guardsmen. All had been grief-stricken at the deaths of so many of their friends, yet nervous boredom had replaced their sorrow during the subsequent weeks.

"Statius always followed orders," Proculus said at last, "even the ones that most of us would find unsettling."

"Always did have a rather cold and calculating nature about him," one of the praetorians observed. "I think Atticus was his only real friend."

"Oy!" a guardsman shouted, pointing his javelin towards the far side of the bridge. "Rider approaching, sir! Looks to be an officer of some sort."

"Finally," the optio muttered, not caring if it was an Othonian or Vitellian messenger. To him, any news at all, whether good or ill, was better than continued silence. "Stand to attention, lads."

The approaching rider wore a plain, muscled cuirass with a faded red cloak draped over his shoulder. His helmet bore a black plume which ran front-to-back. He rode at a quick canter, slowing to a trot as he approached the bridge.

"Hold, sir!" Proculus said, saluting the officer he recognized as a tribune. "What news to you bring?"

"Orders for the commanding officer of this division from Emperor Aulus Vitellius," the tribune replied. The guardsmen were stunned, and quickly glanced around at each other. Proculus maintained his composure.

"Yes, sir," he replied. "That would be Centurion Novellus. I take it, then, that the war is over?"

"You haven't heard?" the tribune asked, perplexed as Proculus shook his head. "Otho was defeated somewhere between Cremona and Bedriacum several weeks ago. He took his own life soon after. Now, take me to your commanding officer."

It was a ten minute walk from the bridge to the house the praetorians had

established as their headquarters. There were no guards posted outside the doors, and the only guardsmen in uniform were those at the bridge.

"Where in Hades are the rest of your men?" the tribune asked, suddenly feeling rather irritated as he dismounted his horse.

"Drunk or at one of the brothels, I suspect, sir," the optio replied candidly. Proculus felt no loyalty whatsoever towards Novellus nor much of the Guard at this point, and he was disinclined to try and cover for his commanding officer's incompetence.

The foyer was empty except a large table in the center with a few documents strewn about. They heard the sounds of a bed creaking and a woman's loud moans coming from the back room. The tribune banged on the door repeatedly, only to hear a very audible *'fuck off'* from the other side.

Before being assigned as one of the leading officers of this disastrous excursion, Centurion Novellus had only commanded troops on the praetorian parade field. The commanding tribune had been imprisoned within days and, with the other leading centurion dead, Novellus was left in command of what remained of the expeditionary force. In the absence of orders, he had done little since their arrival at Album Ingaunum, except drink and fornicate with whatever whores made themselves available.

Now clearly irritated, the tribune threw open the door, which slammed against the wall, and shouted, *"Centurion!"*

"I said *fuck o*…oh shit!" Novellus clumsily fell from the bed and stood at attention, completely naked and erect, his eyes wide in shock.

His female companion tried to sink down into the bed, the blankets pulled up to her chin.

"By Bellona's cunt, it's the middle of the day, man!" the tribune snapped. "You stink of wine and unwashed fucking. Get some damn clothes on at once."

"Yes, sir," Novellus stammered.

Proculus bit the inside of his cheek, trying not to laugh out loud. No centurion of any worth would be caught balls deep in a prostitute during the duty day, nor would he take so kindly to being berated in front of a subordinate, regardless of the rank of the chastising officer.

Novellus threw on a tunic and stumbled out into the foyer where the tribune was waiting impatiently. He handed the centurion a rather thick scroll.

"The war is over," the tribune said. "In his generosity, Emperor Vitellius

is offering each of your men three thousand denarii, if they will turn in their weapons and armor and voluntarily leave the imperial service. And I use the word ‘voluntarily’ rather loosely. His highness has no more use for your men. They had best accept his magnanimity, otherwise things might get a little *awkward.*”

“I…I don’t understand,” Novellus fumbled.

“Vitellius won the war,” Proculus quickly explained, before the tribune could lash out again. “He doesn’t want his personal guard to consist of men who served his overthrown predecessor in the same capacity. That he is offering them a donative is quite generous.”

The centurion nodded and then glanced through the scroll once more. “What is this list of names for?”

“Officers from your detachment who are to report to Lugdunum at once,” the tribune said. “The emperor wishes to address them personally.”

“I don’t see my name on this list,” Novellus noted.

“No,” the tribune said, with a smirk. “The emperor thinks you would be better suited to remain here and oversee the cashiering of your guardsmen.”

“Half these men are either dead or missing, sir,” Proculus said, reading the note over the centurion’s shoulder. He winced when he saw his own name on the list.

“We figured as much,” the tribune said smugly. “Those who remain will take ship at once to Lugdunum. I will be accompanying you. Any surviving members of the urban cohorts are ordered to return to Rome and report to their prefect, who will sort them out.”

“Yes, sir,” Novellus said. He then asked awkwardly, “Am I among those to be cashiered from the ranks?”

The tribune said nothing. He simply turned and left. Proculus took the list from the centurion and read through it. The names were mostly centurions and options who totaled about one third of those within the taskforce. He tried to wrack his brain, thinking what the men on the list could possibly have in common. The selection felt completely random. His stomach turned. He did not like the idea of being brought before the new emperor, but he had his orders.

Chapter II: Suffer No Rivals

Rome
Late April 69 A.D.



Praetorian Guardsman

Guardsman Tiberius Statius had returned to Rome, uncertain what the future held for him. Abandoned for dead after their disastrous routing by Vitellian cavalry, he had rather painfully made his way to a nearby port city and, with a hefty bribe to the ship's captain, made the return journey to the imperial capital. After news of Otho's defeat reached the city, there was the awkward question of what should be done with those few guardsmen who remained in Rome.

Statius had heard nothing about the fate of his fellow guardsmen from the ill-fated Maritime Alpes expedition. He half expected to find them returned to Rome, but their continued absence meant they were either holed up in one of the Othonian loyalist cities or captured by the Vitellians. If Vitellius elected to sack the entire Guard, most of them would likely be stranded in the small province. The emperor's offer of an early reduced pension had yet to reach the city, and the few praetorians who remained in Rome feared for their futures. After all, Sabinus had administered the new oath to the remaining urban cohorts, but not the rear detachment of the Praetorian Guard.

Statius was in his quarters one evening, pondering his next move over a light supper, when there was pounding on the door to the nearly deserted billets. He opened it to find a section of vigiles from the urban cohorts waiting for him. And while these men normally carried clubs, each of these men had a gladius slung over his shoulder.

"Guardsman Statius?" one of them asked.

"Who wants to know?"

"You are to come with us," the section leader directed.

Alarmed by this, Statius first thought of reaching for his weapon. However, there were six of them, and he knew at best he could only get one, maybe two, before they cut him down. He had little choice but to take his chances and accompany them. Reluctantly, he followed the men, who escorted him about a mile across the city to the house of Flavius Sabinus.

"What am I doing here?" the guardsman asked.

The urban section leader said nothing as he knocked on the door. A slave soon appeared, the vigiles departed, and the guardsman was taken across the foyer and into a study where the urban prefect awaited. With him was a rather statuesque woman, who appeared to be in her early to mid-forties.

"Guardsman Statius," Sabinus said. He snapped his fingers, and a servant offered the praetorian wine.

"Prefect," Statius replied. "I, of course, know who you are, as does everyone in Rome. I am surprised you know me, for I cannot say we've ever met."

"It is highly unlikely, I'll grant you," Sabinus concurred. "And you may wonder what the city prefect wants with a praetorian guardsman."

"Or rather, what your friend here wants," Statius surmised, casting his gaze at the woman, who grinned appreciatively.

"This is Lady Triaria, wife of the noble senator, Lucius Vitellius," Sabinus said.

"My lady," Statius said with a nod, his brain wracked with suspicions about her motives. "And how may this humble guardsman serve you?"

"You may be a guardsman," Triaria replied, "but I would never use the word 'humble' to describe you. I am certain you are well aware, now that the wicked usurpers, Galba and Otho, have been cast down into the pit of Hades, our new emperor will need his own men of quality to fill the ranks of the praetorians."

“Yes, we realize our services to the empire will no longer be needed,” the guardsman said flatly.

“This is true for most of the Guard,” Triaria agreed. “But then, you’re not like most praetorians, are you? What would say if, on the emperor’s behalf, I was able to secure your position within the Guard? A centurion’s position even.”

“No promotion,” Statius emphasized. He folded his arms across his chest. “Since you knew enough about me to attempt to hire my services, then you most certainly know I only accept jobs that are officially sanctioned, and therefore offer immunity from any repercussions. I also work for gold and silver, not rank.”

Triaria nodded in agreement. “Very well. I can assure you that any service I may call upon has my husband’s, and therefore the emperor’s, blessing. The issue at hand is that the exiled nobleman and former general, Cornelius Dolabella, has returned to Rome.”

“Yes, of course. Dolabella was a great military leader and imperial statesman. Otho only exiled him because he feared Galba might name him his successor. Those fears proved to be unfounded.”

“Still, now that Otho is dead there are many who fear Dolabella might try to claim what he thinks is rightfully his,” Sabinus spoke up. “There are whispers that the general is gathering support from some of the military elements in and around Rome.”

“If there was any truth to such rumors, I would know about it,” Statius countered. “The Praetorian Guard, what’s left of it, is still the largest military entity within the city, aside from your own urban cohorts. Please tell me you don’t put any faith in such rumors, sir.”

Triaria shot Sabinus a sidelong glance as he opened his mouth to speak. He promptly shut it and deliberated as to what he should say.

“Vitellius will suffer no rivals,” Triaria stated categorically.

This caused Sabinus’ face to twitch. It was a backhanded reference to his brother, Vespasian, who Vitellius now feared.

“I have here Vitellius’ order sending Dolabella from the city,” Sabinus replied. “As suffect consul for May and June, it is my duty to read this to the senate. A single escort is all that will be required to take the general from Rome to Interamna.”

“So you want me to escort a former consul and one of Rome’s most respected generals to his place of house arrest at his estate, eighty miles from

Rome."

"Not just escort," Triaria said, with a sinister gleam in her eye.

Sabinus cast his gaze towards the floor.

Statius understood. "How much does this job pay?"

Sabinus' face was pale as he later escorted Lady Triaria to the front door. As soon as his fee had been negotiated, Guardsman Statius had promptly left to prepare for the journey. With their business complete, Vitellius' sister-in-law prepared to leave.

"A beastly undertaking, but necessary," Triaria asserted, turning to face Sabinus. "Let us hope there are no more potential pretenders to be dealt with in such an uncivilized fashion."

"My lady," was all Sabinus could manage in reply.

In many ways he felt like a coward, having acquiesced to Triaria and her husband's plan to eliminate what amounted to an imagined potential rival. But with those closest to Vitellius looking for any reason to declare someone a threat to the regime, Sabinus had very real cause to be concerned about his family. His sons were quickly coming of age, Flavius being eighteen and Clemens sixteen. And there was his nephew, Domitian, who Vespasian had placed in his care.

While Cornelius Dolabella could be rather effortlessly disposed of, Flavius Vespasian was another matter entirely. Sabinus was now gravely concerned, for unless Vitellius proved to be a wise and strong ruler, conflict with Vespasian might prove inevitable. For his family's sake, he had to give the Vitellians no cause to suspect him of treason. Lady Triaria understood this, which is why she was able to so easily manipulate the once proud general into carrying out this hateful task.

That evening, Sabinus dined with his family, along with their recently returned guest, Aula Cursia Vale. Aula had taken on the unusual duty of serving as an imperial courier, in the employ of Sabinus. She had been away for a number of months, having journeyed all the way to Judea, with a series of dispatches for Sabinus' brother, Vespasian. During that time, she had met an old childhood friend, Gaius Artorius, who was serving with the Tenth Legion. Though the reunion had been pleasant, and she was thrilled to have seen the famed port city of Caesarea, Aula was glad to have at last returned to Rome. Sabinus' nephew, Domitian, was conspicuous by his absence, having

been sent to live with the family friend, Cocceius Nerva, who was overseeing the later phases of his formal education.

Sabinus was strangely quiet that evening. His sons assumed it was the stress brought on now that he had yet another emperor to serve.

Aula suspected something more. “Something vexes you?”

Sabinus kept his eyes on his practically untouched plate before finally answering. “I need you to return to Judea.” Aula said nothing at first.

Sabinus’ younger son, Flavius Clemens, protested. “Father, please, she has only just returned to Rome. Surely you have someone else you can send.”

“I wish I did,” Sabinus replied. “But my remaining official couriers are either up north with the new emperor, in Pannonia, or in Gaul. That leaves our dear daughter, Aula.”

The young woman smiled at being addressed as such. Sabinus had become like a second father to her since she arrived in Rome, six years before.

“Send Domitian,” his elder son, Flavius, said with a scornful laugh. “About time the family got some use out of him.”

“He gets lost on his way to the brothel,” Clemens added. “I don’t think he could even find Judea on a map.”

“A bit hard on your cousin, aren’t you?” Aula spoke up.

“You’ve been around him enough,” Flavius replied. “You obviously know how awkward he is. And I think there was something unnatural about his fawning love for his sister.”

“That’s enough,” Sabinus quickly rebuked. “I don’t want to hear such talk ever again.”

“Yes, father,” Flavius said, his gaze falling to the table in embarrassment.

Aula added, “That a younger brother should be devoted to his older sister, especially when he has no other immediate family around him, does not imply anything incestuous. To be fair, Domitian is twelve years younger than his brother, whom he practically worships yet almost never sees. And with Vespasian placing all his hopes and energies into Titus, Domitian cannot help but feel as if his father has forgotten him.”

“Spending some time with Nerva will help,” Sabinus remarked. “The two share a mutual love for poetry and literature. But enough about my nephew. It is you who wears the courier’s signet.”

“Yes,” Aula said, sitting upright on her couch. “When will you need me to leave for Judea?”

“Soon,” Sabinus replied. “I need to compile some notes for my brother about our new emperor, as well as whatever information I can gather about the war in the north.”

“I suspect Antonius Primus has kept him abreast of the war,” Aula recalled.

“Strangely, as paranoid as Vitellius is regarding potential threats, he left most of Otho’s generals in command of their respective legions. I suspect that half measures and confusion will dominate the reign of Aulus Vitellius.”



The following morning, the senate convened to hear the first official correspondence from Vitellius in over five months. Ever since the refusal of the Rhine Legions to swear allegiance to Emperor Galba on New Year’s Day, the senate had heard nothing from the man whose armies had just won him the throne. Sabinus was one of the two suffect consuls for May and June, the other being a vaguely related distant cousin named Caelius Sabinus, so it was he who stood in the center of the senate floor, reading the first words of the triumphant usurper,

To the senate and the people of Rome, greetings.

Having dispatched of the tyrannical murder and usurper, Marcus Salvius Otho, and having subdued his armies into willful obedience once more, I am returning to take my rightful place among this august body.

The impeccably loyal legions of the Rhine Army have brought me victory, and I know that, in your wisdom, you will sanction what they have decreed, that I, Aulus Vitellius, be named Emperor of Rome.

Before it became used as a title, ‘Caesar’ was simply a man’s name, one that was passed down by the emperors of the Julio-Claudian Dynasty. As this is the start of a new era, and a new imperial line, I feel it would be inappropriate for me to accept such a title as my own. I am not Caesar, nor am I of his lineage; therefore, I respectfully refuse to be addressed as such. The title of Augustus is also one which, in my humility, I feel I cannot accept at this time. My legions have instead sought to grant me

the title of 'Germanicus', though as the divine Claudius humbly refused the title of 'Britannicus', instead passing it on to his son, I too am doing the same with this auspicious honor. My son, your future emperor, will henceforth be known as Germanicus Vitellius, the Prince Imperial.

My feelings regarding titles and honors aside, I wish to lead Rome into an age of moderation and pragmatism, while we heal from the wounds of this most vulgar civil war. Therefore, I am decreeing that all practitioners of that vile art known as astrology, who threaten public order and morale with their trickery and false prophecies, are hereby banished from Italia. Rome is the heart of logic and reason, not superstitions and barbaric practices. All astrologers have until the first of October to quit Italia, never to return.

And as the senate and equites are the rulers over this civilization, I am, henceforth, forbidding anyone from the patrician classes from taking part in gladiatorial matches. As gladiators are either slaves, or destitute plebs in seek of pay and renown, it is beneath the dignity of our nobles to actively participate in such activities.

I am celebrating my victory with a parade and series of games in Lugdunum. After which, I will visit the site of the army's triumph over the usurper before I return to Rome. My intent is to return to the capital in time for the autumn harvest, at which time we can celebrate the harvest of prosperity and peace in this new age for the empire.

Until then, I remain your humble servant,

Aulus Vitellius

The several hundred senators, who were practically crammed into the chamber, sat in silence for a few moments, while they pondered all that Vitellius had said. His letter showed a strange mix of humility, as well as supreme arrogance, and even blatant hypocrisy. Astrology may have been superstitious nonsense to the rational and scientific mind, but then so was augury, which was both practiced and officially sanctioned by the imperial state. And the banning of senators and equites from participating in

gladiatorial matches was strange for an initial decree. Surely there were more pressing matters requiring an emperor's immediate attention than whether a young nobleman chose to wear a helmet and swing a sword in the arena!

While most of the senate sat in bemused silence, the recently returned Cornelius Dolabella was smirking and shaking his head. Though he had yet to be fully reinstated as a member of the senate, he had been allowed to sit in on the proceedings, out of respect for his past years of service. Finally, it was Consul Caelius Sabinus who stood from his chair and addressed the assembly.

"Senators, we have heard from the victor of our grievous civil war. I move that we vote to grant all powers, if not specific titles, to Aulus Vitellius without delay."

"It's not as if we have much of a choice," Senator Nerva spoke up. His normally good-natured demeanor was replaced with one of grim acceptance. "Since last June, we have sanctioned two usurpers to the imperial throne, and now we are being asked to ratify a third. But let us not pretend that it is we who still rule in Rome. We may give this usurpation our blessing, but it will fool no one. A dangerous precedent has been set, and it is now the legions, not the Senate of Rome, who have the power to sanction an emperor."

"And what would you have us do?" Senator Italicus retorted. "Otho took what military forces there were in southern Italia, and they have been defeated. Would you have a handful of urban cohorts defy the Rhine Legions? You would bring war to the very streets of Rome!"

A series of quarrels soon broke out. Numerous senators called for Vitellius' ratification without delay, while others shamed their colleagues for cowardice and prostrating themselves before a man who was no more than a military usurper. These arguments lacked conviction, however, as the harsh reality was laid before them by Nerva's cynical speech. The result of this civil war meant the senate was no longer relevant when it came to naming an emperor. Sabinus turned to the porter, who beat his staff onto the marble floor.

"Senators, please!" the consul and city prefect pleaded. "Let us not fight amongst each other. Otho may have had the senate's endorsement for his rise to become Caesar, but like Nero before him, he left no designated heir. Neither his brother nor his nephew, the two most likely candidates, were ever officially declared his successor. As they are in Vitellius' custody, there is no one who could claim to be Otho's rightful heir."

“And if you listen carefully outside, what do you hear?” Caelius asked. After a brief pause, he said, “Nothing! No cries of lamentation, no calls for Vitellius to pay for his regicide, nothing but complete silence. The people mourned Nero, they cheered Galba’s demise, and yet they are utterly indifferent to the death of Otho. If the people did not care who won between Otho and Vitellius, why should we do other than grant a smooth transition of power to the man who has claimed the imperial throne?”

“Something else we should remember,” Sabinus added, “is that Otho could very well have continued the war but chose not to. He gave his own life, so others might live. I think even Vitellius will not object to the senate honoring this sacrifice.”

“More importantly, Vitellius has a son and heir,” Italicus added. “This is something that neither Galba nor Otho provided. Germanicus Vitellius is a young boy of six, and with the right upbringing and mentorship he could make a fine ruler one day. It is to Rome’s future and the stability of the imperial succession we must look.”

“It’s settled then,” Caelius said. “Otho ruled Rome for a total of ninety days, and his death came scarcely after the farthest corners of the empire heard of his ascension. I think we can agree that the manner of his death was the one, and possibly only, noble act of this ‘second Nero’. And while many of us may view Vitellius as a less-than-inspiring persona, he did manage to rally seven legions, as well as all of Germania, Gaul, and Britannia to proclaim him emperor. That alone tells me there is more to our new ruler than any of us foresaw. Let us finish the business of the day and give Rome her rightful emperor.”

The total ‘debate’ over Vitellius’ claim to be emperor lasted less than ten minutes. A vote was called and, predictably, every member present voted to award the powers of emperor to Aulus Vitellius, effective immediately. The senate soon concluded its business of the day. Scribes furiously wrote the official decrees, which would be read in the Forum and posted throughout the city.

As he stepped down from the consul chairs, Sabinus was shamed by his perceived cowering before the demands of a man who was little more than another usurper. And yet, he knew he was completely powerless. He understood, so long as his brother commanded a huge army in the east, he would be under constant suspicion. For the sake of his family’s safety and reputation, he had to be the compliant servant, even when performing the

hateful task he now had to see to completion. The sight of Guardsman Statius standing alone in full armor near the large doorways reminded him of this. Sabinus simply nodded to the praetorian, who came to attention and walked a half step behind him to his left.

As they stepped out into the afternoon sun, Sabinus spotted Cornelius Dolabella talking with a small group of senators on the steps of the senate. Despite currently holding no official position within the assembly, many senators had been welcoming towards him, viewing his exile as little more than the paranoid machinations of the dethroned Otho.

"Otho accused Galba of paranoia, yet he was an even worse offender," one senator said to the returned former general.

"He was simply afraid Galba was about to name me his heir," Dolabella replied.

"There are many who would have supported you as Caesar," another senator remarked. "After all, you are a proven military leader. You defeated the Parthians in Armenia and have a rather distinguished record of service within the army and the senate."

"I am also nearly fifty years old," Dolabella countered. "A potential imperial successor needs to be groomed from a young age. Vitellius is but five or six years older than me, and as he has a son of his own. I can safely say I am off the list of potential Caesars."

"Well then, perhaps Vitellius will reward you for your loyalty in some way," the first senator said. "Another suffect consulship, perhaps?"

"I doubt it," Dolabella chuckled. "You forget that my current wife, Petronia, was once married to Vitellius. And while they may have divorced more than twenty years ago, she has never ceased to tell our friends how much happier I have made her than he was ever able. Needless to say, I doubt either of us will be well-received at any of Vitellius' lavish banquets. The way I hear it, the cost of each one of his feasts would pay the wages of an entire legion for a year."

This brought some appreciative laughs from the senators. That it came at Vitellius' expense showed just how little regard most of the senate had for their new emperor. And, despite his trepidations, Sabinus begrudgingly understood why both Otho and Vitellius viewed Dolabella as a potential threat. The man was a hero of Rome, a charismatic general, and a man the people loved. Should enough of the senate and people find Vitellius to be as gluttonous and uninspiring an emperor as he had been a senator, what would

stop the mob from naming Dolabella Caesar?

“Ah, Consul Sabinus,” the former general said, as he saw Sabinus approaching him. “A pleasure to see you again, old friend. Once I have reestablished my household in Rome, I should like to have you around for dinner. My wife is anxious to host a dinner party for our friends, and us ‘old soldiers’ can tell stories of our glory days with the legions.”

Dolabella’s words struck hard. He hated the task he had been given, further loathing himself for seeing it through. Sabinus bit his bottom lip, while handing off a small scroll which bore the seal of Vitellius.

“Believe me, my friend, nothing would give me greater pleasure,” Sabinus replied. “But I am afraid our new emperor has other ideas.”

“I see,” Dolabella said with a resigned sigh, as he read the short message. He then looked to the other senators. “My friends, I am regrettably being sent away from Rome once more. It would seem that Otho was not the only emperor wracked by paranoia.”

“I am truly sorry,” Sabinus said earnestly. He nodded his head back towards Statius. “This guardsman has been assigned to escort you to Interamna.” His eyes were downcast, though the former general did not know the extent of Sabinus’ sadness.

“It is all well and good,” Dolabella said, placing a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “We all have orders we must follow. Otherwise, this great civilization of ours will fall into chaos. Perhaps you shall just have to come and see us at Interamna.”

“Perhaps,” Sabinus lied, with a forced smile.

Dolabella addressed Statius. “Come, praetorian. You shall be a guest within my house this evening, empty as it may be, since we’ve had no time to move our household back to Rome. And tomorrow I will depart from the Eternal City once more.”



While Vitellius insisted on traveling first to the battlefields between Cremona and Bedriacum, his wife, the Empress Galeria, had taken a ship from Massilia to Rome. The reunion between husband and wife had been short and awkward, much like the vast majority of their marriage. Galeria had sat next to him during the triumphal parade, as well as the series of banquets, yet she quickly came to realize why she found her husband so boring and

nearly insufferable. Vitellius himself had offered no protest when Galeria said she wished to return to Rome. And while he loved his wife, the emperor found he was more at ease when she was not around, watching his every move.

The empress' cousin, Galerius Trachalus, had accompanied her back to Rome, along with a small entourage of senators' wives and a few of Vitellius' personally selected bodyguards. As Otho's former speechwriter, who'd written some rather damning remarks about his cousin's husband, Galerius wished to depart the emperor's entourage as soon as possible. There were those within the new imperial council who called for his immediate trial and execution. It was only the intervention of Galeria, who convinced her husband that it would be both unnecessary, as well as potentially embarrassing for him, that saved Galerius.

"I was more anxious to see you, dear cousin, than I was my husband," Galeria confessed, as they stepped off the ship at the Ostia docks. The accompanying guardsmen sent a messenger ahead, with orders to bring litters to carry the empress and her cousin back to Rome.

"I am flattered." Galerius smiled warmly. "Of course, now that you are Empress of Rome, it was only fitting that you be by your husband's side when he celebrated his victory."

"*His* victory," Galeria scoffed, shaking her head in disdain.

A pair of litters, each carried by more than a dozen slaves, arrived. The two cousins lounged comfortably with the inner curtains kept open, so they could talk freely. The senators' wives were left to wait for their own litters, while armed soldiers marched alongside the empress and Galerius.

"Aulus cannot even conquer his own gluttony, let alone an empire," Galeria continued. "He is my husband, the father of my children, and now our emperor. But I also know him better than any, except perhaps his mother. She and I both know it was Caecina and Valens who won the war, not Aulus. And they did not do so out of any sense of loyalty to Rome, or to my husband. They are a pair of vipers who lust for power. Aulus is merely a tool to be used for their own ends."

"I know both Caecina and Valens well," Galerius remarked. "Valens and I are of similar age and were, for a time, in a sort of rivalry within the Cursus Honorum. Caecina is much younger, though I would say he is far more dangerous, as his loyalties are fickle at best."

"In other words, he is like almost every other member of the senate,"

Galeria replied with a mocking laugh.

Galerius responded with an understanding chuckle. “Honestly, I no longer give a damn about imperial politics,” he remarked candidly. “I was Silius Italicus’ colleague during last year’s consulship. Though it was a far greater honor being elected to a full year-long term, rather than the two to six month suffect consulships that have sadly become the norm in recent years, I was only too happy to give up the chair. Titus Vinius, who assumed the consulship after me, had played the game of imperial succession for Otho. A lot of good it did him. He took a lance through the back within minutes of Galba’s death, slain by the soldiers of the very man he helped gain the throne.”

It was almost seventeen miles from the Ostia harbor to the imperial palace in Rome, and it took the litter bearers several hours to negotiate the crowded streets. Curious onlookers tried to get a glimpse of who was behind the drawn curtains. They were forcibly kept at bay by Vitellius’ soldiers. Many wondered aloud if it was the new emperor, while others were dismissive altogether of it being anyone of importance. And since the plebs had no idea what Galeria even looked like, it would have done little to sate their curiosity, even if they had gotten a glimpse.

“I’m sure your husband will have plenty of coins and statues made in your honor,” Galerius replied, when his cousin made note of this. “Within a few months, the whole of the empire will know your face. For good or for ill, dear cousin, your days of anonymity are over.”

It was almost nightfall by the time they arrived at the imperial palace. Surprisingly, the emperor’s mother, Sextilia, was waiting for them with her pregnant granddaughter, Vitellia. Vitellia’s husband, Valerius Asiaticus, was there to greet the empress consort. That Asiaticus was thirty-four and had a daughter nearly the same age as his fifteen-year old wife was not out of the ordinary. The two families had been a good match at the time of their wedding, and Asiaticus was most certainly all the more elated to now be the son-in-law of Rome’s emperor.

“Dearest mother,” he said, taking Galeria’s hand and helping her from her litter. Given Roman marriage conventions, it was also not strange that he was five years older than his mother-in-law.

“Thank you, Valerius,” the empress replied, standing stiffly for a moment, as she stretched from the long litter ride. She then embraced her daughter, before extending both hands towards the old woman, who now

stood from the chair that had been brought out for her.

"Welcome home, daughter," Sextilia said, taking Galeria's hands. "The sight of you fills me with much joy."

Being an old stoic, many speculated whether the aged woman had ever smiled. And yet, her daughter-in-law, along with her grandchildren, provided Sextilia with most of the joy she allowed herself. There were rumors that she loved Galeria more than her own son, and she had never said a word to rebut this.

Though they had much to talk about, the empress was exhausted from her journey. Sextilia had slaves take Galeria to her rooms. The palace was vast, and the empress wondered how many times she would get lost in its many halls before she knew where she was. And as a servant opened the door to her personal bedchamber, with its enormous bed and beautiful frescos adorning the walls, Galeria surmised that this room alone was larger than the small flat she had lived in for the past few months. It was a strange new world she found herself in, and Empress Galeria Fundana wondered if she would ever truly adapt to it.

Chapter III: A Desolate Peace

Caesarea, Judea
14 May 69 A.D.
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It was well into spring, and the campaign season should have been fully underway in Judea. The army had not fought a single action in over a year, not since General Trajan had lead a brief invasion of the neighboring kingdom of Perea. However, an internal Jewish civil war was still being bitterly contested between the various zealot factions. Vespasian had ordered his legions to remain in their garrisons. Not only did he not wish to expend valuable Roman lives in an assault on the holy city of Jerusalem, he wanted his men in a state of readiness, should *other* issues within the empire demand their services.

Vespasian and the armies in the east first received word about Otho's demise not from the senate, but from General Marcus Antonius Primus. Primus, who was legate of Legio VII, Gemina, had assumed command of the taskforce of three legions that were en route from the Balkans to reinforce Otho at Bedriacum. The impatience of the late emperor's brother had led to the war being decided before these forces could arrive. They were perhaps a week's march from Bedriacum, when a dispatch rider from Valens informed them the war was over.

Before he'd even ordered his legions to turn about and return to their barracks, the legate sent his fastest rider with a detailed dispatch to Vespasian. The man had ridden south to the port city of Tergeste and booked passage on a merchant vessel bound for Caesarea. It would be six weeks before official correspondence from Rome verified Otho's death and Vitellius' assumption of power; Primus' courier reached Vespasian in half that time.

The commander-in-chief had just returned from a plunge in the sea when he was approached by Optio Gaius Artorius, who had been temporarily assigned to the army headquarters as a scribe during the lull in the Judean campaign. He was accompanied by one of Primus' tribunes.

“General, sir,” Gaius said, after a quick salute. He did not even seem to notice that Vespasian was dripping with sea water. “An urgent message has come from Antonius Primus.”

“It must be urgent if he sent one of his staff tribunes to deliver it,” Vespasian observed, as he apprised the messenger. “Well, out with it.”

The tribune seemed confused that Vespasian did not wish to receive the dispatch in a more private setting, but he complied and handed over the scroll. At that moment, Vespasian’s son, Titus, stepped out from the open doorway of the palatial headquarters building.

“Otho is dead,” the tribune said, as Vespasian started to read. Though this revelation did not get a reaction out of him, Titus raised an eyebrow.

Gaius took a step back, wishing to remain inconspicuous, so that he would not be dismissed before he heard the rest of the grave news.

“That damned fool,” Vespasian muttered, handing the message to Titus. “Primus had the better part of three legions, plus additional auxiliary infantry and cavalry regiments, scarcely a week’s march from Bedriacum. And that stupid twat, Titianus, decided to attack the Vitellian Army without waiting for them!”

“Looks like it was still a close-run battle,” Titus noted. “At least from what Primus was able to sort out.”

“Yes, and with three extra legions, it would have been a rout. Vitellius’ head would now be on a spike, and the empire at peace once more. Instead, the gods only know what unrest that fat bastard will cause as he gorges his way through Italia, impoverishing every city he comes to. Juno help us if the imperial coffers cannot keep up with his appetites!”

“Still, this might work for the best,” Titus said, with a knowing grin.

“That it might,” his father acknowledged. He asked the tribune, “Did Primus have any other messages for me, verbal ones, perhaps?”

“Only that he asks what your intentions are, sir,” the man replied. “He did not outright say it, but he wishes to know if you will be casting your support behind Vitellius.”

“I’ll not send a written reply, because those have a nasty tendency of falling into the wrong hands,” Vespasian said. “When you return to the Danube, tell Primus to remain alert and keep his soldiers well-drilled and ready for further orders.”

“Understood, sir.” The tribune saluted and took his leave.

“Tell the truth, general,” Titus said quietly, “you were at least partially

hoping for this outcome."

Vespasian chuckled softly in reply but said nothing. He simply patted his son on the shoulder, and the two disappeared into the palace proper. Gaius took a deep breath and slowly made his way back to the clerks' offices on the western wing of the palace, all the while avoiding the shocked stares from nearby soldiers who overheard Vespasian's conversation with the tribune.

Rumors would travel throughout the army with a far greater speed than any imperial courier, yet the optio kept his thoughts to himself, at least until they received some sort of official word from Vespasian. All he knew was that the world had suddenly changed, and he suspected much turmoil would follow before it was made right again.



Statius and Dolabella departed Rome inconspicuously, under the cover of the predawn glow. No servants or other retainers accompanied them. The senator sent his chief freedman ahead to inform his wife of his pending return, while the rest remained in Rome to oversee his household there. Their destination lay approximately eighty miles southeast, halfway between Rome and Capua. The guardsman was quiet and reserved, partly out of deference to the former general, partly because of what he had been ordered to do. Dolabella, on the other hand, was rather friendly and talkative.

"You served with the legions before coming to the Guard," Dolabella speculated. That he would speak so freely with a mere praetorian was uncanny, and the guardsman did not know what to make of it.

"How did you know, sir?" Statius asked, maintaining his reserved demeanor.

"The way you carry yourself," the senator answered. "There was a time when all members of the Praetorian Guard were hand-picked from the very best of the legions. Politics, the courting of favors, and the granting of first priority to the sons of guardsmen have diluted this considerably. Your bearing tells me you are a man who lived a hard life, long before taking the relatively comfortable posting in Rome. Not many spend a career in the praetorians and end up as scarred as you. Am I correct?"

"You are very astute, sir," Statius concurred. Roman society was notoriously prone to favoring beauty over substance, and scars earned in battle were severely frowned upon. Statius had several that were impossible

to hide; one in particular that ran along the length of his forearm, and another along the side of his neck, where an enemy spear had only just barely missed the artery.

"Did we ever serve together?" the former general asked.

"I was with Legio VI, Ferrata," the guardsman replied. "I was wounded at Tigranocerta during the Parthian War in Armenia."

"Ah," Dolabella said, in a sudden moment of realization. "That is why your name sounds familiar to me. It was you who won the Rampart Crown during the final assault."

In what was his first showing of emotion since the journey began, Statius shook his head and laughed at the memory. "I'm surprised you remember that, sir. That was ten years ago, and I doubt that many within the Sixth Legion could even recall my name. Hell, no one in the Guard even knows what legion I was with, let alone the wars I fought in. I suspect if any of them did see that golden crown with its encircling castle designs, they would assume I stole it from somewhere. That's why I keep it locked in a chest. I've been tempted to sell it, but I can't bring myself to do so. Promise you won't tell anyone, sir?"

"Your secret is safe with me," Dolabella said, grinning broadly.

As they rode out of the city, past the Temple of the Divine Claudius, Statius was surprised at just how candid he was being with the former general. In just a short time, he had divulged more to Dolabella than he had to anyone within the praetorians. Even his late friend, Atticus, never knew about his role in the Siege of Tigranocerta. He at first wondered if he was getting careless and letting his guard down. Then he quietly shrugged and reckoned that his time with the senator would be short, and in another day or two it would not matter anyway.

"So you were transferred to the praetorians as a reward for earning the Rampart Crown?" Dolabella asked.

"More or less," Statius said. "Syria and Armenia are a dry, desolate shit hole. I had already been there for ten years when the war broke out. I took a Parthian spear to the leg during the attack on the walls, and to this day I'm amazed that filthy weapon did not give me gangrene. After the battle, I was being carried out on a stretcher when General Corbulo came up to me. Apparently, my centurion had already told him I was the first man over the wall, and that I should be awarded the Rampart Crown. Corbulo asked me if there was anything else he could do for me. Typical political speak from a

senatorial officer, but I think he meant well. I told him he could transfer me to the Praetorian Guard, so I would never have to return to such a forsaken place ever again. I made the remark partly in jest, and partly because my damn leg hurt so much I didn't know what else to say. Two months later, after recovering in a field hospital, I received my orders."

"A fascinating story," Dolabella said. "The Rampart Crown is indeed a rare honor. I still remember the story of when Julius Caesar launched a simultaneous amphibious and ground assault on an enemy city. Both the naval and army forces claimed their respective candidates were the first ones over the walls, causing quite the heated debate. But since the city was so large, and none of the allied forces could actually see each other, Caesar did the pragmatic thing and awarded the crown to both men."

"I recall reading the same story," Statius replied.

Dolabella looked to him with a raised eyebrow. "A literate soldier, winner of the Rampart Crown, yet you have never accepted promotion."

"It is true, sir, I can read. I thought I'd keep my education hidden when I joined the legions. But I forgot and actually signed my pay chit instead of making a simple mark. I had officers, from my optio on up to the centurion pilus prior, telling me I should be groomed for promotion. I would have none of it, and cannot tell you how many times I declined promotion to decanus… personal reasons, you understand. But tell me, sir, why are you so interested in me? Why does a mere praetorian guardsman fascinate one of Rome's most decorated generals?"

"Personal reasons, I suppose," Dolabella replied. His rather serene demeanor never changing. "I guess you could say, I would like to get to know a little more about the man who will likely be the last person I ever speak with."

Statius stopped his horse abruptly, his eyes wide for a moment. Dolabella simply looked back at him and smiled.

"Oh, come now, did you really think I didn't know?"

The two continued to ride in a very awkward silence for the next few minutes. It was all so very strange and surreal to him, that a condemned man would want to hear the life story of his executioner.

"I…I don't know what to say, sir," Statius stammered.

"Otho was paranoid, because he saw me as a potential threat," Dolabella explained. "I was the one he feared Galba might name as his successor. When instead that 'honor' fell to poor Licinianus, Otho should have realized I was

no threat to him at all. He had me sent away from the city anyway, though if he really wanted to exile me, he would have found some remote island."

The corner of Statius' mouth twitched, as this brought back the memory of Cornelius Laco, and his savage fate. The guardsman had been instrumental in his death, as well as that of Licinianus. And while he was but one among many of the emperors' assassins, he seemed to get a lot of the more high profile assignments in and around Rome.

"I only ask one thing of you," Dolabella said, his countenance now serious, and his jovial demeanor gone.

"Of course."

"Refrain from fulfilling your orders in front of my wife," he said. "You probably know that my dear Petronia was once married to Vitellius, albeit more than twenty years ago. Theirs was an unhappy and mercifully short-lived union, similar no doubt to his marriage with the unfortunate Galeria. Petronia has never made it a secret that she has been far happier with me, leaving Vitellius simmering with jealousy these past two decades. I think that is the real reason he is convinced I must be disposed of permanently."

"I think he also sees you as a potential rival," Statius added. "He is afraid someone, potentially a former general with great charisma, will do to him what he did to Otho."

"Vitellius is too stupid to see where the real threats lie," Dolabella scoffed. "If I wanted the imperial throne, I would have played the game against Otho and dispatched him politically long before he won the empire by cutting off Galba's head. Instead, I will be a far greater threat to Vitellius in death, than I ever was in life."

"How do you mean?"

"By having me disposed of so early in his reign, Vitellius will set an ugly precedent," Dolabella explained. "Unlike Otho's quick slaying of Laco, whom the people hated, I will flatter myself for a brief moment and say that I know well my reputation with my countrymen. Vitellius thinks he is dealing with a threat, when instead he will create even more. Legates and senators will feel that, like Nero, he will punish virtue and competence rather than reward it. Aulus Vitellius will not rule for long, and I predict my death will mark the beginning of his downfall."

After a few moments, the tone of the conversation changed. Dolabella began bantering with the guardsman once more, as if nothing had transpired regarding his pending demise. Statius privately admired the man's outward

stalwartness in the face of certain oblivion. He had had little qualms about doing away with either Licinianus or Laco, though he was still deeply troubled by the brave woman in Albium Intimilium that he'd been ordered to slay. And now he was tasked with the killing of one of Rome's most celebrated heroes, all due to the petty jealousies of a fat tyrant who only came to the throne so his manipulators could rule through him.

It was now midafternoon, and the sun shone brightly. And while the trees lining either side of the road offered some shade, it was rather warm, and both men were sweating and thirsty. About a quarter mile up ahead, they spotted an out of the way tavern.

"I don't know about you, but I am rather parched," Dolabella said. "Are you needing refreshments?"

"I am, sir," Statius replied.

The two dismounted near a large tree, under whose shadow the single-story tavern sat. As Dolabella tied both their mounts to a stone mile marker post, Statius realized that to go any further on this journey was utterly pointless. He also knew the more time he spent with the former general, the greater his guilty conscience would become. And so, as silently as he was able, he unsheathed his gladius and crept up behind his prey. Dolabella had just stood upright when the guardsman grabbed him around the face from behind. With rapid precision, he slashed his blade across the senator's throat. Dolabella's cries were muffled by Statius' hand. He grabbed and clawed at the guardsman's arm as he sank to his knees. Blood was gushing from the gaping wound in his neck, as well as from his mouth, and all over Statius' hand and forearm.

"Forgive me, sir," the praetorian whispered into his ear. "I pray that you will be avenged against those who gave me my orders. Ride now to Elysium."

The body was left where it fell. There was no sense in taking it to its destination or back to Rome. The guardsman knew someone would find him soon enough. He quickly wiped the blood from his gladius, remounted his horse, and began the long trek back to Rome. His thoughts soon turned to his daughter. He constantly reminded himself that it was for her he performed these gruesome duties. The amount of coin he had earned would ensure a better life for both of them. And yet, how much longer could he continue to be little more than an assassin who wore a uniform, especially in the service of an emperor he so vehemently despised?



It was now the third week of May, and on this warm Mediterranean spring morning along the coast of Caesarea, Vespasian decided to spend it riding his horse along the beach. A ship from Rome had docked an hour before. And as the commander-in-chief was leading his horse from the stables, he saw a familiar face coming towards him with Titus.

“By Diana,” he said with a laugh. “Did I not just send you back to Rome?”

“That was two months ago.” Aula Vale smiled. “And most of that time has been spent at sea.” She was wearing her red courier’s tunic, and she carried her satchel and spatha slung over her right shoulder. It was a far cry from the more womanly stola she wore in Rome and while staying as Vespasian’s guest in Caesarea. “More dispatches from my brother, then?” Vespasian asked.

Aula nodded.

The old general shrugged. “Well, nothing that can’t wait until after I’ve had a morning ride. Care to join me?”

Aula broke into a broad smile. “I have just spent the last three weeks aboard a cramped ship,” she said, before adding, “I would love to.”

Titus found a mount for the young courier, and the three of them rode out onto the vast stretches of beach that ran along the western coast of Judea. Aula was glad to ride a horse once more. Some of her earliest memories were of her father teaching her to ride, almost from the time she was able to walk, and she relished the blow of the sea winds and the warmth of the sun on her face.

Vespasian was laughing boisterously, at one point jumping down from his horse and splashing out into the waves.

“The sea feels wonderful, Titus!” he shouted, as he sat with the tide rolling past his chest.

“Your father has quite the jovial personality,” Aula said to the young legate, with a laugh.

“Yes,” Titus said with what could only be described as a relieved smile. “It is a side of him that has been absent for far too long. The war in Judea has done much to sap his strength and good humor. I am glad to see him laughing again.”

“Normally, I would have stripped naked before plunging into the sea, modesty be damned!” Vespasian said, as he briskly walked out of the surf, his heavy footsteps splashing. “Yet for some reason, I feel like I have to at least try and behave myself around you, Lady Vale.”

“Please don’t feel you have to be prudish on my account,” Aula replied with a half grin. “I have spent plenty of time in public bathhouses both in Rome and Britannia.”

“I have always felt a sense of refreshing candor in such places,” Vespasian said, as he remounted his horse. “When one is laid out naked as the day they were born, for all to see, they tend to be a lot more honest with themselves and with others. Besides, I find it amusing to snicker at those men who, being less than blessed by the gods, like to claim their inadequacies are the result of the cold plunge!”

Both Aula and Titus laughed at this. Aula had never met Vespasian before her first journey to Judea and had no knowledge of his penchant for practical jokes and sexual innuendo. The brutal sieges, with thousands of his soldiers left dead and wounded, had created a pall of gloom over the commander-in-chief. This extended reprieve from the fighting had done wonders for his physical and emotional well-being. Just six months shy of his sixtieth birthday, Vespasian was certainly no longer a young man, and the Judean revolt had done much to age him. Yet he now looked completely revived, as if he were ten years younger.

As they rode back to the governor’s palace at Caesarea, Titus rightly suspected it was not just the sea air and the lull in the war that had rejuvenated his father. There was a greater sense of purpose about him now, a purpose they had yet to fully embrace. What they did know was that the destiny of the Flavians was not to simply languish in the hellish landscapes of Judea, slaughtering rebellious fanatics. Their time was coming, and the fates had something greater in mind for both father and son alike.

Vespasian was still soaking wet, his sandals squishing, as they walked up the stone steps into the courtyard of the palace. Aula was about to take her leave of the commander-in-chief when she saw her old friend, Gaius Artorius, walking along the breezeway, his eyes fixed on a stack of documents he carried.

“General, sir,” he said with a salute, as he caught sight of Vespasian and Titus.

The two returned the courtesy and made their way into the palace.

“And not even a ‘hello’ for me?” Aula asked, as the large doors closed behind her.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Gaius said with a laugh, nearly dropping his papers. “I did not think I would see you here again.”

“Nor I you,” Aula replied.

“Yes, well, if I stay away too much longer, my temporary replacement back at the century won’t let me have my position back. But what are you doing here?”

“Same thing as before, acting as courier for the Prefect of the City of Rome. I take it you’ve heard?”

Gaius nodded. “Yes, though we only received the official word recently. It was Antonius Primus who sent one of his tribunes to deliver the news to us, three weeks before we heard anything from the senate.”

Gaius nodded towards the doors. “Enjoy your ride with the young legate?” he asked with a cocked grin.

Aula looked at him and raised an eyebrow. “Really, Gaius? We have only recently heard that the emperor is dead, a usurper has laid claim to the throne and you’re jealous of my going on a horse ride with Titus and Vespasian?” Before he could answer, she giggled and quickly said, “Not that it matters, but I am scarcely his type. I hear Titus likes his women slightly older.”

“You’re referring to Queen Julia Berenice,” Gaius replied, with a laugh and a shrug.

Aula simply smiled.

Titus carrying on an affair with the sister of the allied Jewish king, Marcus Julius Agrippa II, was no secret to anyone. Berenice’s brother encouraged the liaison, as he felt it strengthened the ties between his family and the Flavians. That she was eleven years older than Titus, with her eldest just five years younger than him, mattered little.

“I am sorry,” Gaius said, with a short laugh and a shake of his head. “You are right. The empire has scarcely rid itself of the tyrant, Galba, and now Otho is gone as well. If Vitellius is half as incompetent as Vespasian believes, I suspect Rome will find herself facing another grave crisis this year.”

“We can only wait and see,” Aula remarked.

“Yes, but I am very glad to see you, especially since I am heading back to the legion in two days. I thought I would have returned some time ago, but then General Trajan extended my duties here for another month. We received

a draft of twenty new recruits, and I am to escort them to Scythopolis. But what about you? Will you stay long in Caesarea?"

"Like you, I am bound to do my duty," Aula replied. "Vespasian may keep me here for a while, or he may send me right back to Rome. He'll likely have plenty of messages to send to his brother, but after that, who knows? Sabinus is my employer, and I will go wherever he needs me. Still, something tells me you and I will see each other again before this is over."

She was now giving him a rather coy grin. It was a look she had used since she was a girl, and Gaius found it rather alluring. He truly loved Aula and had expressed his feelings for her during her last journey to Judea. Her reply had been evasive. She did not feel she could commit her heart to anyone at this time. They could only wait and see what the future brought. Both suspected the probability of war would soon arise between Vitellius and Vespasian. How cruel would the fates be, if they should fall for each other only to have one or the other killed during the coming conflict?



For the praetorian officers from Maritime Alpes, the journey to Lugdunum had taken the better part of a week. A trireme had taken them as far as the River Rhodanus, from there they were transported by river barge to the city. It was baffling to Optio Proculus and the other officers that while they had been directed to leave their weapons and armor behind, they had never been formally placed under arrest. No one was bound or shackled, and aside from the accompanying tribune, there were no other soldiers journeying with them. There were twenty total officers from the maritime taskforce ordered to Lugdunum, including Proculus. The rest were either dead or missing. While most of the men were more curious than fearful about meeting the new emperor, three of their companions had jumped overboard in the middle of the night when the barge passed by the city of Valentia. The tribune had berated the others in the morning, not to be so damned foolish. He then simply crossed the names off his list as 'deceased,' not wishing to have to explain to his superiors that he let three of his charges escape.

Upon reaching the Gallic capital, an armed escort was waiting for them. Then the optio's stomach began to twist, as his feelings of unease turned to outright fear. In a sudden revelation, he began to realize the significance of not who was on the list of names, but rather who was left off. Weak-willed

men like Centurion Novellus were not ordered to come before the emperor. Proculus realized the list was not random at all, but a compilation of those praetorian officers who had set the stage for Galba's overthrow and who most voraciously fought for Otho. He wondered if the other praetorian cohorts had also been given a paid discharge. And were their perceived troublesome officers also sent to Vitellius?

"Wait here," a legionary ordered the men, while he went into the mayor's palace.

They were now surrounded by at least an entire century. All the soldiers remained rigid and completely silent. The quiet indifference of their fellow soldiers was even more unnerving than the maddeningly long wait to see the new emperor.

After at least an hour, the men were finally ushered in to the audience chamber. The walls within were lined with soldiers, with a large gathering of senators, magistrates, and other hangers-on flocked around the large chair in the middle of the floor.

Proculus had heard stories about the slothful Vitellius. Yet until that moment, he'd had no idea the new emperor was an even more wretched sight in person. His fat face was flushed as if he had run a great distance, though the optio suspected he had not left his chair for most of the day. A large laurel crown sat atop his head, and while his purple and gold imperial robes were magnificent, they could not take away attention from Vitellius' protruding stomach. To say Proculus and the other praetorian officers found him uninspiring was an understatement. Seated on either side of the emperor were two men, who Proculus could only guess were the Vitellian generals, Caecina and Valens.

"The last of the praetorian officers from Maritime Alpes, sire," a centurion stated.

"Ah, yes," Vitellius said, sitting upright and folding his hands in his lap. "Having dealt with your companions who accompanied the usurper, I almost forgot about you. A pity for you that I remembered."

"Are we being formally charged?" Proculus asked, taking a step in front of his peers. His sense of indignity was now overwhelming his fear.

"The emperor will suffer no rivals," Valens spoke up. "You men not only fought most voraciously for the usurper, but you are also the same ones who placed him on the throne in the first place."

"A list has come into my possession," Vitellius said, holding up a piece of

parchment. “It contains the names of every man who claimed to have personally slain Emperor Galba, and who demanded they be rewarded for it. All of you are on this list and have, therefore, confessed to the murder of your own emperor.”

“But you rebelled against Galba!” Proculus protested. “How can you condemn us, when you marched on Rome with seven legions in order to depose him?”

“And by your confession,” Valens shouted, interrupting him, “You are sentenced to death, to be carried out immediately.”

Proculus and the others shouted in protest as they were violently dragged away by a swarm of legionaries. One man punched the praetorian optio hard in the stomach, doubling him over. Two others grabbed him by the arms and dragged him down the long foyer and out into the main courtyard. Twenty legionaries stood in a line, each with his gladius drawn and hands folded in front of him.

“Consider yourselves lucky,” the decanus leading them said to the condemned. “The last lot were strangled to death. At least my lads will make it quick for you.”

Proculus and the others were roughly forced down onto their knees, with at least two to three legionaries holding them in place. There was no gloating from the executioners, but rather an air of sadness about them. None took any sort of pleasure in executing fellow soldiers of Rome, even if they were praetorians. The legionaries with the drawn swords stood behind the condemned officers, while their decanus stood in front of the mournful display.

The decanus raised his hand up. Proculus gritted his teeth, his mind racing in a contrasting frenzy of both terror and acceptance. There were also long-suppressed feelings of guilt. Even though Galba had been a despicable tyrant, Proculus knew his actions in overthrowing him amounted to nothing short of murder. The decanus dropped his hand, and for a few brief moments, Proculus felt the blinding pain of a gladius being plunged into the back of his neck. The agony soon left him, and his world went black.

Chapter IV: Feasts of Victory and Bloodshed

Ticinum, Northern Italia
28 May 69 A.D.
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The unpleasant business in Lugdunum concluded, the new emperor finally began his long journey towards Rome. Three days before Vitellius' arrival at Cremona, he spent the evening in the city of Ticinum, sixty miles to the west. In an attempt to win favor with the emperor, the city's governor had levied a one-time tax upon the entire populace to fund a massive banquet, celebrating Vitellius' triumph. The tax, which was enforced either by coercion or threats, raised nearly half a million denarii for the extravaganza. And it was not just for the emperor's banquet, but also to provide food, drink, and a bevy of entertainment to the emperor's ever-growing entourage of soldiers, senators, magistrates, and various persons seeking imperial favor.

In addition to Valens and Caecina, Vitellius had invited the newly appointed Governor of Britannia, Marcus Bolanus, as well as the Governor of Gallia Lugdunensis, Junius Blaesus. The banquet would act as a farewell dinner for Bolanus before he departed for his new province, and Blaesus was now the largest holder of the emperor's personal debts. While Caecina and Valens continued in their incessant contention with each other, they now had another rival in Blaesus, who was essentially purchasing his influence within the imperial court by continuing to fund Vitellius' excesses. Whatever the rivalry existed between the two generals, both resented an outsider usurping their authority with some chests of gold coin.

Perhaps the most intriguing of the emperor's honored guests was Verginius Rufus. As a reward for his loyalty and service to the empire, Otho had awarded him a two-month suffect consulship which ended in April, soon after the previous emperor's death. Caecina, who understood well the former general's popularity, had urged Vitellius to reach out to him, as he would be a viable ally. He had kept a low profile since resigning his command of the Rhine Legions, following the Gallic rebellion a year earlier.

"The noble senator, former consul, and eminent general, Lucius

Verginius Rufus!” the porter announced, over the noise of the various musicians, who were dispersed throughout the chamber.

“Verginius, my friend!” Vitellius said, as he struggled to sit upright on his dining couch.

“Sire,” the senator said with a bow. He knew of Vitellius’ refusal to take on the name ‘Caesar’ and so avoided its use.

“Please join us,” the emperor replied, waving towards a vacant couch. “You honor us with your presence.” He then clapped his hands and shouted, “My serving dish!”

Slaves quickly departed for the kitchens, while Vitellius grinned broadly. Several trays of half-eaten delicacies and two or three upturned wine cups lay scattered on his table.

“Wait until you see this,” he said excitedly to Verginius. “I had it specially made to commemorate my victory over the usurper. Don’t tell anyone, but it cost two hundred thousand denarii.”

The former general almost choked on his wine. For a man who had been terribly in debt, and who was undertaking a fair number of pragmatic reforms to control imperial spending, Vitellius still spared no expense when it came to his own lavish lifestyle. And it was indeed a magnificent serving dish. Carried by four servants using poles underneath, it was at least a half inch think and looked to be crafted from pure silver. The sides curved upward, giving it the appearance of a flat-bottomed bowl rather than a platter. It was adorned with hundreds of small designs depicting heroic acts from both Greek and Roman mythology. A figure of Perseus holding the head of Medusa was visible, as was the famous she-wolf suckling the infants Romulus and Remus. Atop the platter sat a pair of roasted peacocks whose feathers had been reattached, adding a plethora of color to the display. As magnificent as the platter was, Verginius hoped the emperor was speaking in jest regarding its cost.

“A most inspired memento to your triumph, sire,” the general said in appreciation.

Vitellius reached over and tore of a piece off one of the roasted peacocks, while nearly tipping the platter over. “Ah, Bolanus,” he said to the new Governor of Britannia, whose couch sat near Verginius. “Enjoy the trappings of civilization while you can. In another month or so, you’ll be living in the wild among barbarians.”

“I think you will find the people of Britannia are assimilating well into

our way of life," Bolanus replied. "The rebellion under that filthy bitch, Boudicca, was the last gasp of the unwashed hordes."

Vitellius winced at the mention of the Iceni queen's name. Not that he cared a damn about the slaughter of tens-of-thousands wrought by both Boudicca and the Roman Army, but it served as a reminder that the general who defeated her had later become one of his enemies. That Paulinus was still lauded as a hero by the masses was the only reason Vitellius allowed him to live.

The emperor soon demanded a fresh pitcher of wine, his fourth of the evening, while urging the musicians to play on.

While the emperor and his guests engaged in their vast banquet, the military camps that enveloped Ticinum had become a spectacle of drunken debauchery. The city's wine stores were insufficient to supply an army that now numbered almost sixty thousand men. Every city within five hundred miles had been scoured for its best vintage beforehand. Actors, musicians, and various entertainers had traveled great distances in order to separate the imperial soldiers from their hard-earned coin. Most importantly of all, every brothel from Augusta Taurinorum in the west to Ravenna on the east coast had shuttered their doors, and sent every prostitute under their roofs to satisfy the wanton lusts of Vitellius' army.

Near the western edge of the camp, a large force of Batavian auxiliaries were bivouacked along with legionaries from the Primigenia Legion. The arrogance of the Batavians was well known. They took great pride in the fact that they had prevented Legio XIV from reinforcing Nero during the Julio-Claudian emperor's final days. As such, they ceaselessly proclaimed they had mastery over the legions, and that they had decided who became emperor.

"And I'll prove our superior strength over you Latin cunts!" a drunken trooper proclaimed, while holding aloft a large clay jug of mead. "You Romans are soft as a fat woman's tit!"

Like most Gallic and Germanic peoples, the Batavian soldier was a big man, nearly half a head taller than most of the growing crowd of legionaries. Though his face was shaven, his blonde hair hung down to his shoulders, which looked as if they were cut from stone. The legionaries, who were in an equal state of inebriation, soon took offense to the raving man's insults and began to look for a suitable challenger among their companions.

"I accept your challenge," a voice called from the crowd. "Even if it

means having to put my hands on an unwashed barbarian."

The legionary who stepped forward was also of Germanic origins, though he was still a couple of inches shorter than the Batavian. A big man in his own right, he threw off his tunic, revealing a ripped and muscular physique.

"Excellent!" the auxiliary trooper said, tossing the jug over his shoulder.

A circle was formed of both legionaries and auxiliaries, as the two men faced each other in what was quickly agreed would be a wrestling match. For several moments they circled each other, while their friends shouted and jeered, hurling insults towards their friend's opponent. Finally, they grabbed a hold of each other, grunting and pulling, trying to get the other man onto the ground. The legionary realized he was being overwhelmed by the brutal strength of his adversary, and brought his knee up sharply into the Batavian's groin. The auxiliary howled in pain as he fell to his knees. Then, with a growl of rage, his face completely red, he lunged back to his feet, hoisted his opponent up off the ground, and threw him into several of his fellow legionaries. What happened next would have been predictable to any who witnessed the chaos involving drunken men, who were also heavily armed.

While the Batavian raised his arms in triumph and was being raucously applauded by his mates, the indignant legionaries went for their weapons. The auxiliaries had left their arms stacked around their respective camps, whereas many of the legionaries still carried their gladii. Their hatred for the Batavians, who never ceased in gloating about their thwarting of Legio XIV, boiled over. A wild melee ensued. Men smashed each other with their fists, while blades flashed from their scabbards. Screams of pain echoed throughout, as auxiliaries were slain by their enraged allies. Gladii chopped off hands and into shins, while plunging into the guts of many an auxiliary. The sounding of war horns was the only thing which prevented the Batavians from being completely slaughtered.

"The Othonians are coming!" voices shouted, from near the gates of the encampment.

In their mind-addled stupor the soldiers panicked, thinking somehow the slain usurper's legions were declaring war once again, and marching on Vitellius. Despite the dozens of dead and badly maimed Batavians scattered about, differences were quickly put aside as legionary and auxilia alike attempted to rally to the standards and prepare to face the enemy. What all had forgotten was that two days prior, the emperor had given the former Othonian Legions their marching orders, with several thousand of his own

men acting as escorts. Those soldiers now descending upon the city were in fact the Vitellian forces, eager to return to Ticinum in time to take part in the revelry.

"Damn it all," somebody swore. "It's our own fucking troops!"

As soldiers marched into the camp, they were appalled at the sight of all the self-inflicted carnage.

"What in Hades happened here?" a centurion demanded, angered at the sight of the slain auxiliaries. "Who is responsible for this?"

Embarrassed by their conduct, neither legionary nor Batavian wished to confess that a drunken wrestling match had gotten out of hand. And now the camp was littered with bloody corpses, as though the war had commenced once more.

"There!" somebody shouted, pointing towards a group of men sitting around a fire, surrounded by a number of courtesans.

"Who?" the centurion asked.

"That's one of Verginius' servants," the soldier asserted. "Filthy traitor came here stirring up trouble!"

Eager to find someone else to shoulder the blame, the mass of Batavians and legionaries shouted affirmation that it was the servant's fault. The centurion naturally had his doubts, as all the men stunk of cheap wine and mead. However, if sacrificing a mere slave was what it took to restore order, then so be it.

"Oy!" he shouted, drawing his gladius.

The servant, oblivious to the recriminations made against him, was suddenly filled with terror at seeing dozens of armed soldiers stalking towards him. He quickly leapt to his feet, practically throwing the woman sitting on his lap off him.

"After him!" a legionary shouted, as the slave fled through the camp.

Numerous soldiers, including returning legionaries and drunken revelers, were now chasing the terrified slave through the camp. Many tripped over tent ropes, weapons racks, as well as other soldiers and their various hangers-on. It was more than a mile into the city and the governor's palace. The slave ran for his life, his lungs burning and legs aching from the exertion.

The large doors to the palace were open, as scores of servants, wine and food merchants, as well as inebriated guests came and went at their leisure. Though there were a number of soldiers on guard duty, most were occupied with negotiating the favors of women and wine vendors. Any sense of

discipline or remaining alert while on duty seemed to have abandoned them. It was only after the slave forced his way into the palace and the rampaging mob, which now numbered around a hundred persons, assailed the entrance with their weapons drawn that the guards took notice.

"What in the bloody hell is this?" one of them asked, completely baffled.

"That slave you just let through here is a damned criminal!" the centurion snapped. "Now out of our way so we can dispense with justice."

Within the banquet hall, most of the guests had gorged themselves on both food and drink and were in various states of inebriation. Dozens of servants attempted in vain to keep the floors cleaned, as plates, cups, pitchers, and serving platters were scattered throughout. A group of acrobats were now performing for the emperor and his guests, and as they began forming a human pyramid, the maddened shouts of pursuing soldiers echoed down the corridor.

"Protect me, master!" the fleeing servant cried, as he ran into the banquet hall. He tripped over several discarded serving trays, falling face first at the feet of Vitellius and Verginius.

As the mob of soldiers burst into the chamber, guests cried out in panic, while acrobats and entertainers scattered.

The emperor was aghast and sat upright, his eyes wide. "How dare you interrupt my celebration!" He noted the armored man with the transverse crest on his helm. "Centurion, you had best explain yourself."

"That man is servant to a traitor," the officer said, pointing accusingly at the servant, as well as Verginius. "He caused a brawl between our legionaries and Batavian auxiliaries, a number of whom now lie dead."

"You mean to tell me a mere slave can spontaneously cause a riot among imperial soldiers?" Verginius asked indignantly. The former general then stood up and addressed Vitellius. "Most of these men stink of vulgar drink, sire. Likely they started the brawl amongst themselves and are now looking for someone to blame."

"I agree," Vitellius replied. "It is no secret to anyone, the animosity that exists between the Batavians and our legionaries."

The pursuing mob suddenly lost its vigor and bloodlust. Though most were still drunk, they began to realize the absurdity of what they were trying to do. The centurion and his sober legionaries appeared downright embarrassed.

Vitellius glared at the men. “Centurion, these men started a drunken brawl which got an unknown number of our auxiliaries killed. You listened to the drunken ravings of these madmen, threatened the life of an innocent slave, and now you dare to accuse one of Rome’s greatest generals and statesmen of treason. I should strip you of your rank, then have you whipped and discharged from the ranks for this outrage.” He paused for a moment, while the centurion cast his eyes on the floor. The emperor laid back down on his couch. “Fortunately for you, I am in a good humor this night, and I will not let this disgraceful conduct ruin it. I will leave it to you to sort this matter out, but know that if I hear so much as a single threatening word towards General Verginius or any members of his household, I will hold you fully accountable.”

The centurion and his men said nothing, but deeply bowed before quickly leaving the hall. And though the guests were confounded by what they had just witnessed, both Valens and Caecina were even more shocked by the rare show of leadership presence from their emperor.

“I think,” Valens said slowly, “we should take care of those troublesome auxiliaries, sooner rather than later.”

“Flog a few of the troublemakers and then dispatch them back to their garrisons,” the emperor directed. “They have forfeited their privilege of accompanying us to Rome.”

Vitellius then told the musicians to play on. While the tone of the celebration was certainly marred by the soldiers’ disgraceful conduct, the emperor continued his feast and seemed to forget the matter completely.



Across the Mediterranean, the mood was anything but celebratory. No sooner had word reached the eastern provinces that Otho was dead and Vitellius now emperor, than the seeds of rebellion were being sown once more. The heart of this unrest lay not in Judea, but further to the south in Egypt. Governor Alexander, a staunch ally of Vespasian, had only received vague instructions from the Flavian general regarding maintaining the readiness of his legions, and he was ready to take matters into his own hands. On the first day of June, he summoned one of his legion commanders to discuss the matter.

Tiberius Julius Alexander had served as procurator of Egypt for the past

four years. One of the only provinces that was governed by a member of the equites rather than the senate, the procuratorship was regarded as one of the highest postings a member of the lesser nobility could achieve. The only other position of greater status was Prefect of the Praetorian Guard, and that was debatable. Alexander was an even greater rarity for a member of the equites, for not only was he an Alexandrian, but also a Jew.

Born during the reign of Tiberius, in whose honor he was named, his father had served as an imperial customs official in Alexandria. Due to his family's wealth and connections, and because his father was a Roman citizen, Alexander was allowed to follow the political career path of the Roman equites, something which alienated him greatly from his fellow Jews. And though not a complete apostate of his ancestral faith, he almost without exception put the interests of the empire above those of his native religion. Still, his ethnicity and religion made him a viable candidate to be Procurator of Judea soon after the death of King Agrippa I. And though he only served for two years, it marked a rare period of peace within the volatile region.

Since being granted control over Egypt, Alexander had solidified his relationships with the former imperial family, as well as Vespasian and the Flavians. He had, however, all but completely severed ties with the Jews by this point. After a riot turned extremely violent, Alexander unleashed the legions upon the Jewish quarter of the city, killing all who failed to successfully flee the city. Vespasian's son, Titus, had been Chief Tribune of Legio XV, *Apollinaris*, at the time and was promoted to its commanding legate soon after. The riots aside, Alexandria and Egypt, as a whole, had managed to avoid most of the sectarian violence that threatened to spill over from neighboring Judea.

"Happy Calends of June!" the boisterous voice of the legate said, as he was ushered into Alexander's private study.

"And to you, sir," the prefect said, clasping the general's hand.

Gaius Camillus Thrasea was an experienced officer now serving his third tour as legate of a legion. He commanded Legio XXII, *Deiotariana*, whose history dated back over a hundred years prior to the Primigenia Legion in Northern Italia, which happened to share the same number.

"No doubt you've heard about the fall of our dear emperor," Alexander said, taking a seat behind his desk.

Thrasea chuckled. "I wouldn't call him 'dear'. It isn't as if he was loved like Augustus or Claudius. He scarcely had time to introduce himself to the

empire, and the army knew nothing about him."

"Other than the fact that he was their rightful emperor, ratified by the Senate of Rome," Alexander emphasized.

"Well, yes, *that*," the legate acknowledged. "But seeing as how the senate has now ratified Vitellius as emperor, the same can be said for him." The tone in Thrasea's voice was unconvincing.

"You don't believe that any more than I do," Alexander countered knowingly. "And how can it be considered rightful, when it was done with forty thousand blades pointed at the senate's collective necks? The senate could have denied Otho but chose not to. With Vitellius, they really had no choice."

"And you think we have a choice now?" It was now Thrasea's turn to speculate. He had suspected for a long time what might happen, should Otho lose the war against Vitellius.

"We always have a choice," Alexander conjectured. "Do we simply let that fat bastard and his swarm of locusts devour the empire, or do we take a stand for Rome?"

The legate pondered this for a moment. He had met Vitellius on a few occasions, and while a likeable enough fellow, he was the last person who should have ever been considered a viable candidate to become emperor.

"Whether he compelled the Rhine Legions to fight for him or they simply propped him up as their emperor while they mutinied is of no matter. From what little I know about him personally, I will say Vitellius is not the cruel despot that Galba was. He is intelligent, and I do believe his intentions are noble. However, he is slothful, lazy, and easily manipulated. And just as the Rhine Army refused to swear allegiance to Galba, I cannot see the legions in the east giving their oaths to Vitellius."

"You know what must be done, then," Alexander said, folding his hands on his desk.

"Has Vespasian said anything yet?" Thrasea asked.

Alexander shook his head. "Not officially. I think if we declare for him and make it into a populist uprising, rather than a military revolt, we stand a much better chance of not only gaining the people's support, but of keeping it once this is over."

"All the same, we still need the legions." The legate gave a nod, formulating his own idea as to how they should proceed. "I'll speak with my colleague from the Third Cyrenaica Legion. Their soldiers and mine share the

same fortress, and I have little doubt that they are of a similar temperament. The armies of the Rhine mutinied because their legates and senior officers told them to, but if this is going to be a populist uprising within the army, it should start at the very bottom. I'll need a couple of weeks, but it shouldn't be too difficult to find our voice in the ranks. When did the senate say we are to renew our oaths to Vitellius?"

"The first day of July," Alexander answered.

"Well then, the lads will swear their allegiance, and Rome will have an emperor," Thrasea asserted. "But it will not be that fat bastard whose ass could break the imperial throne."



For Lucius Artorius Magnus, the rise of a new emperor was an opportunity for him to finally achieve his ambition of returning to active military service. There was little chance of Vitellius coming through Ariminum, as it would divert him from the most direct route to Rome.

"I leave tomorrow for Arretium," he told his deputy, a magistrate named Porcius. "It is only fitting that I greet the emperor and congratulate him on behalf of the people of Ariminum."

"Very good, sir," Porcius replied. "Do you know how long you will be away?"

"I don't even know where the emperor is," Lucius confessed. "I heard he has crossed into Northern Italia, but that is all I know. No doubt every major city and township will wish to show him their hospitality and win favor with the new imperial court."

"Only fair that we do the same, then," Porcius concurred. "Fortunately for us, we will not have to host Vitellius and his entourage. I hear he has more than one hundred thousand following him."

"It could be higher than that," Lucius noted. "Just from what I know about the legions and other military units escorting him, their total strength alone must be nearly sixty thousand. And if we take into account all of their servants plus Vitellius' own extensive revenue, along with the senators, equites, various magistrates, and each one of their respective entourages and slaves, I daresay he has his own marching city accompanying him."

"So you'll be gone about a month," the deputy governor speculated.

"That's a reasonable guess," Lucius remarked. "Though let's plan for

two. If I am delayed past the end of July, I will send a message to you."

"I am sure I will manage," Porcius said. He had served a previous four-year term as deputy governor, and his level of experience often made Lucius feel like his own services were scarcely needed. "And will Lady Laura be accompanying you?"



The day after the banquet at Ticinum, Vitellius sought to address his soldiers, as well as the delegation from the senate which had just arrived. Among them was Flavius Sabinus, who was serving his term as suffect consul for May and June.

"Ah, noble Sabinus," Vitellius said, embracing him. Given the amount of wine the emperor had consumed the night prior, it was nothing short of amazing that he appeared to be suffering little, if any, ill effects.

"The senate sends its warmest greetings, sire," Sabinus replied. "There is much work to be done once you return to the capital."

"Yes, of course," Vitellius replied dismissively. "I have the rest of my life to toil in service to my people. But first, there is the matter of my seeing the battlefields where our armies defeated the usurper. And General Valens has promised me quite the display of gladiators at the new arena in Cremona. Those sullen bastards from the Thirteenth Legion built us the new amphitheater as a penance for their crimes."

"An effective use for legionaries," the suffect consul replied, though Vitellius failed to note the trace of sarcasm in his voice. "And you can now dispose of all the surviving gladiators that Otho brought north with him."

Vitellius could not tell if Sabinus was being genuine or sardonic. He therefore decided to ignore the remark. Instead, he led his entourage to the reviewing stand, where a large force of legionaries were gathered. Given the vast size of the army, each legion was only able to send one or two cohorts to parade before the emperor. Something quickly noted was the complete absence of representation from any auxilia regiments. The emperor proceeded to give a short speech, exhorting the legions for their loyalty and bravery and, after the soldiers were dismissed, addressed the senatorial delegation and his senior military officers.

"Forgive me for saying so, sire," Caecina spoke up, "but the auxiliaries are not going to like hearing that you praised the legions on the very day after

they slaughtered a number of Batavians."

"That is why they are no longer needed in my entourage," the emperor replied. "All Batavian and Gallic auxilia infantry regiments are ordered to return to their home garrisons immediately. Furthermore, I have contemplated a few measures as to how we can salvage the empire from further financial hardships."

"A few less banquets that cost the treasury a million denarii a day would be a start," Sabinus muttered under his breath. The senators closest to him chuckled, showing just how little respect they held for Vitellius.

"With the usurper deposed and peace in the empire," Vitellius continued, "I feel that the size of our armies in Gaul and Germania is a strain on the imperial coffers that we can readily lessen. Therefore, I have decided all legions and auxilia regiments in Gaul and Germania shall be allowed to fall beneath their authorized strengths. Recruiting operations within the provinces are hereby suspended for a period of two years, and any soldier wishing to leave military service will be honorably discharged and given a portion of his pension."

This was met with polite applause from a number of the assembled patricians, but Sabinus was aghast at what he'd just heard. He glanced over at the emperor's two closest advisors on either side of him on the reviewing stand. While Valens appeared indifferent, Caecina was livid, his face red and scowling. The emperor then said a few more words. The consul did not even pay attention, excusing himself for what he described as a much-needed afternoon rest.

"Is he trying to bankrupt the empire?" Caecina later asked his colleague. "Gods only know where we will find the coin to pay off however many legionaries decide to walk away from the ranks. Vitellius had to run up a debt to Blaesus just to pay off Otho's praetorians."

"A temporary inconvenience which will save the imperial coffers in the long run," Valens reasoned. "And with the senatorial delegation here, we can access the imperial treasury and no longer worry about Blaesus buying his way into Vitellius' favor."

"If we pay every voluntarily discharged legionary a thousand denarii, it will take four or five years to make good those losses," Caecina persisted. "But if recruitment is to recommence in just two years, then no, the imperial coffers will not save in the long term. This will also not win the emperor

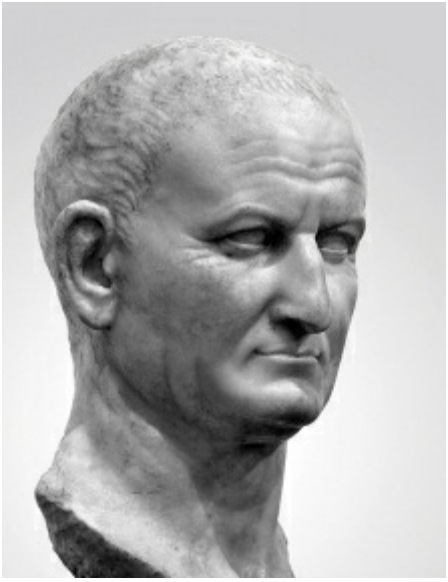
many friends among those who remain. It is not as if the barbarians across the Rhine will remain docile. If anything, they may become even more problematic, once they know our armies are understrength. The legions have to perform the same hazardous duties, but with far fewer soldiers. It will be crushing to morale!"

"Enough already," Valens said, becoming impatient. "In case you have forgotten, the war is *over*. And since when does an emperor need to make friends with his soldiers? They will do as they are told. It should be enough for them that Vitellius is having them billeted in citizens' homes, rather than forcing them to build a marching camp every night. This march to Rome has also allowed them to live a rather comfortable lifestyle compared to usual. There should be less complaints and more gratitude from the ranks."

Caecina knew it was pointless to argue any further. Valens was a veteran general and it shocked Caecina to hear his lackadaisical attitude towards the welfare of his soldiers. He could only hope the older legate was correct, and the wars truly were over, and that he was simply being paranoid about potential threats from across the Rhine.

Chapter V: Rise of the Strong

Alexandria, Egypt
15 June 69 A.D.



Titus Flavius Vespasian

The legionary was still in shock when he entered the governor's palace. He had only been on the grounds once, to serve as part of a guard detail for the commanding legate during the Feast of Vesta a few weeks prior. He had never been inside the palace and was surprised;the guards seemed to be waiting for him. He was escorted by a servant to the audience chamber where not only Prefect Alexander but General Thrasea, the commanding legate of Legio XXII, Deiotariana, awaited him.

The legionary snapped to attention and saluted. "Legionary Faustus reporting, sir!"

"Stand at ease, soldier," Thrasea said. He completely baffled Faustus by handing him a large chalice of wine. "Have a seat."

Still uncertain of what was happening, but having the good sense to follow orders, the soldier did as he was told, while taking a drink off his cup. His eyes widened. He was pleasantly surprised at the delectable flavor of the vintage; a barrel which likely cost more than his wages for a year.

"Tell me," Alexander said, "how long have you served in the army?"

“Almost twenty years, sir,” Faustus replied.

“Your term of service is scheduled to end in November,” his commanding legate said, producing a scroll. He glanced over. “I see you’ve been decorated several times for both valor and exceptional conduct. You were elevated into the First Cohort with just thirteen years in the legion; a splendid feat in its own right. Your centurion informs me that, although you are devoid of any leadership rank or responsibility, your fellow legionaries hold a keen amount of respect for you.”

“I have seen my share of both tedium and bloodletting,” the soldier replied. “I suppose I take it upon myself to look after the other lads in the ranks.”

“Your commanding officer says you wield almost as much influence as he does,” the legate said with a grin, as both men took another drink of wine. Alexander abstained.

“An exaggeration, I assure you, sir,” Faustus replied humbly. “I’m simply able to make the lads see reason and follow orders they might otherwise find disagreeable.”

“Which is why you were summoned here,” the prefect said, cutting to the chase. “The truth is, these are turbulent times we live in with the very foundation of our great empire at stake. Vitellius may have won the war against Otho, but Rome is no more at peace because of it.”

Faustus said nothing, fighting to suppress a scowl at the mention of Vitellius’ name. A servant refilled his cup, and he nervously drank. While he was a rugged soldier who had proven himself to be utterly fearless in battle, he was never certain how to act around senior officers and patricians. In fact, he had made it a point of avoiding anyone over the rank of centurion during his near twenty years as a soldier.

“I’ll speak plainly,” Alexander said. “We need someone of influence, someone the lads will listen to.”

“But not an officer,” Thrasea clarified. “For this little tasking, we need a man who inspires his fellows with charisma rather than rank.”

“Any way I can be of service, sir,” the legionary asserted.

“The first thing you can do is be candid with us,” Alexander stated. “As you know, Rome was recently embroiled in a civil war between Emperor Otho and the pretender, Vitellius. What we need to know is, what is your opinion of these two men? Were either of them worthy of serving?”

“And be honest with us,” the general spoke up quickly. “We don’t give a

damn about false flattery or what you think we wish to hear. Forget about any oaths you may have sworn recently. Just give us your honest opinion of the two men who many Romans have bled for."

Faustus thought about how to phrase what he felt. Finishing his second chalice of wine, he figured he should simply be direct and tell his senior officer and governor exactly what he thought of Otho and Vitellius.

"To be perfectly honest, sirs," he said. "Neither one of them is worth a vat of piss, let alone the blood of a single Roman soldier. I suppose that is being a little harsh towards Otho, but in all honesty, we never knew him. And if he was so easily deposed, how great of a leader could he have been?"

"And can we presume that your brother legionaries feel the same?" Alexander asked.

"Well, I cannot speak for them individually," Faustus answered. "But I will say that the consensus amongst the lads is that no man of any worth has been called 'Caesar' since the end of the Julio-Claudians."

"And is there any man to whom they would willingly swear their allegiance?" Thrasea asked. He then forcefully added, "And don't say anyone in this room!"

"There is one man, sir," Faustus nodded, smiling for the first time.

"That is what we wanted to hear," General Thrasea said.



The Cremona gladiatorial exhibition put on by Fabius Valens was even more violent than typical contests of the day. Fatalities certainly happened in the arena; however, they were far less common than many believed. Gladiators were expensive to purchase, train, house, and keep healthy. Their owners, most of whom were extremely wealthy, took serious umbrage when one of their defeated fighters was put to death in the arena. As such, unless a gladiator performed terribly, or showed abject cowardice, they were most often spared when beaten.

On this day, however, the men—and even a few women gladiators—who had once served in Otho's army as volunteers from the arena, were now pitted against each other for the amusement of their conquerors. And since Valens wished to dispose of as many of Otho's gladiators as possible, he secretly offered handsome payments in coin for any who killed their opponents outright, rather than subduing them and waiting for the crowd to

determine their fate. They therefore fought with reckless abandon, much to the amusement of the mob. So fierce was the fighting, that a large number of those who won their contests later succumbed to their fearful injuries. This, coupled with the losses already suffered during the war, meant only a few hundred of the original two thousand remained when all was said and done. At Valens' behest, Vitellius granted freedom to ten of the best performers. The rest were to be auctioned off to various gladiatorial schools. But, it was not the spectacle in the arena that drew the emperor to the region.

The day after the games ended, Vitellius traveled the short distance to the battlefield between Cremona and Bedriacum. It was a much smaller group that accompanied him this day, mostly military officers and a few senators. When the traveling delegation was still about three or four miles from the battlefield, the pungent stench of death assailed them. None of the Othonian dead had been buried. They had been rotting in the sun, to be feasted on by wild animals for the better part of two months.

"Here, sire, you'll want to take a drink of this," Valens said, handing Vitellius a jug of rather pungent wine.

The legate, Caecina, and several other officers soaked rags in the liquid and held them up over their mouths and noses. Several senators wretched at the hideous aroma.

The emperor did not seem troubled by it. "A dead enemy always smells sweet," he reasoned. "A dead traitorous countryman, even sweeter."

The procession halted near the open field, where the Predator and Adiutrix Legions had battled each other with brutal ferocity. Of the Othonian slain, only Legate Drusus Benignus had been given proper funerary rites. The rest of the bodies were left where they fell. All had been stripped of their armor and weapons, and by this time their tunics were little more than shredded rags. Flies still swarmed about, and most of the corpses had been torn apart by dogs and other foul beasts. One senator could not contain himself any longer and proceeded to vomit violently onto the ground, with several of his companions following suit. Even Caecina and Valens kept the wine-soaked rags up by their faces. Only Vitellius appeared to be completely nonplused.

"Twenty-First Rapax Legion defeated those damned amateurs from First Adiutrix here," Valens said, through the rag. "They then turned the enemy flank and drove into their auxiliaries, who were engaged with our troops in

the wood-line up ahead."

Over the next hour or so, Vitellius continued to traverse the battlefield. His generals gave detailed descriptions of each set piece, while attempting to exhort their own actions that day. When they at last came to a spot along the Via Postumia, where the battle ended and the pursuit began, the emperor brought his horse to a complete halt.

"The sights and smells of victory," he said, before turning to face his entourage.

Most of the senators still looked pale. A few had discretely departed and made their way back to Cremona.

"But this is only half my triumph. I think it is time I pay a visit to my fallen adversary."

Brixellum was about thirty miles south of the battlefield, across the River Padus. Vitellius had sent a messenger back, ordering his household staff to join him there and the rest of his host to proceed the following day.

The town itself was very small, consisting of a few shops and houses, with most of the residents residing in grape and olive estates in the surrounding region. They found Otho's grave near the crossroads that lead southwest towards Parma. It was a simple stone monument, little more than a miniature mausoleum that only stood about chest high. There were no elaborate carvings, just a simple epitaph. The emperor and his small following dismounted their horses and stared quietly for a few moments.

"Diis Manibus Marci Othonis," Vitellius read aloud. "Into the gods' hands, Marcus Otho." He sneered in contempt. "Here is something for you to take to the gods."

With that, he lifted the folds of his robes and urinated on the side of the tomb. He gave a forced laugh, as he splattered both the grave and his own garments. It was an undignified display. The senators and military officers could not help but wonder if Otho would have done the same. After all, he had left Galba's head on display in the Roman Forum and treated that of Licinianus like it was his personal war trophy. And while the senate had paid homage to Otho's self-sacrifice, men like Caecina and Valens found it disgraceful that an emperor should be remembered more for how he died than how he had lived.



The remainder of June would see Vitellius making his painstakingly slow advance down through Italia, spending several days in every city that wished to entertain him. By the first of July, he had been ruler of the empire for two and a half months and had yet to step foot back inside the capital. It was on this first day of the month that Tiberius Alexander decided to put his plan of emperor-making into action.

The Prefect of Egypt knew his plan carried with it substantial risk. Yet, he could not help but congratulate himself for his cunning and knowledge, for he was about to change the fate of the world forever. The previous month had been spent subtly spreading the seeds of discourse throughout the east. And just like the Germanic Legions were compelled to disavow Galba at the start of the year, so too were the legions in the east being persuaded to renounce Vitellius.

On this day, Alexander wore his finest toga with its narrow purple stripe and gold trim. The entirety of Legio III, Cyrenaica, and Legio XXII, Deiotariana, were paraded before the great palace, which had once belonged to Queen Cleopatra, last pharaoh of the Ptolemy Dynasty. As the prefect gave a final glance over his clothing and appearance, the commanding legates walked into the room. Each was wearing their best ceremonial armor, consisting of a highly polished and ornate breastplate with white leather strips coming off their shoulders. Each wore a dark crimson cloak over the left shoulder and carried their helmet under the left arm.

“The legions are assembled,” General Thrasea said.

“Very good,” Alexander replied. He was practically beaming as he clapped his hands together. “Come, my friends, let us make history!”

On the large parade field below gathered ten thousand legionaries, arrayed in a pair of gigantic square formations. Legionaries and decanii were all clustered together. The centurions formed up in two long ranks in front of each legion, along with the staff tribunes. It was midmorning, and the sun was already shining brightly in the cloudless sky. The humidity from being so close to the sea made the air in the enclosed field stifling. The only saving grace from the heat was that the legates had directed their men to parade in tunics only, and to leave their armor at the barracks. Thousands of voices were talking while they waited for the prefect and their generals to make an appearance. At last, after what seemed like an eternity to the restless soldiers in the ranks, Alexander and the two legates stepped out onto the balcony.

"Legions of Rome," the prefect began, "on the first of January you renewed your oaths of allegiance to Emperor Galba. You did this despite the fact that he was a mean-spirited and tyrannical despot; because it was your duty. That tyranny was mercifully brought to a quick end by loyalists within the Eternal City, who saw fit to save Rome from cruelty and destruction. With the Julio-Claudian line now extinct following the death of our dearly loved emperor, Nero Claudius Caesar, the senate took the bold but necessary step of proclaiming Marcus Salvius Otho as the rightful heir to the imperial throne."

It left the Prefect of Egypt with a foul taste in his mouth, referring to Nero in such flattering terms, for he knew what a wicked martinet the deceased emperor could be. And yet, to the legions of Rome he was a beloved martyr whose death they mourned, while cursing the senate that drove him to his ignoble end. But whether a hero or a villain, Nero was gone, and Tiberius Julius Alexander was determined to be the first to gain favor in what he hoped would become a new imperial dynasty. He had gone over his plan a hundred times, often wondering how Vespasian would react. He reckoned perhaps this was exactly the start of the populist uprising the Flavian general was waiting for.

"Civil war has stained our lands," he continued, "with a usurper who comes from the north purchasing the imperial throne with the blood of our brother legionaries. Though only ratified by the senate due to intimidation from his army of mercenaries, this man, Aulus Vitellius, now demands we declare him our emperor and swear our oaths of allegiance to him. It is the divine duty of every soldier of Rome to give absolute fealty to the rightful ruler of the empire. But are we to bow before a man who now controls Rome not because of merit or birthright, but simply because his army placed him there in an act of rebellion? I ask you, my brothers, is Aulus Vitellius truly the rightful Emperor of Rome?"

"No!" Legionary Faustus shouted from the crowd. *"I piss on Vitellius, the pretender to the throne!"*

This was met with immediate shouts from his fellow legionaries. The ripple effect was immediate. Soldiers from both legions shouted profane insults towards Vitellius, calling him *'usurper'*, *'pretender'*, *'tyrant'*, along with a host of more vulgar names. Per their legates' orders, centurions and tribunes remained silent, allowing their legionaries to openly defile the name of the man who now demanded their absolute loyalty.

While the Roman Army was the most fiercely disciplined military force in the known world, throughout its eight hundred year history, various leaders had been able to call upon the passions of the soldiery to bring about the storms of revolution. Tiberius Julius Alexander felt such power in his hands, as he raised them up to silence the raucous mass of legionaries.

"The empire," he said, "must have an emperor. If you will not swear your oaths to Vitellius, then who will you follow?"

"Vespasian!" Faustus quickly shouted. *"We will follow Vespasian!"*

The effect was instantaneous, with legionaries chanting Vespasian's name over and over again. Unbeknownst to the near ten thousand soldiers assembled, it was all elaborate political theater. While there was the definite possibility that the legions would have declared for the Flavian general regardless, the Egyptian prefect was glad he'd left no room for doubt. Alexander was confident the few hundred denarii he'd spent securing the vocal ovations of a handful of legionaries, which spread like wildfire throughout the entire army, was well spent. He held up his hands, silencing the soldiers once again.

"It is not for the armies of Rome to appoint or depose emperors," he emphasized, fully aware of the dangerous precedent Vespasian had warned of. "However, it is the duty of every last one of us to defend Rome from tyrants and usurpers. A fat, despotic pretender now sits upon the imperial throne, which he stole from our rightful ruler. More Roman blood will have to be spilled in order to remove him, but it is that sacrifice alone that will save our great empire. Your legates will oversee your swearing of the sacred oath. Say it with every bit of pride and personal devotion you gave to the Julio-Claudians. And let history record that on the first of July, in the eight hundred and twenty-second year after the Founding of the Eternal City, that Titus Flavius Vespasian was lawfully declared Emperor of Rome!"

Chants of Vespasian's name echoed over and over again as Alexander and the legates stepped back into the foyer.

"And like Julius Caesar, we have committed the act of 'Crossing the Rubicon'," the legate of the Third Legion said, referring to the historic moment when the divine Julius and his legions crossed the River Rubicon, igniting the civil war against Pompey Magnus and the senate.

"Yes," General Thrasea concurred. "Except this time, our Caesar does not even know he's crossed the proverbial Rubicon."

This drew an appreciative chuckle from his fellows. They then became

somber once more.

“I have already sent dispatches to every officer of senatorial rank within the eastern empire,” Alexander said. “The first went to General Placidus, who commands Vespasian’s auxilia corps, a few days ago. He is a brash and somewhat bull-headed officer. However, he is able to rally the men in the ranks like few can, and he is fiercely loyal to Vespasian.”

Thrasea then added, “Whatever his previous hesitations, with the legions in Egypt proclaiming him emperor others will soon follow, including that massive army he has posted throughout Judea and Syria. He’ll have little choice but to accept his destiny.”



It was late afternoon of the same day when General Placidus received the dispatch from Alexander. His auxilia troops were far more mobile than the heavy infantry of the legions, so his various regiments patrolled much of the pacified and recently re-conquered regions in both Galilee and Judea. The zealot survivors from Vespasian’s furious rampage through the region had mostly fled to Jerusalem, where they now fought against each other.

Placidus was encamped with the small residual garrison at the coastal city of Ascalon, where the Imperial Army had won a decisive victory over the Judean rebels two years before. His intent was to conduct an inspection of the garrison, before leading a mounted reconnaissance in the direction of Jerusalem, fifty miles to the northeast, the following day. Ever the aggressive attacker, he hoped to goad some stray band of rebels into a scrap.

On this particular afternoon, he and the city’s governor were walking along the ramparts of Ascalon, checking the guard posts manned by both local militia, as well as a company of Syrian auxiliary archers.

“Sir, there’s a rider approaching from the south!” an archer atop one of the towers shouted down.

Placidus and the governor scanned the wide open plane, where the path leading from the city intersected the main north-south road approximately two miles from the gates.

“Looks like an imperial courier,” the governor said, noting the red tunic and cloak. As the rider turned onto the path leading into the city, he and Placidus both descended the steps nearest the gate, as lookouts called down to the man.

“Hold! Who approaches the city of Ascalon?”

“A message for General Placidus from Governor Tiberius Julius Alexander,” was the reply.

“I’m surprised the good governor knew where to find me,” the general said.

As the rider dismounted and reached into his satchel, he replied, “He didn’t, sir. He sent me a week ago, with the intent of delivering this to you somewhere between Alexandria and Caesarea. If I could not find you, I was to deliver the message to Emperor Vespasian.”

“*Emperor?*” the governor asked, suddenly perplexed.

Placidus simply grinned as he read the message. “Excellent! This is what we’ve been waiting for. It would seem our commander-in-chief has been proclaimed Emperor of Rome without even knowing it.” He then addressed the governor. “It will take me at least two days to reach Caesarea by horse. Do you have any ships you can spare?”

“There is a vessel with olive oil departing for Antioch this evening,” the governor replied.

“Then I must make ready to leave at once,” Placidus remarked. “I will temporarily commandeer the vessel and compel their captain to drop me off at Caesarea.”

“You should reach the city in about three hours by ship,” the governor noted. He then smiled. “Give the emperor our best regards. Ascalon stands with him.”



Vespasian! Vespasian! Vespasian!

The echoing shouts of his name startled the commander-in-chief from what had been an unusually deep slumber. He quickly donned his tunic and stumbled from his quarters. Others were emerging from their rooms and out onto the palace veranda, where they saw a large gathering of soldiers marching and chanting their commanding general’s name. He was surprised to see it was General Placidus who was leading the men in their continuous ovation. There were perhaps fifty soldiers gathered around with more coming from the barracks on the palace grounds. All were chanting the commander-in-chief’s name, while thrusting their weapons into the air. Even the soldiers guarding the palace entrance were taking part in the spectacle.

Vespasian! Vespasian! Vespasian!

"Damn it, Placidus, what the hell is the meaning of this?" the commander-in-chief snapped, as he stepped down onto the parade field.

"The lads have had enough, sir!" the general responded with a force of energy that Vespasian only saw from him when he was readying to go into battle. He then produced the scroll from Alexander. "The legions of Egypt have proclaimed you emperor. Once word broke, it spread like wildfire throughout our own men."

"Damn the usurper, Vitellius!" a legionary shouted, raising his gladius high.

"No," Vespasian said, quickly shaking his head. "I am not emperor!"

"If not you, then who?" a centurion asked. "We won't follow the fat pretender, fuck him!"

"Corpulent twat stole the throne and murdered our rightful Caesar!" another officer spat. "I'd rather have barbarians pissing on my mutilated corpse than call him 'emperor'!"

"If Alexander has sent word to us, you can bet he has also sent dispatches to the rest of the eastern regions," Placidus quickly added. "The army may be spread all over Judea, but I suspect they'll all know within a few days." His hand rested on the hilt of his sword. "Face up to it, sir, you may not have a choice."

"Put that away, Placidus," Vespasian said, his expression calm. He fought to suppress the broad grin that wished to spread across his face. "Send word to Mucianus, as well as all legion commanders. We will meet in Beirut in two weeks' time."

"Yes, sir," Placidus said. He turned to the still-growing host of imperial soldiers and raised his fist in the air. *"Hail, Caesar! Hail, Vespasian!"*

This was immediately echoed by the legionaries and their officers.

Aula Vale was among those who witnessed the spectacle. Her hair was unkempt from having just rolled out of bed, and she had scarcely thrown a tunic on before coming out to see what the commotion was about. She was now giving the newly-proclaimed emperor a cocked grin as he turned to face her.

"Lady Vale," Vespasian said, matching her smile, "Are you ready to return to Rome?"



Both Lucius Artorius and his wife, Laura, had been enjoying the hospitality of the governor of Arretium, while all waited for Vitellius' arrival. Around the end of the first week of July, the emperor and his colossal entourage finally arrived. This was to be his final lengthy stopover before he made the push into Rome. Banquets and spectacles had become the norm. Vitellius' entire journey represented more of a roving carnival than the royal procession of an emperor. It was the morning after the imperial court's first night in Arretium that Lucius was granted an audience.

"The noble Governor for the City of Ariminum, Lucius Artorius Magnus," the porter announced.

Both Lucius and Laura entered the governor's public audience chamber, which was serving as a temporary throne room, and bowed before Vitellius. Laura was a little put off by his corpulent and slovenly appearance. Lucius appeared not to notice.

"Hail, Caesar!" he said, raising his hand in salute.

"Please, not Caesar," Vitellius gently corrected. He was beginning to think that he'd have no choice but to accept the name. Emperors of Rome had been addressed by this title for the past hundred years, and it was simply a force of habit for most citizens.

"Forgive me, sire," Lucius replied. "I come on behalf of the City of Ariminum and regret we were not able to host you personally."

"And for that, you have your emperor's gratitude," Vitellius said. "Is there any favor you may need, for either your city or for yourself?"

"For my city, no," Lucius replied, shaking his head. "We prosper. As for myself…" He paused and glanced sideways at his wife. Her face was hard, and she appeared to be gritting her teeth. She knew what it was he would ask.

"Come on, out with it," Vitellius persisted. "Do not let a personal audience with your emperor be wasted."

Lucius took a deep breath, knowing if he did not make his request now he would forever live with regret.

"I wish to serve Rome as more than just a civilian magistrate. As a member of the equites, I have completed my compulsory tour with the legions. And while I am honored to be mayor and governor of one of the empire's greatest cities, I wish to return to active service."

There was a moment of silence while Vitellius pondered the request.

Finally, it was Caecina who spoke up. "Sire, there is a cavalry regiment in

Northern Italia that still has neither a commanding tribune nor even a deputy. They were the first to pledge their loyalty to us when my army came over the Alpes."

"It's settled, then," Vitellius said, with a wave of his hand. "Caecina will fill you in on the details, but yes, you will return to military service for a full three-year term as commander of an auxilia regiment of cavalry."

"You honor me, sire," Lucius said with a deep bow.

"And now I have other matters to attend to," Vitellius replied. "But please, do be sure to join us for this evening's feast. I will see to it there are places for you at the head table. And just wait till you see my commemorative serving platter!"

Lucius and Laura bowed once more and took their leave of the emperor.

"I hope I have not upset you, my dear," Lucius said, once he and Laura were alone in the foyer waiting to meet with Caecina.

"This is what you have wanted," Laura replied, taking him by the hands. "I am just grateful you did not make this request during the war between Otho and Vitellius."

"Porcius will be thrilled," Lucius chuckled. "He will at last be governor of the city. I imagine a few of my father's political friends will be a little upset, but a little military service has never harmed one's career possibilities. And it's not as if I will be very far, a week's journey by horse at most. Depending on what sort of accommodations I have, I hope you will soon be able to join me."

"Perhaps," Laura said, with a hopeful smile. Like Lucius' mother, she was not very keen on the idea of him returning to active service. However, now that the war was over, she had less reason to worry. She was also astute enough to realize that command of a cavalry regiment would help bolster her husband's career immensely. Still, she wished to start having children soon, and they had already decided to delay this during his six months with the legions. Perhaps she could give him a son before his three years with the cavalry was complete.



Tiberius Alexander had been thorough, having dispatched every last courier under his charge throughout Egypt, Syria, Judea, as far west as Cyrene, and north into Asia Minor. General Trajan, who had returned to the

Tenth Legion's headquarters at Scythopolis, received Alexander's message around the same time as the confirmation from Vespasian himself. And like his commanding general turned emperor, Trajan was filled with a long dormant sense of purpose once again.

"Summon all staff officers and cohort commanders," he ordered one of his clerks. He handed the message to his chief tribune.

"The entire legion will be in a frenzy over this," the young officer replied. Already word had spread throughout the camp. Legionaries were shouting ovations and chanting Vespasian's name.

"Which is why we must address this at the highest level, immediately," Trajan remarked with a cocked grin.

Given the extended lull in the fighting in Judea, rampant boredom had become the common soldiers' greatest enemy. Having to swear their oaths of allegiance to a new Caesar every few months, brought on by repeated overthrows of said emperors, was an added cause for consternation amongst the ranks. Legionaries took their oaths very seriously, and it was with much chagrin they greeted the news of Otho's overthrow coupled with Vitellius' demands for their fealty. That the legions in Egypt had refused this directive, and instead declared for their commander-in-chief emperor, had convinced the legions in Judea to do the same.

Following the arrival of the dispatch from Vespasian and the meeting with General Trajan, Centurion Pilus Prior Galeo briefed his subordinates on the situation. He kept the meeting short. He knew his centurions needed to address their soldiers immediately. Centurion Nicanor hurriedly returned to find his senior officers and decani waiting for him. Optio Gaius Artorius had finally returned to the legion, and not a moment too soon it seemed.

"As we can all see, everyone has obviously heard about what's happening in Egypt," Nicanor said, nodding towards a large group of legionaries, who had produced a cask of wine and were boisterously drinking to the health of Emperor Vespasian.

"It's all the lads are talking about," Tesserarius Julius spoke up. "I swear, every last one of them would pack up and march on Rome tomorrow."

"Which is exactly what we won't be doing," Nicanor emphasized. "This war in Judea may be in an extended state of pause, while we wait for the rebel factions to kill each other off; however, you all know it is far from over. And even if it does come to war between Vespasian and Vitellius, there is no

way in hell he is going to simply abandon this campaign and all we have fought for."

"Sir, if I may," Gaius said. "I understand the need to deal with only the facts as we know them, but let us not pretend there are doubts as to what Vespasian will decide. Today is the day we were supposed to swear the oath to Vitellius, yet the only emperor being proclaimed around here is Vespasian. Agreed, he won't abandon the war in Judea, but I do think a substantial portion of this army will be sent in an awfully long march towards Rome."

The decani and principal officers all muttered their agreements of the optio's assessment. And while Nicanor did not wish for his legionaries to become obsessed by rumors and hearsay, he knew Gaius was right.

"Then what we need to do is focus on the loyalty of our men," he stated. "It appears the soldiers of the Tenth Legion have already declared Vespasian emperor. I want every last one of our legionaries to swear their oaths with a clear conscience. This will likely not be an issue. Vespasian is loved by the men, while Vitellius is a complete nonentity to them."

"Not only that," Julius said, "but Vespasian personally swore fealty to Otho. Vitellius has now violently deposed him. I don't think we'll have much of an issue compelling our soldiers to fight for Vespasian."

As if to emphasize his point, the sounds of soldiers marching past, chanting Vespasian's name, while singing a rather randy song about the decadent Vitellius, caused them to laugh amongst themselves.

"The first thing we must do is curtail the mob mentality of our legionaries," Nicanor asserted. "We'll encourage their fealty to the newly-proclaimed emperor, but I want their enthusiasm tempered with the understanding that this will likely mean another civil war for Rome."

His officers all agreed, and the centurion dismissed them.

"*Emperor* Vespasian," Gaius said, as he and Nicanor walked through the camp later that evening. "I rather like the sound of that."

"I admit I do, too," his friend and centurion replied. "I also agree with what you and Julius said earlier. I don't think Vespasian will be able to stop what has already transpired even if he wanted to. He also knows Vitellius will not take kindly to the legions in the east naming him emperor, so for our commander-in-chief there is no going back. This wave of populous support will not be confined to just the army. The common citizens are no doubt tired of war and usurpers, and every last rumor coming from Italia, regarding Vitellius, is pretty damning."

“Therein lies the difference between this revolt and that of Vitellius,” Gaius conjectured. “Vespasian is a man of the people, far more so than Vitellius. Like our soldiers, I cannot help but wonder what role we will play in this little game. Will we be pieces on the board or simply spectators?”

“Who knows?” Nicanor shrugged. “We could be left sitting on our asses here, waiting to finish off the Judean rebels. After all, someone has to. Or, we could very well end up taking a *very* long walk to the imperial capital.”

Gaius whistled in appreciation, as he tried to comprehend just how far it was by land from Judea to Rome. From what he could recall, anyone marching to Rome would have to go up through Syria, across Asia Minor, through Greece, over the mountainous Balkans, and into Italia from the north. It was a journey of between three and four thousand miles, with weather and terrain dictating the pace of the march. Travel by sea would be impossible for the entire army. There simply were not enough ships available, plus they had no idea where the Imperial Navy stood on the issue between Vitellius and Vespasian.

“Even if we conduct a number of forced marches along the way,” Gaius said, “we’re still looking at a trek that will take anywhere from four to six months.”

Nicanor added with a laugh, “Well, then, you can bet we’ll all have stretched legs and sore feet by the end of it!”

Chapter VI: Defenders of the Crown

Beirut
17 July 69 A.D.



Tiberius Julius Alexander

Beirut was conveniently located halfway between Caesarea and Antioch, and so served as the perfect location for the Flavians to make their preparations for the now inevitable campaign. Vespasian had at last dropped all pretenses about becoming Caesar. What's more, while it had been legates and other senior officers who had compelled Vitellius to claim the throne, Vespasian's rise had been predicated by the common soldiers in the ranks. This had been greatly humbling for the Flavian Emperor, and his humility only further endeared his soldiers to him.

Mucianus had arrived a day earlier, along with his legates from Legio VI, *Ferrata*, Legio IV, *Scythia*, and the reconstituted Legio XII, *Fulminata*. Vespasian brought with him his three legion commanders, along with their chief tribunes and master centurions. Each legion also dispatched a cohort to act as an honor guard to what was now being referred to as the imperial court. There was much pomp and ceremony, with Vespasian donning the laurel crown and a hastily made gold-embroidered purple cloak over his shoulder, as he rode at the head of a massive procession through the city. The people

flocked by the thousands to see him. All shouted praises, with many chants of *'Caesar'* echoing above the fray. It was all very surreal to the Flavian general, who had at one time sold mules in order to pay his debts, later was cast out of Nero's court in disgrace, and was now being proclaimed emperor. And while he was a man of simple tastes, he was also deeply pragmatic. He knew if he was to become Caesar, then he needed to look and act the part.

Mucianus and his delegation were waiting for Vespasian on the steps of the governor's palace. All wore their best formal togas, while the soldiers who provided their honor guard had polished their armor and helmets which shone brightly in the midday sun.

"Hail, Caesar!" Mucianus proclaimed, holding up his hand in a salute.

Vespasian returned the formal courtesy before dismounting and handing the reins to a waiting servant. He climbed to the top of the steps and turned to face the gigantic crowd. His soldiers were doing their best to keep them from swarming the palace. His rarely seen smile beamed as he held up his hand held up his hand in salute, eliciting even more voracious and deafening cheers.

"Caesar! Caesar! Caesar!" they chanted.

"They love you, Father," Titus said.

"Let us hope the rest of the empire does as well," Vespasian replied, still genial and waving to the crowd.

He then followed Mucianus and his entourage into the palace. Once inside, he quickly removed the laurel crown and tossed the purple cloak to a nearby slave.

"Damn thing makes my head itch," he said with a laugh, as he furiously scratched his balding head.

He then noticed Tiberius Julius Alexander, who had been waiting for him inside. His narrow purple stripe, denoting his status as a member of the equites, stood out from the rest of the assembled host. And yet, as Prefect of Egypt, he was not only one of the most important men in the whole of the empire, he was also the same person who set in motion the events that led to Vespasian being proclaimed emperor.

"Hail, Caesar," he said, with a formal bow.

"I hear you've been playing the game of kings and emperors," Vespasian remarked.

The prefect chuckled in response, then stated, "The imperial armies in Egypt stand ready to defend the empire in your name."

“And for that, I thank you,” Vespasian replied. He leaned in close and whispered into Alexander’s ear, “How does it feel to be writing the pages of history?”

“A bit surreal, sir,” the prefect quietly answered, candidly. “I only hope our venture does not falter.”

“So do I,” Vespasian replied, with a sigh of acknowledgment. He then addressed the assembled officers and magistrates. “It is time, my friends, to reclaim the empire from the pretender and bring about an end to the reign of the tyrants. Come, let us begin our preparations.”

A large map was fastened to the wall of the meeting hall. Wasting no time, Vespasian briskly walked over and placed his finger on the spot where Rome was marked.

“Alright,” he said, “If we’re going to do this, then we must be quick as well as cautious.” He nodded to his auxilia corps commander. “Placidus, if it were up to you, you’d launch a direct assault on Rome, cutting the whole thing off at the head.”

“You’re damn right I would,” the general said emphatically. “Lop off Vitellius’ head and make certain no other legions dare try and make one of their own Caesar.”

“And for once, I agree with you,” Vespasian replied, drawing a few laughs from the assembled officers. “Our primary focus will be taking the capital itself. No doubt that will draw quite the forceful response from Vitellius, so I do not expect this to be a bloodless campaign. However, I do wish to spare lives whenever possible. Always remember, these are our fellow countrymen we will be facing.”

“While I agree with your concept,” Trajan supposed, “we cannot simply uproot all of our legions and have the lot of them march on Rome. With Armenia and the Parthian Empire on our doorstep, it would not do to leave our borders unprotected, like Vitellius did in Germania.”

“General Corbulo may have defeated King Vologaeses of Parthia, during the Armenian War,” Mucianus observed, “but has he really learned his lesson or might he be smarting for a taste of revenge?”

“And while King Tiridates of Armenia is technically a client king of Rome, he is also Vologaeses’ brother,” Trajan added. “And, of course, we have the war in Judea that is still unresolved.”

“We need not uproot all of our forces from here,” Vespasian remarked. “Between my army in Judea, Mucianus’ forces in Syria, as well as those in

Egypt, we have eight legions who have already sworn loyalty to us."

"That alone gives us a full third of all legionary forces in the empire," Placidus added. "And I have no doubt that more will follow. That ought to make our enemies shit themselves a bit."

"Antonius Primus has been stalling for time, so he can have Seventh Gemina swear allegiance to you," Titus noted. "The Eleventh and Thirteenth Legions have no love for Vitellius either, so I think it's safe to say we can count on their support."

"Eleven loyalist legions, plus an equal or greater number of auxilia troopers," Vespasian responded approvingly. "Still, Vitellius knows we cannot send all of our forces against him. But, neither can he against us. The British, Germanic, and Gallic legions have the very same issues to contend with as we do."

"So how many troops do we send?" Mucianus asked.

"We must leave sufficient forces in Judea to keep the rebels contained," Vespasian answered. "Since the zealots are embroiled in their own petty civil war, and are essentially confined to Jerusalem in the southern regions, four cohorts from each legion should suffice. The remaining six will be detached along with the entire Legio VI, Ferrata. They will act as the spear point of the Flavian Army."

"Very good, sir," Mucianus said, with an approving nod. He then asked, "Since we will have such a large division, the question now becomes, who will lead them?"

This last remark caused the legates to look at him with confused gazes.

"The emperor himself should lead us," Trajan asserted. "In all his campaigns, he has never been one to sit idle while others do the fighting for him."

"That may be," Mucianus replied. "But we have a volatile situation here in the east. Not only is Jerusalem still in the hands of the zealots, but someone will have to deal with the political situation along our borders. It would also be unwise to risk the emperor becoming trapped in Rome before stability is brought to the empire. And forgive me, Caesar, but what if you are killed? You have accepted many risks during your years in the legions; the most recent being your leading a cohort during the assault on Gamala. Whatever your previous thoughts on the value of your own life when compared to your men, the new reality is we can no longer afford to lose you."

While they were words he most certainly did not wish to hear, Vespasian knew they were valid. While serving as a legate, and even lately as commander-in-chief of the armies in the east, he had often drawn his blade and inspired his soldiers by his own example. That was not a luxury he could afford anymore. In his mind, a legate was just as expendable as a legionary; however, the same could not be said of an emperor. Soldiers fought and died for their emperor. If he should fall, the entire Flavian cause would be lost and all their blood spilled in vain.

"Something that will be very difficult for me to accept," Vespasian began slowly, "is no longer being able to lead my soldiers into battle. But if I am to become emperor, then I need to put my trust in my legion commanders. I will remain in the east, shoring up our borders, as well as dealing with any issues that may arise in the eastern provinces."

"And, as both the Ferrata and Fulminata Legions are under my command," Mucianus added, "it only stands to reason that I lead the expedition."

"Seeking a little personal glory, are you?" Titus asked, a touch of derision in his voice.

This retort surprised many, for Titus and Mucianus shared a far more amicable relationship than the Syrian governor did with any of the other legates, and least of all with Vespasian himself. It was perhaps because of this the commander of the Fifteenth Legion felt he could be so outspoken. At least that is how Mucianus took it.

"If you wish to lead the expedition, by all means feel free," he said reprovingly. "You are, after all, the emperor's son and presumed heir. And if you should fail, or worse, be captured or killed, all we are fighting for will be undone. The prince imperial may be more expendable than the emperor, but only slightly. Your brother is already at risk of becoming a political prisoner in Rome, are you suggesting the emperor chance losing both his sons? If not, then I recommend we send a commanding general who is of no use to the enemy as a hostage should disaster befall us."

"Enough," Vespasian interrupted. "Mucianus will command the eastern division. He has the most troops involved, and command should rightly fall to him. We will send a dispatch to Antonius Primus, as well. Though I have little doubt as to where he stands, I need personal reassurance of his fealty. He is also in the best position to parlay with the survivors of the Othonian Legions, who I doubt are in any hurry to swear allegiance to Vitellius. That

will give us a second division, with Primus the commander-in-chief. He will rally what troops can be spared from the Danube, along with any Othonian legions and auxilia regiments who declare their loyalty to us."

This last directive caused Mucianus' face to twitch. While in his own way he viewed Primus as a friend, he knew the general was as aggressive during war as he was unscrupulous during peace. It was no secret that Mucianus pined for the chance at martial glory, which he had been deprived of during most of his senatorial career. Still, he reasoned if Primus managed to field a large enough army, they could readily hold the Vitellians at bay, or at least bloody them enough that Mucianus' army could readily finish them at their leisure. What he did not want, however, was for Primus to launch an attack on Rome and possibly end the war, before his own forces could even engage the enemy.

"Forgive me, Caesar, but I must speak plainly," he said. "While I understand you wishing for both of your divisions to operate independently, I do fear that our friend Primus' aggressive nature may get the best of him. Should he decide to invade Italia without waiting for reinforcements, he could end up losing a large number of our soldiers in the process."

"That will be his risk to accept," Vespasian replied. He knew of the rivalry between his two commanding generals and understood it was unavoidable. While he would counsel Primus to exercise both aggression, as well as prudence, he was reluctant to place either in a senior-ranking capacity over the other. He was putting a lot of trust in their judgment, and only time would tell if it was well-placed or not.

"Now," Vespasian continued, "we need to get word to Primus but also to Rome. I want a small flotilla of three of our fastest ships to head towards Dacia, keeping along the coasts, and avoiding any contact with other vessels. Two weeks ago, I dispatched a single vessel with a message for the senate, formally announcing our intentions. I'll not play the underhanded usurper, like Vitellius, who refused to even acknowledge the senate or the rule of law. I have made my declarations to the noble fathers of Rome and will let them decide where their consciences and loyalties lay."

"It will be a bit hard for them to openly support us, what with Vitellius' army hanging about Rome," Titus observed.

"And that is why I have eyes and ears within the city," Vespasian replied with a knowing wink.



Like Galba the year before, Vitellius was now poised to make his triumphant return to the city of Rome via the Milvian Bridge. And while many within the imperial capital were anxiously awaiting the arrival of their newest emperor, Vitellius' advance guard had caused quite a disturbance within the city. As most of these soldiers came from places such as Gaul, Germania, and Belgica, they had never even seen Rome, let alone tried to navigate its maze of narrow streets, residential districts, and crowded marketplaces. The auxiliaries were particularly frightful to the local citizens, as many brandished large spears and wore animal hides over their armor. Their task was to find billets for their units, with many in the ranks now grumbling and asking why the army hadn't sent men into Rome who knew their way around. The now-vacant praetorian barracks was the only military camp within the city and would prove insufficient for such a vast force. Even if cohorts erected their tents on the parade fields and took up every vacant space within the praetorian billets, it would still only house about half the army. The rest would need to find accommodations with the city's populace.

"Even the tribunes and centurions seem to have gotten lost," Caecina reported to the emperor, who sat on his camp chair in the large pavilion tent he was using for meeting with dignitaries. "And they've caused numerous brawls within the city."

"That's what happens when the entire army comes from places outside of Rome," Valens said, with a shrug. "It can't be helped. We have a rather large and unwieldy mass of men and camp followers with us, all converging on a city of over a million persons."

"Well, let's hope they don't destroy too much of the capital," Vitellius remarked. "It would not do to have my triumph marred by such unseemly conduct. But for now, we must prepare for my entry into the city. About how far away from the Milvian Bridge are we?"

"Seven miles, sire," Caecina answered. "The crowds of onlookers are already swarming around the camp. I heard that earlier this afternoon, a group of men thought they'd play a joke on some of our soldiers by stealing their sword belts and then asking them if they had all their equipment."

"I can't imagine that went over well," Vitellius said, his brow furrowed as he tried to envision the scene.

"It didn't," Valens spoke up. "Our lads became incensed and attacked

them. They slew around twenty men, but at least they got their sword belts back." He gave a rather morbid laugh at this, which Vitellius echoed. Only Caecina did not find it amusing. While he certainly had no qualms with his men giving a severe beating to any civilian who tried to play such a foolish trick on them, the fact that twenty men were now dead was rather disturbing. Their families would cry out for retribution, and they would find none. It was not the best way for the emperor to make his return to Rome.

"I have no armor," Vitellius said, interrupting the legate's thoughts. "But I do think I should wear my purple imperial robes with a magnificent spatha strapped to my hip. And I'll ride my best horse, driving the people before me."

"While that would make for a magnificent display, I think it would be unwise," Caecina replied. "Remember, this was not a victory over a foreign kingdom or barbarian tribes, but over our own countrymen. To ride into Rome like a conquering general will be seen as grossly disrespectful, even by our staunchest allies."

"I would have to agree," Valens said, in an increasingly rare concurrence with his peer. "Ride your horse as far as the bridge, sire. Then make your way into the city on foot, at the head of your armies. If you do this while wearing your patrician's toga, your victory will be magnified by your humility before the people."

"Oh, very well," Vitellius remarked with a bored sigh. "I suppose it would do me some good to stretch my legs a bit."

It would take another three days for the Vitellian Army to ready itself for its grand entrance into Rome. But at long last, three months after the defeat of Otho, Emperor Aulus Vitellius at last entered the Eternal City. Heeding the advice of his closest advisors, he wore his simple toga with no cloak, although he did don the laurel crown. Flanked by a handful of his personally selected guards, he marched at the head of his massive force, while the mobs numbering in the tens-of-thousands cheered him. The plebs cared little for the political turmoil or the extravagant cost of Vitellius' gluttony. All that mattered was they now had an emperor and peace had returned to the empire.

Directly behind Vitellius marched all of the legates, tribunes, and master centurions from each of the legions. Like the emperor, all wore formal togas instead of armor. And while a centurion primus pilus was not officially named a member of the equites until after his retirement from the legions,

they were still allowed to wear the purple stripe on their togas as a sign of respect for their rank and achievements.

The standard bearers of his units all marched together, about fifty feet behind the emperor and senior officers. The eagles of his four legions that had marched at full strength, First Italica, Fifth Alaudae, Twenty-First Rapax, and Twenty-Second Primigenia marched at the head. Directly behind them were the vexilation flags from the four Germanic legions, as well as the detachments from Britannia. Behind these were the mounted standard bearers from twelve auxilia cavalry regiments who served the Vitellians. Behind them, musicians played their trumpets while drummers beat a rhythmic cadence. Next came the vast columns of the soldiers themselves. Legionaries came first, led by their centurions whose armor gleamed in the sunlight, all of their decorations proudly displayed. They marched shoulder-to-shoulder with red cloaks draped over their left. Behind them rode the various cavalry regiments, thousands of horsemen representing the various tribal peoples that served as imperial auxiliaries. And finally came the various auxilia infantry cohorts, or at least those Vitellius had not dispersed back to their homes. There were thirty-four cohorts of these particular soldiers, which was equal to roughly three and a half legions' worth of troops. So vast was this column of military might, that though the soldiers marched ten abreast with minimal intervals between ranks, it stretched back nearly five miles.

The urban cohorts had been tasked with keeping the streets clear and the cheering crowds at bay. The Roman Forum was crammed with thousands of spectators, as the emperor and his senior officers broke off from the parade to ascend the steps of Capitoline Hill. The location of the Temple of Concord, as well as the infamous Gemonian Stairs, it was dominated by the massive and extravagant Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, which cast its shadow over the Forum. Measuring two hundred feet by two hundred feet and nearly sixty feet tall, it dwarfed all other buildings on the hill, creating its own skyline that could be seen for miles.

Vitellius' face was red and dripping with sweat, as he slowly climbed the long stairs. He was completely out of breath by the time he reached the top, though he quickly composed himself to greet the delegation that awaited him by the steps of the temple. Leading these was his former enemy, Suffect Consul Marius Celsus, along with the emperor's brother, Lucius Vitellius. Twenty or so leading members of the senate were with them, to include former Consul Italicus, and even his peer and former Othonian speechwriter,

Galerius Trachalus. Vitellius' wife and children stood with the senators as did his son-in-law. But it was his mother, Sextilia, he greeted first.

"Ave, Augusta," he said, kissing her on both cheeks. "I hail you as mother of the empire and of the Roman people."

"You honor me, sire," Sextilia replied, with a bow. Her demeanor was very formal and distant, and not what one would expect from a mother greeting her son on his greatest day of triumph.

Vitellius chose to ignore her coldness, and instead moved on and embraced his wife. "And you, my loving wife," he said, "Galeria, Empress of Rome."

"Caesar," she said, causing her husband to wince. Was it deliberate that she called him by the name he was trying so hard to shun? Unlikely, but still, her demeanor was almost as indifferent as his mother's.

"We welcome you to Rome at last, sire," Italicus bowed. "The senate has looked forward to your return, as well as your guidance and leadership."

Such fawning was seen as undignified by Celsus and some of the other senators, but they also knew Italicus was a personal friend of the emperor's. It was to be expected. Vitellius had prepared a grandiose speech as a means of self-congratulation, yet forgot most of the words. Those he did manage to say sounded self-serving and completely flat. Still, though they were almost immediately forgotten, the assembled senators gave the courteous applause before ushering the emperor away. Only his brother and mother remained. Sextilia's gaze was fixed on the Forum below, with its throngs of spectators and continuously marching columns of soldiers.

"It is a magnificent parade," Lucius Vitellius said approvingly.

"Yes," Sextilia concurred, then added coldly, "Worthy of any emperor not named Aulus Vitellius."

"You are being unfair, Mother," Lucius chastised. "Neither you nor Father may have had any use for him, but Aulus has won the empire and is now master of Rome. Like it or not, his is the greatest triumph for our family."

Sextilia's perpetual scowl turned into a smirk of defiance, as she and her eldest son continued to watch the seemingly endless process of imperial soldiers marching past the Forum below.

"He has won nothing," she said defiantly. "Those two vile creatures, Valens and Caecina, won the empire for him. And they only did so because Otho was foolish enough to let his idiot of a brother command his armies.

Had a general of competence commanded them, it would be Otho who would be leading this triumphant parade rather than your brother."

"You seem to be an expert on military strategy and tactics, Mother," Lucius muttered reprovingly. While most certainly closer to their parents than Vitellius was, ever since his brother was named emperor by the legions of the Rhine, Lucius had been engaged in a perpetual quarrel with his mother.

"No one may say it to your brother's face, or that of his generals, but everyone in Rome knows that Caecina lost both battles he fought before Bedriacum. And I have it on good authority that even their great victory was only narrowly won. They likely would have lost, had Otho been supported by the Balkan legions. No, my son, I may not understand actual military tactics, but I do know that Aulus' victory was not the decisive triumph he makes it out to be, nor was it even his to begin with. Your brother may wear the laurel crown, but it is Caecina and Valens who now rule the empire. So forgive me, if I have my doubts about the future of Rome."

Lucius said no more. He was tired of squabbling with his mother. He knew her fears were well-founded; however, he wished just once, on his day of triumph, she could pretend to be proud of her son.



While the senior Flavian officers and political magistrates met in Beirut, the armies of Vespasian were already making preparations for the coming conflict. At the headquarters of the Tenth Legion, the master centurion had taken the initiative to sort out which cohorts would remain in Judea and which would take part in Mucianus' expedition to Rome. Centurion Galeo was practically glowing with excitement when he summoned his centurions and options that afternoon.

"We are to be part of the expedition," he said, bringing a plethora of excited remarks from his officers. "The Eighth and Tenth Cohorts are already posted to the east of Jerusalem, blockading the road across the River Jordan so they will stay put. And the Fourth and Seventh Cohorts are the most understrength right now, so they will be left to garrison our sectors north and east of the rebel capital. The rest of us will march within three weeks' time, if not sooner."

There was an air of anticipation throughout the camp, as centurions informed their subordinate officers and legionaries of the upcoming

campaign. There was deflated disappointment among those who would remain, with an equal measure of excitement from those who would march to Rome.

"The lads are definitely enthusiastic," Tesserarius Julius said, as he joined Gaius for his evening meal.

"Well, they should be," the optio replied. "They are helping restore peace and stability to the empire. I hope their enthusiasm is treated with a measure of caution. This will not be a stroll into Rome with the gates flung opened for us. I daresay, we will be engaged in some of the harshest fighting any of us have ever seen."

"Agreed," Julius acknowledged. "Our soldiers are used to fighting armorless barbarians who lack training and discipline. Battling against brother legionaries will be much different. Still, a lot can happen between now and then. Unless Vespasian manages to conjure up a fleet of warships to take us across the sea, it will be late winter or early spring of next year before we even get to Italia."

As the two sat and ate their supper of wheat porridge and strips of cooked pork, Gaius found that, while he certainly had a lot of trepidation over the coming conflict, he was glad to be back where he felt he belonged. The time he spent in Caesarea, following his stint of leave, had allowed him to live quite comfortably, especially when compared to life in a legionary camp. And he was also grateful to have seen dear Aula. His affections for her helped mask the feelings of loss over never seeing his son again. For all that, he knew his place was with neither Aula Cursia Vale nor with his son, whose mother had taken him away to Cyprus. Here was where he belonged, with his century and cohort, under the eagle of the Tenth Legion. And on that Judean summer night, there was nowhere else he would rather have been.



"I'll never understand what would compel someone to join the Imperial Navy," Aula muttered, as she slung her satchel over her shoulder and disembarked down the wobbly gangplank.

The seas had been reasonably calm. A solid wind allowed the ship's journey from Caesarea to Ostia to be completed with relative speed. Two weeks had passed. As the imperial warship gently rose and fell, bumping against the long dock, Aula grumbled, hoping never to set foot on another

seaborne vessel again. Since accepting Flavius Sabinus' offer to serve as an imperial courier, she had spent more time at sea than she had on land. She'd naively expected a bit of thrill and adventure. Most days, especially those aboard ship, were filled with tedious boredom. That men voluntarily enlisted into such a dreary life, all for roughly five sesterces a day, was baffling.

Roughly sixteen miles separated the harbor from the city of Rome, and while she could have readily acquired transport aboard a merchant cart for a few pieces of copper, she decided to walk. It was almost midday. The sun shone brightly, reflecting off the stucco buildings and painted stone columns. Aula squinted, attempting to shield her eyes with her hand. So before leaving Ostia, she found a clothing vendor and purchased a large brimmed hat, much like those seen in Greece and among the peasant farmers.

"Fashionable can wait," she reasoned to herself with a laugh. "Right now, what I need is practical."

While Aula took the long walk towards the city, Rome's newest emperor had committed a terrible gaffe. The date was the 18th of July, a day of ill omens due to marking the anniversary of a pair of ignominious defeats for Rome in the remote past. As such, marriages and religious ceremonies could not be performed, nor were official edicts to be published. Vitellius instead decided to produce a slew of these, including a number which grandiosely exalted him for his victory over Otho. As he was now supposed to be Pontifex Maximus and, therefore, head of the official Roman religion, this was viewed by some to simply be a matter of poor taste. Others took it as a dire omen of things to come. Despite all their advances in science, engineering, and rational thought, Romans were still notoriously superstitious. The perception of Vitellius' actions marking an ill omen and an affront to the gods caused much consternation, especially after Aula arrived to deliver her dispatch to the senate.

She did not wish to cause any sort of disturbance nor answer any uncomfortable questions from Vitellius' staunchest supporters, so she waited outside the chambers until the senate convened.

"Consul Celsus," she said, hailing the former Othonian general.

"Why, it's Lady Vale," he said with a smile, before apprising her fully. "By Juno, I did not know you were acting as an imperial courier."

"It's my own little way of serving," she explained for what felt like the hundredth time. She handed him the scroll from Vespasian. "I've just come

from Caesarea. The senate needs to know about this as soon as possible."

Celsus' face tightened as he read the message. He could not say he was surprised by its contents. He lamented that Rome was sliding once again towards civil war. That hideous affliction, which they had been spared since the days of Antony and Octavian, was now rearing its ugly head for the third time in a year.

"Now I must take my leave," Aula said, with a respectful nod. She hastily made her way from the senate chambers.

Celsus did not even see her go. He read the message two or three times before deciding it would be best if his colleague read it to the assembly. Most senators were making ready to depart for their homes, and were rather put out by being hastily called back into the chamber for an emergency session. There was much grumbling. But as Celsus and his co-consul read the message, they understood the grave importance of informing the senate at once. The porter beat his staff on the floor, silencing the disgruntled mutterings.

To the Noble Senate of Rome, greetings,

I have just received word of the death of our noble emperor, Marcus Salvius Otho, at the hands of an unlawful usurper, Aulus Vitellius. It wounds me deeply to see that our brothers, fathers, and sons have made war upon each other. No good has ever come from Romans spilling the blood of their countrymen. As much as my heart breaks, I am filled with even greater revulsion that our rightful emperor was deposed and driven to commit self-slaughter. All was brought about by a vile pretender, who seeks nothing more than to engorge his coffers and his bloated stomach.

What good has come to Rome, to have her lawful ruler and protector cut down to make way for a usurper? What has Vitellius brought to our beloved nation? Only swaths of Roman dead, and the arrogance that comes from being placed on the throne by rebellious soldiers who have forsaken their oaths. Understand that the armies of Egypt, Syria, Judea, and Asia Minor have refused to forsake their honor by swearing allegiance to such a vulgar despot. Rome was freed from one tyrant by the death of Galba, and she will not stand the reign of another.

I come to Rome not as a pretender who seeks to gratify his own indulgent excesses, but rather as a loyal soldier, duty bound to serve the empire. It is with great reluctance that I find myself compelled to retrieve the crown of laurels from the gutter of wretched ignominy into which it has been tossed. I seek the blessing of the senate to grant me, unworthy as I may be, the ratification of my claim to become Emperor of Rome. Unlike the pretender, I will honor the decision of the senate once the matter between Vitellius and myself is brought to a conclusion. It is time to rid ourselves of usurpers and, once and for all, put an end to the Reign of the Tyrants.

Your humble servant,

Titus Flavius Vespasian

The words of Vespasian's damning letter were read aloud in the senate chamber by Celsus' colleague, Suffect Consul Gnaeus Arrius Antoninus. The senate was deathly quiet as its members contemplated the horrors of having yet another civil war thrust upon them. Vitellius would expect the senate to openly condemn the Flavians for their treason. Yet, if the senate had learned anything, it was not to choose sides too quickly. After all, should Vitellius be defeated and deposed by Vespasian, it would not do to have so publicly supported the losing side. Consul Celsus was glad it was his colleague, and not he, who read the defiant dispatch from Vespasian.

"A pity," Senator Italicus said, "that we should again suffer the dark days of civil war."



While the senate pondered the ramifications of Vespasian's message to them, Vitellius held a meeting with his two closest advisors to decide what should be done about reconstituting the Praetorian Guard.

"Since we sacked practically the whole lot of them, we need to find replacements from our own loyal forces," the emperor stated.

"And to start with, Valens and I each have our own candidates for the two prefect vacancies," Caecina remarked. "I nominate Publilius Sabinus for one of the positions. No relation to our city prefect, he was previously a cavalry officer who commanded one of our regiments at Bedriacum."

“Fair enough,” the emperor said, with a nod. He asked Valens, “And what of you?”

“One of my centurions,” Valens answered. “His name is Julius Priscus, and until recently he was a centurion primus ordo with Legio XXII, Primigenia. True, it may be a bit irregular to promote a man from the ranks into the most exalted position a member of the equites can strive for; however, Priscus is a staunch loyalist who the new guardsmen will obediently follow.”

“And since I am the emperor, I can elevate whomever I wish into the next order of the social hierarchy,” Vitellius said, with a forced chortle. “But now we must decide where the actual guardsmen will come from. The city’s urban cohorts were also depleted during that unfortunate affair in Maritime Alpes. I want sixteen new praetorian cohorts with four more for the urban units. And I want these to hold a thousand men each.”

Caecina almost choked on his wine when he heard this. “And where do you propose we get twenty thousand new soldiers?”

“We have upwards of sixty thousand men encamped throughout the city,” Valens reasoned. “That’s more than enough to fill the ranks of the praetorian and urban cohorts.”

“The army we brought here is not a permanent garrison for Rome,” Caecina countered. “Sooner or later, they will have to return to their barracks. Do we wish to return them to the hostile frontiers with their ranks so grossly depleted?”

“You worry too much,” the emperor spoke up. “There have been no incursions from those filthy barbarians across the Rhine, even while we took the majority of the legions with us on our glorious expedition.”

There was a rapid knock on the door, and one of Vitellius’ freedman clerks hurriedly ushered in a messenger from the senate.

“A bit late for dispatches from the senate,” the emperor observed.

“Forgive me, sire,” the messenger said. “This is urgent.”

Valens impatiently stepped forward and snatched Vespasian’s dispatch from the man. He gritted his teeth as he handed it to Vitellius. “The winds of treason blow once more.”

Chapter VII: Generations of Valor

Rome
18 July 69 A.D.
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It was late when Aula arrived at Sabinus' manor house. After this latest trek across the Mediterranean, she was completely exhausted. Her hair was matted from two weeks of sea spray, then being crammed beneath her large hat for most of the afternoon. Her tunic was filthy and splotched by the salt water, and she desperately wished to strip out of it. She banged the large knocker of the main door. It was opened by a slave woman, who seemed rather pleased to see Aula.

"My lady," the young girl said, with a bow.

"I need a bath," Aula replied, removing her cloak and hat.

"Of course," the servant said. "I will have one drawn for you immediately. I am sorry that Master Sabinus is not in. He is at an important meeting with the senate."

"Yes, I know," Aula remarked, with a tired smile.

A pair of slaves escorted her to her room, where they helped her out of her tunic and into a loose fitting robe. She set her spatha on a side table and decided she would give it a good cleaning with an oil rag later. The weapon had served her father for decades, and she was determined to care for it, in case it should ever need to serve her as well.

She hurried along to the smaller of the private bath chambers. The waters were only partially heated, yet she did not care. She stripped naked and completely submerged herself in the deep pool, scrubbing her fingers through her hair. The last two weeks' worth of sweat, grim, and sea spray were slowly soaked away from her body, as she leaned back against the side of the small pool. Aula closed her eyes, allowing her mind and body to relax as growing heat of the water seeped into her pores.

After nearly half an hour, she emerged from the bath and laid out on a nearby table. Slaves scraped and then rubbed scented oil into her skin. Aula instructed them to massage her thoroughly, a relief to her tired muscles. After

almost another hour, her skin red from being scrapped and vigorously rubbed, she finally donned her stola and decided to see if her benefactor, Sabinus, had returned.

It was late evening, and as she approached the dining hall she heard voices. She knew Sabinus' voice immediately, though it took her a moment to recognize that of Suetonius Paulinus. She decided to wait and listen for a time, before announcing herself.

"So Vitellius denied you the chance to redeem yourself?" Sabinus observed. "To be honest, I'm surprised he did not order your exile."

"He essentially told me to piss off," Paulinus muttered. "And believe me, Valens and Caecina would love nothing more than to see my defiled corpse laid out on the Gemonian Stairs. Fortunately for me, Vitellius and most of the senate still remember my victories in Britannia, as if that gives me any sort of immunity. Still, the emperor emphasized that if he gave me an army, I'd simply hand it over to your brother."

"And would you?"

The old general looked down at the wine cup he turned around in his hands. He decided to avoid the question altogether. "I understand you and Vespasian have not always gotten along, so forgive me if I do not directly answer your question at this time."

"I do love my brother," Sabinus replied, his countenance stern. "However, as brilliant of a soldier as he may be, he has been a headache and an embarrassment for the family on numerous occasions. It seems he's little suited for anything except killing mindless barbarians and eastern zealots. He was given the perfect opportunity to make some real money when Nero named him Proconsul of North Africa. Instead, he failed miserably to extract any additional revenue from the populace, saying Rome should only take what it needs from provincials. What's more, the people still hated him, far more than even the worst fleecing governors they'd had before. I later had to rather inconspicuously give him an unsecured loan to prevent his house from being seized."

"Wasn't too inconspicuous, since I knew about it," Paulinus commented. "But he made it good to you in the end."

"Sure, by selling mules," Sabinus scoffed. "Not exactly a dignified way for a former proconsul and one of the empire's most renowned generals to make good his debts." His tone then softened considerably. "But as I said, I do love my brother. It just frustrated me to no end, seeing him given all the

opportunities to make his name, as well as increasing the family's financial and political status in Rome, only to squander it. I will hand it to him, though, he has made a fortune off the Judean campaign. He sent me a rather healthy donative about six months into the war, saying he had kept a tally of all the times I helped him, and this was what I was owed."

"How much was it?"

"Let's just say, it was enough that I could buy a palace on Sicilia that's twice the size of my current residence. And according to Titus, both he and my brother have increased their personal fortunes tenfold."

"Well, to be fair," Paulinus said, "when he was helping you conquer Britannia, he was sacking settlements and barbarian hill forts that were of little value. After each slaughter, there were only a handful of slaves to be had. I'll grant you, he missed quite the opportunity in North Africa. Though I would attribute this to his rather naïve sense of nobility and fairness. That he was despised by the late empress-dowager, Agrippina, only made matters more difficult for him."

"Yes, I understand both of you had your little spats with her." Sabinus laughed.

"I didn't go as far as Vespasian, who called her an 'insufferable twat' right to her face. And by the time she and I had our disagreements, Nero was already sick of her and didn't give a damn if anyone insulted his mother. But going back to Vespasian, Judea has been the only real chance for him to make his fortune. Since he is there to punish the region rather than conquer new lands, he can plunder what he wishes, while enslaving as much of the populace as he likes. Galilee, in particular, is very rich in resources with a populace of potential slaves that far exceeds what you encountered in southern Britannia."

"Yes, the slave markets have been glutted with fresh stock, because of his exploits," Sabinus noted. "This has driven prices down so much, I just recently purchased ten new household slaves for less than what I paid for three just a few years ago."

Servants entered the hall, bearing the first dinner course. With a momentary pause in their conversation, Aula nodded to the porter who stood near the entrance. He beat his staff three times onto the echoing floor before announcing, *"The Noble Lady Aula Cursia Vale!"*

Aula stepped into the hall and saw only two of the couches were occupied. Paulinus sat upright, while Sabinus rose and strolled over to

embrace his charge.

"You've returned safe," he said, much joy and relief in his voice. "It pained me to have to send you away so soon, but my other three couriers had yet to return. You have done well."

"I delivered Vespasian's response to the senate," she replied, then nodded to Sabinus' guest. "General Paulinus."

"Lady Vale," Paulinus said, standing up. "What pleasure is this?" He spied the ring on her finger. "Here, let me see that…this is the ring of an imperial courier. Sabinus, since when do you employ patrician women to act as your messengers?"

"Since I needed someone I could completely trust," the old senator replied, sitting on his couch and pointing Aula to take one next to them. Servants immediately rushed over with wine and what was left of the first course.

"As Prefect of the City of Rome, I am granted the authority to employ up to four imperial couriers," Sabinus continued. "Or at least, that's as many signet rings as I had. Lady Vale is an excellent horse rider, and she has more than once expressed to me how she wishes to better serve the empire. As a woman, she naturally cannot stand for any sort of political office, nor can she serve in the army. A pity that. I do recall in Britannia seeing a small number of women fighting on both sides. One of our own companies of allied Syrian archers was led by a woman. A shame she took a spear through the guts."

"Yes, I fought against a number of women in Britannia," Paulinus added.

"However," Sabinus continued, "there is no prohibition of Aula serving as a means of gathering and disseminating information for me. As you know, dear friend, information is the ultimate source of power."

Paulinus decided not to press Sabinus any further, though his curiosity made him ask a few questions directly of Aula. "You've come from Vespasian?"

Aula simply nodded. She assumed both men had been at the senate chambers when the commander-in-chief's message was read. She further understood the rather awkward position this placed Sabinus in. Were he to openly declare for his brother, he would be imprisoned or possibly killed as a traitor. And any attempts at voicing support for Vitellius would be viewed as disingenuous and, therefore, bring even greater suspicion upon him.

"Vespasian will be declared an enemy of the state, if he hasn't already," Aula remarked.

“Given the persons who immediately called for his arrest and execution, it was not difficult to see who was anxious to curry favor with Vitellius,” Paulinus observed. “But most of the senate was rather muted in their condemnation of Vespasian.”

“The presence of Vitellius’ army in Rome is what makes them cower,” Sabinus conjectured. “The frontiers have been left terribly understrength. Meanwhile, sixty thousand soldiers rot away, doing little but drinking, whoring, and gambling. I cannot help but wonder what kind of shape they will be in, once Vespasian’s army arrives in Italia.”

“They do a fine job of bullying our colleagues, I’ll grant you that,” Paulinus scoffed. “I swear, half of those cowardly twats would offer to suck Vitellius’ cock, if they thought it would get them a governorship. And should Vespasian defeat Vitellius, these same bastards will likely grovel at his feet.”

“For which they would get a swift kick to the face,” Aula stated.

Sabinus enjoyed her comment. “It’s true, my brother detests false flattery.” He then said to Paulinus, “You know both of us will face increasing scrutiny over the coming months. You for having supported a rival emperor, and me for being another claimant’s brother.”

“Then we must continue to be cautious,” Paulinus replied. “I fear I may have overstepped, when I asked Vitellius to give me command of a legion. Lady Vale, you’ll likely be safest as far from the city as possible.”

“Do you think Judea is far enough?” she asked, with a playful laugh. “I loathe the idea of climbing aboard another ship, but I am ready to continue doing my part for Rome. It is the empire and her people we all serve. And I do hope whoever wins this hateful war is worthy of ruling as Caesar.”

“Well spoken,” Paulinus acknowledged.

“There will be other duties for you to perform,” Sabinus added. “But for now, my dear, you have earned a well-deserved rest. We shall wait to see if the senate decides to send a formal response to Vespasian. If they do, there will be no need for you to travel east for the time being. If not, I will draft a message to be delivered to Vespasian, along with a similar one to his closest ally, Antonius Primus. I will inform Vitellius, personally, that I intend to send such a dispatch to my brother, and I will urge them to choose the path of peace and reason.”

“A wise move,” Paulinus concurred. “Vitellius, or at least his agents, likely suspect you are sending personal correspondence to Vespasian. Openly declaring you have nothing to hide will help ease any suspicions Vitellius

may still harbor towards you."

As she laid on her couch listening to the two men talk, it felt strange to Aula. She had almost unfettered access to both sides of the brewing conflict. Still, as she was in the direct employ of Sabinus, she decided she would avoid contact with the Vitellians as much as possible. Since she was, quite possibly, the only woman acting as an imperial courier, she could not hide in anonymity like her male counterparts.

The game, which many assumed concluded, was instead becoming more dangerous, even within the imperial capital. She reckoned it would become far more hazardous over the coming months, as the Vitellian and Flavian armies came closer to battle. And while grateful for the reprieve, for she was exhausted both physically and mentally after the past few months, she hoped Sabinus would have a mission for her sooner rather than later. Should Vitellius panic and decide to start eliminating anyone who might be associated with his rival, Rome was the last place she wished to be.



The vessel Vespasian dispatched to Primus and the Danube legions had returned surprisingly quickly. In less than a month, the courier managed to deliver his message to the commanding general and return by ship with his response. This was helped, in no small part, by Primus having already written his dispatch to Vespasian, while posting envoys at each of the port cities in Pannonia. Anticipating what Vespasian would ask of him, he had sent his response before even receiving the original message.

"Primus has asked for reinforcements," the commander-in-chief said, as he read over the dispatch. "No surprise there. We should send at least part of our task force to assist him. He says Seventh Gemina is ready to march, as is Seventh Claudia. Though he has yet to hear from Thirteenth Gemina, he doubts General Aquila has any fond feelings towards Vitellius."

"Not after the pretender humiliated him and his legion by making them build his amphitheaters," Titus remarked. "That gives us three more legions, though I agree they need reinforcements."

"The problem is, Vitellius still commands a huge fleet," Mucianus replied. "His ships outnumber ours three-to-one. Otherwise, I would say send Primus in from the north with my division landing on southern Italia at Croton, from there we could smash Vitellius in the middle."

“There will be others,” Titus added. “Third Gallica and Eighth Augusta Legions were both Othonian loyalists. If Primus can rally Eleventh Claudia, his army will be almost as large as the one here.”

“Send three cohorts from our army in Judea,” Vespasian directed. “They will add a Flavian presence to Primus’ division. It’s not much, I’ll grant you, but he needs every blade he can get his hands on. And if we only send three cohorts, the few number of ships should be able to stay along the Greek coast without drawing suspicion from the Vitellian fleet. Six triremes should suffice.”

“It will be a tight fit for the legionaries,” Mucianus observed. “And there won’t be room for the officers’ horses. Plus the seas along Greece are always extremely choppy, regardless of the time of year.”

“Using our fastest ships will help mitigate this.” Vespasian shrugged. “And while I never treat the lives of my soldiers as disposable, we must accept the risk with three of our cohorts. I will offer sacrifices to both Neptune and Triton for their safe passage. If the divines do favor our enterprise, then our lads will arrive safe.”

“My division is making final preparations as we speak,” Mucianus stated. “We should be ready to begin our journey within the next few days.”



At the camp of the Fifth Cohort of Legio X, Centurion Nicanor expected their orders to make final preparations for the long march to come at any time. In preparation for this, he had ordered a series of inspections of his entire century, with all weapons, armor, and kit laid out for him. Normally, these were conducted by the decani; however, Nicanor felt it was necessary, as their commanding officer, to personally make certain his soldiers were prepared for the long journey ahead.

The task forces from Judea and Egypt were to first travel to the city of Cyrrus, in northern Syria, where they would join the Sixth Legion and the detachments from Legio XII. And though few of the men in Legio X knew much about Mucianus, all lamented that their own legate, General Trajan, would remain behind in Judea. Along with Vespasian himself, Trajan was regarded as one of the most formidable military leaders in the entire Imperial Army. His absence, therefore, made it plain that politics among the patrician officers still played a substantial role, even within the more populist Flavian

Army.

"I just hope we're not setting ourselves up for disaster," Gaius remarked, as the two officers walked towards where the century had assembled. "The easternmost provinces have declared for Vespasian, but what about the west? Will Britannia, Gaul, Hispania, and Germania side with the pretender? And what of North Africa?"

"Depending on one's point of view, either we're all traitors to Rome or the Vitellians are," Nicanor conjectured. "When Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon, half of Rome demanded his execution for treason. The other half hailed him as a hero and savior."

"But is it really that simple?" Gaius asked. "Is one side truly loyal to Rome, while the opposition are traitors?"

"When both sides claim to be fighting for the same thing—that is the people of Rome—then whoever wins will be who history declares as the righteous."

The two officers ceased in their banter as they approached their century. Signifier Aurelian and Tesserarius Julius walked over and saluted their centurion.

"The century is ready for your inspection, sir," Aurelian said.

Nicanor returned the salute and told the two to stand easy. He turned and said to Gaius, "I'll take the first rank, you take the second."

"Yes, sir."

Nicanor and Gaius, along with the decani in their century, proceeded to conduct the day's inspection, specifically, their soldiers' footwear. While inspections were a part of every legionary's daily routine, in this case, the centurion had stressed the need for serviceable caligae. They expected to be on the march practically nonstop for up to six months. Each squad of legionaries stood in a long line. All were barefoot, holding up their sandals for the officers to inspect. Hobnails on the bottom, serviceability of straps, as well as the condition of the soles, were all checked thoroughly.

"This strap needs replacing," Gaius said, as he checked one legionary's sandals. The man's decanus made notes on a small wax tablet. "Two hobnails are missing," he observed on another. He continued down the line, each squad leader denoting any deficiencies found. The inspection was quick yet thorough. Within twenty minutes, he and Nicanor had finished and stood in front of their century.

"All legionaries have until tomorrow to sort out any issues with their

caligae," Nicanor said. "Decani will conduct their own re-inspections before breakfast. That is all. Dismissed!"

"I suppose we should check our own footwear," Gaius said in a low voice, as they walked away from their men.

Nicanor snorted. "You can check mine. If so much as one hobnail is loose, I, too, will be spending the day sorting out my damned sandals instead of relaxing in one of the brothels."

"Centurion Nicanor!"

Their cohort commander, Centurion Galeo, walked briskly towards them.

"Sir," Nicanor replied. "What news?"

"Seems we won't be walking all the way to Rome after all," Galeo replied. "Emperor Vespasian has scrounged together enough ships for three cohorts, one from each legion, to sail to Pannonia where they will be attached to General Primus' division."

"And we drew Fortuna's lot?" Nicanor asked.

"Both figuratively and literally," the pilus prior replied. "The master centurion said it was the only fair way to determine who got to ride most of the way to Rome."

"When do we depart?"

"In three days," Galeo answered. "There are two ships from Cyprus already in port at Caesarea. The rest are coming from Egypt and should be arriving tomorrow. And, of course, there will be all the logistical issues to sort out first. With no room for horses, it looks like you and I will be doing a fair amount of walking."

"Very good, sir," Nicanor acknowledged. He turned to his optio. "We'll inform the men, but I still want their caligae repaired by tomorrow."

"Five hundred miles of walking certainly beats three to four thousand," Gaius noted with a short laugh. "What do we know about General Primus? I have only heard rumors, many of which are rather unsavory."

"Which means they are probably true," Nicanor snickered. "I would say, don't let him anywhere near your coin pouch and hide all the expensive silver when he comes over for supper. But give him a sword and an army and he'll win you an empire."



Three thousand miles away, it was a blue-sky summer afternoon in the

Italian coastal city of Ariminum. Lucius Artorius had recently returned, though he immediately informed his deputy that he would soon be departing. His meeting with Emperor Vitellius had gone far better than he could have possibly imagined. Instead of another six-month tour as a staff tribune, he now had command of a cavalry regiment for the next three years.

"I suppose the news we heard will preclude me from journeying with you," Laura said somberly, as she met her husband in the palace garden following his meeting with Porcius.

She had at first been happy for Lucius. Laura had come to accept the fact that he would never be truly happy until he fulfilled what he thought was his destiny, to truly become a soldier of Rome. Just days before his scheduled departure, they received the news that Vespasian had declared Vitellius an illegitimate usurper, whom he intended to remove from the imperial throne. With war now on the horizon and Lucius likely to be right in the thick of it, Laura was completely devastated. But like any good Roman wife, she dried her fearful tears and stoically accepted his decision.

"Only for a short time," Lucius assured her. "But until we know what these Flavian rebels are about, I would rather you remained here. Otho's former soldiers in Pannonia may not be so keen to remain true to their oaths. If they declare for Vespasian, it may not be safe for you to accompany me."

They walked through the large complex towards the governor's house just off the main road along the sandy beach. It truly was a paradise. Yet Lucius had no doubts at all about leaving its comforts for the far more austere life of a cavalry officer. As they strolled through the open archways that led into the fountained courtyard, they were met by one of Lucius' freedman clerks.

"Your guests are waiting for you in the reception hall, master," the man said, ascending the short flight of steps into the palace proper.

"Guests?" Lucius asked. He wasn't expecting anyone. He supposed they were either friends of his and Laura's, or government officials, who would have heard about his assumption of command. Instead, his mouth fell open when he saw his father, Metellus, and his mother, Marcia, waiting for him.

"Mother…Father!" he said excitedly, rushing forward and embracing the parents he had not seen in over ten years.

Marcia's hair was mostly gray now, though her face looked as if she had not aged a day. Metellus, who would be sixty the following year, was still relatively fit, though his years away from the legions had left him a bit slower

in the step, with a few extra pounds around his stomach. They had traveled all the way from Britannia to Ariminum. It surprised Lucius, and he told them as much.

"I received word about your election as governor of the city," Metellus explained. "I have business to attend to in Gaul, and I wished to see and congratulate my eldest son. Of course, your mother insisted on accompanying me."

"And I am delighted that she did," Lucius said, holding his mother's hands in his. "When did you arrive?"

"Early this morning," Marcia replied. "Your clerk told us you were away but were expected back this afternoon."

"I had an important meeting," Lucius explained, as he ushered his parents into the small chamber he used for meeting with dignitaries and other important persons. Slaves quickly brought wine and trays of appetizers. "I had instructions to give to my deputy, in light of my audience with the emperor."

"An esteemed honor for a member of the equites," Metellus replied. "Provided he manages to retain the throne longer than either of his predecessors."

Lucius was uncertain how he should answer this. It had already been a violent and extremely turbulent year for Rome.

His father then said, "Galba came to the throne via rebellion. He was slain by Otho, who in turn was usurped by Vitellius. And now Vespasian seeks to overthrow Vitellius."

"It is all so utterly senseless," Marcia said, with a trace of venom in her voice. "Rome's sons have been compelled to kill one another just to satisfy one man's vanity. At least you will have no part in this madness."

"About that," Lucius said, turning his now empty cup over in his hands, staring at the floor. "I will not be in Ariminum for much longer. Vitellius has offered me a commission to command a regiment of the imperial cavalry."

While Metellus' expression remained impassive, Marcia looked as if she might burst into tears.

Her pained countenance wounded Lucius. "Are you not proud of me, Mother?"

"We believe your brother marches with the Flavians," Marcia replied.

"I suspect that he does, since the Tenth is one of Vespasian's legions," Lucius surmised, casting his gaze down for a brief moment. He looked his

mother in the eye. “Have you heard from Gaius?”

“No,” his father replied. This was not surprising. Personal correspondence between soldiers in the legions and the families they left behind was extremely rare. The only reliable couriers were imperial messengers, whose jobs were to deliver official dispatches around the empire, not ferry letters from homesick sons to their mothers.

“What we do know is the eastern legions have all declared for Vespasian,” Metellus stated. “In which case, your brother is most likely with those marching on Rome. I suppose we’ll know for certain in a few months.”

“I don’t give a damn about Vitellius, Vespasian, or whoever else seeks to become emperor with the blood of our children!” Marcia snapped. “Am I to lose both of my sons, like I almost lost your father all those years ago?”

“You’re being unfair, my love,” Metellus said, taking her hand.

“And yet, you were always proud of Gaius, the soldier,” Lucius remarked. He immediately regretted expressing his bitter resentment.

“I wept every night for a week when your brother left to join the legions,” Marcia said. Her voice was calmer now, though her eyes were red and wet with tears. “But after we made certain your career was established, there simply was nothing left in the family coffers to offer our youngest son. We were able to see to his education, and he could have had any of a hundred different professions. I protested his becoming a legionary. Your father overruled me.” There was a sidelong glance to Metellus. It was a sign that they had exchanged many bitter words over his allowing their youngest son to join the legions.

“As a Roman matron, I am expected to show pride in my sons who defend the empire with their lives,” Marcia continued, her voice cracking with bitter sarcasm.

Lucius became exasperated, standing up from his couch and pacing around the room.

“What would you have me do? Resign my command?” he asked, throwing his hands up in frustration. “Am I to pretend that my oath means nothing? Rome has seen three emperors upon the imperial throne since this year began. Shall we make it four? Or how about five? How many times must we allow our rulers to be overthrown at the whims of the legions before we say ‘enough’? I will not sit idly by from the comfort of this magisterial palace, while my country tears itself apart. I am sorry, Mother, for I know this grieves you deeply. But I have my duty to perform, as does Gaius. The

gods will determine which of our causes is right."

Laura sat next to her mother-in-law and placed an arm around her, while Metellus motioned with his head for his son to follow him out into the gardens. Lucius was angry, with his mother for her overprotective selfishness, and with himself for having berated her.

"I am sorry for upsetting Mother," Lucius apologized, once he and his father were alone.

"She understands why you are doing this," Metellus replied. "But she is also your mother, and she now has to fear for both you and Gaius. It is the same for all who send their sons off to war. Spartan women may have stoically told their sons to return with their shields or on them, but you cannot tell me they were not crushed inside. As you may recall, I did not join the ranks until after my own mother had passed on to the afterlife."

Lucius raised an eyebrow as he turned to face his father. An old memory suddenly resurfaced. He knowingly nodded his head.

"Of course," he said. "I often forget Diana was not your mother."

"She didn't raise me, and I was a grown man when I met her. But after I was adopted by her and my uncle, she helped fill that void all sons feel when they bury their mothers."

Given his status as a retired centurion primus ordo, and now a respected member of the equites, most knew little about his upbringing. Only a very select few were aware that Metellus Artorius Posthumous was the biological son of a Germanic woman named Rowana and a Roman legionary, also named Metellus. His father had been killed in battle before he was even born. It was only eighteen years later, when Rowana lay dying from a serious illness, that she told him to seek out his uncle, Artorius. Metellus spent a year as an auxiliary infantryman before finally finding his uncle who, at the time, was a centurion with Legio XX along the Rhine. It was during the aftermath of the horrific Battle of Braduhenna in Frisia, where both men were badly wounded, that Metellus and Artorius finally met.

More than forty years had now passed since Metellus' adoption by Artorius and his wife, Diana Procula. His status as a Roman citizen confirmed, he had been given an immediate transfer into the legions, where he steadily rose through the ranks. He would later serve with his adoptive father in Judea and during the Invasion of Britannia. The Artorians had since established themselves as respected members of the equites. Even Metellus' own sons often forgot about his very humble origins.

“Diana was the strongest woman I have ever known,” Metellus remarked. “She feared greatly for both me and Artorius when we left for Britannia. You were scarcely two then, and your brother not even a year old. But Diana had her duty to perform, just like the rest of us. Hers was to protect your mother, and be that pillar of strength she so desperately needed. Those were difficult times for her.”

“Some things never change,” Lucius reasoned. He thought for a moment. “But with Gaius and I supporting rival emperors, whose cause is truly right?”

“I’m not sure how I should answer that,” Metellus replied. “As you know, I served under Vespasian in Britannia. So my feelings are undoubtedly clouded by bias and personal loyalty for my former commanding general. I’ll not pretend to know Vitellius’ motives and will simply assume that, as you are loyal to him, he is worthy to serve.”

Father and son walked in silence for some time. Metellus wished he had some words of wisdom to impart to his son. “For generations, it has been the duty of the Artorians to take up arms in defense of the empire, sometimes at extreme cost. I would never say this in the presence of your mother. But, if the gods should demand such a price from our family, then may you and Gaius live and die with honor.”

Chapter VIII: Into the Unknown

Rome
14 August 69 A.D.
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Content to fritter away his remaining years in the imperial palace while his confidants performed most of the duties required of an emperor, Vitellius had been convinced that his legacy was secure. He appointed himself as consul for the next ten years, while intending to have his son, Germanicus, serve as his colleague once he came of age. Unlike Galba or Otho, Vitellius had a son to succeed him, enabling him to found a new dynasty. The populist uprising under a fearsome military leader in the east ended all of this.

Two weeks had passed since news broke of Vespasian's rebellion. There was a great deal of tension and unease within the capital, even as the people went about their daily lives. Vitellius' generals were now filled with a sense of urgency, in some cases bordering on outright panic. And yet, the emperor was largely unconcerned.

"According to our loyal Governor Saturnius of Moesia, only one legion has rebelled," Vitellius remarked dismissively.

"Third Gallica," Senator Italicus noted. "But he sent his dispatch two weeks ago. A lot could have changed during that time. And he makes no mention of his other two legions, Seventh Claudia and Eighth Augusta. I should remind you, all three were amply rewarded by your predecessor following their crushing of the Rhoxolani incursion."

"Yes, and their benefactor is now dead," the emperor replied, feeling rather irritated. "Had they wished to press the issue, they could have continued to march to Bedriacum. Instead, they returned to their billets like good little soldiers. I'll not stress over the grumblings of a single legion in the Balkans. And as for Vespasian, I suspect his army will lose heart before they even cross over Asia Minor. Should he still wish to contest the issue, we have the Rhine Legions waiting here for him."

"But our legions and auxilia regiments are terribly understrength," Caecina said plainly. "We not only ceased recruiting efforts, but we've

stripped a full third of all our forces within Rome in order to fill out the ranks of the Praetorian Guard. The soldiers who remain have done little except gorge themselves on wine and women for the last month."

"A few miles of marching and some drill will have them ready," Valens countered. "I swear, Caecina, I sometimes wonder whose side you're on. If I hadn't turned up before Bedriacum, I daresay Otho would still be emperor."

"You are a liar and a cowardly son of a whore!" the younger general snapped. "If you had arrived when you were supposed to, we could have swept Otho's forces from the field within an hour. Instead, you left my division without reinforcements, almost costing us the entire damned war!"

"Enough!" Vitellius shouted, slamming his fist onto the arm of his chair. The emperor had been watching his two closest advisors do little except squabble since they returned to Rome.

"Forgive us, sire," Valens said, with a bow. "My colleague and I simply have a few differences of opinion, that's all."

"That's putting it mildly," Italicus grumbled.

Vitellius nodded in agreement.

"You two are taking over the consulship very soon," he said. "And if Vespasian should decide to foolishly go to war against us, it will be you who I rely upon to stop him. I cannot have my best generals feuding with each other. Now, the first thing we need is intelligence, not just on Vespasian, but on every province from Pannonia to Syria. I need to know who my friends and enemies are."

"We should also send word to the governors in Gaul, Hispania, and Britannia," Caecina added. His face was still red, but his voice had calmed considerably.

"Yes well, see to it," Vitellius said, waving dismissively. Once more showing little more than indifference to the pending crisis. The smells wafting up from the trays of food being prepared by servants reminded him that his midafternoon feast was set to commence in less than an hour.

Caecina was becoming more and more disillusioned with the idea of serving Vitellius. He loathed seeing his emperor demonstrate on a daily basis that gluttony was a way of life and he cared for little else. Vitellius' ineptitude was a key reason why he and Valens had hoisted him onto the throne, so they might rule through him; however, the bitter rivalry between the two former friends was making Caecina doubt their entire enterprise.



In the Judean port capital of Caesarea, it was chaos along the docks as three cohorts of legionaries waited impatiently to board their ships. It was a logistical nightmare, for what amounted to little more than a symbolic gesture. Twelve hundred legionaries were but a small fraction of the Flavian Army. Still, three cohorts was better than nothing, plus the men from Legio V, Macedonia, Legio X, Fretensis, and Legio XV, Apollinaris were all hardened veterans. Their capabilities would greatly assist the readiness of some of Primus' less-experienced legions, in particular Legio VII, Gemina.

All weapons, with the exception of gladii, were stowed in the cargo hold below deck. Armor was broken down, chest and shoulder plates detached from the torsos, allowing them to be stacked for ease of storage. Segmentata armor had to be fitted for every legionary, so each section had a wooden tag tied to it with its owner's name, rank, and cohort. It was inevitable that some of these would get lost or ripped off, leading to much confusion when the time came for the soldiers to reclaim their kit. Helmets were stacked in rows along a shelf, a cord running in between each stack to keep it from falling onto the floor in the event of rough waters. Each squad had a small bin in which to store all of their camping equipment. Tents were stacked on the floor of the hold beneath the rows of armor. And while officers were prohibited from taking their horses, about half of their pack animals all rode aboard a single ship, under the assumption they could acquire more once they reached Pannonia.

"We'll have to make extra stops along the way," the admiral commanding the flotilla explained to Centurion Galeo and the other two cohort commanders. "With so many extra bodies on board, plus all their armor and equipment, our food and water storage space has been cut in half."

"I understand," the cohort commander acknowledged. "About how long do you think it will take us to reach Tergeste?"

"The prevailing winds do favor us this time of year," the admiral observed. "Normally, we could make that journey in about ten days. However, as you can see, the amount of weight your soldiers and their equipment is adding has my ships dragging much lower through the water. Since we will have to stop off and restock our provisions at least once, if not twice, I would say at minimum two weeks. Of course, that's if I can even get you all the way to Tergeste. If the Vitellian fleet spots us and thinks we're

hostile, we could all be in a world of shit. With all the extra weight we're carrying, I cannot promise we'll be able to outrun them."

"Understood," the centurion replied.

Work details were sent aboard the ships to store all the soldiers' armor and equipment, while the rest remained on the beach, endlessly waiting. It took most of the day to load the vessels, and by evening it was decided to delay their departure until morning. With all of their tents buried in the hulls of the ships, the task force of legionaries would be sleeping under the stars. All of their cooking pots were also in the storage holds, leaving soldiers to improvise when preparing their suppers. Each squad sent one or two men into the city to acquire rations, while the rest laid out their traveling cloaks on the sandy beach. Some had decided to bed down too close to the water's edge and found themselves soaked by the incoming tide.

"Stupid twats!" a decanus shouted at the wet and complaining soldiers. "What the fuck did you think would happen?"

"One would think they had never been near the sea," Gaius said, with a laugh. He sat near a small fire, further up the beach where it met with the tall grasses. Julius had joined him, along with the century's signifier, Aurelian.

"Some of them probably haven't," Julius surmised. "A lad grows up in some city like Palmyra, never leaves home until he joins the army, and then spends most of his career at a fortress that's hundreds of miles from the sea."

"Still, some of them just need a bit of sense beaten into them." Aurelian remarked. He scrunched his brow in thought for a moment. "Gaius, I suspect you came to the Tenth from further afield than anyone in the whole damned legion. I mean, Nicanor was born and raised in Jerusalem, Julius came to us from Tarsus, and I grew up on Cyprus."

"There are very few of us," the optio concurred. He gave a dark laugh. "Had I not taken that incentive stipend when I first joined, and instead enlisted into one of the Britannic or Gallic Legions, I might have found myself fighting on the wrong side of this little conflict."

"Well, here's hoping your childhood friends don't end up on the wrong end of your gladius," Aurelian said, holding up his water bladder in a salute.

Gaius grunted. It was a very real concern for most of the army. They might have to face friends or even family members on the opposing side. Gaius suspected for him this was highly unlikely since he was raised as a member of the equites, where a career in the army was the last thing on the minds of most of the young men. Most of his childhood friends had been

groomed for political and bureaucratic careers. Only his older brother had seemed envious of his opportunity to win glory for the empire in the east.

"If you only knew what life in the legions was really like, dear Lucius," he said quietly.

"What was that?" Julius asked.

Gaius shook his head.

"Nothing. Just talking to myself is all."

As he lay down on his cloak that night, the young optio's mind wandered. He gazed up at the infinite number of stars in the cloudless sky. His eyes closed. He'd started to fade when a sandaled foot nudged him in the side.

"Sorry to wake you," Centurion Nicanor said, kneeling next to him. "I just received orders from Galeo. We are to board the ships just before dawn so we do not miss the morning tide."

Gaius nodded, mumbled a few incoherent words, and let sleep take him. It would be the last full night of rest he would see for some weeks.

The following morning, the Flavian contingent boarded the vessels bound for Pannonia. Emperor Vespasian stood on the dock with a few of his staff officers. There were no flowering speeches, just a simple handshake from the man they would soon be going into battle for. This simple act reminded them that the emperor was a soldier first, and he would always be one of their own.

"Neptune and Mars guide you," Vespasian said in a low voice, as he clasped Gaius' hand.

The optio was overwhelmed by the gesture, though he only managed to mumble, *'Ave, Caesar'*, before moving on. He forced his way to the very back of the ship, laying his pack down against the curved stern. He knew that traveling by sea disagreed with him, and the only practical place to relieve himself was over the backside. There was a lot of grumbling and shoving. Soldiers tried to find a small amount of personal space to lay their packs down, while staying out of the mariners' way. Within an hour of boarding the commands were shouted by the officers, oars splashed into the water, and the flotilla pushed away from the docks. Gaius watched as Caesarea slowly grew smaller in the distance. He was fine as long as he had something to fix his gaze to, but once land was out of sight his stomach would begin playing havoc.

Trireme-class ships were among the smallest vessels in the Imperial Navy at roughly a hundred and thirty feet long and twenty feet wide. The oars

required only a single rower, as opposed to the two or three men needed to heave the mighty oars on quinquereme-class vessels. While the one hundred and seventy oarsmen were divided into three decks, these were very small and could be rather claustrophobic. Contrary to many merchant vessels, the oarsmen in the Imperial Navy were not slaves but enlisted sailors. In addition to the men below decks, there were thirty sailors manning the sails, along with the ship's commander and his officers.

Having to transport over two hundred legionaries apiece, the number of persons aboard each ship had doubled, and conditions were very cramped. Boredom and seasickness would be the soldiers' greatest adversaries during the rather tedious journey.

Once out to sea the winds picked up, filling the sails, and allowing the ships to cut through the waves with surprising speed, Gaius and numerous others were now being crippled by nausea and vomiting. On the second day, they sailed past the island of Cyprus. Gaius found himself leaning against the rail, his stomach perpetually twisting in knots. This was partially relieved as he caught sight of the distant shore, his illness temporarily forgotten.

"How are you managing?" Nicanor asked, joining his friend on the rail.

"If you're referring to my last trip to Cyprus, I am fine with it," Gaius replied. "I have greater things to concern myself with than some bitch who ran off with my son four years ago."

"I was actually asking if you can make it to Pannonia without spewing your guts over the side every day," Nicanor remarked with a forced grin.

Gaius took a deep breath. "I should probably eat something. As long as land is in sight, I can keep it down."

"Make sure you drink plenty, too," the centurion added. "I'll not have my optio dying of dehydration before we even get to Greece."

By the end of their first week at sea, the Flavian vessels sailed into the Greek port city of Hermione, located almost due south from Athens, across thirty miles of sea. Aside from the half-day it took to sail past Cyprus, Gaius' seasickness had been horrific. The contents of his stomach had been vomited over the back of the ship within the first few hours, and he'd been scarcely able to eat or drink since. A number of soldiers were also suffering the ill effects of traveling by sea, and they had to be helped off the ship by their mates.

"A damned awful price we pay for expediting our journey west," Gaius grumbled, as Julius helped him down the gangplank. Once off the dock, he

found a place where the sandy beach met with the grassy embankment and collapsed onto his back. His eyes were shut. And as he breathed in deeply, all he cared about was that he was off the ship.

"Going to survive, old friend?" Nicanor asked, as he stood over him. The centurion was no worse for wear and was only a little cramped from having been confined to such a small space these past few days.

"I would sooner walk the rest of the way to Pannonia, than get on that damned ship again," Gaius muttered.

"I never knew the seas disagreed with you so much," Nicanor chuckled, sitting down in the sand next to his optio.

"I try to forget," Gaius replied, his eyes still shut. "I handled the crossing of the channel between Britannia and Gaul easily enough when I first joined the legions. Of course, that took just a few hours, not days on end."

"Yes, I always thought it strange that you came all the way from Britannia," the centurion replied, trying to help his friend take his mind off his discomfort. "Why did you not join one of the Britannic Legions?"

"I thought about it," Gaius said. "But then they offered an extra thirty denarii to anyone who would volunteer for the eastern legions. Seems they can't find enough citizen volunteers in places like Syria and Asia Minor. There were about fifty of us from Britannia and Gaul who took them up on it. We had to walk much of the way, at least as far as Pannonia. Took us two weeks by ship to reach Syria from there, and I did not fare any better than I did this time. I thought perhaps seasickness was something one could grow out of."

"Give yourself a day to recuperate," Nicanor remarked. "I hear the second leg of a sea journey is never as bad as the first."

Gaius forced a grim smile, though he remained where he was for some time. Hermione was a bustling port city, and those legionaries not still feeling the effects of seasickness fell upon every tavern and brothel in a drunken orgy. Gaius cursed his affliction. He longed for the touch of a woman. Regrettably, he knew he was in no condition to perform. He settled for a light supper of bread and broth, along with plenty of water. He soon passed out and slept long into the next morning.

Fortunately for Gaius and the other soldiers who fared poorly at sea, Nicanor's prediction proved true. While the optio's stomach felt a little uneasy as the ship lurched away from the docks, within an hour or so, he found the rest of the journey at least bearable. His thoughts now turned to

what would transpire during the next phase of their lengthy trek to Rome.



Having left Ariminum soon after his parents, Tribune Lucius Artorius Magnus made the four-day journey by horse to the auxilia fort that was to be his new command. Known as *Castra Auraei,* it was, in reality, little more than an oversized road station used by imperial couriers along the Via Postumia. Lucius was puzzled at how small the post was, for it appeared nowhere near large enough to house a regiment of cavalrymen and their horses.

"Is this the headquarters for the Siliana Regiment of Horse?" he asked a pair of sentries, who stood on either side of the gatehouse.

"Aye, that it be, sir," one of the men said.

Lucius nodded and rode into the small encampment. There was a blacksmith, as well as two farriers on either side, and troopers were seen walking their horses to and from the stables that lined most of the encampment. At the far end of the fort was a larger building he could only surmise was his headquarters.

"Tribune, sir," a trooper said, as he dismounted. "I'll take your horse for you."

Lucius nodded and went inside the rickety building. The ceiling was low. The floorboards creaked as he walked over to the desk, where a decurion sat going over some reports.

"Ah, tribune," the man said, looking up from his work. "We've been expecting you. The centurion is out with a patrol at the moment, but he should return within the next hour or so."

"Very good," Lucius replied. The decurion saw his puzzled expression as he looked around the rather austere building. A set of makeshift stairs were in the corner leading up to the second floor, though they appeared to be little more than a ladder that had been laid down at angle and then nailed to the floor.

"Probably not the type of accommodations you're used to," the decurion observed.

"I admit, I was expecting something much larger," Lucius confessed. "Both in terms of the principia, as well as the camp itself."

"We're a mobile force, sir," the officer explained. "We spend most of our

time out in the field. And with our companies scattered throughout the region, it didn't make much sense to build a grand fort. Your quarters are just up those steps, as is your office. I'll let the centurion know you've arrived once he's returned."

Lucius nodded and gingerly made his way up the steps. The second floor was no larger than the first, and with its sloped ceiling the tribune could only stand completely upright in the very center of the partitioned room. His bunk lay in the far corner behind a small wall. At the foot was a battered chest for his personal effects. This was certainly far different than what he'd experienced with the legions. He'd had his own house then, complete with servants.

There was a small table in the center of the room, and he noticed a large, rough-looking map laid out. It was crudely drawn, with various pins at numerous cities and towns in the region. Each pin had a strip of parchment with a number written down, which Lucius surmised designated the various companies within his regiment.

As he stood with his hands resting on the table, the front door opened down below, and the sound of numerous voices echoed from the small foyer. After a few moments, he heard the audible creak as someone made their way up the stairs.

The man who stepped onto the second floor was huge. He stood a good half head taller than Lucius, arms and legs thick with corded muscle. His armor was a plain tunic of hamata chain mail. The transverse crest atop his otherwise unadorned trooper's helmet was the only thing to denote his rank. Given his immense size, Lucius reckoned he was either a German or Gaul. As the centurion removed his helmet, the mop of blonde hair beneath seemed to confirm this.

"Tribune Artorius," the man said, with a nod. "I am Centurion Marcus Liberius."

"A pleasure," Lucius said. He then rather awkwardly extended his hand, which the centurion hesitantly accepted. His grip was crushing, as his fingers seemed to swallow up Lucius' entire hand.

"I see you've acquainted yourself with the disposition of our regiment," the centurion said, looking towards the map.

"Yes," Lucius replied. "That explains the rather small size of this fort."

Liberius grunted and walked over, placing a thick finger upon the spot marked 'Castra Auraei'.

“We are here with my first company,” he said. “Our regiment was originally posted along the Danube in a much nicer fort, I’ll grant you. However, after the war against the pretender, Otho, our mission has changed to that of reconnaissance throughout northeastern Italia.”

“Yes, I heard your previous commander declared himself for Otho,” Lucius noted.

“The last one who was here for any significant amount of time. And as you can see, the regiment did not exactly follow his lead.” Both men shared a chuckle, though Lucius was confused by the statement ‘for any significant amount of time’. Before he could ask, Liberius continued in his explanation about the dispersing of the regiment. “Second Company is split into two elements; the first is twenty miles to the west at Verona. The other is fifty miles north of there at Tridentium. Third Company is to the east at Acelum, with Fourth and Fifth Companies patrolling the roads around Aquileia, which is about fifty miles from the Pannonian border. The Flavians control everything east of the River Aesontius.”

“Seems straightforward enough,” Lucius replied, unsure as to what he was supposed to say. Given his demeanor, it appeared that Centurion Liberius assumed his new commander was an experienced officer.

The tribune’s hesitancy made him question this. “Just for my own satisfaction,” he said, “what previous postings have you held in the army?”

“Six months as a staff tribune with Legio IV, Macedonia,” Lucius replied.

“And what else?” Liberius asked, after a rather awkward pause.

Lucius could only shrug his shoulders. The centurion was an imposing figure he found rather unnerving, to the point that Lucius did not even think about correcting him for not addressing him as ‘sir’.

“That’s it,” Lucius confessed. “Afterwards, I was mayor of Ariminum for a short time, before the emperor awarded me this command.”

“I see,” the centurion grumbled. “We ask for a new regimental commander and Vitellius sends us a damned politician wearing a uniform.”

Lucius knew he was being disrespected, and whether he had the experience or not, he was still Liberius’ superior. The centurion soon corrected himself, saving Lucius from an awkward situation.

“No disrespect intended, tribune,” Liberius said. “You must understand that, while we are currently on reconnaissance duty, this is still a fighting regiment. Every last trooper is an experienced veteran, to include fighting against fellow Romans. Our last commander was an inexperienced politician

who arrived just prior to us going into battle. He was young, eager, but could barely ride a damned horse. When we faced the Othonians at Locus Castorum, which is not very far from where we stand now, the stupid twat led us in a headlong charge against the Thirteenth Gemina Legion. The enemy's legionaries had plenty of time to react. Yet, even after they established their *'repel cavalry'* formation, our idiotic commander thought our charge would break their ranks."

Lucius swallowed hard as the centurion briefly paused.

"This regiment went into battle nearly six hundred strong. We left fifty dead on the field that day, including our illustrious commanding tribune. We also suffered three times as many wounded. There has been little time to find replacements, and a number of our wounded were invalided out of the army. With another war on the horizon, every last one of our companies is understrength. I hope that, while you lack experience, you possess at least some wisdom and tactical savvy."

"It is from you that I hope to learn," Lucius asserted. "I know my shortcomings, but you will not find me wanting when it comes to the desire to listen and improve myself for the good of the regiment."

"Well spoken," the centurion acknowledged. "Normally, you would have been placed under the direct charge of an experienced equite officer, acting as his deputy. Since you have been denied this, it is up to me and my subordinate centurions to make you into a worthy commander; one who inspires both confidence and respect from our troopers."

"I will do all I can to earn their trust," the tribune stressed. He remembered the words his father had spoken to him before he left Ariminum. "Know that I will allow you and your centurions to exercise as much personal initiative as needed. I also accept that, while I can delegate authority in this manner, the responsibility of command is still mine alone."

"I think we will get along well, sir," Liberius said.

The corner of Lucius' mouth turned up in a partial grin. He felt as if this had all been a test and by addressing him as 'sir', the centurion was letting him know he'd passed.

He was disappointed, although hardly surprised, to discover that there were no baths at the fort. Normally, the commander had his own private bathing facilities attached to the principia. The mobile nature of his regiment made this completely impractical. It was likely they would be transferred to a new location within the next few weeks. So instead, he settled for washing in

the nearby stream, where his troopers often went to clean themselves and their clothing.

As he laid down on his bunk that night, pulling the wool blanket over him, Lucius stared into the dark, contemplating all that had transpired that day. He was grateful to have a second-in-command like Centurion Liberius, who was at least ten years older than he and possessed an infinite amount of experience. By the same token, he also felt terribly alone. While he was a tribune from the noble class of equites, his men were all non-citizen auxiliaries with a few citizen plebs amongst their officers. It was a strange world he found himself in. Equites were often given command of auxilia regiments, because men of the senatorial class felt it was beneath them to be in charge of non-citizens, whom they viewed as scarcely more than barbarians.

For the first time that day, he allowed his thoughts to fall on his brother. Lucius let out a melancholy sigh as he realized, in the coming months or possibly even weeks, he and Gaius could very well find themselves on opposing sides of the great battles that would determine the fate of Rome. And given the placement of his companies, the Siliana Regiment of Horse would likely be among the first to greet the invading Flavian Army.

Chapter IX: The Gathering Storm

Pannonia
28 August 69 A.D.



Legionaries in marching camp
(Photo © Cezary Wyszynski)

The main Flavian division under Mucianus had rallied in Syria, departing soon after the detachments from Judea had set sail in early August. Their pace was excruciatingly slow, with Mucianus halting at every major city in order to placate the local governors and demanding donatives to help fund his expedition. By the end of August, they had only advanced as far as Ancyra in Asia Minor. But as no one in the Flavian Army thought they would invade Italia until the following spring, Mucianus and his generals were unconcerned. For them, it was better to secure the eastern provinces in their fealty, keep the army well-supplied and paid, and take the time to completely undermine Vitellius politically and diplomatically.

In Pannonia, General Antonius Primus had no intentions of waiting until the next spring to launch his offensive against the Vitellians. In addition to his own Legio VII, Gemina, the Moesian Legions, Legio III, Gallica, and Legio VIII, Augusta were also joining the Flavian cause. The former

Othonian Legion, Thirteenth Gemina was also anxious to exact retribution against Vitellius. At their fortress near the city of Poetovio, Primus met with the other allied legates. His own Seventh Gemina was on the march from their post at Carnuntum, two hundred miles to the north. The first matter to deal with, however, was the Governor of Moesia, Marcus Aponius Saturnius.

"General Primus," Saturnius said, as the other assembled officers turned to see the commander of Legio VII entering the large pavilion tent. "I am glad to see you answered our summons appropriately."

"Yes. And I must say, your threats were unnecessary," Primus replied. "Especially coming from the man who first went sniveling to Vitellius about the rebellion."

There was an uncomfortable pause as the various legates looked to Saturnius, who swallowed hard in embarrassment.

Primus smirked. "What? Did you think I didn't know? Come now, I *allowed* your courier to pass through, because I wished to see how that fat despot would react. I may only be a legate, but nothing passes through Pannonia without my knowing about it."

"Until I knew the disposition of my legions, I had to do my duty as I saw fit," Saturnius replied defensively. He attempted to regain control of the conversation. "Having since openly declared my fealty to Vespasian, I am as much a part of this as you are. And as the senior governor present, it is only fitting that I assume command of this army."

"Is that so?" Primus asked.

"Yes," Saturnius emphasized. "As you so aptly stated, you are but commander of a single legion. I am therefore your nominal superior and, like it or not, we all have our orders to follow."

"That we do," the legate replied, producing a scroll which he tossed to the governor.

Saturnius gritted his teeth as he read the message. "*Will expect full cooperation and support…command of the Balkan Division will fall to*…but this cannot be!"

Primus was now grinning. "Like you said, we all have our orders. And mine come directly from Emperor Vespasian. This trumps whatever nominal seniority you think your governorship holds over me." He then struck an almost conciliatory tone. "Just keep my supply and communication lines open. And whatever you do, don't let a maritime force of Vitellians get behind us and fuck me in the ass."

“Excuse me, governor,” Legate Aquila of Thirteenth Gemina spoke up. “Are we to understand that Antonius Primus is our commander-in-chief?”

“According to Vespasian,” Saturnius grumbled, tossing the scroll onto the large table and dejectedly taking his seat.

Primus set his helmet on the table and addressed the assembly of officers. “Men, I know many of you personally. Some of you I consider friends, others would cut my throat if given the chance. But any friendships or personal differences must be set aside. We are here because we share a common purpose, and that is overthrowing the pretender, Vitellius, while bringing peace and stability to the empire. And whether a friend or rival, I know each one of you is skilled in the art of war.” He then looked over at a very young officer, seated near the head of the table. “Except I cannot say we’ve ever met. Who in Hades are you?”

“Vipstanus Messalla, sir,” the man said, standing up. “Chief Tribune of Legio VII, Claudia. Now acting legate, since General Tettius was sacked by Governor Saturnius.”

“It was a justified removal,” Legate Lupus of Eighth Augusta spoke up. “Because of Tettius, Seventh Claudia has yet to leave their billets. But Tribune Messalla is a capable officer and more than fit to lead them.”

“Fair enough,” Primus acknowledged. He then addressed the throng of legates and senior commanders. “I know most of your legions and auxilia regiments are already on the move. I want all forces to rally at Emona in three weeks’ time. I have also asked Vespasian for reinforcements. Once they arrive, we will assess our total military strength, while preparing for the invasion of Italia and the liberation of our great empire. In the meantime, I have numerous sets of eyes within the capital, and they have kept me abreast of the enemy’s strengths and weaknesses. As we get closer to the invasion, we will know as much about our adversaries as they know about themselves.”



In Rome, the issues surrounding intelligence gathering was a different matter altogether. While spies for Antonius Primus had been gathering information since well before Vespasian’s declaration, the Flavian general had posted small bands of cavalry pickets along every major road leading out of northeast Italia. Nearly every courier from Rome had been intercepted and detained. Primus had almost unfettered access to Vitellius’ attempted

correspondence. It was these same pickets who captured and later released Governor Saturnius' courier from Moesia.

"We are completely blind," Caecina grumbled, as he and Valens read through the paltry number of dispatches. "We sent dozens of couriers and scouts to Pannonia, Africa, and Syria. So far only four have returned, and none of these came from the Balkans. We have no knowledge of how many legions have defected."

"Vespasian is being rather thorough in controlling the flow of information," Valens replied, with a trace of reluctant admiration.

"And yet, we have captured none of his spies or informers," Caecina added. "You cannot tell me he doesn't have eyes in Rome, his brother being the most obvious. But with a population of a million citizens, plus the tens-of-thousands from our army, it is impossible to prevent information from leaving the city."

"I took precautions there," Valens said. "Sabinus' privilege of using imperial couriers has been revoked, and we have recovered two of his four signet rings. He understands, of course. Can't be easy, when one is not only the brother of a traitor, but Prefect of the City of Rome. Vitellius has not sacked and imprisoned him simply because he hopes to still draw support from many of the Flavians' backers."

"And what of his remaining couriers' signets?"

"I doubt we'll be seeing those back. One has departed for the Danube, carrying an overture of peace. I suspect the armies there, if they are in fact traitors, will simply refuse to allow the courier to return. The other is simply missing, but of no matter. Sabinus has been rather diligent in projecting his fealty to Vitellius. If he still has one imperial courier's signet, it's scarcely a crisis."

"What *is* a crisis is the messages we've received from Germania and Britannia," Caecina remarked. "By keeping the bulk of the armies of the Rhine here in Rome, the frontier has become largely unstable. The feeble old twat, Flaccus, has been completely overwhelmed by crisis after crisis. And now he's telling us the Batavians are rebelling."

"We'll send Fifteenth Primigenia and Fifth Alaudae to deal with them," Valens replied. "But what of Britannia?"

"Their defenses have been spread terribly thin," Caecina replied. "Before the reassignment of Fourteenth Gemina, there were only three legions posted there. Legio XIV has yet to re-establish themselves within the province, and

the detachment of eight thousand legionaries has left the rest at less than half strength. To make matters worse, our strongest ally, Queen Cartimandua of the Brigantes, has been overthrown by a rebellion led by her former husband. Governor Bolanus has stated rather emphatically that he cannot spare more troops. In fact, he has gone so far as to demand his legionaries back."

"Damned impertinent bastard," Valens snapped. He broke into a brief coughing fit before continuing. "We will sort him out, as soon as Vespasian's head is on a spike. In the meantime, I think we should start readying our forces in Rome for the journey north."

"I'll begin at once," Caecina replied. He frowned as Valens' coughing began once more, ending when he unceremoniously spat onto the floor. "Are you not well?"

"I spent too much time down by the Tiber the other day," the older general grumbled. "The flies are terrible from all the carcasses and shit that gets dumped in there. And the congestion of this place has only made things worse. Just don't think I'm going to fall over dead, so you can have sole control over the emperor."

"No, unfortunately, I need you right now," Caecina said, with a twisted smile. "Feel free to take the plunge to Hades after we've dealt with Vespasian."



A little over a week after departing the port city of Hermione, the Flavian flotilla was compelled to divert their course, when a sharp-eyed lookout spotted what appeared to be an entire squadron of Vitellian warships from the fleet at Ravenna. The narrower Adriatic Sea was now essentially blockaded by enemy ships. Only an early morning fog masked the Flavians from their adversaries. The admiral then made a difficult but necessary decision. He would drop the legionary cohorts at the port city of Senia, a hundred miles south of their original destination.

"What should have taken a day, will likely take you five or six," the admiral said to Centurion Galeo, his voice apologetic.

"It is what it is," Galeo replied. "Had those Vitellian warships spotted us and decided to give chase, we'd likely all be dead."

"I intend to return to Caesarea immediately and inform Emperor Vespasian," the admiral stated. "Unfortunately, I won't be able to retrieve

any dispatches from General Primus this time."

The unloading of all the soldiers and their equipment went much quicker than it took to store them aboard the ships. The mariners were anxious to get the cohorts off their vessels, so they could be underway before drawing any unwanted attention from the roaming Vitellian fleet.

For Optio Gaius Artorius, returning to land felt like sanctuary. Though he handled the second leg of their voyage far better than the first, his legs were still wobbly. When he took a long drink off his water bladder, he promptly vomited it up again.

"By Hades, I thought you were over being seasick," Nicanor said reprovingly.

"Actually…I feel much better now," Gaius replied, taking another drink and rinsing his mouth out.

It took some time for their soldiers to sort out and reassemble their armor and kit. As they anticipated, a number of tags had come off the armor and helmets, and legionaries were trying to sort out which sets were theirs. The cohort commanders, meanwhile, sent some of their signifiers into the city to purchase pack animals. Signifiers were not only the keepers of the cohorts' treasuries, they were also far better at negotiating with traders. Gaius' signifier, Aurelian, arrived back at camp later that afternoon with four mules in tow.

"Luckily, I was one of the first to find the mule traders," he said to Gaius and Nicanor. "I had pick of their stock at reasonable rates. Once they saw how many centuries were needing pack animals, their demeanor changed from one of friendly traders to downright extortionists. I heard one fellow from the Fifteenth shouting at the top of his lungs that he was going to *'gut the bastard and use his entrails for rope'*."

The three officers chuckled in relief, and set about sorting out their own kit. By late afternoon, the cohorts were ready and their commanders decided to begin the long journey. They followed the coastal road north, the Balkan island of Curicta visible off to their left, just a couple of miles out to sea. On the first evening, Centurion Galeo halted the taskforce near a road station known as *Ad Turres*. The road ran along an extremely high and steep ridge. Forests covered the landscape on either side. There was a small lake a couple miles further on, where the cohorts watered their animals and refreshed their own stores.

The long march from Senia came as a relief to Gaius. He would have

rather walked a thousand miles than set foot on another ship ever again. Though the Dalmatian province was heavily mountainous, the taskforce kept along the coast for much of their journey. The terrain did, however, prevent them from taking the most direct route, instead forcing them to follow the main road towards the city of Tergeste, before winding their way northeast towards their destination. At Tergeste they met envoys from General Primus, who had anticipated them arriving at the port by ship. Once Centurion Galeo explained the situation, one of the riders departed to inform the commander-in-chief, letting the legionaries know the army was assembling at the city of Emona, four or five days to the northeast.

In addition to the far more rugged terrain, the land was very green and lush, especially when compared with the arid and often desolate lands of Judea and Syria. It was now the middle of summer, with the proximity to the sea making it hot and extremely humid. Legionaries found themselves drenched in sweat from the time they donned their armor each morning, until well after they halted and made camp for the night. Splotched salt stains encrusted their tunics, which stank after a day's wear. Though each soldier carried three extra tunics, and took the time to try and wash both themselves and their clothing whenever possible, their officers complained that the enemy would be able to smell them twenty miles away. Hence, when the cohorts arrived at Tergeste, Centurion Galeo and the other pilus priors ordered a day of rest and washing for their men.

"We're all so used to the dry climate of Judea, everyone is sweating buckets each day," Tesserarius Julius observed, as he and Optio Gaius Artorius pulled their tunics out of their packs.

"True," Gaius consented. "And since we only brought enough water for drinking and not washing, the damned Vitellians can probably smell us all the way in Rome!"

Rather than washing in the saltwater of the sea, Galeo and the other centurions had ordered their soldiers to wash at a large pool, where excess runoff from the local aqueduct gathered.

"I wore this damn thing for three days, and it's practically white," Gaius laughed, holding up one of his tunics. The once deep red had been partially faded by the sun; the salt stains making it appear as if it had been bleached.

As they sat naked in the cool waters, soaking and scrubbing each of their tunics, Julius reached up and was appalled by the scruff on his face. With little spare water for their journey, most of the men had not been able to

shave regularly. He was further repelled by his reflection in the water.

"Ugh, I look like a damned barbarian," he moaned.

"I think we all do," Gaius replied, unhappy with the several days of growth on his own face. "Well, in addition to washing our clothes, Galeo says we are all to be clean-shaven before we depart tomorrow."

"Gladly," the tesserarius remarked. "Last thing I want is to be mistaken for a bloody savage when we finally rally with General Primus and the Danube Army!"

The total trek from Senia to Emona was two hundred miles, and would take them almost three weeks to complete. The constant marching up and down mountains slowed them considerably. By mid-September, they were well into Pannonia and ready to join with the Flavian division under Marcus Antonius Primus.



Several hundred miles to the west, Tribune Lucius Artorius led his cavalry regiment in training maneuvers along the open plain to the northeast of Castra Auraei. Bisected by numerous rivers and streams which came down from the mountains to the north, the plain was an ideal place for him to learn how to lead a full regiment of horsemen into battle. Training had been relentless over the past month, and Centurion Liberius was proving to be an excellent tutor to the young tribune.

The vast majority of his troopers were lancers, each wielding a long spear with a wide blade that could either be tucked under the arm for support or thrust down onto enemies below. Section leaders, as well as higher ranking officers, carried spatha longswords. Troopers and officers alike wore lorica hamata chain mail armor, carrying long, oblong shields that protected their legs and torso on their non-weapon side. Their helmets were equipped with cheek guards and were very similar to those worn by legionaries, albeit very plain in design, and mostly bronze rather than iron.

Liberius continued to teach and lecture his commander as they rode in a large wedge formation, towards a make-believe enemy in the distance.

"As a regimental commander," Liberius said, "you must position yourself where you can best see all of your subordinate companies. Not only that, but a good officer will lead from the front whenever possible, especially when charging the enemy. And in a cavalry regiment, it is equally crucial to know

when to attack and when to maneuver. Being mounted gives us a decisive advantage in speed and mobility over infantrymen; provided we know how to utilize it."

"No attacking infantry formations head-on, especially, legionaries," Lucius remarked.

"Correct…most of the time. If they are in loose array or we've caught them completely off-guard, then a timely charge could very well shatter their ranks. But, yes, the majority of the time we will attempt to find our way around the enemy's frontage. And, of course, we will not be taking on a legionary cohort by ourselves. When the time comes for battle, we will almost certainly be part of a much larger army. Our primary mission will be to protect our own flanks or exploit theirs."

"It is good that your men are familiar with the terrain between here and Pannonia," the tribune noted.

"Correction, sir," Liberius replied. "These are *our* men. And, yes, they know the terrain well."

"Yes, thank you." Lucius appreciated the assertion by the centurion.

His first week as commander of the Siliana Cavalry Regiment had been spent on mostly administrative matters, as well as becoming more acquainted with the intricacies of maneuvering his horse in battle. While an accomplished rider, Lucius learned quickly that, while a crucial prerequisite, there was a lot more to being a cavalryman than simple horsemanship. There was the matter of being able to stay mounted during the frenzy of combat, especially when one's horse reared up in terror from having an enemy spear thrust in its face. And as Centurion Liberius had stressed repeatedly, the worst thing that could befall a cavalry trooper was to be unhorsed. If not outright butchered by the mass of enemy soldiers that he would likely find himself in the midst of, there was the very real possibility of being trampled by your own companions.

Another lesson had involved effectively wielding one's weapon while mounted. Lucius found he was most dangerous when his adversaries were within the swinging arc of his spatha, which extended from straight out to his right, around towards his horse's head. While it was possible to attack enemies on the left, this was extremely awkward and rather impractical.

Having acquitted himself well in these matters, at least according to Centurion Liberius, Lucius had decided he needed to drill with the entire regiment. As such, he left only a small number of lookouts at the necessary

garrisons, ordering the rest of his companies to rally fifteen miles northeast of Vicetia along the Via Postumia.

While he had enjoyed a relatively comfortable existence for much of his life, Lucius relished being in the field with his soldiers. He rose every morning before dawn, was washed, shaved, and had his breakfast well before the cornicens sounded the call to wake up and fall in. He observed his companies performing their own drills, while attempting to learn all he could about cavalry tactics, all under the tutelage of Liberius and the other centurions.

Though he savored every chance to ride with his troopers, his days were broken up with the tedium of administrative matters. There were rations and supplies to be ordered; pay, leave, and disciplinary reports to review; and, of course, the daily intelligence that came from his patrols to the east. On this particular day, he had been notified by a courier from Rome that his regiment would be under the overall command of General Caecina Alienus. The two had only met once before, soon after Lucius' appointment by Vitellius. Lucius promptly sent him a reply in order to better acquaint himself with his division commander, and to see if he had any pressing orders at this time. Liberius spoke well of Caecina, and said it was good that they were falling under his direct command rather than the political demagogue, Fabius Valens.

Drill would continue throughout the afternoon. Come evening, while the men were feeding and caring for their horses, Lucius would meet with the company commanders and review the day's training and plan for the next day. While he worked closely with Liberius, he was becoming more familiar with the other centurions. At the end of the day, Lucius was exhausted yet completely exhilarated. He felt as if he had finally found his true calling, and each night he thanked the gods for allowing him to fulfill his destiny as a soldier of Rome.



The gathering of Flavian allies at Emona, in Pannonia Superior, brought a conglomerate of various legates, governors, and other magistrates. All were anxious to exert their influence, while many hoped to coerce their way into a military command. Chief among these was Aponius Saturnius, the governor of neighboring Moesia. It was his legions including the Third Gallica that

routed the Rhoxolani raiders earlier in the year. And while disappointed in Vespasian's appointment of Antonius Primus as commander-in-chief, Saturnius still felt the need to exert his authority and influence wherever possible. While Vespasian had praised Saturnius for his loyalty and resolve, he had seen fit to reward Primus with overall command.

"As long as he doesn't name you Regent of the Empire during his absence," Saturnius said, with a touch of sarcasm.

"Trust me, I hope he doesn't either," Primus said, with a forced scowl of revulsion. He then looked to the large assembly and began to lay out the groundwork of the upcoming invasion.

Most of the auxiliaries in the region would be left to man the frontier, lest the barbarian tribes attempt to raid Roman lands while they fought with each other. The Rhoxolani were still smarting from their bloody defeat, though it was impossible to know if they were properly cowed and docile.

Among his military assets, Primus had the bulk of four legions. Though most were understrength due to natural attrition and casualties suffered in the previous war, he knew the Vitellian legions were in even worse shape. He also had the detachments from Vespasian's army, along with a very strong contingent consisting of sixteen regiments of cavalry. In all, Antonius Primus had twenty-four thousand men ready for battle, not counting the still-absent Legio VII, Claudia, and a large contingent of auxilia cavalry that was promised to him. Legio XI had still not been heard from, and Primus knew he could no longer depend on their turning out for battle.

"Should we not wait for Mucianus and the rest of the army?" one officer asked. This was followed by several mutterings of concurrence.

"Yes," Saturnius added. "I cannot help but think you are being a little brash in insisting on an immediate invasion of Italia. Surely you do not wish to make the same mistake that we all admonish Otho Titianus for."

It was a biting accusation. Surprisingly, Primus maintained his composure. "You make a compelling point, Governor Saturnius." It was a reply that surprised almost everyone. "I confess, my greatest concern is not repeating the same grave mistakes as our late emperor and his generals. But my reasons for pushing for an immediate invasion are many. Firstly, the Vitellian Legions have been billeted throughout Rome rather than in a proper barracks. They have grown soft from indulgent living, and their numbers have been depleted by the past war and a complete lack of recruitment. However, they are still the Rhine Army, and they can easily be conditioned

back into fighting shape in a short period of time."

"All the more reason to wait for Mucianus, so we can attack Vitellius with overwhelming force," Saturnius persisted.

"You forget, it is not just Italia where Vitellius has troops," Primus countered. "The whole of the western empire has remained loyal to him. There are still plenty of legionaries and auxilia regiments he can call upon in Germania. And while we may be in a position to seize control of the Alpine passes, should we lose these, the enemy will have us completely trapped. And there are plenty more forces Vitellius can rally from Gaul, Hispania, and Britannia. This will likely negate any advantage we could draw upon from waiting several months for Mucianus to arrive. Remember, Vitellius still controls the Ravenna fleet. Should we delay too long, he could very well send a maritime force into Dalmatia, cutting our lines of supply."

"Otho tried the same thing during the last war," General Lupus remarked. "It did not go well for him. I find it rather preposterous to think Vitellius would do the same to us."

"In his army's present state, I would agree," the commander-in-chief noted. "But if given several months to bring up reinforcements while getting the Rhine legions back into fighting shape, then yes, this could become a very real threat. The harsh reality we have to face is that we accept risk regardless of whether we delay or attack now."

"We can reach Verona in just a few weeks," General Aponius of Legio III asserted, in an effort to draw support behind Primus' intent. "The roads are good and the weather has been fair. Siege trains will be what moves the slowest."

"It is not my intent to smash Roman cities into dust," Primus replied. "Still, we'd best bring them, in case the good citizens fail to come to their senses. What auxiliaries we do have will act as their escorts. Are we agreed, then, that we invade now?"

"You're the commanding general," Saturnius remarked. "It's not as if we have much of a choice."

"We're with you, Primus," Legate Aquila of Legio XIII replied. He then said with a grin, "Your administrative talents are nonexistent, but you know how to win a battle. Just tell us where you want us."

The other legates and regimental commanders gave nods and words of approval. Everyone, most of all Antonius Primus, understood the gravity of the pending invasion and the dangers presented. They also trusted in the

intelligence the commander-in-chief had garnered and his assessment of the enemy's state of readiness.

"For now, our immediate objective is Aquileia," he said. "It is about three days' march from here. From there, we will advance south and southwest towards the River Padus. Centurion Galeo, I want your cohort from the Tenth Legion to act as infantry support to our cavalry scouts."

"Yes, sir," the pilus prior responded.

"Seventh and Thirteenth Gemina will follow, along with the cohort from Fifth Macedonia," Primus continued. "We don't have our entire army assembled in one place, and I wish to establish ourselves within northeast Italia before all forces converge. The Vitellians haven't left their comfortable billets in Rome. Although, you can bet they will once they hear we are on the move. And unless the cities close their gates and compel us to lay siege, we should easily get at least as far as Patavium before we reconsolidate and rally with the rest of the army."

That evening, the newly appointed commander-in-chief supped with his centurion primus pilus, anxious to be rid of his fellow patricians for the time being.

"Logistics are playing hell on getting enough reinforcements this far west," Master Centurion Vitruvius noted. "Vitellius controls the seas, and Vespasian has only a handful of ships he can utilize."

"Still, I ask for reinforcements, and all I get is a single cohort from each of Vespasian's legions," the legate grumbled. "And that pompous oaf, Mucianus, is doing little except blackmailing his way through the eastern provinces, marching at a snail's pace. He fattens his coffers, while the Vitellians still hold the capital. Hell, it will be next summer before Mucianus even catches up with us!"

"I thought you two were friends," Vitruvius said, his head cocked to one side.

"Oh, we are," Primus said, with a laugh. "I love the man like a brother, but that doesn't make him any less of a pompous twat."

"That may be," Vitruvius conceded. "And I will say this; the longer it takes for us to go on the offensive, greater is the chance that Vitellius will be able to concentrate his forces against us, bringing over reinforcements from Britannia and possibly North Africa."

"And that is why I don't plan to sit on my ass while Mucianus takes his

bloody sweet time." Primus quaffed his wine and let out a loud belch. "Fuck him, I say. Nothing in Vespasian's orders said anything about us having to wait on Mucianus. We have a sizeable force here, and once I rally the remnants of the Othonian Legions, we'll take the fight to Vitellius!"

"Thirteenth Gemina is no doubt anxious for a little retribution," the master centurion observed. "Sadly, we have yet to hear anything from Eleventh Claudia. Like us, I suspect they regret missing their chance to take it to Vitellius when Otho was still emperor."

"And meantime, I have several sets of eyes in Rome keeping track of the Vitellian forces there. Within a week, maybe two, we should have a better idea as to the disposition and overall readiness of our adversaries."

"Our soldiers are relatively well-trained, though they still lack experience," Vitruvius noted, while he and Primus reviewed some issues specific to Legio VII. "We have sufficient pila and gladii. I wish we could have procured enough sets of segmentata plate armor for the lads; however, hamata chainmail is better than nothing."

"The question now is, will they stand when facing their brother legionaries?" the legate confessed. "You understand, of course, that I am going to have to rely on you when it comes time for battle. I have the entire army to coordinate. And since our dear chief tribune declared for Vitellius, that leaves you to command the legion."

"Just tell us where the enemy is and we'll thrash them, sir," Vitruvius said. "Legio VII may be raw and underequipped, but they do not lack for valor or desire to prove themselves in battle. And above all, they believe in the cause they are fighting for. They loathed Galba, who had the audacity to think he could append his name to the legion, as if it were his own."

"Yes, the lads never took to being called *Legio VII, Galbiana*," Primus mused.

"Not one of them shed a tear when that wicked bastard met his end," Vitruvius added. "Otho they somewhat respected, perhaps because he rid us of Galba. We never got a chance to find out if we would have grown to love him, or if he would have become another despot."

"And what of Vitellius?" Primus asked. He had always assumed since he was a loyal Flavian, so too were his legionaries.

"*Corpulent twat* is what most of the men call him," the master centurion chuckled. "When we saw one of his statues, one of the lads said they needed as much marble for his fat chin as they did for the rest of his head."

“I have met Vitellius a couple of times,” Primus remarked. “I never thought much of him one way or the other. He was always genial enough, though never a man of energy or any real initiative. And he certainly looked like he gorged enough each day to feed a squad of legionaries.”

“Appearances aside,” Vitruvius continued, “he inspires little from the men, in either loyalty or contempt. Such indifference is even more damning than being hated. Yet, of all the men who have claimed to be ‘Caesar’ since this year began, the only one who has inspired the men of this legion is Vespasian. He is a true leader, and the only one among the Four Emperors who has actually fought with his soldiers in battle.”

Their discussion was interrupted when a legionary opened the large flap of the principia tent. “Beg your pardon, sir, but an imperial messenger has arrived.”

“Very well, show him in,” the general directed.

“It’s actually a ‘her’,” the legionary said.

Primus called out, “Lady Vale!” as the young woman entered the tent.

“General Primus,” she said, with a short bow of respect. She nodded to Vitruvius who returned the gesture.

“So, do you come from Vespasian or from Rome?” Primus asked.

“From Rome,” Aula replied. “I have a message for Emperor Vespasian from his brother, the noble Flavius Sabinus. However, as there were no transport ships available, I am required to travel by land. Sabinus has another messenger waiting in reserve, in case he is able to find a vessel to take him across the sea before the winter storms make them unnavigable.”

“I suspect Sabinus will not be sending any more couriers once we cross into Italia,” Primus noted. “No doubt, Vitellius is already keeping a close watch on him.”

“That is why I will not be returning to Rome,” Aula asserted. “My subsequent orders are to report to you and see how I can be of assistance. Which is why I have avoided any Vitellian forces along the way. I came through Ariminum and was stopped by an auxiliary cavalry patrol. They thought to detain me, seeing as how I am employed by Flavius Sabinus. It took a few veiled threats for me to outtalk those halfwits. Yet, I suspect if an officer with one of Vitellius’ legions discovered me I may have been arrested as a spy, even though Vitellius himself is well aware of my dispatches. But, yes, Sabinus agrees this will likely be my last mission for him for the time being.”

“Might I ask what the letter to Vespasian contains?” the general asked.

“Of course,” Aula replied, producing a scroll. “The one addressed to you is almost an exact duplicate.”

Primus snickered quietly as he read the contents of the scroll, then handed it to Vitruvius. “Our friend, Sabinus, is both prudent and cautious,” he remarked. “He implores us to find a peaceful solution to the conflict, while vaguely stating the power of the Vitellian Army.”

“He had to be vague,” Aula explained. “If this message were intercepted, it could be construed as him attempting to pass on intelligence to Vespasian’s army.”

“Not to worry, we have plenty of eyes on their forces,” Vitruvius spoke up.

“So I gathered,” Aula said. “Sabinus knows their two commanding generals well. Caecina is competent, though his loyalty is dubious at best. Prior to Bedriacum, he was defeated twice by Suetonius Paulinus. Something he may wish to atone for. All the same, he seems less enthralled and quite disillusioned by serving Vitellius.”

“Something we may be able to exploit,” Primus observed. “I cannot say I’ve ever considered him or Valens friends, but they have done respectably well thus far. At least in their battles against Otho’s legions. And for Caecina, there is no shame in being defeated by a general of Paulinus’ caliber.”

“A pity Otho was foolish enough to place his own brother as commander-in-chief of his forces,” Aula noted.

“Yes, and it cost him dearly,” Primus noted.

“Paulinus is friends with Sabinus, and I have spoken with him as well. He told me, after his pair of victories over the Vitellians, Otho ignored him and deferred to his brother on further prosecution of the war. Their forces were separated from each other, with Titianus completely defeated.”

“There are those who say that such remarks are Paulinus’ wounded pride speaking,” the general observed. “I know he also told Vitellius that he deliberately lost the campaign for Otho. I think everyone, including the usurper, knew this was a dubious statement.”

“I was at the house of Sabinus when Paulinus told him about Vitellius refusing his request to assume command a legion. While he has not been exiled or arrested, Paulinus is not trusted by anyone within the Vitellian regime. They suspect if given a command, he would simply hand his forces over to Vespasian.”

“A distinct possibility,” Primus replied. “But enough about General Paulinus, as he can do little to help us at this time. And since Sabinus has tasked you with aiding me, there is something you can do for us. I was going to send a dispatch rider east to find Mucianus and his army. If you are heading in that direction anyway, I will give my dispatches to you.”

“However I can be of service,” Aula stated.

“The letter I will draft to Mucianus will not be as cryptic as those given to you by Sabinus. Fear not, the lands east of here are firmly loyal to Vespasian. Unfortunately, many of the courier stations along the main roads have been abandoned, so there is no way for you to pass your message on or to even change horses.”

“I understand. I have sailed by ship from Rome to Caesarea and back again. I can certainly make the journey by horse this time.”

“It will take much longer,” Primus said. “What can be done in two to three weeks by sea, will take you three to four months by land, even with a horse. Once you locate Mucianus, feel free to acquire shipborne transport to Caesarea and hasten on to Vespasian.”

They discussed a few additional matters. Primus gave Aula what he thought were the most logical roads she might find Mucianus’ army traveling along. The courier then dismissed herself to tend to her horse, as well as her supper. Primus ordered a slave to have her evening meal prepared for her from his own stores. As soon as Aula left, Vitruvius nodded his head towards the tent flap.

“Who is she, sir?” he asked. “I heard you call her ‘Lady’ Vale.”

“She is the daughter of a renowned former cavalry officer,” Primus replied, “Aulus Nautius Cursor.”

“I know his reputation well,” the master centurion said. “He earned the *Grass Crown* at the Battle of Braduhenna…the same place where my father was killed.” His eyes were suddenly transfixed on the remote past, his expression darkening. He was a very young boy when his father, a centurion pilus prior with Legio XX, fell in battle. A shame, if the Valeria Legion sided with Vitellius and he had to fight against the eagle his father had served under. He quickly shook his head, ever fighting to suppress the innumerable feelings of loss that had haunted him since his earliest days. “If she is the daughter of a patrician, what is she doing here dressed as an imperial courier?”

“I don’t know the entire story,” Primus said. “I do know her father settled

in Britannia and helped found the town of Aquae Sulis. Cursor was never the traditional patrician and, in fact, was only granted membership in the senate about seven years into the reign of Claudius. It would seem he had no interest in simply using his daughter as a political pawn. Instead, he gave her the freedom to decide for herself how to serve Rome."

"That's absurd," Vitruvius scoffed. "Her father appears to have spent too much time among the uncivilized Britons."

"I didn't say I understood it," Primus replied. "Gods know my own daughter will never be seen cavorting around the empire dressed as a mere courier, with a sword strapped to her hip. Still, given Aula Vale is a member of the patrician class, and well-connected, makes her useful as more than a mere errand girl. And if she is loyal to Sabinus, we can assume she is loyal to Vespasian."

The remainder of the afternoon was spent going through tedious, yet crucial logistical details. A number of non-military administrators were given the tasks of keeping the army fed and supplied, establishing communications lines, and preparing for the grim task of handling potentially large numbers of wounded. The commander-in-chief did not mince words when he stated that, if both armies met each other at full strength, it would be a bloodbath. By the Calends of October, Antonius Primus would be ready to cross the border and renew Rome's civil war.

Aula returned to Primus' principia the following morning. She left soon after, stuffing several messages into her leather bag. As she walked through the camp, she saw the red vexilation flag that read in gold letters, *Legio X*, *Cohort V*. She knew Vespasian had sent a detachment to reinforce Primus' division, though she laughed at the improbability that her dear friend's cohort would be among them.

Chapter X: Reckless Initiative

Flavian Camp, Emona, Pannonia
28 September 69 A.D.
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The attached cohorts from Judea occupied the remains of what had once been a vexilation fort, previously used by the Fifteenth Legion. The surrounding region consisted of impassible mountains of extreme elevation. Some of the men from Legio XV made offhand remarks about ‘coming home’. The fort had not been occupied in over eight years and was in a dilapidated state of disrepair. Rats and other vermin had infested many of the buildings, and a handful of despondent squatters were driven out of what had once been the detachment headquarters.

“By Jupiter’s cock, who shit in here?” an irate centurion shouted from one of the former offices, as the filthy peasants hurried out the door to the principia.

Barracks buildings were swept out, with legionaries cramming into the small rooms that once housed squads of soldiers. Those not quick enough to find such accommodations were forced to set up their tents in and around the fort.

Not knowing when they would receive the order to commence the invasion of Italia, the men looked to find distractions wherever they could. The large number of wine merchants and brothels in the region provided an ample way to relieve soldiers of both anxiety and coin. Such ‘camp followers’ sprouted up, seemingly out of nowhere, wherever an army was posted. Many reckoned these same people, just a few months prior, were selling their services to both the Othonians and Vitellians. Soldiers from some of Otho’s former legions confirmed this, as they recognized both merchants and prostitutes alike.

Gaius had spent the night in the tent of one of the thousands of ‘ladies of pleasure’ that surrounded the vast encampment. After their arduous journey from Caesarea by sea, followed by many days of forced marches just to reach

General Primus' camp, the night of erotic pleasure came as a much-needed reprieve.

Since he and his century had not been quick enough to claim one of the fort's buildings, and not wishing to sleep in a tent with the other principle officers, he paid the woman a couple of extra coins to allow him to share the rest of the night in her humble camp bed. She had been rather generous and allowed him to have his way with her one more time after he woke the following morning.

"It's been a pleasure, my dear," he said, as he donned his tunic and sandals.

"Believe me, love, the pleasure was all mine," the woman replied. She lay on her side, still naked. She giggled. "If your army remains here for a few more weeks, I could make enough to buy my own villa and retire."

Gaius laughed as he slung the baldric of his gladius over his shoulder and belted his tunic.

"May Venus and Fortuna smile upon you," he said with an exaggerated bow, as he left the tent.

He gazed up at the sky and took a deep breath in through his nose before walking towards his cohort's section of the vast camp. This region of Pannonia was notorious for its nearly ceaseless rains, especially in the fall. And yet, on this day the skies were clear and peaceful.

"Are you following me all over the empire?" Aula's voice caused Gaius to jump. He turned and smiled as he saw her. His face turned several shades of red, betraying his inner thoughts, causing Aula to laugh playfully. He hoped she did not notice the womanly stench from the brothel. He was certain he reeked.

"Are we at a loss for words?" she asked. She walked over and wrapped her arms tight around him. "I thought you'd be happy to see me."

"I…I am, believe me!" Gaius replied, returning her embrace. He was glad he was not wearing his armor, for it would have impeded him from feeling her body against his. The hardened optio, who had endured enough brutality and tragedy to last a hundred lifetimes, suddenly felt smitten. It was a rather boyish infatuation with this young woman, who he'd known since the time he could walk. His companion from the night before completely forgotten.

Gaius then noted a somber change in Aula's demeanor. "What is it?"

"I passed through Ariminum on my way out of Italia," she explained. "Your brother is governor of the city, or at least he was."

“What do you mean ‘was’?”

“Vitellius has given him command of an auxilia cavalry regiment,” Aula explained.

“He always wanted to be a soldier,” he said. “The last time I saw him was before I departed for the legions. He said he envied that I was able to make my own path in life. It would seem he has finally been allowed to make his.”

“I’m sorry, Gaius.” It was all Aula could think of to say.

“There will be many who must face their brothers,” Gaius reasoned, though his expression was now one of depression and regret. “And I am certain there will be fathers who will draw blades against their own sons. It’s been ten years since I last saw Lucius. I only hope when we do meet again, it will be after this hellish issue is decided and not on the battlefield.”

With tens-of-thousands of combatants on each side, Gaius knew the chances seeing his brother were remote. He also knew, when time came to face the Vitellians in battle, he would be watching every mounted officer among the enemy’s cavalry, always questioning if Lucius was the man who led them. He decided to not dwell on the issue, at least for the time being.

“Another mission from Sabinus?” he asked.

Aula nodded. “And General Primus. Tomorrow morning I will begin my journey towards Thrace, where I hope to find Mucianus’ army as soon as possible. Primus grumbled that they better not still be plodding their way through Asia Minor. I imagine it will be two weeks before I reach Byzantium. And if Mucianus hasn’t crossed over yet, who knows how long it will take me to find them? After all that, it will take an additional three weeks, perhaps a month, to reach Vespasian in Caesarea.”

“By that time, this whole thing could be over,” Gaius observed. He added with a chuckle, “You might reach Vespasian only to find that seaborne messengers have already informed him of either our defeat or victory.”

“The thought has crossed my mind,” Aula remarked. “If I find Mucianus anywhere near Byzantium, and if the city and its port proves friendly, I hope to gain passage by ship to Caesarea.” She took a deep breath and sighed. “Who would have thought the little girl you grew up with would be getting sent from one corner of the empire to the other and back again?”

“You know I’ve always loved you.” Gaius’ face turned red, horrified at what he’d just blurted out. His words stopped Aula midstride, causing her to stumble. The two stood facing each other in an awkward silence for a moment. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.”

“One should never hide what is in their heart,” Aula replied. “I don’t know that I can say the same. You are very dear to me, Gaius, but I don’t know that I can give my heart to anyone, at least not right now. Tomorrow is not promised to any of us, especially with our entire world in upheaval. You might be killed in battle, while I could run afoul of Vitellian loyalists and be strangled as a traitor.”

“Both distinct possibilities,” Gaius concurred. He was gazing at the ground now and fumbled to find his next words. “I don’t know why I am so awkward around you. I’m no stranger to women, believe me!”

“Yes, well I hope I am more than someone you just want to fuck.” Aula’s coarse choice of words seemed to startle both of them. She laughed and shook her head. “I am clearly spending too much time around legionaries! You are all influencing my speech, in ways that are not exactly becoming of a patrician woman.”

“One profane slipup does not diminish your status as a lady,” Gaius said. “And, yes, you are far more than someone I simply wish to take into my bed. But I have always understood it could never be between us.”

“Father was a bit unconventional, so I cannot say he would have disapproved of our families joining. However, the moment you joined the legions an impenetrable wall came between us. But when you left I was still a girl and hardly worthy of your affections.”

“And now?” Gaius asked. “Your family was elevated into the senatorial class three years after I left. Am I the one who is made unworthy, because of my status as a plebian soldier?”

“Hardly!” Aula replied. “You know I am less concerned with a man’s profession than who he is as a person. It is a strange concept, I know. There were many who questioned my being sent to Rome to be educated rather than betrothed to another influential family. If the patricians back home ever knew I was acting as a humble courier, it would cause quite the scandal.”

“That it would,” Gaius said. He took solace in knowing that, should the worst happen to either of them, at least nothing was left unsaid.

“I am concerned about your mother,” Aula said, changing the subject. “She worries so about both you and Lucius. I suspect you don’t know she and your father have been to Ariminum as well.”

“I did not. I wonder if they would have stayed had they known I was this close.”

“I don’t know,” Aula replied, shaking her head. “I spoke to the deputy

governor of the city. He said Metellus and Marcia left Ariminum before Lucius did. I would have liked to have seen them again."

"So would I," Gaius remarked. "Mother bravely refrained from shedding any tears in front of me before I left. I heard later that she was nearly inconsolable for a time."

"By Minerva, how long has it been?" Aula asked.

"Ten years," Gaius answered. "You may also recall, I was raised in Britannia but my family's ancestral home was in Ostia."

"I know," Aula replied. "Remember, my father bought the villa and vineyard from your grandfather."

"Ah, yes, I had forgotten. You know, I've never seen it. Since your father sold it after he decided to resettle in Britannia, gods only know who owns it now. It feels strange, though. I march towards the home of my ancestors not as a returning son, but with my sword in hand."

"I wouldn't over-philosophize it," Aula said, placing a reassuring hand on his shoulder, causing him to involuntarily shudder. "Think of it this way, you are returning to the home of your ancestors to liberate it from the reign of the tyrants."

"Well spoken," Gaius said, turning to face her. With a confidence that he had lacked before, he placed both hands on Aula's hips. "And while I wish for nothing more than to spend this glorious day with you, I have my duties to perform."

"As do I." Before she could reply further, Gaius leaned in and kissed her firmly but gently on the lips.

He lingered for a second or two. She did not pull away from him. He then took a step back and was smiling broadly. "Ave, my lady," he said with a bow, before turning and briskly walking back to his cohort.



It had taken almost a week to make the necessary preparations for the Vitellian Army's departure from Rome. Months of lethargy and excess had weakened their physical and mental readiness. Many of the Germanic and Gallic legionaries suffered terrible illnesses brought on by the heat of the Roman summer. Caecina could only hope Valens was correct in his assumption that a couple of weeks on the march would sort them out.

Caecina departed Rome with the first wave of his division, consisting of

the bulk of Legio I, Germanica, Legio IV, Macedonia, Legio V, Alaudae, detachments from various legions, and ten cohorts of auxilia infantry. Between casualties from the first war, the discharges authorized by Vitellius, and the depletion of volunteers to fill out the newly raised praetorian cohorts, his legions were severely depleted. A compiled report from his legates was rather alarming. Four in ten of their authorized billets were vacant.

Not only were the legions short of numbers, they were severely lacking in experienced leaders. Caecina was still commanding legate of Fourth Macedonia, and while the chief tribune of First Germanica had been replaced, the currently absent Valens was still its legate. Despite these shortcomings, Caecina headed north with a force of almost fifteen thousand imperial soldiers. They would soon join Legio XXI, Rapax, and Legio I, Italica who had been encamped near Cremona since the Vitellian victory over Otho. And, as they had not been required to transfer soldiers into the new Praetorian Guard, their fighting strength was much higher than the other legions. Caecina was confident that the addition of their forces, along with the recall of numerous auxilia regiments, would give him the numbers necessary to defeat any immediate Flavian threat.

Like Otho's armies five months before, the Vitellian legions first rallied on the enormous arena floor of the Circus Maximus. Tribunes and centurions had worked feverishly to make their soldiers ready for the long march. The months of excess and a total absence of discipline had left many legionaries in a sorry state. However, the call to arms had come as a relief to the Gallic and Germanic legionaries, who were ready to depart from the insufferable heat of the imperial capital. Few had ever ventured this far south, having lived their entire lives in cooler, temperate climates. The stifling heat and humidity of Rome had left many sick, with some of their companions succumbing to disease. Marching to war gave them a purpose, and the soldiers hoped to return to their homes, once the Flavians were beaten.

Valens, speaking on behalf of the emperor, exhorted the legions to remember who they were, and what they were fighting for.

"You are soldiers of Rome!" he proclaimed. *"The armies of the Rhine are the fiercest fighters in the world, vanquishers of the empire's enemies, both foreign barbarian, and traitors within our own ranks! Many of you wish to return home, and I tell you this, the road home will be paved with the bones of Flavian dead!"*

This elicited a loud ovation from the assembled horde of soldiers, more so

for the promise to return to their homes than out of loyalty to Vitellius. And as they departed the Circus, the road leading north across the Milvian Bridge was lined with the newly raised praetorians and urban vigiles. These men, whose task was to keep the streets clear for the departing army, watched somberly as their former mates marched past them. Many of these would be making the trek soon enough, however. Valens was organizing a second wave of troops with the intent of securing central Italia and reinforcing Caecina.

"Our armies depart once more, to make war upon each other," Suetonius Paulinus said bitterly, as he and Flavius watched the legions from their senatorial box at the Circus.

"It is an ugly thing," Sabinus concurred. "Vitellius is doing at least one thing correct that Otho neglected. He's keeping a sizeable military force in Rome, just in case the Flavians should seize the initiative and defeat Caecina. Not that that would trouble you, of course."

"Or you," Paulinus added, with a dark grin. "Should your brother gain the upper hand in this war, the more likely Vitellius will come down on you. Not an easy thing to live with."

Sabinus did not reply. With Vespasian's army poised to invade Italia, Sabinus' attempts to remain neutral would likely come to naught. He was still deeply shamed by his submitting to Lady Triaria's demand for the life of Cornelius Dolabella in an attempt to pacify the new regime. Because of this grievous act, Sabinus no longer cared what happened to him. He suspected the gods may demand his life to atone for Dolabella's murder. However, he still feared for his family; his sons, his nephew, and even his brother's mistress, who had been like a member of the family for years. And as he and Paulinus watched the imperial armies depart the capital once more, Sabinus vowed to do whatever it took to protect those closest to him. If need be, he would sacrifice his life in order to protect theirs.



Despite their declined state of readiness and fitness, the legions of the Rhine moved at a surprisingly brisk pace, once they were away from the congestion of the city. And though they were lacking in senior officers, centurions were quick to restore their usual discipline using a combination of berating, physical chastisement, and praise of their past deeds. It all served to

remind the soldiers that they were still the best troops in the Imperial Army and, consequently, the entire known world. Their personal pride and the dignity of their legions compelled them to march, long after their weakened legs ached and their lungs wished to give out. And though they were all red-faced and utterly exhausted when they made camp each night, Caecina was confident it would not take long for their bodies to be restored to their former fighting strength.

By the end of the first week, they had reached Arretium, in the heart of central Italia. The commanding general spent much of his time ruminating over the coming campaign. The further away from Rome they marched, the greater his doubts about the cause he was fighting for. Caecina only knew Vespasian in passing and couldn't recall a time they had ever actually conversed with each other. However, he knew the Flavian general's reputation. His skill as a soldier was legendary, with Emperor Claudius commending him and Sabinus for seemingly conquering the Britannic province by themselves. And while his tenure as Proconsul of North Africa had been a disaster, he had since redeemed himself with his performance in Judea. Though of very humble origins and only a second generation senator, aristocratic pedigree had become obsolescent following the death of Galba.

And what of Vitellius, the emperor he had faithfully served since the revolt against Galba? He was lethargic and easy to manipulate; plus, his lack of any sort of oversight had allowed Caecina to continue to make himself immensely rich. Just prior to the revolt, Galba had issued a warrant for the arrest of Caecina on charges of embezzlement. The trouble was, Vitellius was weak, and everyone knew it. He didn't try to put up a façade of being in control of the imperial court. Even the poorest plebeians knew it was Caecina and to an increasing degree, Valens, who controlled the emperor. And if their constant squabbling was causing a rift within the court, what were the ripples being felt throughout the rest of the empire?

"Vespasian's uprising, for a start," Caecina muttered to himself, answering his own question. He sat at his desk within the principia tent, ruminating, with the light of an oil lamp dancing off the table.

"Sir?" a nearby staff tribune asked.

The general simply shook his head. He sat with his chin resting on his hand, contemplating just how long these men would be willing to bleed for Vitellius.

"Once we establish at Hostilia, I will need to secure the allegiance of the

fleet at Ravenna," he finally said.

On the morrow, they would begin their march once more. In three days they would reach Florentia. Another three or four after that, they would cross over the mountains and arrive at Bononia. While the intent was for the army to encamp near the small fort known as Hostilia just north of the Rive Padus, Caecina would be personally making a diversionary trip down to the coastal city of Ravenna. He needed to speak with Admiral Bassus, who commanded the largest fleet in the Imperial Navy. Caecina knew Bassus was angry with Vitellius for denying him promotion to Prefect of the Praetorian Guard, and so his loyalty was sketchy. He sat quietly, scarcely touching his supper while sipping on a cup of wine, his gaze distant. Caecina Alienus was beginning to think that perhaps Rome needed a strong emperor, rather than a fat, malleable puppet.



It was a cloudless day, and the late summer sun beat down upon the advance elements of the Flavian Army. Primus' cloak and armor was making his back sweat, as his horse swatted at flies with its tail. The high humidity intensified the heat, as did the glare of the sun off the armor and helmets of the vast column of legionaries and auxilia troopers. They halted every hour or whenever there was a stream or river for the men to refill their water bladders, which they drank from constantly.

Having decided to seize the initiative, General Antonius Primus had launched his invasion into Northern Italia devoid of any pomp or ceremony, dispatching his first wave towards Aquileia. Command of his cavalry corps fell to the competent equite officer, Arrius Varus, who personally led their reconnaissance-in-force. And, as Primus was commander-in-chief of the entire army, he combined his advance guard from the Seventh and Thirteenth Gemina Legions into a single division under the command of the Thirteenth's legate, Vedius Aquila. Primus himself rode with Aquila this day, though he made certain he was in constant communication with the second wave of his army. The bulk of these forces came from Third Gallica, Seventh Claudia, and Eighth Augusta Legions. As they were coming from further into Pannonia and Moesia, Primus did not expect to see them for at least two more weeks, possibly longer for Seventh Claudia.

"As long as Vitellius doesn't throw everything at us between now and

then," the commanding general said, with a mirthless chuckle.

"Not unless he's found a way to magically transport his soldiers three hundred miles," Aquila remarked. He gave a shrug. "Of course, they did seem to make soldiers appear out of thin air when Caecina crossed over the Alpes during winter."

"Otho did not have scouts watching north of the mountains," Primus observed. "Whereas I have eyes in every direction. Their only scouts come from a single cavalry regiment, who have not dared venture east of the River Aesontius. And the only legionary forces in Northern Italia have not moved from Cremona."

"Given the size of Arrius' cavalry corps, they can likely roam wherever they wish," Aquila noted.

"We've kept Vitellius blind up until now," Primus observed. "However, he knows by now that we are coming. Arrius' last report stated that the citizens of Aquileia were friendly, and even opened the gates to his troops. Hopefully, the same will hold true when we arrive at Patavium. Once we do, I want us to hold in place and wait for our second division. By then we should know where the main Vitellian Army is and have an idea as to their fighting strength and disposition."

"Yes, sir," the legate replied. "Do you plan on advancing to Verona next?"

"While arguably the most important strategic city in the region, I don't think we shall, at least not right now," Primus said, drawing a confused gaze from Aquila. "I'm concerned about the Ravenna fleet. They have a large force of marines who could very well be dispatched to fight on land. And those ships could easily transport an enemy force across the Adriatic Sea, dropping them behind us while cutting our supply and communications."

"A possible threat, though unlikely," Aquila surmised. "Any expedition they launch risks being trapped between our army and Mucianus, wherever he may be."

"Likely getting his cock stroked by eastern boy-whores," Primus scoffed.

"Reconnaissance patrol returning, sir!" a centurion shouted, from the vanguard of Legio XIII.

"That will be Arrius," Aquila speculated.

Approximately twenty horsemen were seen riding alongside the road on the open field of tall grass. One of their number had the black plume on his helmet denoting a senior officer and confirming the legate's assessment.

“General, sir,” Arrius said, riding over and saluting Primus.

“Commander Arrius,” Primus replied, returning the courtesy.

“My lead regiment has reached Patavium. He spoke with the mayor himself, who pledged the city’s fidelity to Vespasian, provided we don’t abandon them to the mercy of the Vitellians.”

“Likely they would make the same entreaty to the enemy had they arrived first,” Legate Aquila said.

“Patavium is well-fortified and a gateway into Northern Italia,” Primus noted. “Thankfully, we’ve arrived first and are saved the time-consuming and messy detail of a siege. Any sign of the enemy?”

“Just their scouts, so far,” Arrius replied. “I suspect they only have a single regiment of cavalry in the region. Since the most we have seen at one time are individual companies, they must be spread thin.”

“Attempting to send scouts between our regiments to get eyes on the main column,” Primus observed.

“I think it is safe to say, we’ve thwarted their efforts thus far,” Arrius asserted. “My lads control the roads leading out of Vicetia. Patrols are covering the gap between the mountains near the road station of Ad Finem.”

“Excellent work,” the commander-in-chief said. “Once we establish our headquarters at Patavium, we’ll conduct a reconnaissance with both infantry and cavalry and see if we can’t goad the Vitellians into playing the next round of this little game with us.”

Over the next few days the long column continued its advance unmolested. Any troops in the region that were loyal to Vitellius had fled long before the Flavians arrival. A week after departing from Emona, the advance guard arrived at the city of Patavium. A sprawling city, it was the central hub of all commerce between Northern Italia, Pannonia to the east, and Raetia to the north. As Arrius had reported, the citizens proved friendly, opening their gates and welcoming the Flavian Army. The commanding general wisely kept his forces cantoned outside the city walls, minimizing any drunken quarrels with the local populace. While Primus waited for the remainder of his army to arrive, Arrius Varus dispatched four regiments of cavalry and the Tenth Legion’s attached cohort to screen the southwest and attempt to make contact with any Vitellian elements in the region.



The past week had been one of exhilaration, as well as frustration for Tribune Lucius Artorius. He was at first filled with nervous excitement, once they spotted the Flavian horsemen. However, as Arrius had rightly surmised, the Siliana Horse were scattered throughout the region. Lucius had left one company patrolling the area around the auxilia fort of Hostilia, while the rest attempted to scout every possible avenue of approach the Flavians might use.

Unfortunately, the enemy had an entire corps of between four and five thousand horsemen saturating the region, and Lucius simply did not have the numbers to so much as skirmish with a single element of their force, even if his regiment was concentrated in a single place.

The two companies that rode with him made camp near the town of Ateste which lay approximately twenty-five miles southwest of Patavium. The presence of at least one regiment of Flavian Cavalry, which his lead scouts had watched come and go as they pleased, told him the city had betrayed the emperor.

It was well after dark when Lucius returned from a patrol, along with Centurion Liberius and about twenty troopers, to confirm the intelligence about Patavium's betrayal. Their camp was two miles northwest of the town, where a small river served as a natural protective barrier. The troopers guarding the entrance were noticeably on edge, knowing overwhelming numbers of enemy soldiers were just a few miles away with no sign of their own reinforcements. As Lucius dismounted and handed the reins to a servant, he signaled for Centurion Liberius to walk with him so they could speak in private.

"I feel like we've been left to defend the whole of the damned empire by ourselves," the tribune muttered, as he removed his helmet and ran his fingers through his hair, damp with sweat. "General Caecina has tasked us with gathering intelligence for him, yet all we have seen is their cavalry. We've counted the standards of what, five different regiments?"

"Six," Liberius corrected.

"And our own regiment is scattered to the fucking winds," Lucius spat, fighting to keep his composure. Though they were out of earshot of their men, sentries could still see the pair, and it would not do for their commanding officer to lose his temper in front of them.

"I don't know what to do," he said, clearly flustered. "If I try to consolidate, we will be left blind, which means we cannot hold the line

anywhere. The Flavians are using an entire corps of cavalry as their reconnaissance. How am I supposed to gather any useful information when every element of the enemy that we see has us horrifically outnumbered?"

"We do what we can," the centurion replied. His voice was calm, though Lucius could sense he shared a lot of his commander's vexations. "When there are that many horsemen present, you know their infantry cannot be far off."

"That I understand," Lucius remarked. "But where are they? And how many? I have yet to see a single legionary or auxilia infantryman. What am I supposed to tell General Caecina when he arrives and asks me about the enemy's strengths? And where is he, anyway?"

"The army has a long journey from Rome," Liberius observed. "It will take two, possibly three weeks for them to reach Hostilia."

"The orders we received from Caecina are dated three weeks ago," Lucius noted. "That means they should have arrived by now."

"Centurion Petronius is an astute officer," Liberius said. "Which is why I recommended his company remain at Hostilia. He has sent riders to Mutina. Once the army reaches that point, we'll know about it."

Lucius nodded, feeling reassured that he was still in control of the situation, even though his nerves were frayed. "I cannot help but wonder if I blundered, placing our camp so close to the enemy."

"Believe me, sir, if I thought this was a poor choice for camp, you would know it." Liberius was grinning now, which brought a much-needed sense of relief to his commander.

The two officers had just sat down to a late supper when they heard the challenge and watchword being given at the camp entrance.

"Who could be coming to us at this hour?" Lucius asked. "Messenger from Petronius?"

Liberius nodded, his mouth full of bread, as a dismounted trooper was escorted to them. He looked completely disheveled, but now breathing deep sighs of relief.

"Thank Juno I found you, sir," he said emphatically, as he rendered a salute. "It's pitch-fucking-black out there, and I somehow took the wrong road out of Hostilia. It wasn't until I was ten miles along I realized I was on the Via Claudia Augusta, heading due north towards Verona. I found my way back and…"

"We don't care about you getting your stupid ass lost," Liberius snapped.

“Just give us your bloody report already.”

“Yes, sir…my apologies.” He took a breath and smiled broadly. “Centurion Petronius sends his compliments and wishes you to know that the army has encamped halfway between Mutina and Hostilia. They should arrive before midday tomorrow.”

“That is the first bit of good news we’ve had in a month,” Lucius said to his centurion. He asked the trooper, “Were there any orders from General Caecina?”

“Yes, sir,” the man replied. “You are to consolidate your regiment and Hostilia with the rest of the army.”

“That’s a bit strange,” Centurion Liberius said. “We’re the only eyes the army has this far forward right now. If we withdraw all our companies, the army will be left blind. The Flavians could easily maneuver behind us and surround the entire army.”

“We’ll leave a detachment at Montagnana,” Lucius directed. “It’s near the main crossroads between Patavium and Verona, as well as the roads to the south.”

“Very good, sir,” the centurion acknowledged.

Lucius surmised that it would be at least a week before messages got to his scattered companies and they could rally with the rest of the army. While he was as puzzled as Centurion Liberius, regarding the order, he was glad to know they were not alone anymore.



It was with many cheers and celebratory blasts from the cornicens’ trumpets that the Vitellian Army crossed over the River Padus. Master Centurion Aetius of the First Germanica Legion was the first to ride across the bridge. He shouted a series of orders, directing the detachment from Siliana Horse to escort the army’s surveyors to where the various legions and regiments were to establish camp.

Aetius was filled with extremely bitter feelings about this war, especially after his experiences during the last conflict just a few months prior. Many of his legionaries died during the attacks on the Othonian city of Placentia, where he himself was captured and held prisoner for a short time. And while his feelings towards Emperor Vitellius were mostly of apathetic indifference, he hated the Flavians for bringing the scourge of civil war back to Rome.

“Now we wait for General Caecina,” a legate named Fabius said, as he rode over to the master centurion.

“Sir, we should conduct a robust reconnaissance of the area,” Aetius advised. “I recommend we send scouts in every direction from which the Flavians may approach.”

“Hmm,” Fabius replied, seemingly bored. He nodded towards a large group of horsemen crossing the easternmost of the two bridges across the northern river. “Well, what about that lot?”

Aetius squinted for a moment before recognizing their standard. “Those men are from the Siliana Regiment of Horse,” he said. “I was wondering when we’d find them. Hopefully they have some viable information for us.”

“Yes, well, see to it,” the legate replied, kicking his horse into a trot and heading towards his legion’s section of the vast camp along the Via Claudia Augusta.

The primus pilus grumbled to himself as he made his way over to where a section of auxilia infantry had halted the approaching horsemen. Fabius was the senior officer present and should have taken charge; however, he had little interest in any sort of command outside of his own legion.

“Tribune, sir,” Aetius said, saluting the cavalry officer as he dismounted near the bridge.

“I am here to see General Caecina,” Lucius explained. “My regiment has been placed under his division, and we await our orders.”

“Yes, we know. You have been our eyes and ears since the conflict began.”

“We were until we received orders from Caecina to rally at Hostilia,” the tribune noted.

“If you are our only scouts in this region, then why is your entire regiment converging here?” Aetius asked, slightly confused.

“Orders are orders,” Lucius replied with a shrug.

Aetius’ furrowed brow showed he was still troubled by this directive from their commanding general.

“We left a detachment at Montagnana,” Centurion Liberius spoke up. “We’ve encountered large columns of enemy horse near Patavium. Whether their main forces come via Patavium or the Ad Finem gap, our lads will spot them.”

“Unfortunately, General Caecina is delayed at Ravenna, checking on the status of the imperial fleet,” the primus pilus replied. “He will likely be

delayed at least two weeks. I can only assume he did not anticipate the Flavian Army invading so soon and hoped to consolidate our forces here, before sending our scouts ahead in larger numbers."

"Yes, that makes sense," Lucius concurred rather awkwardly. Still very new to being a cavalry officer, he was trying to learn the differences between battle tactics and overall strategic thinking.

"I advise we attach some auxilia infantry cohorts to our regiment," Centurion Liberius said. "Since General Caecina was unaware of the Flavian's advance into Italia, we should post a more robust lookout to the northeast."

"Follow me, I'll take you to the camp prefect," Aetius said.

Just east of the bridge they found an older officer shouting orders to groups of laboring soldiers, who were fortifying the open ground between the two rivers. The man appeared to be in his sixties, though he was still well-built with a thick head of grey hair and a face that was weathered from decades of campaigns.

"Cassius!" Aetius shouted to the man.

"Damn it, Aetius, can't you see I'm busy?" the old soldier snarled.

"I'm sure these men know how to properly dig a ditch," the master centurion retorted.

"Given the way you trained them, I'm surprised they know where to stick their cocks in a brothel."

"Any hole is a good hole, as long as it feels good."

Lucius assumed the two men knew each other well, given their rather biting banter.

"Old friend of yours?" Lucius asked quietly.

"He was Primus Pilus of First Germanica before me," Aetius replied. "After he retired, he was made camp prefect." He added in a louder voice, "Because the old fucker can barely walk in a straight line without someone barking orders." This was met with a hard punch to the shoulder. Both men were now laughing.

"Tribune," Cassius said, with a nod of acknowledgement to Lucius. "What can this tired old bastard from the ranks do for you?"

"Stop being so bloody dramatic for starters," Aetius remarked.

"The Flavian Army is massing to the northeast," Lucius replied. "I need infantry reinforcements to help me reconnoiter their likeliest approaches."

"Bugger me," the prefect said, his eyes widening slightly. "I didn't think

they’d be in Italia already.”

“Nor did we,” Aetius added. “So can you spare a couple cohorts from playing in the dirt?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a couple,” Cassius said. He contemplated for a moment, tapping his vine stick on the ground. “I’ll give you two cohorts of Belgic infantry. These particular lot do nothing but complain, and if they happened to get slaughtered while searching for the enemy, it wouldn’t break my heart.”

Chapter XI: First Clash

Near Patavium, Northern Italia
30 September 69 A.D.



Legionaries in battle formation
(Photo © Cezary Wyszynski)

The city of Patavium had welcomed Antonius Primus and his advance legions with celebratory ovations. The mayor offered the services of the city's merchant guilds to assist in the ferrying of food and supplies to the advancing army. He further dispatched a hundred of the city's militia to the small ports of Ad Portum and Portus Edronis to serve as lookouts, in case the Vitellians did launch a counterattack by sea. He was clearly placing a rather sizeable wager on the Flavians' success, and the hopes that he would be suitably rewarded by Emperor Vespasian.

"This will cover our more immediate flank and negate the necessity of detailing more troops to provide security," General Aquila noted.

"Which means we can turn our attention towards our friends to the southwest," the commander-in-chief remarked. He asked Arrius, "Any new movements to report?"

"No, sir," the cavalry corps commander replied. "There is a very small force encamped near Montagnana, though it is no more than twenty

horsemen. I have two regiments holding at Ateste. The rest of my corps are screening the Ad Finem gap all the way to the Via Postumia."

"Which means their main army is most likely here," Primus said, pointing to a spot on his map marked *Hostilia*.

"We should take our advance guard and secure Ateste," Aquila suggested.

"Agreed," Primus nodded. "From there we will tease the enemy a bit and see if he bites."

Though his sizeable advance guard was moving through Northern Italia at a pace that would certainly alarm the Vitellians, to Primus it felt like their trek was agonizingly slow. They were now into the first week of October, and he began to wonder if his intent of winning the empire for Vespasian by Saturnalia in December was mere fantasy. Primus was an experienced general, and he knew it was unlikely the war would be decided in a single action, like the conflict between Vitellius and Otho. What he needed was a decisive victory in order to break the morale of the Vitellians, while compelling more defections from their ranks.

The Flavian forces that departed Patavium consisted of Legio XIII, Legio VII, Gemina, four regiments from Arrius' cavalry corps, and the single cohort from Legio X. The commanding general and Legate Aquila rode behind the lead cohort for Legio XIII. They were approaching the town of Mons Silicis where the road curved to the west, when they saw a horseman being escorted back by several troopers from their vanguard.

"A courier from Caecina, sir," a tribune said, accompanying the messenger who wordlessly handed the scroll to Primus.

"You come from Hostilia?" the commander-in-chief asked.

"No, sir," the messenger replied. "Ravenna."

"What in Hades is Caecina doing in Ravenna when his army is at Hostilia?" Aquila asked.

"I have my suspicions," Primus replied, breaking the seal on the scroll. The general slowed his horse to a slow walk as he read through the message. After the first few lines, he began to smirk. By the end, he was bursting into a fit of laughter.

"Our adversary has some new jokes for you?" Aquila asked. "If it's the one about the Vestal Virgins and the anatomically correct horse statue, I've heard it."

Primus was still chuckling as he rolled the scroll up and handed it to the legate. He was then composed and rather stern as he addressed the courier. “You will remain with my column until I am ready to send a suitable reply to your commander.”

“By Juno’s tits this is weak,” Aquila said, as he scanned over the scroll. “Caecina exhorts the prowess of the Rhine Army, which he confidently claims has us badly outnumbered.”

“They have more legions and cohorts,” Primus stated. “But given how depleted their ranks are, I would hazard a guess that their actual numbers of fighting men are about equal to ours. And that’s only if you include the legions at Cremona, who thus far have not moved an inch. If you keep reading, he spouts off a slew of colorful flatteries towards Vespasian, yet not once does he even mention Vitellius. Makes one wonder which side he’s on.”

“Well, if he’s trying to scare us into capitulation, he’s doing a terrible job of it,” the legate replied.

“I doubt he is,” Primus said contemplatively. “Were he trying to panic us, he would have berated our legions as inexperienced and poor fighters, while singing the praises of his master in Rome. I don’t doubt he believes strongly in the fighting prowess of his army, but his indecisive tone tells me he has rather pervasive doubts about the cause he fights for.”

“He’s a damned slow learner, then,” Aquila stated bitterly. “He could have made up his mind six months ago and saved much needless bloodshed. I’ve never forgiven him and Valens for attempting to humiliate my legion after Bedriacum. Forgive me, sir, but I would rather piss on Caecina’s bloody corpse than parlay with him.”

“Save your venom for Vitellius,” Primus remarked. “I will write an official response from the army, and I want you and the other legates to do the same. Insult Vitellius all you want; I intend to use a number of descriptive terms like *tyrant*, *despot*, *usurper*, along with some more colorful words like *fat bastard*, *corpulent twat*—which happens to be a favorite term of endearment from the lads—and some other choice phrases. But I don’t want any disparaging words said about either Caecina or his soldiers. In fact, we shall play up the nobility and valiant heritage of the Rhine Army while reassuring every centurion and tribune that they will keep their rank in a post-Vitellian Rome.”



Ateste was located at a crossroads approximately twelve miles north of the River Athesis. The road ran close to a small hilltop, and it was at the base of this Centurion Galeo ordered the Fifth Cohort to make camp. The rest of their force spread out in either direction with one legion on each side of the southern crossroads. As Gaius Artorius strolled up the side of the hill, he could see hundreds of cavalry troopers watering their horses in the stream that ran from the western slope. It was midday, and the sun shone down as he scanned the west in the direction of Montagnana.

"I wonder if they know we're here?" he asked, as he was joined by Centurion Nicanor.

"That road station is at least twelve miles from here," Nicanor observed. "If they haven't seen us yet, they will once the sun goes down and all our campfires light up the sky."

"It is rather impressive," Gaius said appreciatively, as he nodded towards their vast camp below. It extended for at least two miles to both the east and west. "And to think this is just our advance guard."

"The enemy has at least as many soldiers as us," the centurion remarked. "Rome is the only nation in the whole of the world that can feed and supply such vast armies for so long. If not for our extensive logistics networks, we would either starve to death or devour every town and city we passed through."

"Which is what I hear Vitellius did," the optio said.

"Nicanor!" The voice of Centurion Galeo shouted from halfway up the slope.

"You should come up here, sir, it's a lovely view," Nicanor replied.

"I would love to, but unfortunately there's no time for it. Get your lads ready to march. We move out in thirty minutes."

"Where to?" Nicanor asked, as he and Gaius trotted down the hill towards their cohort commander.

"General Primus wants us to provide infantry support to a large mounted reconnaissance force," the pilus prior explained. "He has one regiment riding towards Montagnana to clear out any stray enemy horsemen still in the area. He wants the rest of us to head southwest towards the River Athesis. We're to goad the enemy into a scrap, if possible. If not, then we are to secure the westernmost bridge over the river."

"It will be after dark by the time we get there," Gaius remarked.

“I want the lads traveling light,” Galeo ordered, ignoring the optio’s statement. “One day’s rations and entrenching tools only. It will mean sleeping under the stars tonight, but at least it doesn’t look like rain.”

Though soldiers were notorious for grumbling, the men of the Fifth Cohort were filled with excitement. They and their large force of cavalry would be the ones to strike the first blows for Emperor Vespasian! Even though they had yet to catch sight of the main Vitellian Army, it was widely conjectured that their camp lay somewhere just beyond the Athesis. No one knew whether or not any of their lead elements had crossed over, though the Flavian soldiers were hoping for a brawl.

Because of the impending chance of contact with the enemy, Arrius decided to personally lead the mission. A thousand horsemen would form the crux of his force, two companies scouting ahead, and the rest forming a massive wedge that spread out a half mile in each direction. Centurion Galeo and his cohort of legionaries would occupy the center, near the apex of the wedge. Small groups of cavalrymen would ride out in numerous directions, providing eyes on the flanks. Their main force had to walk at a much slower pace to keep the correct distance between themselves and their infantry support.

The land in this region was mostly flat, open farmland. Fields of wheat, large vineyards, and olive groves extended as far as one could see. The overseers and the slaves tending to the crops, which were in the midst of harvest, scattered from the advancing mass of soldiers. Both horse and legionary alike trampled through the expanses of tilled earth lined with the broken stalks of harvested wheat and other grains. Endless rows of trees lined the roads. Every time the taskforce approached one of these, troopers were dispatched forward to make certain they were clear of enemy soldiers. The sun was falling in the west as they halted near a narrow brook.

“It’s about another six miles to the bridge,” Arrius said to Centurion Galeo and the senior cavalry officers.

“It will be dark soon,” one of his centurions observed. “We should keep our lead elements close to the main body, in case they run into trouble.”

Arrius nodded and turned to his infantry commander. “Centurion Galeo, think your lads have another six miles in them?”

“It’s already been a long day. But, yes, they can march another six miles…and fight a battle, if need be.”

“We’ll rest here for a bit and let the men get a quick meal,” Arrius directed. “We haven’t seen so much as a single enemy scout. I think it is unlikely we’ll run into the Vitellian Army this day.”

“A shame, really,” one of the centurions replied. “The lads have been anxious to give those bastards a good thrashing.”

“Let’s not forget who we’re fighting,” Galeo countered. “These aren’t mindless barbarians we’ll be facing.”

“Your legionaries aren’t scared, are you?” the cavalry centurion retorted.

“Never mistake respect for fear,” Galeo shot back.

“Alright, enough,” Arrius interrupted. “The sun will be down soon, and it will be at least a couple hours before we reach the bridge. Get your men fed and the horses watered. I want us on the move in half an hour.”



Lucius’ initial relief at having been reinforced by most of Caecina’s army had been replaced by excruciating frustration. He had been compelled to wait several days before his attached cohorts of auxilia infantry were ready to depart Hostilia; and even then, they had not left until late afternoon. The tribune hoped to secure one of the bridges across the River Athesis, sending his scouts out in force the following day. It had been over a week since they had last seen any of the Flavian horsemen, and the gods only knew where their army was now. Lucius viewed Caecina’s absence as a stroke of luck. Now he had time to find the Flavian Army and bring some useful intelligence to his commanding general.

The River Athesis served as the boundary between Vitellian and Flavian territory. Two bridges spanned fast-moving currents approximately twenty-five miles apart. Lucius’ taskforce reached the westernmost bridge, where he decided to make camp on the north bank of the river. It was already after dark. A sliver of moon cast its light upon the ground.

“Tomorrow we should advance towards the crossroads at Montagnana,” Centurion Liberius said.

“Agreed,” Lucius replied. “We haven’t heard from the lads we left there for several days. It frustrates me that we have not been able to get any eyes on the Flavian Army. We have no idea what their numbers are or if they managed to persuaded all of the Danube legions to rebel. The enemy’s auxilia regiments from both Pannonia and Moesia are disproportionately cavalry,

and they have kept us blind to the Flavians' true strengths."

What neither man knew was their detachment had been driven off by one of Arrius' regiments earlier in the evening. They were now twenty miles further upriver, attempting to evade any would-be pursuers.

The hour was late, and Lucius was anxious to remove his armor and bed down for the night. As regimental commander, he had come to accept the fact that he was always the last to bed and the first to rise. He therefore decided he should inspect the auxilia infantry cohorts, whose duties including fortifying and securing their position. As he rode through the camp, his servant walking next to him holding a torch, he was appalled to see that the camp had not been entrenched, and that only a handful of sentries were posted.

"What in the fuck is the meaning of this?" the tribune snapped.

"Nothing to worry about," one of the sentries replied. "The Flavians are miles from here."

"Excuse me?" Lucius said, his face turning red. "Get me your damned centurion at once!"

As the soldier started to slowly ponder away, sulking all the while, Lucius rode up behind him and kicked him hard in the back of the head, sending him sprawling onto his face.

"At the double, damn you!"

As the trooper staggered back to his feet, muttering curses towards the tribune, Lucius was suddenly filled with a deep sense of foreboding. The interception of most Vitellian scouts and couriers had left them completely in the dark. Like Centurion Liberius, he was certain the Flavians were much closer than when they last saw them. And while he would give a sound verbal lashing to the auxilia centurions, he knew he had only himself to blame. They fell under his command now. It was his responsibility to make certain daily camp duties were performed, especially since he did not know the infantry cohorts. After a few minutes, a bleary-eyed centurion stumbled over to him.

"What is it, tribune?" he asked with much irritation.

"You were tasked with setting security for this camp," Lucius said, fighting to control his anger. "Explain to me why there are only a handful of sentries posted and no regulation entrenchments dug?"

Before the centurion could answer, Lucius' fears were realized with the sounding of war horns just beyond the edge of the camp.

"Oh, fuck…" the centurion muttered. He was suddenly alert and realized what a gross transgression he had committed.

“If we survive this, I will have you stripped of your rank and flogged in front of the entire army,” Lucius growled. “Now get your men up!”



It was a fortunate stroke of luck for Lucius Artorius that the Flavian advance guard stumbled upon them in the dark. Had they known the strength and disposition of the Vitellian force, they would have taken the time to quietly envelop them, while conducting a more coordinated assault. But because Lucius’ small taskforce departed so late in the day, the Flavians did not even realize they had crossed over the Athesis. Hence, no contact had been made with Vitellian scouts beforehand. Instead, they had been spotted by an enemy sentry, the cavalry officers sounding the charge in an attempt to seize the initiative.

Gaius Artorius and the soldiers of the Fifth Cohort were still about half a mile back with most of the cavalry. The rapid sounding of trumpet blasts alerted the marching legionaries, who had been plodding along in a daze brought on by fatigue and the encompassing darkness.

“It would seem your lads have made contact, sir,” Centurion Galeo said, walking over to Commander Arrius.

“The bridge is not too far from here,” Arrius replied. “I’ll take the rest of my men and have them swing out wide and attempt to surround and fix the enemy in place. Deploy your men into battle ranks and press up the center. Be prepared to withdraw if things take a turn for the worse. Since we saw no trace of them today, I thought the Vitellians were another ten to fifteen miles from here. It seems I misjudged them.”

“Understood,” Galeo acknowledged. He turned to his still-marching legionaries. *“Fifth Cohort…battle formation, on me!”*

Orders were echoed down the column. The legionaries rapidly deployed into battle lines. Packs were quickly dropped and left under the watch of a handful of officers’ servants.

Every soldier was now wide-eyed and alert. Given the relatively flat and open terrain, Galeo elected to keep as wide of a frontage as he was reasonably able to control. Each century was arrayed in four ranks with a gap of ten to fifteen feet between. Gaius was on the far left of his men, Centurion Galeo and the First Century to his left.

“Steady, lads!” Centurion Nicanor said, from his position on the far right. “Maintain your intervals and hold formation. We don’t know what’s out there. Look sharp!”

“Not that any of us can see shit,” a legionary muttered under his breath.

Arrius advanced his cavalry in two large wings, each in a lengthy echelon on either flank of the legionary cohort. He was cautious, not wanting to risk a head-on assault should they discover Caecina’s entire army north of the river.



At the bridge, Flavian horsemen clashed with sentries. Those who could not flee fast enough were trampled under the hooves of their chargers. Meanwhile, the troopers of Siliana Horse frantically rallied around their commander. He sent a squad of troopers ahead to see how large a force was bearing down on them.

“Could be just some scouts, or it could be their entire damned army,” he muttered, before drawing his spatha.

Auxilia centurions kicked and berated their men as they scrambled up and haphazardly threw on their armor, struggling in the dark to find their weapons and shields. By the same token, Lucius’ cavalrymen were moving with a sense of urgency, yet refusing to let panic set in. Within minutes, all of his companies were formed into six ranks, ready to ride into battle, lances resting on their shoulders, officers’ spathas drawn. Soon his scouts rode back to him, their horses sprinting, and their expressions wrought with fear.

“The Flavians are attacking in force, sir,” one of the men reported. “We spotted both cavalry and legionaries.”

“Could you see how many?” Centurion Liberius asked.

“No, sir, it’s too bloody dark. We damn near ran right into them as it was. But their legionaries are in battle formation, and they are marching at the quick step. This is not a mere reconnaissance; they’re coming to fight, sir.”

Lucius gritted his teeth. Were his camp properly fortified, they could make a viable stand with the auxiliaries while his cavalry probed for weaknesses. As it was, his attached infantry were proving useless, and the enemy horsemen greatly outnumbered his.

Reluctantly, he turned to face his assembled regiment. “Alright lads, our mission was to locate the Flavian Army. And as you can hear, we found them. We need to hold them long enough to get everyone across the bridge.

And, yes, that includes those damned fools who got us in to this predicament. Form a screen line around the camp. As the last elements cross the bridge, they will cut the supports behind them." He saw the despondent looks on the faces of his men, who were hoping to take the fight to the Flavians. "This is not a defeat, but simply a redeployment. Your lances will taste the flesh of traitors soon enough."

Liberius and his subordinate centurions shouted orders to their men. The companies deployed into a large horseshoe-shaped formation around their camp. The Flavians were mostly skirmishing with the near-panicked infantrymen, out of concern there might be a larger Vitellian force encamped within. As the enemy's true strength became apparent, Lucius was suddenly thankful for the cover of darkness. While it greatly impeded the ability of leaders from both sides to coordinate, he now realized the Flavians had them badly outnumbered, though they probably didn't even know it. His own horsemen spurred their mounts forward, engaging in a series of brief clashes with the enemy's mounted troops.

Lucius had positioned himself and a mounted escort nearest the road. He could not see any enemy soldiers to his front. "Keep your eyes open, we know they have infantry support," he told those nearest him. He tried to listen carefully over the sounds of shields and swords crashing together, while injured cried out as they were struck down. He turned his ear towards the north and held his breath. Just then, he thought he heard the faint sound of advancing footsteps.

After a few moments, there was no mistaking the echoing of hobnailed sandals off the paving stones.

"Centurion Liberius!" he shouted.

"Sir?" his second quickly rode over to him.

"What's the status of our withdrawal?"

"About half the infantry are across," the centurion replied. "I'm collapsing the circle and sending the first two of our flank companies over."

"We'd best hurry," Lucius said, looking down the road. "Their infantry are almost on us."

Both of them were able to catch the faint glint of moonlight reflecting off the armor and shields of what appeared to be at least a cohort of legionaries. Both sides had spotted each other at the same time, and unintelligible orders were heard being shouted from the Flavian officers. The legionaries were

now advancing at a quick jog. Within a minute or so, the Vitellians would be in range of their javelins. Their extraction would be a bloody affair, should they fail to withdraw quickly. And if the enemy managed to get some of their troops over the bridge before it could be collapsed, it would be a disaster.



"There they are," Centurion Galeo said, keeping his voice calm. He nodded to his cornicen, who sounded a pair of notes on his horn.

"At the double time!" centurions shouted up and down the line. *"March!"*

Javelins were now resting on their shoulders, as legionaries anticipated the pending order to unleash upon their panicked adversaries. Their own cavalry, having not been able to coordinate with Arrius and Galeo beforehand, were still skirmishing with the Vitellian horsemen on the flanks. Distances were also extremely difficult to judge in the dark. As they approached the bridge, the last of the Vitellian horsemen could be seen fleeing across to the other side. The sound of axes and gladii hacking away on the support ropes halted any attempts to cross over.

"Halt!" Galeo shouted, raising his gladius high.

"Fucking cowards, good riddance!" a legionary said, before spitting on the ground in contempt.

"I don't suspect they are attempting to lure us into a trap," Centurion Galeo said, when Commander Arrius rode up to him.

The sounds of the bridge supports crashing into the river on the far side seemed to confirm this.

"Well, bugger," Arrius said. He then addressed his own officers. "Did we take any prisoners?"

"Just a couple, sir," a centurion reported. "Damned barbarian auxiliaries who probably don't know shit."

"Well, find out what they *do* know," Arrius replied curtly. "Send a rider back to General Primus, tell him we've found the Vitellian Army. The rest of you start fortifying our camp."

"Sir, our packs and equipment are a couple miles up the road," Centurion Galeo stated.

"Very well," the commander said. "I still want this camp dug in when you return. I don't suspect we'll have any more trouble with our friends across the

river, but I’m not taking any unnecessary chances.”

The first contact between Vitellian and Flavian forces had amounted to little more than a minor skirmish. Fifteen Vitellian infantrymen had been killed along with three of Lucius Artorius’ cavalry, with about twice as many wounded. Four men from Arrius’ regiments had been slain and another dozen injured. What mattered was both sides had found each other. As for the Artorian brothers, they had, for the briefest of moments, been within a hundred feet of each other, yet neither knew it. It was as if the fates were playing a cruel game with them, and every other brother, father, son, or other kinsman who found themselves on opposing sides of this war.

Word reached General Primus the following day, and soon the entire division was encamped just north of the River Athesis. After this brief and rather anticlimactic first encounter, both armies remained anchored to their camps, neither side willing to take the next move. While this inactivity was frustrating for the men in the ranks, both commanding generals were playing for time.

The Vitellians were in a strong defensive position, though Primus knew they were in no position to openly attack his forces. And while his second wave of legions were but a few days’ march away, his scouts to the west had reported no movement from the legions at Cremona. The next move, he reckoned, fell to Caecina.

“Come on, Caecina,” Primus said one evening as he gazed across the river. “Time for you to show us which side your pieces are playing for in this game.”

Chapter XII: The Race to Cremona

Northern Italia
18 October 69 A.D.



Marcus Antonius Primus

Though the Flavians and Vitellians had yet to engage in any sort of decisive battle, the overall strategic situation was quickly becoming bleak for the emperor in Rome. Vespasian had already cut grain supplies from Egypt, and while there was no shortage of food supplies that could be imported from loyal provinces like North Africa, Caecina suspected their fealty was superficial at best.

His brief meeting in Ravenna with Admiral Lucilius Bassus was the last bit of reassurance he needed to convince himself the time was right to turn on Vitellius. Bassus was not only still personally angry with the emperor, but his mariners had been deprived of much-needed rations and supplies, and had not been paid since Vitellius came to power. So, unbeknownst to Antonius Primus, who had detached some of his auxiliaries to Altinum to protect his flank and communications, the Ravenna fleet was ready to declare for Vespasian.

Once the Flavians discovered the vast majority of the Imperial Navy was now theirs, they could easily blockade every port in Italia and wait for the

Vitellian armies to be weakened by hunger. Food shortages would also lead to riots within the major cities, and even though the Vitellians possessed a fearsome army, the Flavians would have them substantially outnumbered in the coming months once Mucianus arrived with his division. A decisive victory over Antonius Primus could change all of this, and turn the tide in favor of Vitellius. However, Caecina was more interested in saving his own neck. The sooner he defected, the better.

As he departed Ravenna, he thought he should send an immediate message to Primus, informing him of his intentions. However, he decided it would be prudent to first make certain his army was ready to turn against the pretender. After which, he could say he brought the northern army and the Ravenna fleet to Vespasian. It would then simply be a matter of deciding who should command the swelled ranks of the Flavian Army, Caecina or Primus?

He found his army deeply entrenched south of the River Athesis. Palisades had been built up with spikes, snares, and other various obstacles lining the deep trench.

"Sir, our forces have located the Flavian Army," a staff tribune reported, as Caecina dismounted near his principia.

He ignored the man, who was neglecting to mention anything at all about the debacle of a skirmish from a few nights prior.

"I need all senior officers here at once," Caecina ordered the tribune. His expression was grave, and he hoped his legions would follow his example. If not, Rome would be subjected to a bitter scene of carnage in the coming months.

The other senior legate was a man named Fabius Fabullus, who was an unassuming officer of adequate tactical skill, though little imagination when it came to long-term strategy. The camp prefect, who had nominally assumed a senior leadership position, was a retired centurion primus pilus named Cassius Longus. They, along with Master Centurion Aetius of First Germanica, made up the senior officers of Caecina's division. That he had not been given enough officers of rank was telling. It almost felt as if Valens had yet again deliberately set him up for failure. The remaining legates for the entire army were supposed to come up with Valens, but Caecina had no way of knowing when that might be. As the officers assembled, Caecina ordered all centurions pilus prior and above to attend his brief as well.

"Men," he said, pacing back and forth in front of the assembled officers,

his hands clasped behind his back. “I fear our cause has been undone.”

“What are you talking about, sir?” Legate Fabius retorted, his voice indignant. “We have the most powerful army in the world at our command, with more legions on their way. How could we possibly be undone?”

“The Ravenna fleet has betrayed us,” Caecina explained. “Vespasian now has control over most of the Imperial Navy. It won’t be long until all ports are blockaded and they attempt to starve us into submission.”

“Piss on that,” Cassius spat. “Once we smash their pitiful armies and send Primus’ head in a box to the pretender, it is they who will capitulate.”

Caecina was suddenly nervous. The legates, tribunes and centurions were becoming defiant in their speech. He also knew he had no choice but to try and finish what he started in Ravenna.

“My friends, please!” he implored them, his hands raised. “We must look to more than just ourselves. Are we the strongest force in the Imperial Army? Without a doubt. But if we are to bring peace to Rome, it will take far more than just our swords. Vespasian is a noble man and above all a good Roman. He is more than fit to rule the empire, while Vitellius has done nothing except bring us to the brink of ruin. I have assurances from the Flavian Commanding General, Antonius Primus, that all centurions and tribunes will be allowed to keep their positions under the new regime…”

“Fucking traitor!” someone shouted.

Several dozen gladii were suddenly drawn from their scabbards.

“Are we to listen to this?” Fabius spoke up. “Do our oaths mean so little that we would cast them aside because a handful of sailors are cowards and shirkers? The very army Antonius Primus brings against us are nothing more than the same men we defeated barely six months ago. Sorry, general, but we will *not* capitulate!”

Caecina was now fearful for his life, as the enraged mob stepped towards him. It was Master Centurion Aetius who stopped them. His own blade was drawn, and he quickly stepped between the general and the furious officers.

“Hold!” he shouted. “This will not end with murder. We are legionaries, not barbarians. General Caecina, you are under arrest and will be brought before the emperor on charges of treason. But we will not let our discipline lapse into that of savages, no matter how much we have been betrayed.” He whispered to Caecina, “I am sorry, sir, but if I don’t have you placed in chains now, this lot will kill you for certain.”

“As will Vitellius, should the Flavians lose,” the general muttered

despondently.

Legionaries were summoned to place their traitorous commanding general in chains. As Caecina was led away, all the while being subjected to torrents of abuse from his former officers, Aetius found himself privately echoing the general's doubts. Still, he had given his sacred oath to Emperor Vitellius. Having already fought one war on his behalf, he steeled himself to fight another.

"You're in command now," the master centurion said to Legate Fabius. "The time for waiting is over."

Fabius swallowed hard. With General Valens still in Rome with the more senior legates in the army, he was now faced with the daunting task of commanding the entire northern army.

"Summon Tribune Artorius," he said.

"Yes, sir."

Word of Caecina's betrayal had spread quickly throughout the camp. The loss of their commanding general to the enemy would greatly harm morale, and the remaining senior officers knew it was even more crucial they acted soon. Within the hour, every legionary cohort and auxilia regimental commander was soon crammed into the principia tent. All eyes were on Lucius Artorius. He relayed what information he had managed to gather over the past few days.

"General Primus has concentrated what forces he has here, south of Ateste," he said, pointing to a map. "Since we have cut the western bridge across the Athesis, this is the only way they can approach."

"They're less than twenty miles from here. What are they waiting for?" General Fabius asked.

"Reinforcements most likely," Prefect Cassius remarked.

"That was our assessment as well," Lucius replied. "From what we can see, Primus currently has two legions, some attached cohorts, and a very strong force of cavalry. We can assume the entire Balkan Army has declared for Vespasian, and this is likely just his advance guard."

"There is also the matter of the entire eastern army," Master Centurion Aetius spoke up. "We don't know when they left Syria or at what pace they are marching, but it's highly probable this army is substantially larger than whatever Primus may throw against us."

"Meaning we have to deal with Primus now, rather than sitting on our

asses allowing him to wait for reinforcements," Fabius said begrudgingly. "I've sent messages back to General Valens and the emperor, informing them of Caecina's betrayal, urging them to send what forces remain in Rome with all possible speed."

"What about our troops at Cremona?" a tribune asked. "We have two full legions there plus a strong contingent of cavalry."

"They were not depleted by having to supply men for the new Praetorian Guard," Cassius observed. "And Fifth Alaudae Legion has yet to depart for Batavia. We should keep them with us until we've taken care of the Flavians."

"Agreed," the new commanding general said. "Cremona is a place of strength. It wouldn't surprise me if the Flavians went around our position and try to take it first, rather than engaging us."

"Some of my scouts believe they have sent a detachment to Verona," Lucius remarked. "If that's the case, and they can overwhelm the garrison at Cremona, they will control all of Italia north of the River Padus. Without the Ravenna fleet, we will be isolated from Rome."

"It's settled, then," the new commanding general asserted. "We must make for Cremona at once."

"Sir, I recommend we take the longer route, south of the river," Lucius stated. "Primus' strength lies in his cavalry. He has an entire corps of four, maybe five thousand troopers. I simply do not have the numbers to keep them at bay, not with only a single regiment. If we take the road north of the river, our columns will have their flanks completely exposed."

"The direct road is about sixty miles," Fabius observed, running his finger along the map. "We could sneak away in the middle of the night."

"Sir, even if we did, we could only cover half that distance before they discovered we've gone, and their cavalry caught up to us," Master Centurion Aetius noted.

"If we go around, the distance increases to a hundred miles," Lucius admitted. "But at least that way, we can arrive at Cremona with our army intact and negate the risk of being cut to pieces while on the move."



While General Fabius and the Vitellians made preparations for their nighttime departure and flight to Cremona, two more Flavian Legions arrived

near Verona to reinforce Antonius Primus. Their commanding generals, Legate Lupus of Legio VIII, Augusta, and Legate Aponius of Legio III, Gallica, had arrived a few days prior. The latter was the second cousin of Governor Saturnius in Moesia. These two legions constituted the core of Primus' second wave and were now within half a day's march of his advance forces. The commander-in-chief had ridden to Verona with General Aquila. He was relieved the people greeted his forces with the same level of friendly hospitality as at Patavium.

"My cousin sends us good tidings," Aponius stated. "Seventh Claudia Legion has declared for Vespasian and is on the move with the bulk of their legionaries."

"That gives us five legions, sir," General Aquila said. "We've lost a number of auxiliaries to guarding our flanks from the sea, and the possibility of enemy reinforcements coming via Raetia. But, we still have most of our cavalry."

Primus was greatly pleased with this latest development. As he and his senior legates rode back to their ever-growing encampment, they were greeted a few miles up the road by a rather frantic Arrius Varus.

"The Vitellians have hoofed it, sir," he said quickly. "They must have broken down camp in the middle of the night."

"Any idea which direction they went?" Primus asked.

"I sent scouts as far as the town of Andes, but the locals said they have seen nothing."

"If the enemy has crossed the River Padus, should we not pursue them?" Aponius asked.

Primus shook his head. "No. I'll not have thirty thousand men chasing phantoms. Besides, I know exactly where they are headed.

"Cremona," Aquila said knowingly. He grimaced at the memories of the last battle he fought not far from there.

"I would bet a thousand denarii that that is where our friend, Caecina, is headed," Primus remarked. "He may have gotten an early start on us, but he has nearly twice the distance to travel. Ready the legions. Once Eighth Augusta and Third Gallica have joined us, we will advance first to Bedriacum. From there we will head to Cremona and compel the garrison to surrender before Caecina can reinforce them."

"If there is a second Vitellian division under Valens, they are likely headed to Cremona as well," Arrius surmised.

“Let us hope we do not give them too great of a head start,” General Lupus added.

Primus held a determined grimace, “The race to Cremona is on.”



The reinforcing Flavian Legions had scarcely a day to rest and recuperate after their long trek from the Danube, before the entire army was on the move. Primus had privately complained before about what he perceived as the slow pace of their advance through Italia. Now his army would have to practically sprint the next leg of their journey. The commanding general was determined to reach Cremona first and goad the two legions there into battle or surrender. If they chose to fight, his five legions and vast cavalry corps would crush them utterly, well before the rest of the Vitellian Army could arrive to reinforce them.

“I was beginning to think the war would be over, ending in some sort of awkward truce,” Tesserarius Julius said, as he and the other principle officers oversaw the frantic breaking down of their camp.

“It did seem strange that we sat around for so long, both sides just looking at each other across the river,” Optio Gaius Artorius concurred.

Neither of the officers realized that was exactly why the two armies had remained static, simply watching each other, since the skirmish at the Athesis Bridge. General Primus had told no one, not even his fellow legates, about his thoughts regarding the possible defection of Caecina and his army. Since the Vitellians had withdrawn during the night and were likely headed for Cremona, it would seem they would not be abandoning the pretender after all. Neither Primus nor any of his soldiers knew about Caecina’s attempt at defection and subsequently being thrown into chains. All anyone knew was it was now a race to Cremona, where they hoped to either compel the garrison to join them or quickly subdue them before the Vitellian’s main force arrived.

“What news?” Gaius asked, when joined by Centurion Nicanor.

“We’re to cut cross-country due west,” their commander answered. “There’s a small river called the Mincius that flows into the Padus. We’re to cross at a town called Mantua about thirty miles from here.”

“If we’re marching cross-country, I don’t suspect we’ll reach it in a day,” Julius noted.

“That’s what the officers from Thirteenth Gemina are saying,” Nicanor concurred. “They know this region well, and have told us it will be slow going until we reach Mantua. However, there is a paved road that intersects with the Via Postumia just northeast of Bedriacum. General Primus wants us to reach the city in two days and has ordered us to establish a stronghold once we arrive. Bedriacum will become our staging point until we know the disposition of the garrison at Cremona.”

“Much like it was for Otho,” Julius grumbled.

“At least we’re not being led by an inexperienced halfwit,” Gaius conjectured.

Nicanor let out a laugh. “That is exactly what the primus pilus of Thirteenth Gemina said.”

The journey across the vast expanses of open grasslands farm fields was indeed slow going, especially now that Primus had most of his army consolidated. The purpose of his dividing his forces into two divisions was for ease of travel, and to prevent congestion by having so many soldiers in such a confined space. He had allowed them to converge only because he anticipated having to fight the Vitellians at Hostilia, should they refuse to desert Vitellius. Instead, he now had to get his entire force of nearly thirty thousand men as far as Bedriacum in very short order. He had no choice but to keep this unwieldy mass of men, pack animals, and equipment together.

It soon became apparent that Primus was fortunate to have Legate Aquila and Thirteenth Gemina guiding his army. Primus himself was completely unfamiliar with the terrain, and only had a handful of crude maps to show him where the roads, rivers, and major cities were. The town of Mantua and its bridge crossing was not even noted on any of his maps. He had, at first, thought he would have to divert his army all the way to Verona before heading towards Bedriacum.

“I’m damnably grateful you decided to tell Vitellius to piss off when he demanded your allegiance,” Primus said to Aquila, as the army made camp along a vast expanse of grassy fields near Mantua.

“Defeating Otho’s army wasn’t enough,” Aquila replied. “Vitellius, or at least his handlers, Valens and Caecina, wished to humiliate us. But, since they sent Fourteenth Gemina to Britannia, and First Adiutrix to Hispania, that left only us. Our lads busted their backs building those damned amphitheaters, all the while being harassed and publicly embarrassed by the people of Cremona. They treated my legionaries like slaves.”

“No wonder they are so anxious for a bit of reprisal,” the commander-in-chief stated.

“To be honest, I wouldn’t be surprised if my lads try to burn Cremona to the ground,” Aquila said ominously.

“Then the city had better surrender quietly,” Primus declared.

They heard the sound of a horse whinnying just outside the principia tent. The large flaps were soon held open. Commander Arrius entered and removed his helmet.

“Forgive my late appearance, general,” he said. “I was out with some of my lads scouting for another crossing.”

“And did you find one?” Primus asked.

“We did. There’s a little town called Andes just a few miles south of Mantua. Some of my troopers spotted it when they were trying to see where the Vitellians ran off to. There’s no bridge, but there is a viable fording site near there. The current isn’t too fast, and the water is only about waist deep.”

“We’ll send most of the cavalry that way,” Primus decided. “Eighth Augusta is at the back of the column with the detachment from Fifteenth Apollonia. We’ll send them that way. The rest of the army can cross at Mantua.”

“Once we reach Bedriacum, there are a number of bridges we can use,” Aquila added. “I recall there being one to the east, and at least two more to the north. They’re mostly used by farmers and not very wide, though that will save us from the congestion of crossing everyone at the Via Postumia bridge.”

“There was no sign of any enemy troops?” Primus asked Arrius.

“None,” the cavalry officer confirmed. “I don’t think the few peasants I saw at Mantua even know there is a war ongoing. We were the first imperial soldiers they’ve seen in months. One of my decurions said he saw a bust of Vitellius at the town hall, though most of the people had no idea who he was. For all they know, it’s either Galba or Otho.”

“We’ll make certain no one mistakes that fat bastard for Vespasian once we finish with him,” Aquila remarked.

The crossing of the River Mincius was mostly uneventful. However, the shallow ford proved quite the obstacle for the legionaries ordered to cross, burdened as they were by armor, weapons, and their heavy packs. Primus sent a lone regiment of cavalry into Mantua to clear a path for his remaining

legions and auxilia regiments, but it still took several hours for his men to cross the town's lone bridge. Once his forces were across and out on open ground again, however, their paced quickened considerably. As General Primus predicted, it took the better part of two days for the Flavians to make the journey to Bedriacum. The city still bore the ignoble distinction of being the last viable stronghold for Emperor Otho. For the soldiers of Legio XIII, their return felt like a rather surreal homecoming.

"That last time I was here, my own soldiers wished to hang me as a traitor," Aquila grumbled. "They might have done so, had General Celsus not intervened."

The legate was filled with many bitter and resentful feelings regarding the previous war. Otho had been the lawful Emperor of Rome and the Vitellians, who dared to now call the Flavians traitors, had committed mass treason.

While General Primus laughed off Aquila's suggestion that, if unleashed, his legion would destroy Cremona, the legate knew full well the simmering wrath of his soldiers. In fact, all of them hoped the people of Cremona and their garrison would be stupid enough to defy them. One way or another, they would have their revenge.



A deep sense of gloom hung over the Vitellian Army since word spread regarding their commanding general's betrayal. And no sooner had they found the Flavians, they were ordered to retreat with scarcely a blow struck. Now they were taking the excruciatingly long route to Cremona, all the while looking over their shoulders lest the Flavians catch them spread out in what had become a vast and disorganized column, stretching for several miles along the Via Aemilia. It was a tribute to their discipline and tenacity, though, that the entire army had not simply crumbled. Casualties, discharges, and reassignments to the Praetorian Guard may have depleted their numbers, but they had lost none of their fearsome resolve. After all, they were still the Army of the Rhine. Despite the repeated blows to their morale, they moved with a purpose, achieving an astounding sixty miles the first two days.

All were aware of the two legions waiting at Cremona. Should they be overrun before the Vitellian forces arrived, it would spell disaster. Conversely, should they succeed in outracing the Flavians, they would add eight to ten thousand legionaries to their ranks, along with several hundred

cavalry.

As he led his regiment in the vanguard, half a day's journey ahead of the main army, Tribune Lucius Artorius was particularly vexed by Caecina's betrayal. He had been one of the two most responsible for getting Vitellius onto the imperial throne in the first place. How could he so callously abandon his oath while his soldiers remained loyal? Regardless of the circumstances surrounding Caecina's treachery, all that mattered now was getting their troops to Cremona. At Centurion Liberius' suggestion, Lucius rode back to speak with General Fabius, the de facto leader of their division.

"Sir, the enemy has no troops south of the River Padus," Lucius observed. "I recommend taking my regiment ahead to Cremona. We need to inform the garrison as soon as possible that they have reinforcements coming. If the Flavians reach the city before us, they could simply cow them into surrendering, should they think we've abandoned them."

"Yes, well, we cannot allow that," Fabius said, with a nervous nod. The legate was still struggling with the concept of commanding such a vast force, and he hoped General Valens would rush to Cremona to assume command.

Upon returning to his regiment later that afternoon, Lucius arrayed his companies into two marching columns and began to make haste towards Cremona. Halfway between the cities of Parma and Placentia, the tribune's spirits soared. He saw the first welcome sight in many days. There was no mistaking the gleam off helmets and armor, yet the tribune knew it was impossible for the Flavians to have gotten around and in front of them.

"It would seem General Valens is joining us after all," Centurion Liberius, said with a relieved smile.

"Hard to tell just how many men he's brought with him," Lucius remarked. "But I would say at least two legions."

It was, in fact, a single legion, the Fourth Macedonia, along with vexilation cohorts from seven other Vitellian Legions. The rear guard of the column had turned about to face the unknown force coming up behind them. They quickly broke into cheers once they saw the standard of the Siliana Regiment of Horse.

"By Mars and Victoria, you are a welcome sight!" their chief tribune announced, as he rode out to meet Lucius and Liberius. He was accompanied by a number of staff officers. "We were dispatched immediately, once we heard about General Caecina's betrayal. A pity that my own legate should

prove to be a traitor."

"Is General Valens not with you?" Lucius asked.

"Unfortunately, no," the chief tribune replied. "A damned stomach illness has overtaken him. He made it as far as Florentia, but he can't stop shitting and vomiting long enough to mount his horse. About half of the remaining division is there. The rest are holding in reserve at Narnia, along with most of the Praetorian Guard."

"Did he leave instructions as to who he's leaving in command?" Liberius asked.

The chief tribune shook his head. "No."

"General Valens hopes to be well enough to ride within a few days," a staff tribune spoke up.

"The trouble is, we will most certainly have a fight on our hands before then," Lucius remarked. "The Flavians are headed for Cremona. If they get there before us, all of Italia north of the Padus will be lost, and we'll be cut off from any reinforcements from Germania or Britannia."

"That explains why you've come this far so quickly," the chief tribune noted. "How far back is the rest of your column?"

"About half a day," Lucius replied. "General Fabius sent us ahead to inform the Cremona garrison and reinforce them as needed."

"Sir, we should send our legionary cavalry with them," a centurion said to the chief tribune, who nodded in reply.

Lucius did not know the details of the dispatch Fabius had sent to Valens, though it now appeared to have been rather vague, as had the commanding general's orders to the reinforcements he sent on ahead. It seemed that all the chief tribune knew was Caecina had defected, and that a Flavian division had reached Patavium. That enemy forces were now rushing to take Cremona was unnerving, and made their current mission all the more urgent.

"Our original intent was to take the road to Placentia before heading to Cremona," the chief tribune said. He looked to his master centurion, who appeared to be acting as both his second-in-command and his senior advisor. "We should break off and head due north, cross-country."

"Sir, if you take this road as far as Ad Fonteclos the ground is a lot flatter," Centurion Liberius spoke up. "You'll also avoid any river crossings that way. It's not as quick as marching along the roads; however, the distance of your journey will be halved." As no one in the Rhine Army was familiar with the terrain, it was good to know they had some soldiers who knew the

region.

“Yes, thank you, centurion,” the chief tribune replied. He extended his hand to Lucius. “We’ll see you in Cremona. Let the garrison know we’ll be there by tomorrow evening, should Fortuna favor us.”



It was now the afternoon of 23 October, and the streets of Bedriacum were lined with thousands of cheering citizens when the Flavian Army crossed over its bridges. Unlike the Cremonans to the west, the populace here hated Vitellius and were hopeful Vespasian’s army could succeed where Otho’s had failed.

“We need to reestablish the stronghold here,” Primus informed his senior officers. He surveyed the ruins of the fortifications Otho’s army had erected. “Though I’d like to end this war quickly, we must prepare ourselves for a protracted campaign. Bedriacum is a natural supply base, and I want it built up into a fortress.”

“What of Cremona?” Legate Lupus asked.

“We’ll send a massed mounted reconnaissance forward,” the commander-in-chief replied. “As quickly as we managed to reach Bedriacum, it will take the Vitellians at least a few more days to arrive at Cremona.”

“And if the garrison refuses to surrender?” Aquila asked. “They have two legions posted there with a sizeable force of cavalry.”

“The only way across the River Padus is a bridge just southwest of the city,” Primus stated. “It is wide and made of stone. Tearing it down will not be practicable. We can, however, blockade it with siege engines and archers, thereby hindering any reinforcements from the south. The closest crossing to there is at Placentia.”

“Even then, they’ll have to cross the River Addua,” Arrius noted. “The total journey is at least eighty miles.”

“By which time we will have smashed the walls of Cremona into dust,” Primus said grimly. Unlike Aquila, he was reluctant to raze any Roman cities no matter how defiant.

“I can leave two regiments behind to patrol the outlying regions,” Arrius said. “That will still give us four thousand troopers to conduct your reconnoiter tomorrow.”

“The sight of so many horsemen should be enough to compel the garrison

to capitulate," the commander-in-chief reasoned. "They will know our legions are not far behind. And with their own reinforcements nowhere in sight, they will have little choice. The men of the Italica and Predator Legions are exceptionally brave, but they are not stupid. They will hand Cremona over to us once they know their cause is unwinnable."

Primus breathed a sigh of relief as he surveyed the legions making camp and beginning the work of rebuilding all of the fortifications around Bedriacum. Little did he know, he had unwittingly committed a grave strategic error, underestimating the pace of the Vitellian Army's march. Had he sent a section of scouts south to Brixellum, the deposed Emperor Otho's final resting place, he would have known the Vitellians had passed through two days prior. While the Flavians were brimming with confidence that they would soon take Cremona with ease, Legio IV, Macedonia had arrived and was securing the bridge to the southwest. By the following day, the rest of Caecina's former division would arrive from Hostilia. Antonius Primus would soon be facing the same Vitellian Army he had stared down scarcely a week prior. Only now, they were reinforced by three legions with numerous additional attached cohorts of both infantry and cavalry. Should Valens bring the rest of his division up from Narnia, the Flavians would find themselves terribly outnumbered.

On the following morning, 24 October, Primus ordered his legions to continue fortifying the camp around Bedriacum. Cremona was now just twenty miles away. With the main Vitellian Army having to conduct a much longer road march, the Flavian commanding general was convinced he had two days to spare. He would rest his infantry this day while waiting for the arrival of Seventh Claudia. Outside the western gate of the camp, the vast array of imperial horsemen stood by their mounts. While they conducted their massed reconnaissance, Primus sent his auxilia infantry cohorts out foraging for food and building materials.

"General, sir," Arrius said, as he saluted his commander-in-chief.

"We'll send your advance guard forward," Primus replied, returning the salute. "The rest will remain in echelon formations on either side of the road, keeping the foraging infantry cohorts in ready reserve."

"We'll bloody up any Vitellians who are foolish enough to scrap with us," the cavalry commander proclaimed.

It was just after breakfast when General Primus departed the camp at

Bedriacum. His auxilia infantry cohorts were relatively fresh, and he allowed them to forage afield while he led his cavalry in a massed reconnaissance. His lead scouts were sent even further ahead, with Commander Arrius leading them personally.

The only sounds heard as the large force departed were the calling of birds and the River Ollius to the north. The river wound northwest, and after the first few miles it could no longer be heard. The Via Postumia was a wide and well-traveled road, and the large reconnaissance force moved at a rapid pace. As the miles went by, there was no sign of the Vitellians, though Primus did halt his men for a brief moment when they reached the sight of that terrible battle between Otho and Vitellius.

"And along this road, Otho's hopes were dashed," Primus mused.

He looked around for any sign of the bodies left to rot where they fell. He knew the previous struggle was being called *The Battle of Bedriacum*, even though most of the fighting had taken place much closer to Cremona. After six months, the flesh of the dead had mostly been devoured by wild beasts, or rotted away. Piles of bones would litter the area for many years to come.

"How many of us will soon join them?" he quietly asked himself.



Tribune Lucius Artorius and his regiment of Siliana Horse had arrived at Cremona the previous evening, warning the garrison of the pending Flavian attack. He reassured the legates that the main Vitellian force was but a day's march behind him.

"They covered an impressive thirty miles yesterday," he stated. "I suspect they will arrive here by midafternoon."

"And what of my cousin?" Legate Manlius Valens of First Italica asked. "Is he assuming command now that Caecina has betrayed us?"

"He promises he will soon," Lucius replied. "He's already sent Fourth Macedonia forward. They should also arrive by the morrow. However, the good general himself has been stricken by a stomach illness and will need a few days to recover."

"Well, he's certainly not as young as he once was," Manlius, who was a good fifteen years younger than Valens, replied.

Rumors had reached Cremona of the Flavian invasion, and the legates were relieved to know the emperor was sending his best troops to deal with

the rebellion. Their forces began to arrive in the early afternoon, along with Valens' advance cohorts. Lucius was given the day to rest his men and their tired horses. This would be cut short, however, with the sighting of Primus' cavalry scouts.

"Enemy horses have been spotted, sir!" a trooper frantically reported. "General Manlius has ordered all cavalry to make ready for battle. First Italica and Twenty-First Rapax Legions are preparing to advance on them."

Even as the rest of the army crossed over the Padus and into Cremona, to the shouts and cheers of their mates, there would be no rest or reprieve for either side this day.

"And so it begins," Lucius said grimly.

Chapter XIII: The Second Battle of Bedriacum

Four Miles east of Cremona
24 October 69 A.D.



Legionaries unleashing their javelin volleys
(Photo © Cezary Wyszynski)

Antonius Primus could not fully explain his trepidations, but his instincts told him he had committed a rather grievous mistake by not pressing on immediately for Cremona. This was soon confirmed, as his previously serene calm was shattered by the hurried approach of his forward scouts. They were sprinting their horses and in a panic.

"The Vitellians approach!" one of them shouted. "They have sortied a large contingent of cavalry, and it looks like they are deploying both legions from Cremona."

"So much for taking the city without bloodshed," the commanding general acknowledged glumly. He turned to one of his aids. "Return to Bedriacum at once. All legions are ordered to advance with all possible speed."

"In the meantime, I'll sort out the impudent bastards from Cremona," Arrius said.

Before Primus could stop him, the cavalry commander shouted a series of

orders. Soon, almost a quarter of their entire contingent was racing after him.

"Shall we sound the general advance, sir?" a nearby centurion asked.

"No, damn it!" Primus snapped. He could not believe that Arrius was so recklessly leading a thousand cavalry in a head-long charge against an unknown enemy force. "Recall all auxilia infantry cohorts and form a defensive line here. We will not advance another step until the legions arrive. In the meantime, I want a thorough reconnaissance of our flanks, as well as back up the road. We are out in the open here, and we need to find more suitable ground."

General Primus' nerves were wracked. Now, there was no mistaking he had committed a series of errors. The first was underestimating the strength and tenacity of their adversaries. The Italica and Predator Legions were neither beaten nor demoralized, but were clamoring for a fight. His second and most serious mistake was deploying so far forward without his legions. He thought he was being prudent by having them fortify Bedriacum into a viable stronghold. Instead, it appeared he had blundered into a pair of legions supported by an unknown number of cavalry regiments.

"Perhaps it is all for the best, seeing as how they wish to fight me in the open," he reasoned quietly to himself.

They were now roughly fifteen miles from Bedriacum. It would be four or five hours before the legions arrived. Primus had yet to learn of the arrival of the main Vitellian division. There would soon be more than just two legions from Cremona advancing on him.



Though they had arrived at Cremona in astounding time, the Vitellian's main army was now slow to advance, despite the sighting of a sizeable Flavian force. With Valens still absent, the senior officers were arguing amongst each other over who should assume overall command. While Legate Fabius did not want it, most of the division from Hostilia was arguing in his favor. It was only when Manlius Valens rode into encampment that the other legates and senior commanders realized how serious the situation had become.

"While you lot have thirty thousand men sitting on their asses, my two legions from Cremona are engaging the enemy!" he snapped. "An entire corps of enemy horsemen are moving towards the city, so you can bet their

legions are not far behind."

"Our army is still mostly on the far side of the bridge," Fabius noted. "It will take some time to get them across, several hours at least."

"Then you'd best hurry them along," Manlius said impatiently. "Your men did not march a hundred miles in three days, just so Cremona could fall while their legates squabbled like a bunch of fucking Sicilian whores!"

Without saying a word, Master Centurion Aetius left the arguing legates and quickly made his way back across the bridge. With a few shouted orders, the various legions and attached cohorts began kitting up and preparing for battle.



The few wisps of clouds and only a very slight breeze meant it was going to be a hot day for the legions entrenching and fortifying near Bedriacum. During the autumn, the days were pleasant. The nights were brisk and cool, though the last week had been unseasonably warm. The sounds of axes echoed as legionaries chopped down trees, while hammers pounded nails into the slowly erecting barricades.

As they were only an attachment, and not part of any legion, the three cohorts from the Judean Army were given some of the less agreeable duties, such as digging the latrine trenches and hauling stones and fallen timber to build the ramparts. The Fifth Cohort of Legio X had been given the task of harvesting timber from a large forest south of the road outside the city gates. They worked at an easy pace. General Primus wished to give his soldiers at least some measure of rest over the next couple of days.

"Rider approaching the camp, sir," a legionary said to Centurion Nicanor.

"He's in a hurry," Nicanor replied. "Something's happened with General Primus. Gaius, have the men form up but stand easy. It might be nothing, but if Primus is in contact, he may well have sent back for legionary support."

Gaius set about finding the decani while Nicanor located their cohort commander, Centurion Galeo, who had also seen the rider.

"That's one of our troopers," the pilus prior noted. "He wouldn't have been in such a rush if he were carrying a routine message."

"My lads are standing down, sir," Nicanor said. "Shall we return to the camp?"

"Yes," Galeo replied. "I want the entire cohort to fall in on their

equipment and start arming themselves. I'm going to go find someone who knows what the fuck is happening."

As he mounted his horse, the echo of cornicens sounding the call to arms rang out from the camp.

"There's our answer," Galeo sighed.



Approximately two miles from where Arrius had left Primus and the rest of his corps, he spotted the eagles of the First Italica and Twenty-First Rapax Legions. They were in march columns, their standard bearers at the head with the legates and staff tribunes. The Flavian Cavalry Commander grinned sinisterly. He saw an opportunity to wreak havoc upon their foes. However, he had been in such a rush to attack the enemy and seize the initiative that he failed to allow time for his scattered troopers to consolidate.

"With me!" he shouted over his shoulder, raising his spatha high.

His intent was to smash into the legions before they could reform from column into battle lines. His troopers spurred their mounts into a fast gallop, lances lowered, while shouting their battle cries. Had they been in close formation, ideally a wedge, perhaps they could have overwhelmed the flank of the right enemy legion, which happened to be Twenty-First Rapax. By the time the first wave crashed into the infantry ranks, however, legionaries were closing their files and bringing their javelins to bear. It was a frantic clash, as horsemen attempted to bring their long spears down upon the exposed necks and faces of their adversaries. And while a number where cut down this way, with others trampled by the rampaging horses, a salvo of javelins ripped into the Flavian Cavalry bringing down men and horses alike. With speed and precision, the men of Legio XXI began reforming into battle lines, while those who'd been engaged directly with the Flavian horse drew their gladii and battled with them at close quarters. The horsemen who had so brazenly smashed into the Predator Legion were now attempting to withdraw from the wall of shields and flashing blades.

"Sir, enemy horse on our right!" a panicked trooper shouted to Arrius.

While his contingent withdrew from the wall of legionaries, they completely lost their nerve as several hundred Vitellian horsemen bore down on them. Meantime, both legions were rapidly forming their battle lines. The Flavian horsemen had lost all initiative as spears from the Vitellian cavalry

clashed against shields, men crying out as the long blades punctured their light mail armor. The charge of the Vitellian regiments broke up what remained of Arrius' cavalry. Their courage failed them as they turned about, fleeing in terror.

Leading the Vitellian attack was Lucius Artorius' regiment of Siliana cavalry, with the squadrons from the Cremona region on either flank. Their well-disciplined assault had shattered the Flavian advance guard, who were now in a fight for their lives. Lucius engaged with one enemy trooper, keeping close, so the man could not effectively use his long spear. The tribune swung his spatha in a hard slash, embedding it deep into his adversary's brow. Lucius thought the man's helmet had absorbed the blow, but the trooper started to scream, dropping both lance and shield. His eyes were crossed, his tongue protruding from his gaping mouth. Lucius ripped his weapon free. The enemy soldier fell from his horse, blood streaming into his face, as he screamed in horrific agony.

"Reform!" he heard Centurion Liberius shout to their centurions. He then rode over to his commander, who was staring at the stricken enemy trooper. His body convulsed as death took hold.

"First time you've killed a man," the centurion observed. Lucius could only nod. "Come on, sir, there is nothing you can do for him."

Lucius was breathing deeply, his face pale as he returned to his regiment. His sword arm hung down by his side, a thin streak of blood lining the edge of the blade. He exhaled audibly and composed himself. They had certainly gotten the better of their brief clash with the Flavian horsemen, but they had suffered losses of their own. Centurions and their subordinate decurions had done an outstanding job of maintaining order and preventing their troopers from haphazardly chasing after the fleeing Flavians. The tribune took a deep breath through his nose in grim determination. He knew this day would involve hard fighting for his men, and he was filled with immense pride at being able to lead them.

"Have our wounded evacuated to the fort," he ordered. "I assume that is where the Twenty-First is sending their casualties. Form into a screen line on the right flank, skirmishing formation. I will ride back to General Manlius and see if he's ordering a general advance."

Lucius directed one of the supporting regiments to cover the extreme left flank, while the other was to hold in reserve behind the two legions. He

looked back towards Cremona. There were no advancing reinforcements visible.

“Please don’t let petty political bickering lose this coming battle for us,” he muttered, as he spurred his horse into a gallop.



Antonius Primus had been extremely irritated when Arrius led a thousand of his horsemen in a disorganized assault. Now he was furious as he watched the once brazen regiments of cavalry fleeing from the field. Long since breaking contact with the enemy, they were still struck by terror. Even Arrius had lost control of them. They refused to heed his orders to reform with the rest of the corps.

“That does it,” Primus snarled, as he saw a standard bearer riding towards him at breakneck speed. The commanding general rode his horse into the man’s path, causing his mount to rear up as it came to a jarring halt. “Get back in formation, you fucking cowards!”

When the man refused to listen and tried to ride around him, the general drew his spatha. Grabbing the standard, he plunged his weapon into the deserter’s throat. As gouts of blood gushed onto his blade, he yanked the standard away, shoving the dying man from his mount. Holding the reins of his horse in his blood soaked hand, the commanding general held the standard high and rode along the ranks of panicked horsemen.

“Stand, soldiers of Rome!” he shouted. “Do not stain your names with such wretched faintheartedness. Rally to me!”

Whether by his words, the sight of him clutching a regimental standard, or perhaps because his spatha was dripping with the dark crimson from a deserter, the distraught horsemen heeded his call and began to reform.

“Thank the gods,” Arrius said, riding over to him. His face dripping with sweat, though breaking into a relieved grin.

Primus threw the standard at him. “Pull another reckless move like that, and it will be your blood that stains my weapon.” Primus was rightfully enraged that Arrius behaved so erratically, losing a number of their cavalrymen in the process. But, he was even angrier with himself.

“Sir, scouts report an even larger Vitellian Army spotted marching from Cremona,” a mounted centurion said.

“Impossible,” Arrius breathed.

“No,” Primus said, shaking his head. “Inconceivable, perhaps, but certainly not impossible.” He looked at Arrius. “We’ve grossly underestimated our adversaries this day. I hope it does not cost us the war.”

It was implausible that the Vitellian Army could have marched a hundred miles in such short time. Primus could only hope his legions arrived soon, before the enemy could mass their numbers against him. He still had most of his four thousand cavalry remaining, as well as another three thousand auxilia infantry. However, if Caecina had the bulk of five legions plus thousands of attached troops, Primus’ pitiful force would not last ten minutes.

“Sir, there’s a spot of ground we can hold from,” a rider said. “We’ll have to withdraw about a mile back up the road, but there is a hilltop with trenches that will serve as a natural barrier.”

“Very good,” the commander-in-chief replied, finding his nerve once more. “All units are to withdraw one mile back. I will ride ahead and scout the ground myself. Arrius, you will organize the move. And keep an eye on the Vitellians. I want to know when they are on the move and how many there are.”

“Yes, sir.”

Commander Arrius regained control of his composure, as well as his errant horsemen. He took just two companies of cavalry with him. Primus ordered the remainder of his forces to withdraw to better ground. A mile up the road, he spotted the ground his trooper informed him about. Just a few dozen meters south of the Via Postumia was a small hilltop. No more than fifty feet high, it still provided an excellent position from which to anchor his army. Off the southernmost spur was a deep trench filled with rainwater, as well as numerous branches and other natural entanglements.

“Auxilia infantry will form up in the center,” he ordered his regimental commanders. “Once the legions arrive, your cohorts will pull back and form a reserve. I want two wings of cavalry, one anchoring each flank.”

He gazed up at the sky. Late afternoon was giving way to early evening, and the sun had begun its slow descent into the west. It was still rather hot and uncomfortable, and Primus was covered in sweat. He removed his helmet and wiped a rag over his brow before looking back down the vacant road. Three hours had passed since he sent his rider to Bedriacum. Even if the legions left their packs and equipment behind, carrying only weapons, water, and a minimal amount of rations, their armor and shields alone would slow their advance considerably. He was glad it was not midsummer. The days

were warm enough as it was. He not only needed his legionaries to expedite their march, but to have sufficient energy left to fight a battle at the end of it.

As his auxilia cohorts took up their positions, the infantry spread in a long, thin line, Primus suddenly felt very much alone. While he was anxious for the arrival of his legions, he was perplexed by the absence of the Vitellians. With the two legions from Cremona having already engaged his errant cavalrymen and the enemy's main body already arrived unexpectedly at the city, he anticipated seeing their advancing standards at any moment. Strangely enough, the Vitellians had yet to press their advantage. Primus was unaware that Caecina was now in a Cremona prison, with Valens still indisposed; leaving his adversaries devoid of a commanding general. Had he known, he could have used his cavalry to conduct a series of feints to confuse and fluster the Vitellians, rather than waiting to engage in a bloody grind.

"Mercury, grant speed to my legions," he uttered quietly.



Upon receiving their orders from General Primus, the Flavian Legions departed Bedriacum and formed into a pair of columns consisting of two legions apiece. The remaining auxilia infantry and the three cohorts from Judea marched at the very back. The terrain was open and grassy, allowing the columns to march sixteen to twenty men abreast. Each stretched well over half a mile from beginning to end. Optio Gaius Artorius found himself at the very back of it all.

"At least the Vitellians aren't hoofing it this time, eh, sir?" one of the legionaries to his front said.

"Fucking cowardly bastards likely got tired of running from us," one of his mates added.

While supremely confident in the fighting prowess of his men, Gaius was filled with a sense of cautious foreboding. He knew the Vitellians had added at least two legions to their ranks, and gods knew how many auxilia cavalry and infantry cohorts. There was also the matter of whether or not General Valens had dispatched forces from his own division in time to support the main Vitellian Army. Gaius continually glanced back over his shoulder. He knew somewhere back there was the Seventh Claudia Legion. Primus sent his messenger to find them and urge them to press on with all speed, hoping they were not too far behind to reach the field and swing the odds in favor of the

Flavians.

The legions continued to march, taking long, rapid strides. The miles passed rather quickly. All had wished for an overcast day, yet there was scarcely a wisp of cloud in the sky. The legionaries' armor and helmets added to the sun's radiant heat, and every last soldier was dripping with sweat. Understanding they needed their men fit to fight after such a long and rapid march, centurions allowed their soldiers to rest a few minutes every hour, giving them a chance to catch their breath and take in water.

The hours and miles passed, with the sun glowing red in the west, blinding the advancing legions. At the head of the column, General Aquila was met by a rider from Arrius' cavalry, who informed him that Primus had established their battle lines just four miles away.

"The Vitellians have not driven him back?" the legate asked, perplexed.

"No, sir. Their cavalry have engaged ours on the flanks but nothing decisive. From what we could see, their legions appear to be in a series of columns about a mile from our position. It's very strange, sir. They seem unorganized."

"What the hell is Caecina doing?" General Lupus from the Eighth Legion asked, as he joined the men. "With our advance cohorts hopelessly outnumbered, he should have attacked by now."

"I don't know," Aquila said, shaking his head. "When we battled with him a few months ago he was ever the aggressor, often recklessly so. Prudence and caution are not his watchwords."

"Do we have any idea as to their total strength?" Lupus asked the messenger.

"We counted five eagles, sir, and a lot of vexilation flags."

"Then even with our four legions, they still outnumber us rather handily," Lupus said, dismayed.

"Not necessarily," Aquila conjectured. "Vitellius foolishly allowed his legions to fall well below strength, and their ranks are severely depleted. And remember, we may have only four eagles with us now, but a fifth is coming."



As the sun was setting in front of them, it baffled Primus that the enemy had halted in their advance on his rather paltry force of horsemen and auxilia

infantry cohorts. The sounds of cornicens' horns announced the arrival of his legions, much to his relief. He was still flabbergasted, though, that the main Vitellian Army, which appeared to have been reinforced by an additional legion, had managed to make the long trek along the southern route so quickly. Both cavalry forces had bloodied each other, starting the opening phase of what would later be known as the *Second Battle of Bedriacum*. But now, the heart of the fighting would be done by the legions.

The Vitellians, lacking in senior leadership since the arrest of General Caecina, were still a fearsome enemy. They had almost the full strength of First and Twenty-First Legions from the Cremona Garrison. The main force of Legions V, Alaudae, and XXII, Primigenia were supported by numerous attached cohorts from seven different legions including First Germanica. General Valens was unable to ride to the front and had sent on ahead Caecina's own Legio IV, Macedonia. Opposing them, albeit rushing forward almost piecemeal, were Legions III Gallica, VII Gemina, VIII Augusta, and XIII Gemina.

As his forces deployed forward, Antonius Primus was assailed by doubts, cursing himself for his carelessness. Had he now committed the same folly as Otho Titianus? Would the Flavian Army face the same ignominious end the Othonians had? And on the same field, no less?

The sound of rapidly galloping hooves on the paving stones alerted him to a lone rider approaching from the east.

"General, sir." The man saluted. "Compliments of Seventh Claudia. They are just a few miles up the road and will be on the field within the next couple hours."

"Thank Victoria!" He took a deep breath and blew it out hard, attempting to calm his nerves. The timely arrival of an additional legion would negate any numerical advantage the Vitellians currently possessed.



Lacking any substantive orders, Tribune Lucius Artorius took the initiative and led his regiment in an armed reconnaissance of their extreme left. The Flavians appeared to have concentrated a large portion of their cavalry there.

"Wedge formation, on me!" the tribune shouted, spatha held high. He spurred his horse into a gallop, his men giving a loud battle cry as they

attacked what appeared to be no more than a pair of companies that had strayed from the enemy's main body.

The Flavian horsemen were briefly caught off guard, as Lucius led his regiment in a headlong charge into their ranks. It was a brief and extremely violent encounter. Spears clattered against shields, horses crashed into each other. Men and beast cried out as they hacked and stabbed away at each other. Lucius caught one enemy trooper with a vicious stab where the chest and shoulder joined together. His adversary's armor absorbed much of the blow, though the man shouted in pain as his lance fell from his twitching hand. He wheeled his horse about, catching the tribune with a blow from his shield before riding away. His weapon arm hung useless at his side.

"They have friends coming, sir," Centurion Liberius said, riding up next to his commander.

Lucius, momentarily dazed, shook his head as he tried to get his vision to clear. He then saw several hundred Flavian cavalrymen racing towards the fray. "Sound the recall!" he shouted to his cornicen.

As the loud blasts sounded from the horn, the troopers from the Siliana Regiment veered off in two directions, rapidly breaking contact with their adversaries. A couple of men were not quick enough to spur their horses into the gallop and were stabbed from behind by enemy lancers.

"Damn it," Lucius said, looking back.

A small group of his wounded cavalrymen were dragged away by Flavian soldiers.

"It was inevitable," Liberius remarked. "Don't worry, sir, as soon as we've won this battle we'll get our lads back."

Lucius had never intended for this to be a decisive engagement. Instead, he wished to harry the Flavians and prevent them from attempting to flank the Vitellian Army. He understood that every clash, no matter how brief, would likely result in casualties for both sides.

"What the *fuck* are our gods-damned legions doing?" the tribune snapped, nodding to their left where thousands of infantrymen stood in columns. "They could have smashed the Flavians while they were on the march. Instead they're just sitting on their asses, allowing the enemy to establish their battlefront. Reform the regiment. Counter any attacks their cavalry may send against us. Otherwise, hold this position."

Without waiting for confirmation, Lucius kicked his horse into a fast gallop and made his way to the rear of the massed column of Vitellian

legionaries. There he found a group of legates arguing amongst themselves.

"You only think you deserve command because Fabius Valens is your bloody cousin!" one of the generals stated.

"It's not that the commanding general is my cousin," Manlius retorted. "I have experience against this very army we now face. I *know* how to beat them."

"He makes a valid point," Claudius Zeno of Legio XXII concurred. "No one could have foreseen Caecina's treason nor Valens' poorly timed stomach illness."

Two of the other legates protested his logic as Lucius rode up and shook his head in dismay. "Beg your pardon, sirs," he spoke up loudly. "But if we don't get our legions into battle formation now, your arguments over succession of command will mean nothing. The Flavian legions have deployed not two miles from here. I have already clashed twice with their cavalry."

From their position, the bickering legates could not see the approaching enemy legions. Their anger at each other turned to alarm.

"Form the legions for battle, *now*," Manlius snarled at his fellow legates. "We can debate this later. For now, the First Italica will deploy on the right, all legions on our left. Move!"

There were no further arguments. The legates and their staff officers quickly rode back to their respective units.

General Manlius gave a nod of appreciation to Lucius. "Thank you, tribune," he said. "Your arrival could not have come at a better time."

"Just doing my duty, sir," Lucius replied. "The Flavians have concentrated the largest number of their cavalry on our left. There is a hilltop to our right front that appears to be where they are anchoring their lines."

"Very good," Manlius acknowledged. "We'll disperse most of our cavalry on the left accordingly. I want your regiment to pull back into a reserve. You will be my eyes and ears on the right. If you see a chance to exploit a weakness, take it, but do not be careless with your lives."

"Sir!" Lucius gave a sharp salute and rode back to find Centurion Liberius and the rest of his regiment. In his peripheral vision, he saw thousands of legionaries deploying from column into battle ranks. Despite their lost opportunities and petty squabbles among the senior officers, Lucius returned to his men feeling supremely confident that the battle would be won.



There was a long moment of rapt anticipation as the two armies made ready to do battle. The evening sun shone in the faces of the Flavian legions and they prayed for nightfall. Inexplicably, the Vitellians did not take advantage of his.

"What in Hades are they waiting for?" Primus asked Master Centurion Vitruvius.

"Very strange, sir," Vitruvius replied. "It's as if they are allowing us to deploy our legions before they attack."

"That or they've finally un-fucked themselves, once they saw our forces ready for them." Primus then nodded towards their immediate front, where a single legion advanced on them. "Is that legion intent fighting its own battle?"

"Hard to tell from here, but I think that's First Italica," the master centurion observed, his eyes squinting in the last bright light of the falling sun. He shook his head as he watched the massed columns of Vitellian legionaries deploying for battle.

"Something troubling you?" Primus asked, noting Vitruvius' pained expression. "Not scared of our enemy, I hope."

"It's not that. Something's been bothering me, sir. Somewhere in that mass of men and metal are cohorts from the Twentieth Valeria Victrix…my father's legion. He died forty years ago, and his mates are either old men or dead. Still, I wonder what he would say if he knew his son drew his blade against his legion."

"I think he would say that he expects you to do your duty…both you and them," Primus surmised. "You should be glad you're not facing your father. Some lads are not so fortunate."

"It's true," Vitruvius said, with a sad smile. "Three quarters of all imperial legions have at least one vexilation cohort on this field today. Though both sides will pray to Fortuna, Victoria, Mars, and Bellona, I suspect the gods will defer from granting favor to either us or the Vitellians. We can only do our duty."

"And I will need you on the ground," Primus said, looking towards the center of the Seventh Gemina where the First Cohort stood ready. "This will be the first action for most of our lads, and they need to know we stand ready to die with them."

“As long as I stand so will they,” the master centurion asserted, while dismounting his horse. “And should we fall, then they will fight ever harder to avenge us.”

Vitruvius retrieved his shield and drew his gladius. The sun had set behind the mountains, casting its red glow upon the battlefield. Cohorts from both sides were rushing towards their places on the lines, which began at the base of the hill south of the road, extending more than a mile north. Two Vitellian Legions, First Italica and Fourth Macedonia, advanced on Primus’ own Seventh and Thirteenth Gemina Legions. They would begin the battle, with the remaining legions and auxilia regiments soon joining the fray.

“Javelins ready!” The order was shouted by centurions from each army, as the Vitellians continued their advance. The rhythmic cadence of their footsteps echoed along the lines. As the pilum was one of the few weapons that could puncture segmentata plate, while rendering shields useless, Primus had devised a strategy for the Seventh Gemina, which he hoped would be employed by his other legions.

Instead of increasing their intervals to allow room to throw the long javelins, the men of Seventh Gemina maintained close order, even as the Italica Legion advanced to within fifty meters of their lines.

“Steady, lads,” Master Centurion Vitruvius said, as he shifted his weight back and forth on his feet.

“Front rank…throw!” the enemy centurions shouted. The Italica front rank sprinted another twenty meters before unleashing a storm of heavy pila, yet the Gemina legionaries still held theirs.

“Testudo!” Vitruvius and the other cohort commanders called out.

Salvos of the heavy javelins rained down upon them, burrowing deep into the wall of shields that encompassed each mass of legionaries. Subsequent volleys followed. The long shafts smashed through shields. Hapless legionaries cried out as they were stabbed in the face, arms, and other exposed areas.

A long blast was sounded from the cornicen ordering the front cohorts to withdraw. The Gemina legionaries rose up with scores of men either killed or injured from the storm of enemy missiles. Despite the savaging they’d taken within the initial seconds of their very first engagement, the men kept their composure. Primus had told his soldiers repeatedly that they would suffer casualties in the initial pila salvo, and that all they could do was minimize the losses. Wounded men tried to drag themselves away. Their rattled, yet

unscathed companions sprinted away, dragging their shields, with numerous pila hanging off them.

The Vitellians, thinking the inexperienced Legio VII had already broken, drew their gladii with a shout and charged. A subsequent long note from the cornicen ordered the reserve cohorts from Seventh Gemina to attack. These men unleashed their own volleys as their companions raced between the files of their cohorts, where they reformed into a new reserve force. The Italica legionaries dropped behind their shields as the storm of javelins fell on them. By opening their ranks to allow room to throw, they were unable to form overhead cover and were more greatly exposed to the return volley from the Flavians. A significant number of legionaries in the first two ranks were cut down, their shrieks of pain the first of many that would echo through the long night to come.

"Gladius…draw!"

The men of Seventh Gemina felt their blood boil as they gave a loud shout of rage. They had bloodied their foes and now looked to press the advantage. However, the Italica legionaries were all highly experienced veterans, who had fought against Otho's legions a few months prior. They had known to expect a return volley of javelins, even though they did not anticipate the method with which Primus' soldiers would unleash. They quickly executed a series of passages-of-lines, relieving their savaged front ranks. Within moments the shield walls of both legions came together in a series of loud clashes, grunts, battle cries, profane shouts, and the smashing of shield, blade, and armor.

"Alright lads!" Master Centurion Vitruvius shouted, at the back of the formation. He set his shield down. Three pila protruded from the splintered wood. He had a deep gash running along his left arm that he attempted to ignore. *"Cut these damned things from your shields, and perhaps we can send a few back to those bastards!"*

"Think of it as an early Saturnalia present!" another centurion stated, bringing a series of laughs and biting rebukes towards their enemies.

With its square shaped head, the only way to extract a pilum from a shield was to cut it out. This left gaping holes and gashes in their shields, yet many of the men viewed these as a sign of honor. They had survived their first bloody clash with the enemy and were still standing.

General Primus rode along the length of the Seventh Gemina, whose

frontage extended almost fifteen hundred feet from end to end. Whistle blows and audible commands ordered individual centuries to execute their passage-of-lines. Each side attempted to keep fresh soldiers in the fight, and the initial flurry of the first few minutes soon gave way to a grinding slog. Soldiers punched away with their shields, seeking openings to strike with their gladii.

The Vitellians of First Italica had a number of advantages, foremost being their superior training and experience. They were also, nearly to a man, wearing segmented plate armor. Only a third of the Seventh Gemina could say the same. The rest wore the lighter, yet less protective hamata chain mail, which a gladius could readily puncture if thrust hard enough. Despite these glaring disadvantages, the Flavians' newest imperial soldiers were earning right to be called *legionaries.* They stalwartly refused to budge against the onslaught from First Italica.

"Ride to each of our legions on the right," Primus ordered three of his staff tribunes. "I need to know their status and what they're up against. Ride back to me every half hour or whenever there's a change in the tactical situation. If our lines break, I need to know about it. If *their* lines collapse, I want our reserve auxilia cohorts to exploit the gap."

"Sir, what about our left?" one of the men asked, pointing towards the hill. "If the Vitellians have a sizeable reserve, they could bring them around and behind us."

"I've got that sorted already," Primus replied. "Now move!"

The three tribunes saluted and rode away towards the long line of Flavian Legions. The sun set, but even with a bright full moon, there was no way for Primus to keep eyes on his entire battle front. The commander-in-chief therefore had to remain mobile. He stayed fairly close to Seventh Gemina, not just because it was his own legion, but because they were the least trained and experienced of the entire army. He knew that as long as they held, the Flavian legions would not waver.

As he trotted his horse up the road to where the vexilation cohort from Legio X advanced, General Antonius Primus was filled with a sense of calm acceptance. The months of political and strategic maneuver were over. As the battle raged in a cacophony of bloodlust and rage, Primus hoped the Seventh Claudia was not too far behind this approaching cohort. The Vitellians had a sizeable reserve, and if they suspected his left flank was weak and exposed, they could easily exploit it.



The Second Battle of Bedriacum

Chapter XIV: Night of the Kin Slayers



An Optio (second from the right) leading a legionary assault
(Photo © Cezary Wyszynski)

The sun had set behind the hills to the west by the time the Fifth Cohort of Legio X linked up with General Primus and the rest of the army. The faint red glow that still lingered cast an otherworldly feel upon battlefield. Officers were shouting orders to their respective cohorts, as legionaries and auxilia infantrymen sprinted towards their positions on the line.

It baffled Gaius that either side would wish to fight a battle at night, yet that is exactly what was rapidly unfolding. The Fifth Cohort had been at the very back of the column and was only now arriving on the battlefield. It seemed both armies were rushing their forces piecemeal into the fray. To their direct front, at least two of their legions were engaged in battle. Others were positioning themselves on the far right. A long row of dead legionaries could already be seen behind the Seventh and Thirteenth Gemina Legions. Men in the reserve cohorts attempted to get as many of the far more numerous wounded to the medics who were establishing a hasty casualty collection point.

Centurion Pilus Prior Galeo marched at the head of his cohort in a column ten soldiers wide. It was the end of a long trek that had begun midafternoon.

And though he and his men were already worn from their journey, they knew their bloody toils had only just begun.

"Centurion!" The pilus prior looked to see it was General Primus himself who was calling to him.

"Sir!" he responded, coming to attention.

"You see that hill to the left of our front?" Primus asked.

"Yes, sir."

"I want you to move your asses over there and take the high ground. Seventh Gemina is on your right, with the rest of the army to the right of them. Seventh Claudia should be arriving on the field at any moment. Once they do, they will hold the ground to the left of the hilltop where a drainage ditch acts as a natural obstacle. But until they do, you are the flank. Do not let those bastards get behind us!"

"Very good, sir, we'll hold the high ground." Galeo turned to his men. *"Fifth Cohort, at the double-time…march!"*

Antonius Primus rode back to the rest of his army. He saw his own Seventh Gemina was still holding in place. Master Centurion Vitruvius walked the line, making certain every cohort refused to yield a shred of ground to their Vitellian foes. With Primus commanding the entire army, Vitruvius was tasked with coordinating Seventh Gemina. A series of barked orders and trumpet blasts led his reserve cohorts back into the brawl. Those who engaged the Vitellians in melee at the start pulled back and reformed once more into a reserve.

To the right of them, straddling the road itself, was General Aquila and Thirteenth Gemina. These men in particular were anxious to exact retribution against the Vitellians across the half mile of open ground. To the right of them, north of the road, were Legates Lupus and Aponius with the Eighth Augusta and Third Gallica Legions, respectively. Primus had placed a single regiment of cavalry to screen the right flank, supported by the two remaining cohorts from the Judean army. That his ready reserve consisted of just seven auxilia infantry cohorts made him uneasy.

Thus far his legions had held their own against the relentless Vitellian force. Barring any unforeseen changes to the enemy's tactics, it now came down to which side broke first. Primus knew the long day was turning into an endless night.



The Flavians still had no knowledge about the collapse in leadership within the senior ranks of the Vitellians. Had he been aware of their inability to coordinate en mass, Primus may very well have used his cavalry and reserve infantry to harry and confuse the enemy flanks.

But it was not just the Flavians who were blinded by the larger tactical situation. General Manlius, who had haphazardly assumed command, was constrained by having to lead First Italica. Had Caecina not turned traitor, there was a very real chance he would have noted Primus' weakness and sent most of his reserve cohorts, whose total strength equaled two legions, at the hill on the Flavian left. It was Tribune Lucius Artorius, whose regiment was scouting to the right of the Vitellian line, who noticed the end of the glinting wall of shields, just prior to the base of the hill.

He spurred his horse back to where General Manlius was overseeing the emplacement of onagers and ballistae. A brief lull had come over the battle, as First Italica had withdrawn a quarter mile back, along with the rest of the army.

"Those bastards have beaten back our initial assaults," the legate stated, his voice betraying both anger and reluctant respect for their foes. "It is time we let our artillery speak to them."

"Sir, I reconnoitered the hill on the far right," Lucius explained quickly. "From what we can see, the enemy have no soldiers up there. While you suppress the enemy, I can take the high ground and get behind the Seventh Legion."

"Good work," Manlius acknowledged. He then observed, "Those men are all amateurs. They may have stood their ground for now, but a few catapult stones will break their resolve. If you can get behind them, it will be a complete rout. Once you hold the hilltop, I'll send some of our reserve cohorts to reinforce you. We'll then finish off this pitiful band of turncoats that Vespasian has sent against us."

Lucius rushed back to his regiment, his rapid breathing matching that of his mount. Since their initial skirmish with the Flavian horse on the far left, his men had yet to engage the enemy again. All were anxious to get back into the fight.

"Any orders, sir?" Centurion Liberius asked. He, too, was ready to take the battle to the Flavians, though he was wise enough to know that any head-

on attacks would be suicidal. They had yet to see any Flavian Cavalry this far to the right, which he hoped was a weakness they could exploit.

"We're to assault that hill," Lucius replied, pointing with his spatha. "Once we capture the heights, General Manlius will send in a reserve force to help us turn the flank."

"Just let us at them, sir!" a trooper shouted, brandishing his spear.

"We'll teach the Flavians the bloody price for treason," a decurion added.

Lucius' heart was pounding in his chest. He looked to Centurion Liberius, who nodded in concurrence. Reassured that he was making the right decision, the tribune raised his sword high, turned his horse about, and kicked his mount into a gallop. His troopers shouted in excited fury as they joined their commander in the storming of the heights. All were confident they would catch the enemy off-guard and quickly bring about an end to the battle. With such a victory, the Flavian resolve to continue the war would crumble. Lucius secretly thought to himself how fitting that he was now earning the right to march in an imperial triumph, like his father and grandfather before him.



Though the air was cool on this night, the soldiers of the Fifth Cohort were sweating under their heavy armor as they began their rapid ascent up the hill. Centurion Galeo had ordered his centurions to form their own battle lines, and to act as independent entities rather than trying to keep the entire cohort in one massed formation on the broken ground. Just prior to reaching the base of the hill, the cohort seamlessly transitioned from a marching column into battle formation. The hill face was wide, so each century arrayed their men into four ranks, allowing for as much frontal coverage as possible.

"Watch your step!" Galeo shouted to his century as they stumbled over large rocks and deep gouges within the hill face.

Gaius, on the far left of his century, felt the stinging of sweat in his eyes and could hear the loud and rapid breathing of the legionaries on his right. To his immediate left, a few paces away, was the next century within the cohort. Centurions and options had their gladii drawn. The rest of their soldiers plodded up the hill with their javelins resting on their shoulders, ready to throw. Gaius could see clear sky and stars as they neared the top. His legs burned. The slope had been much steeper than he'd realized. A series of shouts to the left alerted him, as all hell suddenly broke loose.

“Enemy horse to our front!”

“Oh, fuck!” a legionary next to Gaius shouted.

“By Juno’s cunt, where did they come from?” another said, with panic in his voice.

“Get to the top!” Centurion Nicanor bellowed, from the right of the century’s line. Decani shouted subsequent orders for their men to hurry, lest Vitellian cavalry claim the high ground.

It was scarcely another twenty meters to the crest, yet it felt as if they could not reach it soon enough. Legs pumped as blood rushed through their veins, sweat dripping, breaths coming in rapid gasps. With each step they expected to see an unstoppable wave of Vitellian horsemen storming over the hill. Yet, all they could see was the starlit sky. It took just half a minute from the time of the initial alert until the entire cohort reached the top. With the open plain below giving a glimpse of the enemy army in the moonlight, they spotted an entire regiment of horsemen angling towards them to their left front. The Vitellian riders were doubtless as shocked as they were to see opposing forces reaching the top of the hill. With no other options, they kicked their mounts into a sprint, giving a loud battle cry as they charged.

“Set to repel cavalry!” Nicanor shouted, as his century crested the hill.

“First and second ranks, down! Third and fourth ranks, set!” Gaius ordered.

In a contest between infantry and cavalry, it all came down to who managed to seize the initiative first. With enough momentum, and by not allowing their adversaries time to react, a wall of horsemen could smash through even the battle lines of even the most battle-hardened legionaries. However, the Romans had developed a stratagem to counter this hundreds of years prior. Legionaries in the front rank were quickly collapsing their intervals, so they were practically shield-to-shield. They immediately dropped down to one knee, while planting the butt of their javelins in the ground, the weapons protruding towards their foes. All the while, they braced hard against their shields. The second rank remained standing but also collapsed their intervals. They balanced their shields at an angle, off those of the soldiers in the front rank. They kept their pila protruding forward, with both ranks creating a bristling wall of spears. The third and fourth ranks raised their javelins up to their shoulders, ready to throw.

Thankfully for Nicanor and Gaius, their century was towards the extreme right, among the last to be engaged by the rampaging horde of enemy

horsemen. Loud crashes were heard to their left as hundreds of cavalrymen crashed into the ranks of the centuries on flank. They and the century on their immediate left had been quick enough to form the repel cavalry formation. The leading elements, roughly one hundred horsemen, came at them. Horses reared up and shied away from the wall of spears, refusing to ride headlong to their deaths.

"Third rank…throw!" Nicanor cried.

A salvo of heavy pila slammed into both men and horse, the shrieks of the latter ripping through the very souls of all who heard them.

The weight of men and horses smashed against the braced shield walls, toppling a number of legionaries. The cavalrymen were being stabbed from beneath by the kneeling infantrymen. It was a chaotic struggle. With the Fifth Cohort's left in disarray, yet their right holding the line and inflicting a terrible toll, the Vitellian horsemen appeared to be in a state of confusion. They didn't know whether to withdraw or continue to press the attack.

"Look out, sir!" a legionary in the fourth rank shouted to Gaius.

He quickly shoved his optio aside with his shield before unleashing his pilum towards an enemy mounted officer riding straight towards him. The remainder of the fourth rank threw their pila into the now disordered mass of rampaging horses and helpless riders.

The man charging towards Gaius had taken the pilum in the lower left of his abdomen. He gave a loud cry, dropping his spatha as his horse continued to stumble forward. The optio sidestepped to the left, tilted his shield, and slammed the bottom edge into the rider's chest. The officer tumbled from his mount with a loud crash of armor. The entire action lasted but a few seconds. Only then, did Gaius notice the plumed helmet and single breastplate worn by an officer of the equites.

"Reform!"

There was no time for him to see who the fallen rider was. All was a hectic frenzy as the Vitellian cavalry retreated back down the hill. A line of enemy troopers quickly formed a wall of lances in front of their stricken officer. Four men dismounted and helped the badly injured man onto the back of a horse. One of them wrenched the javelin from his stomach, causing the man to cry out once more in pain.

Though a number of their elements succeeded in smashing through the cohort's battle ranks, their numbers were too few. With the centuries on the right holding their ground, all momentum was quickly lost. Perhaps two

minutes had passed since the first riders were spotted, and they were now falling back in shambles towards their own lines. Twenty-five horsemen lay dead or wounded. Their surviving officers had been wise enough to realize they could not win this struggle for the hilltop. The Flavians now held the high ground.



While the Vitellian cavalry and Flavian infantry were caught up in their frenzied death struggle, the soldiers of the Seventh Gemina Legion waited anxiously for the enemy to engage them. Centurions paced behind the ranks of their legionaries, all waiting with bated breath. There were a handful of dead Vitellian soldiers to their front; the wounded having been dragged behind the lines to be cared for along with their own. Were they fighting barbarians or a foreign adversary, their injured foes would likely have been killed or left to suffer in agony. Although this war had become a savage and hateful struggle, those who fell in battle were still brother Romans.

“Eyes front, damn you!” a centurion shouted to a group of legionaries, whose gazes were transfixed on the melee taking place atop the hill.

“Enemy horse were trying to flank us,” his optio said, walking over to him. “From the looks of it, some of our lads managed to steal the high ground and now have their cavalry on the run.”

“Very good,” the centurion nodded. He looked out across the open expanse. The brightness of the moon was deceiving. It was impossible to make out the definitive shapes of enemy soldiers. Perceived distances were also deceptive. The glow of torches from the enemy lines further disrupted their night vision.

“Think they’ll come at us again?” the optio asked quietly.

The centurion shook his head. “I don’t know. The damn wait is always the worst.”

In truth, both officers were filled with trepidation. They knew the Vitellian Army was comprised of highly experienced legionaries from the Rhine. Their own soldiers of the Seventh Gemina, aside from the centurions and principle officers, had all served less than a year in the ranks. Recruit training had been a very ad hoc affair, and most of their soldiers were equipped with second-hand armor and helmets. Still, they had acquitted themselves well thus far. They could only hope that the rest of the army had

fared as well as them.



Relieved he had sent the cohort from Legio X to secure the hilltop, General Primus was still coming to grips with the massive risk he had accepted by invading Italia and rushing to engage the Vitellians without waiting for Mucianus. He was beginning to wonder if his hurried attempts to follow up on his early success had been sound initiative or rash imprudence. His thoughts were interrupted by the sounding of trumpets to the rear of his army. Legio VII, Claudia, had arrived!

Messalla, the acting legate, rode up to the commander-in-chief and saluted. “Seventh Claudia, all present and ready for battle, general. I hope we are not too late.”

“Your timing is fortuitous,” Primus replied. He then pointed past the hilltop. “I need you to occupy the extreme left. There’s a ditch that will make for a viable obstacle to your front. The Vitellians just tried taking the hilltop with a force of cavalry. I suspect they will try and find another way around our flank.”

“Understood,” the legate replied. “Don’t worry, general, they won’t get past us.” He then called over his shoulder, *“Seventh Claudia, with me!”*

Primus watched as the tired soldiers, who had marched even further than his own, followed their acting-legate around the small hill. He knew the Vitellians had a sizeable reserve of legionary detachments. He rightly suspected that once they saw this fresh legion on the Flavian left, they would have no choice but to sortie a large force against them.

“We’ve just evened the odds,” Primus said under his breath. By engaging the Vitellians before the arrival of Seventh Claudia, he had gravely risked being overwhelmed by the enemy’s superior numbers. Now he had no idea who, if anyone, held the numerical advantage. Since there appeared to be a brief lull in the fighting, the commander-in-chief rode the length of his battle lines and did a quick assessment of his army’s morale and fighting strength. Given his terrain advantage, the Flavian general was determined to make this a defensive battle. This meant, however, that the next move was the Vitellians’ to make.



The pain in Lucius' side was terrible. The pilum had punctured through his armor and embedded itself deep in his lower left stomach. When his troopers carried him hurriedly from the field, they inadvertently tore the heavy weapon from his side, which ripped open the already terrible wound. His men laid him with his back against a large rock. The tribune felt terribly nauseous. He practically tore his helmet from his head and struggled to keep from fainting. Centurion Liberius leapt from his horse and knelt next to his commander, clasping his hand.

"Looks like I made the same damn mistake as your last commanding officer," Lucius said. With a series of deep breaths he fought the blinding pain.

"No, you did the right thing, sir," the centurion reassured him. "None of us could have known they had legionaries scaling that damned hill the same time as us."

"Feels like Neptune skewered me with his bloody trident," Lucius replied.

"If you're in pain, it means you're still alive," the centurion reasoned, trying to assure the badly stricken tribune. Lucius armor prevented him from seeing just how bad the wound was, though the length of tunic that protruded from his under his armor was soaked in blood.

"I'll be alright," Lucius said, hoping to convince both himself and the centurion. "Get me a rag or something so I don't bleed to death."

"Right away, sir," a nearby trooper said.

He quickly returned with a large strip of cloth, which the tribune folded into a square and thrust under his armor over the wound. He winced in renewed pain as he did so.

"We should get you out of that armor," Liberius said.

Lucius pushed him away. "Leave it. I need you to take command of the regiment and get our men back in the fight. Inform General Manlius of what happened."

"Yes, sir." Liberius let out a sigh of resignation, as he caught his first glimpse of the soldiers from Seventh Claudia. "It would seem the enemy has reinforced their left with an entire legion."

"Wouldn't have mattered if we did take that hill, then," Lucius reasoned. He took another long, slow breath before ordering his centurion to, "Go and win this battle."

Before departing, Liberius knelt and clasped Lucius' hand once more. "It has been an honor to serve with you, sir. Our time was brief, but you have earned your place in history as a Soldier of Rome."

Chapter XV: Engines of Hades' Fury

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Master Centurion Vitruvius walked up and down the line of soldiers in his lead cohorts. Twenty minutes had passed since the enemy withdrew, and the energy surge brought on by their first encounter with the Vitellian forces had subsided. All were now filled with trepidation brought on by the extended lull since the initial contact. Eyes strained in the moonlight to catch a glimpse of any potential enemy movements, yet nothing could be discerned with any certainty.

"Come on, attack, damn you," Vitruvius whispered. He understood his soldiers' anxiety. The fear of the unknown was often far greater than that of a visible threat. The sooner the Vitellians attacked, the sooner the issue could be decided.

The air was still. The only sounds heard were the muted conversations between legionaries. After a few tense moments, a muffled thump came from across the field. This was followed by an audible sound of something landing about twenty feet behind the rear rank of the frontline cohorts.

"What the hell was that?" a legionary asked, looking about frantically.

This was followed by the smashing sound of a large stone crashing into the propped up shield of a legionary. The soldier gave a bark of surprise as he was toppled over.

"What the fuck?" another voice yelled.

Rounded stones, weighing between ten and twenty pounds each, were landing in and around the assembled ranks of the Seventh Legion.

"Damn it all," the master centurion swore. "They've brought up siege engines. *Everyone down, now!"*

The order was quickly echoed by centurions and their subordinate officers. Legionaries were already dropping down to one knee, futilely using their shields as cover. The scutum was effective against swords, spears, and arrows, but did little against a heavy stone shot from an onager or siege ballista. Shields were splintered, soldiers screaming in pain as their limbs and bodies were shattered by the heavy stones. The one thing saving the legion

from an even greater savaging was that the darkness impeded the enemy crewmen's vision. They were having to blindly guess their ranges. Most shots either sailed over the formation or impacted in front of them, kicking up large clods of dirt and rock. Regardless, the psychological effects were devastating. Vitruvius feared his legion would not be able to stand against such an onslaught for very long.

For the Tenth Legion's detachment, the small hilltop protected them from the enemy siege engines. The entire battlefront was very large, extending at least a mile from the right of their position with the Seventh Claudia Legion now anchoring the left.

"The Vitellians think Seventh Gemina is our weak point," Centurion Galeo said, as he and his centurions and options surveyed the field below. "It's hard to say how many heavy weapons they have. However, I suspect they've concentrated all of them on this one spot."

"If Seventh Gemina breaks, then that punches a big fucking hole in the entire formation," Nicanor added.

"Enemy cohorts are moving against Seventh Claudia," another centurion noted. "Which means they cannot move to plug the breach should the lads in Seventh Gemina break."

"There's nothing for it, we have to silence those siege engines," Galeo stressed.

"We're one cohort, sir," a centurion said. "If we launch a frontal assault, they'll simply deploy their infantry forward and overwhelm us. There's likely an entire legion positioned behind them."

"I'll lead a raiding party, sir," Gaius quickly spoke up. "There's a large number of enemy shields lying about. Give me two men from each century, and we'll silence those weapons."

"Very good, optio," Galeo replied. "Nicanor, see to it. I'm going to find Gemina's master centurion and let him know the plan. Hopefully, his band of novices haven't run off by then."

"You sure you know what you're doing?" Nicanor asked, as he and Gaius stumbled their way back down the small hill.

"Not even a little bit," the optio replied, as he was tripped up by an unseen hole. He regained his footing, and they quickly made their way to the base of the hill. "If we don't attempt something, and the Vitellians manage to break our lines here, the entire army will collapse."

“I’m with you, sir!” Legionary Decius said, as he joined the officers at the base of the hill.

Just a few feet away, siege stones continued to sail overhead, occasionally smashing into the ranks of the Seventh Gemina.

“Glad to have you,” Gaius acknowledged to the legionary.

Surprisingly, it took no effort to find sufficient volunteers for the mission. Centurion Galeo soon joined the waiting band.

“Their primus pilus has his men collecting shields from the enemy dead and wounded,” he said.

Just then, a number of legionaries from the Seventh converged on them. Each was hunkered low, attempting to avoid the unseen terrors that had smashed a number of their friends.

“Here you are, sir!” one of them said, as the soldiers dropped the enemy scutums in a pile. “Orange, with gold wings coming out of the boss and a silhouette of Victoria at the top. Very different from our shields; should buy you some time. We also brought you some pitch to ignite those engines from Hades; compliments of our archers.”

“Hold!” Master Centurion Vitruvius shouted, as he rushed over to them. “We think their watchword is ‘Germanicus’. It may have been changed, but we heard a number of them shouting it as they withdrew earlier.”

“Thank you, sir,” Gaius said. He then addressed the volunteers. “Right, we’ve got two small buckets of pitch, so let’s not waste it. Given the rate of bombardment, I suspect the enemy only has a handful of siege engines working. We’ll burn what we can and sever the torsion ropes of any we cannot.” He took a deep breath, calming his nerves, before telling his assault party, “Alright lads, get on my ass and let’s send those engines back to the hell from whence they came.”

Given the frenzy of activity, the time it took for the optio to blurt out his plan to his centurion pilus prior, rally volunteers, gather enemy shields and some pitch to burn the siege engines had taken only a few minutes. It was only now, as he led his small band of raiders across the field, that Gaius felt pangs of fear. Was his leading this attack an act of extreme bravery or a brief bout of suicidal insanity? Perhaps it was both. All he could do was focus on the short row of torches to his right front. He knew the Vitellian siege engine crews would need light to operate their machines. Judging from the distance between the torches, he reckoned there could not be more than eight to ten

heavy weapons on the line.

As they drew closer, his assumption proved correct. There were five onagers spread out in a long line, interspersed by three medium siege ballistae. While the crews cranked on the cogs, several of them spotted Gaius and his soldiers. There was a frenzy of shouts, and several crewmen were pointing towards them.

"Germanicus, Germanicus, Germanicus!" the optio shouted quickly, holding the captured shield up towards his face.

"What the hell is this?" a centurion asked, walking over to them, his fisted hands on his hips. "Who in the bleeding fuck are you?"

"Beg your pardon, sir," Gaius said, speaking rapidly. "But we were cut off and almost captured. Your bombardment saved our asses! But you're aiming too high; most of your shots are landing a good fifty feet behind the enemy lines."

"Is that so?" the centurion asked. He turned to one of his onager crews, who were looking to him for instructions. About twenty meters behind them, Gaius could make out the shields and gleaming helmets of the enemy legionaries.

"Hey, who's that over there?" one of the soldiers shouted. *"Optio Apronius, is that you?"*

"Yeah, it's us!" Gaius replied, attempting to mask his voice. He decided to take an extra gamble. "We overheard the Flavians saying they have an entire army of reinforcements coming. Not sure how far away they are."

"And how the hell would you know that?" the centurion in charge of the artillery said.

"Panicked shouts from some of their lads," Gaius replied. "You know Seventh Gemina are all amateurs. Likely they are shitting themselves and only holding on in the hopes of being reinforced."

"Alright," the centurion said, waving the optio away with his vine stick. He turned to his engine crews. "Onagers, decrease elevation three clicks! Ballistae…*here, what the fuck?*"

Gaius had pretended to stumble and fall, uprooting one of the torches in the process.

"He's hurt, sir," Legionary Decius said. "Got stabbed in the leg when we were withdrawing. Don't worry, we'll take care of him."

"You lads ready?" Gaius said quietly, as his volunteers gathered around him.

“We’re with you, sir,” a legionary asserted. “Lead on and take us to Elysium!”

Gaius nodded slowly and pointed to Decius, then to the artillery centurion who had his back to them. Gaius stood and masked the torchlight with his body, as the young soldier quickly crept up behind the enemy officer. Decius wrapped his left arm around the big man’s helmet, grabbing him by the forehead and jerking backwards, exposing the neck. Before the centurion could say a word, the legionary slashed open his throat, dropping the twitching body to the ground in a heap. Flavian legionaries then rushed the first onager. One of them kicked a kneeling crewman hard in the chest, while another smashed his shield across his companion’s face. One of the soldiers with the pitch quickly poured some over the ropes. Gaius rushed in and ignited it with his torch.

Fortunately for them, most of the enemy legionaries had been standing idly for some time and were mostly oblivious to what was happening, even as flames licked up from the first onager.

One of Gaius’ raiders grabbed another torch. Before the crew at the first ballista and second onager knew what was happening, they were assailed by the attacking legionaries who smashed into them with their shields and cut down several with their gladii. In the few seconds it took for the three siege engines to begin burning in earnest, confused shouts erupted from the ranks of Vitellian legionaries.

“What in the name of Hera’s twat…”
“It’s a damned Flavian raid!”
“Kill those filthy bastards! I want their heads, all of them!”

Javelins flew in an awkward arc over the line of oxcarts which carried the engines’ munitions. Most landed harmlessly, though one caught a pitch-bearer directly in the chest. The soldier dropped his bucket and grabbed at the large pilum, which was embedded in his lungs. A trickle of blood ran out the corner of his mouth. He gritted his teeth and collapsed in agony.

As his soldiers set fire to a third onager, Gaius sprinted over to one of the carts, waving his torch in the faces of the draught animals. The beasts of burden groaned and panicked, turning about and dragging their cart right into the advancing line of Vitellian infantry. The optio did the same with two more wagons. The whole scene erupted into chaos. Enemy officers were

shouting contradictory orders. Some were telling their soldiers to attack the raiders, with others screaming at them to put out the fires.

Only one onager and one ballista remained. Half of Gaius' men were attacking the catapult, hacking apart the torsion ropes with their gladii. The ballista crew suddenly turned their cumbersome machine about on its pivot stand and fired right into their assailants, the shot struck one man in the face, ripping his head clean from his shoulders.

"Fuck!" shouted one of his companions. A geyser of blood gushed from the stump where his head had been, while the twitching corpse collapsed to the ground.

The heavy stone continued on. It was deflected just enough by the unfortunate legionary, that it struck Gaius on the outer part of his upper right arm. The extreme force knocked him to the ground, and he cried out. The pain was excruciating, and he was blinded by the shock of this brutal wound. Two pairs of hands roughly pulled him to his feet. He screamed again in agony, as one man grabbed him by his now stricken arm. Another retrieved the optio's gladius.

At first he thought it was Vitellian soldiers. Then a voice said, "We've got you, sir!"

"Let go! Let go!" Gaius shouted, as he stumbled to his feet. "I can still walk."

"Well, you'd better be able to run, sir!" Legionary Decius said, his voice firm yet calm. He sprinted away, having set fire to the last onager.

Gaius glanced back and saw that all eight of the Vitellian siege engines were now engulfed in flames. Enraged enemy legionaries started to chase after them but were quickly recalled by their officers. The optio grabbed his wrist and used it to pin his arm against his body. The limb had not been severed, yet the slightest twitch caused terrible pain. Gaius was nearly overwhelmed by nausea, brought on by the horrific pain.



The storm of enemy missiles had ceased for a few moments. The men of Seventh Gemina thought, perhaps, the Vitellian Army would soon be attacking. Then they caught sight of flames from the first burning onager.

"Sir, look!" an excited legionary shouted, pointing and rising to his feet.

"Well, I'll be damned," Vitruvius muttered, with a relieved sigh. He then

bellowed, *“Seventh Gemina, on your feet!”*

The entire legion gave a series of shouts and accolades as the remnants of the raiding party frantically raced back to their lines. Only five of the original twelve remained. In addition to Gaius, two other men were injured. One had taken a sword thrust to the shoulder beneath his armor. Another had been stabbed in the leg and had only managed to hobble back with the help of one of his companions.

“By Juno’s cunt, would you look at that?” General Primus shouted excitedly, as he sprinted up on his horse. He skidded to a halt in front of the group of soldiers from the Tenth Legion.

Gaius was grimacing in pain and clutching his badly injured arm. He could not salute, so he simply nodded to the commander-in-chief. “General, sir,” he said through gritted teeth. “The enemy siege engines have been silenced.”

“They won’t be bothering us anymore,” a legionary emphasized, as Centurion Galeo and others from the Fifth Cohort walked over to congratulate the survivors.

“Centurion,” Primus said, pointing his spatha at Galeo. He then waved it at the surviving raiders. “I want the names of all these men. If any of them survive this night, I will reward them, personally.”

“Yes, sir,” Galeo replied with a salute. “How goes the rest of the battle?”

“A bloody stalemate,” the commanding general remarked. “They had us outnumbered early on, but with Seventh Claudia on the field we’ve evened the odds a bit.”

“We saw a large force, mostly legionaries, advancing on them,” Galeo remarked.

“Which means they’ve had to commit a portion of their reserves,” Primus speculated. “I’m shifting the Fifteenth Legion’s vexilation here, along with three cohorts from our reserves. The Apollinaris legionaries will serve to reinforce you, should those bastards try to take the hill again. Valens, Caecina, or whoever the fuck they have commanding their army, may think their barrage weakened us. I suspect they’ll concentrate much of the next assault here.”

Without waiting for any further acknowledgments, the general turned his horse and rode at a fast canter down the line.

“They’re coming again, sir! They’re coming again!”

The near panicked shouts from the line alerted Vitruvius. In the pale moonlight, he could see the advancing wall of Vitellian legionaries. He took a deep breath, and gave a short nod of acceptance, then looked to Galeo.

"Centurion, keep your cohort on the hill, defend it at all costs and keep your eyes on our left," he ordered. "If the Seventh Claudia gets into trouble, you send a runner to me immediately."

"Understood," Galeo replied.

"And whatever you do, do *not* let those bastards flank us!"

As the centurion pilus prior started up the slope, Gaius gritted his teeth and followed. He found his century on the right end of the line and staggered over to Centurion Nicanor.

"Still alive, I see," his commander said, with a sigh of relief. He caught sight of the bloody scoring on Gaius' arm. "Bloody hell, man, what happened to you?"

"Damn ballista got me."

"I'll say it did! Well, you won't be fighting with that arm."

"I can still give orders readily enough," the optio said. His complexion was pale, and his face covered in sweat. He unslung his gladius, removing the weapon from the baldric, which he then used to strap his right arm across his body. Not bothering with either sword or shield, Gaius took up his optio's staff, which he used to help him climb back up the hill.

Down below it appeared the battle was ongoing everywhere except on the hill. To their left, Legio VII, Claudia was engaged with an equal number of soldiers from the Vitellians' various vexilation cohorts. To their right, the soldiers of Legio VII, Gemina seemed to have recovered from the storm from the enemy siege engines, and were now battling with the enemy's Legio I, Italica. It was impossible to see but half of that particular engagement. They could only assume such clashes were being replicated all the way down the line.

"A bloody impasse," Centurion Nicanor observed. "Except here. The terrain may be an obstacle, but this is still our weakest point in the line."

"And it looks like our 'friends' are going to exploit it," Tesserarius Julius said, pointing with his gladius. Hurriedly making their way in between Legio I and the vexilation legionaries were two cohorts of auxilia infantry.

"Javelins ready, lads," Gaius said. Like Julius, he was keeping his voice calm but firm. Any sense of panic among their senior officers would become

infectious among the men in the ranks. Gaius learned from the moment he was promoted to decanus—when he first became a leader of legionaries—that keeping calm during battle was crucial, no matter how extreme one's personal sense of terror.

"Galeo!" Nicanor called out, as he walked down the line behind his century.

Down below, the enemy cohorts were forming into battle ranks, their shields held high to receive any missile weapons from the Flavian troops. It was strange that there was a complete lack of archers and light skirmishers on either side. The only missiles employed in this battle had been legionary javelins and the heavy stones from the still burning Vitellian siege engines. What archers the Flavians did have were scattered along the rear of the main battle line, and had been largely ineffective.

"I see them," the cohort commander replied. He nodded to his cornicen who blew four short blasts on his horn, a prearranged signal for the soldiers from the Legio XV detachment.

There was a quick scramble as three centuries formed into a column, placing themselves just to the right of Nicanor's century while keeping low behind the crest of the hill.

"Just hold them in place for a few moments, and we'll take it from there," their pilus prior told Nicanor.

Their remaining three centuries were sprinting along the side of the hill towards the far end of the Fifth Cohort's line.

The enemy's auxilia troops continued their methodical advance up the slope. They outnumbered the Fifth Cohort two-to-one. Centurion Galeo ordered his centuries to spread their ranks to keep from being enveloped.

"A few pila salvos, then we'll let the Apollinaris lads even the odds," he said quietly. He took a deep breath and shouted, *"Front rank…throw!"*

The orders were soon echoed all along the line.

"Second rank…throw!"

"Third rank…throw!"

"Fourth rank…throw!"

On the orders from the centurions, a storm of javelins rained down from above, the height adding to their range and penetrative power. Auxilia troopers shrieked as their shields were splintered. Hands, forearms, and various limbs were punctured and smashed. Scores of men were either wounded or lay dying. Many more were forced to throw down their now-

useless shields. Auxiliary infantry carried only gladii or stabbing spears, leaving them no opportunity to unleash a return volley against the Flavian legionaries.

"Gladius…draw!"

"Rah!"

Blades flashed from their scabbards as the men of the Fifth Cohort settled into their fighting stances. The Vitellian auxiliaries may have outnumbered them, but they held the high ground. On they came. And while not as well trained or equipped as legionaries, imperial auxiliaries were professional soldiers; highly disciplined and dangerous adversaries. They attacked with spear, sword, and the smashing of shields, hoping their numbers would allow them to overwhelm the single cohort of legionaries. The Flavian soldiers fought back with fierce determination, unwilling to cede any of the high ground to their Vitellian foes.

Gaius had taken up his place on the far left of his century, though now keeping a few paces back from the front rank being assailed by a wall of enraged Vitellian troopers. The pain in his arm was subdued to a throbbing ache. His focus was now on the enemy formations that were frantically trying to gain a foothold on the heights.

Flavian legionaries maintained a fairly decisive advantage, so long as they held the high ground. Auxiliaries attempted to get beneath their shields and armor with their long spears. One poor soldier caught a spear blade in the thigh and fell screaming down the hill. The legionaries primarily used their large shields to smash their foes in the face and chest, bringing their gladii down on any who stumbled into their shield wall.

"Set for passage-of-lines!" Centurion Nicanor shouted from the right of their formation. The command was echoed down the line by legionaries and their decani. Soldiers in the front rank braced themselves. Those behind them crouched into fighting stances and made ready to burst past them. Nicanor followed the preparatory command with a blow of his whistle. His first rank quickly lunged backwards between their mates in the subsequent ranks. Those directly behind them leapt forward, crashing into the Vitellian auxiliaries with a wall of shields.

During the split second it took for the second rank to surge into the fray, a handful of enemy soldiers managed to get their footing at the top of the hill. One of them caught a legionary on the left end of the line with his shield,

causing the man to stumble. As the trooper brought his spear up high to stab the soldier in the neck, Gaius rushed forward and awkwardly jabbed him in the face with his optio's staff. The auxiliary trooper gave a yelp and stumbled back. As he did, he swung his oblong shield in a wide arc, the bottom edge catching Gaius on his injured arm. Gaius fell to his knees, blinded by pain. However, he had given his legionary enough time to regain his balance and slam his gladius hard into the trooper's back. The hamata chain mail only partially impeded the blow. The point of the weapon buried itself several inches into his back. The auxilia soldier cried out in pain, dropping his shield and spear as he tumbled down the hill.

The soldiers from Legio X frantically held off the Vitellian assault. Meanwhile, a series of whistle blows sounded, and the centuries from Legio XV rose up and raced past either end of their allied legionaries. Extending into long lines, only two ranks deep, they enveloped the auxiliary cohorts both on the flanks and from behind. Twin salvoes of javelins followed. Many were cut down in their wake.

"Sound the advance!" Galeo shouted to his cornicen.

The loud trumpet blast was followed by a loud battle cry from the soldiers holding the hill. They surged forward, crashing hard into the disheveled ranks of the Vitellian auxilia. The ensuing quarrel only lasted a few moments, as the panicked troopers began throwing down their weapons, raising their hands in surrender. Legionaries immediately ceased their attack and looked to their officers for instructions.

"Disarm this lot and get them back over the hill," the pilus prior from Legio XV ordered. "Send a runner to General Primus. Let him know we've got a horde of prisoners for him." He walked over to Centurion Galeo and gave an approving nod. "Good work holding that hill. If you wish to take control of the prisoners, my men will take over this position and give your lot a rest."

"Thank you," Galeo replied, his voice tired and coming in panting gasps. As his men led the prisoners over the hill, he sought out their commanding officer.

"It would appear the war is over for us," the auxilia centurion said. He gave a sinister grin. "That is, if you manage to actually win this battle."

"If we don't, I'm sure you and I will be changing roles," Galeo replied with a morbid smirk of his own. "Your men are to strip out of their armor. I

also want your word, as a Roman officer, neither you nor your soldiers will attempt to escape or take any further action in this battle."

"You have my word," the auxilia centurion replied. He looked over toward the line where Seventh Gemina was still locked in its death struggle with First Italica. Rows of dead soldiers lay behind the battle line, many smashed by the storm of catapult shot. "I am impressed those men have lasted as long as they have. Still, you marched all day in the heat, you've taken a barrage from our siege engines, and now you are slowly being beaten down. I daresay it will take an act of the gods to grant your army victory."



No one knew what hour it was, or how long this latest clash had been ongoing. Cohorts of legionaries stood head-to-head against each other. The incessant screams of men and the clashing of shields was almost deafening. Master Centurion Vitruvius held his ground with the men of the Seventh Gemina's First Cohort. The best prospective troops of the legion, they were still mostly inexperienced and were getting a savage baptism in blood and steel. Still they refused to yield. Even as their mates fell, others surged into the fray, holding the line against the Vitellians' unending assaults. The rows of dead and wounded legionaries extended behind both formations. Neither side would cede so much as a foot of ground.

As exhaustion took hold, with each commanding centurion making ready to order the next passage-of-lines, the shouts and the fighting suddenly ceased. Every soldier was filthy and completely spent. They leaned against their shields, gasping and trying to catch their breath.

"What the *fuck* are we doing?" someone on the Flavian line spat.

"I don't even know anymore," a despondent Vitellian legionary replied. The two men had spent the last several minutes slamming their shields together, trying to find an opening to strike at one of their adversary's vulnerable areas. Now, as they leaned against their shields, the thought of trying to kill one another became an absurd atrocity.

Other similar mutterings were heard from soldiers on each line, with many protests as to why they were fighting each other. Vitruvius sensed what he hoped was an opportunity. He raised his gladius and stepped in front of his cohort.

"Hold, friends!" he said loudly, for all to hear. "Why must we fight each

other? What good has come from this senseless act of Roman slaying Roman? Are we not brothers?"

"This war brings us neither joy nor honor, sir," a Vitellian decanus spoke up. "A tragedy that would serve rival Caesars."

"We can put an end to this now," the master centurion said, trying to gage the demeanor of the enemy soldiers. "All of us are defenders of the empire. We should be fighting together, as Romans."

"Yes, we should," the voice of a Vitellian centurion said. The man strode in front of his own formation and stood face-to-face with Vitruvius. "We are all brothers here, sir. To kill fellow Romans is an affront to the gods themselves. If your men will abandon the usurper, Vespasian, their previous treason will be forgiven. They will return to their place of honor as imperial soldiers."

"You speak of treason, yet it was Vitellius who betrayed the will of the senate and people of Rome," the primus pilus countered. "How many more will die for him? He is not worth a single drop of blood from any one of your soldiers or mine. You cannot hope to win this war, not with another Flavian Army rapidly approaching from the east. Their numbers are even greater than ours. Surely you must know this."

"I'm not here to argue whose cause is right or wrong, sir," the centurion replied. "You may have reinforcements coming, but so do we. And we have the whole of Gaul, Germania, Hispania, and Britannia from which we can call additional soldiers. I do not want to lose any more of my brothers, but I cannot forsake my oath."

"Neither can I," Vitruvius said, grimacing in frustration. "Let us reform then, and pay our penance for offending the gods in blood."

The two officers exchanged salutes with their gladii before returning to their positions on their respective battle lines. As Vitruvius settled into his fighting stance his most overwhelming emotion was not fear, but sorrow.

At least my father died fighting Rome's enemies and not his brothers-in-arms, he thought to himself. He took a deep breath and blew his whistle. His cohort came alive. Men in the second rank came rushing past those in front, bellowing with rage. The Vitellians executed a similar maneuver and soon the clash of arms commenced once more.

Similar actions played out all along the battle line, in particular amongst the competing ranks of legionaries. Whenever exhaustion led to momentary pauses in the brutal grind, men on both sides would plead with their enemies

to give up their cause. They would state that the other side could not possibly win, and the spilling of further Roman blood was a futile abomination. And though it was a hateful thing, having to fight fellow imperial soldiers, not one man on either side capitulated to the other's entreaties. Privately, every soldier on the field held at least some measure of respect for the stubborn will of their opponents and the refusal of any man on the field to break his sacred oath.

After another twenty or so minutes of relentless fighting, the Vitellian cornicens sounded the withdrawal. They did not go far, however. They simply needed time to rest and regroup. As for the Flavians, they found themselves fighting a new pair of enemies, fatigue and hunger.

Chapter XVI: An Inexplicable Truce

Field of Cremona
Midnight
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It was now midnight, and the moon rose high through the broken clouds, casting a pall of ethereal sadness upon the battlefield. The Vitellians withdrew about fifty meters from the battle front, dragging away their wounded. They were met with a much-needed reprieve. Hundreds of Cremonans, mostly women, had come out of the city, bearing baskets of bread, pots full of stew and cooked meat, as well as carts laden with casks of wine and water. They were led by the wife of the governor of the city, who oversaw the distribution of food and drink. She led a large number of younger women to where General Manlius had assembled with a handful of his senior officers.

"We had to shift most of our reserves to the right to counter a Flavian Legion that arrived late on the field," Master Centurion Aetius was heard saying.

"And we've twice failed to take that damned hill," an auxiliary tribune said. "Siliana horse ran into a wall of legionaries, lost a good number of troopers, and their commanding tribune was badly wounded."

"We thought it was just a single cohort," another officer stated. "So we dispatched two auxilia infantry cohorts from our reserve. But when they got to the top, the Flavians had been reinforced. They were soon surrounded, and it appears the whole lot of them were taken prisoner."

"So just like that, we've had a cavalry regiment mauled and lost two entire cohorts of infantry," General Manlius noted, grinding is teeth in irritation. "Alright, no more attacks on that fucking hill. The high ground alone provides the enemy with a decisive advantage. And besides, we don't need to take the hilltop in order to beat them. Exhaustion and hunger are their biggest enemies now."

"Noble Manlius Valens," the governor's wife said. "Forgive the interruption, but we have come from Cremona to offer food, drink, and

medical assistance to your army. These women are here to tend to your wounded."

"I am indebted to you," Manlius replied. "We have many who have been injured in this battle against the traitors. And all of our soldiers hunger and thirst."

He then saw a sizeable number of younger women retrieving discarded gladii and spears from the long line of casualties. "Do they intend to fight as well?" the legate asked.

"If you will have us, let us help you defend our homes."



"Are you alright, sir?" a legionary asked the still dazed Optio Gaius Artorius.

"I'll be fine," he replied, painfully trying to get back to his feet.

The soldier standing over him extended a hand and helped pull him up. "I just thought I should thank you for saving my life, sir," the legionary said. "That damned auxiliary would have stuck me through the neck, had you not jabbed him in the face with your optio's staff. Come on, I'll help you down the hill. The lads from the Fifteenth are taking over here."

Gaius was glad to leave the hilltop. He knew he was in no condition to fight anymore. Besides the pain in his now useless right arm, he was completely exhausted. Pangs of hunger manifested themselves as he sat with his back against a rock at the base of the hill. These were soon forgotten, however. He saw the row of dead legionaries, each with their traveling cloaks draped over them. The numerous wounded were being helped to a large open space. General Primus had sent for the medics and hospital crews, though they would likely not arrive from Bedriacum for several more hours. In the meantime, soldiers did as best as they could to tend the wounds of their injured friends. Gaius was very much surprised to see the legionary who had taken a spear to the thigh and tumbled down the hill was still alive. His body was battered and filthy, and his leg was wrapped in a rag. He gritted his teeth in pain as four of his companions carried him over to the casualty collection point.

"Another lull in the battle?" Gaius asked as his friend as Centurion Nicanor knelt beside him.

"So it would seem," his commanding officer replied. "The lads are still

holding, and the Vitellians have been taking a beating just as much as we are."

"Centurion," Tesserarius Julius said, walking over from the direction of Seventh Gemina. "It's the strangest thing out there."

"What is?" Nicanor asked.

"It looks like a damned festival across the way. I saw what may have been some cooking fires. With my bad ears I couldn't hear a damned thing, but some of the lads said they heard women's voices."

"That doesn't surprise me," Gaius said. "Cremona is loyal to Vitellius. Their women are probably bringing food and drink to the pretender's army while our men hunger."

"That does bode ill," Julius remarked. "All they need to do is hold fast and wait for dawn to come. Our lads are already exhausted, and the want of food will only make it worse."

"If they do not attack again," Nicanor said, "and decide to simply wait us out, we may have no choice but to retreat all the way back to Bedriacum. Let us hope the darkness can cover our withdrawal."

"What about all of our wounded?" Julius asked, nodding towards the open area that was covered in badly injured soldiers. Nicanor could only grimace and shake his head.



As he dismounted his horse and stretched his legs, Antonius Primus was filled with the same trepidations expressed by Centurion Nicanor. He would not describe the sounds heard across the field as merriment, for the Vitellians were badly battered and had lost many men this night. Yet it was a far cry from the somber silence that consumed the Flavian Army.

"They feast, drink, and rest to regain their strength," Legate Aquila said, as he rode up to his commanding general.

"If they do not attack us again within the hour, I am going to order a withdrawal from the field." The commander-in-chief's order was dismaying, but scarcely surprising, given the state of their army. "If we wait until dawn, our soldiers will be even more beaten down by hunger and exhaustion. The enemy will run right over us. We must prepare to retreat while we still have the cover of darkness."

"Sir, what of our wounded?" General Lupus asked, echoing Julius'

concerns. “They number in the hundreds, maybe even thousands.”

“We cannot take them with us,” Primus said, his voice cracking. “It is a terrible thing, but we must leave them to the mercies of our enemies, who I hope will show them clemency.” He shook his head as he removed his helmet and threw it onto the ground. “I am sorry, my friends; sorry my aggressive initiative has proven to be nothing but recklessness. It has cost us dearly.”

“They’re coming again, lads!” a centurion’s voice shouted, from the battle line.

“At least they’re not leaving us to starve to death,” Aquila said grimly, as he turned his horse about and quickly rode back to his legion.

As he forced his way through the mass of legionaries, Primus noted a large number of torches among the advancing mass of Vitellian soldiers. “What in Hades are they playing at?”

“Sir, it doesn’t even look like they’re armed for battle,” a soldier stated. “They’re not carrying shields, nor are their weapons drawn.”

“They’re not coming to fight,” Master Centurion Vitruvius said. His eyes were sharper than most, and he was the first to see the wagons and carts that came with the enemy soldiers.

“Come, friends!” a voice shouted from the Vitellian ranks. *“Here is meat, here is drink!”*

“Bugger me, are they really asking us to come eat with them?” a perplexed legionary asked.

“Take and eat, take and drink!” another voice called, as if in answer to the question.

“Let us be strong when we slay and are slain! Let none of us die while ignominiously fainting from hunger!”

“Fuck this,” another soldier said, dropping his shield. “If those bastards want to stick me, it’ll be better than starving for another six bloody hours!”

Neither Primus nor any of the man’s officers tried to stop him. Instead, they watched to see if it was perhaps a ruse. A loud cheer was heard, and they could see the Vitellians handing the soldier a clay pitcher and a wooden plate piled high with meat and bread. Similar cheers were heard up and down the line, as other soldiers made their way across the field, succumbing to their hunger and thirst.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Primus said with a grin, shaking his head in disbelief.

“It would seem our enemy has brought us salvation,” Vitruvius added. He

nodded to the dozens of soldiers, whose eyes were fixed on the scene playing out barely two hundred meters away. “Go on, lads. Eat and drink your fill.” With the clattering of thousands of dropped shields, the entire Seventh Gemina Legion rushed towards their enemies, not with swords drawn for battle but with eyes wide and mouths salivating.

“Were I not seeing this with my own eyes, I never would have believed it,” Primus said, as he and his master centurion slowly walked across the field. “I wonder which of their generals ordered this act of noble charity.”



In fact, no Vitellian officer had ordered the truce, nor did anyone know who started it. While they had gorged themselves on the plethora of meat, bread, fresh vegetables, water, and wine that the women of Cremona had brought forth, there were mutterings about what a shame it was that their brethren adversaries hungered while they feasted. Many openly stated it was both unmanly and dishonorable to defeat such worthy foes and fellow Romans only by exhaustion and hunger. Like an unstoppable wave cresting over the shoals, Vitellian soldiers began to pile food onto carts before making their way across the battlefield, calling out to their enemies to join them.

The women were aghast by the spectacle. The men who were supposed to be their protectors were bringing aid to the very ones who wished to destroy their beloved city! They were not the only ones who were enraged.

“What in the bleeding fuck are they doing?” General Manlius screamed, as he rode his horse down the now abandoned line. “Get them back here!”

His legates, chief tribunes, and auxilia regimental commanders were as stunned as he was. None of them were able to stop their men from conducting a spontaneous truce with their adversaries.

“Just leave them be,” General Claudius Zeno of Legio XXII said. “It’s hateful enough they have been making war on their own countrymen, to say nothing of those with brothers, cousins, or even fathers and sons on the other side.”

Manlius wished to berate the legate but held his tongue. Though he had seized command of the Vitellian Army, he was not actually the commander-in-chief. He was, therefore, in no legal position to give orders to Claudius or any of the other legates.

“You command Fortuna’s Legion,” he said instead to Claudius. “May she

save us from the act of compassion that could lead to our ruin."



"Come, brothers," a Vitellian soldier said.

Legionary Decius and others from the Legio X vexilation joined the men of Seventh Gemina in taking part in their adversaries' generous hospitality.

"I'll be damned," Decius said, laughing and shaking his head. Though it was dark, with traces of moonlight dancing off their faces and helmets, there was no mistaking the face of the older soldier who had removed his helmet. "Uncle Paullus!"

"Bugger me, if it isn't my sister's son," the gray-haired legionary said, with a sigh. "What in the name of Hades' cock are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same," Decius replied, removing his helmet. He added, with a macabre chuckle, "Sorry if I almost killed you out there. Mother would be most displeased if I slew her only brother."

"You're not fast enough to best me, lad," Paullus retorted. "Unfortunate that I have to risk my sister disowning me for killing her second son." His expression was one of mixed and confused emotions. Under any other circumstances he would have been thrilled at seeing his nephew, whom he had not seen in ten years or more. Instead, the fates mocked them, like so many other families, placing them on opposing sides of a savage war.

"Then we'd best make the most of this brief moment of peace," Decius reasoned. He embraced his uncle, and thought he heard the old soldier choke up slightly.

"Come, you must eat," Paullus said quickly. He ushered Decius to the back of a wagon laden with stacks of bread and plates of still-warm meat. "If I am to kill my own blood, it won't be because you were weakened by hunger. Here, have some water, too."

The young legionary ate and drank heartily. It was only as he choked down the first mouthful of bread, followed by a long, slobbering quaff of water, that he realized just how weak he was. He took deep breaths between mouthfuls, as he ravenously attacked the food he was offered.

"Fate is cruel to place us here," Decius said, as he leaned back against the side of the cart.

"Fate is a filthy cunt," his uncle said, with disdain. He placed a hand on the pommel of his gladius. "I would sooner tell Fortuna to go fuck herself

than spill the blood of my kinsman. But as Fortuna has abandoned this field, along with all of the gods I suspect, then all I have left is the bonds of oath, both to my emperor and to my brothers."

"As have I," Decius acknowledged. "My only hope is that, if either or both of us falls this night, we may die with honor."

There were many such meetings on this night of death. Along such a large battlefront, with armies that numbered in the tens-of-thousands, it was absurd, profane even, that so many saw their kinsmen standing with their enemy. Some reunions were filled with a mix of joy and sadness, others with bitter feelings of anger and betrayal. In one particular instance, a centurion father and his legionary son spat curses at each other, each threatening to slay the other for having disgraced the family as a traitor.

For Optio Gaius Artorius, there would be no reunion with his brother. Lucius was gravely wounded, having been struck down mere feet from where he had stood. His mind was clouded by fatigue and the terrible shooting pain in his arm. He sat with his back against the side of the hill. His left arm lazily held his optio's staff, resting against his shoulder armor.

"Here you are, old friend." Nicanor's voice startled him.

Gaius had not even noticed the centurion who knelt next to him, his mess tin piled with a chunk of bread and some strips of roasted pig.

"I can't even think about food right now," the optio replied.

"At least drink some water," Nicanor said, handing him his freshly filled water bladder. "I'll take yours and have one of the lads get it refilled, before our gracious hosts cease feeling hospitable."

Gaius forced himself to choke down some of the food his centurion had brought him. Though his stomach was twisted in knots, he knew he needed to eat something if he was going to keep his strength up. His arm ached. Every time it would involuntarily spasm, pain would shoot all the way up into his shoulder with such ferocity as to nearly blind him. He stubbornly refused to be evacuated to the rear with the rest of the wounded, though.

Using his staff to pull himself up, he slowly made his way to the top of the hill. Down below he spotted the line of torches extending as far as he could see. Thousands of imperial soldiers gathered around the food-laden wagons, talking, laughing, and hurling the occasional humorous insult towards each other.

"If only such fraternal affections were enough to put an end to this war,"

Gaius lamented quietly.



For Antonius Primus, the sudden and unexpected truce came as a sign that the divines were favoring the Flavians this night. The utter exhaustion of his army, coupled with hunger and thirst, had tilted the odds back in favor of his enemy. And though he was prepared to order a withdrawal, the chances of extracting his army were remote. The Vitellians would have maintained the pressure, negating any chance of the Flavians making the long trek all the way back to Bedriacum. Defeat would have been total, with Primus' entire army captured. Instead, this reprieve given to them by their enemies allowed his men a brief period of rest and replenishment.

"Mars and Victoria smile upon us this night," he said to General Aquila, who for all intents and purposes was acting as his second-in-command of the entire army.

"It is still difficult to say who holds the advantage," the legate remarked. "We had to commit most of our reserve auxilia cohorts to providing support for Seventh Gemina."

"Whereas they have dispatched what appears to be almost all of their reserves against our Seventh Claudia," Primus added. "Even if the gods do favor our enterprise, this battle will be a close-run affair. I do not expect either side to break the other, but hope that by morning I can parlay with General Caecina and compel him to put an end to hostilities. He has to know Mucianus approaches from the east. Unless he manages to rally every last fighting man from Italia, Hispania, Gaul, Germania, and Britannia in less than a month, he cannot possibly hold against our combined strengths."

"A tactical draw might be the best either army can hope for at this point," Aquila observed.

"Our forces are retiring back to our lines, sir," Master Centurion Vitruvius reported, as he walked over to the commanding general. "It was the strangest thing I ever saw. Men, who just an hour before were trying to flay one another, were suddenly embracing their enemies as friends and brothers. Even as we departed, the Vitellians wished us well, hoping that we would all meet again in Elysium." He donned his helmet and gave a grim assessment. "And now the killing must begin once more."

Primus nodded and had his cornicen sound the commanding legates' call

on his trumpet. In the distance, the Vitellian wagons were being withdrawn. Centurions and other officers shouted orders for their men to reform and make ready to attack.

It was Aquila who thought expressed their shared thoughts aloud. “I wonder if history will ever again record such an inexplicable act of nobility between enemies.”

Chapter XVII: God of the Rising Sun

Field of Cremona
25 October 69 A.D.



Sol Invictus
"The Unconquered Sun"

No sooner had the spontaneous truce between armies ended, than the Vitellians assailed the Flavian lines once more. During the withdrawal, the Flavians retrieved a number of spent javelins, which they subsequently hurled at their adversaries once hostilities reengaged. As a handful of attackers were struck down, some of the Vitellians cursed their foes for their treachery. Others surprisingly praised them for their initiative. In the end, it achieved little more than kicking a hornets' nest when the two sides smashed into each other.

The last few hours of night passed. Most of the combatants were in a near stupor. Shields continued to clash together, though by dawn their wielders were so utterly spent their blows lacked any real conviction. As the first rays of sun broke over the horizon to the east, Vitellian trumpets sounded the order to withdraw yet again.

A brutal and exhausting ten hours had passed since the initial clash commenced between the Flavian and Vitellian forces. The field was littered

with the dead and dying; the terrible carnage only now being made plain with the light of the slowly rising sun. Commanding officers on both sides hoped the grim light of dawn would allow them to better assess their foes and their ability to continue the fight.

“What do we do now?” Legate Lupus asked Primus, as he rode over to the commander-in-chief.

They had scarcely been off their mounts since the battle commenced, and both man and horse alike were greatly fatigued.

“I will cross over to our enemy under a flag of truce,” Primus replied. “Caecina has to know that if he could not best us here, there is little point in throwing away more good Roman lives. We will see if he’s a reasonable man.”

Primus dismounted his horse and stretched his stiff legs and back. He wandered a few dozen feet behind the main battle line to relieve himself. During those few moments of solitude, he contemplated his contingency plan should Caecina refuse his entreaties and insist on continued hostilities. Though the battle itself had been an inconclusive stalemate, the Vitellians still had the advantage. They were close to their supplies and could very well bring up more siege engines, should they decide to attempt that tactic again. Primus’ army, on the other hand, had no siege equipment nor any of their tools to so much as begin fortifications of their current position. It was likely Caecina was very much aware of this and would tell Primus to piss off.

The Flavian commander-in-chief was unaware of the two strokes of fortune that played in his favor. Firstly, the Vitellians were still essentially leaderless and uncoordinated. The second was an obscure eastern custom that one of his legions performed every morning, which would change the fortunes of all.



“The sun rises,” a legionary with Third Gallica said.

His master centurion was pacing in front of his First Cohort.

“So it does,” the primus pilus replied with a tired grin. Like the rest of the army he was utterly beat, his men having clashed repeatedly with soldiers from Twenty-Second Primigenia and Twenty-First Predator Legions respectively.

“We should pay our daily homage,” another soldier stated. “Even if the

rest of the gods have abandoned this place, at least our own Sol Invictus casts his blessings upon us. Perhaps he will show favor on us this day."

Legio III, Gallica, which had been posted to Syria for a number of years, occupied the center-right of the Flavian line. And like most legions that were posted to the far-flung corners of the empire, they had picked up a number of rather strange local customs. Legates who came to the legions from Rome tended to humor their soldiers in this regard. It was one such native tradition from the east that would unexpectedly turn the tide of this relentless struggle.

The Third Legion stood in a massed parade formation. Both their friends and adversaries looked on. As happened every morning since the beginning of the campaign, the master centurion stood in front of his soldiers, his gladius held high.

"Third Gallica Legion!" he shouted. "The sun rises, bringing warmth and life to our world. This day and every day we salute the great Sol Invictus. *Salute!*"

With a sharp about face the entire legion turned to the east, drew their gladii, and raised their weapons high in a salute to the sun.

"Solis Invicti grando, lux mundi! Ave! Ave! Ave!"



Just across the battlefield, the Vitellian Army witnessed the strange spectacle. While they could not make out the words shouted by the master centurion, the chants of the near-five thousand legionaries echoed across the plain.

"Who the bloody hell are they hailing?" General Manlius asked, riding up towards the vanguard of Legio XXII.

"Could it be Mucianus and the rest of the Flavian Army?" a centurion asked.

"Damn it all," Manlius swore. "They're marching all the way from bloody Syria. How in the fuck could they be here already?"

"If he's been conducting forced marches every day, he could conceivably have made it this far," the Twenty-Second's legate, Claudius Zeno, remarked, his voice betraying his sense of dismay. "What else could those damned fools be saluting?"

"It sounds like they're saluting the sun, sir," a legionary spoke up.

"Who the fuck salutes the sun, especially on a day like this?" Manlius

grumbled.

The bright rays shone in their faces, and they could see very little except the glare off the battered armor of their foes.

“If it is Mucianus, then we are damned,” another legate said, his voice rising in fear.

It was a terrible thing for a commanding general to say, for it spread quickly among the ranks. Similar remarks were soon made all along the entire frontage of the Vitellian Army. A sense of panic soon began to take hold. The brutal, ten-hour, grinding battle of the previous night had decided nothing, and the entire army was beyond exhausted. Many had assumed that since Primus’ army had to be equally drained, the day would be spent recovering the dead and wounded, while both armies decided upon their next course of action. However, if Mucianus had arrived with his army from the east, then all was surely lost. The Flavians would have them badly outnumbered with more than half their troops fresh.

“The Flavians have brought up an entire army!”

“Lost! All is lost!”

“Flee, my brothers! Save yourselves!”

The Vitellian Army’s once impenetrable sense of discipline and order was quickly collapsing. For Romans, such unbecoming conduct was unthinkable. And yet, with the growing perception that an entire army of fresh legionaries was about to take to the field, General Manlius lost all control over his panicked forces.



“General Primus, sir!” a legionary from the vanguard shouted, as he rushed over to his commanding general, who was ruminating over his plan with Vitruvius and a couple of staff tribunes.

Antonius Primus’ eyes were bloodshot, his face strained with both exhaustion and doubt.

“Damn it, man, get a hold of yourself!” a staff tribune berated the young soldier.

Primus held up a hand, silencing the officer. No legionary would dare burst in upon his commanding officer unless it was dire.

“Calm down, soldier,” he said. “Now what is it?”

“The Vitellian Army is retreating, sir!” The legionary was unable to

curtail his enthusiasm.

"Caecina has had enough, I see," the general said, with a sigh of relief.

"It's not an orderly withdrawal, sir," the soldier added. "Something has completely spooked them. They are panicking and starting to flee in disorder!"

"What?"

Primus sprinted the short distance to where his front rank cohorts were formed. Soldiers were talking excitedly to each other, pointing towards the bizarre scene of havoc that played out less than half a mile across the plain. Legionary and auxilia alike were wavering in their resolve, shouting and pointing towards the Flavian Army. All the while, scattered groups of soldiers began to bolt in all directions. Officers were riding about frantically. Some were trying to restore order. Others took the liberty to flee with their men.

"I'll be damned," Primus said. He turned to Master Centurion Vitruvius.

"What do you think has gotten into them, sir?" Vitruvius asked.

"I don't know, and I don't care," Primus replied. "Sound the general advance. No doubt the rest of our legions have noticed what we are seeing. I want the Vitellians swept from the field. Sack their camp and prevent them from regrouping."

"Yes, sir," the master centurion acknowledged. "What shall we do about the city of Cremona?"

"We'll sort them out when we get there."



That there was any strength left in the Flavian Army was a testament to their fortitude and indomitable resolve. The irony was lost on none of them that the Vitellians' sense of compassion and hospitality was contributing to their downfall. Had they not filled their enemies stomachs with food and drink a few hours prior, the entire Flavian Army would have likely collapsed from hunger and exhaustion. But now, as the cornicens sounded the call to advance, a loud battle cry roared from tens-of-thousands of Vespasian's soldiers. There was no order to be had from their defeated foes. A large number fled towards their fortified encampment, while the two legions from Cremona practically ran the four miles to the city's walls. Most of the rest scattered in various directions, all the while being harangued by Flavian

Cavalry.

"Attack the camp!" General Aquila shouted, as he rode beside one of his center cohorts. "Do not give them the chance to regroup!"

It was Legio XIII, along with Legio III, Legio VIII, and about half of Legio VII, Gemina who assailed the Vitellian Army's vast encampment. Seventh Claudia and Eighth Augusta had bypassed the fortifications, along with most of the reserve auxilia cohorts, in order to pursue the two legions fleeing for Cremona.

"Get those men back here!" Primus ordered. "We take the camp first, and then Cremona will be ours."

The sounds of trumpets, coupled with the berating of centurions and commanding legates, and within thirty minutes the pursuit to Cremona had ceased. The entire Flavian Army was now regrouping outside the Vitellian camp.

"Sir, we've captured a large number of enemy siege engines." A tribune rode up and reported excitedly. "They were in a column along the road, waiting to be brought forward."

"And now we will turn them on their masters," the commander-in-chief asserted. He summoned his legates and senior centurions, who rode with him to assess the strength of the enemy camp.

"Standard legion defenses," General Lupus observed. "Entrenchments, earthen ramparts topped with palisade stakes. They even built up wooden guard towers on the entrances, topped with scorpions."

"Launching a hasty assault on that could be disastrous," Chief Tribune Messalla of Seventh Claudia stated. "Especially given our army's state of exhaustion. None of them have slept in over a day, and they have already expended themselves beyond what most men are capable of."

"And what would you have us do?" Aquila asked indignantly. "Should we cede the field, retreat to Bedriacum, and hand back our victory to the enemy?"

"Look, general, I know your men from the Thirteenth are more anxious for retribution than any," Messalla countered, "but they will have no vengeance if they are all lying dead in those entrenchments."

"Enough," Primus interrupted, keeping his voice calm but firm. In truth, he knew both men were correct. They had won a victory of sorts, even though they had no idea as to why the enemy had fled from the field. To order his army to retire to Bedriacum could incite a mutiny. Plus, it would

mean everything they'd fought to achieve thus far had been in vain. The shouts of profanity and insults being hurled by the men of Legio XIII towards the Vitellian camp accentuated this point.

"I have ordered our siege and logistics trains brought forward," the commander-in-chief continued. "However, it will take the better part of a day for them to arrive. Even after they do, we simply do not have the manpower necessary to lay siege to both the enemy camp and the city. We have little choice but to attack." He walked towards the camp about a hundred meters, folded his arms across his chest, and decided on his plan of assault. "Their fortifications are very large. We cannot attack all four sides at once. We'll blockade the western gate with our cavalry and auxiliary infantry cohorts in order to prevent them from escaping to Cremona. Third Gallica and Seventh Gemina will attack the south. Seventh Claudia and Eighth Augusta will be our center and assault the eastern ramparts."

"That leaves my lads to attack the north," Aquila observed.

"The two cohorts from Fifth and Fifteenth Legions will support you," Primus remarked. "Arrius will take most of the cavalry to form a screen line to the west, lest those bloody cowards decide to venture out from Cremona."

"Sir, my horses need water and forage," the cavalry corps commander spoke up.

"Detach two regiments at a time," Primus replied. "There is plenty of grass for them near the banks of the river."

Arrius saluted and left to oversee his task. The commanding general then said to the assembled legates, "Exhort your men this day. Remind them victory is not yet achieved, not until we smash the Vitellian camp and compel the garrison of Cremona to capitulate. Stir up their competitive spirit as they engage the fortifications with the captured siege weapons. The enemy may have fled the field, but this *Second Battle of Bedriacum and Cremona* is anything but decided."



Gaius felt as if his entire cohort had been forgotten. The trumpets had sounded the general advance, yet the Fifth Cohort of Legio X had not been given any additional instructions.

"We'll fall in behind the Seventh Gemina," Centurion Galeo ordered. "I'll try to find General Primus and see where he wants us."

“Yes, sir,” his centurions responded.

Nicanor relayed the order to his century before walking over to Gaius. “How’s the arm?” he asked.

“Completely numb,” the optio replied in a low voice. “I suppose that’s a good thing for now. I’m a little freaked out that I can’t even feel my right hand.”

“You might have that baldric strapped too tight,” Nicanor remarked. He loosened the buckle, causing Gaius to gasp.

“That did it,” he tried to say, while stifling a groan.

“Fifth cohort on me!” Galeo shouted, his gladius raised high.

A number of enemy corpses were strewn along the far side of the hill. Although, they had done their best to extract any wounded from the field, there were still a significant number who groaned in pain, while trying to crawl away from the numerous legionaries who bounded over them. As Gaius reached the bottom, using his staff to help balance, he took a brief moment to gaze at the scene of death off to their right.

The Vitellians, in their panic, had abandoned their wounded from the last few assaults. Many of these men were in terrible shape. To their credit, a number of injured soldiers from the Flavian casualty collection point, at least the ones still able to walk, were doing what they could to aid them. Lack of medical supplies was making this extremely difficult, and all anyone could do was rip up tunics to use as bandages. Despite the hellish struggle that continued to play out between the two armies, for the wounded, every man fallen was once more a brother Roman and friend.

The cohort gradually caught up to the rest of the pursuing army, and the large Vitellian camp soon came into view. Soldiers from Seventh Claudia had captured a large portion of the enemy siege train and were distributing the wagons to each assault division.

“Three heavy siege ballistae, ten onagers, and twenty-two scorpions,” a centurion said to the commander-in-chief.

“Excellent,” Primus acknowledged. “Once all engines are in place, I want the ammunition wagons dismantled to build siege ladders and assault planks to get us over the ramparts.”

“Look out!” a voice behind them shouted.

Primus turned just in time to see a large catapult stone slam into the earth near where the Third Gallica was forming its cohorts.

“Damn it all, keep your men back!” he shouted to Legate Aponius.

A salvo of shot from onagers and ballistae from within the camp flew in the direction of the Flavian troops.

Primus spoke to Vitruvius and Messalla. “It would seem our adversaries still have some fight left in them. Keep all assault troops out of range until it is time to attack.”

“Sir, their engines are behind their ramparts,” Vitruvius observed. “Ours will be exposed.”

“That can’t be helped. I’m not interested in dueling with their heavy weapons, but creating breaches for our men, as well as smashing their guard towers on the gates.”

It would take some time to wheel the large wagons around the vast perimeter of the Vitellian camp, at the same time deploying the entire army to their designated assault points. Thirteenth Gemina had the furthest to march, as did the blockade force on the western edge of the encampment. Crews were quickly designated for the engines on the southern flank. As they wheeled the heavy machines forward, they were subjected to a barrage from enemy ramparts. One onager took a shot on the front left wheel, which spilt down the center. The metal band snapped from the impact.

“Fuck!” a crewman shouted in alarm.

“We’ll hold the scorpions in reserve until we’re ready to assault, sir,” Master Centurion Vitruvius said. “They can’t do much good right now. Their crews will only get chopped to pieces if we deploy them.”

“Very well,” Primus concurred. “We only have six or seven for each flank anyway.”

The sound of a cornicen’s horn sounding the assault in the distance warned the commanding general. He looked towards the north and could still see the wagons with siege engines making their way around the perimeter. “Damn it all, who in the fuck ordered the attack already?”

Chapter XVIII: Fortunes of War

Cremona
25 October 69 A.D.
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The first assaults had gone very badly for General Primus' army. Legate Lupus was, under most circumstances, a sound leader and tactician. On this morning, however, he seemed to have lost control of most of his legion. His soldiers had discovered a number of discarded siege ladders on some of the captured Vitellian logistics wagons. Most were numb in both mind and body following the harrowing ordeals of the past day and night. Even the centurions and principle officers were in a state of stupor. The only focus of the men of Legio VIII was final destruction of the Vitellian Army. Two cohorts had grabbed a dozen or more ladders and, of their own volition, assailed the eastern ramparts. Knowing he could not risk losing over eight hundred men this way, General Aquila ordered the entire legion to attack.

The Vitellians had far more fight left in them than the Flavians realized. The assault proved haphazard, with men sprinting towards the ramparts and gate without so much as forming a shield wall. While speed had negated any attempts by the Vitellians to utilize their siege ballistae and catapults, they put their scorpions to deadly use. Ladder bearers were especially vulnerable. Several were shot down by heavy bolts that punctured their armor or burst through exposed necks and lower abdomens. A duo of volleys from enemy archers were unleashed as the legion approached the earthworks. The armor and helmets worn by legionaries were impervious to arrows; however, since they had not formed either testudo or shield wall, a few were felled by arrows to the face, neck, and legs.

Archers quickly withdrew from the ramparts as the ladders were dropped across the entrenchments and onto the earthworks. The rows of palisade stakes actually helped keep the ladders in place, as they were wedged between the rungs. It was still hazardous to try and cross over. Vitellian legionaries and auxilia troopers were kicking and shaking the ladders, trying to throw the Flavian soldiers off. Most did cross safely, but they could only

get a few men across at a time, and waiting for them were the massed battle ranks of enemy soldiers.

The Vitellians seemed to have recovered from their earlier panic. That or they accepted that they had little choice now but to try and hold the ramparts against the Flavian onslaught. They were still unaware that Mucianus had not actually arrived on the field. They were facing the same army they had brawled with over the past twelve hours. They rushed forward to the row of palisade stakes, thereby forcing the Flavians to try and fight from their ladders. Men were smashed in the faces with the edges and bosses from Vitellian shields, and sent falling into the six-foot ditch below.

While the attack on the ramparts was floundering, the soldiers of the Thirteenth were having marginally better luck attacking the northern gate and its wooden towers. The base of these was not very large. One carried a scorpion. The other housed an onager. One of the crewmen took a gladius underneath his armor into the guts, and he fell screaming to the hard ground below. Hundreds of legionaries had formed into a long column along the narrow path that led into the fort. If their assault troops could get over the gatehouse they could throw open the gates, allowing the entire legion to spill into the camp.

Disaster struck just when it looked as if the Flavians would take both towers. The defenders on the right, along with the scorpion crew, had been either killed or driven off. On the left tower, the decanus leading a squad of Vitellians knew he had to take a desperate gamble.

“Push the onager over the side!” he shouted. The sergeant and six legionaries got behind the heavy engine and began to shove with all of their strength. One of his men took a gladius to the neck for his efforts, yet they proved successful. With a snapping of timbers, the large siege engine broke one of the support poles of the ladder before falling with a loud, sickening crash onto the heads of the clustered soldiers below. At least ten men were crushed outright. Many others were badly injured as the onager shattered among their closely packed ranks.

The morale of the Flavians broke and a retreat ensued. With much greater order and discipline than they had attacked with, the soldiers of Legio XIII withdrew, keeping their shields close for protection. This repulse, followed by the jeers from the Vitellian defenders, only incensed them further.

General Aquila finally managed to regain control of his errant legion.

“Focus all bombardment on the gatehouse,” he ordered his onager crews, who were quickly unloading the engines from their wagons. “We’ll hold in place until the gates are smashed.”



“Idiots!” Primus snapped, as a staff tribune from the Eighth Legion informed him of the legion’s repulse.

“General Aquila has ordered our men to wait until the gates are broken before attacking again,” another messenger quickly explained.

“At least he’s doing something right,” the commander-in-chief grumbled. Aquila was an officer who Primus respected greatly, and to see him lose control over his legion in such an embarrassing manner was infuriating.

Off to his left, his four onagers and single siege ballista were commencing their bombardment of the enemy defenses. They were met with a punishing counter-fire from the Vitellian artillery. Several men were struck down in ghastly fashion by heavy shot.

“Sir!” a voice shouted behind him.

Primus turned to see Optio Gaius Artorius from Legio X. The officer’s right arm, which was strapped to his side, was deeply scoured and a hideous shade of purple and black.

“What is it, optio?”

“Your onagers are shooting too high. They haven’t even hit the damn gatehouse yet.”

“Are you an expert on siege engines?” the general asked, his voice strained.

“I haven’t touched a catapult in years, but yes.”

“Sir, Optio Artorius is the one who ended the Siege of Tigranocerta,” Centurion Nicanor spoke up. “He’s the one who flung the head of an enemy general right on top of their war council.”

“That was you?” Primus said, bemused. “Alright, you’re in charge of the siege engines on this side. I want those fucking towers brought down and the gatehouse smashed!”

“Yes, sir!”

With his sword arm useless, Gaius was glad to put some of his long-dormant skills to use. As heavy shot from enemy weapons sailed over their

heads and kicked up clods of dirt nearby, he took a deep breath and maintained his composure. The mind-numbing, bleary-eyed fatigue of the past day and a half left the designated crews indifferent to the onslaught of Vitellian catapults. Few even took notice as a draught oxen was smashed to pieces in a spray of blood, bone, and gore.

"You're aiming too high," Gaius said calmly, to the nearest onager crew. "Back it off three clicks."

"Yes, sir," the legionary said. The crewmen were simply those who first volunteered. They were not necessarily skilled at siege warfare.

Gaius turned to the struggling ballista crew. "Get me six men who know how to work that damned thing!" he shouted. "The rest of you will act as ammunition haulers. And keep those wagons out of range!" His last emphasis was on the poor animal that had been smashed apart, its mate bellowing in fear.

"Here, unlatch the damn thing!" a decanus called out, rushing over.

The terrorized beast was cut loose, lest it drag off the wagon full of smooth stone shot for the ballista. The optio turned his attention back to the first onager as it fired again. This time the large stone sailed at the proper elevation, but veered in an arc to the right, slamming into the earthworks.

"The basket is bent and the throwing arm warped," Gaius observed. "Reload!"

The men did as he ordered. Two on each side pulled back on the poles of the large sprockets, while two more hefted a large stone into the basket.

"Adjust left." Gaius knelt behind the catapult as the crew shifted it over the hard-packed dirt until it looked like the throwing arm was aiming a few feet to the left of the left-hand tower. "That should do it…fire!"

The entire crew waited with bated breath as the stone flew in a high arc. At first it looked as if it would sail too far left. Then it gradually veered to the right, smashing with a loud, splintering crash into one of the main support poles of the tower. This elicited a loud cheer from both crewmen and on-looking legionary alike.

"Reload!" Gaius walked over to the next onager, giving them a similar series of directions as he helped them sight on the gatehouse. He quickly did the same with the third and fourth, ordering the ballista to concentrate on the gate itself.

The Vitellian defenders, clearly alarmed by this sudden change in the accuracy of their adversaries' heavy weapons, became more frantic in their

attempts to put the catapults out of commission. Onager and ballista shot flew quicker yet more erratically towards them.

“Steady lads,” Gaius said. He maintained his bearing, even though he thought he might shit himself if any of those large boulders landed any closer.

With a loud crack, the gate folded down the center as a ballista shot broke the cross brace on the other side. Seconds later a pair of onager stones slammed into the left tower, splintering timber and bringing the entire thing crashing down. The scorpion atop spilled into the trench. A pair of hapless soldiers who’d remained atop were flung from the falling defenses. Legionaries gave a loud battle cry, raising their weapons high. Gaius grinned in satisfaction at the result of their labors. He neither saw the large stone that flew right at them, nor did he hear the crashing of the onager being smashed apart. All he was aware of was the stabbing pain in his left thigh as he was knocked to the ground, landing hard on his injured arm.

His vision blurred. Gaius gritted his teeth as he tried to sit upright. He then saw the large splinter protruding from his left thigh. Unnerved by the ghastly sight, he yank the large chunk from his leg, gasping as fresh pain shot all the way up into his hip. The muscles were twitching, blood oozed from the hideous gash.

“Oh, this is not good,” was all he could think to say as he clasped his left hand over the wound, trying to hold the torn flesh together. Blood seeped through his fingers. He heard screams coming from some of the badly injured onager crew. One man’s right forearm was shattered, the bone jutting through the skin. Another had taken a large splinter to the throat, which he clawed at while his life’s blood flowed onto the ground. A third man lay motionless. Gaius could not tell if he was dead or had been knocked unconscious by flying debris.

“By Victoria’s cunt!” he heard Legionary Decius say as he rushed to his side. The young soldier took a long strip of rag and tied it over the wound.

“Damn, Gaius,” Centurion Nicanor added, kneeling beside him.

“It’s been quite the day,” the optio remarked. He attempted to grin through the terrible pain in his arm and leg. “I think it is time I allowed myself to be taken to the hospital.”

“That it is,” the centurion concurred. “I would say you’ve done enough for one day.”



“That did it!” General Primus shouted with glee. He was so focused on the destruction of the enemy defenses, he failed to notice one of his onagers had been shattered.

“Here, sir, you’ll need this,” a soldier said, handing him a shield. “Sorry that it’s a Vitellian shield; belonged to someone from Fifth Alaudae.”

“Hmm,” Primus said, apprising the battered scutum. He gave a shrug. “Well, why not.” He drew his gladius and walked over to Master Centurion Vitruvius. “You ready to take this fucking camp?”

“We are, sir,” the primus pilus acknowledged. He raised an eyebrow. “You’re coming with us?”

“Of course. I can’t very well sit on my ass doing nothing while the rest of you attack. That would be in poor taste. Besides, the emperor would never forgive me if I failed to set a proper example for my men.”

The commander-in-chief then forced his way through the ranks of his legion, taking his place in the center of the First Cohort. The young, inexperienced men of the Seventh Gemina Legion had proven their mettle time and again over the past two days. Now he would lead them to their greatest triumph.

“Seventh Gemina, follow me!”



Though the Vitellians had a strong position to defend from, there was little order to be had once two of their gatehouses were smashed by Flavian catapults. And while they had valiantly thrown back the initial assault by the Eighth and Thirteenth Legions, the camp was now being attacked on three sides. With two of their legions having fled for Cremona, and thousands of other troops having absconded altogether, they simply did not have the numbers to withstand a determined Flavian onslaught. General Manlius Valens had taken it upon himself to act as commanding general during the battle. Now, he was nowhere to be found.

“Bastard likely buggered off with the rest of his legion!” a soldier spat in anger, when asked where the legate was.

About the only officer who had not lost his head was Legate Claudius Zeno of Legio XXII. It was his soldiers who had repelled Thirteenth Gemina.

They now stood in well-disciplined battle ranks, ready to meet this latest assault. His legion had also been the only one to withdraw in order after the Vitellian lines broke. Nearly a third of all legionaries from Fifth Alaudae and Fourth Macedonia had abandoned the field. Legio IV's chief tribune had been among these. The commanding general of Legio V lay dead, brought down by a javelin during the night's intense fighting.

"Sir, the Flavians are through the south gate!" a rattled staff tribune reported. "The southeast ramparts are being overrun as well."

"There is only one thing left to do," the legate said grimly. While leaving the Primigenia Legion to hold the north ramparts, which had yet to be breached, he signaled for his cornicen and aquilifer to follow him.

At the very center of the large encampment was a tall platform the commanding legates used to address their soldiers. As Claudius stood atop, he looked to the south where thousands of Flavian troops had overrun the rather pitiful attempts by Fourth Macedonia to hold the gates. Many of these soldiers, along with a substantial number from Legio V, were rushing for the western gate. The Flavians had a blockade in place consisting of auxilia infantry and cavalry, but they would not have the numbers to stop such a surge of fleeing soldiery. Both the aquilifer and cornicen grimaced at the sight. Each understood why the legate ordered them to come with him.

"Order the stand-down," he directed.

The cornicen nodded glumly and sounded the somber notes on his horn. The aquilifer inverted the eagle standard and raised it up and down. Both armies used the same signals and trumpet calls. There was no mistaking the intent. Soldiers fleeing towards the western gate stopped, fearing they would still be assailed by the Flavian auxiliaries should they continue their attempt to reach Cremona. The soldiers of Fortuna's Twenty-Second Legion sheathed their gladii and laid their shields on the ground.

The Flavian Army had also ceased in its frenzied assaults. General Primus, his armor and gladius covered in blood from a nasty brawl his lead cohort had engaged in, ordered his own legions to stand down.

"Have all Vitellian soldiers disarmed and paraded outside the camp," he ordered. "I think I shall go have a chat with our adversaries' commanding general."

The Vitellian Army's remaining senior officers were waiting for him near the central principia. Primus was surprised to see that Caecina Alienus was

not among them. He did, however, recognize the commander of Legio XXII.

"Claudius Zeno," he said. "The gods have a sense of humor, it seems."

"A rather morbid one," Claudius replied, extending his hand.

While the two were not exactly friends, Claudius was one of the few members of the senate who ever spoke well of Antonius Primus. The Flavian general, in turn, had always given him a fair deal on his wine shipments, considering him off limits to any of his more corrupt money-making schemes.

"I was hoping to speak with General Caecina," Primus remarked. "He hasn't bought it or buggered off, has he?"

"In a manner of speaking," Claudius replied. "He tried to turn the army against Vitellius back at Hostilia."

Primus laughed out loud at this. "I knew it! A pity he failed to convince the rest of you lot to join him. We could have avoided this rather embarrassing affair."

"In retrospect, I would have to reluctantly agree," Claudius confessed. "Especially if we'd known Mucianus had already reached the field."

"What are you talking about?" Primus asked. His eyes grew wide. "By Diana's unsullied twat, is *that* why you fled from the field this morning?"

"You mean to tell me that was not Mucianus your men were hailing at dawn?" Claudius was aghast at what a profound misjudgment the entire army had made.

"No, that was just those silly buggers from Third Gallica hailing Sol Invictus. They do that every morning; odd little tradition they picked up in Syria."

Claudius could only shake his head. "And here I command Fortuna's Legion, yet she has clearly favored you this day. Come, we should discuss our terms of surrender inside."

"Gladly," Primus replied.

Chapter XIX: Revenge is My Name

Cremona
25 October 69 A.D.
***

The commanding generals dealt with the formalities. Centurions, options, and their decani went about the arduous task of overseeing the disarming of the Vitellian Army. Vitruvius had ordered their adversaries to not only disarm but to remove their armor. As tired as they were and having no more need of it, they were only happy to oblige. While his own troops stacked weapons and armor, the master centurion tasked the Vitellians with sorting the wounded from the dead. Artillery wagons were commandeered to transport the hundreds of badly injured soldiers to where the Flavian Army designated their casualty collection point.

Given the large numbers of slain and the filth brought on by the copious amounts of blood and gore, Vitruvius felt the Vitellian camp was no longer habitable. “Our own tents and camp equipment will be here by nightfall,” he reassured his subordinate centurions.

“In the meantime, what say we take care of those contemptuous bastards at Cremona?” the primus pilus of Legio XIII asked, his eyes filled with malice.

Having defeated the majority of the Vitellian Army, the men of the Thirteenth were anxious to exact retribution against the people of Cremona. Neither two days without sleep nor the exhaustion of fourteen hours of battle could assuage their wrath.

“We should wait and see what General Primus’ intentions are,” Vitruvius noted. “Besides, we have ten thousand prisoners to take care of.”

“Suit yourself,” the other master centurion said, with a shrug. “You want to keep an eye on the prisoners? Go ahead. Me and my lot are going to start wheeling these siege engines towards Cremona.”

Vitruvius grimaced, but said nothing. He could see the hateful gleam in his fellow senior centurion’s eye, despite his rather tranquil speech. He also

knew, despite thinking they should wait for confirmation from General Primus, that he could not order the master centurion to do anything. After all, the man was his peer and from another legion.

An hour later, while the soldiers of Thirteenth Gemina loaded the last of the Vitellian onagers and ballistae onto their transport wagons, Antonius Primus emerged from the principia. He was accompanied by his legates, as well as Claudius Zeno.

"Ah, Vitruvius," Primus said, wiping his tired, bloodshot eyes. His face was filthy, and he could not stop yawning.

"Sir, the lads of Thirteenth Gemina are headed for Cremona," the master centurion reported.

"Good," Aquila confirmed. "That means they are taking the initiative. And I see they have packed up the catapults." The legate was still smarting from the initial repulse of his legion during the attack on the camp. And like the rest of his men, he was anxious to put the people of Cremona in their place by the harshest means possible.

"Sir, they mean to burn the city to the ground," Vitruvius protested.

"So what if they do?" Aquila retorted. "That is not your concern, *centurion*."

"Alright," Primus said with irritation. Waving off his fellow legate, he addressed Vitruvius. "Whether Cremona gets sacked and destroyed depends on their behavior once we arrive at their walls. We'll try not to burn the entire place down, though." His words were unconvincing.

Vitruvius knew it was all he could ask.

Primus continued, "I want our lads and the detachments from Judea to see to the prisoners, as well as the wounded. I'll take the rest of the army and pay a little visit to what remains of our enemy at Cremona."

Claudius Zeno then spoke up. "General, if you have no more need of me, I would like to stay with my men."

"By all means," Primus replied. "Have a little chat with them and let them know what we discussed." As he walked away, looking for his groomsman and his horse, he was heard shouting, "Fuck me, I *stink!* Where in Hades can I go have a wash?"



Fear gripped the citizens of Cremona as their garrison legions fled

through the gates of the city. Many had witnessed the nighttime battle, many of the women bringing food and drink to their defenders. That much of this food had been given by the Vitellian Legions to their adversaries was appalling. In the chaos, many of their supposed protectors had now taken to looting, in the hopes of filling their packs with treasure before fleeing the city.

"The Flavian Army approaches!" the governor rushed into the palace.

General Manlius had taken up refuge inside and was completely beside himself. "How can they even walk, let alone fight?" That their adversaries were still battling after the horrific ordeals of the past two days was beyond comprehension.

"Sir, they've set fire to some of the villas outside the city gates!" a frantic councilman said. "And they approach with catapults."

"We have to put an end to this," Manlius said glumly. "Have Caecina brought to me at once."



"That's enough!" Primus shouted to a handful of soldiers who set fire to a pair of large houses in the district just outside the city gates. "We don't need to burn the whole quarter, just send a message to the people who've foolishly closed their gates to us." As he slowly rode over to the long line of onagers being staged, he kept sniffing under his armpits and looking offended.

"Onagers are ready, sir," a centurion reported.

"Very good," Primus replied with a loud yawn. "I want flaming shot only. We don't need to smash the shit out of the city walls. And besides, fire brands are more likely to scare the piss out of the good citizens."

It was indeed terrifying to both citizen and soldier alike within the walls of Cremona. The Flavians had taken every single catapult and ballista from the Vitellian camp that hadn't been smashed in the fray. All were arrayed in a line half a mile long, facing the eastern wall. Clay pots filled with pitch were ignited, and in cases where these were not available, crews simply tossed burning timbers from the blazing buildings nearby. General Primus, still astride his horse, raised his spatha high. As he brought it down in a long swoop, the clashing sound of throwing arms from scores of catapults flinging a terrifying volley of fire and death towards the city, echoed throughout. Many smashed against the walls in an impressive spray of liquid fire. Others

sailed over the walls and burst among the streets or against the closest buildings.

"Reload!" section leaders shouted.

Screams of horror reverberated from inside the city.



Caecina Alienus had been locked inside a dank dungeon cell for the better part of two weeks. His hair was disheveled, his face unshaven. He was filthy. The bruises on his face from where indignant soldiers had struck him had only just begun to heal. The disgraced Vitellian general could hear the screams and shouts of soldiers outside the palace and could only assume things had gone ill for his former army.

"Manlius Valens," he said, with disdain. "What pleasure is this? I thought for certain your cousin would wish to dispose of me."

"Unfortunately, the general—your co-consul I might add—is unwell and has not been able to travel. And it is not disposing of you that I intend, but rather to implore you for assistance."

"Why?" Caecina asked incredulously. "Have the great armies of the Rhine been defeated?"

"The Flavians are burning the city with their catapults," Manlius remarked. "And only two of my legions remain to defend against them. I need you to speak with them on our behalf."

"Fuck you," the consul said, plainly and without emotion. "If you bastards had listened to me in the first place, we could have joined with Vespasian, cast down the incompetent Vitellius, and spared Rome the horrors of another civil war. How many have died, then? Hundreds? Thousands? And what will happen to this defiant city once they do breach the walls? You're finished!"

There was an uneasy silence. Manlius did not know how to best respond.

Caecina sighed and decided to answer for him. "You would do well to release me, so I might bathe, shave, and change into my formal robes. I also want my lictors returned to me. Negotiate your own terms of surrender with the Flavians. Just remember, I am still Consul of Rome and should be treated as such."

There was no point in further debate. Manlius simply waved Caecina off. The consul and former general shoved his way past his guards and left the

chamber. The Vitellian commander was left to think of his own salvation now. The commanding legate of the Predator Legion had been badly wounded during the retreat to Cremona, which left only Manlius to negotiate with the hated Antonius Primus.



"Sir, they're hanging banners of truce from the walls!" a staff tribune shouted.

"Cease fire!" Primus called out.

The order was echoed all along the line of siege engines. An hour had passed since the first order to unleash was given. It was now close to midday, and the plumes of smoke from dozens of fires could be seen billowing over the city walls.

After a few minutes, the gates slowly opened with a loud groan. Primus and his entourage of legates and senior officers rode forward, the commander-in-chief dismounting near the large wall. He removed his helmet and ran his fingers through his matted and filthy hair, waiting to see who emerged from Cremona's defenses. Wails of pleading sorrow were heard coming from within, as many of the citizens begged the legions not to abandon them.

It was a very small delegation consisting of Manlius, the chief tribune from Legio XXI, and both aquilifers. No other officers or soldiers accompanied them.

"General Marcus Antonius Primus," he said slowly. He tasted bile, as he addressed the one he so hated. "I have come to negotiate the terms of surrender for the Italica and Predator Legions…"

"There is nothing to negotiate," Primus interrupted. His discussions with Claudius Zeno had lasted over an hour, and all he wanted at this point was to wash and rest. His biting tone told all that he was in no mood for niceties or parlance. "Your entire army will disarm and march through the city gates. From there, you will all be escorted to the Flavian camp two miles east of yours. After we have dealt with the people of this city, your fate will be decided."

Manlius nodded in grim understanding and returned back through the gates. The chief tribune and both aquilifers remained.

Primus turned to Legate Aquila. "I'll leave you to oversee this. I'm going

to find a place to wash and change into some more formal garb before we parlay with the governor of the city."

"There's a bathhouse about a quarter mile north of the main road," Aquila replied.

Primus made ready to leave. He was interrupted by a series of shouts from the growing number of legionaries forming ranks on either side of the city gate.

"Who the fuck is the pretty boy?" one man shouted.

"He's dressed as a gods' damned consul!" another added.

"Bloody hell, it's that faithless twat, Caecina!"

Having bathed, shaved, and donned his best toga complete with consular regalia, Caecina Alienus had not expected to be assailed with insults from the very soldiers he had attempted to defect to. Legionaries had their blades drawn and were roughly handling the lictors who had acted as his escorts. Others were threatening the consul directly.

"Stand down, damn you!" Primus shouted, quickly shoving his way past his soldiers.

They were disgusted at the sight of Caecina.

"A warm welcome, I see," the former Vitellian general said. His voice was full of sarcasm, though his eyes betrayed his feelings of terror. "Is this how the Flavian armies greet the Consul of Rome?"

"Piss on you!" a legionary spat. "At least those we fought did so with honor. You are a soulless viper!"

"Enough already!" Primus snapped. He was now extremely agitated, especially since his bath had been interrupted.

Soldiers on either side took several steps back, while others unhanded the terrified lictors.

"Thank you," Caecina said, suddenly humbled as he quickly walked away from the growing columns with Primus.

The Flavian general was once more looking to find the bathhouse in this abandoned, yet rather wealthy district.

As they walked, Caecina asked awkwardly, "What would you have of me? I cannot exactly return to Rome."

"No, you cannot," Primus concurred. "Especially since everyone from Vitellius on down to the plebs knows about your attempt to have your army defect to us."

"That I did, and yet your own soldiers assailed me for it."

“They respect courage and those who honor their oaths,” Primus replied with a shrug. “What do you expect them to do? Welcome you with open arms?”

“To be honest, that is what I expected,” Caecina said, feeling rather foolish.

“I’m sending you to Vespasian,” the Flavian general stated.

“You are asking me to travel all the way to Judea?”

Primus stopped in his tracks and turned to face him. His expression was hard. “I’m not *asking* you to do anything. I am *telling* you that you are going to Vespasian. I have no use for you here. You’d be lucky if you didn’t wake up one morning with your throat cut. And as you have just seen, irate legionaries don’t always honor the inviolability of a Roman consul.”

“It’s just as well,” Caecina remarked. “Vitellius has likely revoked my position. Besides, I was only suffect consul, and my term was set to terminate at the end of this month. To Vespasian I will go and offer supplication.”

“He’ll treat you far better than you would have gotten with my lads or if you’d returned to Rome…ah, here we are, then!”

The bathhouse was smaller, but still had all of the cold, hot, and warm plunge baths. There was even a room where one could be oiled and scraped by slaves. Slaves were the only people around, and they had remained in hiding since their masters fled for the safety of the walls.

“Make ready a bath for me!” Primus shouted, his voice echoing.

“Your pardon, sir,” a middle-aged slave said, coming from one of the back rooms. “The fires are not lit, and it will take some time for the hot waters of the caldarium to be sufficiently heated.”

“So light the fucking thing,” Primus said, his voice louder than he normally would have intended. “The whole damn thing will burn hot soon enough.”

What the general did not know was that a single staff tribune and several legionaries from Legio XIII happened to walk by the bathhouse as he uttered those words. They looked at each other with raised eyebrows. The tribune gave a nod as the men hurried back to their commanding legate. They did not hear Primus’ next words, regarding how his muscles would be better served with a cold plunge first. All they heard was, *‘The whole damn thing will burn hot soon enough.’*



Legates Aquila, Lupus, and the rest of the Flavian commanding officers sat astride their mounts at the end of a long stretch of road leading from the city gates. Two large columns of soldiers lined either side of the road. All watched as the eagles and other standards from the two Cremonan Legions were marched out of the gates. They were soon followed by the legates and tribunes who remained mounted. These were followed by the dejected columns of legionaries, all in parade formation, with their centurions marching at the head.

The victorious Flavians at first hurled insults at their defeated adversaries. The Vitellians kept their heads high, maintaining their dignity, and the abuse quickly changed to solemn respect. After all, these were the same soldiers who had called the midnight truce, complete with food and drink for their enemies.

At the end of the long walk, a half mile from the gates, the standards were planted behind the line of Flavian officers. The aquilifers and signifiers then stripped out of their armor, which was laid in a pile off to one side. As each cohort reached the end of the walk, they drew their blades, saluted the Flavians, and laid them off to the opposite side of their armor.

“They were worthy adversaries,” Chief Tribune Messalla said. He then added thoughtfully, “I will be glad when we can welcome them back as our brothers.”

“There are a few things that need to happen first,” Aquila remarked.

It took the better part of two hours for the Vitellian Legions to march out of the city and lay down their arms. As soon as each cohort was disarmed, they were marched to the Flavian camp several miles up the road. As the defeated soldiers had given their vow not to flee or attempt to renew hostilities, only a handful of escorts were sent with each cohort. Last to come out of the city were the wounded. Though most of the more badly injured had been captured before they could reach the city, there were still between two and three hundred that were carried out on oxcarts or who attempted to walk, held up by their mates. These men made their way past the line of Flavian officers, offering neither salute nor acknowledgment. The victorious legionaries looked to their commanders as they milled about.

“Time for Cremona to pay for its treachery,” a voice was heard saying, from the ranks.

“Bastards thought they could humiliate us, now it’s time for retribution,”

another muttered.

People were slowly emerging from the city, curiosity and confinement to its walls finally getting the best of them. The throngs of soldiers varied in their demeanor between indifferent and hostile. The harshest reactions came naturally from those of Thirteenth Gemina.

“General Aquila!” a tribune shouted, as he rushed over to his commanding legate.

“What is it?”

“It would seem General Primus has given his authorization to sack the city.”

“What do you mean ‘it would seem’?” the legate asked, his brow scrunched in contemplation.

“His exact words were, *‘the whole damn thing will burn hot soon enough’*,” the tribune explained.

“That’s good enough for us, sir!” a nearby centurion shouted.

The men in the ranks were getting extremely agitated, and neither lack of sleep nor extreme fatigue could quell their rising lust for vengeance.

Aquila, who was of the same mind as his soldiers, nodded in concurrence. He drew his spatha and addressed the mob. *“Legions of Vespasian! The City of Cremona has committed acts of both treason and sedition against you. Its people aided and even fought beside the enemy, thereby forfeiting their rights as citizens of the empire. The city is yours, my brothers!”*

This was met with a voracious shouts of triumph and rage. The humiliation the people had visited upon Thirteenth Gemina would be repaid in fire and bloodshed. The other Flavian legions, anxious for plunder, echoed the calls for Cremona’s destruction. People screamed in horror as swords were drawn and the victorious soldiers attacked them with an unholy frenzy. There was no time to flee nor to attempt to close the gates.

Within moments, scores, then hundreds, and finally thousands of legionaries and auxiliaries spilled into the large city. The women were treated with exceptional cruelty. They had not only provided food for their enemies, many had taken up arms and fought beside the Vitellians during the previous night’s battle. The governing mayor of the city stumbled from the mass of terrified citizens who were being beaten and in some cases killed by the rampaging mob.

“What is the meaning of this?” he shrieked, as he came upon General Aquila. “Why, why are you doing this?”

“It is the price Cremona must pay for its folly,” Aquila said, his eyes boring into the man.

“Who are you?” the mayor asked, his voice venomous. “What pit of Hades did you crawl out of?”

The legate dismounted his horse, his sword drawn. He stood almost nose-to-nose with the despondent magistrate for a brief moment, then plunged his blade into the man’s guts. The mayor gasped as Aquila grabbed him roughly by the hair.

“Revenge is my name,” he hissed into the man’s ear before slashing him across the throat.



The enraged legions didn’t know that not every Vitellian soldier had dutifully surrendered. There were many hundreds still in hiding within the city’s walls. Not because they wished to continue to fight, though. Because they knew Cremona was for the sack, they wished to take part in the looting of spoils. They had discarded their shields, which was the only means of identifying them as Vitellians. Still wearing the armor and helmets of imperial soldiers, they would be lost among the masses with complete autonomy to brutalize and steal from the very citizens they were supposed to defend.

All the while, Marcus Antonius Primus, the commander-in-chief of Vespasian’s army, soaked his tired and battered body in the frigid waters of the bathhouse’s cold plunge. It would be some time before he finished his bath, shave, and a massage given by the terrified slaves of the facility. His manservant brought him his finest toga. He changed so he could be appropriately dressed when he met with the city’s governing council. Little did he know, the mayor of Cremona was dead and most of the councilmen either cowering in their homes or fled from the city. Primus’ brutally fought triumph was now being tarnished by the horrific and disgraceful conduct of his victorious army.

Chapter XX: Brothers in Death

Flavian camp, outside of Cremona
Midafternoon
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Six miles from the city, the Flavian camp was oblivious to the profane destruction being wrought on Cremona. Few would have given the city much sympathy, not even the Vitellian prisoners. All had speculated that the Flavians would unleash their wrath upon the populace, especially the vengeful Legio XIII. Many of the soldiers who now milled about aimlessly, waiting for word from their officers regarding the surrender, lamented that they had not stayed to take part in the looting with their more adventurous friends.

The Flavians who had remained at the camp were more concerned about taking care of the vast numbers of wounded, while sorting out the living from the dead. The Vitellians offered to assist them, as many of the fallen were their own soldiers. The long caravan of wagons bearing the hospital tents had arrived, along with scores of surgeons, medics, and civilian volunteers from Bedriacum. It was they who would deal with the terrible suffering that came in the aftermath of every battle.

In all, each side had lost between eight hundred and a thousand dead, with four to five times as many wounded. And with the Vitellians having surrendered, it was left to the victorious Flavians to care for all the casualties left on the field. Unlike the Vitellians, who had left the defeated Othonians where they fell, the Flavians felt duty-bound to care for all of their wounded countrymen. They had also captured nearly two thousand prisoners during the night, including those that surrendered to Centurion Galeo and the Seventh Claudia's reserve cohorts. Now the outskirts of the camp swelled with the many thousands of men captured at the Vitellian camp, while the cohorts from Cremona slowly began to arrive.

Gaius was beyond exhausted, yet he was unable to sleep, so great was the pain in his arm. His left hand clutched his right wrist and held it against his

stomach. That seemed to be the only way to keep his arm still. The wound to his leg was also painful, the crude bandage saturated with coagulated blood.

“Fifteen dead,” he overheard Centurion Galeo say. “Including the seven we lost destroying those Vitellian siege engines. Another forty were wounded.”

“We marched from Bedriacum with just under four hundred men in the ranks,” another centurion noted. “And we weren’t even at the heart of the fighting.”

That so many of their soldiers had fallen was a somber reminder of just how bitter the struggle had been.

Casualties for both armies were appalling, though they could have conceivably been much worse. The armor worn by legionaries offered them substantial protection. As such, there were fewer injures to the chest or upper abdomen on the wounded. Most of the dead had been struck in the exposed neck, lower abdomen, groin, or thigh. The bombardment from the Vitellian catapult and ballistae had wreaked exceptional havoc on the Seventh Gemina Legion.

Unsurprisingly, Gaius had to wait some time to be seen. With the surgeons overwhelmed by the more gravely wounded, scores of medics were dispersed to do what they could for the rest. It was a Syrian aid-man who finally came to see the optio. The man looked very young with a few days of stubble covering his otherwise boyish face.

“Nature of your injuries?” the man asked, as he knelt beside Gaius.

“Ballista shot to the arm,” the optio said, through gritted teeth. He clutched his arm close to his body and nodded to his leg. “And a nice little gouge, courtesy of a shattered onager.”

The medic took hold of his arm, causing Gaius to fight back the tears of pain. The whole of his upper arm was almost completely purple with a hideous scraping gash covering the outside of his bicep and triceps. The medic was quick yet thorough. He gently grabbed at various parts of the arm, working it through its normal range of motion. It was excruciating. Bolts of pain shot through Gaius’ entire body. He was now sweating profusely, his face pale.

“From the looks of it, it does not appear to be broken,” the Syrian man noted. “However, the bone has been severely traumatized. The muscles and tendons have taken some severe damage as well.”

“I suppose I’m fortunate it didn’t take my arm completely off,” the optio

said, thinking back to the poor legionary who'd been decapitated by the same shot. Gaius was breathing rapidly, despite his effort to remain composed.

"Had it struck a couple inches to the right, we would not be having this conversation," the medic replied bluntly. "Your arm would have been ripped off and carried fifty feet from your body. You would have bled to death within minutes. Now, we need to get you out of your armor. I need you to sit upright."

Gaius did as he was told, though he was so exhausted it took every ounce of his strength to sit up completely.

The medic then straightened his arm out to the side. "Can you undo the ties on your armor?"

With his left hand, Gaius struggled to unlace the six sets of leather ties that held the segmented plates across his torso. It was tedious, and the pain in his arm was made worse by the medic holding it out. He jerked on the leather strap and undid the buckle that held the chest plates together. His armor fell off his left arm, while the medic unstrapped the right chest plate from the torso, allowing the optio's armor to collapse to the ground.

"Place your right hand up on your left shoulder," he directed. As Gaius did so, the man took a wide swath of cloth and wrapped it around his arm and chest, creating a sling for his stricken limb. "You won't be using this arm for quite a while. The muscle and tendons should heal over time. Whether or not you regain full usage will depend on the extent of the damage done."

"How long?" Gaius asked.

"A couple of months, maybe more. All depends on your body's natural constitution. I would say that if you have not regained full use of it within six months, then you never will. Now, let's take a look at your leg."

Gaius bit the inside of his cheek as the rag was pulled from the gash. The clotted blood caused it to stick and tear the wound open afresh.

"They got you pretty deep," the Syrian said, as he dabbed at the gash. "We need to wash this out and stitch it up. I've got some dried herbs that should prevent infection provided you don't rip it open again."

He poured water on and around the wound, which he quickly wiped away with a rag. He squeezed around the injury, draining out the water, blood, and other fluids. He then held the gash closed with one hand and with a brass needle began to stitch the torn flesh together.

"Damn it all," Gaius said, the sharp poking for the moment hurting even more than his arm. "What are you using, a spike for sewing leather tarps?"

“Now that you mention it,” the medic replied with a macabre chuckle. He then wrapped a fresh bandage around the injured leg. “There you are. Don’t be catching gangrene and you’ll be able to walk within a month or so.”

The man excused himself and quickly moved to the next wounded man; a legionary with a hideous gash across his neck. That the soldier had not already bled to death meant the wound was not fatal unless infection set in. The Syrian aid-man said as much.

Gaius slowly worked his way up to his knees, doing everything he could to not jar his bad arm or bend his injured leg. He picked up his scabbarded gladius. He had no idea what he should do with his armor and helmet, so he simply left them where they were. He doubted anyone would pilfer them; and even if they did, he did not care at the moment. His shield was lying on the ground somewhere near the base of the hill. At least that had his name inscribed on the inside! The blinding pain had subsided to a dull, very pronounced ache. Having his arm wrapped against his body did much to help his mobility, though his leg was stiff and refused to work properly.

He used his optio’s staff to stand up. All he wanted to do was get away from the vast scene of suffering that unfolded before him. With not enough tents to house the thousands of injured soldiers, those not critically wounded were left out in the open. If they were lucky, someone had found their traveling cloaks to lie on, though this was rare at best. And as the Flavian doctors were treating friend and foe alike, legionaries and auxilia troopers from both sides were co-mingled in a mass of humanity that stretched for half a mile in each direction. Few complained. The fighting, as far as any of them could reckon, was over.

The Vitellian eagles and the thousands of prisoners taken at Cremona were marched along the road, a hundred meters or so from where Gaius now stood. Those who did not volunteer to help the wounded would be kept in the open under a minimal guard. Wagons and pack animals bearing rations had followed the field hospital, and so the Flavians were able to return the favor of providing food and drink to their vanquished foes.

Gaius took a deep breath and looked up at the sky. There were only a few wisps of clouds. At least the wounded would not get rained on this day. The lack of rain, however, reminded him of just how thirsty he was. His lips were parched, and his mouth was so dry he could not spit even if he wanted to. He started to slowly hobble towards the main Flavian camp. He wished to get away from the sea of sorrows. As he reached the edge of the mass of

wounded, he thought he heard a voice whisper his name.

"Gaius…"

Gaius was the most common of Roman given names. The voice could have been calling to any number of people; a best friend, a son…a brother. He started to scan the pain-stricken faces of the wounded men nearest him. His heart almost stopped as he saw one badly injured man lying not ten feet from him near the edge of the road. He was naked to the waist, his stomach wrapped in bandages saturated with a dark crimson stain.

"By Diana," he said quietly. "Lucius…"

He nearly collapsed as he fell near where his brother lay. Lucius' face was pale and clammy, his eyes coming in and out of focus as he struggled to hold on to life.

"Dear brother," Gaius said. He then clutched Lucius' hand, his own severe pain forgotten. "What happened to you?"

"We were taking a hilltop…thought we had you lot outflanked when we ran into a cohort of legionaries. One of them caught me with a javelin. Went right through my damned armor."

A tear streamed down Gaius' face as memories of the night before suddenly flooded back. With over thirty thousand men on each side, and a battle frontage that extended a mile or greater, how could the fates be so cruel to place the two brothers at the exact same spot? Gaius then knew, it was Lucius who had nearly run him down. He hated himself for having smashed his brother with his shield, after Lucius had already been stricken by a legionary's pilum. And though he did not know it, fate had been particularly unkind that day. There was a new recruit from Legio VII, Gemina who slew his own father in Legio I, Italica. And also a father in Legio VIII killed his own son, who served with Legio XXII. An inconceivable number of men had fallen to the blows wrought by their own kinsmen. Many would later say it was the gods' punishment for the Romans making war on each other.

"What…what were you doing here?" Gaius persisted.

"My duty," Lucius replied. "Just as you were. I have no regrets, dear brother. I fought for the cause I believed in. I only wish I could have lived to see an end to this senseless killing of our fellow countrymen."

Gaius wanted to reassure his brother, to tell him that his wounds were not so bad, and that he would recover in time. Such talk would be a lie. He would not so disrespect Lucius during his last moments in this life. Abdominal injuries were not only terribly painful, but they took an agonizingly long time

to perish from. It had already been almost sixteen hours since Lucius had been struck down, and still he lingered. Perhaps the gods were being merciful enough to allow him to find some closure with his brother who, even after all these years apart, he still loved dearly. Gaius vowed not to leave his side until Lucius' soul departed for Elysium.

"I regret," Lucius said quietly, "the jealousy I bore towards you. I always envied you, because you were given the freedom to choose what path your life would take. For years, all I ever wanted was to be a soldier…and now, the gods have granted my request, yet they demand that I pay the highest price for it."

"You have nothing to regret, dear brother," Gaius said. He squeezed his hand, in the vain hope that somehow he could give him a portion of his life's energy. "You fought valiantly, and you have done your duty."

Lucius forced a weak smile, but was then saddened once more. "Our poor mother," he said. "This will break her heart. Give my love to Mother and Father, and to my dearest Laura. To think I should repay her love by making her a widow so young."

Another four hours would pass. The late afternoon sun glared down, almost accusingly, upon the battlefield of Cremona. As a gentle breeze blew in from the east, Lucius Artorius Magnus finally breathed his last. Gaius stayed with him, and as his brother's eyes clouded over, his last breath slowly easing from his lungs, the once stoic optio openly wept. His broken heart hurt far worse than his physical injuries, and he was blinded by the tears he was no longer ashamed of. After several minutes of uncontrolled sobbing, he managed to compose himself. He closed Lucius' eyes and kissed him on the forehead, saying a quick prayer to any gods who may have been listening, that his brother would find his way to the Fields of Elysium.



It was with both sadness and relief that Claudius Zeno addressed the survivors of the Vitellian Army. Manlius Valens had appointed himself as their commanding general during the battle, yet he remained silent and sulking as Claudius addressed the mass of soldiery.

"Soldiers of the Imperial Army," he said, his voice cracking slightly. "You have fought well, having gone beyond the limits of both valor and duty. But for us, this war is over. Now we must look to heal the wounds inflicted

by our brothers-in-arms. We have fulfilled our oaths to Vitellius and must now renew the same pledge, this time to Vespasian."

There were no retorts or words of protest. The defeated soldiers were exhausted beyond measure and found they no longer cared who they served. Each understood there were far worse potential Caesars than Vespasian. Their oaths satisfied, the legions that had bloodied themselves in two wars for Vitellius quietly yearned to never draw another blade against a fellow Roman.



Antonius Primus knew he was facing a political and diplomatic dilemma. He had emerged from his bath cleaned, revitalized, and ready to accept the surrender of the city. Instead, he found the governor dead, and his army unleashed beyond his ability to control them.

The Vitellian legions and the city of Cremona had all surrendered. And yet, by removing himself from the scene to have a bath, he had completely lost command of his soldiers. Thousands of legionaries and auxiliary troopers now rampaged the city; looting, burning, and killing all who tried to stop them. Even the centurions, whose job it was to maintain order, were taking part in the destruction.

As Primus walked over to where his commanding legates and chief tribunes were gathered, all appeared dejected despite their great victory. Only Aquila was grinning with sinister delight; his legion finally had its revenge. Primus wondered if their dejection was due to losing control of their legions or if it was because they had lost the opportunity to fatten their own coffers.

"Probably a little of both," he said quietly to himself.

"What was that, general?" Legate Lupus asked.

The commander-in-chief simply shook his head. "Now it becomes tricky. We've laid waste to a Roman city. We must make it appear to be the Vitellians' fault. Hard to do since they surrendered and marched their legions out of the city before we did this."

The army's lust for plunder and retribution against Cremona would not be satiated for another three days. The officers watched as legionaries made their way from the Flavian camp to take their share in the spoils. All of this reflected poorly upon Marcus Antonius Primus. Romans firmly believed the actions and character of the legions directly mirrored that of their

commanding general.

“To be fair, the people did attempt to flee into the city and bar the gates,” Master Centurion Vitruvius said, as he walked towards the group of senior officers. The primus pilus for Legio VII, Gemina was partly ashamed that he had been unable to keep his own men in line. Although they could hardly be blamed, once the entire army went berserk.

Still, it was a weak argument. Even if the people had managed to bar the gates against the Flavian Army, with the Vitellian Legions gone there had been no one left to protect them. Saner heads would have prevailed, undoubtedly coming to a settlement. Regardless of provocation, be it real or fabricated, Antonius Primus knew the city of Cremona and its tens-of-thousands of citizens did not deserve the horrific fate that now befell them.

“Fuck it,” he said, in the exact same dismissive tone he’d used when he received word of Emperor Otho’s defeat and suicide.

Chapter XXI: Thunder in the Silence

Bononia, Italia
29 October 69 A.D.
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For Fabius Valens, the incapacitation brought on by a sudden stomach illness would prove disastrous. He had made it as far as Bononia, along the Via Aemilia, which lay halfway between Ariminum and Cremona. Word had reached him rather quickly regarding the horrific defeat of his northern army. Antonius Primus had sent laticlavian and staff tribunes from the defeated Vitellian legions to spread the word of his victory throughout the western empire. And while these officers were dispatched to Germania, Gaul, Hispania, and even far-flung Britannia, the Flavian commanding general thought it would be mildly amusing if it were Valens' own cousin, Manlius, who delivered the message of his army's destruction.

"The entire army, lost?" Valens asked, his mind refusing to grasp the magnitude of the disaster.

His cousin nodded. "It was perfidy that undid us," he stressed. He spent the next hour telling Valens of all that had transpired. He changed many of the details, while outright omitting others. No mention was made of Primus' almost disastrous decision to force march his legions sixteen miles and send them into battle. Nor did Manlius dare speak of the impromptu truce orchestrated by his legionaries, or the panic that swept over his forces when they thought Mucianus had arrived from Syria. Instead, he fabricated a type of treachery brought on by Caecina's sympathizers, led by Claudius Zeno.

"Why would Claudius betray us?" Valens asked, completely perplexed by the idea.

"I don't know," Manlius replied. "But seeing as how Primus has allowed him to retain his command while dismissing the rest of us, makes me think he was in collusion with the Flavians from the very beginning."

The elder Valens stood and paced the room, his hands clasped behind his back. His entire army of five legions, numerous vexilations from seven more, and countless regiments of auxilia infantry and cavalry were lost. He now

regretted sending Legio IV, Macedonia to reinforce Cremona. All Valens had with him was a regiment of cavalry, three regiments of auxilia infantry, and a handful of legionary vexilations and praetorian cohorts; scarcely four thousand total fighting men. Another legion could have given him a viable force with which to make a defensive stand until reinforcements arrived. Instead, the soldiers of Fourth Macedonia and the rest of the northern army had most likely changed their allegiance to Vespasian. While Valens did not expect Primus to be so brazen as to try and compel the former Vitellian legions to march with him, he still had a formidable army in its own right. At least Valens reckoned they were formidable. They had, after all, defeated the feared Army of the Rhine! And Mucianus was still out there, somewhere between Syria and Northern Italia.

"The fates test us, dear cousin," he said, after a long and uncomfortable silence. "Betrayal seems to spread like a disease. First Caecina, then Claudius, and now the Ravenna fleet."

"We've lost the fleet?" Manlius asked, his eyebrows raised.

"Apparently they defected to Vespasian around the same time as my former colleague, Caecina. But all is not lost. Germania, Gaul, and Hispania still remain loyal. And though it will take some time to bring troops all the way from Britannia, they have a sizeable army with which to swell our ranks."

"What would you have me do?" Manlius asked. He sought to find even a glimmer of the same hope that his cousin exuded.

"You will be my messenger to the emperor," Valens explained. "I will withdraw our forces here back to Narnia. It is much closer to Rome and the most direct route to the capital. It is also in the mountains and commands an ideal defensive position. We could hold indefinitely against the Flavians, even if they outnumbered us ten-to-one."

"I will have every praetorian sent from Rome to reinforce you," Manlius asserted.

"You do that. Our cavalry will head towards Ravenna to prevent any incursion by the enemy fleet. Auxilia cohorts will blockade the road south to Ariminum. While the remainder of our men fortify Narnia against the Flavian scourge, I will take one of our fastest ships to Gallia Narbonensis."



While Fabius Valens hastened west towards the port city of Pisae in the hope of finding allies to continue the fight against Vespasian, the emperor and senate in Rome had yet to receive word about the magnitude of the disaster suffered by the northern army. Vitellius was aware of Caecina's betrayal, as well as the defection of the Ravenna fleet. However, he was supremely confident that Valens and the Rhine Army would make short work of Antonius Primus. Mucianus would afterwards be compelled to either change allegiances, or fight a losing battle long after the Vitellians had called up more reinforcements from around the empire.

"One way or the other, this war needs to end soon," Marius Celsus said, during a private meeting with his former fellow Othonian general, Suetonius Paulinus. Ever the ultimate political survivalist, Celsus had been given a suffect consulship for July and August by Vitellius. Meanwhile, Paulinus had been expelled from the imperial court and threatened with exile. Regardless of the emperor's animosity towards the former general, Celsus still regarded Paulinus as both a confidant and friend.

"Northern Britannia has already suffered as a result of our internal quarrels," Paulinus observed. "Our noble ally, Queen Cartimandua, has been overthrown by a rebellion led by her former husband."

"So I heard," Celsus remarked. "A lot of trouble will now come from the Kingdom of the Brigantes, who have been our allies for the past twenty-six years."

"They aided us considerably during the war against Boudicca and the Iceni," Paulinus remembered. Cartimandua had further sealed her personal alliance with the Roman general by taking him into her bed on several occasions during Paulinus' governorship; something he remembered most fondly. "But with the empire tearing itself apart, there simply were not enough soldiers available to save her kingdom."

"The queen herself was saved, though?" Celsus conjectured.

"She was. But the kingdom was lost to an extremely hostile enemy. It is not just in Britannia that troublesome provincials are causing havoc. Another of our former allies, the Batavi in Germania, has openly rebelled, but the Rhine Army is in no position to put them down."

"The Fifth Alaudae Legion was supposed to deal with the situation," Celsus noted. "However, as I understand it, Valens procured them for his fight against Vespasian. We should count ourselves fortunate that the Jewish zealots are embroiled in their own civil war at the moment. Otherwise, we

could risk losing much of the territory our friend, Vespasian, has re-conquered these past two years."

"In other words, if this war does not end soon, Rome risks falling apart from within," Paulinus said thoughtfully. "If the empire were to ever fall, it would not be from external conquest but because we destroyed ourselves."



Near midday, three days after the sacking of Cremona came to an end, the entire Flavian Army stood in a massed parade formation on the open plane that surrounded their camp. Clustered close together, ten ranks deep, the legions and auxilia infantry formed a large hollow square on three sides; each of which extended over half a mile. Master centurions and cohort commanders stood in a long line in front of their respective units. The fourth side of the square was occupied by the Army's Cavalry Corps. All faced towards the inside of the square where General Primus, the legates, chief tribunes, and regimental commanders stood. It was a cloudy day, heralding the coming of the late fall and winter rains that would soon turn the entire valley into a virtual swamp. A breeze blew across the plane, causing officers' crests and vexilation flags to whip about.

"Soldiers of Rome!" Primus shouted, his voice echoing loudly. *"We have fought a terrible battle and emerged victorious. While our triumph was wrought by the collective skill and valor of every man here, there are five exceptionally valiant souls who we honor for their bravery and personal sacrifice. By their actions, the Vitellian siege engines were silenced, saving countless lives and leading us to ultimate victory."*

There were a number of murmurings of approval from the ranks, in particular those of Seventh Gemina who had been savaged by the enemy catapults and ballistae. Primus turned to Legate Aquila, who read off the list of names.

"Optio Gaius Artorius Armiger, Legionary Decius Arsinius Olennius, Legionary Drusus Tertinius Caelianus, Legionary Manius Avidius Longinus, Legionary Titus Vesuvius Belletor…post!"

The five soldiers, who stood together in front of the massed formation of legionaries, walked slowly over to their collected senior commanders. Of the twelve who attacked the enemy siege engines, only these five had survived. Besides Gaius, two others were badly wounded. Gaius used his optio's staff

to help him hobble across the field. The other uninjured survivor stood between his two mates, helping them make their way over. The assembled generals were in their armor and helmets, but Primus had directed these men wear only their tunics and sword baldrics.

A staff tribune carried a stack of laurel crowns, and he walked behind his commander-in-chief, who took each crown in turn, placing them on the heads of the survivors.

General Aquila continued, *"In the name of the Senate and the People of Rome, and by the authority of Emperor Titus Flavius Vespasian. For valor and extreme courage, far beyond that expected of an imperial soldier, and for saving the lives of many of your brethren, you are hereby awarded the Civic Crown. May your bravery in the face of danger continue to set an example to all soldiers of the empire."*

With the last crown presented, Primus took a few steps back from the men. *"Legions,"* he barked. *"Gladius…draw!"*

A thundering shout resounded from over thirty thousand voices as blades flashed from their scabbards. The assembled legates and senior commanders drew their own weapons. The entire army raised their swords in salute. The five soldiers nodded in acknowledgment. Only two of them were even able to draw their gladii. The short ceremony complete, centurions quickly dismissed their legions.

It was strange for Gaius. He wasn't sure exactly how he was supposed to feel about being presented with one of Rome's most prestigious military decorations. The Civic Crown was the highest award for valor that a soldier from the ranks could receive and was specifically for saving the life of a fellow soldier or citizen. The only award of greater precedence was the Grass Crown, given to a commanding officer whose actions had saved an entire army. Only a handful of these had ever been awarded during Rome's eight hundred year history, and the only currently living recipient was, ironically, Aula Vale's father, Aulus Nautius Cursor.

Unbeknownst to any man on that parade field, Cursor's Grass Crown had been awarded during the same battle in which Vitruvius' father had been killed. Gaius' father and grandfather were badly wounded during the same action. Nor did the master centurion of Seventh Gemina or the young optio from Tenth Fretensis know that Vitruvius' father had been both friend and mentor to Gaius' grandfather. In the span of just forty years, the memory of such shared histories was lost forever.



Whether by coincidence or deliberate design, the months of September and October were among the least busy for the Roman senate. Come November, the elections for the next year's two consuls would bring about a short season of political campaigning, where likely candidates attempted to coerce their peers into selecting them. Vitellius was considering nominating his old friend and son-in-law, Valerius Asiaticus, to one of the consulships, while he had named himself as the other consul for the next ten years. December, in turn, was dominated by preparations for the Saturnalia celebrations, with most of the empire's political business left dormant until the start of the next year.

The two months prior to this were often a time of rest and minimal work for the imperial government. Most senators took an extended holiday during this time, though with the crisis in the north, few strayed far from Rome. Emperor Vitellius, meanwhile, retired from the capital to his family's villa in the town of Aricia, a half day's ride southeast of the capital.

Some of his political critics argued that Vitellius should have taken a more direct hand in leading his army against the rebellious Flavians. However, as he had during the war against Otho, Vitellius recognized his shortcomings as a military leader. And so, he had deferred to Caecina and Valens, his two most competent generals. Though he was troubled by hearing of Caecina's betrayal and attempted defection to Vespasian, he was heartened to hear the vile traitor had been thrown into chains and imprisoned. His confidence had been further enhanced with the news that Marcus Antonius Primus had invaded Northern Italia without reinforcements from Mucianus, who was thought to still be in Greece or Dacia. The emperor was supremely confident that matters regarding the war were well in hand. So he elected to retire to his villa, for what he felt was a well-deserved holiday.

Despite this reprieve from the strains of ruling the empire, Vitellius was feeling rather ill during the last week in October. His gout was acting up again, and he found himself having to walk with a cane. He was only fifty-four years of age; six years younger than his imperial rival, Vespasian. Years of soldiering and his ever-vigorous lifestyle had blessed Vespasian with a constitution normally seen in one half his age. Vitellius was constantly plagued by sickness and other physical ailments. His obesity contributed

greatly to this, though none had the courage to tell the emperor to cut back on his incessant feasting.

Vitellius' wife, Galeria, joined him at their estate with their six-year old son, Germanicus. Though the senate reluctantly accepted her husband as ruler of Rome, Galeria had trouble thinking of herself as Empress of Rome. Vitellius wondered if it was because the reigns of his two predecessors were so short. Perhaps Galeria worried her husband would meet a similar ignominious fate.

Late one morning, after a lengthy and filling breakfast, the emperor found his wife playing with their son in one of the walled gardens within the estate.

"It has been good to have you here with me," he said, feeling rather awkward at his choice of words. Though they'd been married for sixteen years, they had grown even further apart since the armies of the Rhine declared him emperor. "You know I regretted not being able to return to you sooner, but there were so many issues that delayed my arrival in Rome."

"I go where my husband needs me," Galeria replied, her voice devoid of any emotion. "And you needed me here. When will you return to Rome?"

"Tomorrow," Vitellius replied, suspecting his wife was glad to be rid of him again. He leaned against his cane awkwardly watching Galeria, who was engrossed in watching her son play. "There's the matter of Caecina's betrayal to address, and of course we must look to the consular elections next month. I'm considering nominating Valerius to one of the positions."

"Our son-in-law will serve the empire well," Galeria said, not looking at him.

"Yes…well, will I see you at supper this evening?"

"If that is your wish."

As Vitellius left the garden, his face was red with anger. He detested the way his wife spoke to him; yet because she was never rude or blatantly disrespectful, he could never find it within him to berate her. He was Emperor of Rome, yet he was afraid to chastise his own wife!

That she had been only fourteen when betrothed to marry the thirty-nine year old Vitellius was hardly out of the norm. Young girls, especially those within the nobility, were often married off to older men in order to cement political alliances as soon as they were old enough to bleed. Giving birth to their daughter, Vitellia, scarcely a year later had been an arduous ordeal. Because of this, there was a large age difference between their two children.

Vitellia was now the same age her mother had been when she married her

father. She had been given as a bride to Valerius Asiaticus, despite her mother's protestations that she was too young. She was now expecting their first child, and Vitellius wondered if his wife's animosity stemmed from his marrying off their daughter so young. Galeria would be a grandmother by the time she was thirty.

The emperor and empress dined together that evening, though scarcely a word was spoken between them. In order to avoid any awkward silences, Vitellius had invited the local magistrate and several patricians from the area, as his honored guests.

Her husband's incessant gorging through numerous courses turned Galeria's stomach, and she found she had little appetite. The following morning Vitellius would depart for Rome, and she would be expected to follow soon after. Perhaps she could stay with her mother-in-law; the only member of the Vitellius family who Galeria had any sort of affection for.



The sky was overcast with a smattering of rain as the emperor rode in his rather ornate litter, complete with silk curtains, the entire sixteen mile trek to Rome. Along the way they were joined by throngs of onlookers, both pleb and patrician alike. Several of these were senators, who were also returning to Rome following their brief holiday. They either rode on horseback or in litters like Vitellius. An entire cohort of praetorian guardsmen acted as his escorts. Among these was the ultimate survivalist within the entire Guard, Tiberius Statius.

Statius was one of a small number of Otho's former guards who had been allowed to retain their postings within the praetorians. In his case, it had come at the price of assassinating one of Rome's national heroes. Though a disagreeable task, Statius had accepted the slaying of Dolabella as both necessary and inevitable. If anyone was going to profit from his death, it may as well have been him. At that time, he had never seen what Emperor Vitellius looked like. Had Statius known what a morbidly fat, sickly, and apathetic figure he was, he may have had second thoughts.

"A pity Vespasian has no use for my sword," he muttered quietly, as he walked a few feet behind and to the side of Vitellius' litter.

The journey was long and tedious. Slaves could only walk at a shuffle

while carrying the emperor's litter. As they entered the city, centuries of praetorians marched ahead clearing the road, while shouting, *'Make way for the emperor!'* The senate house, or curia, was located on the western end of the Forum, just in front of the Forum of Augustus and the Temple of Mars Ultor.

The emperor was met by his brother, Lucius Vitellius. They entered the chamber together. All the members stood in respect. Though many were split in their loyalties, none had yet made any open denouncements of Vitellius. Once the Flavians were defeated, and Vespasian either dead or in chains, the emperor hoped to shore up the devotion of Rome's ruling classes. As much as it pained him to admit it, he knew he could not possibly control the vast and unstable empire without their unified support. He knew he needed to be decisive in his dealings with them this day, to show all that he was worthy of being called 'Caesar', for he had finally acquiesced to be being addressed by that particular name. Vitellius took his seat at the head of the chamber between the two vacant consul's chairs.

"Noble senators of Rome," Vitellius said, electing to sit instead of stand while addressing them. "I welcome you all upon your return from your autumn holiday. My one regret is that our collective minds are not yet at ease, so long as there are traitors who would threaten all that we have strived for."

"Your pardon, Caesar," a voice said. It was the emperor's son-in-law, Valerius Asiaticus.

"Senator Valerius," the emperor acknowledged. "It is your appointment as consul for the following year that I wish to address."

"Honored, sire, but first I must inform you of the tragic news from the north," Valerius said, his face full of vexation. "Valens has been defeated. Most of his army surrendered to the Flavians at Cremona."

Vitellius swallowed hard, his face flushed as his eyes grew wide in disbelief. "The entire northern army, lost?" he asked. "But how?"

"Perfidy and treachery, sire," Senator Italicus spoke up. "However, this is but a mere setback, rather than a total defeat."

"The loss of forty-thousand men seems rather total to me," Suetonius Paulinus retorted rather audaciously. "The majority of Primus' army is likely still intact, and will be reinforced by Mucianus in the coming weeks. And let us not neglect the very distinct possibility that Primus has compelled some of the legions of our former army to change their allegiance and march with him on Rome. How, then, do you call this a mere setback?"

“Because Valens has taken ship at Pisae and is en route to Gaul in order to bring back reinforcements.” It was the emperor’s brother, Lucius Vitellius, who countered Paulinus’ assessment. “We have forces in Hispania, Gaul, as well as additional troops on the Rhine, and of course the bulk of the Praetorian Guard. And sire, you will be pleased to know I have personally overseen the creation of a citizens’ army in Rome.”

“There, you see?” Vitellius said quickly. “All is not lost. At this very moment, I suspect Valens has arrived in Gaul where our loyalist forces will soon be marching to crush this upstart, Antonius Primus.”

The emperor was especially angered by Paulinus’ outburst. The former Othonian general had mostly behaved since his return to Rome; however, since the uprising of Vespasian, he had been practically seditious in his speech. While he wished to be rid of the insufferable old general, Vitellius loathed the thought of ever reviving the notorious treason trials, especially against a national hero who was beloved by both the plebs and the army. With a noted pause in the proceedings, a senator named Rosius Regulus stood to address the assembly.

“Your pardon, Caesar,” the man said. He was an older patrician in his early sixties, who wore a rather expensive Egyptian wig in order to mask his rather rampant hair loss.

“Senator Regulus,” Vitellius said, acknowledging him.

“As a matter of propriety, we should discuss how to deal with the treachery of our own consul, Aulus Caecina Alienus. The very fact that he still holds his consulship, despite his attempt at turning his own soldiers against his rightful emperor, is a gross travesty.”

“His term ends tomorrow,” Marius Celsus remarked. “Since he is not even in Rome, it matters little.”

“It matters if we wish to observe proper decorum,” Regulus stated. He addressed Vitellius once more. “Sire, I firmly suggest we revoke Caecina’s consulship for the final day of his term. I also humbly request that I be appointed to the position in his place.”

“A splendid idea,” Vitellius replied.

“You will take up office and lay it down on the exact same day,” Nerva said, with a touch of disdain in his voice. “A splendid idea, indeed, for one who has served in the senate for several decades and never once held the consulship to hold Rome’s most auspicious office for one day.”

“And, of course, this will make you eligible for a long sought after

governorship," Celsus added, leading to a series of retorts back and forth between Regulus' supporters and political adversaries.

Vitellius sighed in dismay and waved to the porter, who beat his staff on the marble floor three times.

"Caesar calls for silence!" the man's voice boomed.

"Good senators, this is ridiculous!" the emperor protested. "We have enough enemies to contend with without resorting to fighting each other. Senator Regulus will assume the traitor Caecina's consulship for its final day. And while we await the noble Valens' return with reinforcements, our praetorian prefects, Varius and Priscus, will mobilize their cohorts and make ready for the defense of Rome."

"Sire, we should also send word to Valens' forces and let them know they have not been abandoned," Lucius Vitellius added.

"Yes, agreed," the emperor replied quickly. "Where is it they have withdrawn to?"

"Narnia, sire," Senator Valerius said. "Approximately a hundred and twenty miles north of here."

"If the traitors come that way, which is very likely," Lucius said, "then Valens' troops can hold the stronghold there indefinitely."

"And should they fold, Primus can be in Rome in less than a week," Paulinus said quietly, to his friend, Celsus. His peer gave him a sideways glance, uncertain if the old general meant this as a point of dismay or something he personally wished for.



Valens rode day and night to reach the port city of Pisae. The city's governor was a personal friend of Vitellius and a staunch loyalist. He therefore had little issue with acquiring transport. Valens had explained the urgent nature of his mission, to rally reinforcements from Gaul and Hispania; however, he made no mention of his army's humiliating defeat at Cremona.

He reached the coastal city of Hercules Monoecus, just a couple days sailing from the port city. His original intent was to travel west to Massilia and then north to Lugdunum. However, time was short, and he first needed the governors of Gallia Narbonensis and Maritime Alpes to rally what troops they could to reinforce the Vitellians preparing to defend Narnia. Valens hoped this would stall Primus long enough for him to bring forward the

western legions. Maritime Alpes only had a couple of cohorts of auxiliary troops, yet Valens knew they were loyal and had fought well during the repulse of Otho's previous expedition. He rode by horse the short distance from the port of Monoecus to the provincial capital of Cemenelum, where he was greeted by the governor, Maturus Marius.

"General Valens," Marius said, greeting him with an extended hand.

"Dark times are upon us," Valens replied candidly. "The traitor, Antonius Primus, has defeated our loyalist forces at Cremona. Caecina has also betrayed us and gone over to the Flavians. I need to get to Narbonensis and meet with Valerius Paulinus at once."

"That would be ill advised," Marius said. "As you know, Governor Paulinus is Suetonius Paulinus' brother. And well, he too has defected to the Flavians. Given Suetonius was such a strong supporter of Otho, I suppose this does not come as much of a revelation."

"Damn him," Valens swore.

It was no secret that Suetonius Paulinus resented his treatment after the defeat of the Othonians. Many suspected that, had Vitellius not kept him close under watch, he would have already defected to Vespasian. That his brother had now done so should have surprised no one.

"What forces has he mustered?"

"All of Otho's discharged praetorians," the governor replied. "Plus, about six auxiliary infantry cohorts and one regiment of volunteer militia cavalry. I am sorry, but my two cohorts are not suited to take on such a force."

"Well, you've fought them once already," Valens noted. "But no, I do not expect you to abandon your people here, especially when the nearest province has defected to the traitor." He let out a sigh of resignation. "There's nothing for it, then. I will have to travel far into Gaul, and possibly Hispania, to find aid for our emperor. Let us hope those forces still in Italia prove loyal and are able to keep the traitors from taking the capital."

At the Marius' insistence, Valens spent the night at his villa, though he slept little. He wondered if Vitellius even knew how rapidly everything was becoming unraveled. If the governor of Narbonensis had become brazen enough to declare for the Flavians, how many other provinces were in danger of falling? Given the nature with which Vitellius seized the throne, and the fact that he scarcely defeated the Othonians before the armies in the east declared for Vespasian, it was difficult to know who could be trusted. Legio VI, Victrix had been sitting idle in Hispania since Galba came to the throne,

and they had been unnervingly silent since the fall of Otho. Still, they were his best hope of rallying substantive reinforcements.

While Valens slept fitfully, Marius had a rider dispatched to Valerius Paulinus, informing him of the visit from the Vitellian Army's chief general.

"I thought you were loyal to Vitellius?" the messenger protested, as he mounted his horse.

"In my heart, I still am," Marius replied. "But I have the safety and welfare of my people to consider. Governor Paulinus would not have declared for Vespasian were the other western provinces still firm in their loyalty to Vitellius. I'll not risk subjecting our people to reprisals from those who have already changed their allegiance to the Flavians."

The next morning he made no attempt to stop Valens from departing. The Vitellian general had come with an armed escort, whereas Marius had but his local city watch available. Valens left the city before dawn. The black clouds in the west boded ill for his pending journey.

Marius was partially shamed by his betrayal of Valens; however, like he told his messenger, he could not allow his personal loyalties to take precedence over the welfare of his people. The war had taken a decisive turn against Vitellius, and even if he managed to somehow win a miraculous victory…well, all Marius had done was inform Governor Paulinus that the Consul of Rome and commander-in-chief of Vitellius' armies had arrived in his province. It was scarcely a treasonable offense.



For the Flavians, there was a period of rest and recovery. The legions and auxilia regiments were reorganizing, in light of the numerous losses suffered. Those with lesser injuries were assessed as to their ability to return to the ranks, while the more severe were still being tended to at the field hospital. The commanding general had a number of matters that required his attention before the army could advance. No sooner had they completed their victory, with the remains of Cremona a smoldering ruin, than political infighting had broken out amongst the Flavian legates. Before he could sort out the squabbles among his own generals, Antonius Primus had the former Vitellian legions to contend with.

Standing in a massed formation were the soldiers of Legions XXI, Rapax, and XXII, Fortuna Primigenia. All were devoid of armor and helmets. Regardless of rank, every man looked the same. Each stood with his gladius scabbarded and placed on the ground near his feet. The Predator Legion's new commanding legate, a longtime friend and supporter of Vespasian named Flavius Silva, stood in front of his soldiers, hands clasped behind his back. The commander of Fortuna's Legion, Claudius Zeno, stood next to him. In one of the few truths told by Manlius to his cousin, Valens, Claudius was the only Vitellian general not sacked by Primus. The Flavian commander-in-chief held immense respect for the legate, who he knew was also extremely popular with his legionaries. The commander of Twenty-First Rapax, however, had not only been wounded in the shoulder during the last battle, but was unrepentant in his loyalty to Vitellius. Primus had therefore sent him to, 'crawl back to your podgy master in Rome'.

The ceremony with the legions was an important formality. Both Claudius and Silva knew Vitellius was beaten. The only way to restore peace to the empire was to acknowledge Vespasian as Rome's rightful ruler. That renewed spirit of allegiance now needed to come from the men in the ranks.

"General Primus," Silva said. "The legions, which formerly served the pretender, Aulus Vitellius, are ready to recant their misguided fidelity and swear the oath of allegiance to Rome's true emperor, Titus Flavius Vespasian."

"Fortuna and Predator Legions," Primus said, addressing the soldiers directly. "Though we fought on opposing sides in this unfortunate conflict, all of us kept true to our oaths. You have fulfilled yours with distinction and valor. The scourge of defeat shall now be cleansed. It is time you rejoined your brothers and took your place as legionaries of the empire. *Are you with me?"*

"Yes!" ten thousand voices shouted, fists held high in the air.

Primus nodded to the two legates, who turned to face their soldiers.

"Gladius…draw!" both men shouted together.

It was the simplest act, one which legionaries would perform countless times throughout their time in the ranks. Yet, for Primus to watch ten thousand weapons flash from their scabbards simultaneously was a thing of beauty.

"Swear the oath!"

“In the name of the Senate and People of Rome, and by the gods in the heavens, we do pledge our undying fealty to Titus Flavius Vespasian, Emperor of Rome, and Defender of the Empire!”



Flavius Silva and Legio XXI soon departed for their fortress at Vindonissa in the middle of the Alpes Mountains. From there they would return to their duties as guardians of the mountain passes that led into Italia. Legio XXII left for Carnuntum on the Danube, replacing Legio VII, Gemina. Fourth Macedonia was allowed to return to their garrison at Mogontiacum in Germania. Their presence would not only reinforce the frontier, but act as a deterrent for other Germanic forces who would consider heeding Vitellius’ call for reinforcements. Neither Fifth Alaudae nor First Italica would return to their respective posts in Germania or Gaul. Instead, they were sent on a thousand-mile trek to Moesia to replace many of the troops that had taken part in Primus’ invasion force.

Chapter XXII: Loyalties Betrayed

Rome
5 November 69 A.D.
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While the war in the north, in particular the army's ignominious defeat, were among the most substantial issues facing Emperor Vitellius, they certainly were not the only ones. The latest ruler of Rome still faced many enemies, both personal and political, who would no doubt rejoice in his downfall. And it was his brother, Lucius Vitellius, who took on the task of rooting out those who could threaten the regime. Chief among these perceived threats was not even an enemy, but rather a friend and benefactor.

Quintus Junius Blaesus had aligned himself with Vitellius since the very beginning of the emperor's rise. A highly respected patrician, as well as one of the wealthiest members of the senate, he had somehow managed to avoid the purges wrought during the last few years of Nero's reign. This was, perhaps, because the Junii were among the most ancient and celebrated noble families in Rome, albeit with many rather notorious episodes in their history. Perhaps the most infamous member of the family was Marcus Junius Brutus, the assassin of Julius Caesar. Blaesus' own grandfather, who had borne the same name as he, was the uncle by marriage of the traitorous praetorian prefect, Lucius Aelius Sejanus. The elder Blaesus had been put to death, with several members of his family, during the brutal vengeance of Tiberius.

"And yet you have somehow managed to remain unscathed all these years," Lucius Vitellius said. The two men met at a banquet being hosted in Blaesus' honor by a senator named Caecina Tuscus. They had arrived early, the emperor's brother deliberately seeking out the guest of honor.

"My father and uncle were, remarkably, spared," Blaesus recalled. "This was strange, because they both had a fairly amicable relationship with their cousin, Sejanus. Grandfather scarcely knew him, yet he was implicated as one of his associates during the plot to overthrow Tiberius. His suicide saved the family fortune from being taken by the state. But that was a long time ago. I was barely twenty-two when Sejanus fell and was serving in North

Africa, as laticlavian tribune of the Third Augusta Legion."

"And will your old legion come now to the emperor's aid?" Lucius asked.

"I should hope so," Blaesus replied quickly. "I did not loan half my fortune to the emperor, your good brother, so that some upstart in Judea could cause me to lose it all."

It was a rather careless thing to say, though both Blaesus and Lucius laughed aloud at the remark.

"Ah, Noble Lucius," Tuscus said as he joined them. "It is good to see you this fine evening. Can we expect to see the emperor later?"

"Alas, no," Lucius replied, shaking his head. "He has other matters keeping him indisposed at the moment."

What he failed to mention was that Vitellius' gout had been extremely painful lately, and the emperor had eaten what turned out to be a sour batch of snails. He was confined to his bed and was, in fact, resting at the imperial villa located in the Servilian Gardens, scarcely a block away. Lucius had known about Tuscus' banquet for Blaesus and decided to recommend his brother recuperate at the Servilian Gardens.

"The financier celebrates while his emperor suffers just a building over," Lucius' wife, Triaria, said quietly into his ear.

"It would seem he is gloating over my dear brother's fit of ill health," Lucius remarked. "He talks about the funds he gave to the emperor to help settle his debts and pay his troops as if it were some kind of loan, rather than his civic duty to the imperial state."

"He'll use his past generosity as a means of extortion," his wife asserted. "He will have to be done away with just like poor Dolabella."

"Yes, well, we cannot use an assassin to deal with Blaesus," Lucius observed. "I applaud your initiative in dispatching Dolabella. The few coins and the promise to a praetorian that he could retain his post were a small price to pay. But now that Aulus sits firmly upon the throne, we must observe the formalities of both law and decorum."



Vitellius could not recall the last time he was this miserable. His gout was getting worse, and since being proclaimed emperor, his weight had continued to increase. He was very much aware that his poor health was, in a large part, his own making. In many ways, he blamed his parents for instilling such a

lack of self-esteem in him. He took comfort in food from a very early age. Part of the reason he had banned astrologers from Rome was due to the unnatural influence they had held over his parents. They accepted the ill omens regarding their son almost from the moment he was born, as if there was nothing they could do to help him change the future. At first, Vitellius thought his becoming emperor was the ultimate act of defiance of the fates. And yet his mother, Sextilia, had not so much as said one kind word since his return to Rome. It was with a sense of dread he saw her enter his room. He grumbled something unintelligible and rolled onto his side, away from her.

"And is it my son who greets me so warmly?" Sextilia asked. She used a long staff to help her walk.

Her maidservant carried a bowl and a small bottle.

"Mother, what are you doing here?" Vitellius asked, still facing the open window where the sounds of merriment could be heard from Tuscus' dinner party.

"I heard you were unwell. A mother always looks after her sick children, no matter how old they are." She placed a hand on his forehead, which was soaked in sweat and hot to the touch. She thought for a moment and then took the bottle from her servant. "Here, drink this. It will purge the poison from your belly."

"Please, I have my own doctors." Vitellius tried to protest.

"A lot of good they have done you," Sextilia retorted. "Now drink. This will not be pleasant, but you will thank me for it later."

The concoction, whatever it was, was extremely bitter and vile to the taste. Vitellius struggled to swallow the foul liquid which immediately churned inside his guts. His mother took the bowl and held it under his head as he proceeded to heave and vomit rather violently. After about a minute she handed the bowl, which stunk terribly, to her servant, ordering her to leave them.

"There, how is that?" she asked her son.

Vitellius was panting, though he gave a nod of consent. "Better, actually." He rolled onto his back and took in a few deep breaths. "Doesn't do anything for my gout, but at least my stomach pains are subsiding."

"A change in your diet will help the gout," Sextilia chastised. "But right now you have greater issues to deal with than just swollen feet."

"I *knew* it," he said, trying to force a laugh and rolling onto his side once more. "My dear mother, concerned about my health, but come to actually tell

me how to manage the war and the empire."

"I cannot *tell* you to do anything," Sextilia corrected. "However, I have very grave concerns; not just for you, my son, but for your wife and my grandchildren."

"So what would you have me do, give up now?" Vitellius asked.

"For the good of the people, not to mention the safety of our family, you *must* send a deputation to Antonius Primus at once. I have no doubt the battle went very hard for them, and they do not wish to throw away any more lives than they have to."

"Yes, like they did at Cremona," the emperor retorted. "One of our proudest ancient cities in Northern Italia, and those bastards razed it to the ground. Only the Temple of Mephitis, outside the city walls, was left unscathed. How many thousands do you think perished?"

"And how many more will you allow to die, if they should lay siege to Rome herself?" his mother countered.

"Please, their outrageous behavior will only steel the resolve of the people. The citizens of Rome will never allow Marcus Antonius Primus to take the capital. Even now, my brother is rallying a large force of volunteers to help us stand up to the usurper's army."

"Did someone mention me?" a voice said, from out in the all.

Vitellius felt a sense of relief at seeing his brother strolling into the room. Strangely enough, he carried Aulus' young son, Germanicus. The little boy was bleary-eyed and rubbing his face. "Mother," Lucius said in surprise, "what pleasure is this?"

"Just here to look after my son," she replied, while standing up. She looked to Vitellius and said, "Remember what I have told you." She then gave Lucius a quick embrace before leaving.

Lucius set the boy down, who rushed over to his father, hugging him around the neck.

"Papa doesn't feel well," young Germanicus said.

"It's alright, my son," Vitellius said, kissing the boy on top of his head.

"What exactly did Mother tell you?" Lucius asked, once they were alone.

"She thinks I need to attempt to negotiate with Antonius Primus," his brother replied glumly.

"But that's absurd!" Lucius retorted. "Parlaying with the same people who destroyed beautiful Cremona would be madness, not to mention treasonous."

“That’s what I said,” Vitellius replied. “And how goes the recruitment of the citizens’ militia?”

“Very well. We have had thousands of volunteers come forward to defend the city, both men and women alike.”

His brother raised an eyebrow at this last remark.

Lucius simply shrugged. “These are desperate times, let us not pretend otherwise. The women have just as much to lose as the men do, and if they wish to take up arms to fight against the Flavians, I will not stop them.”

“Even if we mobilized the entire city, it would not be enough,” the emperor conjectured. “We need professional soldiers. I only hope what forces Valens has can delay Primus long enough for reinforcements to come from Gaul and Britannia. The year grows late, and any troops from Germania need to depart their garrisons soon.”

“They will come,” Lucius reassured him. “But Caesar, we must allow Valens and the loyalist armies to do their job. We have a more urgent matter here in the capital.”

“Oh?” Aulus asked, sitting upright. Still hot and flushed, his stomach felt immeasurably relieved. Even the pain in his feet had subsided. “Do I face traitors within my own walls?”

Lucius nodded towards the open window facing Tuscus’ villa. “In a matter of speaking. You can clearly hear the sounds of merriment coming from Tuscus and his guests. They celebrate whilst their emperor lies ill.”

“Yes, well, that may be bad manners, but I would hardly call it treasonous. Why have you come here with my son, who you took from his bed in the middle of the night?” He looked down at the boy. His eyes were closed and he leaned against his father’s side.

“Because I fear for you and for your children,” Lucius replied. “You have no reason to fear Vespasian; not when thousands of our soldiers keep him at bay, with reinforcements on their way from all corners of the empire. And while Tuscus’ banquet is in poor taste, it is his guest of honor I fear.”

“Who is it?”

“None other than the man who helped finance our little venture to get to Rome.”

“Blaesus?” Vitellius was perplexed by this revelation. “But what could he have done that could ever be construed as treachery?”

“Aside from parading before the troops the fact that he descends from both the Junii and Antonii lines?” Lucius asked in return.

“He does claim lineage from two of the most ancient and noble families in Rome, I’ll grant you. But that is something one should be proud of. Why should we hold that against him?”

“Blaesus eyes a position higher than that of a mere senator, or even consul,” his brother explained. “He used his massive fortune to buy his way into our favor. I heard him say this evening that he intends to make good on what he thinks were simple loans.”

“By Vulcan, he could try to blackmail us!” the emperor replied, now alarmed by this latest news. “I have already had one turncoat come from within the imperial court. I am dealing with traitors in the east. Am I to suffer a rival here in Rome?”

“Undoubtedly. Junius Blaesus is extremely popular with our peers in the senate, many of whom have turned up for Tuscus’ banquet in his honor. And, as you can hear, the celebrations have been quite boisterous. He was named Governor of Gallia Lugdunensis by Galba scarcely a year ago. Yet, he returns to Rome as a member of the imperial entourage, being fawned over by the senate, as if he had won some great victory.”

“And all the while he has been establishing his power base within the capital,” Vitellius noted. “He must be stopped. But how? If he is loved by the plebs, as well as the senate, any accusations or trial will turn the people against me. Right now we need unity within Rome, not division.”

“I have a plan, dear brother,” Lucius said, with a malevolent grin. “I think we should take a page from recent history; a rumor, mind you, regarding Empress Agrippina and the death of the divine Emperor Claudius.”



While Vitellius panicked over perceived plots within Rome, Vespasian had scarcely been sitting dormant while his armies marched towards the Eternal City. As soon as Mucianus departed to rally his legions, the presumptive emperor immediately traveled to Egypt to meet with the very man who first declared him Caesar, Tiberius Julius Alexander. It was a three-day voyage by ship from Caesarea to Alexandria. During this time, his son, Titus, spent several weeks traveling the region and securing the loyalty of the people of Cyprus and Cilicia. The commanding legate of Legio XV then joined his father in Alexandria, where he was establishing his new imperial headquarters.

Once the issue with Vitellius was decided, Vespasian made it known that he intended to leave Titus in command of the war in Judea. And while this caused some grumblings among several of the older legates, in particular General Placidus, to leave anyone else as commander-in-chief of the eastern armies would have been rather improper. If Titus was to be his father's presumptive heir, it would not due for the Prince Imperial to fall under the command of one beneath him in the patrician hierarchy. That Titus had performed heroically, while demonstrating exceptional strategic and tactical skill, helped placate any reservations.

The Calends of November soon came. Primus had won his decisive, albeit improbable, victory ten days prior, though it would still be another week before Vespasian got word of it. On this particular afternoon, he was joined by Octavianus, one of his personal bodyguards. The two shared a unique history, something the emperor was quick to bring up.

"When Galba dispatched you to bring him my head, did you ever think I would eventually become your emperor?" Vespasian asked. His good-natured grin was rather disarming given the disturbing reminder.

"To be honest, Caesar, I thought of nothing the entire journey other than how hateful my task was," the former praetorian centurion replied. Octavianus had served under Vespasian as a young legionary with Legio II, Augusta during the Conquest of Britannia. Galba had likely been oblivious to this. He would have been foolish to think a soldier would kill his own former commander, whom he greatly revered.

"Well, you were right about one thing," Vespasian said. "Poor Clodius Macer in North Africa was not as fortunate as I was. The assassin sent to dispose of him was not one of his former soldiers, and had no qualms about driving his blade into the proconsul's heart."

"I wonder who the killer was," Octavianus mused. "The Praetorian Guard is quite large, but still, I wonder if I know him."

"He's someone who's been lost to the pages of history," Vespasian remarked. "And with two emperors sent violently to the gods since then, no one who reads of these rather interesting times will give a shovelful of shit who it was that slew one governor on the coast of Africa."

"To live in interesting times seems almost a curse," the bodyguard stated.

"Only if we lose," Vespasian replied, with a grin and a wink. "Our campaigns in Britannia were most certainly interesting times, wouldn't you

say?”

“That they were, Caesar. That they were.”



It was during the Calends of November that Vitellius wished to underpin his standing with the people and the senate. There was also much need to fortify their resolve to continue the conflict, in light of Caecina’s betrayal and Valens’ terrible defeat. The emperor hosted a series of private gladiatorial exhibitions for various senators, as well as prominent members of the equites. This was in lead up to the *Ludi Plebeii*, or *Plebeian Games*, which took place from the 4th to 17th of November. As this was more of a chance for the owners of various gladiator schools to showcase their talent before the emperor, the combatants fought with blunted weapons, in order to minimize injury. During such events, superior gladiators would often be bribed by their owners to lose their matches to an inferior foe. Wealthy patrons would then bet against the man, should he face the same opponent during the actual games. In such a way, many a gladiator owner made fortunes during large festivals off of duped senators.

“At least the games will keep the people’s minds occupied, and away from the war for the next couple of weeks,” Flavius Sabinus said, to his longtime friend, Suetonius Paulinus.

In an effort to show his conciliatory nature, a number of the guests were from among his former enemies to include Paulinus, as well as Marius Celsus. The former consul and Othonian speechwriter, Galerius Trachea, was also an honored guest, though this may have been due to the influence of his cousin, Empress Galeria.

“Right now they need every bit of distraction they can muster,” Paulinus replied. He nodded towards a pair of men battling with gladii and circular shields. “I would pit any one of my legionaries against this lot.”

“I seem to remember an incident when a legionary fought in the arena,” Sabinus recalled. “I was just a boy of about nine at the time, and it was during the Triumph of Germanicus Caesar, following his defeat of Arminius.”

“You’ll have to forgive me if my own memory is a little dim. I was two years old then,” Paulinus said, with a short laugh.

The Prefect of Rome’s gaze was distant as he tried to recall the very old

memories. “Yes, I remember now. Julius Sacrovir—the same fellow who led that sad little revolt in Gaul several years later—had owned a substantial number of gladiators. The fiercest of these was a large African, though I cannot recall his name. I do remember the soldier who fought him, though.”

“Who was he?”

“His name was Vitruvius. I remember, because the crowd kept chanting it over and over again. I think he was a weapons instructor with one of the Rhine Legions at the time, and was a legend amongst the men in the ranks. He slew Sacrovir’s prized gladiator in less than a minute.”

“Whatever happened to him?” Paulinus asked.

“Eleven years later, when I was serving my first term as chief tribune of the Fifth Macedonia Legion, I heard Vitruvius had been killed during the Battle of Braduhenna.”

“If they draw their blades in battle enough times, even the greatest fighters will eventually lose,” the old general noted.

“A good thing you and I have drawn ours for the last time,” Sabinus noted. “I decided a long time ago, I would rather die an old man comfortable in my bed than screaming in agony with a sword in my guts.”

Both men chuckled at this last remark. They were soon joined by Junius Blaesus, who was in rather high spirits on this day.

“I do hope this is but a taste of things to come, once the games commence,” he said, as he sat next to Sabinus. He nodded across the arena toward where Domitian sat next to Senator Nerva. “Your nephew is enjoying a day with his mentor, I see.”

“Unfortunately, the two rarely see each other these days,” Sabinus explained. “Vitellius has become a bit paranoid when it comes to the family of his chief rival.”

“He still allowed you to remain as prefect of the city,” Blaesus remarked. “Why would he do that if he fears where your loyalties lie?”

“I think he did so, in part, to give the appearance of not being overly paranoid,” Sabinus mused. “However, he has made it a point of keeping his enemies, whether real or imagined, close to him. The emperor’s brother made a rather curt suggestion to Nerva that he would be best served not keeping the son of a traitor under his roof.”

“A pity, that,” Paulinus remarked. “Domitian is a young man who needs all the mentoring he can muster. Nerva is someone he looks up to who comes from outside of his immediate family.”

“Yes, well, you are certainly one I suspect Vitellius keeps many sets of eyes on,” Blaesus said, to the former general.

Paulinus snorted. “Of that I have no doubt.” He then looked over toward Blaesus. “And what of you? Do you sometimes worry about falling out of favor with Vitellius?”

“Me? No. The emperor got to where he is today because of me. Oh, don’t think I am trying to act all self-important; far from it! No, my friends, I do not have any ambitions about becoming emperor. Nor do I look to place any other man upon the throne. After all, dear Sabinus, were your brother to succeed in his little coup, I would be out a substantial fortune. Not that I have any ill will towards Vespasian; but, there can be only one Caesar.”

The constant reminders for Sabinus were uncomfortable, not to mention dangerous. Vitellius may have allowed him to maintain his position as Prefect of Rome; however, he had revoked his courier signets. Sabinus knew he was constantly being watched, as were his sons and nephew. He further accepted that, while he openly remained neutral, it was best he no longer had direct contact with his brother. His final directive to Aula Vale was that she would remain with Vespasian and the Flavian Army. By doing so, Sabinus had blinded himself. But with Antonius Primus’ path to Rome only marginally defended against, the end game was surely coming soon. That is, of course, unless Vitellius’ generals managed to rally the remaining legions of the western empire and North Africa to his defense.

“Hey, you still with me?” Paulinus’ words startled him.

“Sorry, I was miles away,” Sabinus replied, with a nervous smile.

“I understand,” his friend replied. He looked up at the sky. “The day grows late, and I have no doubt our presence will be expected at the emperor’s feast this evening.”

“Yes, if I don’t at least make an appearance, there will be those who insist I have run off to conspire with my brother in Judea.”



The reassurances of Lucius, as well as the reports of Valens heading west to bring up reinforcements, did not change the harsh reality for Emperor Aulus Vitellius. Antonius Primus could possibly reach the imperial capital within the next month or so. Therefore, the emperor looked forward to the distraction that would be brought on by the Plebeian Games even more than

the rest of the populace. And, as Vitellius could not host any sort of event without a lavish dinner party, he had earlier announced his intent to invite guests to the palace after the gladiatorial exhibition. Even more importantly, he had a rather delicate matter that would be settled this evening.

Sunset came early in November, and it was well after dark by the time most of the guests arrived at the palace. There were roughly a hundred senators in all, plus their wives and freedman servants. As Paulinus had suspected, many of the noblemen present were former Otho supporters. Vitellius had previously treated most of these men, in particular Paulinus, with contempt. With the Flavian Army breathing down his neck, he was now anxious to reconcile with his former adversaries. No surprise most of these men sat together with the exception of Marius Celsus. The former consul lounged with the two current suffect consuls, Quintius Atticus and Caesilius Simplex.

The turmoil of the past year, with three factions claiming the imperial throne, had led to a string of short-term suffect consulships. Fifteen men had been named consul during the year, albeit this included the one day term of Rosius Regulus. Vitellius was anxious to restore a bit of stability to the senate's highest office and named his son-in-law, Valerius Asiaticus, to a full year term. Though initially naming himself consul for the next ten years, Vitellius had decided to leave the other consulship election up to the senate. Its members naturally selected the emperor himself to fill the vacancy.

"The noble senator, Quintus Junius Blaesus!" the porter's voice sounded, as the emperor's financier walked into the dining hall.

"Ah, Blaesus!" Vitellius shouted, from across the large room. His wine chalice sloshed. He waved his hand carelessly towards a pair of ornate couches. "You are most welcome. We have saved a pair of couches for you and your wife at the head table!"

"Honored, sire," Blaesus said, with a respectful bow.

The emperor's countenance was its usual flushed and covered in sweat. This was the case whenever he engaged in one of his hours-long feasts. On this night, however, there was something far more pressing on his mind. While Blaesus and his wife took the couches on Vitellius' left, Empress Galeria and his brother, Lucius, occupied those on the right. Lucius had tempered his wine consumption. It was he who would oversee the emperor's plan. He considered enlisting the aid of the praetorian prefects but because one of them, Junius Priscus, was a distant relative of Blaesus, that was

immediately scuttled. “The Junii tend to stick together, no matter how thin their blood relations are,” Lucius had said.

About an hour into the banquet, a theatre troupe burst its way into the hall to the boisterous tune from numerous musicians. At this time, Vitellius subtly nodded to his brother who recused himself. The emperor turned to Blaesus. “I have specially acquired the services of this particular group.”

“I have seen them before,” Blaesus replied. “They are quite good. Only last month we saw their performance of *Miles Gloriosus, the Vainglorious Soldier*.”

Vitellius then said, “I wanted this to be a more festive occasion without thought of soldiers. I have charged them with performing Melissus’ *A Comedy of Manners*.”

The farcical play, written during the reign of Augustus, was well-known by all of the assembled guests. There was much laughter, especially from Blaesus who had an affinity for classical comedy. During a brief intermission between the first and second act, Lucius Vitellius returned bearing a small plate of mushrooms.

“As Agrippina once fed the divine Claudius,” he whispered into his brother’s ear. This was in reference to the rumor that Emperor Claudius had been poisoned by his wife with a plate of mushrooms. Something, ironically, that neither Agrippina nor her son Nero ever outright denied. Lucius tapped the edge of the plate closest to his brother, who took a few of the sliced mushrooms. As he ate, he gave an exaggerated groan of approval.

“My dear Blaesus!” he said exuberantly. “You must try these, they are an absolute pleasure!”

The senator, Lucius knew, had a passion for mushrooms and was only too happy to oblige.

“Delighted, sire.”

Vitellius handed him the entire plate, giving a curious glance to his brother. Lucius gave a quick nod of affirmation.

The play continued as before. Vitellius continued to watch Blaesus out of the corner of his eye. Other than wiping the sweat from his brow a few times, there seemed to be little wrong with him. The emperor did not know what his brother had laced the mushrooms with, but it seemed as if the plan had failed. Lucius, unconcerned, had become completely engrossed in the play.

Around midnight, the banquet was finally brought to a close. Scores of slaves were beginning to clean up the piles of plates and serving platters.

Others took rags to wipe up the various amounts of spillage on the floor.

"An excellent feast, sire," Blaesus said with a bow, as he and his wife took their leave. "A fitting way to start the Plebeian Games."

"This same theater troupe is performing again tomorrow near the Circus Flaminius," Vitellius replied. "Perhaps you will join me?"

"It would be a pleasure," the senator said. Bowing once more, he departed the hall.

Another hour would pass before the last of the guests were gone.

"Damn it, man!" Vitellius spat, once he and Lucius were the only ones remaining. Triaria and Empress Galeria had long since retired to their bed chambers.

"Calm yourself, dear brother," Lucius said reassuringly. "It is a slow-acting substance we gave him. Something I purchased from the great concoctor, Locusta, before Galba had her put to death."

"I see," Vitellius nodded. "Then when can I expect to be rid of the troublesome Blaesus."

"Trust me, he will not survive the night. There was enough on that plate to slay a dozen men. Even if he does have a jar of Mithridatium lying around, by the time he realizes he's been poisoned it will be far too late. By morning, you will have one less rival to the throne."

Chapter XXIII: Ashes of Victory

Alexandria, Egypt
10 November 69 A.D.
***

Aula had been correct when she speculated that her message regarding Antonius Primus' advance on Northern Italia would come around the same time as a seaborne message, denoting the outcome. It had taken her the better part of two weeks by horse to reach Macedonia. With great relief she came upon Mucianus' army. The Flavian general was irate, albeit unsurprised, to hear Primus invaded Italia without waiting for him. With a verbal message to reassure Vespasian he was proceeding with all haste, Mucianus arranged for Aula to sail directly to Caesarea from the port of Thessalonica. Her journey was not ended there, however. As soon as she arrived, she was informed that Vespasian was in Alexandria. She was back aboard a ship the following morning, and two days later finally caught up with the Flavian Emperor. Though glad to be at the end of her journey, for the young Lady Vale there would be little reprieve.

"Quite the long voyage you have had, my dear," the emperor said, as he read the dispatch from Primus. "A pity it was completely unnecessary. We now control the Ravenna fleet, who carried the news of Vitellius' defeat and the loss of most of his army."

"I am gladdened to hear of your victory, Caesar," Aula said, with a respectful bow. She was filthy, and exhausted, and a little put off that she had hastened almost two thousand miles over the period of five weeks on an unpleasant voyage, only to find there was no need for her to travel to Egypt in the first place. She said as much to Vespasian as servants took her traveling cloak and brought her water and wine. She then laid on a reclining couch near the desk in the governor's office the emperor was utilizing.

"I feared this war would possibly last for years, but it seems to have been almost completely won within a few weeks," Vespasian replied. "I will need you to soon take a ship and sail for Ariminum. I believe that is where Primus will head first. His initiative was a bit reckless, but he has proven successful.

I do hope that you were able to compel Mucianus to hurry his ass up."

"I would assume so, Caesar," Aula answered. "When I saw him, his army had made it as far as Stobi in Macedonia."

"Meaning, if he sets a decent pace, he can reach Rome in about eight weeks," Vespasian noted.

"If not, Primus will have plundered the imperial treasury and all of the kitchen silver by the time Mucianus arrives," Titus remarked.

"A shame there is no way of coordinating them and the Ravenna fleet," Trajan noted. "They could march to the coast and sail to southern Italia in a week. Vitellius would then be faced with a two-front war, caught between Mucianus and Primus."

"Unfortunately, that is not possible," the emperor replied. He held up a thick scroll which he handed to Aula. "This is a message General Primus is to read to the Roman Senate. You are to remain with him after that. I'll have another messenger deliver my instructions to Mucianus, who I hope is not too far from Rome by then."

"Do I leave at once, Caesar?" Aula asked tiredly. "I would at least like to have a bath first."

"Take a few days," Vespasian replied. "And please know that I thank you for your service, Lady Vale. You do your family and Rome great honor."

That evening, the Flavian Emperor met with his war council to decide the next phase of their campaign. While Primus and Mucianus were leading the actual invasion forces, there was more to be concerned about than just winning battles.

"The sack of Cremona was most unfortunate," Trajan noted, as he read the report.

As much as he tried to place the blame on the shoulders of the Vitellians, there was no real way for Primus to deflect responsibility for the city's destruction away from himself.

"Yes, well, Primus was always a little unhinged," General Placidus remarked.

"Coming from you, that's saying something," Titus said quickly.

"Oh, piss off already," the auxilia corps commander retorted. "All I am saying is that it's one thing to raze the squalid dung-heaps of barbarians or the cities of traitorous Jews. It's another to sack and destroy Roman cities that have stood for centuries. Are we to believe he has so little control over

his forces that they can simply burn one of our own cities to the ground and he cannot stop them?"

"As I said," Trajan interjected. "It is unfortunate. But it was a victory all the same."

"And besides, Vitellius did plenty of his own wanton destruction on his journey to the capital," Titus added. "In his case, it was simply a matter of devouring his way through the region."

This got an appreciative chuckle from his peers, despite the rather uncomfortable political ramifications to come from Primus' levelling of Cremona.

"Vitellius has suffered a rather bruising defeat," Vespasian observed. "But that does not mean he is finished. There are still plenty of reinforcements he could call upon. Legio X, Gemina, and VI, Victrix are in Hispania, but it will take some time for them to march a thousand miles from their fortresses to central Italia. Our more immediate threat, however, is from North Africa." He placed his finger on a large map in emphasis.

"There is only one legion there, the Third Augusta," Titus noted.

"Yes, but they have a lot of auxiliaries," Placidus added. "If the province were to prove loyal to the pretender, they could rally upwards of thirty thousand fast-running Numidian spearmen in a couple of weeks."

"And there are five port cities they could leave from, including Carthage," Vespasian said. "As far as we know, the fleet at Forum Julii in Maritime Alpes is still loyal to Vitellius. They could ferry the bulk of any African reinforcements to Ostia in a matter of days."

"Carthage is sixteen hundred miles from here," Tiberius Alexander spoke up. "Still, give the word, Caesar, and my two legions will be ready to march."

"First off, let us hope they don't have to invade North Africa," Vespasian replied. "And secondly, even if they do, they should not have to walk most of the way. Remember, the Ravenna fleet has declared for us."

"Yes, but they are still in the Adriatic Sea," Alexander remarked. "It will take at least two weeks to get a message to them by ship, and the same amount of time for them to return." He shrugged. "I guess I'll tell my lads to start walking. The fleet can pick us up somewhere in Cyrene."

"And the North African Army will have landed in Ostia and engaged our forces well before then," Placidus countered, a disgruntled tone in his voice.

"That's why we bluff them," Vespasian explained. "We don't need to uproot two entire legions or send the Ravenna fleet on a fool's errand. All I

need is one ship and a single messenger."

"Will you send Lady Vale?" Titus asked.

"No," his father replied with a soft laugh. "She has done enough trudging across the seas as a messenger for one lifetime. I am sending her as my personal emissary to General Primus. But I don't want any regular courier to take this message for me."

"I'll go, sir." It was his bodyguard, Centurion Octavianus, who spoke. "I feel I have some unfinished business there, after what happened to Clodius Macer."

The emperor nodded. "Nothing you can do about that. Whichever one of your mates did the killing, he was either slain during Otho's disaster in Maritime Alpes or was among those dismissed by Vitellius. Besides, I have no intention of dealing with the proconsul. He's a mindless old twat, who was likely one of Galba's bedfellows. No, I will send you directly to the fortress at Thamugadi. It's about four days' ride south of the port city of Rusicade. The only person I want you speaking with is Legate Festus of Third Augusta."

"I know him," Trajan said. "He's your typical senatorial nobody who buried his face up Nero's backside in order to get a legion command." The legate gave a short laugh. "He annoyed Nero so much that he was sent to arguably the biggest shit hole in the entire empire."

"Yes, I have met him a few times," Vespasian remarked. "He was part of Nero's entourage around the same time I got sent on my little exile to Achaea. He's a notorious flatterer, but he's no fool. Even if the province remains loyal to the fat pretender—whose ass has likely broken the imperial throne by now—he's not stupid enough to leave the province completely undefended. If he suspects there is the remotest possibility of ten thousand legionaries invading his shores, he'll stay put, no matter what the proconsul demands."

"I'll make ready to depart at once," Octavianus said.



During the weeks following what was now being called the Second Battle of Bedriacum—despite the actual fighting taking place at Cremona—the Padus Valley was subjected to the first deluge of the late autumn rains. Political infighting had further hampered Primus' attempts at getting his army

on the move, even more so than the saturated ground. Chief among the malcontents was a newly 0arrived legate named Lucius Plotius Grypus. A former member of the equites who Vespasian recently elevated into the senatorial class, he had been sent by Mucianus, ostensibly at the emperor's directive, to assume command of Legio VII, Claudia.

"My appointment displeases you, general," Grypus observed.

"To be perfectly candid, yes, it does," Primus replied. "Chief Tribune Messalla distinguished himself by his valor and conduct during our victory at Cremona. Command of the legion should have fallen to him."

"A victory, perhaps, though it was won by Fortuna rather than you," Grypus retorted. "Forgive me, general, but your recklessness nearly cost us the entire campaign."

"You weren't there, so forgive *me* if I tell you to piss off," the commander-in-chief said rather gruffly, though keeping his voice level.

"Grypus wasn't there, but we were," Legate Lupus spoke up. "He's right, general. You hurried forward with the cavalry, devoid of any legionary support, and got into a spot of trouble. Instead of taking the time to regroup properly, you ordered a forced march of sixteen miles with no food or logistics. To top it all, we ran headlong into a battle at night! By any stretch of military logic, we should have lost."

"But we didn't," Aquila countered. Though he'd had his share of squabbles lately with the commanding general, the legate of Thirteenth Gemina knew this was not the time for airing grievances. "Instead of arguing about the past, we need to decide how to proceed now that the Vitellian's Northern Army is smashed."

"There is no proceeding," Grypus emphasized. "We hold here and wait for Mucianus."

"Agreed," Lupus concurred. "We may have won the battle, but our army took a sound thrashing. All of our legions lost a lot of good men, especially among the officers. My Eighth Augusta alone lost ten centurions at Bedriacum."

"And for their sacrifice, we honor them," Primus said earnestly. "But I will not have their deaths be in vain. We have won *a* battle, but the war is far from decided." He took a long drink of his wine and paused. He knew his next words would cause dismay in his assembled legates. "Given the circumstances, I have decided to use the emperor's prerogative and allow the men in the ranks to nominate those who will command them. Standards will

be maintained, of course; they must be literate, with a good service record, and prior leadership service as a principle officer."

As predicted, a number of disheartened grumblings were heard from each of the commanding officers.

"Have you gone mad, or are you looking to build your own private army?" Grypus protested. "You would have us all dragged about by centurions who will be loyal to *you* rather than their legates!"

"If you are not capable of controlling your legions, then feel free to go running back to Mucianus while I find men who can." Primus' rebuke was rather severe, but he had been appointed commander-in-chief by Vespasian. The grumbling legates knew they had little choice in the matter. Where they did have a say, however, was on the movements of the army.

"I think one thing we can all agree on," Aquila said, trying to calm the mood of his peers, "is that the Vitellians are broken. The war may not be finished, but I simply cannot see the armies in Gaul, Hispania, or North Africa coming to the pretender's aid. Bedriacum may have been a close-run affair, but all anyone will care about is that Vitellius' entire northern army was lost, and the survivors are now loyal to Vespasian."

"Perhaps," Primus conceded. "Though I cannot help but feel we are being rather presumptive to assume so. Even with Fourth Macedonia returning to their garrison on the Rhine, there are still plenty of legionary and auxilia forces who remain loyal to Vitellius in Germania. To simply sit here and wait is to become complacent, allowing the enemy the opportunity to regroup. No, we must continue the advance and strangle him before any more of his allies arrive."

"To take the entire army would be rather ponderous," Grypus observed. He was now calmer in his demeanor, deciding it would be best to compromise with the commander-in-chief rather than continuing to bicker with him. "Most of Northern Italia has been turned into a quagmire by these incessant rains. If we are confined to only using the roads, our column would stretch anywhere from five to ten miles from end-to-end."

"And if there is a viable threat in Germania, we should not leave ourselves exposed," Aquila added. "General, I recommend we leave the bulk of the army here, and send the more lightly equipped auxilia infantry ahead with the cavalry and select cohorts of legionaries."

The other legates hurriedly agreed to this compromise. While most of them felt the Vitellians were, for all intents and purposes, broken, Antonius

Primus was the last man they wanted taking Rome. They also knew Mucianus held nominal seniority over Primus. And for men like Grypus, who were firmly in the camp of Mucianus, they felt if Primus continued to advance south with too light of a force, he would have no choice but to wait for reinforcements.

While the senior commanders debated rather spiritedly, sometimes with belligerence, Master Centurion Vitruvius stood by the entrance to the principia tent, his hands clasped behind his back. As the officers began discussing which elements would go forward with Primus, the large entrance flap was pulled open and a legionary stepped in.

"Beg your pardon, sir," the soldier said, "but you will want to come to the north gate of the camp at once. There is a legion approaching."

"A legion?" Primus asked incredulously.

He and Vitruvius hastened from the principia. The other legates soon followed. Some speculated as to whether it was Mucianus' advance guard. Grypus had just come from his entourage and informed them that they were still at least three weeks' away. The other thought was that it might be Vitellian loyalists, looking to engage in hostilities.

"If that were the case, they would not advance with just a single legion," Primus retorted, when he overheard this speculation. He squinted his eyes, trying to discern the standards in the distance while the sound of trumpets heralded the legion's approach. It was Vitruvius who recognized them.

"It's the Eleventh Claudia, sir," the master centurion said, denoting the standards that accompanied the eagle.

"About bloody time," Primus remarked with a relieved sigh. "I thought they weren't going to turn up for this little party at all."

Legio XI, *Claudia Pia Fidelis*, had a history dating back to the time of Julius Caesar and the Conquest of Gaul. Perhaps its most famous veterans were the centurions Lucius Vorenus and Titus Pullo, who gained fame when Caesar noted their extreme valor in his Gallic Commentaries. In more recent years, the legion had been garrisoned along the Danube. Having first declared allegiance to Otho, they were part of the division that Primus had led to come to the former emperor's assistance. Since Otho's death and their return to the Danube, the legion had been rather quiet.

"I know their legate," Primus said. He strolled through the camp entrance, where a growing number of auxiliary troopers tasked with guard detail was forming.

“Bassus, you old bastard!” Primus said, as the Eleventh’s commanding officer dismounted.

Annius Bassus was a highly experienced legion commander, who had served in various posts along the Danube and in Asia Minor, for the past fifteen years. The fact that he had yet to hold a substantial governorship, and was instead content to command legionaries, made him a safe political nonentity to Nero and his immediate successors. He was also very effective at fighting the various tribes who relied heavily on their horsemen, across the Danube.

“Marcus Antonius Primus,” Bassus grinned, extending his hand. “Never was a man less suited for peace, yet better matched in war.”

“Your flattery will not get you a discounted rate on your next wine shipment,” Primus retorted, clasping the legate’s hand. “And as our colleagues here will likely tell you, I almost completely botched the last battle. Had Fortuna, Mars, Victoria, *and* Bellona all not been favoring our little venture, we should have lost. So I may not be as well matched for war as one may think.” He was smiling and gave a wink at this last remark.

Bassus laughed boisterously. Even the assembled legates, who’d only minutes before been arguing voraciously with their commanding general, appreciated his candor and honest self-deprecation.

“I’m sorry we are so late,” Bassus said, becoming serious once more. “We received word of your victory just a few days ago. Well done, all of you. Delayed as our journey was…Eleventh Legion reporting for duty, all present and correct!”

“You appear to have brought a lot more than just the Eleventh with you,” Primus said, nodding toward a Dalmatian warrior who still sat astride his horse.

“Indeed,” Bassus acknowledged. “This is Krsto Luka, of the Scordisci tribe. He brings six thousand spears and the friendship of his people.”

“We fight for Rome and for Vespasian,” Krsto said, his voice heavily accented.

“So what exactly did this ‘army’ cost us?” Primus whispered to Bassus.

“Just some preferred trade rights,” the legate replied. “And the promise to come to their assistance should their hostile neighbors, the Celegeri, become unruly.”

“And Silvanus approved this?” General Aquila asked, referring to the old, decadent senator who governed the Roman province along the Danube.

“Fuck him,” Bassus said. “That fat old bastard can’t even remember what he had for breakfast this morning, let alone a treaty with a potential ally. He’s been the perfect shield for me these past six years. I’ve been able to do, essentially, whatever I want, while the emperor and senate believe he controls the province.”

Primus laughed appreciatively before addressing Krsto.

“You are most welcome, noble ally,” he said slowly, with a respectful nod.

The Scordisci chief nodded in return but remained mounted.

“Vitruvius, see to these men,” Primus directed. He then said to Bassus, “Come, I’ve heard nothing from you since Otho’s unfortunate demise. The Eleventh Legion has been strangely quiet.”

“We returned to our billets like good soldiers,” Bassus answered as he accompanied Primus into the vast camp. “However, the lads refused to swear the oath of allegiance to Vitellius. I was not about to threaten them with flogging or other forms of punishment. I believe an oath administered under duress is completely worthless. Besides, I have no love for Vitellius any more than they do. That said, after I received word from my cousin that the Ravenna fleet had defected to Vespasian, I knew Vitellius’ cause was lost. I only hope we can make good our absence from the Battle of Bedriacum.”

“That all depends on the pretender’s masters,” Primus said candidly. “Caecina betrayed Vitellius. Since my soldiers despise traitors, regardless of which side they originally fought for, I sent him to Alexandria. Let Vespasian deal with him. Valens has not been seen and has likely fled Italia to try and scrounge up allies. My scouts report some cavalry and a few auxilia cohorts are holding just north of Ariminum. Narnia is the most likely place for them to make a stand.”

“I’d recommend dealing with the forces at Ariminum first,” Bassus advised. “Besides, the Via Flaminia, while following the coast and being a less direct route to Rome, is actually much faster than trying to take the straight passes over the mountains towards Florentia. We will have to pass through Narnia in either case, so I agree that is probably where the enemy will meet us next.”

It was now early evening, and the commander-in-chief ordered food and drinks for all of his officers. Krsto remained with his men until they could establish their camp for the night, then joined his imperial allies. He ate in silence and spoke very little. Primus was uncertain if he was standoffish or

simply not fluent in Latin and had trouble discerning what the Romans were saying.

"Your cousin commands the Ravenna fleet," Primus remarked to Bassus. "I wish I had known sooner that he had declared for Vespasian. We could have sailed around Italia, taken the capital via Ostia, and avoided Vitellius' army altogether."

"There is something else," the legate remarked. "A substantial number of the mariners, especially the younger men, are hoping to achieve promotion into the legions. Despite the terrible atrocities committed against First Adiutrix by the tyrant, Galba, there is still much talk among the Ravenna fleet about raising another legion."

"Unfortunately, I do not have the authority to do that," Primus replied. "And even if I did, I have experienced first-hand the arduous task of trying to train and equip five thousand brand new legionaries." He paused for a moment, a grin crossing his face as he had an epiphany. "I have an idea; one that will benefit everyone from the legions, to the fleet, to our new allies, the Scordisci."



The days following the death of Junius Blaesus were met with outrage from members of the senate, as well as the plebeian assembly. Even the two weeks of games could not completely distract the people from the fact that one of the most respected statesmen in Rome had been slain by poison. Far from declaring it an unfortunate accident or trying to distance himself from it, Vitellius took full responsibility for Blaesus' death.

"Junius Blaesus posed a substantial and immediate threat to our great emperor," Lucius explained to an angry senate. "It was crucial that he be brought to justice swiftly and decisively."

"If he was such an imminent threat, why was he not arrested and placed on trial?" an irate Senator Nerva retorted. "What kind of justice is it, when a man can be poisoned at one of the emperor's own banquets? Are we to all fear for our safety whenever Vitellius asks us to dine with him?"

"Blaesus' death was a special case, I assure you," Lucius replied, trying to quell the angry retorts that echoed from various senators and friends of the deceased financier. "The war has, unfortunately, caused us to take some extraordinary measures in order to protect the emperor's person. I assure you,

once the crisis has ended all normalcy and decorum will return to the senate and the empire at large. And in his mercy, Emperor Vitellius has decreed that only half of Blaesus' fortune and assets will be seized by the state. His widow and children will still receive a substantial portion of his rather massive fortune."

This perceived sense of clemency was meant to placate the unruly members of the senate. It only made Vitellius and his brother appear guilty of murder. If Blaesus were indeed a traitor and a threat, why spare his family at all? However, Vitellius was emperor and, therefore, immune to prosecution. There was little actual recourse Blaesus' friends could take. And as Lucius had acted on his brother's orders, there were no repercussions that he could face either. It was much the same as when men like Guardsman Tiberius Statius acted as assassins on the emperor's behalf. So, while many of his colleagues were outraged at his poisoning, there was nothing more to be done. However, if Vitellius thought Blaesus' death would subdue any attempts at insurrection, he was clearly mistaken. The emperor had traded one perceived enemy, who had in reality given him no reason to think of him as a threat at all, for a number of former allies who now secretly hoped for a Flavian victory.

Chapter XXIV: Poison Tears

Along the Via Aemilia, Northwest of Ariminum
8 November 69 A.D.
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Antonius Primus' compromise with his disgruntled legates soon turned to his advantage, as he led his restructured division southeast towards Ariminum. He did not have the authority to raise a new legion; what he was able to do was take volunteers from the Ravenna fleet and use them to fill the vacancies within his legions. As for replacing the near two thousand mariners who wished to become legionaries, Primus' newest allies, the Scordisci, gave him a fresh stock of manpower. Service in the Imperial Navy was a viable path to Roman citizenship, so there was no shortage of willing volunteers who would lay down their spears and take up the oar and the mast.

The division Primus led towards Ariminum was still quite large. The other legates had thought he would only advance with six or so legionary cohorts, roughly ten thousand auxilia infantry, and about two thousand cavalry. Instead, the arrival of Annius Bassus had given him an entire fresh legion who would act as the apex of his taskforce. And despite a third of their men volunteering to join the Ravenna fleet, the Scordisci still had four thousand spearmen marching under the Flavian banner. Primus had taken all three of the vexilation cohorts from Judea, as well as two cohorts from each of his legions, and a single cohort from each of the defeated former Vitellian Legions. Even with most of his legions and about half his auxiliaries remaining in Northern Italia, Antonius Primus still marched south with a formidable force of nearly twenty-five thousand men.

The other Flavian legates, therefore, decided it was best if they traveled with the commander-in-chief. However, as the crux of their legions remained up north, they were relegated to serving as little more than staff officers for General Primus. The one exception was Legate Grypus, who Primus left in command of the bulk of their forces in the Padus region.

As the commander-in-chief explained, "I need someone in overall command of the army. And whatever our initial differences, it would be

unfair for me to strip you of any meaningful command by having you accompany me south without your legion."

"I understand," Grypus replied, surprised by Primus' almost amicable demeanor.

"You will also have two thousand new recruits from the fleet within the next two to three weeks," the commanding general continued. "Ensure they are distributed where most needed amongst our depleted ranks. Make certain the army stays busy, but leave the actual training to the centurions and options."

"We won't be sitting idle," Grypus assured him.

Primus gave a lopsided grin with his next remark. "And when Mucianus finally shows up, feel free to tell him where we've gone, and what an insufferable shit you thought I was."

Grypus gave a snort. He wondered if the commander-in-chief was simply ridding himself of one he viewed as a troublemaker. It mattered not. Despite their cordial meeting, there was little love lost between the two. Grypus knew he would be far happier serving under Mucianus' command. He was therefore content to wait three weeks for a general to arrive who was not so bloody reckless.



The continued journey south was extremely arduous and painful for Optio Gaius Artorius. He had refused to stay with the wounded at Bedriacum. He could still ride a horse and was able to perform most of his duties, with the exception of actual fighting, so Nicanor had allowed his second-in-command to remain with the century. It served as a source of motivation for their tired and battered legionaries, seeing their optio still marching with them.

His smashed arm was slung across his chest. Getting into and out of his armor each day was the worst, and it took a pair of legionaries to help him ease his arm between the shoulder and torso plates of his segmentata each time. His left leg was stiff, and he had to be careful how he moved, lest he tear the wound open.

"I still cannot believe either of us were left standing after that," Legionary Decius said one morning, as he helped his optio into his armor. Once the torso ties were bound, he slung Gaius' arm across his chest. "I thank the gods we still find ourselves among the living."

“The gods had nothing to do with it,” the ever skeptical optio replied.

“Well, if we had fallen, at least we would have found ourselves in the fields of Elysium.”

Gaius sighed and gave a tired smile. It was the same thing every day from Decius. He was a simple man. And like most legionaries, he was illiterate, uneducated, and highly superstitious. Soldiering was all he knew or would likely ever know. Still, he was fiercely loyal. He had demonstrated his bravery numerous times throughout the Judean campaign, as well as his latest selfless actions while saving the Seventh Legion from the Vitellian Army’s relentless bombardment.

In truth, the optio was rather fond of the legionary. They were roughly the same age. Yet because of their respective upbringings, Gaius tended to view Decius like a younger brother. He resolved that once the fighting was over, he would talk with Signifier Aurelian and see if he would teach the legionary to read and write. Gaius had heard of his grandfather doing something similar with his soldiers; taking those with the brightest minds and leadership potential and hiring a tutor to help them better themselves.

“We should arrive at Ariminum by midday,” Centurion Nicanor briefed his principle officers and decani, as their soldiers ate a hasty breakfast and broke down their camp.

“Any sighting of Vitellius’ remaining forces?” Tesserarius Julius asked. “Or have they run all the way to Rome?”

“No word, yet,” the centurion replied. “My guess is, if they haven’t retreated all the way to Rome, they’ll likely attempt to make a stand at Narnia.”

“That region is very mountainous,” Gaius observed. “But even then, we’ve defeated their legions. What could possess them to think they have a chance against us?”

“Narnia is a natural stronghold,” Nicanor answered. “The terrain is extremely rugged, and the city walls are built atop jagged stretches of rock. Getting siege engines within range is a hazardous task at best.”

“Which we don’t have a lot of anyway, sir,” a decanus added. “Just the lot the lads from Eleventh Claudia brought with them.”

“I know Narnia well,” Julius remarked. “I spent a few summers there with my uncle when I was a boy. One could defend it easily with just a handful of trained soldiers. A direct assault would be extremely costly.”

“Let us hope they come to their senses before we have to sack yet another Roman city,” Nicanor stated.

Their meeting was interrupted by Centurion Galeo riding up quickly on his horse. A potential siege of Narnia was quickly forgotten by the more immediate threat.

“The cavalry are in contact,” the cohort commander said.

“How far?” Nicanor asked.

“About six miles from here. That they are not holed up in the city, means they likely did not find many welcoming friends there.”

“We’ll be ready to march within thirty minutes, sir,” Nicanor asserted.

“Alright, but I wouldn’t get too excited,” Galeo replied. “From what I’ve heard, it’s only a few infantry cohorts. Besides, the Eleventh Claudia is anxious to redeem themselves. Primus is letting them have first crack at the enemy.”



It was Arrius Varus and the cavalry vanguard that made first contact with the Vitellians since Cremona. There was at least one regiment of cavalry and three cohorts of auxilia infantry lurking behind established earthworks, about five miles from the city.

“They’re just sitting here, out in the open,” the cavalry commander observed. His corps alone had the enemy outnumbered. He wondered how exactly they intended to hold off the entire Flavian Army with just a few feet of earthworks and palisade stakes.

“I’m surprised we found them this far from the city,” one of his centurions replied. “You would think they’d be waiting for us there, from a position of strength.”

“Ariminum has few defenses,” Arrius said. “Since they most likely know about our victory, as well as Ravenna’s defection, the Vitellians may find few friends there.”

They soon heard the sound of hobnailed sandals marching in a rapid cadence along the road, with a cornicen’s horn announcing the approach of Legio XI.

“Commander Arrius!” Legate Bassus said, riding up to the men.

“Sir,” Arrius acknowledged. “I’m sending three regiments to take care of their cavalry. The rest of my corps will surround the camp and prevent them

from fleeing to Ariminum."

"Don't tell me these poor dumb bastards intend to fight," the legate scoffed. He then shrugged. "At least it will give my lads a chance to bloody their blades a bit."

Arrius turned to his assembling regimental commanders, ordering them to envelop the camp while dispersing the enemy horsemen. Meanwhile, the Eleventh Claudia Legion rapidly deployed from its large column into vast battle lines. Two to three cohorts were dispatched to each of the four sides of the camp. Inexplicably, the enemy's auxilia infantrymen were manning the earthen ramparts, shields and spear at the ready.

Cohorts quickly divided their centuries into initial assault troops, as well as those who would support with javelin volleys. The auxiliaries had no missile weapons of their own and could do little to harry the Flavian legionaries, as they advanced quickly and with much discipline towards the ramparts. Long rows of siege ladders were dropped across the large trench that surrounded the camp. Before the Vitellians could dislodge any of them, they were met with waves of pila, flung in volleys over the earthworks in a rain of death. Men screamed in pain as they were struck down. Others brought their shields up in a desperate attempt to save themselves. Still others fled from the ramparts and into the camp itself. A stalwart number of brave souls managed to find their courage, however, and they reformed to face the coming onslaught. Flavian centurions blew their whistles, signaling the attack. Legionaries, their gladii drawn, scrambled across the ladders, throwing themselves against the wall of Vitellian spears. A few were knocked off the ladders and into the six-foot trench; however, the Flavian numbers coupled with the simultaneous assault, proved too much for the auxiliary troopers. Within minutes it was over.

A hundred Vitellian soldiers had paid for their defiance with their lives, with about three times as many wounded. And for their efforts, the Eleventh Claudia had lost twenty dead and roughly sixty wounded. Most of these were suffered during the brief moments of exposure as they climbed over the siege ladders. The surviving Vitellian auxiliaries were disarmed and taken prisoner. Within an hour of Arrius Varus first making contact, the enemy were routed and the road to Ariminum secured.



The Flavian Army remained encamped just outside the city. Soldiers were notorious for being rough with the civilian populace during the best of times, and Primus wanted to avoid any of the shameful incidents that had transpired at Cremona. Word of that city's destruction had reached Ariminum and the people were terrified at the prospect of being subjected to similar ignominy. It was those fears Primus immediately sought to allay. Merchants and prostitutes were therefore encouraged to ply their trade with the Flavian soldiers. Centurions and their subordinate officers threatened their men with the severest of punishments should they abuse the good citizens. Stalls and tents soon surrounded the large encampment. The celebratory atmosphere did much to allay the fears of citizen and senior officer alike.

On the morning following the establishment at Ariminum, General Primus, his legates, and various auxilia commanders, made their way into the city. A contingent of legionary cavalry accompanied them as they rode along the coastal road that stretched across the short rise, scarcely a quarter mile from the sandy beaches. Down below, hundreds of imperial soldiers were seen splashing about in the surf, as they enjoyed their respite from the relentless campaign.

The aquilifer from every legion, along with standard bearers from each auxilia regiment, were part of the commander-in-chief's large procession. Marching behind them all was Centurion Nicanor and his century of legionaries. Galeo had earlier explained to General Primus that Optio Gaius Artorius' slain brother had been governor of Ariminum. Because of this, Primus took Gaius and his century as his personal guard into the city.

Porcius, the governor who stepped into the position after Lucius Artorius assumed command of his regiment, awaited the contingent from the triumphant Flavian Army. His wife stood by his side along with the entire city council. The cavalry continued on while Primus and his officers halted at the base of the palace steps.

"Century…halt!" Nicanor shouted.

His legionaries took one extra step, then halted with an audible clap of their hobnailed sandals upon the paving stones.

Gaius, who rode at the back of the entire formation, strained to see the faces of Porcius' entourage. On the far right, he saw who he assumed he was looking for. She was the only woman present besides the governor's wife.

Gaius reckoned she had to be his sister-in-law. She was as pretty as he remembered his brother telling him, in that rarest of letters he'd received from Lucius. In fact, that letter was the last time Gaius had heard directly from his brother up until their unfortunate encounter on the battlefield. Laura, for he knew it was her, simply stared ahead, a sad smile upon her face. It tore Gaius up inside. He presumed she did not know about her husband's fate.

"General Primus," Porcius said, with a respectful nod. "On behalf of our absent governor, I welcome you to the City of Ariminum."

"And for that I thank you," Primus replied. "Please know that the armies of Emperor Vespasian greet the people of Ariminum as friends."

He then dismounted, as did his senior leaders. A number of cavalry troopers also dismounted and took charge of the officers' horses. Porcius waved his hand towards the governor's palace, taking his place beside Primus as the group walked through the large open gates to the outer gardens.

"You understand my concerns, of course," Porcius said, electing to speak plainly. "Ariminum is a Roman city. After what happened to those poor souls in Cremona, I fear greatly for our citizens."

"They are all our citizens," the general remarked. "And you must remember, unlike the people of Cremona, Ariminum is not offering safe haven to the emperor's enemies."

"But which emperor?" Porcius countered. "While I appreciate your overtones of friendship, I am largely troubled by the insinuation that we have only one emperor. The harsh reality is that four men have been called 'Caesar' since this year began. Now we are down to two. Who, then, are the plebs supposed to profess their loyalty to?"

"To be completely honest, they would do well to wait and swear their fealty to whoever wins." Primus' candor had a slightly humorous, as well as extremely pragmatic undertone.

"And I am to assume, then, that Vespasian is the victor in this war?" the governor asked. "After the news we received a few days ago, and your very presence here, I deduce he is winning at the moment."

"Like any loyal general, I am expected to say that our adversaries are on the run and victory for the Flavians is eminent. But I will simply give you the facts, and those are that we defeated the Vitellians at Cremona. The former legions of Vitellius, which we cornered within the city, have sworn their allegiance to Vespasian. We've brought a single cohort from each of those

legions with us, if you should wish to personally verify this claim. Their chief and equites tribunes have been dispatched throughout the region, to inform all provincial governors and military commanders of Vitellius' defeat."

"I knew of Vitellius' defeat before we received any official word," Porcius remarked.

"I take it his surviving forces have passed through this way?" Primus asked.

"They have," the governor confirmed. "It was a modestly sized army, mostly praetorians, a few auxiliary regiments, as well as some individual cohorts from his defeated legions. But there was not one eagle standard amongst them, nor was this a calculated withdrawal."

"Indeed. And did you see where they were bound for?"

"No idea, though I would assume they intend to regroup in Rome." Porcius paused, his brow furrowed. He then corrected himself. "Actually, I do recall hearing one of their officers stating that they would make a stand at Narnia while awaiting reinforcements from General Valens. I take it Valens was not captured or killed at Cremona?"

"No," Primus said, shaking his head. "In fact, he was not there at all. Some of the prisoners informed us he had been taken with a severe illness, and had only begun his trek to join up with the army, just prior to our attack on Cremona. If he was there, he did not remain for long. One of the reasons why I dispatched former Vitellian officers to the nearest provinces was because I believe Valens will try to bring reinforcements back from either Gaul or Hispania."

"Well, then, for the sake of peace within the empire, I hope he is captured soon," Porcius remarked.

"As do I," Primus concurred. "Many of his soldiers, particularly amongst Vitellius' praetorians, are fiercely loyal. If they suspect there is a chance of reinforcements coming to their aid, then I believe they'll continue to make a defiant stand against us."

The assembled leaders drank in silence for a few moments, though Porcius was clearly vexed about something which did not involve General Valens and his continued defiance.

"I have to ask you something personal, general," he said. "As you know, I am only the deputy governor of this city. The actual governor, Lucius Artorius Magnus, took command of a Vitellian cavalry regiment a few months ago. He and his wife are dear friends of ours. There was no sign of

him when the Vitellian survivors passed through here. Am I to assume he was captured by your forces?”



The question which Porcius now asked of General Primus had haunted Laura ever since they received word of the Vitellian Army’s disastrous defeat at Cremona. As the governor’s wife, she felt obligated to stand with his deputy to greet the Flavian generals. But as Porcius and Primus left most of their respective entourages to go speak in private, Laura was left to wander the gardens of the palace alone. Certainly there were hundreds of dignitaries and government officials, along with the escorts from Primus’ army. Yet, it was as if none of them even noticed her. She sat on the edge of a fountain, located in the small side garden that followed an open air corridor away from the mass of people. Her emotions were twisted with fear and trepidation about the unknown fate of her husband. With the arrival of the Flavian Army, she hoped to hear something soon.

“Hello, Laura.” The voice caused her to jump to her feet. She stared for a moment at the armored soldier who addressed her, though she did not recognize him. He carried an optio’s helmet under his left arm, his right was held by a sling across his chest. His left leg was heavily bandaged, and he walked with a limp. There was something familiar about him, yet she could not place it.

“Do I know you?” she asked.

“We have never met,” the young man said. “Yet, I feel as if I should have known you all my life.”

“By Diana,” Laura said, seeing traces of her husband in the young man’s face. “Gaius?”

He smiled sadly and nodded. Such was Laura’s sense of joy and relief at seeing a familiar face, her own brother-in-law, that she did not notice the melancholy nature which consumed Gaius. She embraced him passionately yet gently. She was careful to avoid his injured arm.

“It fills my heart with gladness, to see you,” Laura said, as they both sat on the rounded edge of the fountain. “I only wish it were under different circumstances.”

“As do I.”

“It greatly upset your mother when Lucius was given his command,”

Laura continued. She spoke quickly, her courage failing her as she delayed in asking the question which haunted her. “It hurt him deeply that she did not seem proud of him. Her sorrow was because she knew both her sons were on opposing sides of a terrible war.”

“Mother?” Gaius asked, raising an eyebrow. “She is here?”

“She was,” Laura corrected. “She and your father came to see us after we received word of Otho’s suicide. Traveling from Britannia by sea, they had little knowledge about the awful series of internal wars which have afflicted Rome. They left for Gaul two months ago. Your father said there was an old friend he wished to see.”

Though meeting her brother-in-law gave her a brief reprieve from her trepidations, she was filled with an even greater sense of vexation. Laura took a deep breath and steeled herself. “But please, dear Gaius, I must know if you have seen my husband. Was he captured at Cremona?”

Gaius had hoped to remain somewhat stoic long enough to tell Laura what had happened to her beloved. The memories of Lucius’ last few hours in this world overwhelmed him, and he found he could not speak. He slowly shook his head. He choked up as a single tear ran down the side of his face.

Since the day Lucius left, Laura had tried to prepare herself, though she had always denied any such possibility. It was inconceivable that her husband should be so mercilessly wrenched from her. Every day Laura’s heart told her he would be alright. That no harm would come to him. Her heart was a liar.

No words were said by either of them as Gaius placed his good arm around Laura. She rested her head on his shoulder, the months of strain, and now this horrifying realization that Lucius was never coming home, shattered her very soul. Gaius had once thought he had no more tears left to shed for his brother, but as Laura sobbed uncontrollably, her hands clutching at the plates of his armor, he found his sorrows as raw and painful as the moment Lucius died.



It was almost nightfall when Valens reached Massilia. His horse was completely exhausted. It collapsed as he fell from the saddle. He had barely escaped with his life, and he cursed to Hades the abominable traitors from the First Adiutrix Legion.

“That Galba ever made those filthy bastards legionaries!” he swore.

An unfortunate stroke of misfortune, the riders sent by Antonius Primus had gotten a head start of several days on him. They had reached Lugdunum long before Valens arrived by ship in the province. Once word of Vitellius' defeat spread, any sense of loyalty or courage immediately failed the provincial governors and their armies. The Sixth Victrix and Tenth Gemina Legions had declared for Vespasian, while the men of Legio I, Adiutrix had drawn their blades against the Vitellian general. As he rode away from their fortress, scarcely escaping with his life, Valens had cursed himself for his naivety. After all, First Adiutrix had been fiercely loyal to Otho, and no doubt resented their old enemy demanding they march for him. He may very well have succeeded had word of Primus' victory not already reached the legion. Many soldiers viewed the Vitellian defeat as their own vindication. Aligning themselves with Vespasian would give them a chance at redemption.

Valens had ridden through the night and well into the next day, all the while eluding the patrols of legionary cavalry sent to dispatch him. His mission a complete failure, he now looked to his own survival. He would return to Rome, gather what forces he could muster, and make a stand against Primus at the fortified city of Narnia. And while he had never had much genuine loyalty to Vitellius, he knew he was completely trapped. He had no intention of trying to turn his soldiers like Caecina. He also recognized that if he were captured now, his life was forfeit. His one hope was to make Primus bleed and then negotiate terms with him. Only by surrendering on his own terms could Fabius Valens hope to save himself.

As he stumbled to his feet, he was relieved to see his ship still docked. It was a small trireme-class warship with three decks of oarsmen, in addition to its sails.

"Cast off at once!" he ordered the ship's commander.

With a few shouts to the crew, the mooring lines were taken in, the plank retracted, and within minutes the rhythmic beating of the drummers echoed from below deck. Rowers dipped the long oars into the water, slowly pulling the vessel away from the shore.

"What's happened?" the commander asked Valens, who was clearly distraught. His eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep and his hair disheveled.

"Betrayal," he replied coldly. "There will be no aid coming to the emperor from either Hispania or Gaul." He then excused himself and quickly

walked over to his small cabin at the back of the ship. It was three days' journey from Massilia to Ostia, and General Fabius Valens dreaded his next meeting with Emperor Vitellius. Exhaustion overtook him that night. He fell into a deep sleep, not knowing that such a meeting would never occur.

The ship had sailed through the night, her oarsmen weary from their labors, when they passed the inlet harbor for the port of Athenopolis. The seas were rough this time of year, and the ship's commander elected to take the coastal route rather than risk the treacherous, deep waters of the most direct route to Rome. They were still about twenty miles from Forum Julii, the home of the western fleet, when they spotted three distinctive shapes on the horizon. The commander stood on the prow, gripping the railing hard as he watched what he knew to be three imperial vessels coming closer into view. Two were heading straight for them, the third was veering off to their right, looking to cut off any means of escape to the east.

Valens slept late and had just come out of his cabin when he heard the commotion from the forward deck. He stumbled along as the vessel heaved up and down the tall waves. He heard the voice of a lookout shout, *"Three imperial warships, quinquereme-class!"*

"It would seem Paulinus is not about to let you return to Rome," the commander said, as the Vitellian general joined him.

"Can you not outrun them?" Valens asked.

"Not a chance. Triremes are faster over short distances and far more maneuverable. In a dead race, we haven't a chance. Besides, my oarsmen are spent. We had little wind last night, and they expended themselves just getting us this far."

"Then turn towards the shore and drop me off there!" Valens ordered, the desperation rising in his voice.

The commander glared at him. "And just how far do you think you would get?" he asked indignantly. "You made us leave your horse, remember? And if I do beach my vessel so you can make a futile attempt to escape on foot, what do you think those warships will do to me and my crew?" He then looked to his nearest mariners. "Take him."

"Hades damn you!" Valens spat as a pair of sailors grabbed him by the arms. He suddenly regretted leaving his spatha in his cabin, for he wished for nothing more than to impale this vile traitor.

"I am truly sorry, sir," the commander said. "But I will not needlessly

sacrifice my crew for any one man, not even the emperor's right hand." He shouted to his crewmen, "Strike the sails and bring in the oars!"

It would be another thirty minutes before the much larger warships closed around them. Fires could be seen near the catapults, emphasizing their seriousness in capturing or killing Fabius Valens. As the vessels drew closer, they saw that the central ship was not a quinquereme, but a massive octeres-class with eight files of one hundred rowers per side. It towered over the trireme, which it could easily split in half with its formidable ram. And unlike the smaller vessels, it had two large castles, both fore and aft.

"That's Admiral Flavianus' flagship," the sailing master said, as he joined his commander.

In addition to the imperial standards, there was a large blue flag that depicted a hammer encircled by a pair of wings. The banks of oars were retracted as the massive vessel slowed to a gradual halt next to the trireme. Both ships rose and fell on the large rolling waves, though it looked as if the octeres could cut through even the harshest surf. The respective sailing masters hailed each other, and a large plank was lowered with a loud slap as its massive spike slammed into the trireme's deck, holding the two ships together.

The fleet's admiral was a large Norseman, hence the hammer on his flag. His father had been a Roman mariner, while his uncle was a retired senior-ranking centurion from the legions. He wore no armor, only his tunic and a rather plain-looking gladius on his hip.

"Admiral, sir," the trireme's commander said, saluting as his superior boarded the ship with several marines and other officers.

"Commander," Flavianus replied. "I believe you have something I want."



A sad interlude had fallen over much of the empire, as if the very corners of the Roman world were suddenly aware of the tragedies which had unfolded at its heart. For Aula Cursia Vale, and indeed every person employed as an imperial courier, there was no reprieve. Her long and arduous trek lasted over two months and would have taken far longer, had she not been able to acquire passage by boat from Thessalonica in Macedonia. And now, with only a few days of rest in Alexandria, she was being sent back to Italia. This time, there would be no returning to the east. The winter seas

were extremely violent. Speed being of great importance, Vespasian was willing to accept the risk involved with sending Aula by ship.

"I'll not lie to you, it will be a rough voyage," the emperor said, as he escorted Aula towards the docks. "However, this ship is quite large and was the same vessel which brought me news of Primus' victory at Cremona. It would take you another three or four months to return by land, and I need these dispatches to get to him at once."

"I understand," Aula acknowledged. "I knew the risks when I accepted Sabinus' offer to act as his courier." She then said with a laugh, "I only hope I am done sailing after this. I have spent more time on the seas this year than most of our sailors."

"I don't expect to see you again until I return to Rome," Vespasian replied. "In one of my directives, I am naming you as an envoy to General Primus. He is a vile, rakish sort of fellow. He is also extremely loyal to me. He *will* treat you with the dignity and respect due to a noblewoman and friend of the emperor."

"Then until we meet again in Rome, Caesar," Aula said, with a bow.

Chapter XXV: Futile Defiance

Ariminum
15 November 69 A.D.



Slopes of Narnia in central Italia

The Flavians lingered at Ariminum for almost a week while they consolidated and debated their next move. Antonius Primus originally thought to use the Ravenna fleet to sail directly to Rome. Upon the advice of his experienced legates, including General Aquila, it was determined an amphibious assault on Ostia could be very costly. Instead, the fleet was tasked with ferrying food and supplies for the army. Warships could carry an extraordinary amount of rations and equipment, traversing in days the same distance that would take ground transportation weeks or even months was a huge boon for the Flavians. Still, it was plain to see he rift between Primus and his wayward counterpart, Mucianus, was only continuing to worsen.

“Our friend, Grypus, has written to Vespasian, via Mucianus, denouncing my ‘reckless’ actions,” the commander-in-chief said, to Aquila on the eve of their departure from Ariminum.

“He does have a point,” the legate replied. “You’ve even said so yourself.”

“That may be, but he also praised Mucianus to the ends of the earth, as if

it were he and not us who won the greatest battles of the war thus far."

"Yes, well…" Aquila paused, unsure of how to phrase his next words.

"Well, what?" Primus persisted. "Don't hold back on me now, not after all we've been through."

"Your own letter to Vespasian was rather…heavy-handed, to say the least."

"What do you mean?"

"I know he is your friend," Aquila explained. "But if he is as we have declared, Emperor of Rome, then a certain propriety in speech must be observed. To be blunt, you chastising of Mucianus for his delay while praising your own actions in this war was rather boastful and self-centered."

"Hmm, I admit I can be a little headstrong," Primus confessed.

"That's putting it mildly," Aquila replied. "It was egocentric to say the least, and it will not win you any additional praise from Vespasian."

"So what should I have done?" the commander-in-chief asked indignantly. "Just sit back and let my own legates and fellow commanding general berate me to the emperor?"

"Not at all. But in your position, I would have let our victories speak for themselves. After all, whatever the difficulties and tactical errors made, you still won the battle and in one stroke eliminated Vitellius' entire northern army. Such actions don't require self-gratification or boasting."

Primus hated to admit it, but it was true. His headstrong demeanor had won him few friends during his tenure in the senate, never mind all his questionable financial practices. The truth was, he was ideally suited for leading a single legion into battle. As commander-in-chief of an entire army, he found himself wanting. Not that he lacked strategic or tactical skill, but his oftentimes autocratic nature and abysmal political savvy created a number of enemies within his own army. And every last man, from the legates to the lowest legionaries, knew an improbable series of fortuitous events had won the Battle of Bedriacum for them. Were the gods not so overwhelmingly favoring the Flavian cause, then they most certainly should have lost. To boast directly to Vespasian about such a victory, instead of simply letting Vitellius' loss of most of his army speak for itself, was the worst kind of grandstanding.

The commander-in-chief sighed and nodded in acknowledgment. To Aquila he suddenly looked very tired. "The sooner we get to Rome and end this the better."



Marcus Vettius Bolanus found his brief tenure as Governor-General of Britannia to be fraught with adversity. The previous governor, Marcus Trebellius Maximus, had been essentially overthrown by a mutiny within his own legions. Foremost leading this coup had been Legate Caelius of Legio XX. A devout follower of Vitellius, he had wished to see all of the Britannic Legions sent to the emperor's aid.

"I cannot simply uproot all of our forces, seeing as how the frontiers have become far more volatile," the governor stated with irritation. He was spending several weeks in Londinium, overseeing the reconstruction efforts.

Though eight years had passed since Boudicca and the Iceni razed the city, it felt as if the area was still healing from a terrible wound. Among the projects the governor was overseeing was the erection of the first of a series of bridges over the River Tamesis. These would help connect the city to the southern reaches of the province.

"The Flavians are rampaging through Northern Italia," Caelius protested. "If we are loyal soldiers of the empire, then we *must* come to the emperor's aid. Vitellius named you governor of Britannia; you owe him your allegiance."

"I owe Vitellius nothing," Bolanus retorted. He handed the legate a crumpled scroll. "This came this morning, delivered by one of Valens' own tribunes."

"But…this makes our expedition even more urgent!" the legate stressed, as he read the account of the Vitellians' defeat.

"Have you forgotten the issues we already face here?" the governor said, with an irritated sigh. "Our most loyal ally, Queen Cartimandua, has been usurped by her former husband. The Brigantes are the largest tribe in Britannia, and now they are our enemies. And the only reason we could not aid Cartimandua is because our damned emperor demanded nearly half of my legionaries for his little war against Otho. Most of them have yet to return and are still dispersed throughout Germania and Gaul. The Fourteenth Legion was supposed to have arrived here, yet they are scattered between Atrebates and across the sea in northern Gaul. Vitellius' spats with Otho and Vespasian have undermined our defenses, while costing us our most powerful allies in this land."

Caelius was about to offer his own retort when the sound of cornicens' horns alerted them. Two companies of auxilia cavalry could be seen riding in from the northwest on the main road from the bridge, through the city, and eventually to Ratae. Bolanus recognized the standards as belonging to the regiment known as Indus' Horse. Towards the head of the column, near the commanding tribune, rode a Britannic woman and a few of her bodyguards.

"Queen Cartimandua," the governor said, as the contingent halted near him. The tribune saluted before dismounting.

"Governor Bolanus." She slid off her mount. The two had never met, but Bolanus had heard tales from one of his predecessors, Suetonius Paulinus, regarding the Brigantes queen's striking beauty and strong nature. And while Cartimandua was still an attractive woman of above average height, with a body that had never felt the ravages of childbirth, to Bolanus she looked weathered and tired. Uncertain as to her age, he guessed she was in her late fifties. It seemed the grey in her hair and the stress lines that creased her face had come upon her over a very short time period.

"A pity we could not have met under more favorable circumstances," Bolanus said.

"Yes, tragic that both my kingdom and the empire should find themselves in the throes of civil war at the same time," the queen observed. "I fear no matter who wins in Rome, my kingdom is forever lost to me."

As a means of courtesy, the governor introduced his legate. "This is General Caelius of the Twentieth Valeria Victrix Legion."

"Your highness," Caelius said respectfully. The queen bowed her head in acknowledgment. The legate then excused himself. He knew his conversation with the governor was at an end. And seeing Queen Cartimandua in person was a harsh reminder of the losses felt within Britannia. The civil war between Vitellius and Vespasian may have been fought in Italia, but no corner of the empire would be spared its repercussions.



Hopeful that Fabius Valens could bring reinforcements from Gaul and Hispania, and that Legate Festus would send his own Legio III, Augusta from North Africa, Emperor Vitellius had been surprisingly proactive. He came to realize the full magnitude of the disaster at Cremona. With the first wave of Flavian troops scarcely three weeks' journey from the capital, he had called

for a massed mobilization to defend Rome. Both praetorian prefects, Julius Priscus and Alfenus Varus, had been dispatched with fourteen cohorts from the Guard and a picked force of nine thousand marines from the Misene fleet.

"Defenders of Rome," Lucius said.

He and his brother watched the large columns depart from the Circus Maximus.

"A pity we did not have time to better equip the marines," Vitellius remarked.

The praetorians were equipped almost identically to legionaries with large scutum shields and lorica segmentata plate armor. The marines had only their issued gladii and small buckler shields from the fleet. Despite the protestations of Flavius Sabinus, the urban cohort armories had been raided. Almost half of their mail shirts were handed over to the mariners. Sabinus had insisted his men needed their armor for the defense of the city; however, as the next phase of the war would take place at Narnia, fifty miles north of the capital, priority on armament fell to the expeditionary force.

"The marines declined any armor heavier than hamata chain or larger shields," Lucius replied. "Their commanding officers insisted their light armor and smaller bucklers were better suited to fighting from the ramparts of a fortified city."

"Regardless, Primus is in for a nasty surprise when he reaches Narnia and thinks he only has to contend with a handful of survivors from Valens' army," the emperor remarked.

Lucius had been very thorough in rallying men to his brother's cause. The trek to Narnia would only take the contingent three or four days. For the first time since news reached them about Cremona, Aulus Vitellius felt a modicum of hope for final victory. The emperor would depart in a few days, along the remaining cohorts of the Praetorian Guard and a large number of newly raised volunteers. Lucius and the consuls had urged, if he was to be an emperor during a civil war, his soldiers needed to see him act like one.



The Flavian Army advanced from Ariminum on a brisk late November morning. Near many of the towns and villages, throngs of cheering supporters lined the roads hailing General Primus and shouting ovations to Emperor Vespasian. It was highly probable this was done more out of fear of

reprisal from the thousands of imperial soldiers who had destroyed Cremona, rather than any sense of loyalty to the Flavian Caesar. The army's advance through Italia went mostly without incident. The occasional flogging of legionaries and auxiliary troopers for bad behavior notwithstanding. By the Calends of December, they encountered the first real threat posed by the Vitellians since Cremona.

"Well, there it is," Primus said, as the city of Narnia came into view. "The last viable holdout of Vitellius."

"The city is a damned fortress, sir," Master Centurion Vitruvius said appreciatively.

Narnia was a fortified city located in the mountains, a week's march from Ariminum. Antonius Primus hoped he had not committed another strategic blunder by leaving so much of his army up north. His intent was to travel as light and fast as possible, making certain he maintained a large enough force to smash any Vitellian holdouts that continued to oppose them. If the remnants of Valens' army were reinforced at Narnia, they could pose a substantial obstacle to the Flavians. Legio XI had bolstered their forces considerably, but he had far fewer soldiers under his command than he did at Cremona and Bedriacum.

"The last thing I wish to do is send back for more legionaries and our siege train," he explained.

"To be honest, sir, you may have misstepped by not bringing more of the army with you," Vitruvius replied.

Primus found that he appreciated the master centurion's sense of candor and honesty. Especially when it echoed his own thoughts. "Depending on the defenses they have, we may have to send back for the rest," he noted sullenly. The terrain around the city was mountainous and extremely steep. The ramparts of the city walls weren't that high only about twenty feet high in most places. Given the rugged and nearly unassailable terrain, they didn't have to be. Primus' fears were confirmed when his scouts returned.

"The garrison is very large, sir," a decurion reported. "They were massed on the walls, and they let us get very close."

"Clearly they want us to see what their defenses are like," Legate Aquila noted.

"Did you see any of their standards?" Primus asked.

"We did, sir," the scout replied. "No legionaries, but a lot of praetorians. There were also plenty of men in hamata armor, devoid of helmets, and

looked to be carrying small bucklers for shields."

"Marines," Aquila conjectured. "Probably from the Misene fleet. They are the only ones left who are loyal to Vitellius."

"Fuck me," the commander-in-chief swore. "I expected no more than three or four thousand survivors from Valens' division. I had no idea Vitellius would send the entire damned Praetorian Guard here."

"He knows we cannot go around," Bassus spoke up. "Even if we could, it would leave our flanks and supply lines completely exposed." The legate of Legio XI made another grim assessment. "I don't think I can get my heavy weapons within range of their walls. The slopes are just too damned steep. Even the lowest points of the walls are well out of range. I can maybe get my scorpions close enough, but not a chance of deploying onagers or siege ballistae."

"If they are heavily reinforced direct assault would be suicide," Aquila remarked. "Our only options are to wait for Mucianus or go back the way we came, follow the coastline south, and take the Via Valeria into Rome."

Primus sat in silent contemplation. He and his senior officers scanned the formidable defenses. To be so close to Rome, only to find the way impassibly blocked, was maddening.

Finally he shook his head. "No. To go all the way around will take us a month. Meanwhile, we give the Vitellians time to gather more reinforcements, plus we'll have this lot crawling up our asses. As soon as we head south along the coastal road, they'll cut our supply and communication lines behind us. Waiting for Mucianus will not help either. Even with the strength of both armies, their defenses will be too difficult to break without senseless bloodshed from our soldiers. No, these Vitellian fucks are playing for time, nothing more. I am only lacking one piece to this puzzle. Once we have it, we can end this pointless standoff without any losses."



"Impertinent bastard," Mucianus swore, as he read the dispatch from Grypus.

"What is it, sir?" one of his legates asked.

He was then handed the rather biting dispatch from Antonius Primus, asking when he might see his fellow Flavian general on the battlefield. "Bugger me."

“That idiot does not realize the troubles we’ve had to face while he blindly marches on,” Mucianus grumbled. “He took most of the Danube army with him and left the entire frontier exposed. Damned barbarian raiders have upset the whole province. Primus doesn’t understand. We’ve had to leave our prime legion, Sixth Ferrata, to reinforce the Danube. Meanwhile, that self-righteous shit is determined to win this war all by himself.”

“And if he should succeed?” the legate asked.

Mucianus guffawed. “I’ll give him credit where it is due. But Jupiter help him if he should fail.”



The seas had been hellish. If not for the skill of the sailors and oarsmen, Aula was certain she would be a bloated corpse on the bottom of the sea. A journey that normally took ten days to two weeks during the summer had taken almost a month. The citizens of Ariminum told her of the Vitellian Army’s retreat. The Flavian forces under General Primus had passed through almost a week prior. It was near the city of Narnia, fifty miles from the imperial capital, where Aula at last caught up with Primus’ army.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” the commander-in-chief laughed, as he read the message from the emperor. “It would seem I am to act as Vespasian’s regent, at least until that boy-fucker, Mucianus, arrives.” He saw Aula blushing slightly. “Apologies, Lady Vale. It is not every day I see the daughter of a patrician acting as a humble imperial courier.”

“No apologies necessary,” Aula replied. “I have witnessed what your legions are capable of, and believe me, a few profane words do little to shock me.”

“Be glad you did not come in from Bedriacum.” His expression was one of sober reflection. “You undoubtedly saw that our numbers are much fewer than before. Had your journey taken you past the battle site, you would have seen the terrible price we paid. The entire town has become nothing more than a massive field hospital, filled with thousands of badly wounded soldiers.”

A loud cheering outside interrupted their conversation. They and Primus’ staff officers stepped out into the open. The sky was grey, with the late fall rains threatening. This gloom was offset once the general saw that which

caused his soldiers to break into spontaneous celebrations.

Fabius Valens was filthy and had been beaten severely by his captors. Yet, there was no mistaking his handsome, godlike face, which age had done little to mar. His hands were bound. He rode in the middle of a section of six cavalry troopers, at the head of two companies of horsemen.

"Compliments of Admiral Flavianus and Governor Valerius Paulinus," a cavalry tribune said, with a salute.

"Tell the governor he has helped ensure our final victory in this war," the commander-in-chief replied, with much relief and elation. He then ordered food and his best vintage to be brought to the tribune and his men.

Valens was gruffly pulled from his horse by a pair of legionaries and made to stand before the Flavian general.

"Fabius Valens," Primus said, with a smirk. "You are indeed a most welcome sight."

"Go fuck your mother, filthy traitor!" Valens snapped back at him.

This was met with a hard fist to the stomach by a legionary guard. The old general laughed, despite the pain, and stood back up. Primus waved his legionaries away.

"Come now, Valens, is that any way for a noble Roman to behave?" he asked.

"And what would a turncoat like you know about nobility?" Valens retorted. "Not that it matters. I'm a dead man and we both know it. So piss off with your flattery and supposed sense of honor. For you, sir, have none!"

"Take him away," Primus ordered his soldiers.

They dragged the laughing, cursing Valens to the prisoner stockade. "See to it that he's fed and take those bonds off his wrists. He won't be going anywhere."

"This will serve us well," Legate Bassus of Legio XI noted. "The Vitellian holdouts at Narnia are convinced that General Valens is bringing reinforcements to them. Now we can put an end to their vain hope."

"A pity he must die for it," Primus added. "As long as Fabius Valens lives, his soldiers have hope; even if he is in captivity. Valens is the last bastion of defiance the pretender has left. We show them his head on a spear, and we will bring this war to a fitting end."

"If you do not need me, general, I will take my leave," Aula said.

Primus responded, "Vespasian has ordered me to take you as part of my entourage. Your days of traversing the empire on the seas may be over, but I

think there will be much good you can do for Rome before this is over."

Aula concurred and took her leave. She immediately set out to find the vexilation from the Tenth Legion. It was a difficult task. The camp was extremely large, and the recent arrival of the Eighth Legion had only increased its size.

When she finally found the vexilation standard it was nearly sunset. Aula realized she had not eaten since morning, her stomach grumbling as an uncomfortable reminder. She saw numerous small campfires where soldiers set about preparing their evening meal. Some of them stared at her as she walked past. Others appeared to ignore her. Regardless, no one said a word until she found Centurion Nicanor.

"Lady Aula." His voice carried a trace of surprise. "I thought General Primus had sent you to Vespasian months ago."

"He did. And the emperor sent me right back. I've been attached to Primus' entourage until we get to Rome." She looked around, appearing nervous. "Where is Gaius? I do not see him among your soldiers."

"Gaius was badly wounded at Cremona. He led a small number of our men in an attack on the enemy siege engines. He burned or otherwise disabled a number of them before a damned ballista shot him. Nearly took his arm off."

Aula grimaced and bit her lip. She imagined Gaius lying on the ground, a bloody stump all that remained of his arm.

The centurion placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Hey, I said *nearly* took his arm off," he repeated. "It was only a glancing blow, though it still did terrible damage. The crazy bastard insisted on returning to the line and was supervising our artillery bombardment when the onager he was next to took a precise hit and blew apart. Not only does he have one arm in a sling, but he now walks with a slight limp." He nodded toward the edge of the camp "He should be over there, checking on the entrenchments or at his tent, having supper."

All soldiers tended to look the same when fully armored. Aula tried to spot Gaius' optio's crest in the mass of soldiers manning the camp's defenses. It was not his crest she noticed first, for he was wearing neither armor nor helmet, but the heavily bandaged arm slung across his chest and a pronounced limp. As Gaius saw her, his face broke into a broad smile.

She stood with a stern expression and her hands on her hips. "Really? I cannot leave you alone for a couple of months without you nearly getting an

arm and leg ripped off?"

"Good to see you, too, Aula." He was still smiling, but Aula could see the strain on his face. Gaius' injuries were clearly very painful. "It's getting better," he tried to reassure her as he sat down on a camp stool outside his tent.

"Fabius Valens has been captured." Aula sat on the ground nearby. "I figure everyone will know soon enough, so no harm in telling you."

Gaius flinched as he slowly untied the sling on his arm. "That will take the strain off General Primus," he noted. "Not to mention the rest of us. When?"

"He was brought in soon after I arrived," Aula replied. "Given his role in the rise of Vitellius, as well as his importance to their army, I'll be surprised if Primus allows him to live."

Gaius' fatigue and constant pain was momentarily forgotten by his joy at seeing Aula. It was so improbable that they would ever see each other again, let alone find themselves in the same army camp during Rome's most brutal civil war in a century. He said as much to Aula.

"The empire is quite large, as I have now seen for myself," she remarked. "You left Britannia to join one of the legions clear on the other end of it. In all likelihood, we never should have seen each other again."

"I'll not pretend it was anything like fate or destiny," Gaius said, his countenance suddenly darkening. "The fates are cruel. They allowed my brother to finally realize his desire of becoming a soldier of Rome, yet the price was leaving his dear wife a childless widow."

Aula did not reply. She didn't know what she could possibly say. It had been a little over a month since Lucius was killed. The feelings of loss were still felt strongly by his younger brother.

"I'm sorry," Gaius said, suddenly uncomfortable with the silence. "I should not burden you with this."

"It's alright," she said reassuringly, as she stood. "Forgive me, but I am very tired. I have not slept well in almost a month. The weeks at sea were hell, and I rode as fast as I could from Ariminum. But do not despair, dear Gaius. I ride with this army and will not be leaving again."

She leaned down and kissed him on the top of his head. He trembled. He struggled against his feelings for Aula, but Gaius knew it was one battle he could never win.



The resolve of the defenders of Narnia had begun to crack, even though they were unaware of Valens' capture. The praetorian rankers from Vitellius' Germanic legions were fiercely loyal to their emperor. The officers, on the other hand, were not as willing to fight to the death. Even the two prefects were daunted by the task now before them. As night fell, they stood atop the high ramparts overlooking the hills to the north. Innumerable campfires burned at the Flavian Army camp.

"Did you know my cousin, Arrius, is commanding Vespasian's cavalry?" Varus asked.

"I was not aware of that," Priscus replied. Cynically, he added, "I suppose he hopes Vespasian will give him your job when it's all over."

"Probably." Varus shook his head, then expressed what he knew his colleague was feeling. "This is a good, strong place to make a defense. But how long can we really hold? The enemy had another legion arrive just yesterday. How many more are behind that? From what we know, Mucianus has an entire division that hasn't even been engaged yet."

"Well…Valens did promise to return with reinforcements," Priscus said unconvincingly.

"Come now, Junius," Varus retorted. "You don't believe that any more than I do. I don't doubt Valens' intentions. But how many troops can he really bring over from Hispania and Gaul? No doubt the Flavians are sending every rider they have to the far-flung corners of the empire to tell them our main army has been defeated, and the survivors are defecting to Vespasian. No matter how strong these defenses are, they cannot bear the weight of the entire empire, should the provinces abandon Vitellius."

"What can we do?" Priscus asked.

"Survive," a voice said, behind them.

Both prefects were startled when one of their men walked out from the shadows.

"What is it, guardsman?" Priscus asked curtly.

Varus recognized him. "Statius isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," the guardsman replied. "Forgive me. I was not intentionally eavesdropping. However, I think all three of us are of a like mind. We won't be able to compel the men in the ranks to abandon this position."

"What do you mean, we?" Priscus replied, his voice filled with irritation.

“Easy there,” Varus said, placing a hand on his shoulder. “This man is the emperor’s personal blade.”

“I know who he is,” his colleague stated. “Guardsman Statius has somehow managed to serve Nero, Galba, and Otho. Somehow Vitellius allowed him to maintain his billet within the Guard, whereas he sacked the rest. Are you here to put your sword into our guts?” His hand instinctively rested on the pommel of his gladius.

“Now why would the emperor order me to do that?” Statius replied. “Either of them. Vespasian probably doesn’t even know who you are, and Vitellius needs you. But he needs the Guard in Rome, not here. Like you both have said, this fortress cannot stand against the weight of the entire empire.”

“You are very presumptuous for a guardsman,” Priscus remarked. “Even for one as cunning and ruthless as your reputation states. And what would Guardsman Statius recommend we do?”

“The same thing you are already planning,” he replied. “Abandon this futile defense, return to Rome, and see which master is worth serving.”



It took two weeks for Centurion Octavianus, formerly of the Praetorian Guard, to arrive at the North African port of Rusicade. Having thought of North Africa as a dry, desolate wasteland, Octavianus could not believe the lushness of the area surrounding the small port city. The hills consisted of green grasslands where sheep and cattle grazed. The valleys were mainly farm fields watered by an entire network of irrigation canals.

The populace was a mix of various peoples from around the region. The largest indigenous ethnicity were the Berbers, who looked very similar to Latins in hair color and skin tone. There was also a substantial Jewish population, particularly in the merchants’ quarter of the city. Mixed in were Africans of various tribes and ethnic groups. Many were from neighboring Numidia.

When he first met Vespasian, he had been wearing a tunic and carrying a gladius. The Flavian Emperor had seen to it that he was now properly kitted up in full segmentata armor. Though he was a personal bodyguard with no troops under his command, out of respect he was allowed to maintain the centurion’s crest atop his helmet. His conspicuous attire made him the target of every merchant and peddler within the port of Rusicade. As he walked his

horse through the crowded streets, Octavianus kept a close grip on his gladius and his money pouch.

He did stop to purchase some of the local cuisine from a vendor near the edge of the vast market. It was a type of yellow pepper stuffed with rice and some unknown meat. Rice was a rare commodity in Rome; only the rich could afford it. The centurion was surprised to see how plentiful it was here. He nearly choked when he took a bite. The peppers were extremely spicy.

"Is good, yes?" the vendor asked him, a hopeful expression on his face.

"If it doesn't burn my tongue out of my head," Octavianus said, his mouth still full. He took a second bite, and was surprised when the spice was not as overwhelming. He gave the man a nod of approval.

The centurion was anxious to reach the legionary fortress. He had not seen any imperial soldiers within the port aside from the local urban cohort. He took this as a good sign. Perhaps the African Army had already departed for Italia and he was too late. As he spurred his horse into a moderate canter, he prayed that was not the case.

Chapter XXVI: The People's Army

Outside of Rome
16 December 69 A.D.
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It was not just the Flavian Army at Narnia that threatened to overthrow Vitellius. There was unrest in southern Italia. Several of the larger cities were defiantly calling for the emperor to surrender the throne to Vespasian. Upon Lucius' advice, Vitellius had recalled several of his praetorian cohorts from Narnia. This gave the two prefects, Priscus and Varus, the excuse they had been waiting for to return to the capital. They made certain the cohort Tiberius Statius was a part of was among those recalled. And while the emperor decided whether he should personally lead his forces in quelling the uprising in the south, his brother had a rather pleasant surprise waiting for him.

On the grounds of the Circus Maximus, thousands of men were crammed into the vast arena. They cheered voraciously as the Vitellian brothers and the two consuls, Simplex and Atticus, stepped onto the field.

"The People's Army, sire," Lucius said, waving his hand towards them ceremoniously. "The one true defense of Rome herself."

"We fight for you, Caesar!" one man shouted.

"Down with the Flavian traitors!" said another.

This was followed by deafening chants of Vitellius' name over and over again. The emperor finally raised his hands, silencing the mob. "I am so honored that I am nearly moved to tears."

"Arm us for battle, sire!" a volunteer bellowed.

"It is time," Consul Atticus said, as Vitellius looked to his companions for advice. "Arming of the mob would normally be considered madness. But these men have sworn to fight for you to the last. And right now, even with the defenses holding at Narnia, Rome will need every blade she can muster."

It was difficult to say just how many were asking to take up arms for Vitellius. Lucius guessed they numbered ten thousand, maybe more. And while his brother was moved by such a large showing, in a city of a million

souls it was not difficult to find ten thousand loyalists who were willing to fight and die for their emperor.

"You will forgive me for taking the initiative," Lucius said, later that day, "but I have already ordered every smithy within fifty miles to start turning out swords and shields."

"And for that you have my gratitude, dear brother," the emperor replied.

"The blades may be crude, but they'll cut through flesh," Lucius explained. "Legionary scutum shields are time consuming to make, but we can have sufficient bucklers and other types of shields made."

"And what about armor?" Vitellius asked.

Lucius shook his head. "Unfortunately, that is something the majority will have to make do without. But remember, these are supplemental troops. We still have the praetorians and the urban cohorts."

"I just hope Festus arrives soon with our African forces," the emperor remarked. "In the meantime, we should take what military troops we have and deal with the malcontents in the south."



Legio III, Augusta had a history dating back over a hundred years, when it was raised at the *'Third Republican Legion'* by Pompey Magnus. And while they held the honor of being the only autonomous legion in all of Africa, they also held the rather ignominious distinction of being one of the last legions to suffer decimation; a punishment they had been subjected to when the entire legion fled from battle during the revolt of the Numidian traitor, Tacfarinas, during the early reign of Tiberius. It was a stigma the legion had fought for fifty years to rid itself of. In addition to the legion's fortress, there were various auxilia camps housing ten to fifteen thousand additional soldiers.

Centurion Octavianus arrived at the legionary fortress near Thamugadi after three days of riding. He was here to see the Augusta legate, and was glad to see legionary and auxilia going about their daily duties, as if there wasn't a civil war raging just a short distance across the sea.

"Centurion, sir," one of the men guarding the gate said, coming to attention. "What business brings you to Third Augusta?"

"I am here to see General Festus," Octavianus replied. He took a bold

step with his next words. “Inform him that I come with a vital message from Emperor Vespasian and must speak with him at once.” Whether he was welcomed or arrested would tell the centurion which side this legion was on.

The soldier was nonchalant. “Of course. One of the lads will take your horse, and I’ll escort you to the legate personally.”

“Glad to hear you’re on the right side, sir,” another legionary added. “We’ve been compelled to detain Vitellius’ envoys who’ve been begging us to hasten to his defense.”

The words heartened the centurion. He knew threats against Legate Festus were now unnecessary. Instead, he would give the general the emperor’s warmest regards with the hope that peace would come to the empire soon.



It was the evening of 14 December, and Antonius Primus was hosting Fabius Valens as his guest in the principia tent over supper. There were no other officers present and only a handful of slaves serving them. A pair of legionaries stood outside the entrance with strict orders. No one was to disturb them.

“Is this the final feast of a condemned man?” Valens asked bluntly.

The servants brought the first course of fruits and nuts, along with pitchers of wine.

“So it would appear,” Primus replied candidly. “To be honest, I wish it did not have to be so.”

“Bah!” Valens retorted. “You’ve wanted to shove my head onto a spike since long before this war began.”

“Honestly, Fabius, I’ve never thought much of you one way or the other. I do know you were a worthy adversary. After all, you did defeat Otho’s army and almost singlehandedly assured Vitellius’ rise. I will even go so far as to say that had you been on the field at Second Bedriacum, I may not have emerged the victor.”

“You can say that again.” The Vitellian general’s tone was hostile, though wine and an acceptance of his pending fate had begun to soften his demeanor towards his rival.

“By the same token, you would not have won First Bedriacum had I been there. Unfortunately, Otho became impatient, entrusted overall command to

his idiot brother, and could not wait a week for me to show up with three additional legions. It was your own cousin who I fought against, was it not?"

"Aye, in a manner of speaking," Valens answered. "He tried to assume overall command. I fault myself for not appointing a temporary commanding general until my health returned. I will give you credit, though. As brazenly stupid as it seemed, your bombastic and reckless assault won you the campaign. I had a *lot* more troops with me and intended to reinforce Cremona. I did not expect you to attack so suddenly. Had you faced the full strength of my division, you wouldn't have stood a chance."

"Undoubtedly," Primus concurred. "I applaud your tenacity to continue the war. But once you saw Gaul and Hispania were changing their allegiance, you had to know the war could not be won."

"Perhaps," Valens acknowledged, with reluctance. He stared at his plate for a moment and sampled a date. "I was not ready to recant the oath I swore to my emperor. There are forces in Germania, Britannia, and Africa that could overwhelm your forces with their combined strength."

"True. But where are they?" It was the Flavian commander-in-chief's turn to stare at his plate for a few moments. He took a pull off his wine chalice and demanded another before speaking again. "Look, Fabius, I do not want to order your execution. Perhaps I did at one time, but not now. We may not like each other, but I do respect you. Not only as a worthy adversary, but because you are just as much a deviant, conniving, rat-fucking-bastard as I am. How can I not respect that?"

His last remark caused both men to laugh appreciatively.

"You always were the worst kind of senator, Antonius," Valens remarked. "Perhaps we are kindred spirits. A shame we ended up on opposing sides…in both conflicts no less."

"You must understand the conundrum I face," Primus said, serious once more. "Most of those men defending the ramparts of Narnia are praetorian guardsmen. And I know they came from your legions in Germania. They are not only fiercely loyal to Vitellius but also to you. There is nothing I can say that will compel them to throw down their arms and surrender. If I am forced to unleash the legions, it will be a bloodbath. The steep terrain coupled with the city's ramparts means I will lose a lot of men getting into the city. But, as more reinforcements arrive, I will have the numbers to do so. And given the losses my legions will suffer, neither your praetorians nor the people of Narnia can expect any mercy. You know what happened at Cremona. I would

rather that not happen again."

"And you think I can stop it," Valens stated. He shook his head. "As long as I live, those men will never capitulate. And if I were to try compelling them to surrender, I would be labeled a traitor just like Caecina."

"Then I will do what I must."

"Just grant me one request," Valens urged. "The master centurion of my First Germanica Legion, do you know if he lives?"

"Of course," Primus replied. "He is with our entourage."

"I want him to carry out my sentence."



Despite the stalwart resistance offered by the praetorians in Narnia and the designated 'People's Army' in Rome, Vitellius was still assailed by doubts. Several times a day he swung from defiance to dejection and sorrow. At least two couriers had brought messages directly from Antonius Primus, urging him to abdicate and put an end to the fighting. Vitellius had sent back a pair of responses, each showing his wildly changing demeanor. In the first, he asked a slew of questions. How many slaves would he be allowed to keep? What sort of donative he could expect? Would Vespasian be willing to absolve him of his personal debts? Conversely, the second response was filled with defiant rhetoric, stating Vitellius was the rightful Emperor of Rome, and no 'mule driver' would take the throne from him.

Word of these messages had not been kept secret. In small numbers, members of the senate became emboldened to speak out against the Vitellian regime. It was Vespasian's brother, Sabinus, who these patricians looked to for guidance. Still ostensibly the Prefect of the City of Rome, the elder Flavian was kept under close watch. His nephew, Domitian, had several personal guards assigned to him, supposedly for his own protection. Vespasian's son-in-law, Cerealis, was also kept under guard at the Flavian villa. Late on the evening of 14 December, a pair of senators, Suetonius Paulinus and Cocceius Nerva, paid a visit to Sabinus.

"At least I managed to get my daughter away from this," Cerealis said.

The men met in Sabinus' private study. "Gods know, Vitellius may have the lot of us disposed of should Primus launch a direct assault on Rome."

"Vitellius' emotions sway from one extreme to the other," Nerva added. "If he cannot be persuaded to give up the throne, then it must be taken from

him.”

“Yes, that is what Antonius Primus is attempting to do,” Sabinus remarked sarcastically.

“I don’t mean Primus,” Nerva said. “I mean you.”

“What in Hades are you talking about?”

“You command the urban cohorts,” Paulinus spoke up. “Vitellius has the praetorians, but almost half of them are in Narnia. If we call up the citizens’ militia we can overwhelm the praetorians, possibly even compel them to give Vitellius up.”

“You forget,” Sabinus said, “most of my men were replaced by Vitellian loyalists after Otho’s maritime expedition. They’d hang me as a traitor if I tried to convince them to turn on Vitellius. I am sorry, my friends, but it has been too long since I wielded a sword. Diplomacy is the one weapon I have left, and I will use it to see if Vitellius can be made to see reason. I will speak with Italicus. The two are close friends.”

“I will fight,” Cerealis stated. “I cannot do a damn thing while trapped within the city. If I can escape from Rome, I will return with my blade drawn for battle.”

“I can get you out of here,” Paulinus assured him. “I have a servant who is about your height and build. Let your face remain unshaven for a day, and I will have him do the same. I will then pay a visit to our friend, Sabinus, and bring him with me. You will then take his clothes and depart with me later that evening. A horse will be waiting for you at my house.”

Nerva and Paulinus were disappointed in Sabinus for his refusal to mobilize the urban cohorts against Vitellius. If they were, however, still firmly loyal to the pretender, then they could scarcely blame him for his caution.



Dawn greeted the 15th of December with overcast skies and a stiff wind coming up from the south. Fabius Valens stepped out from the tent Primus allowed him to use and took a deep breath in.

“Rains will come later,” he said. “A pity I shall not see it.” His countenance was one of calm acceptance as legionaries led him to the small open space along the nearest ridgeline.

Master Centurion Aetius was waiting for him. For the primus pilus of

Legio I, Germanica, this was a hateful day. “I had hoped my days of killing in this war were over, sir,” he said quietly.

“And I am sorry for what I have asked you to do,” the Vitellian general replied, “but I know your blow will strike true.”

“I’ll make it quick, sir,” Aetius reassured him. His hands rested on the pommel of Valens’ spatha, the point of the scabbard pressed into the earth.

Valens looked across the valley to the ramparts of Narnia, then turned his gaze to Antonius Primus and his assembled officers. He thought, perhaps, the entire army would want to witness his execution. But given the rugged terrain, a large audience was simply not practical. Instead, there was a single century of legionaries and some mounted troops from one of the legions’ cavalry squadrons.

“Please tell me you don’t have a grand speech prepared,” Valens said. “I would like to get this over with.”

Primus nodded without a word.

Valens knelt down, hanging his head and silently praying Aetius’ blow struck true. He was breathing deeply in an attempt to remain calm. Any movement could disrupt his executioner’s strike. As he stared at the ground, he saw a baby mouse scurry up to him, gazing up at his face with an inquisitive expression. Valens smiled and then closed his eyes. He heard his spatha being drawn from its scabbard, which fell to the ground with a soft thump. He took his last breath and held it. Aetius was true to his word, and Valens scarcely felt the blow.

It had taken two strikes to cleave Fabius Valens’ head from his shoulders. The first had split his neck and spine, and buried itself deep in his throat. Aetius wrenched the blade free as the thrashing body slumped onto its side, blood spilling onto the ground. The second blow was a hard downward chop. The body rolled to its back, leaving the head where it lay.

The master centurion gritted his teeth and glared at Antonius Primus. He dropped the weapon next to Valens’ corpse and quickly strode away.

“Wipe the blood off the head,” Primus ordered. “His men must see that it is him.”

The commander-in-chief then donned his helmet and called for his horse. An auxilia cavalry lancer impaled the severed head on his long spear and held it aloft. A contingent of senior officers, including Legates Bassus and Aquila, accompanied Primus as he rode towards the city gates. A single company of

cavalrymen acted as their escorts.

Along the ramparts, sentries were seen scurrying about, shouting to their companions that the enemy commander approached. By the time Primus and his entourage reached the gates, the walls were crawling with Vitellian soldiers. The Flavian general took a deep breath and hoped his men would not have to storm these formidable walls.

"It's over!" he shouted, to the men above the gate. "Fabius Valens is slain. There is no help coming to you. If you surrender now, you will be treated with clemency. If not, there will be no mercy, either to yourselves or to the people of the city that offers you refuge."

There was a series of mutterings heard from the ramparts. The defenders talked rapidly amongst themselves.

One voice was heard saying, *'How do we know that is General Valens?'*

Another said something about knowing him personally, and he would verify for himself. After a minute or so, the loud creaking of the cross brace being slid back from inside the gate was heard. It slowly opened, and a lone praetorian centurion emerged. He walked over to the cavalry trooper, who lowered his lance so Valens' head could be clearly identified. The centurion halted abruptly and removed his helmet. He hung his head for a brief moment.

"Where is your commanding officer?" Primus asked.

"You're looking at him, sir." His voice betrayed his sense of defeat. "Prefects Varus and Priscus took a number of our lads and departed for Rome two days ago."

"Then you have been abandoned," the Flavian commander-in-chief attested. "Open the gates, have your men disarm and parade in front of the city. I will accept your formal surrender then."

"Yes, sir," the dejected praetorian officer acknowledged. His eyes were fixed on the ground, and he refused to look up at Primus.



The Flavian legates were relieved to avoid what would have been an extremely bloody assault on the city. Many of their soldiers did not share this sentiment. As word spread of the garrison's surrender, Aula walked through the camp and was appalled to hear the bitter grumblings from many of the soldiers. While direct insubordination was avoided, there was still plenty of

hateful speech about being denied their share of plunder in this war. Aula eventually found Gaius, whose century had just been dismissed by Centurion Nicanor, following their notification that the siege was over.

“I thought the soldiers would be relieved none of them would have to die here,” Aula said.

Gaius’ limp was still somewhat pronounced, but he did seem to be getting some usage back in his leg.

“Instead, they think of nothing but looting and fucking every woman within the city.”

“It’s the way they are,” the optio observed. He noted the horrified expression on Aula’s face. “I wouldn’t read too much into it. The simple fact is, soldiers are not happy unless they are complaining.”

“What a horrific thing to complain about, being denied the opportunity for theft and rape,” she said.

“You should see the peoples we fight against on the frontiers,” Gaius remarked, sighing quietly.

“I suppose I am being a little naïve.”

Though both had been raised in Britannia, as children they had never witnessed the horrors men were capable of inflicting upon each other.

“There were barbaric peoples not far from where we were raised, who not only looted and raped but would take survivors and cut them up as human sacrifices to their foul gods. It is the same along the Rhine, the Danube, and anywhere else on the frontiers where our legions are posted. I suppose in that regard, I should give the rebellious Jews in Judea a bit of credit. Their god does not call for human sacrifice. And since some of them can actually read and write, that does make them more civilized than the unwashed hordes in Germania and Caledonia.”

“So what will happen now?” Aula asked, as they stood along the earthen ramparts of the camp.

Down below they could see hundreds of Vitellian soldiers marching from the city. The Eleventh Claudia Legion had been tasked with overseeing the surrender, and their cohorts stood on either side of the road, while their adversaries marched between them.

“You’re part of Primus’ entourage, you tell me,” Gaius replied, with a chuckle. “We won’t linger here, that’s for certain.”

“Rome is only fifty miles away,” Aula observed.

“Meaning we can be there in two to two-and-a-half days.”

Chapter XXVII: All Roads to Rome

Along the Via Flaminia, Twenty Miles from Rome
17 December 69 A.D.



The Via Flaminia

Much to the dismay of the Flavian Army, General Primus had strictly prohibited his soldiers from entering the city of Narnia. Traders and prostitutes had been given a single night to ply their trade within the various military camps. But on the day following the surrender, the Flavians were on the march once more. On the second night, they encamped outside a mining community called Malborghetto, twenty miles from the imperial capital. Feeling the endgame was close, Antonius Primus called for a council of war.

"Vitellius has to know he's beaten," the commander-in-chief surmised. "Our scouts are less than ten miles from Rome, and they have met no resistance."

"What, then?" Legate Bassus asked. "Do they intend to make us fight them on the very streets of Rome?"

"A direct assault would be disastrous, sir," Master Centurion Vitruvius added. "Legionaries rampaging the streets of Rome would be catastrophic, no matter who wins."

"I agree," Primus acknowledged. "Yet, I am afraid that a direct assault is

something we must plan for…”

“Excuse me, sir,” the voice of a legionary at the tent entrance interrupted. “Forgive me, but there’s this fellow who rode up to the camp and demands to see you. He claims he’s an imperial general, but he’s dressed like a slave.”

“Interesting.” Primus curiosity got the best of him. “Show him in.”

The man the soldier escorted into the tent was filthy and disheveled, with a face bearing two days’ worth of scruff.

Primus recognized him outright and burst into a fit of laughter. “I’ll be buggered.” he said. “Quintus!”

“Antonius,” Quintus Cerealis replied.

The two men embraced, and Primus ordered food and drink be brought to their guest.

“But what are you doing here?” Primus asked. “And what is with your rather beastly appearance?”

“It was the only way I could escape from Rome,” Cerealis explained. “Vitellius had me placed under house arrest and left under guard at the home of Flavius Sabinus.”

“Sabinus?” Aula asked, her ears perking up. “I take it he is well, then?”

“As well as can be expected, my lady. But I come for two reasons. Firstly, to let you know Vitellius has raised an army of volunteers from within the city. There is rumor he intends to arm a number of slaves.”

“Slaves do outnumber free citizens in the capital,” Primus noted. “Gods only know who they will fight for once the killing begins.”

“Quite,” Cerealis remarked. “And my other reason for coming is to offer you my services in battle. I would offer you my sword, but I do not have one available at the moment.”

The assembled legates chuckled.

“I’m sure we can find you some weapons and kit,” Primus said. “I will be glad to have your services, *general*. I am sorry I do not have a legate’s vacancy, but I think you would be well-suited to lead a wing of our cavalry.”

“Does this mean he’s taking over my corps?” Arrius Varus asked. Despite the large number of soldiers under his command, he was still a member of the equites, whereas Cerealis was a patrician and former legate.

“I don’t want your entire corps,” he reassured him. “Nor do I want a legion. But I will ask for a wing consisting of mainly reconnaissance troopers, that I may be your eyes within Rome.”

“Granted,” the commander-in-chief approved. “And after you’ve had a

meal, a wash, and a proper shave, we can continue in our plan of attack. I hope to avoid bloodying the streets of Rome, but we must be prepared, should it come to that."



Disastrous news seemed to assail Vitellius from all sides. While his brother had successfully quelled the dissidents in the south, every other dispatch told the emperor his entire empire was turning against him. Legate Festus had refused to leave his fortress in North Africa, nor would so much as a single auxiliary soldier be crossing over to Italia. What was worse was the news from Bolanus in Britannia. The very man who had for years professed to be one of Vitellius' surest friends, whom the emperor directly appointed to govern the province, had declared for Vespasian. But the most terrible news of all came from the city of Narnia.

"Valens is dead," Vitellius lamented. He sat on the imperial throne in his audience chamber, the dispatch crumpled in his lap. It was dark. Night had fallen and only a few oil lamps cast light within the pale gloom. "I am truly alone."

Surprisingly, his wife had elected to spend the evening with him. While there had never been anything resembling love between the two, in this moment of her husband's despair, Empress Galeria pitied him. She placed a hand on his shoulder. He reached back and clasped it with his own. No words were said, for what could she say? Would he listen if she implored him to surrender for the good of their children? No. Despite his previously hopeful messages to Antonius Primus, Emperor Vitellius was determined to see this tragedy through to its bitter end. Galeria could only hope that she could save her children.



The hour was late, and most of the Flavian Army slept. Antonius Primus and his senior officers were making preparations for an attack on Rome; one which they hoped they would not have to implement.

"We are all in agreement," the commander-in-chief said. "We will only launch a direct assault if we have no other options. With that in mind, we must strike hard and fast." He pointed to a roughly drawn map of Rome on a

large piece of parchment. “General Aquila, you will take our right wing and attack from the west. Your objective will be to seize the Forum and Capitoline Hill. Cerealis’ cavalry wing will form your vanguard.”

“Understood,” the legate of Legio XIII acknowledged.

“General Bassus, you will take charge of our center column and attack from the north. The Milvian Bridge is where I expect the stiffest resistance, so in addition to the Eleventh Legion, I am attaching most of our auxiliaries, along with Arrius and the largest division of our cavalry. Once over the bridge, you will head for the Temple of Venus and blockade the north side of the palace district.”

“Yes, sir,” Bassus said with a nod.

“I will lead the assault on our left and come in from the east,” the commanding general continued. “General Lupus, you and the Eighth Legion will be with me, along with the attached cohorts from Judea. We will look to secure the imperial palace and capture Vitellius. Be ready to support each other and dispatch centuries and cohorts as needed. I do not want this to be a frenzied brawl with little to no coordination.”

“It will likely denigrate into that no matter what we do,” Cerealis remarked.

“That may be,” Primus conceded. “But I will not have the entire city sacked and burned like Cremona. If we have to attack Rome, it will be to finish the overthrow of the pretender, Vitellius, not so our soldiers can engage in an orgy of looting and destruction. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” The legates sounded off in unison.

He then spoke to Aula. “Lady Vale, you are still in the employ of the imperial messenger service.”

“I am.”

“Then I will have a message for you to take to the imperial palace. If we can compel Vitellius to renounce his claim to the throne and accept exile for both he and his family, we can save a lot of good Romans from dying for a lost cause. We’ve tried negotiating with him before. This will be our last chance for a peaceful end.”



Empress Galeria left her husband to brood over his sorrows. While she pitied him, he was no longer in any position to help her or their children. The

forces at Narnia had surrendered without a fight, and the Flavian Army was less than a day's march from Rome. And while Vitellius contemplated what, if anything, he could do at this point, he heard the soft sound of footsteps in the hall, accompanied by the thump of a cane on the tiles.

"Hello, Mother," Vitellius said, into the shadows.

Sextilia appeared in the chamber. She said nothing.

"You were right, you know. I have brought about the end of our once-great family. I achieved the impossible, became Emperor of Rome…only to lose it all in the end."

"The fate of the family is for you and your brother to decide," his mother finally said. "But I do not wish to see it, regardless of what may come."

"What are you saying?" Vitellius sat upright. He was alarmed by what his mother was implying.

"What I am saying is I have lingered for far too long. My distaste for this current situation and my fear of the future has forced my hand. It is time I joined your father. If you bear even the remotest shred of love for me, you will join me in my quarters within the hour. Bring the fastest-acting poison your assassins can scrounge. And if you do not still love your old mother… well, then let it be out of spite that you would remove my presence from this world."

Sextilia's words disturbed him greatly, though they should have come as no surprise. She was a proud old woman, and she felt the ignominy and shame of her family's imminent downfall. Even if her son were allowed to give up the throne and live out his days in peace, the stain upon their name would never go away. All that her husband and his father before him had worked for was lost.

Vitellius said nothing but nodded in consent. His mother left him and he went to find one of his alchemists who specialized in both elixirs and poisons. When he did come to his mother's bedchamber, she was lying peacefully. Her maidservant knelt beside the bed, weeping uncontrollably. Sextilia dismissed the woman who almost ran into the emperor, as he handed a small vial to her.

"I am assured this will make your passing quick," he said.

There were no attempts to convince her otherwise. And even at the end of her long life, it still proved impossible for either mother or son to express their feelings for each other. Each felt as if they had failed the other. Yet, they could not find any words to say.

And so, Sextilia simply nodded. She watched the tear that ran down the side of her son's face before taking the vial and in a single gulp swallowing the bitter contents. She felt a searing pain in her throat. She tried to gasp but found she could not breathe. She clenched her teeth and clawed at her neck as the burning pain shot down her throat and into her stomach. With a blinding flash across her vision it was over.



The Seven Hills of Rome were now in full view of the Flavian Army, as they encamped and made preparations for a possible assault on the city. From the west bank of the River Tiber to the Via Flaminia, the legions and auxilia regiments formed a large frontage out of their various camps. Primus wanted to make certain that the Vitellians were well aware of his army's strength, *'Lest they do something stupid'*.

The vexilation cohorts from Judea occupied a large open field, nestled between two curves of the Tiber. From their position on the valley floor, the silhouette of Capitoline Hill stood majestically just a few miles away. It was early evening, and the sun was beginning to set. Soldiers not on sentry duty bathed in the river, washing the sweat and grime out of their tunics and socks.

"A shame that we come as an army, girded for battle," Gaius said, with a sad shaking of his head. He used his optio's staff to pull himself out of the river.

His leg still ached, though he was able to get around better. He was also getting at least some movement back in his right arm, but the yellowish-purple bruising had still not gone away. What was more troubling was the numbness in his hand. He had given himself a quick shave while bathing, having become rather proficient with his left hand; albeit his face bore numerous cuts and scars from his failed attempts over the past six weeks.

"Worried about holding your sword again?" Nicanor asked, as he joined his second-in-command.

"I have learned to shave with my left hand," Gaius remarked. "But even if I did learn to wield a gladius with it, I'm still useless if my other hand cannot carry a shield. The surgeons said it will be three or four months before I know if my arm will ever be fully functional again. I simply do not have that much time; not if we are poised to go into battle." He looked his centurion in the eye and saw the concerned expression on his face. "Don't hold me back,

not now."

"If the Vitellians make a stand, the fighting will be fierce," Nicanor replied. "You know this. Your primary job is to keep our soldiers on line and coordinate with the century on our left. I'll not relieve you of your duties. But I do want you keeping well back of the main battle line. Should it come down to house-to-house fighting, as is likely, you are to remain on the streets and keep our sections together."

"Something I should be doing anyway," the optio observed. "Don't worry, I won't let you or the lads down." With a macabre grin, he added, "and if I happen to catch a sword point in the neck, well…Julius has been anxiously waiting for a promotion for years."

He donned the closest he had to a clean tunic and slowly walked over to his tent. The cold water of the river had bit into him at first, but it worked wonders on his injured arm and leg. For the time being, he could walk with only the slightest trace of a limp.

Outside the tents for the centurion and principle officers, Nicanor's manservant was cooking their supper. It was a simple stew of cooked meat with vegetables and some various grains. After the slave filled Gaius' mess tin, the optio sat down on a camp stool and stared at the steaming plate. He tried to grip his fork with his right hand. Only with great exertion was he able to close his fingers around it. Every morning and evening it was the same. He would try to eat with his right hand for as long as possible, but whenever it became too messy, or he simply could not grip his utensils anymore, he would switch to his left. Though it had only been six weeks since his terrible injuries, he was filled with trepidation. He might never again be fit for active service.

He wondered if he was being foolish by compelling Nicanor to allow him to take part in the assault. He would, of course, be careful and keep back from the actual fighting. However, urban warfare, by its very nature was a chaotic nightmare. They could very easily find themselves assailed by enemies from all sides. If his decision proved foolhardy, he may find himself reunited with his brother in Elysium.

Chapter XXVIII: Abdication and the Final Betrayal

Rome
17 December 69 A.D.
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It was eerily quiet as Aula rode along the Aqueduct of Claudius on the eastern outskirts of the city. The sun was setting, and the nighttime traffic should have been rolling to and from the city. Instead, it was deathly quiet, not a single oxcart or pedestrian to be seen.

Aula soon spotted a row of evenly spaced, ornate trees on either side of the road. Not far from there was where the aqueduct took a sharp turn to the west, leading directly past the imperial palace. The young courier saw a section of soldiers; legionaries from Vitellius' defeated northern army who had escaped capture. They had placed palisade stakes on either side of the road and were questioning what few people there were trying to enter or leave Rome.

"Hold there!" a legionary shouted.

Aula slowly rode up to the barricade.

"What business have you within the Eternal City?"

The soldiers looked relatively clean, yet haggard and utterly beaten. The legionary who stopped Aula had bloodshot eyes, as if he had not slept in weeks.

"I bring a message to Vitellius from the Flavian general, Marcus Antonius Primus."

"That would be *Emperor* Vitellius to you, lass," the soldier replied curtly. "And why would that filthy traitor send a saucy little bitch like you to parlay with the emperor?"

"Just a minute," the man's decanus said, walking up behind him. He pointed to Aula's left hand. "She bears the signet ring of the imperial couriers." He then addressed Aula. "Who was it that employed you?"

She swallowed hard, not knowing what may have happened to Sabinus. No messages had reached the Flavian Army since Bedriacum, and it was feared they might take reprisal against Vespasian's brother or son. Still, she

knew she had to be candid and accept the risk that might come from naming her benefactor.

"The Prefect of Rome, Flavius Sabinus," she said.

This brought a few guffaws from the soldiers.

Their squad leader simply nodded. "He is with the emperor at the palace," the sergeant replied. He then stood aside. "You may pass."

Aula kicked her horse into a modest trot. She did not wish to cause any alarm. However, she wanted to get away from those men as soon as possible, lest they have second thoughts about letting her enter the city unmolested. At the Temple of Apollo she would find the defeated Vitellius. The temple was located on the palace grounds, west of the imperial residence itself, and next to what had been the houses of Emperor Augustus and Empress Livia a half century before.

The temple was chosen for this meeting because its sanctity, as well as being 'neutral ground'. A pair of guardsmen stood outside the doors. They ushered Aula in when they saw she bore a message from the Flavian Army. She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw Sabinus with the emperor and the former consul, Italicus. The only other one present was Cluvius Rufus, a former governor and close confidant of Vitellius. Aula saw Sabinus' eyes grow wide for a moment. He fought against the smile that wished to form on his face. The two had been out of contact for months, and he had feared the worst for his young ward.

"I bring a message from Flavian General, Marcus Antonius Primus," Aula said formally, producing the scroll, which Italicus took from her.

"It is a reiteration of his terms of surrender," the former consul said, quickly scanning its contents. "He once again offers to spare your life and the lives of your wife and children. He offers a substantial donative of twenty-five million denarii, and you will be allowed to live in retirement on an estate in Campania."

Vitellius looked like a man beaten. His eyes were fixed on Aula. "Was there any other news?"

"Valens is dead," Aula replied.

"Yes, I know," Vitellius acknowledged.

"That would explain the surrender of our forces at Narnia," Italicus muttered.

Aula continued, "The praetorians had steeled themselves to fight to the last, believing Valens was bringing reinforcements from Hispania and Gaul.

It was only when his head was displayed for them to see, that they realized all was lost."

"I will have my reply to General Primus shortly," Vitellius said. He waved the courier off.

Aula stood in a corner near the entrance. She was the only witness to what transpired next between the four men. Even the praetorian prefects and the current consuls were not allowed into the meeting.

"The terms are fair," Sabinus emphasized. "Unlike Galba and Otho, you are being given a chance at life."

"Life," Vitellius snorted. "I think that having you and Vespasian's son in my care are the only reasons I am being offered such clemency."

"Though I think you are being unfair, I will not argue the point," Sabinus replied. "If not for yourself and your son, then abdicate out of love for the people of Rome. If there is further resistance and Primus is compelled to launch an assault on the city, how many more will die? Will we subject the Eternal City to the same fury our legions wreck upon foreign adversaries?"

"It is not just the Flavian Army that we need to worry about," Rufus said, "but the emperor's own supporters."

"What do you mean?" Sabinus asked.

"What he means is that most of the Vitellian loyalists who remain are hardened bastards," Italicus said. "They will view abdication as a form of betrayal. Should the emperor surrender the throne after all they've fought for, then he will be safe from neither his former enemies nor his supporters. There are many who will refuse to give up without one last fight, to include the thousands of volunteers Lucius Vitellius raised for the People's Army."

"It is true," Rufus added. "There are those, especially within the praetorians, who would rather see the city burn than surrendered to Vespasian." He looked to Vitellius. "And even if Primus keeps his word, for the rest of your days you will live in fear of retribution from those who followed, as well as opposed you."

"Then we have no choice but to stand and fight," Italicus replied. "We have seven cohorts of the Praetorian Guard that are still loyal. Our friend, Sabinus, may be the brother of the usurper, but his urban cohorts consist of men loyal to the Vitellian regime."

"Even so," Sabinus interjected, "I have only three cohorts available. These are part-time militia who are called up only in the direst of emergencies…"

“And if this is not a dire emergency, what is?” Rufus interrupted. He had another thought, one bordering on madness. “More than half the population of Rome are slaves. We can arm them as well.”

“As dire as this is, ten cohorts of praetorian and urban fighters will not last an hour against Primus’ army,” Sabinus retorted, keeping his cool demeanor. “And if you are thinking of arming slaves, then you are truly mad. Eight out of every ten slaves in Rome are women; they are maidservants, housekeepers, and prostitutes, not soldiers. Even if you armed every gladiator and male slave you can find, offering the promise of freedom, who’s to say they won’t simply turn on you once they see the strength of Primus’ legions advancing on them?”

“Sabinus is right,” Italicus said. “Arming slaves would be insanity. The Flavians have us terribly outnumbered, and with the surrender of our forces at Narnia, there will be no aid coming to us. It is finished.” A tear ran down the side of his face as he looked to his friend and emperor. “I am sorry, Aulus.”

Vitellius said nothing for a few moments, staring at the floor in contemplation. The recent death of his mother, the defeat of his armies, and now the loss of the empire had left him unreservedly broken. He knew there would be no heroic comeback from the brink, no elusive victory to be had in the face of overwhelming odds. Valens had been his last hope, and his death ended the reign of the Vitellians.

He finally took a deep breath and said, “If there is one thing I learned from my predecessor, it is that there comes a time when even an emperor’s life no longer matters.” He signaled for Aula to come to him. “Inform General Primus that I accept his terms. There is much that needs to be done first to ensure a peaceful transition of power. When the time is right, I will convene the senate at the Temple of Concord, and from there will I hand over the imperial signet ring and lay down the rule of the empire. Sabinus, I have no doubt that your brother will wish for you to act as regent until he arrives.”

The city prefect responded, “As you treated the family of Otho with clemency, so too will Vespasian show kindness to you and yours.”



The sun had set, and it took two hours for Aula to ride back to the Flavian camp. Even from a couple miles away, she could make out just how vast their forces were. Legions had established themselves all along the hills. The

southern rampart of the camp stretched nearly a mile in each direction from the Via Flaminia. She knew Primus had established his principia on the eastern end near the Tiber and Legio VIII, Augusta.

Despite the late hour the camp was alive with activity. Few would be able to sleep, so great was their anticipation. Everywhere was lit up with torches as decani inspected their legionaries' weapons and armor. Centurions and their immediate subordinates sat together outside their tents, discussing the battle plan. Most had never been to Rome. They were dependent on those who could give them some idea as to the city's layout.

Aula found the principia tent glowing from the numerous oil lamps within. A legionary held the entrance flap open for her. She saw the commander-in-chief lounging with a cup of wine, along with a handful of officers.

"Ah, Lady Vale," he said, sitting upright. "Has the pretender accepted our terms?"

"He has," Aula replied. "I just happened to arrive when he was holding a private meeting within the Temple of Apollo. Only Flavius Sabinus, Silius Italicus, and Cluvius Rufus were there."

"A strange group for a meeting of this magnitude," Lupus thought aloud.

"Sabinus is Vespasian's brother, as well as the city prefect," Primus noted. "I don't know Rufus' role. I have never met him. But I do know that Italicus, besides being a recent consul and rather influential member of the senate, is one of the few true friends Vitellius has. What all did they say?"

"They acknowledged that it is finished, but Vitellius said he will need to set his affairs in order, so that there may be a peaceful transfer of power. He will lay down his authority at the Temple of Concord, where he intends to give the imperial signet to Flavius Sabinus."

"Do you think he's stalling for time?" Legate Lupus asked.

"I doubt it," Primus said, shaking his head. He sighed impatiently. "The strategic game between Vespasian and Vitellius may be over, but now it is the smaller one that must be played."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"A game of power between allies," the general replied candidly. "Vespasian has named me regent, with the assumption that I capture Rome before Mucianus arrives."

"I thought you didn't want the regency?" a legate asked.

"Oh, I don't, at least not the responsibility that comes with it. What sucks

a pile of horse shit is that Vitellius intends to hand the imperial signet over to Sabinus. *I* won this damned war. He sat on his ass in Rome. And Mucianus took his sweet time, extorting every major city within the eastern empire, enriching himself in the process, while marching at a fucking tortoise's pace! Now the senate will name Sabinus as regent, simply because he's Vespasian's brother. Once Mucianus arrives in Rome, I'll be cast aside and sent back to the Danube without so much as a bloody 'thank you' from either of them."

For a triumphant general, there was a great deal of bitterness in Primus' voice. He slammed his fist on the table in frustration. He knew his outburst was rather unbecoming, and he took a brief moment to compose his thoughts. "Forgive me, my friends. Like many of you, I have scarcely slept in weeks. I should be glad of these tidings. The war will finally be over, without bloodshed in the imperial capital."

"Perhaps we should all get some sleep," Lupus said, standing up from his couch and yawning.

"Yes," the commander-in-chief replied, with a yawn of his own. "I've already dispatched a pair of spies into the city. Come the morrow, I expect they will have returned to let us know Vitellius has abdicated, with Sabinus as Regent of the Empire until Emperor Vespasian arrives."

He dismissed his officers, but asked Aula to stay for a few minutes.

"You think I'm selfish," Primus said. "It's alright for you to say so. Firstly, because you are my social peer, and secondly, because it's true."

"I understand that all generals use war as a means of making their fortunes," Aula replied evasively.

"Absolutely," Primus concurred. "Regrettably, not this time; at least not for the men who bled during this wretched campaign. It was my soldiers who fought and died, deposing the usurper. It is Mucianus who will reap all the benefits."

"You two have a strange friendship, I must say."

"Politics and war make for the most unusual bonds," the general noted. "If I'm being honest, Mucianus and I were at first only joined by our mutual loyalty towards Vespasian. Even those two were only allies of necessity for the longest time. I think it was perhaps within the past year or so that their rather cold rapport with each other became something one could describe as friendly. Mucianus and I like and despise each other in equal measure, I think. Even Vespasian and Sabinus, brothers separated by scarcely a year in

age, have never been what one would describe as ‘close’.”

“I know,” Aula replied, taking a sip of wine. “I think Sabinus loves his brother in his own way. Though I will admit, I think the only time they have shared mutual affinity towards one another was during the Conquest of Britannia.”

“When both are commanding legions, they work surprisingly well together,” Primus observed. “They are able to put their collective egos aside. Each knows very much how the other thinks. However, that was a long time ago; twenty-seven years since the Flavian brothers last bloodied their swords together in battle. Forgive me, for I know you are very close to Sabinus, but I cannot help wondering if there is a measure of envy towards his brother. After all, he is the elder Flavian and should be head of the family. He also had to financially prop up Vespasian on more than one occasion, which I’m certain was a source of embarrassment for him. And now, it is Vespasian and not Sabinus who is Emperor of Rome. I wonder how he will handle serving as regent to his younger brother.”

“It is unusual,” Aula concurred.

Primus then added, “Whatever opportunities I may have lost, at least Vitellius intends to abdicate, which will save numerous Roman lives.”

“That’s a very noble observation,” Aula said, with a trace of sarcasm.

“It wasn’t meant to be,” Primus chuckled. “If compelled to attack the capital, I’ll end up taking a large portion of the blame for the destruction, regardless of provocation from our enemies. I wonder if Mucianus deliberately delays since he knows Vitellius is beaten, and he has me to shoulder the blame for everything that goes wrong.”

Primus’ eyes were growing heavy. Aula decided to take her leave.

Her small tent was near the principia. As she sat on her small cot, removing her sandals and her tunic, she was suddenly very tired. The camp was still alive with activity, though it was slowing as the darkness enveloped them. A light rain sprinkled on Aula’s tent as she tied the flap closed. A small oil lamp sat on the table near her camp bed. She took her father’s spatha and smiled as the glow of lamp flickered off the brass artwork of the scabbard. She set the weapon next to her cot, pulled the heavy blankets over her, and slept a deeper sleep than she had since before she left Judea.



The nighttime rains left a glistening sheen on the stone streets of the Eternal City. And though many had reveled in the first night of Saturnalia, the morning brought a somber mood to the capital. The city criers announced that all official observances for the day were to be delayed or cancelled altogether. The emperor was calling for a public meeting in the Forum with some very important announcements regarding the future of Rome. Crowds gathered, mostly those whose loyalties lay with Vitellius. Many of these were members of the newly raised People's Army, hoping their emperor was coming to lead them in the final battle against Vespasian's legions.

An ominous horn blow heralded the emperor's approach. The people first thought to cheer, but were suddenly silenced by the somber procession. Praetorian guardsmen cleared the path and walked on either side of the column. Vitellius walked at the head, dressed in black mourning garb, and devoid of the laurels of his office. His son, Germanicus, also dressed in black, was carried in a litter next to his father. The boy's mother, Empress Galeria, walked on the other side of the litter, clutching the boy's hand. Their son-in-law, Valerius Asiaticus, walked beside the emperor, wearing the armor of an imperial legate. Only Vitellius' heavily pregnant daughter, Vitellia, was absent. At first, one might assume the family was dressed in mourning for the emperor's mother, Sextilia. However, she had been cremated and sent to the gods in a very private ceremony not long after her passing. And there would be no need for the entire household to accompany them. At least a hundred slaves and freedmen walked behind the imperial family. All who witnessed the spectacle knew something boded ill for Vitellius and for Rome.

Despite being crammed with upwards of ten thousand spectators, the Forum was eerily quiet. The procession made its way to the base of the steps leading up to Capitoline Hill, where Consul Simplex awaited them. His colleague, Atticus, was conspicuously absent. Flavius Sabinus had also declined to attend. He felt his presence would be in poor taste, and he did not know how the crowds would react.

"People of Rome," Vitellius said, his arms held open wide. His signet ring was held in one hand, and the emperor's ceremonial gladius in the other. *"I have come to say farewell. Fortune and the gods have forsaken us in favor of our enemies. I am renouncing my claim to the imperial throne, for the sake of peace and the lives of our people!"*

"No!" a voice shouted.

"You cannot abandon us, sire, not now!"

“Please, hear me out, I beg of you!” Vitellius pleaded. “As I have been your father, so are all of you my beloved sons and daughters. My life is not worth the sacrifice of any one of you. And I implore you to show pity on my wife—your empress mother—my dear brother, as well as my children who are blameless of any crime. Because I love Rome more than I love my own life, I will not allow her to fall victim to our enemy’s bloodlust. By my abdication, Rome shall be spared.”

There were further grumblings and shouts of protest from the crowd who, though sympathetic, were unmoved by the emperor’s speech. Wishing to finish the proceedings and be done with it, Vitellius approached Consul Simplex.

“Gnaeus,” he said, addressing the consul by his given name. “I am giving you the emperor’s signet and gladius. They are to be entrusted to Flavius Sabinus until such time as…*Emperor* Vespasian, arrives in the capital.”

“I cannot accept these,” Simplex said, folding his arms across his chest.

“The Guard is still loyal to you, sire!” Prefect Varus said, walking over quickly. His face was red with anger. Neither he nor the consuls had been given any prior knowledge of Vitellius’ intent to abdicate. All felt betrayed by the emperor’s actions, as did the people who witnessed the spectacle. “They will stand with you to the death. You *owe* it to them to continue fighting!”

“And we are with you, Caesar!” a man in the crowd shouted. “Vespasian will never be emperor, not so long as we draw breath!”

Distraught at what he had not foreseen, Vitellius thought to climb the Gemonian Stairs and leave the signet ring and gladius within the Temple of Concord. Instead, the mob refused to allow him to pass. The praetorians were not about to clear the way, just so their emperor could surrender without a fight. As he looked frantically around the Forum, every means of approaching the hill was blocked off. Only the path back to the palace was still open.

“Take my wife and son to my mother’s villa,” he ordered one of the guardsmen. “I will retire to the palace.”

Though sorrowful when he approached the Forum, Vitellius had felt a sense of relief, the crisis was supposed to be at an end. Now, with the people and the Guard refusing to allow him to abdicate, he suddenly feared the worst.



At the same time as Vitellius approached the Forum, a large entourage made its way to the home of Flavius Sabinus. They consisted of the three urban cohorts that remained within the city. Thought to be staunch Vitellian loyalists, all had declared for Vespasian that morning. They came to demand that their prefect lead them to seize the throne for the Rome's rightful Caesar. Though primarily a firefighting and police force, on this day they were equipped for battle. Each man wore hamata chain mail with a bronze helmet. Their shields were similar to the rectangular legionary scutum, though about half the size. They each carried a long stabbing spear with a wide blade, along with a gladius on their hip.

At the cohorts' head rode the venerable Suetonius Paulinus. For the first time since the war between Otho and Vitellius, he was armed for battle. He was joined by Consul Quintius Atticus, though he was unarmed and still in his formal toga. Unlike his colleague, Simplex, he wished for the war to end peacefully and was, therefore, ready to offer his assistance to Vespasian's brother.

"Paulinus, what is happening?" Sabinus asked, as he stepped out onto the steps leading into his manor house. "Why are you dressed for battle?"

"A precautionary measure," the old general asserted. "I recommend you knock the dust off your armor, as well."

"The urban cohorts are at your command," Consul Atticus added. "Vitellius is poised to lay down the imperial signet ring at the Temple of Concord. The senate is ready to accept you as Vespasian's regent. It would be best if you spoke directly to the people."

"There may be resistance," Paulinus warned. "Which is why we've rallied the urban cohorts."

A centurion named Cornelius Martialis stepped forward. "Sir, I took the liberty of opening the armories for our men. We hope the transfer of power is peaceful but best not to take chances."

"I am with you, too," another voice said.

At first Sabinus did not recognize the man. Once he removed his helmet, the prefect's mouth cocked into a half grin.

"I'll be damned," he said. "Tribune Pacensis."

"Former tribune, sir," the man replied. "I am here to fight for Vespasian and atone for my past crimes."

The ‘crimes’ he referred to took place during Otho’s ill-fated maritime expedition during the spring and summer. Aemilius Pacensis had once commanded an urban cohort under Sabinus. Notorious for his drunkeness and mean behavior, he had proven incompetent as commander of the expedition. He was promptly overthrown by a mutiny within his own ranks and sacked by Sabinus upon his return to Rome. The prefect had not seen the disgraced tribune since. He looked better than Sabinus ever remembered. He was both sober and ready to do his duty.

“I ask for no command, sir,” Pacensis emphasized. “Just let me fight by your side!”

“Yes,” Sabinus said, his mind filled with conflicting emotions. “I think… it is time I donned my armor.”

Chapter XXIX: In the Shadow of the Gods

Rome
18 December 69 A.D.



Capitoline Hill

Though slightly rounder and much softer than when he'd served as legate of Legio IX, Hispania, during the Conquest of Britannia, his armor still fit. The leather subarmalis that went underneath the metal cuirass was old and well-worn. The white accents on the shoulder straps were cracking in places. The muscled cuirass itself was almost as old as he was and had seen many battles. The decorative designs were far simpler than most, consisting of a series of bronze leaves over the torso with an ornate circular disc over the chest.

Flavius Sabinus found himself assailed by conflicting feelings. It was not the potential danger that troubled him. He had faced death on many occasions during his tenure with the legions. At sixty-one years of age, he had lived a full life. Yet it was that age difference between he and Vespasian that troubled him greatly. Not something as demeaning as petty jealousy, but rather a deep-seated tradition that went back to the beginning of civilization. Rome was a very patriarchal society where the eldest male ruled over the family. Sabinus was the eldest living member of the Flavian clan. It went against all sense of tradition that he would, in any way, be subservient to his

younger sibling.

"We're ready whenever you are," Paulinus said, as he joined Sabinus in the foyer.

"Tell me something, Suetonius," the city prefect replied. "How would you feel if it were your younger brother who was poised to become emperor?"

"I've never given it any thought," Paulinus remarked. He then understood. "You are the elder brother, and therefore should be head of the Flavian house. Yet, you cannot be head of your own household if Vespasian is emperor."

"I doubt my brother has any intention of having a co-ruler," Sabinus conjectured. "Even if he does, it will be his eldest son rather than his older brother."

"No disrespect, old friend, but isn't it a little late in the game to make an issue of you being the elder brother? Does this go against what is deemed proper? Perhaps. But it was Vespasian, the man, who was named Emperor of Rome, not the House of the Flavians."

Sabinus turned to face him. A slave slung his sword baldric over his shoulder, while another handed him his dusty legate's helm with its faded black plume.

"I couldn't exactly assert any sort of rights over my brother while Vitellius still held firm to the imperial throne," he observed. "I've had to remain loyal to the emperor that is here in Rome or at least remain neutral. But you are right, my friend. It was Vespasian who the eastern legions proclaimed Caesar, not Sabinus. And it is they who have won this war. So I must do their bidding, as well as that of the senate, and be a good and loyal subject of my brother."

As the two generals stepped onto the street, they were greeted with a voracious cheer from the urban cohorts. The men had been quick to forgive Tribune Pacensis and insisted he lead one of the cohorts on what they felt would be a glorious day. Though fully armed and kitted up, none of the men anticipated anything outside of a few rioters who were still loyal to Vitellius.

The first cohort under Centurion Cornelius took the lead. They marched ten men abreast, spears shouldered. Sabinus and Paulinus followed on horseback with the remaining cohorts behind them. Pacensis commanded the rear-guard as the procession made its way towards the Forum.

“Just think,” Paulinus said, with a grin. “Today we turn the page of history.”

Sabinus matched this with a nervous smile of his own.

They wound their way along the city streets. This district housed a large number of senators and wealthy equites. A handful of their peers soon joined them.

“I thought you would have already been at the Forum,” Paulinus said, as they were joined by his former colleague in Otho’s army, Marius Celsus.

Not having a horse readily available, he walked beside his friend. “I heard Vitellius planned on giving a riveting speech before surrendering his laurels.”

“Yes,” Celsus replied. “He’s likely already given it. I knew the whole spectacle would be rather undignified, and so I decided it would be better to march with the new emperor’s regent.”

“Ever the political survivalist,” Paulinus chuckled.

“I kept my word,” Celsus emphasized. “I was just as loyal to Vitellius as I was to Galba and Otho.”

“You are certainly the only man who all would agree loyally served every ‘Caesar’ in this Year of the Four Emperors.”

Their revelry was cut short as they approached the Forum. The street was clogged with hundreds of citizens, who quickly cleared away from the armed force. A handful of senators, including Consul Simplex, stopped on the steps of the curia. Atticus noted his colleague’s face was ashen as he wordlessly watched the procession.

The Forum was still crammed with thousands of onlookers, as well as numerous centuries from the Praetorian Guard. Vitellius, however, was nowhere to be seen. At first, the crowds thought the urban cohorts had arrived to help with the city’s defense against the Flavians. When they saw Sabinus they flew into a collective rage.

“The traitor’s brother!” they shrieked. “He comes armed for battle!”

“Cast the Flavians into the Tiber!”

The lead ranks of the urban cohort suddenly halted, their expressions wrought with fear as the hordes descended upon them.

“That’s a lot more than just a few rioters,” Sabinus noted.

“Where the fuck is Vitellius?” Paulinus asked. “His guardsmen are here, but there is no sign of him.” He then composed himself and began giving orders to the lead cohort. “Close ranks, weapons ready!”

The nervous men crouched into their fighting stances behind their shields

with spears protruding forward. The mob was being whipped into a frenzy by the praetorians, who were forming into their own battle ranks.

"They outnumber us, sir," Centurion Cornelius called back. "Even without this mob who wants to tear us to pieces."

"Back up, lads," Paulinus said, keeping his voice calm and measured. "Nice and steady. Maintain formation."

The old general was back in his element once again. With so many years of experience in innumerable campaigns, it all came instinctively to him. He knew they were in a bad position, almost half of the lead cohort was out in the open. He also knew the men of the urban cohorts were terribly outmatched by the praetorians, most of whom had come from the Rhine Legions.

As the long column tried to back its way onto the main the road, the hostile crowd surged forward. Many of them carried clubs and other makeshift weapons. There were also many from the People's Army that carried gladii and small shields. The brandishing of spears from the urban soldiers kept them mostly at bay. One overzealous young Vitellian rushed forward, ready to bash in the skull of one of his adversaries, only to take a spear to the guts. He cried out as he fell onto his side, blood oozing from the terrible wound. This elicited a howl of rage from the man's companions, who attempted to overwhelm the Flavians by sheer force of numbers. Several others were spitted by the long spears, their shrieks of pain echoing over the din of the growing battle. Two of the Flavian vigiles were felled by the clubs of the mob, and as their companions haplessly backed away from the frenzy, they were bashed to death by scores of the enraged Vitellians.

The crowd soon backed away. They were by far getting the worst of the exchange. Two Flavians had been brutally slain, while more than a dozen from the mob lay dead or dying. The shrill sound of whistles caused a parting in the crowd, as praetorian officers led their men into the fray.

"Guardsmen, on me!" a senior centurion shouted, holding his gladius high.

With the discipline that came from years in the legions, hundreds of praetorians rushed through the crowd and formed into battle ranks across from the urban cohorts. With a blow from the centurion's whistle, they gave a loud battle cry and charged. Their larger shields and superior armor negated the reach of the vigiles' spears, though one guardsman's head snapped backwards as he was stabbed through the throat. The other spear thrusts

embedded in the praetorians' shields, becoming stuck as the guardsmen rapidly closed the distance with a clashing of shields. The urban soldiers in the first few ranks either hurled or dropped their spears, then drew their gladii as their ranks buckled under the praetorian onslaught.

Towards the rear of the first cohort there was much confusion. The urban soldiers could hear the sounds of battle coming from the Forum; however, they could not see anything other than the men directly in front of them. Tribune Pacensis had made his way up from the rear cohorts to see what the confusion was. He saw a lone praetorian running towards them from a narrow side street.

"Contact right!" he shouted.

Both Celsus and Consul Atticus turned. General Paulinus was still near the front, trying to withdraw their lead elements.

"Wait, wait!" the guardsman shouted, holding his hands up in surrender.

A score of vigiles turned their spears towards him. "This is not a flank attack! I mean you no harm!"

"I know you," Sabinus said, as he rode over to the man, his eyes narrowing. "You're Guardsman Statius, the emperors' hired blade."

"And you are Prefect Sabinus, who called upon my skills after Vitellius' rise," Statius replied bluntly. He looked over his shoulder. "Now is not the time to discuss our pasts, sir. If you still wish to take Capitoline Hill, follow me. This street leads into a series of alleys which will take us around the backside. There is no one posted up there, and the western steps are clear."

"Can we trust him?" Atticus asked nervously.

Sabinus gave a short nod of consent. "Given the hell our lads at the front have been subjected to, we don't have much of a choice."

"Our column extends back half a mile," Pacensis noted. He turned to his nearest centurion. "Send word down the line, have everyone withdraw and make their way around to the north side of the hill. We'll rally at the southern steps."

"Yes, sir."

"Come on!" Statius said. He waved the men on as he raced down the street, his hobnailed sandals clattering on the cobblestones.

"Withdraw by ranks," Sabinus ordered the men of the lead cohort. He remained astride his horse just on the other side of the small intersection. From there he could coordinate their withdrawal. Atticus and Celsus had

gone with Statius, and Sabinus wondered why the guardsman was helping them.

At the front of the cohort it was absolute chaos. The vigiles had managed to back their way out of the Forum and onto the street, but only after leaving a score of their soldiers dead with dozens more badly injured. Those unable to walk were regrettably left behind. Paulinus grimaced. He hoped those unfortunate men would be taken prisoner by the praetorians, rather than beaten to death by the mob.

The old general kept himself in the second rank, and as the praetorians surged forward, he would thrust his spatha over the shoulder of the vigiles in front of him. He caught one unfortunate guardsman in the face. The man dropped his shield and gladius, falling to the ground, screaming as he clutched at his shattered cheekbone. The surge of the praetorian onslaught soon dissipated, as their commanding centurion ordered his men to pull back to the Forum.

"General Paulinus!" Sabinus shouted from atop his horse. "Follow me down this side street. There's another way around to the hill."

The general nodded and waved with his sword for the surviving urban soldiers to follow him. The vigiles were bloodied, and their nerves frayed from the harrowing ordeal they had just endured. Few had any sort of experience with the legions, and the battle against the praetorians had been completely unexpected. They rushed through the side street following Sabinus. All the while, Paulinus wondered just how much fight their men had left in them.



Back at the Forum, Prefect Varus had just arrived, having escorted the Empress Galeria and Prince Germanicus to the house that had belonged to Lady Sextilia.

"By Vulcan's cock, what the fuck happened here?" he asked, as he saw the large number of bodies near the north end of the Forum. Praetorians were binding the hands of those wounded vigiles they had managed to save from the mob's wrath.

"Sabinus came here with the urban cohorts, armed for battle," one of the centurions reported.

“I see,” Varus acknowledged. “So our dear city prefect decided to help his baby brother onto the throne after all. Where are they now?”

“They withdrew down the main street there, sir,” the praetorian officer said, pointing with his gladius. “I elected not to pursue them, in case it was a trap.”

“Very well. I want the house of Sabinus surrounded, and he is to be arrested on charges of high treason.” The prefect happened to glance to his left. Behind the Basilica Julia and Temple of Saturn, the stairs on the southern slope of the hill extended to the top. Varus grimaced in anger as he saw large numbers of men from the urban cohorts sprinting up the steps. “*Idiots!* They’ve gone around the backside of the hill! Stop them!”

The large forum square was still filled with both Vitellian supporters, as well as thousands of curious spectators. By the time the praetorians forced their way through the immense crowds, it was too late. Flavius Sabinus, Consul Atticus, Generals Paulinus and Celsus, and a thousand vigiles now held the high ground atop Capitoline Hill.



Capitoline Hill was extremely steep on all sides. At the top was a high wall that encompassed the complex of temples and other buildings. The most practical way inside was via the side stairs on the southern face, known as *‘The One Hundred Steps’*. The only other approach was up the infamous Gemonian Stairs, which led down into the Forum.

“Barricade all entrances!” Sabinus ordered.

There were still numerous priests, temple workers, and various civilians within the large complex. Many of these elected to hide within. Others forced their way out past Sabinus’ soldiers and fled down the flights of stairs.

Meanwhile, vigiles were building barricades from tables, benches, and even statues while their senior leaders looked down onto the Forum below. The hour was late, and the sun shone behind them, as the Temple of Jupiter cast its massive shadow over the square.

“The praetorians are just sitting there,” Celsus observed.

Guardsmen were scattered about, and while there were groups at the base of the stairs, none seemed anxious to try and storm the heights.

“They know we have a strong advantage from up here,” Paulinus reasoned. “Rest assured, once they have sufficient reinforcements they’ll try

to dislodge us. There is no way in Hades Vitellius will allow enemy troops to occupy this sacred hill."

"We must get word to Primus at once," Sabinus asserted.

One of the vigiles then ran over to him. "Sir, the western edge of the hill is mostly undefended. I saw your horse still tethered near the Theater of Marcellus."

"How are your climbing skills?" Sabinus asked.

"I can make my way down the hill, if that is what you're asking, sir."

"Take my horse," the city prefect ordered. "And ride like hell to General Primus. Let him know that we are under siege and need him to come to Rome with all possible speed."

"Yes, sir."

The southern stairs ended at the base of the complex's surrounding wall, where a much narrower set of stairs angled up to the main square. On the lower level a narrow walkway extended back towards the Temple of Jupiter, and it was here the young urban soldier crept. He kept to the shadows, hoping the glare of the setting sun would blind any who would seek to hinder him. Sabinus and Paulinus watched anxiously, as the man eased his way onto the rocky face of the vertical hill and slowly made his way down. With less than ten feet to go, he lost his footing and landed hard in a large shrub with a loud crash. Sabinus grimaced. He thought the young man was badly hurt. But he soon emerged, limping a bit, covered in numerous cuts and scrapes. He looked up and gave a wave to say he was alright, before rushing over to where the prefect's horse was tethered near the famous theater.

"I'm surprised no one ran off with my horse," Sabinus said. They watched the urban soldier mount up and ride towards the western gates leading to the Field of Mars. Paulinus, however, was more interested in the walkway below them.

"Once the Vitellians do decide to attack, that is where they will come," he surmised.

Both men gazed along the wall, to where it joined with the southwest corner of the Temple of Jupiter.

"You're certain?" Sabinus asked.

"It's how I would do it," the general remarked. "They'll launch an assault on the main stairs, but here is where they will focus their energies. The portcullis on the backside of the temple is wooden with many windows. They could either break them down or set fire to them."

“And we have shit for missile weapons,” Sabinus lamented. “Of course, had we known Vitellius’ supporters were still anxious for a fight, we could have better prepared.”

Celsus joined them. “We’ve barricaded the top of the Gemonian Stairs. The crowds seem to have dispersed, likely due to boredom, and the praetorians are still sitting on their asses.”

“I should send a message to Vitellius,” Sabinus remarked. “It is unfortunate that blood was spilled this day. Unless he has recanted his intent or lost all control of his soldiery, he can still put an end to this.”

“I’ll deliver your message, sir,” a voice said, behind him.

Sabinus turned to see Centurion Cornelius.

“Very good.” The city prefect nodded. He sent a man to fetch parchment and a quill from the nearby Temple of Concord.

“It won’t work, you know,” Guardsman Statius spoke up.

“And why is that?” Sabinus asked. His voice was a little more indignant than he’d intended. He knew the praetorian was well aware of the Vitellian forces’ disposition.

“Vitellius’ remaining supporters are fanatics,” Statius explained. “They’re determined to fight to the death. And before you ask, that is why I decided to help you.”

“Ever the survivalist,” Sabinus noted.

“Just practical, that’s all,” the guardsman replied, with a shrug. “And, yes, I intend to survive this. I told myself yesterday; I did not serve three emperors over the course of this past year and come back in one piece from Otho’s idiotic expedition to Maritime Alpes, only to be slaughtered with these fanatics. I am one of maybe fifty of Otho’s praetorians who was allowed to remain with the Guard. The rest were sacked and are most likely marching with Antonius Primus. But I did not turn on Vitellius only to die here this night. I will survive this, and I’ll do what I can to help you get through this as well.”

“I am grateful,” Sabinus said with a slight laugh, unsure how one lone praetorian could possibly ensure his safety. “So you’re still loyal to no one, then?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Statius replied candidly. “I have always done my duty and followed the orders of my superiors. I kept my oaths to Nero, Galba, and Otho. I only broke it to Vitellius when I realized the rest of the Guard will never allow him to abdicate.”

“Fair enough,” Paulinus interjected. He grinned as he asked, “But, of course, you could have left the city. Once it fell to Primus, no one would be the wiser.”

Statius smirked knowingly but said nothing. In truth, he wasn’t exactly sure why he decided to help the Flavians. Perhaps, for the first time in many years, it wasn’t about the rewards. Maybe he was finally willing to fight for something other than gold and silver.

Sabinus decided to wait until morning to sending Centurion Cornelius with his message for Vitellius. It was mostly quiet. The praetorians were blockading the Forum, and the merchant carts were unable to unload their supplies for the markets. Sometime around midnight, while Sabinus fitfully dozed against the steps of a small shrine near the western wall, guards heard the sound of footfalls sprinting up the steps.

“Halt!” one of them shouted, as they shone their torches over the barricade. “Who comes upon the bastion of the Flavians?”

“Domitian, son of the emperor,” the nervous voice called out, from the shadows.

“Domitian!” Sabinus said, stumbling to his feet. He beamed as the young man was helped over the barricades. “Praise Diana! How did you manage to get here?”

“Your house is surrounded, but the guards were sloppy and careless,” Domitian explained. “Two near the servants’ entrance were practically asleep, and I was able to walk past them. I did the same here, once I reached the southern steps. I figured this was the safest place in the city for me.”

“Well done, my boy,” Sabinus said, embracing his nephew. Since the brawl in the Forum, he had been worried that the young man would be imprisoned or otherwise harmed by Vitellius’ maddened supporters. He said as much, adding, “The fact that you live tells me Vitellius still has some control over his reckless mob. He knows that, should anything happen to you, there will be no mercy shown to either him or his family.”

The Flavian defenders passed the rest of the night in nervous anticipation of the coming dawn. Sabinus knew his message would either bring about Vitellius’ capitulation, or there would be bloodshed atop Capitoline Hill.

Chapter XXX: The Burning of Rome

Rome
19 December 69 A.D.
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Vitellius had gotten no more sleep than Sabinus that night. His eyes were swollen and bloodshot, his hair disheveled, and he was in need of a shave. The morning sun seemed to glare down on him accusingly, as he stepped out onto the landing that overlooked one of the gardens below. He had not only lost control over most of the empire, but over his entire world. He was so powerless, he could not even abdicate the throne!

"Is death my only way out, as it was for Otho?" he asked aloud as he paced back and forth.

"Yes," Prefect Varus responded bluntly. While Priscus was in the south with Lucius Vitellius, quelling the insurrection in Campania, Varus was now sole commander of all Vitellian forces in and around the capital. He had also gotten little sleep this past night, yet his eyes burned with a fierce sense of determination. "You need to face up to it, Caesar. Once you assumed the imperial throne, it was for life. Only death can sever you from your duty."

Vitellius glared at him before looking back at the gardens below. "I now understand how Otho felt, once he knew he was beaten. My hope was by abdicating, I would save anyone else from dying needlessly."

"And what of those who have died already?" Varus retorted. "*Thousands* have been killed fighting for you in the wars against Otho and Vespasian. And even greater numbers bear terrible scars, with many maimed and unable to walk again. As long as you still draw breath, those of us who remain will not allow their sacrifices to be in vain."

It was in that moment Aulus Vitellius finally found his resolve. He clenched his teeth with determination. "Until I draw my last breath," he asserted. "Is the temple complex on Capitoline Hill properly encircled?"

"It is, sire," Varus assured him. He had no idea Domitian had snuck past his men during the night.

A sense of serene calm came over Vitellius as he descended the steps

leading to the gardens. From there he made his way to the great dining hall. He intended to fill himself with a great breakfast. It was here a pair of guardsmen brought Centurion Martialis to him.

"This traitor came from Capitoline Hill, sire," one of the men said. "Says he has a message for you."

"What is your name?" Vitellius asked the man.

"Cornelius Martialis," he replied. Shooting a piercing gaze at the guardsmen, he growled, "*Centurion* Martialis to these insulant twats." He handed the scroll from Sabinus to the emperor.

Varus read the message over his shoulder.

To Aulus Vitellius, greetings,
It is with a deep sense of indignation that I am compelled to write to you, while being besieged by our own soldiers of the Praetorian Guard. That they, along with your most loyal of supporters, attacked my urban cohorts in the Forum is conduct that is both shameful and despicable.

Are we to now think that your abdication was nothing more than a ruse? A jest of some sort? You have promised to bring peace to the empire, yet there is now bloodshed on the streets of Rome herself. That the Prefect of Rome should have to take refuge among the city's most sacred temples, out of fear for his own life, is disgraceful.

Whether you choose to continue in this war, which was lost at Cremona and Bedriacum, know that you gain nothing by laying siege to our temples, while threatening the life of a former consul. I have served you loyally, despite my brother being your rival for the throne, and I demand that you bring about an end to this shameful siege at once.

Yours faithfully,

Titus Flavius Sabinus
Prefect of the City of Rome

"Sabinus should have his tongue cut out for his insolence," Varus scoffed.

Vitellius held up a hand, silencing him. He then said to Cornelius, "Return to Sabinus and offer him my apologies for the conduct of my

supporters, as well as the praetorians. Reassure him that we will put an end to this siege."

Cornelius nodded and shoved his way past the two guardsmen who awkwardly saluted their emperor before departing.

"Sire, do you mind telling me what that was all about?" Varus asked.

Vitellius kept his gaze fixed on the hall where the centurion departed. "I said we would put an end to the siege, and we shall. Once Sabinus' messenger has returned to Capitoline Hill, you will attack with every guardsman you have. I want our sacred temples restored to us before the day is done. Kill whoever you must, but bring me Sabinus and any other noble traitors alive."



The sun shone in the faces of the defenders of the Hill, as Centurion Cornelius returned to the barricades. Men from the urban cohorts nervously gazed down into the Forum below, which was crammed with centuries of praetorian guardsmen and volunteer militia from Vitellius' People's Army. Sabinus and Paulinus walked along the wall, checking the guard posts. Guardsman Statius did the same. Despite his lack of rank, he suddenly had leadership thrust upon him, due to his natural talents and years of combat experience. Atop the Temple of Jupiter, General Celsus and about a hundred men were gathering stones, roof tiles, and anything else that could be hurled down onto their assailants.

"It's not sacrilege if we save the temples from destruction," Celsus reasoned.

"And now we wait," Paulinus said, to the very tired Sabinus.

"I only hope our message gets to Primus," the city prefect remarked. "Otherwise there will be no aid coming to us this day."

"He probably expects the truce to hold and Vitellius to abdicate. To be honest, I'm not all that certain our contingent of urban fighters can stand against a determined onslaught from the praetorians."

What unnerved General Paulinus most was not the quality of their enemies nor their superior numbers. Despite the ferocity of the Vitellian attacks, the old soldier knew he had a very strong defensive position. He was in an even better position than when he'd fought against Boudicca's hordes,

eight years earlier. What troubled him was the quality and lack of training of his troops. The men of the urban cohorts were brave and resolute in doing their duty, but they simply were not professional soldiers. Fighting fires and policing the populace was the extent of most of their experience. Against previous generations of pampered, untested praetorians, they might have stood more of a chance. But Vitellius had filled the ranks of the Guard with fearsome veterans from the Rhine Army. The odds were decisively stacked against the urban cohorts.

Vigiles leaned against their spears and the barricades. They waited to see what the Vitellians' next move would be. There was a cheer as Cornelius was helped over the stacks of benches, doors, and statuary.

"Compliments of the fat pretender," the centurion said, as he saluted Sabinus. "He apologizes for his inability to control his men."

"Did he say anything else, anything of substance?" Sabinus asked.

"He promised the siege of Capitoline Hill would be over soon."

The sound of numerous whistles from praetorian centurions alerted the men.

'Form testudo!' was shouted by an officer at the base of the Gemonian Stairs.

"Seems they intend to end this siege, alright," Paulinus sneered.

"They're coming up from the south!" Celsus shouted, from the rooftop of the Temple of Jupiter.

From the height of the enormous temple, whose peak was nearly eighty feet high, the general and former consul had the best vantage point on the hill.

"Skirmishers forward!" Paulinus ordered. He drew his spatha.

Piles of rocks and stacks of roofing tiles lay near or on the barricade. The men with the best throwing arms, designated the night before, lined the rampart. An entire cohort of vigiles arrayed themselves into battle lines, six ranks deep, behind them. They knew they had to hold the barricade. If the praetorians broke through the obstacle and were able to reform within the vast open square, the urban cohorts would be horribly outmatched.

Walking slowly up the *'stairs of mourning'*, the praetorians braced behind their large shields. The men in the front rank hunkered low, trying to keep their shields from catching on the steps as they ascended. Soldiers behind them held their shields overhead, providing extra protection. They walked in step, with their footfalls sounding rhythmically upon the stairs. Any

disruptions or failure to maintain proper speed and cadence could cause gaps in the testudo. The sound of their hobnailed sandals echoing off the steps had a hollow and ominous tone.

"Let them get a little closer, lads," Paulinus said.

They only had a finite amount of missile weapons, and he wanted to make certain none were wasted. On came the first wave of guardsmen. In the Forum below, centuries were standing ready to launch successive assaults upon the heights. Once their foes were within thirty feet, the Flavian general raised his spatha and brought it down in a hard chop.

"Now!"

A salvo of stones and heavy tiles flew from the barricade, crashing into the Vitellians' shield wall. This was met by a series of grunts, yelps, and shouts of profanity, as the guardsmen continued to advance. A fairly large chunk of broken mortar was heaved over the barricade by a pair of vigiles. It smashed into the shields of two praetorians, sending one of the men backwards into his mates. He was propped up and shoved forward, only to take a stone to the face. The man screamed as blood streamed between his fingers. He clutched at his smashed nose and brow. The praetorian centurion blew his whistle. His men gave a shout of rage as they lowered their shields and sprinted the short distance to the top.

"Vigiles, forward!" Paulinus shouted.

"On me!" Centurion Cornelius called. Holding his gladius high, he sprinted to the barricade.

The urban cohorts used their long stabbing spears to keep the praetorians at bay. It was a difficult struggle for the guardsmen. None of the men in this wave had brought their javelins. The crude barricade hindered their efforts to close the distance and engage with their gladii. Sword and spear clashed against armor and shield, and a stalemate quickly ensued. The praetorians pressed hard in an attempt to breach the defenses.

The guardsmen, being former legionaries, were highly-skilled fighters. The marginally trained vigiles found it difficult to keep them at bay, even with the barricades protecting them. One overzealous soldier thrust his spear forward, only to have a bold praetorian grab the shaft of the weapon. Before the vigile could think to let go of his weapon, he was violently pulled onto the barricade where another guardsman plunged a gladius into his back. The light mail armor worn by the urban cohorts offered marginal protection, and proved useless against the razor point of a gladius thrust downward with most

of its wielder's weight behind it. The stricken man's scream unnerved his companions. His writhing body was flung back over the rampart. Still the men of the urban cohort held the line, even as praetorians smashed against the barricade or attempted to scramble over. One guardsman took a spear to the guts as he tried to climb the wreckage. His armor deflected the blow, but the force sent him over the edge of the stairs, where he crashed against the rocks of the steep cliff face.

Paulinus kept close to the cohort commander on the right flank, occasionally thrusting his long spatha over Cornelius' shoulder and into the faces of their assailants. He kept glancing off to his right, past the Tullianum prison and a series of shrines and smaller temples.

"Hold here, centurion," Paulinus said to Cornelius.

"Sir!"

The Flavian general sheathed his spatha and rushed along the eastern wall, his gaze blocked by the shrines and smaller temples as he sprinted towards the southern wall. As he suspected, here was where the Vitellians were concentrating their efforts.

Tribune Pacensis was holding the defenses at the top of the steps. He had attempted to make a stand where the side stairs met with the larger One Hundred Steps along the landing, twenty feet below. The Vitellian numbers were simply too great, and he was forced to withdraw up to the main square.

"General, sir!" the tribune yelled to Paulinus.

The legate instinctively ducked as the whoosh of a scorpion bolt rushed past his head.

Pacensis was keeping low behind the wall. "Now you know why we couldn't hold the lower defenses."

Paulinus glanced over the wall and saw a number of dead and dying men sprawled along the landing that ran beneath the wall. The Vitellians had brought four scorpion bolt throwers from the praetorian barracks, with many of the fallen vigiles been struck down by the fearsome weapons. As he suspected, the praetorians who attacked the barricade atop the side steps were simply keeping the urban cohorts contained. Scores of guardsmen now raced along the landing with their shields held overhead.

"All depends on Celsus now," Paulinus said grimly.



Sabinus noticed the danger at the same time as Paulinus and took a large contingent of their reserves to the Temple of Jupiter. Domitian took a gladius from one of the fallen and insisted on fighting beside his uncle.

"It is time I earned the right to be called a Flavian," he said, despite Sabinus' protests.

The city prefect knew better than to argue with the young man. With nearly two hundred men, they ran through the open doors of the Temple of Jupiter. The porticos along the back were made of wood, as were many of the windows and internal structures.

"We must prevent the enemy from gaining access to the temple grounds from here," Sabinus emphasized to his soldiers.

The sounds of shouting and the crashing of stones and tiles from above warned the men. Sabinus ran outside and saw the Vitellians being bombarded by Celsus and his men on the rooftop. Given the extreme height of the temple, the force of the stones and other projectiles smashed shields and crushed the helms and armor of those they struck.

The roofs of nearby shrines were manned by Flavian defenders who rained havoc down upon the enraged Vitellian assailants. Ladders were being placed against the surrounding wall. Given the narrowness of the lane, these were easier to tip over. Several crashed from the great height of the hill onto the rocks, trees, and buildings below. The praetorians were now redoubling their efforts on the temple itself. The southwest corner butted up against the surrounding wall and was the most vulnerable point in the defenses. They were still being subjected to intense bombardment from the heights. Their shields providing scant protection against the weight of the heavy projectiles. Those who attempted to clamber around the backside and come in via the porticos and windows were met with a frenzy of spear thrusts and gladius strikes from within.

Sabinus gave a sign of nervous relief and headed back towards the Gemonian Stairs to check the defenses there. He saw Suetonius Paulinus coming from the southern stairs and walked briskly over to the legate.

"Celsus is doing a magnificent job defending the temple," he noted. "How goes the southern defense?"

"Pacensis is holding," Paulinus replied. "But the Vitellians are not really trying to break through there. They are simply keeping him from inhibiting their attack on the temple. Cornelius is being pressed hard at the Gemonian Stairs, but unless the Vitellians bring up catapults, they won't get through

that way."

"Sir, they've brought scorpions and fire brands onto the landing!" Pacensis shouted from the southern steps.

"Damn it all," Sabinus swore.



There was a combined sense of determination and desperation from the Vitellians. Prefect Varus was not about to let a few urban fighters keep Rome's finest troops from taking Capitoline Hill! At the same time, the casualties suffered by his men were unnerving. Scores of wounded had been carried or drug down the southern steps and Gemonian Stairs. One could only guess how many dead littered the ramparts.

Varus cursed that the praetorians had no archers. It would have been easy to keep the defenders suppressed while his men broke down their barricades.

"It will take at least two hours to bring the onagers up," a centurion reported to him. "The streets are crammed with Saturnalia revelers. Even with our blades drawn it is proving difficult to clear a path."

"A bitter irony," Varus muttered. "A war rages within the holiest place in Rome, yet the people celebrate the festival as if nothing were amiss."

The prefect had ordered his infantry and scorpion crews to use fire only on the smaller shrines. He was willing to sacrifice a few, if it created a breach for his praetorians. What he did not want was for them to use flaming shot on the great Temple of Jupiter itself. Such a loss would have been unforgivable.

While men grabbed burning torches from the metal fire pit they dragged up to the landing, scorpion crews wrapped oil-soaked rags to the ends of their bolts and set them alight. The flinging of fire brands and burning scorpion bolts was quickly having its intended effect. A dried wooden portico on a small shrine of Minerva burst into flames. The defenders on that structure were driven from the rooftop, but they persisted in repelling the guardsmen who attempted to scale the wall with their ladders.

While the brawl along the rampart continued, an ardent scorpion crew decided to dislodge the defenders on the Temple of Jupiter. With the weapon set to max elevation, a burning bolt was placed in the feed tray. The flames obscured the gunner's vision. He quickly loosed the bolt, lest the scorpion catch fire. The projectile flew in a high arc, embedding itself in one of the massive eagles that sat on either end of the temple. Unbeknownst to most,

these large monuments were neither stone nor marble, but carved out of wood. One hundred and thirty years with only the occasional repainting had left the large bird in a highly combustible, bone dry condition. Flames quickly engulfed the eagle, causing both defender and attacker to panic.

"What the fuck have they done?" Varus shouted, as he raced across the Forum towards the One Hundred Steps. As if to emphasize the gods' displeasure, a large gust of wind blew across the top of Capitoline Hill, carrying the burning remnants of the shrine of Minerva portico onto that of the Temple of Jupiter. The massive and most sacred monument to Rome's chief deity was now in flames.



As a million sets of eyes fell upon the burning Temple of Jupiter, which dominated the horizon, the men who had manned its defenses fled for their lives. Domitian and the men inside rushed through the large doors, closing them behind them. Many of the vigiles cried out about how all was lost, that Jupiter himself had abandoned them.

And while this sacrilege wrapped in hellfire certainly unnerved the attacking praetorians, it gave them the breach into the Flavian defenses they so desperately needed. Tribune Pacensis now realized his right flank was completely exposed. The One Hundred Steps could no longer be defended.

"Fall back to the inner courtyard!" he ordered his men.

Dread had already overcome many of them, and they were looking for a means of escape.

As the tribune attempted to maintain order of his terrified troops, a praetorian grabbed a discarded spear from the barricade and flung it at him. The blade plunged into the back of his leg. Pacensis cried out in pain and fell to his knees. Unable to regain his footing, he was grabbed by the helm from behind by an infuriated guardsman.

"So dies a filthy traitor," the man snarled, as he plunged his gladius into the side of the tribune's neck.

Aemilius Pacensis lay dying, watching helplessly as his life's blood gushed onto the cobblestones. He hoped history would view him kindly. Would future generations remember him as the disgraced overthrown leader of Otho's maritime expedition? Or would they know that in the end, he chose

to fight for the right side, and gave his life so Rome might be saved from the reign of the tyrants.



“Our southern defenses have fallen!” Paulinus called out to Centurion Cornelius. The commander of the first urban cohort looked over his shoulder and saw dozens, if not hundreds of praetorians storming into the square. And like every man on both sides, he was horrified to see the Temple of Jupiter engulfed in fire.

“Fall back!” he shouted to his men, who quickly abandoned the barricade atop the Gemonian Stairs.

Within seconds, Vitellians smashed through the barricade, many scrambling over the wreckage. Most of the vigiles were now in a state of panic. The roof of the Temple of Jupiter was completely engulfed in flames, with thick clouds of black smoke jutting towards the heavens. The walls and pillars were of stone, the inner scaffolding and supports were made of wood. This terrible desecration also unnerved the praetorians. Though they started the blaze, they managed to keep their composure and now swarmed the overwhelmed soldiers from the urban cohorts.

A wall of more stalwart Flavians kept themselves between Sabinus and their adversaries. And though they fought courageously, even while their companions tried to flee in terror, they were little match for the former soldiers from the Rhine Army. The Vitellians were arrayed in battle formation, their shield walls smashing into the outmatched vigiles. Many fell beneath the praetorian blades in a bloody frenzy. As they continued to be driven back, the lone guardsman fighting for the Flavians grabbed Sabinus by the shoulder.

“We have to get you out of here, sir!” Tiberius Statius shouted, above the din of shields crashing and crackling of flames from the temple. “Follow me, there’s a narrow path cut into the backside of the hill.”

“No,” Sabinus said, shaking his head. “It’s me they want. Save who you can, but I will accept whatever the fates hand me.”

“I am with you, Sabinus,” Atticus added. “As Consul of Rome, I will not cower in the face of an emperor who is already beaten.”

“Gods go with you,” Statius said. He knew the vigiles’ battle line would not hold much longer, as their flanks collapsed under the onslaught of

praetorian cohorts from each direction. Near the Temple of Concord he found both Celsus and Paulinus.

"It's over lads," Paulinus said, to the remnants of the urban cohorts. "They win this one."

"General, I need you to follow me," Statius said emphatically. "Just over the western wall there is a narrow path. It will lead us down to a back alley below. You cannot stay here; if you do, your life will be forfeit before Vitellius."

"And should we run into your mates down there?" Celsus asked.

"I'll take care of that, sir," Statius assured him.

"We've captured the traitor's brother!" a voice shouted.

The battle was drawing to its ignominious close.

"Come on," the guardsman said, as they watched the cheering praetorians surround Sabinus and Atticus. The surviving vigiles were being disarmed and led away.

The wall was hidden in the shadows of one of the many shrines. The crash of the roof imploding on the Temple of Jupiter was deafening, ash and glowing wisps of embers fell all around them. Statius pulled himself onto the wall, turning back to face his companions as he eased himself down onto the constricted ledge below.

"This first bit is the trickiest," he said. "A few feet down it widens enough to gain better footing." He slowly lowered himself down the far side of the wall.

Paulinus helped Celsus over the wall. His fellow former Othonian general was encumbered by civilian dress. As he pulled himself up and over, he was startled by the distance from the wall to the ground below. The old general took a deep breath and lowered himself down until his feet found purchase on the jutting rocks.

"Ease over to your right," Statius directed him.

Paulinus saw a handful of men from the urban cohort running towards the nearby alley. Either they had fought their way past the praetorians or found another way down. Most had dropped their weapons and were stripping off their armor, so as to not be recognized as enemy combatants by the Vitellians.

Once he found his footing, it was a short trek to the street below. The path was little more than a series of rock outcroppings allowing them to climb down. As the three men landed on the cobblestone road, they heard the

clattering of armored men running towards them.

"Hold, guardsman!" a voice shouted.

The three turned to see about twenty praetorians led by a tesserarius. A minute number of Otho's former guardsmen had been allowed to remain with the praetorians, yet none of these men knew Statius. The officer pointed his gladius and demanded, "Password!"

"Juno Vitellius," Statius answered. "Now let us pass."

"Just a minute. Who are these men? Prisoners?"

"Loyal generals of the empire," Statius replied. "Do you not recognize the former consul or the savior of Britannia?"

"How do I know whether they are loyalists…" the tesserarius' words were cut short as an enraged Paulinus stepped forward and slammed the palm of his hand into his shoulder armor.

"You would do well to lower your fucking weapon," he said, keeping his voice low yet filled with anger. His eyes narrowed as the praetorian officer swallowed hard. "This man just gave you the proper password. Now stand down, or I will drag you before the emperor myself."

"Y…yes, sir," the man responded nervously, quickly sheathing his gladius. "Forgive us, general. We saw a number of Flavians escape from the Hill, and we hoped to catch the lot."

"They headed west towards the Field of Mars," Statius lied.

"They'll be hard pressed to get through the crowds of Saturnalia revelers," Celsus added. "If you hurry, you might catch a few of them."

The tesserarius nodded and waved for his men to follow him. He seemed glad to be away from the enraged General Paulinus. Few guardsmen ever stepped into the senate chambers. Therefore, they had no knowledge of Paulinus' Flavian sympathies. All they knew was he was still lauded as a national hero, despite his previous loyalties to Otho.

"It is here I must leave you," Statius said. "I have practically no influence over this lot of praetorians. However, I can be your eyes and ears within the palace. Once Primus takes the city, I will guide your men to Vitellius."

"Very good," Paulinus said.

The general then turned to Celsus. "I go to join the Flavian Army. I will not have my last battle of this war end in defeat."

"My armor and weapons are at my villa just outside the city," Celsus replied. "If I can get there without being detained, I will join you for the final assault."

The two men clasped hands before departing.

“May Fortuna guide us.”

Paulinus made his way back to his home. It was only two miles from the Forum, but it took him the better part of three hours, due in no small part to the main roads overflowing with drunken revelers. It was evening by the time he returned to his house, retrieved his horse, and made his way across the Milvian Bridge on the northern outskirts of the city. Armed militias and bands of Vitellian loyalist soldiers roamed about in stark contrast to the celebrations that consumed so much of the city. Strangely enough, no one stopped or questioned the general. A group of auxiliaries actually came to attention and saluted Paulinus as he crossed over the bridge.



Domitian trembled in terror as he hid beneath the tattered robes. A temple slave grabbed him and hustled the young man into the Temple of Concord, once the vigiles surrendered to the Vitellian praetorians.

“You will be safe here,” the slave reassured him, handing him a ratty set of robes.

“How can you be so sure?” Domitian asked. “Do you know who I am?”

“The son of Rome’s rightful emperor,” the slave said, with a short bow. “But it is your uncle they want, highness. I doubt they even know you are here. These terrible blasphemers have already burned our most sacred temple. Jupiter himself will strike them down. But you must remain inconspicuous.”

The slave led Domitian to a side alter, where he directed him to pull his hood up and kneel in prayer.

Vitellian guardsmen came into the temple, though soon left after not seeing any uniformed Vigiles or other nobles. Domitian was one among a dozen men kneeling at the altar. The praetorians likely had no idea what he looked like, and so they paid him no mind.

“Remain here with us, highness,” the slave said, placing his hands on the young man’s shoulders. “Your father’s army will soon come to liberate Rome from the oppressors. Until then, let us pray for their victory.”



While Domitian remained hidden within the Temple of Concord, and

Suetonius Paulinus crossed the Milvian Bridge, Sabinus' messenger finally reached the Flavian camp. Unlike Paulinus, he was unable to ride boldly from the city, but instead had to rely on stealth. It was only when he reached a barricade near the Aqueduct of Claudius that he spurred his horse into a gallop, leaping over the palisade stakes before the startled soldiers could react. Once he was out of the city, it took him some time to reach Primus' army, and find the general.

The red glow of the Temple of Jupiter forewarned the entire Flavian Army, though from their position ten miles distant, it was difficult to ascertain exactly what caused the red glow on the horizon. The messenger had departed well before the temple caught fire, so he could not say for certain either.

"Vitellius was intercepted on his way to the Temple of Concord," the scout reported. "His loyal praetorians and citizens' militia have stated their lives are already forfeit, and that they would rather die with dignity rather than surrender in disgrace."

"Damn it all!" Primus swore. "What of Sabinus and Domitian?"

"Domitian's whereabouts are unknown," the man replied. "But Sabinus has armed himself for battle, as has General Paulinus. They are leading the urban cohorts in a defense of Capitoline Hill, where Vitellius' praetorians have them surrounded."

The last statement caused Aula to gasp. If the Vitellians knew all was lost, how would they exact retribution against the victorious Flavians?

After what transpired at Cremona, Primus was fearful his army would subject Rome to the same horrifying fate. The empire had nearly bankrupted itself during Nero's attempts to rebuild the city following the Great Fire. And now, there was the very real risk that Rome would be destroyed once more; this time by her own soldiers.

With Vitellius no longer in control of the city and Sabinus either dead or captured, the Flavian general knew he had no choice. And, he was not about to make the same mistake he made prior to Second Bedriacum, allowing himself to be drawn into a nighttime battle.

"Alert the legions," Primus said. "We march at dawn!"

Chapter XXXI: Fate is Calling

Rome
19 December 69 A.D.



Titus Flavius Sabinus

Flavius Sabinus had been stripped of his weapon and armor before the praetorians led him off Capitoline Hill. The surviving vigiles were crammed into the Tullianum Prison to await Vitellius' judgment. Whether the emperor was feeling merciful and would simply cashier the lot or make a harsh example of them via execution remained to be seen. The praetorians had taken it upon themselves to form a firefighting effort with civilian volunteers to prevent any further destruction atop Capitoline Hill.

With the fighting now over, citizens were flocking to the Forum. Stages were being quickly erected, where the night's bawdy theatrical performances would be played out for the delight of the masses. It seemed rather macabre, sacrilegious even, that this would all happen while the Temple of Jupiter smoldered above them.

There was also a planned nighttime chariot race at the Circus Maximus. Amateurs would be allowed to compete with their own chariots for a chance at fortune and glory. Such a race was extremely hazardous at night even for professional charioteers. The chance of dazzling wrecks, coupled with serious

injury or death, were part of the event's charm. All of that was far from Vitellius' mind, however, as his city prefect and one of the imperial consuls were dragged before him. The emperor had been told of their capture, and had ceased in his midafternoon meal to quickly don his formal purple robes of state and laurel crown. He sat upon the throne as a herald blew a somber note on his trumpet. As he gazed upon the two prisoners, he noticed Atticus appeared disheveled and perhaps repentant. Sabinus stood tall and defiant.

"Dear Sabinus," Vitellius began, while shaking his head for emphasis. "To think it should end this way. All this time I had faith that your loyalty to Rome was greater than to your failure of a brother."

"My brother was a failure at many things," the city prefect replied. "But he's beaten you." This retort caused one of his guards to swiftly punch him in the stomach, doubling him over.

"Enough!" Vitellius snapped. He signaled for the praetorians to move away from Sabinus. The emperor slowly stepped down from the dais and turned to Atticus. "You disappoint me, consul. All of my advisors have called for your execution, but I am feeling merciful. However, that mercy will only come if you answer me one question. Who was it that set fire to the Temple of Jupiter? Was it my men or yours?"

"It…" Atticus stammered. "It was my soldiers, sire. They panicked and hoped the flames would shield their escape." He hung his head in shame.

No one in the room, least of all Vitellius, believed him. It was what he wished to hear, however, that he might be absolved of the sacrilege. "Your life will be spared," he said. "But you will spend the rest of your years in exile. Pandataria should suffice. You'll be able to walk its circumference in less than an hour. You will become well acquainted with the island prison of Augustus' abominable daughter, Julia." Atticus said nothing, and Vitellius waved for the guards to take him away.

"He'll never even reach Pandataria," Sabinus scoffed. "Within a day, maybe two, you and I will both be dead and Atticus lauded as a hero by Vespasian. And you know as well as I that it was your praetorians who burned the temple."

"You are right about one thing," Vitellius replied, standing close to him. "*You* will be dead by the morrow. Believe me, this breaks my heart; for in spite of your treachery, I still admire you. I would have sent you to someplace not quite as remote as Pandataria, in hopes that you might repent once Vespasian is crushed. But there are limits to even my power as emperor.

I may have been able to convince the senate and my imperial council to spare Atticus, but there is no way we can allow the traitorous Flavians to live. Take heart that your sons will be spared, but Vespasian's will die along with their faithless father."

"And I will see you very soon in the pits of Hades," Sabinus retorted. He started to walk away, his hands still bound in front of him.

Vitellius nodded quickly to the praetorians and to Prefect Varus, who led the defiant Flavian away.

A full century of guardsmen formed a column of two files, with Sabinus walking between them towards the front. Varus marched next to him, keeping one hand on his shoulder. The procession drew hundreds of curious onlookers who followed the men, trying to catch glimpses of the prisoner. Many recognized Sabinus and called out his name in disbelief. All knew of the battle between the praetorians and urban cohorts, accented by the black columns of smoke which spewed forth from the wreckage of the Temple of Jupiter. Many who were not present at the Forum when the fighting erupted, now realized it was the much-loved Flavius Sabinus who'd finally come forward to fight for his brother.

During the long walk to the Forum, Sabinus' eyes were fixed on the plume of smoke that hung like a pall over the city. He had accepted this was a possible fate the moment he armed himself. He now wished he had died fighting beside his men atop Capitoline Hill. Brave Centurion Cornelius and the redeemed Tribune Pacensis had fallen valiantly. Sabinus found he envied their fate. The erection of stages and the preparations for the night's entertainment ceased as the somber procession made its way to the base of the Gemonian Stairs. Hundreds of praetorians and other volunteers were still scurrying about, bringing up buckets of water to put the blazes out.

As the praetorians fanned out into a hollow square, one of their number removed his helmet and drew his gladius.

"Kneel," he ordered Sabinus.

Instead, the former general, who led the Ninth Legion during the Conquest of Britannia, found the courage that had been dormant for far too long. He slammed his forehead into the man's face, smashing his nose. He cried out and dropped his weapon.

"I die standing, like a Roman!" he snapped. Sabinus stared accusingly at Varus. "At least have the decency to kill me yourself, rather than having one

of your lackeys do it!”

The guardsmen were shocked by what they had witnessed, but many broke into grins of admiration for the old general and former consul. All knew his reputation as a soldier, even if he hadn’t donned his armor in more than twenty years. Many had to suppress the urge to break into cheers for the condemned Flavian.

Prefect Varus simply nodded and removed his helmet, which he handed to a nearby guardsman. He drew his gladius and walked over to Sabinus, whose gaze bore into him. A Vitellian loyalist to the end, and one who had forcibly prevented the emperor’s abdication, Varus had nothing but contempt for Sabinus. As if to punish him before death, he plunged the blade of his weapon into the older man’s stomach. Sabinus’ eyes squeezed shut and he gritted his teeth, doubling over as he fought the urge to cry out in pain. Blood gushed onto Varus’ blade as he wrenched the spatha free. He grabbed Sabinus by the hair and violently hacked away at his neck, blood spraying him. It took several blows, but finally Sabinus’ twitching body fell to the ground, leaving Varus clutching the bloodied head.

“Let all who come to the Forum this night witness the demise of the Flavians,” he ordered, as he dropped the head into the pooling blood next to the body. “Throw him into the Tiber.”



Primus was determined to avoid a nighttime assault on Rome, but he needed to probe the city’s defenses. The Via Flaminia led towards the Milvian Bridge along the northern bank of the Tiber, and the Flavian general knew this would see heavy fighting. The terrain was wide open, making it a likely place for the Vitellians to concentrate their forces. He sent two hundred horsemen under Commander Arrius to scout to the west towards the Field of Mars. General Cerealis was dispatched with two entire regiments along the Via Salaria, to the northeast of the city.

Walled farmhouses dotted the landscape which was muddy and slippery for men and horse alike. The fields were deserted, the gates leading to the houses barred.

“No one here to welcome us,” a trooper remarked nervously.

“Keep your eyes open,” Cerealis said. “They may not be holed up in these country houses, but you can bet the Vitellians will be waiting to greet us once

we reach the Colline Gate."

Quintus Cerealis was a seasoned military leader. He'd served under Suetonius Paulinus in Britannia as commanding legate of Sabinus' former Legion, Ninth Hispania. Most recently he led Legio V, Macedonia during Vespasian's campaigns in Judea. The Jewish War had taught him many hard lessons about dealing with wily enemies who liked to utilize the ambush.

The Colline Gate was rather notorious. It was the place where unchaste Vestal Virgins were buried alive. It was also here that Cerealis and his men finally found the Vitellians. A cluster of townhouses lined the road where it turned towards the main city, and from behind the nearest buildings the Flavians heard the shrill sound of a whistle being frantically blown. Horsemen closed ranks, lances lowered as they anticipated meeting their enemy in a head-on engagement. Instead, they saw a lone horseman wearing a red tunic and crimson riding cloak. The whistle protruded from his teeth. With each blow his horse broke into a short sprint.

"Pull back, sir!" the man shouted as Cerealis drew his spatha.

"Who in the bleeding fuck are you?" the general shouted at the man.

"Gaius Valerian, sir," the man said quickly. "I was sent by General Primus to spy on the Vitellians. You must withdraw, immediately. The enemy was on my heels, thousands of them. They will surround you if you proceed further."

Shouts from behind the buildings seemed to verify the man's frantic words. A small number of cavalry were seen galloping off to their left through the sodden farm fields. But it was the swarm of infantrymen to their immediate front that concerned Cerealis. They were led by at least an entire cohort of praetorians who marched quickly in battle formation, their javelins ready to unleash. Massed numbers of Vitellius' militia accompanied them. More lightly armed and equipped than either guardsman or cavalry trooper, their numbers alone threatened to overwhelm the Flavian horsemen.

"Fall back!" Cerealis shouted, wheeling his horse about.

His cornicen sounded the order to withdraw. Hundreds of troopers fanned out in either direction as they sought to escape Vitellius' mob. The confined space of the narrow roads and the boggy fields prohibited their ability to mass their numbers and charge.

The Vitellians chased the horsemen all the way to the outskirts of the country farms. Their cavalry briefly clashed with the Flavians on the far right. Each side lost several dead and wounded, yet the Vitellians shouted in

triumph as if they had won a great victory. Between Lucius Vitellius' suppression of the south and Flavius Sabinus' defeat atop Capitoline Hill and subsequent execution, it was easy for the emperor's supporters to dismiss the fact that nearly forty thousand Flavian soldiers were preparing to assault the Eternal City. It was the unfortunate death of Emperor Vespasian's elder brother that Valerian addressed to Cerealis, once they were clear of any immediate danger.

"Sabinus is dead?" the general asked, his voice filled with dismay and horror.

"I watched those praetorian bastards execute him," Valerian confirmed. "I was only just now able to escape the city. Much of the oblivious public continues in the drunken revelry of Saturnalia, while those most fanatical in their devotion to Vitellius have taken up arms."

"So I saw," Cerealis grumbled. "I am afraid this Saturnalia, rather than being a week of celebration, will end in a bloodshed."



Despite having given the order that Sabinus should die, Vitellius was horrified when he saw the praetorian prefect, blood dripping from his blade.

"I wish it had not ended this way," the emperor said, his voice full of sorrow.

"Too late to waver in your resolve, *Caesar*," Varus countered nastily. "You wanted the Flavians to pay for their treachery, and now they have. The fact that I slew Sabinus with my own blade has sealed my fate. Either we win this or we die."

"It is not just Sabinus' treachery I lament," Vitellius said, shaking his head. Tears of frustration welled in his eyes. "But that our own soldiers burned Rome's most sacred temple to the ground. Do not pretend otherwise. Atticus may have confessed so I would spare his life, but his eyes told me the truth."

"We did not burn Rome's most sacred temple deliberately," the prefect protested. "We set fire to the porticos of a nearby shrine so that we could get in. And it's a shame the lads did not help themselves to a bit of plunder, for all within is now a pile of ash."

"Caesar!" a messenger said, rushing into the room. "Your brother, Lucius, sends his regards. He has suppressed the Campania rebels and taken

the city of Tarracina. He awaits your further instructions."

"You see?" Varus remarked. "The capital is ours once more and the southern rebellion crushed. Now is not the time for indecisiveness. We must make our final stand here!"

"Time," Vitellius said. "Time is what I need, yet do not have. I must convene the senate at once. There must be a way to end this without further bloodshed."



There was a great deal of commotion as Cerealis rode hurriedly into the Flavian Army's encampment. All had seen the columns of smoke and fire coming from Capitoline Hill, yet none knew what it was that burned. Knowing word would spread quickly once his troopers started talking among their mates and other soldiers, Cerealis rushed to Antonius Primus' principia.

"The Temple of Jupiter burns," he reported, as soon as he walked into the tent.

Primus stood talking with General Bassus and Master Centurion Vitruvius. "Damn them," the commander-in-chief swore. He nodded to his spy. "Glad to see you made it out of there, Valerian. What other news do you have?"

"The noble Sabinus is dead, and the emperor's son, Domitian, is missing," Valerian reported reluctantly.

"Vile bastards," Bassus snarled. "Vitellius has just signed his own death sentence."

"My cavalry only just managed to escape," Cerealis added. "It appears that both citizen and slave alike have been armed in order to resist us."

"Fools," Primus said, shaking his head in dismay. "Those idiotic bastards don't realize that it's all over. And Bassus, you are correct. Vitellius has to know that with Sabinus dead, his own life is now forfeit."

Primus sent out messengers to have all legion and regimental commanders join him over supper. There they would finalize their plans for the attack on Rome. They were soon joined by Suetonius Paulinus, who implored the Flavian commander-in-chief to allow him to ride into battle with them. Primus gladly accepted, and though he had no legions to offer him command of, he welcomed the old general to fight by his side.

It was during this meeting that one of the envoys from the senate arrived. Three groups had been sent, one to each of the Flavian camps. Two of these had been very poorly treated, with a lictor from the entourage killed by soldiers from Eighth Augusta. The senators in question only escaped upon personal intervention from General Cerealis. This particular group, who approached the Flavian commander-in-chief, were led by Consul Simplex and accompanied by a dozen Vestal Virgins who often acted as intermediaries during times of crisis.

"Our envoys have been treated with cruelty even mindless barbarians would find unthinkable," the consul protested.

"Unless you have come to offer Vitellius' unconditional surrender, then you are wasting my time," Primus replied brusquely. He sneered at the consul and added, "But then, Vitellius has already forfeited his right to surrender by murdering the noble Flavius Sabinus."

"General, *please*," one of the Vestals said, stepping next to Simplex. "Vitellius implores you to consider a one-day cessation of hostilities so a peaceful solution may be found."

"My lady, the pretender has already had his chance for a peaceful solution," Primus retorted, though in a softer tone than he'd used with Consul Simplex. "The terms of his surrender and abdication were negotiated with none other than Sabinus, whose headless corpse has most likely been flung into the Tiber." He then turned his attention to the consul and his delegation. "If you want to know what my terms are for a peaceful solution, you don't need to wait a day. The senate will immediately recognize Titus Flavius Vespasian as rightful Emperor of Rome and will bring me the head of the pretender, Aulus Vitellius. It is either that or I unleash this army on the gates of Rome. Good night, senators."

Primus stood and ordered that the delegation of senators and Vestals be granted safe passage from the camp. He then finalized the plans with his senior officers before retiring for the night. Expecting sleep would be impossible to come by, the Flavian general was surprised when he slept more soundly than he had since before Second Bedriacum. Perhaps he had accepted what the fates had handed him and made peace with his decision. With the death of Flavius Sabinus, all responsibility for the attack on Rome now fell to Aulus Vitellius, rather than Marcus Antonius Primus.

Chapter XXXII: Saturnalia Bloodbath

Nine Miles North of Rome
20 December 69 A.D.
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Dawn came, with a cold breeze blowing up the valley from the River Tiber. The Flavian Army ate a hearty breakfast, all knowing this day would be savage and exhausting. Every last auxiliary trooper and legionary was anxious for battle. Few had any sort of fear of the Vitellian Army, especially not after what they had already been through. The issue was already decided for many, and those who fell this day would simply be the ones who fate frowned upon and offered up as a token sacrifice to the offended gods.

As planned before, General Primus divided his army into three divisions. Lucilius Bassus and Legio XI, Claudia, would lead the main attack from the north towards the Milvian Bridge. Theirs was by far the largest force with the bulk of the auxiliary infantry and Arrius' wing of nearly two thousand cavalry in support. General Lupus and Eighth Augusta would attack from the west near the Field of Mars with half of Cerealis' cavalry. Primus himself would lead the assault from the northeast, along with Legio VII, Gemina, the Judean legionary cohorts, and the remainder of Cerealis' cavalry.

"We have given that vile bastard every chance to end this peacefully," Primus announced to his accompanying staff officers. "With the death of Sabinus and refusal to honor his promise to abdicate, he has left us with no choice. Let it be known that whatever happens today, the suffering of the people falls on his head, not ours." He turned to his cornicen. "Sound the attack. To all legions, *assault…assault…assault!*"

Three blasts sounded ominously from the cornicens at Primus' main camp. These were echoed by identical replies from the horn blowers from each division. With shouted orders from legates, forty thousand imperial soldiers commenced the march on their capital. Lupus and Bassus' divisions would follow the Via Flaminia until approximately three miles from the Milvian Bridge. Lupus' soldiers would split off to the west. Primus and his forces followed the Via Salaria, which would take them into Rome from the

northeast.

It was nine miles from the Flavian camp to the gates of Rome, and though the soldiers set a quick pace, they knew it would be at least two, possibly three hours before they engaged the enemy. Optio Gaius Artorius and the men of the Fifth Cohort of Legio X were assigned to the division under Primus' direct command that would attack along the Via Salaria; the same route taken by General Cerealis the day prior. Seventh Gemina Legion would lead the attack with the attached cohorts from Judea acting as flank support. A thousand cavalry from Cerealis' wing would accompany them, as well.

"Quite the homecoming, sir," Legionary Decius said, as Gaius walked beside the column of soldiers. "We may as well capture a few spoils while we're at it."

"Just be sure you defeat the Vitellians first," the optio emphasized. Though every officer from General Primus down to the decani had stressed to their men that they were not to pillage the people of the imperial capital, they knew it was a futile order. All they could hope for was that their soldiers did not become so consumed by plunder they failed to complete their mission of deposing Vitellius.

Gaius was walking better, and it felt good to stretch his legs on this morning. His arm, however, was still all but useless, and he kept it in a sling. He carried his optio's staff over his left shoulder, constantly reminding himself that it was not for him to take part in the actual fighting this day. With no shield, any trained soldier could outmatch him and easily pierce the vulnerable places that were unprotected by his armor.

"One more day," he said quietly. "If I survive this day, then I think I shall have survived the war."



As the central column neared the city, General Bassus ordered the Eleventh Legion into attack formation. Five cohorts deployed into the front battle line, four ranks each. The legion's remaining five cohorts formed a reserve. Legionaries accounted for less than a third of the total force, as each of his flanks was protected by ten cohorts of auxilia infantry, supported by several companies of archers. There was a sizeable gap between the Eleventh Claudia and its supporting auxiliaries. Bassus wanted to be able to send his

cavalry between them as needed. The legate rode in the center behind his lead cohorts, accompanied by his staff tribunes. Krsto, the war chief who had brought six thousand spearmen in support of Vespasian, rode beside him. Though many of his men were now mariners in the Imperial Navy, those who remained proudly marched in support of their allies.

"Now my men earn their place as Romans," Krsto said confidently.

"They will get their chance soon enough," Bassus asserted. He was concerned that their friends from the Danube might become uncontrollable once unleashed. But there were two thousand of them at most. A paltry number compared to the size of his division.

The plane leading towards the Milvian Bridge was extremely large and flat with only a few outcroppings of trees dotting the landscape. The sun rose higher in the east, just over the left shoulders of the advancing Flavians. There was little doubt the alarm had been sounded, for all who stood anywhere within the Seven Hills of Rome could clearly see the massive force bearing down on the city.

A mile from the city, they saw the gleaming weapons of their foes. Bassus' division alone significantly outnumbered Vitellius' praetorians. Most of their adversaries were from the People's Army that had been raised just weeks before. Less than half wore any sort of armor, mostly chain mail shirts with no added shoulder protection, or else square brass plates similar to those worn by hastati during the Republican era. Approximately the same number of people carried crude shields. Others had taken those that had belonged to the urban cohorts. In addition to the officially designated People's Army were a number of Vitellian loyalists who had formed their own militias, and armed themselves with whatever they could find. And just like at Cremona, a substantial number of women fought beside them.

"Poor misguided fools," the legion's chief tribune said, as he rode over to his commanding legate. His face twisted in a malicious grin.

"It looks like their praetorians are in the center," Bassus noted. "We'll attack them head-on with the legion, enveloping them with our cavalry. The auxilia infantry can disperse the mob."

A single blast came from the cornicen, ordering the entire division to advance at the quick-step. Legionaries shouldered their javelins, as did the opposing praetorians across the way. For the men of Legio XI, this was their first real battle against fellow Romans, as they had been late arriving and missed the Battle of Bedriacum; the brief skirmish outside of Ariminium

notwithstanding. They were now able to see clearly the grim faces of the guardsmen determined to deny them entry into the Eternal City.

"At the double-time…march!" The order came from the legion's master centurion, and was echoed by cohort commanders up and down the line. Their next maneuvers had been drilled constantly since the Vitellian capitulation at Narnia. When they were within thirty feet of the enemy, centurions shouted the orders for their men to unleash their javelins by ranks. Salvos flew in a high arc at the praetorians, who in turn loosed their own volleys. Both sides immediately dropped behind their shields into testudo formations. Men cried out as the heavy javelins pierced through hands, forearms, and other exposed flesh. Some were not quick enough to get down behind their shields and were struck down as the weight of the pila punctured through their armor.

A cornicen's blast sounded. The soldiers in the reserve cohorts immediately broke into a sprint, rushing past the gaps between each of the frontline cohorts. They outnumbered the praetorians comfortably and were able to launch their subsequent javelin waves, while their enemies' missiles were already expended. The cohorts that led the Eleventh Claudia now became the reserve. Soldiers took the time to cut the enemy javelins from their shields, while others helped their wounded to the rear. The dead were left for the time being.

Despite being savaged by a second pila storm, the praetorians stalwartly held the line. Ranks were reformed, shields linked together, and with a loud cry of hatred they charged the Flavian lines. Hundreds of shields came together in a deafening clash. Soldiers on both sides fought with a savage frenzy not seen since the hateful slaughter outside the walls of Cremona.

On the left and right wing, the Flavian auxiliaries charged into the mass of Vitellian volunteers. Spear and gladii were thrust with abandon. Both men and women were brutally slain in the onslaught. And though the professional auxiliaries held a decisive advantage over the newly-raised militias in both training and armament, the ensuing battle was certainly not one-sided. The Vitellians fought with admirable courage, and they held a numerical edge over the Flavians. Scores of auxiliaries fell injured or slain, as they continued to brutally cut down swaths of enemy militia.

What finally broke the defenders was the charge of Arrius' cavalry. As a thousand horsemen on each flank swept between the Eleventh Legion and their supporting auxiliaries, the previously brave fighters of the People's

Army shattered. Many were trampled beneath the chargers' hooves as the swarm of troopers smashed into the praetorian flanks. Any other armed force would have acknowledged defeat and surrendered. But these guardsmen, so fanatical in their determination to fight to the last, refused to yield. Instead, they conducted a fighting retreat across the bridge, cutting down many of their own allied militia who failed to get out of their way. The bridge was clogged with fleeing soldiers. Thousands of militiamen leapt into the Tiber. A number of those who either neglected to strip off their armor, or who were simply terrible swimmers, sank beneath the current and drowned.

"Secure the far side of the bridge," Bassus ordered his cavalry. "Once the legion is across, we'll push into the city proper."

"Yes, sir," Arrius responded. He then gave orders to his senior centurions, who shouted for their troopers to follow them.

Had the Vitellian defenses been manned by legionaries, or even substantial numbers of praetorians, they could have conceivably held the bridge against the Flavian assault. But with their militias broken, and the remaining guardsmen fleeing towards their barracks, Arrius' horsemen had little difficulty in riding down many of their fleeing adversaries. They formed a large semicircular formation on the far side of the bridge. Legionaries quickly followed, centurions keeping their men organized as they pushed past their cavalry and advanced into the city. Auxiliaries followed, though it would be more than an hour before the last of them crossed over. The Milvian Bridge now belonged to the Flavians, and the brutal fighting within the streets of Rome commenced.



For Alfenus Varus and the Vitellian resistance, the situation was quickly deteriorating. Tragically, among the first slain was Vitellius' son-in-law, Valerius Asiaticus, who had been struck down by a legionary javelin at Milvian Bridge. Originally thinking the Flavians would all attack over the bridge, they had concentrated their forces just on the other side where they hoped to fend them off. But Antonius Primus had divided his huge army into three columns, and the Vitellians were forced to do the same. Varus accompanied his left wing on the Field of Mars, where the Flavian division under General Lupus was now driving away the thousands of citizens who fled the onslaught.

“On me!” Varus shouted from atop his horse, raising his sword high. He had only three cohorts of praetorians but another four thousand volunteer militia.

The Flavians spread out into a long line in between the various temples, foreign embassy buildings, as well as across the large open field where local soldiery drilled. Auxilia archers manned the high steps and rooftops of some of the buildings, raining arrows down upon the attacking Vitellians. It maddened Varus, for although the Flavians were assaulting Rome, they were now content to hold the defensive. Waves of his guardsmen and militia battered the Flavian shield walls in vain. All the while, death rained down on them from above. Hundreds more lay dead or wounded from the Eighth Legion’s javelin volleys. And while the praetorians could more than hold their own against legionaries, the militia were slaughtered in droves. After a couple of hours, and numerous futile assaults, Varus ordered the retreat. The citizen volunteers threw down their weapons and fled for their homes, while the prefect and his guardsmen withdrew to the barracks.



The attack from the northeast would prove far more difficult than either the assault on the Milvian Bridge or across the Field of Mars. The lead cohorts from Legio VII, Gemina, advanced along the narrow road that led between the various country farms and estates. The muddy fields had been churned up by Cerealis’ cavalry the day before, and a fresh splattering of rain that night had turned the ground into a quagmire.

Antonius Primus rode just behind his First Cohort, while Paulinus took charge of the rear of the column with the Judean cohorts. Legionaries advanced quickly but cautiously. The Vitellians knew they were coming, and given the skirmish with their cavalry the day before, they had to suspect the Flavians would send one of the columns this way.

“Too bloody quiet,” a First Cohort legionary muttered.

It was then that Vitruvius spotted the lone enemy soldier standing up behind a tall garden wall, a short throwing spear ready to fly.

“Contact left!” he shouted, as the long dart flew in a high arc towards General Primus. It struck the commander-in-chief directly in the chest, deflecting off his breastplate.

“Contact right!” a centurion called out, as Vitellians on both sides sprung

up from behind the walls of various farmhouses.

Stones and throwing spears rained down on the Flavians who quickly dropped behind their shields. The narrowness of the road combined with the slippery mud of the fields made maneuver extremely difficult. Screams were heard as several of Primus' legionaries were felled in the barrage.

The enemy skirmishers were lightly equipped, and they quickly bounded from one farmhouse to the next. Dozens of smaller battles broke out, as centuries attempted to surround each walled complex and root out their assailants.

Towards the rear of the column, General Paulinus saw the havoc and ordered half his cavalry to swing out to the right and encircle the farmhouses from behind.

"The rest of you, with me!" he shouted. He then signaled for the Judean cohorts to follow him as well.

The mud was slick and ankle deep in most places as Centurion Galeo led the Fifth Cohort in pursuit of their cavalry. The terrain impeded horses from advancing at more than a quick trot, and even then it was perilous for their riders. Several horses slid onto their sides, throwing troopers into the muck. Gaius used his optio's staff to maintain his balance, many of his legionaries using their shields and javelins for the same purpose. It took them the better part of an hour to make their way around the series of houses, where legionaries helped each other over the walls. All the while, the Vitellians continued to unleash salvos of various missile weapons upon them.

"We'll use the cavalry to cut off their escape," Paulinus informed the three legionary cohort commanders. "Meantime, take your men and clear out those insulae near the gate."

"Yes, sir." Galeo and the other centurions acknowledged.

Along the road near the heart of the fighting, Antonius Primus hunkered low behind a wall of legionary shields. Master Centurion Vitruvius crouched down in front of him as they slowly crept towards a nearby house.

"Sir, I wish you weren't so close to me," Vitruvius said, with a trace of morbid humor. "You're the perfect target, you know."

"As if your centurion's crest doesn't stand out," the commanding general retorted. "Besides, I don't have a shield, and I can't exactly get back on my horse, now can I?"

“Oh, you could, sir,” the master centurion said, as a throwing spear skipped off his shield. “Just not sure how long you’d be able to stay mounted before these bastards cut you down.”

Unbeknownst to the defenders, General Paulinus had sent companies of horsemen to attack the buildings. Men rode up near the walls, leaping from their mounts near the gates. Sporadic fighting broke out as the Vitellians were caught unawares. Cavalry troopers quickly fought to get the gates open, allowing the Flavian legionaries to more easily storm each compound.

“That will sort this lot out,” Primus said, as he stood up.

Shrieks echoed from within, as no quarter was given by his soldiers. Those families who had refused to abandon their homes were also slain for providing shelter to the enemy. That they may have had no choice mattered little to the incensed Flavians. The pitiful cries of men and women echoed across the open fields as they were murderously butchered.

The commander-in-chief cringed as he witnessed some of the terrible slaughter. His soldiers were already overly anxious for battle and spoils, and their blood was now boiling, as an unexpected number of their companions had been killed or wounded by the persistent Vitellian ambushers. Would Primus lose all control over them as they swarmed into Rome? All he could do was berate their centurions into keeping their men focused on the task of finishing the Vitellians, rather than abusing and slaughtering the populace.

The commanding general signaled for his manservant to bring up his horse. He quickly mounted and rode to where Paulinus and his contingent were preventing any enemy combatants from escaping into the city. The Judean legionary cohorts were heard smashing in doors of the mostly deserted insulae, many taking what they wished for spoils.

“Once they run out of enemies to fight, they turn to looting,” Paulinus scoffed.

Primus shrugged. “Nothing I wouldn’t do in their position,” he reasoned. “Alright, once we’re through the Colline Gate, I need you to take these men and find General Bassus. The praetorian barracks will likely be where these bastards will make their final stand, and I want them smashed into oblivion.”

“Understood,” his fellow general concurred.

“And thank you, by the way, for that bit of ingenuity,” Primus added. “Sending cavalrymen leaping from their mounts over the walls was bloody brilliant.”

“Just had to get the gates open,” Paulinus reasoned. He nodded in the

direction of the Colline Gate. “What say we dispose of the pretender once and for all, while claiming Rome herself as a prize for Emperor Vespasian?”



It was now late afternoon, and the Vitellian defenses had completely collapsed. The issue was never in doubt. Rome was not built like a fortress and was simply too large for a few praetorian cohorts and citizen militias to make a viable stand. The Flavians had them too badly outnumbered, plus all were professional soldiers. The People’s Army made a more resolute stand than any of their adversaries expected. However, assailing walls of armored legionaries could only end badly.

The Flavian columns now swarmed into the city from three directions. Several centuries of legionaries from Primus’ column pursued the fleeing Vitellians through one of the residential districts, south of the Circus Maximus. Sounds of musicians and celebrations filled the air as the fighting spilled into one of the market squares. There was a war going on, and Rome was under assault, yet in a city of over one million inhabitants, those in the southern districts were completely oblivious to the battle.

Historians would later state with revulsion that so many did not care about the strife over the imperial throne. It was the week of Saturnalia, and there were hundreds-of-thousands within Rome who were not about to let something, even as devastating as civil war, come to the imperial capital and spoil their celebrations. Numerous citizens were so oblivious to what was happening, they thought the horde of Vitellian soldiers, now fighting for their lives, was part of the entertainment. The screams of the dying and violent slaughter quickly turned the entertainment into a symphony of terror.

A hastily erected theatrical stage collapsed under the onslaught of a score of Flavian legionaries. The actors found themselves being trampled as soldiers from both sides scrambled through the wreckage. Several were struck inadvertently by blows from gladii. Their costumes were stained with blood as they fell screaming to the ground. The crowds were so thick that those who wished to escape found themselves caught in the middle of the fray, while those on the far end of the square were still unmindful to the violence that had spilled into their celebrations. Dancers, jugglers, and acrobats continued their acts, even as soldiers crashed their shields together, blades slashing and stabbing in fury, both soldier and unfortunate onlooker

crying out as they were cut down. Those ill-fated citizens who found themselves in the midst of it all were smashed with shield bosses, stabbed with contempt, and crushed under the bevy of rampaging legionaries.



All organized resistance had collapsed, though the surviving praetorians still refused to surrender. While the People's Army was cut to pieces by Primus' unleashed forces, the most fanatical of Vitellius' guardsmen fled for the perceived safety of the praetorian barracks. It was here that Paulinus found General Bassus, whose Eleventh Claudia Legion was surrounding the large complex.

"Fucking bastards *still* don't know that they're beaten!" the legate spat in contempt.

"Those walls are thirty feet high," Paulinus observed. "Each tower has at least one scorpion. And who knows how many archers and javelins they have in their armory?"

"I do," a voice said, behind them. They turned to see Tiberius Statius being roughly handled by four of Bassus' legionaries.

"We found this praetorian shit lurking about," one of the men said, cuffing him behind the head.

Statius skull was still rather tender, even though it had been months since his rather traumatic head injury during the Maritime Alpes expedition. "Fuck me, would you take it easy!" He then nodded to Paulinus. "General, sir, would you kindly vouch for me?"

"Unhand him," Paulinus said to the soldiers. "And give him back his helmet and weapon." When Bassus looked at him with a perplexed stare, he quickly explained. "This man fought beside us atop Capitoline Hill, where the smoke of the Temple of Jupiter's wreckage still smolders. Because of him I escaped the same fate as poor Sabinus."

As the sets of hands released their grip on him, Statius snatched his gladius back from one of the legionaries and then shoved the man roughly. The soldier shoved him back. The two nearly came to further blows.

"Knock that shit off!" Bassus shouted at the men. He then told his soldiers, "Return to your posts. Now, guardsman, what do you have to offer us?"

"You need catapults and a battering ram to get in there," Statius

explained. “And I happen to know where you can get some in a hurry.”

“That’s good,” the legate acknowledged. “Because it will take several hours to bring up our siege trains. I don’t know how long my men will allow themselves to be kept in place. A number of our replacements came from Otho’s former praetorians, and they are anxious for a little revenge.”

“Well, bugger me,” Statius replied with a chuckle. “I probably know most of them. If one of you will come with me, sir, and bring about fifty men. I don’t have any draught animals lying about, and those wagons are pretty damn heavy.”

The warehouse where these siege engines were hidden was only a couple blocks from the barracks, and all could not help but wonder how the guardsman had placed them there in the first place.

“It wasn’t hard,” he explained. “I simply convinced the prefect two months ago that we’d need them for the city’s defense, and they needed to be readily accessible. He then forgot about them.”

“Four onagers with ammunition wagons,” General Bassus noted. “One battering ram with protective shed, and a dozen scorpions.”

“There are also about twenty ladders,” Statius remarked. “And now if you will excuse me, general, I have a usurper to help capture.”

Bassus simply waved the guardsman off, as he ordered his master centurion to see to the deployment of the siege equipment. “Ironic that we’ll be using their own engines against them,” he said to Paulinus, as he stepped out onto the street.

“The re-taking of our camp will be the crowning achievement of our soldiers,” a former Othonian praetorian said to the legate, as the onager wagons were wheeled into place.

Another added thoughtfully, “The fighting may still be intense, but we’ve given the capital back to the senate and the people of Rome. And the temples of the gods will be restored to their true dignity.”

“Load!” a centurion shouted, as soldiers brought forward the heavy stones for the catapults. Others brought up a small metal fire pit. Alternating volleys of solid and flaming shot would reduce the towers and other defenses to ruin.



For Alfenus Varus and the surviving Vitellian praetorians, the end would

come in blood-stained glory. Every last man was determined to fight to the last. Even as the barrage of catapult shot and scorpion bolts pelted the ramparts, the prefect formed up the last two cohorts into a massed battle formation. Their own scorpions were shooting back against their foes, though Varus winced as he watched one of the towers over the gate crumble, the base smashed by Flavian onagers. The men manning the scorpion on top cried out in terror as they tumbled with the mass of shattered stones onto the wall and the ground below.

"They're bringing up a battering ram, sir!" a guardsman called over his shoulder, before he was shot through the stomach by an enemy scorpion.

"At least this will get things over with," Varus muttered, drawing his sword. He took a deep breath and shouted, "Make ready, lads! They will not conquer without suffering pain!"

The ominous sound of the large ram slamming into the gate echoed loudly. All else was silent. Not a man on either side uttered a word with the exception of the officer leading the ramming crew.

"Pull…ram!" A loud crash sounded, and the cross-brace holding the gate split.

"Pull…ram!" Another smash and the gates broke open.

Praetorians wordlessly hefted their javelins up to their shoulders. They were determined that the Flavians would pay a terrible price this day. Hearts pounded in every man's chest as the ram was wheeled away and the first wave of assault troops burst through the splintered gates.

"Now!" Varus shouted.

Waves of heavy pila flew the short distance to the gate, puncturing shield and armor alike. At least a score of Flavian legionaries fell dead or badly wounded, while at least twice as many had their shields rendered useless by the javelin storm. The praetorians gave a cry of despairing rage and charged.

The soldiers of the Eleventh Legion were only momentarily rattled, the survivors quickly reforming and rushing into the fray. The Vitellians at first held the upper hand. The momentum of their charge knocked the Flavians back towards the gate. However, as men hacked and slashed away at each other, large numbers of legionaries could be seen coming over the walls. Bassus had launched an assault with ladders at the same time as his lead elements stormed through the gates. The impetus of the Vitellian counterattack floundered. They were being assailed on all sides by throngs of furious legionaries.

Varus placed himself in the front rank, so he might lead his men by example. He was one of the first to fall. A legionary pinned himself against the prefect's shield, while another plunged his gladius into Varus' exposed neck. Blood spurted from the hideous wound as he fell to his knees. Enraged Flavian soldiers stabbed and hacked away, even after his soul abandoned his body. The rest of the praetorians continued to fight. Their adversaries knew not whether they should admire or hate them for their stubborn tenacity. The former Othonian guardsmen were particularly contemptuous, and they attacked with equal venom. Within an hour, not a single Vitellian within the barracks remained among the living.

Chapter XXXIII: You Win or You Die

The Imperial Palace, Rome
20 December 69 A.D.



Aulus Vitellius

"Come on, hurry up!" Vitellius shouted to his cook and baker, as they followed him down the steps towards the western entrance to the palace grounds. There his private litter awaited him, along with a dozen slaves. He was in such haste as he dove into the litter he nearly upended it and struggled to pull himself back in. "To my family home on Aventine!"

The streets were filled with chaos, though as far as he could tell, the Flavian troops had yet to storm the neighborhoods in the vicinity of the imperial palace. If he could reach the Vitellian ancestral home in the wealthy neighborhood of the Aventine Hill, he would be safe. From there, he could wait until the cover of darkness then flee to Tarracina, where he could join up with his brother and what loyalist forces remained.

"Stop! Stop!" he suddenly shouted, as soon as they were outside the gates of the palace. Through a gap in the drawn curtains of his litter he could see people rushing to and fro, screaming in both rage and terror. Though none of these people appeared to be soldiers, Vitellius was suddenly filled with trepidation and doubt.

Having absolutely no knowledge as to how the fighting was progressing or what avenues of approach the Flavians had used to breach the city, he was now fearful the districts between Palatine and Aventine Hills had fallen to his enemies. The thought of being pulled from his litter and cut to pieces by Primus' enraged soldiers caused him to panic. He fell from his litter, scrambled awkwardly to his feet, and fled for what he supposed was the safety of the imperial palace. His servants were dumbstruck. Fearing their master had succumbed to a fit of madness, they dropped the litter and fled for their lives.

Vitellius, red-faced and panting in near hyperventilation, raced through the gates and forced the heavy doors shut. With his hands on his knees, he tried to catch his breath. He had not the courage to commit suicide like his predecessor, Otho. So he knew he needed to find a place to hide.

The palace complex was now utterly deserted. No praetorians guarded the palace grounds. Those who had not fled had all fought and died beside Varus at their barracks. Screams of chaos could be heard clearly out on the streets. Yet for the moment, Vitellius felt safe behind the walls. As he walked quickly past the Temple of Apollo, he cursed that he failed to follow through with the agreement he had reached with Sabinus. His most fervent supporters had forcibly prevented his surrender and abdication, with so many having died for nothing. And now that the city prefect was dead, there would be no negotiation. Even if Primus wanted to take him alive, the unbridled fury of his soldiers would be almost impossible to contain.

The palace was dark aside from a stray oil lamp here and there. Even the slaves had abandoned the palace. Vitellius was truly alone. He was once more in a state of panic, as he reckoned he had made a grievous error. As large as the palace was, there were only so many places one could hide. And while the bedlam out on the streets had been unnerving, being left completely alone within the palace was terrifying. The sounds of his footfalls echoed ominously, as did his labored breathing. As he made his way down every corridor searching for a viable hiding place, he felt completely abandoned. His mother had left him by taking her own life, his wife and children were in hiding, and his brother was at least a hundred miles from Rome. It felt as if even the gods had forsaken Aulus Vitellius.

Down one of the bottom floor hallways, he came across a nondescript room no bigger than a closet. It was full of rags, brooms, and various cleaning supplies, as well as a small bed belonging to the slave who oversaw

custodial duties on this end of the palace. Not knowing what else to do, he pulled off his robes and threw them into a corner. He then donned a ragged slave's tunic, which he saw on a small stand. He took the bed and braced it against the door before huddling into a corner.



"Alright lads!" the Flavian tribune said, as the southern gate to the palace was breached. "We are here to find the pretender, not to plunder for ourselves. Find Vitellius and bring him to me alive!"

Tribune Julius Placidus was as determined as any to find the usurper and bring him to justice, especially after the decapitated corpse of Flavius Sabinus had been found floating in the Tiber. The fighting within the city was essentially over now that the praetorian camp had been taken. The People's Army that had marched from Rome to defend Vitellius had scattered. Many of its members were now loudly professing their loyalty to Rome's true emperor, Vespasian. The dead were being hastily cleared away. Most would be tossed into the Tiber as traitors, preventing their mourning families from conducting any sort of funerary rites.

"Come with me, sir," Guardsman Statius said, as he escorted the tribune up the steps of the palace. "I know this place better than any. If the pretender is hiding in here, we'll find him."

While detachments of his men searched the outlying buildings, Julius took a century's worth of legionaries and began the search of the palace proper. It was an hour later, when he came upon the small closet door, barricaded from the inside.

"What in the bleeding hell?" he grumbled, as he rammed his shoulder against the door.

A pair of legionaries took turns kicking it, until finally the bed that held it closed slid back enough to allow them entrance into the tiny room.

"Who in Hades are you?" he asked the cowering, fat man.

"Please don't hurt me!" the man pleaded. He was filthy and ragged, the scruff covering his face acted as a disguise.

"Who is it, sir?" a legionary asked, as they opened the door further.

"Just some bloody slave," Julius replied.

Statius then noticed something glinting on the man's upheld hands that gave him pause. "Hang on." He gruffly grabbed the supposed slave by the

wrist and drug him out into the hallway.

"Here, that's the emperor's signet ring!" a legionary exclaimed.

"And look at this," the other said, coming from the closet and holding up the purple imperial robes. "Thought he could hide from us while pretending to be a slave."

The legionary spat on Vitellius, while the other punched him across the face.

Statius grabbed him underneath the chin and looked him over thoroughly. "It's him alright. He hasn't shaved in a couple days, but I recognize that fat face."

"Get him up," Julius ordered.

They took a length of cord and bound Vitellius' hands behind his back. The deposed emperor said nothing but whimpered quietly.

"We found him!" one of the legionaries shouted, as they made their way down the hall.

Shouts of triumph echoed along the corridors, as soldiers made their way into the main foyer to celebrate their success. They shouted profanities at Vitellius, many spitting or physically accosting their former ruler.

"What shall we do with him?" one soldier asked.

"Let's lop his cock off and feed it to him!" another exclaimed, brandishing his gladius before the petrified Vitellius.

"That's enough, lads!" their centurion shouted. He walked over and said to Julius, "We should take him to Capitoline Hill. Let the usurper meet justice like all traitors to the empire."

"Agreed," Julius replied. "Send word to General Primus. And let all know we have captured the usurper!"

Word had spread quickly, even before Julius and his soldiers found Vitellius. Once the Flavian troops were seen entering the palace, the curious onlookers knew it was only a matter of time before they found their quarry. Most had speculated that Vitellius would attempt to hide within the palace, and as word reached families and friends, a crowd numbering in the thousands gathered. Being subjected to the brutal horrors of urban warfare left many in a state of shock; however, it seemed even terrible bloodshed could not overcome the curious voyeurism of the average Roman citizen.

The throngs of onlookers stretched all the way from the palace to the Forum, and then to the Gemonian Stairs. Most thought that once found, Vitellius would be quickly disposed of. There would be no mock trials; at

least he would be spared that indignity.

A loud cheer erupted as Vitellius was led from the palace by Tribune Julius and a century of legionaries. Though unshaven and dressed like a slave, there was no mistaking who they had captured. While a pair of soldiers grabbed him by the arms, Julius held his gladius beneath Vitellius' neck, forcing him to watch the unfolding spectacle.

"And now the pretender will witness the spoils of his treachery," the tribune said. He pointed to an otherwise inconspicuous square not far from the palace. "Behold! The sight of Emperor Galba's murder, brought on by your rebellion!"

In truth, it had been Otho who murdered Galba, but to the people, the current pretender carried the blame.

It was only a short distance from the palace to the Forum, yet it took nearly half an hour to make the journey. The crowds pushed in close, soldiers doing little to prevent them from verbally and physically berating the deposed emperor. As one slapped Vitellius hard across the back of the head, his fat neck was pushed into Julius' blade, cutting him. One of the legionaries grabbed him by his hair and forced him to look straight ahead.

"The same people who fawned so embarrassingly over your fat ass now curse you to Hades," the soldier snarled into his ear.

A path was cleared at the Forum, with Vitellius very gruffly dragged to the top of the *Stairs of Mourning*.

"And there!" Julius shouted, as they reached the top. "The body of our dear city prefect, Flavius Sabinus, murdered and desecrated by your butchers!"

It was a horrific sight. The headless body of Sabinus, lying on its back, covered in blood for all to see. It was completely soaked from spending the better part of a day in the river.

These were all partially unfair accusations. Vitellius had not even known about Galba's murder. Although by rebelling, he had sought it. And it had been his overzealous loyalists who so gruesomely murdered Sabinus. And yet, he had to bear responsibility for both hideous actions.

"Tribune Placidus!" a voice called. Julius turned to see Arrius Varus approach with about twenty of his cavalry troopers. "Captured the traitor, I see."

"Yes, and we're about to do away with him," Julius replied.

Arrius simply nodded. "Bassus has taken the praetorian barracks," he

said. “And I’m doing all I can to restore some damn order. Those few surviving guardsmen once loyal to this piece of shit have fled. General Primus suspects the pretender’s brother is marching towards Rome with whatever cohorts remain.”

“We’ll dispose of them soon enough,” Julius remarked.

Vitellius closed his eyes and tried to fight back his emotions. He knew his own life was forfeit. He was now terrified for his son. It seemed his enemies were deliberately keeping him alive long enough to torment him with such thoughts, during these last few moments of his life. Generals Primus, Lupus, and Paulinus soon arrived. Marius Celsus managed to return to Rome after the fighting commenced. He too joined his colleagues.

The sound of a dozen blades being drawn echoed in Vitellius’ ears, and he was forced down onto his knees. About thirty legionaries had taken up position halfway up the stairs, fulfilling the crowd-control duty normally taken on by the urban cohorts. Thousands of people crowded into the Forum to witness the grim spectacle. This was the first time in Rome’s often violent history that an emperor was to be cut down by way of execution, like a common criminal. There were no speeches to be made, just the savage meting out of justice. Many of the Flavian soldiers found it both perverse and contemptible that these same people who had groveled over Vitellius in life, were now watching his death with malicious glee.

Primus nodded to Tribune Julius, who grabbed the deposed pretender by the hair. “Vile creature, who should have never been allowed to ascend to the throne,” he hissed.

As he accepted his fate, he found a pang of what may have been called courage. Vitellius looked up at Julius. “That may be,” he said, through his bloody and swollen lip. He then added defiantly, “But I was still your emperor!”

Julius gave a cocked grin in appreciation of this last remark. He raised his gladius high. The crowd gave a voracious cheer as he brought his weapon down in a hard blow across the back of Vitellius’ neck. Vicious blows from the other gathered soldiers soon followed. Within seconds, Vitellius’ head was lopped from his shoulders, blood gushing from the gaping hole that remained. His right arm had been hacked off, though it was still tied to his left, and numerous grisly blows left deep bleeding gashes all over his body. A soldier came forward and impaled the head upon his javelin. Another deafening cheer erupted as he held the bloodied head up high.

"Behold!" Julius shouted, pointing to the head with his sword. *"The head of a traitor!"*

It was now the evening of the 20th of December, and the empire at last belonged to Vespasian. He was the fourth man to claim the title of *Caesar* since January. It appeared there would be no more claimants to try and take the throne by force. He now truly was Master of Rome.

Chapter XXXIV: Last of the Vitellians

Ten Miles South of Rome
21 December 69 A.D.
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While families of the slain mourned privately, the Senate quickly and rather enthusiastically sought to confirm Vespasian as Emperor of Rome. However, there were survivors among the Vitellians who refused to capitulate, even though their emperor's severed head now adorned a spike overlooking the Forum. With his brother dead, Lucius Vitellius was doggedly determined to march on Rome and assert his six-year old nephew's rights to the throne. And so, having disposed of the rebels in southern Italia, he marched doggedly towards the imperial capital.

"We only have six cohorts of guardsmen," Prefect Junius Priscus protested. "If Primus has taken Rome there is nothing left we can do. The emperor is dead, and Vespasian now rules the empire. It's over."

Lucius smacked the prefect across the face, his eyes widened with rage. "It is *never* over!" he snarled. "Germanicus Vitellius is now Rome's rightful emperor. We will seize the capital and enforce his rights to the throne. Once the senate confirms this, naming me regent until young Germanicus comes of age, Primus will have no choice but to stand down. He may have won this battle, but he will lose the war."

Priscus was baffled by the ever increasing erraticism of Lucius' behavior. Though he had fought for Vitellius and served as one of his praetorian prefects, he knew neither plebeian nor patrician had any love for the slain emperor. Even if the senate did wish to confer upon Germanicus the right to become Caesar, which was unlikely given his father had been little more than a usurper himself, they were cowed by the victorious armies led by Antonius Primus.

While the Flavian Emperor was far from perfect, Priscus had long admired Vespasian. Undoubtedly there would be those within the senate who decried his less-than-noble origins. However, since the common people were enthralled by one of Rome's greatest military leaders, who had come from rather humble origins, rising up to become emperor, it was best to let matters

lie. Even Vitellius' closest friends quietly admitted that Flavius Vespasian was a far more suitable candidate to become Caesar.

As for Priscus, though he viewed Lucius Vitellius' actions as less-than-rational, he still felt duty bound to stand by the deceased emperor's brother. As such, he left to order his remaining cohorts to make ready to march on Rome.



"Gaius!" Nicanor's voice called from over the optio's shoulder.

The Fifth Cohort of Legio X had been dispatched along with roughly fifteen thousand other Flavian soldiers to deal with the remnants of the Vitellians. Their forces were arrayed along a low ridge south of the town of Aricia, ten miles south of Rome. Their left was anchored by a lake that ran almost up to the Via Appia.

"Yes, sir?" Gaius replied, turning to face his commander.

"The cohort is to take position up ahead on the far slope of that short ridge. We will be on the extreme left near the lake. Should the enemy refuse to yield, we are to charge down the hill and smash into their flank."

"If that happens, Julius can take my position," Gaius conceded, knowing he'd be lucky to stumble the short distance to their position, let alone lead half their century in a charge.

"You'll be interested to know that your little friend, Aula Cursia Vale, is with our commanding general."

At this remark, Gaius actually broke into a short laugh. "You call her my 'little' friend, yet she is tall enough to look me in the eye," he observed.

"What is she doing with General Primus?" Julius asked, his brow furrowed.

"I believe the tribune leading the Vitellians once served under her father," Gaius explained.

"Our commanding general hopes perhaps she can persuade the praetorians to see reason," Nicanor added. "It would be a shame if we have to spill any more blood of our countrymen this day. Enough Romans have died over the past year. I would rather no more had to be slain, not even the Vitellians."



Prefect Junius Priscus rode at the head of his detachment from the Praetorian Guard. Lucius Vitellius rode beside him wearing a legate's muscled cuirass with a purple cloak over his left shoulder.

There was a sense of nervous confusion amongst the ranks of the guardsmen. While they had all sworn the oath of allegiance to Vitellius, now that he was dead they did not hold similar loyalties to his brother or son. They were uncertain whether they should continue to follow Lucius or align themselves with Vespasian. Lucius assured them repeatedly that the people would rise up and proclaim Germanicus as Caesar, overthrowing his father's murderer.

As they approached the smaller lake that lay to the east, the road made its way between a pair of short ridges. These were covered in legionaries. Their armor gleamed in the sunlight and could be seen from several miles away. Priscus recognized the black shields of the Tenth Legion, as well as the red of the Twenty-First Rapax. The largest number of shields were orange, and he did not recognize their markings.

"Must be that new legion Galba raised last year," he surmised. As he recalled, this particular legion had been under the direct command of Marcus Antonius Primus. He knew the display of various legions who previously battled against each other, and were now standing on the same battle line, was to demonstrate without doubt that the defeated legions of Vitellius stood with Vespasian.

"The Predator Legion now stands with the usurper," Priscus said, nodding towards the shields bearing the emblem of Capricorn. They, like the other cohorts, were arrayed by centuries in battle formation.

"Damnable traitors," Lucius spat. "I will see the entire legion disbanded and their legate crucified for this outrage!"

Approximately a quarter mile from the twin formations of legionaries, a detachment of cavalry awaited the approaching praetorians. Riding well ahead of them was General Antonius Primus with a small escort.

"Primus." Lucius scowled, recognizing the legate. "I want his head on a spike!"

"In due time," Priscus cautioned. "We should parlay with him before deciding upon any hostile action. Let us not be too hasty. After all, they hold the high ground and have us comfortably outnumbered."

Lucius made ready to protest, but given the prefect's hard demeanor, he

knew his suggestion was more of a statement than a request. The two men spurred their horses into a fast canter, as the praetorian officers halted their cohorts. The guardsmen all bore expressions of consternation at the sight of fifteen thousand imperial legionaries facing them, plus the cavalry regiment arrayed on either side of the road. A row of scorpions were emplaced ahead of the legions for added psychological effect.

"Commander Priscus," Primus said, as the two men rode up to him. "What is the meaning of this? The war is over. Vitellius is dead, and his legions have declared for the Flavians. The senate has confirmed Vespasian's legitimacy as Caesar, backdating the start of his reign to the first of July. Vitellius has been named an unlawful usurper who stole the throne from the rightful emperor, Marcus Salvius Otho."

It was, of course, hypocritical for Primus to refer to Vitellius as a usurper. Vespasian had acted exactly as he had against Otho. His last statement was also a deliberate falsehood, for the senate had also yet to convene. However, the Flavian commander-in-chief knew the outcome was a forgone conclusion.

While Priscus remained silent, Lucius flew into a rage.

"Damn Vespasian and his duplicity!" he snarled. "Otho murdered Emperor Galba, and my brother avenged him. We come to claim the rights of Germanicus Vitellius, in whose name I am now Regent of the Empire; not you, *traitor*."

No one responded to him. Instead, Priscus' eyes fell upon Aula, who sat astride her horse beside Primus.

"Lady Vale," he said respectfully. "In these difficult times, it warms my heart to see you well. Though it also saddens me to see you have declared your allegiance to the Flavians."

"As has my father," Aula replied. "It is he I am here to represent, not Emperor Vespasian or even the good General Primus."

"Your father is a senile fossil," Lucius rebuked. "That he would cast his lot with the Flavian traitors undoes all his years of service to the empire. For your impudence, I shall invoke *damnatio memoriae* upon him and exile the entire Cursor family!"

Aula's gaze narrowed. She spoke slowly, her voice like ice. "Take heed of your ill-chosen words," she said, throwing back her cloak and reveling her spatha. "Were General Primus not under orders to take you alive, I would split you from your shriveled balls to your throat."

"You dare threaten me, woman?" Lucius sneered. "Once the people hear

of my approach, they will cast out the soldiers of the usurper, who lacks the courage to even show his face in Rome."

"And where are the people?" Primus countered, shaking his head in disbelief. "All of Rome knows the brother of a dead pretender marches with a paltry force of a few praetorian cohorts." He waved his hand back towards the legions. "I have brought but a fraction of the army that overthrew your despotic brother, and yet this lot alone outnumbers you four-to-one."

Aula spoke up quickly, addressing the praetorian tribune. "Priscus, please, I implore you. I can speak for my father who loved you as if you were his own son. That love makes you my brother. I ask, as your sister, to put an end to this madness. Do not allow another Roman life to be lost in vain."

Priscus nodded slowly, then turned his attention to Primus. "I wish to put an end to the fighting," he said. "What terms are you offering?"

Lucius looked at him, horrified at the prospect of negotiating a surrender to the Flavians.

"Your men swore an oath that they thought was right," Primus replied, having rehearsed his words during the short march from Rome. "Though they emplaced the pretender on the throne, Emperor Vespasian wishes to give each of them the chance to expunge the misjudgment from their collective conscience."

Primus took a breath and paused for a brief moment before laying out the terms he had decided upon, having first sent a dispatch to Mucianus. "You and your men are ordered to surrender their arms and return with us to Rome. At the praetorian barracks, each man will be given the opportunity to swear his allegiance to the true Emperor of Rome, Titus Flavius Vespasian. Your peers refused to do so, and their blood stains the barracks of the Guard. Those who swear fealty to Vespasian will be welcomed back into the ranks of the emperor's most distinguished guard. Those who do not will be discharged and ordered to leave the city. No further actions will be taken; they can still live out the rest of their days as free men with the emperor's clemency."

"And if we reject your terms?" Lucius spoke up quickly, before Priscus could reply.

"Then every last one of you will die today," Primus said plainly. "Starting with you. The corpses will be left to rot along the road, with a pall of shame falling upon the families of the slain."

Lucius was filled with terror as reality finally set in. His force was hopelessly outmatched, and there would be no uprising from the people. His

rather sad and pathetic bluff had been called. Given Priscus' lack of resolve, he realized the praetorians who had marched with him would now do anything to save their own necks, even if it meant betraying the heir to the throne. He noted that Primus' offer had only addressed the guardsmen, and not him.

"W…what terms are you offering me?" he stammered.

"Terms?" Primus asked in return, chuckling softly. "If you'd had any sense, you would have returned to Rome and offered your submission once your brother's cause was lost. Instead, you don the imperial purple, which you have no right to wear, and you march towards the capital in an attempt to cause sedition amongst the good citizens. No, sir, there are no *terms* offered to you. Regrettably, the brother and son of Vitellius must die."

Aula quickly turned her gaze to Primus, her eyes widening at the thought of the boy, Germanicus, having to forfeit his life because of who his father was. She remained silent, reminded of the words of Emperor Augustus, *'There can be only one Caesar'*. She took a deep breath in through her nose, and fixed her eyes on Lucius Vitellius once more. Her right hand twitched as her feelings of loathing towards this despicable man rose.

"Give me a few moments to confer with my senior officers," Priscus requested. "If my men will follow my lead, then we will accept your terms of surrender."

"You've betrayed me!" Lucius screeched in despair. He made to draw his weapon.

Aula proved too fast. Her spatha flew from its scabbard, and before Lucius could fully unsheathe his blade, he felt the cold steel plunge into his guts beneath his breastplate. The weapon was not only cold but razor sharp. Aula leaned forward slightly in her saddle, her expression one of pure malice.

The threats to her father and family had filled her with a boiling rage that had been completely foreign to her. Lucius tried to gasp as blood and spittle ran down the corners of his mouth. Aula wrenched her weapon free, and the brother of the slain pretender fell from his horse. She was suddenly drenched in a cold sweat, as a shiver ran up her spine.

"Well done," the general remarked casually. "You are certainly quick with a blade. If you possess even a fraction of your father's skill, I'd like to see how you'd fare in the arena."

Aula took a deep breath. "Forgive me. It's not every day a Roman noblewoman has to kill another human being…even if he was a maniacal

shit. I only did what I had to, nothing more."

All the while, she stared at the thrashing body of Lucius Vitellius, as death slowly took him.

"And by doing so, put an end to this disgusting war," Priscus spoke. "You have also saved my life, Lady Vale. For that I am ever in your debt." He bowed before turning his horse and riding back to his men.

The praetorians were talking frantically amongst themselves. Those in the front ranks had witnessed Lucius Vitellius' slaying.

After a few moments, the prefect turned and raised his spatha high. *"Hail, Caesar! Hail, Vespasian!"*

Praetorian gladii were drawn and held up in salute.

"Hail, Caesar! Hail, Vespasian!"



The final encounter with the Vitellians had been rather anticlimactic, but Gaius Artorius and the other Flavian soldiers were relieved the fighting was finally over. Primus had elected to leave most of his detached army near the lake, where they would camp for the evening before returning to Rome. Most of the legionaries took the opportunity to bathe. Though central Italia was still relatively warm, even in December, the lake water was brisk. Gaius found it helped his arm immensely, and he stood in the deeper waters almost up to his neck, working to stretch the injured limb.

"Damn it all, but I hope I get use of this back soon," he grumbled.

Nicanor joined him. The centurion had stripped down and brought his razor with him.

"About that," Nicanor said, as he began to shave. "I have spoken with Centurion Galeo, and he agrees you should not return with us to Judea just yet."

"What are you talking about?" the optio protested. "I think I have proven myself as much as anyone here. Even with an injured arm, I can do my duty."

"Perhaps. But your chances of fully healing are impeded if you keep banging about with the rest of us. You need to rest and rehabilitate properly; something which you haven't done since Cremona."

Gaius started to speak up when Nicanor interrupted him.

"This is not a request, Gaius. You are being given two months of convalescent leave which you will take in Ariminum."

“Ariminum?” the optio asked. “Why?”

“It is a rather splendid seaside city, perfect for what ails you. Plus I think your brother’s widow could use the company of a friend.”

Gaius was suddenly subdued. Laura had probably remained at Ariminum for the time being, and Gaius did feel a rather strong sense of obligation towards her. “When do I leave?”

“Pack your kit and you can leave tomorrow,” Nicanor answered. “I’ve convinced Galeo that we should give you until the end of February to get your arm strength back. If you manage to do so, then you can take your place among your brothers. And if not…well, we’d best not think about that now. We’ll sort that out, should it arise.”

Chapter XXXV: Regent of the Empire

The Senate, Rome
22 December 69 A.D.
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The two days that followed the execution of Vitellius had been a firestorm of activity. Lucius Vitellius was now dead, with his widow left to see to their remains. Arrius Varus had assumed the role of acting praetorian prefect and had spent much of his time trying to find suitable candidates to fill all the vacancies. In what would become a modicum of Vespasian's assumption of power, Arrius had promised full pardon to all who returned to their duties and swore allegiance to the new emperor. *'As the divine Julius Caesar pardoned the venerable Titus Pullo, so too does Emperor Vespasian offer you pardon,'* he had said.

Still, it was proving problematic. Only about half of the guardsmen who accompanied Lucius Vitellius agreed to give their oaths to Vespasian. The rest had taken their discharge and were now banished from the imperial capital. The former Othonian praetorians had been welcomed back into the Guard; that still left Arrius with scarcely four thousand guardsmen, in a force that could reach as high as twenty thousand soldiers. And while Primus had agreed to look into transferring suitable candidates from the army, he adamantly refused to deplete the legions, as Vitellius had done.

Of even greater importance was reestablishing the urban cohorts. Those who had been imprisoned after the battle on Capitoline Hill had been freed and reinstated, though they were still critically understrength. The already raucous Saturnalia celebrations had turned into something far more sinister. It seemed that every district and neighborhood, even those that had been nowhere near the fighting, were now subjected to looting and other various crimes. The cheekiness of the week of mischief had given way to savage muggings, rape, and vandalism.

Primus had tasked the equite tribunes of the plebs with finding a new prefect and volunteers to fill the ranks immediately. While the thought had briefly crossed his mind of tasking his soldiers with maintaining order, he

knew this would prove disastrous. Legionaries were not policemen. At the first sign of unrest, there was the risk that they would start killing indiscriminately, while perhaps taking part in the ransacking themselves.

Above all else, Antonius Primus knew he needed to convene the senate immediately. More than six years had passed since he'd set foot within the chamber, and that was when he was stripped of his position as a senator and exiled from the city.

On the morning of 22 December he rose before sunrise, bathed, shaved, and donned his best toga. In a show of solidarity among the Flavians, as well as the former Vitellians, he was accompanied by Suetonius Paulinus, Marius Celsus, and even Silius Italicus. There were a hundred different conversations taking place as Primus entered the chamber. All were immediately silent, eyes on him. The two consuls fidgeted rather uncomfortably in their chairs.

"Senators of Rome," Primus' voice boomed. "I have returned."

"You are most welcome, General Primus," Consul Simplex said, as he stood and bowed.

"Am I?" The general's expression remained unchanged. He then waved for the senators to take their seats and walked across the floor. The senators who had accompanied him took their seats near the speaker's platform. Paulinus carried a sealed scroll in his hands.

"Know that I come, not as a senator, nor as a general," Primus began, "but simply as an envoy to Rome's rightful emperor, Titus Flavius Vespasian. He wishes to open the arms of friendship and reconciliation to this august body."

"And we welcome you as a Roman general and envoy of the Flavians," Senator Italicus replied. His eyes fell accusingly on a number of Vitellian supporters. It said much to his political adaptability. He hoped by accompanying the conquering general who had overseen the death of his dear friend, Vitellius, there might be reconciliation between factions.

Italicus continued, "As a token of our esteem, I recommend Marcus Antonius Primus be reinstated to his place within the senate, and that he be given consular regalia."

"I will second this," Simplex quickly added. "And if it pleases the general, I will give him my own consular ornaments, that he may assume my duties."

"If you will accept, then I gladly welcome you as my colleague," Consul Atticus remarked.

There were numerous calls of affirmation from the assembly. Primus grimaced. Though he understood Italicus' intent, he found the whole display to be utterly nauseating. He knew the only reason the senate now lauded him was because his armies had taken the city and killed the usurper. And with Vitellius' brother disposed of, opposition from any of the Vitellian loyalists gave way to flattery and the hopes of saving personal fortunes.

"It is you, who has conquered," added Otho Titianus, the brother of the late emperor. "And if you wish it, the senate will confirm *you* as Emperor of Rome."

"Oh, fuck me," Primus snapped. He shook his head. "You disgust me, the lot of you! You, the noble fathers of Rome, who once cast me out of this hall in disgrace, now wish to name me Caesar. And why is that? Because I defeated a mob sent by the usurper, you would allow me to become one myself? No, good senators, while it is the emperor's intent that I be named Regent of the Empire, but I will *not* be Caesar. Nor will I accept the consulship. I stand now at the head of the senate merely as representative of Emperor Vespasian, whose rise has been decreed by the gods themselves. The time of usurpers and pretenders is over. The fates have seen fit to cast down the once mighty and noble line of the Julio-Claudians. And now, tempered in the fires of war, has the house of the Flavians arisen. The old families have proven themselves self-serving and corrupt, and so the gods have given to Rome the strongest of men, who comes to us from humbler origins. Vespasian's rise to become Caesar has been dictated by merit rather than bloodline."

An awkward silence followed. The assembled senators knew not what they should say in response. All had at one time or another served within the various factions that made war upon each other. That they now came together again under the same roof was a strange circumstance, yet Primus had demanded it.

Finally, it was Suetonius Paulinus who spoke up. His words caused an audible gasp from the senators. "You speak with wisdom when you state you are not worthy to be Caesar." Though most of the senate was appalled, Primus actually grinned and nodded appreciatively. After all, there was a huge amount of respect between the two generals, and not simply because Paulinus had fought beside Sabinus and later helped Primus win the capital.

"I am glad to see there is at least one member of this once august body who is not prone to false flattery," he replied.

Paulinus gave a short nod in response. He then produced the scroll, which he held high. “Senators, the letter I hold comes to us directly from Emperor Vespasian. It addresses his demands of the senate, once the usurper was deposed. It was placed in my hands just prior to the fall of Vitellius and the murder of our emperor’s brother, the noble Flavius Sabinus.” There were a few murmurs at this rather awkward reminder. Those who had sided with the Vitellians were more than a little nervous that Vespasian would seek retribution over his brother’s senseless killing. It was all political theater. For it had actually been Primus who gave Paulinus the message from Vespasian, only the day before.

Paulinus, who was still smarting over his defeat at the hands of Vitellius’ forces earlier in the year, allowed the senators a few moments of nervous fidgeting before he began to read:

To the Senate and the People of Rome,

I, your emperor, Titus Flavius Vespasian, though unworthy of this esteemed honor, and who was compelled to take on the burdens of ultimate service to Rome on the 1st of July of this year, do bid you greetings.

Through much of the past year has our beloved empire been wrought by the foulest of calamities; that of civil war. Brother has taken up arms against brother, with fathers and sons slaying each other in the most wretched of all crimes against our very humanity. Therefore, my first decree as Caesar is that nevermore shall Roman draw blade against fellow Roman. Whatever our differences, you, the noble fathers of Rome, are my brothers. Our dear citizens, both plebian and patrician alike, are my sons and daughters.

I have spent a lifetime in war, yet I cannot truly serve our people as long as Roman blood is being shed through violence. I am therefore resolved to see the doors to the Temple of Janus closed, that we may usher in a new era of peace and prosperity for all Romans, noble and commoner alike.

That being said, there will be no peace in Rome, as long as those within

the patrician class continue to conspire and make war upon each other. My ignominious predecessors saw fit to compel allegiance through fear. So weak was their resolve that they viewed those most loyal as ones who would betray their colleagues and friends. Yet I find such actions deplorable, and make it known that he who would attempt to gain my favor by conspiring against his friend shall find me a most unmerciful enemy. Those who once swore allegiance, however misguided, to any of my predecessors are hereby pardoned without condition. All can confidently call themselves friends of Caesar.

Understand that I will return to Rome with all haste, and only regret that the treacherous seas, brought on by the winter storms, delay my arrival. Until such time as I may enter the gates of the Eternal City, I do appoint my loyal general and confidant, Marcus Antonius Primus, to act as regent in my stead. No one man, not even an emperor, can rule the civilized world alone. I therefore implore you, as both your colleague and friend, to work with me, that we may lead Rome into a new age of enlightenment and prosperity.

Your humble servant,

Titus Flavius Vespasian
Imperator, Princeps, and Emperor of Rome

Paulinus paused for a second before saying the last words of the letter, adding emphasis to its significance. The senators also took note of what at first seemed a passing remark, regarding the date of Vespasian's ascension. Of course he would humbly come before the senate, asking them to deliberate thoroughly before confirming or denying his right to be Caesar. This was all a simple formality, but by specifying the date of 1 July, Vespasian was sending a very clear message. During the last gasps of the republic, it had taken the senate several years to confirm Augustus' powers after the defeat of Marc Antony. Even though Augustus had become emperor in everything but name after the Battle of Actium, his reign was officially recorded as beginning four years later, when his new titles were confirmed by the senate. By specifying the date of his ascension, Vespasian was dictating when his reign as emperor began.

And should the senate confirm the legality of his rise to power, then Vitellius would be branded as a pretender with Vespasian as the rightful heir to the empire. Thankfully, there would be little debate on this issue. Whether they considered themselves in alliance or opposition to the emperor, every last member of the senate was beaten down by the relentless year of civil war, and glad to at last have peace and stability returned to the empire. Whether Vespasian's reign was recorded officially as commencing in July or December was a moot point.

"Unlike the pretender, Vitellius," Primus began, "Vespasian does not wish to use force to dictate his assumption of the imperial mantle. Nor will he accept his ratification based on flattery, born out of fear of reprisal. If any member of the senate has a legitimate reason as to why Titus Flavius Vespasian should be denied the imperial throne, let him speak now."

After a moment's silence, the general was surprised when Italicus spoke up.

"As all of you are well aware," he said, "Vitellius was not only my emperor, but also my friend. I loved him like a brother, and I personally mourn his tragic passing. I must emphasize, however, that Vitellius had no more legitimate claim to the throne than Vespasian. The dilemma we have faced since the death of Emperor Nero has been who holds the most rightful claim to rule the empire? During the dark days that marked the final years of the republic, Rome was embroiled in a series of civil wars. The last one saw Octavian emerge victorious after his defeat of Marc Antony. Our forefathers in the senate willingly created what was then known as *the principate*. Octavian was named first citizen of Rome and given the name Augustus."

"While we are all grateful for the history lesson, Senator Italicus," Consul Simplex retorted, "what does that have to do with the crisis we face today?"

"Everything," Italicus replied. "For by granting the titles and powers to Augustus, the senate ended the republic and created the imperial family. With that line now extinct, we have been afflicted by another series of civil wars; the horrors of which have not been witnessed in over a hundred years. We must not only proclaim an emperor, but also a new dynasty. Vespasian has two grown sons, the eldest of which has become one of our most renowned generals in recent years. And while personally saddened by the death of my dear friend, Vitellius, I must look to the good of Rome. I propose that we not only recognize Flavius Vespasian as emperor, but that we further name his son, Titus, as his successor and prince imperial."



The ‘debate’ over the legitimacy of Vespasian’s succession was concluded quickly. Of even greater issue had been the delegating of funds to rebuild the Temple of Jupiter, while also agreeing to reward Licinius Mucianus for successfully restoring order on the Danube. The other Flavian general would arrive in Rome within two to three weeks, and with relief it was made known that he would replace the hated Antonius Primus as imperial regent. After which, it seemed not to matter at all who was Emperor of Rome, as the various factions soon returned to their daily squabbling and conspiring against each other.

Suetonius Paulinus left the curia that evening feeling both exhausted and vindicated. The empire was still reeling from the trauma of civil war. Their Britannic ally, Queen Cartimandua, had been overthrown, and the Batavians were in revolt. But at least Rome now had an emperor he felt was worth serving under.

“Senator Paulinus!” It was Senator Nerva who called to him.

The two men walked over to one of the large pillars, behind which they could talk more privately.

“It would seem peace has at last come to the empire,” the old general said, a sense of relief in his voice.

“A little redeeming, was it?” Nerva asked. “Given your…*humbling* at the hands of the Vitellians.”

Though the words certainly cut deep, they were not meant to be insulting, nor did Paulinus take them that way. In truth, Nerva had always been a great admirer of the general. The young senator had displayed greater political shrewdness than any during the reign of Nero, as well as all of his short-lived successors, while somehow managing to maintain a sense of integrity and honesty. The one thing he lacked, and that which he had always respected Paulinus for, was military experience.

“I do not seek retribution against my former adversaries,” the general replied. His mouth turned up in a partial smile. “However, I will confess that watching most of those flippant turncoats refuse to look me in the eye as I addressed them was somewhat satisfying.”

“I am just sorry I did not have the internal fortitude to stand with you and Sabinus on Capitoline,” Nerva said. He held up his hands and shrugged

awkwardly. “But I am no soldier.”

“You serve Rome in your own way,” the general reassured him. “If only the sword was needed to rule the empire, we would be no better than those we call ‘barbarians’.”

“Perhaps,” Nerva acknowledged. He furrowed his brow in contemplation for a moment. “You know that my sister is married to Otho’s brother, so that made us family. However, I think you know who my secret loyalties lay with after Nero’s fall.”

“A good thing, then, that it was Vitellius who faced Vespasian, and not Otho,” Paulinus remarked. “Otherwise you would have been forced to choose. Now then, what is it you wished to see me about? Surely not just to hear if I enjoyed being able to gloat over my fallen enemies.”

Nerva shifted on his feet awkwardly and looked away for a moment. “There is something I’ve wanted to know,” he asked, looking Paulinus in the eye. “You know how I’ve always admired your skill in battle as a general, and I have always felt that you and Vespasian were the greatest military leaders of our age…”

“You want to know if I deliberately lost the First Battle of Bedriacum,” Paulinus interrupted, folding his arms across his chest. He sighed and glanced down briefly before answering. “I confess, I feel ashamed, even though I did not say those exact words to Vitellius. That was still the low point of my humiliation; I should have stood defiant to the last, whatever may come. But to answer your question, no, I did not deliberately lose the battle for your kinsman. Once Otho allowed Titianus to overrule me, there was little I could do.”

“Please,” Nerva said, raising his hand. “My relationship with Otho was flippant at best. And if you must know, had I been compelled to choose between him and Vespasian, let’s just say I may have found myself taking a fast horse east!”

The men shared a much-needed laugh at this.

“Had I been placed as commander-in-chief, perhaps I could have defeated the Vitellians,” Paulinus said, returning to the subject of discussion. “But that damned stubborn Otho was determined to give his brother the glory. You know I warned him to wait for the rest of the army after I bested Caecina at Locus Castorum. The Vitellians retreated, after their failed attempts to take Placentia, and I had just beaten Caecina. Primus had three legions scarcely a week’s march away. That damned fool, Titianus, insisted on pressing

forward, and his brother listened. I suppose one could say that I could not have lost the battle, since I was not in command." Paulinus shook his head in frustration at the memory.

"You had faced overwhelming odds before," Nerva persisted.

"Only numerically," the general corrected, knowing the senator was referring to his decisive victory over the Iceni tribes in Britannia. "When that bitch, Boudicca, thought she had me cornered, her army outnumbered ours ten-to-one. However, these were nothing but mindless barbarians dancing about in a frenzy, with no sense of discipline whatsoever. They painted themselves blue, to add to their ferocious appearance, yet body paint does nothing against the pilum and gladius. And since they allowed me to choose the terrain, I held the high ground with impenetrable woods on either side. Those bastards were forced into a narrow channel where their numbers meant nothing. Terrifying though it may have appeared at the time, anyone with a shred of tactical savvy would have known from the moment they charged, the issue was never in doubt. Our javelin volleys cut their lead ranks to pieces. They were ready to break before so much as a single legionary drew his gladius."

"I thank you for taking the time to speak with me," Nerva said earnestly. "Now if you will forgive me, general, I need to find my young ward."

"Yes, it is good that Domitian survived the purging of Capitoline Hill."

"A slave at the Temple of Concord hid him," Nerva explained. "I am going to petition Primus to have the man granted his freedom. After he risked his life to save an imperial prince, it is the least we can do."



Despite being populated by hundreds of people, mostly slaves, the imperial palace felt strangely empty with no emperor or imperial family to occupy it. A praetorian guardsman thought as much as he wandered down the long corridors.

Having served under Nero, then Galba, and finally Otho, the guardsman was glad to be reinstated to his post. The past year had seen so many claimants come and go that they were uncertain as to who, if anyone, they should swear their loyalty to. Like most of his companions, he did not care who sat upon the throne; all they wanted was a Caesar who lasted more than a few months, as well as one who paid them the traditional donative they felt

they were due.

"That is, if the emperor ever gets his ass to Rome," the guardsman grumbled. A sound like the clattering of cups and platters startled him, and he quickly raced down the hall until he came to the emperor's private dining chambers.

As he entered the large room, the praetorian saw a man with his back to him, humming loudly while tossing various chalices, serving platters, and other items of décor into a pile on one of the long tables. At least a dozen servants were following his directives, as he told them what to add to the growing pile. The palace was closed to all visitors, pending the arrival of Vespasian, and so the guardsman assumed it was a slave intent on robbing the palace and then fleeing the city.

Drawing his gladius, the guardsman shouted, *"Hold right there, you damned…"* As the man turned to face him, he saw not a renegade slave, but the very man who currently lorded over Rome. The guardsman quickly sheathed his blade. "Oh, bugger me…beg your pardon, sir."

"Quite alright," Antonius Primus replied with a dismissive wave. "I'm glad to see someone is still guarding this place. Otherwise it might get picked clean by looters." He then shouted at a slave, "Not that! That bust is of the fat prick I defeated in battle. Why in the bleeding hell would I want it?"

The praetorian was completely at a loss. Here was the man who had defeated the Vitellians and won the empire for Vespasian, yet he was plainly stealing from the imperial palace.

"Can I…can I do anything to help?" It was a stupid thing to say. The guardsman was so dumbstruck it was all he could think of.

"Forget what I just said," Primus said to one of the slaves, ignoring the praetorian for a moment. "That bust is of good quality marble and will go well in my dining room. There's something rather delicious about supping with Vitellius staring at me through those cold, lifeless eyes, no?"

As the general laughed out loud and started humming to himself once more, the guardsman slowly backed towards the door.

"As a matter of fact, there is something you can do for me," Primus said, at last answering the man's question. "You can fetch me a wagon. Nothing too large, just one sufficient to haul about a dozen or so crates. And have my chief-of-staff sent to me. I need to let him know that we'll be having ten…no, let's make it twenty additional slaves added to the household." When the praetorian did not move, Primus finally looked at him. "What is it, man? Are

you not able to follow simple instructions?”

“It’s not that, sir,” the guardsman replied. “It’s just that I don’t exactly have a spare wagon with draught animals simply lying about.”

“Ah,” the general said, holding up one finger before walking over to the table. He picked up a small pouch and fumbled through it. He then shrugged and tossed it to the praetorian. “There’s ten gold aurei in there, along with another thirty or so silver denarii. That should be enough to procure a decent wagon; one that the wheels aren’t about to fall off of or with a bunch of holes in the covering tarp. If there’s anything left, treat yourself and your mates to a debauched evening, with the emperor’s compliments.”

“Yes, sir!” the praetorian said, quickly leaving the hall. He was in a state of disbelief as he looked through the pouch, hurrying down the corridor. Five of the gold aurei would be more than sufficient to purchase the finest wagon in the city, along with the beasts of burden. What the guardsman did not know was Antonius Primus was an outstanding general and military leader, but he was absolutely terrible with money. Indeed, the man who had ‘won the empire’ could not be trusted to properly invest a single bronze sesterce, and had no concept of the rather handsome sum he had so freely given to the praetorian.

Chapter XXXVI: Innocence Slain

Rome
29 December 69 A.D.
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Over a week had passed since Vitellius' death and Primus' assumption as imperial regent. After looting the palace of whatever struck his fancy, he had the place sealed up and his wagon laden with treasure sent by ship to Ephesus.

It was now evening, and the regent was poring over the numerous bills and other documents the senate demanded he see to. He only signed two. One approved the awarding of *Triumphal Regalia* to Mucianus for his success in Moesia. The other ratified the consulships for the following year. Vitellius had intended to hold a joint consulship with his son-in-law, Valerius Asiaticus. Of course that was now impossible, what with both men dead. Primus had decided to take the simplest course of action by endorsing the consulship in favor of Emperor Vespasian, along with his son and heir, Titus. Of course, with both men away from Rome for the foreseeable future, Primus reckoned Mucianus would seize a suffect consulship, once he arrived in Rome and took over as regent. And while it would have been easy for him to steal the other consulship for himself, Primus found the thought of being Mucianus' colleague nauseating.

There was a loud knock on the door. Rubbing his tired eyes, Primus tossed the rest of the documents to the side of his desk. He knew who was at the door, and he was about to issue what was arguably the most important, yet unpleasant order of his short regency.

"Come!" he barked.

The door opened, and Junius Priscus stepped in. Though demoted from his position as praetorian prefect, Primus had allowed him to remain with the Guard as a tribune.

"Beg your pardon, sir, but the guardsman you asked for is here."

"Show him in," Primus said, with an impatient waving of his hand.

The tribune turned into the hallway and nodded to the waiting man, who

quickly stepped into the room and saluted.

"Guardsman Statius reporting, sir," he said, with his eyes fixed straight ahead.

Primus stood and returned the salute before addressing Priscus. "Leave us." Statius was one of his men, so this confused the tribune. However, he knew better than to argue. As he left and closed the door behind him, he conjectured that the imperial regent had a final mission for the praetorian's most ruthless member.

"Stand at ease," Primus ordered. He read from a sheet of parchment that he'd kept in the middle of his desk. "Guardsman Tiberius Statius Doro. Age, forty-two. Years of service, ten in the legions, fourteen with the praetorians."

"Yes, sir," Statius confirmed. His service record was public knowledge. Why Vespasian's regent would wish to see him was a mystery. He could only surmise that Antonius Primus had a task requiring his special set of skills.

"You've had quite the…*exceptional* year," Primus said slowly.

"I think we all have, sir," Statius replied, his gaze still fixed straight ahead.

"I hear from General Paulinus that you fought beside him and the unfortunate Sabinus atop Capitoline Hill."

"I did what I had to," the guardsman remarked. "And I do regret not being able to save Sabinus. He truly was a noble Roman, even if he did kowtow to Vitellus right up until the end."

"His death, while tragic, certainly makes things less complicated for the emperor," Primus said, in an offhanded remark referring to the age difference between the Flavian brothers. It was a statement that under normal circumstances he would never utter in front of a mere praetorian guardsman.

"Well, I hope you know that I did everything I could to save him," Statius emphasized once more.

"Of course," Primus concurred. "And I see here your request for discharge and retirement from the Praetorian Guard. You do realize with Vespasian having eliminated all potential rivals he will likely reward his loyal guardsmen. There will be a substantial donative given to steadfast soldiers, such as yourself, who remain in his service. And yet, this request is that you be discharged immediately. Why?"

"My reasons are personal, sir," Statius replied. "I'm not as young as I once was, and my injuries from that ill-fated expedition to Maritime Alpes still trouble me. I simply wish to take what is mine and leave Rome. But I

cannot do so without fulfilling my obligations to the Guard."

"Yes, desertion would be an unnecessary crime to add to murder."

The guardsman was stunned at Primus' assertion, and he finally met the regent's cold stare. It stood to reason that there were many who knew about his killing of Galba's heir, Licinianus. But after all the butchery that had transpired over the past year, did anyone even care?

"I did what was expected of me by the emperor who you and Vespasian both swore allegiance to," he stated.

"Perhaps," Primus concurred. "Though you also had a hand in the death of your own centurion during Galba's overthrow. And there are at least five others who have been slain by your hand, including the noble Cornelius Dolabella. Of course, I do not expect to see any written orders regarding this, as that would make Otho, and later Vitellius, culpable. And there was the very real possibility that you were acting on your own, without orders. Make no mistake, I could give a bucket of shit who you killed in the name of what emperor. However, Mucianus will be assuming the regency from me as soon as he arrives in Rome, and he will be scrutinizing the names of praetorian guardsmen whose actions have been unscrupulous, to say nothing of criminal."

"Why are you telling me this, sir?" Statius asked. "If Mucianus is determined to purge the praetorians of every last one of us who were willing to do the previous emperors' dirty work, what do you care?"

"I don't," Primus confessed. "It matters not if he discharges the entire Guard and has the most heinous among you strangled on the Gemonian Stairs. And your crimes, my good praetorian, are by far the worst of any. You see, I *know* you, Guardsman Tiberius Statius Doro; far better than you think I do. You are highly educated, taught yourself to read and write while serving in the legions. You hold more influence over your fellow rankers than any of the officers, especially since the reinstatement of Otho's praetorians. And yet you have declined promotion no less than five times."

The right side of Statius' face twisted into a grin of subtle defiance. "To be honest, I always felt it was safer that way. And don't think I ever shirked in my responsibilities. Nor did I ever disobey orders."

"No, your service record is quite impeccable," Primus remarked. "The Rampart Crown was a nice way of capping off your time in the legions. And I see you always obeyed orders, especially if the price was right. Oh, yes, I know exactly how much you were paid for each one of your assassinations. A

praetorian, doing his legally-binding duty, would not need to be paid a stipend of a thousand denarii for a single execution. That you were paid by members of the imperial court to slay enemies and perceived enemies of the state, without trial or any sense of justice, is what condemns you as a murderer. Or at least it will in the eyes of Mucianus, unless I can make these damning reports disappear."

"I am resigning from the praetorians because I am done with killing," Statius persisted. "Did I take bribes and commit murder? Of course I did, why should I deny it? So what do you want from me?"

"In a moment," Primus said smoothly. He looked back to the document in his hands. His next words made the guardsman feel as if he'd been stabbed through the heart. "You have a daughter, Gaia Stacia Vorena. Ten years old…"

"Nine," Statius interrupted. "And you would do well not to make any threats towards her. Juno's cunt be damned, I don't give a shit if you are Vespasian's regent." In that moment, once his daughter's name had been invoked, he no longer cared about protocols or courtesy towards senior officers. He felt as if Primus were toying with him, and he felt his hand twitching against the pommel of his gladius.

"Stay your hand, my good praetorian," the regent said, noting the motion. "I am not here to threaten you. I have summoned you here to offer you a deal."

"You want someone dead," Statius said, through clenched teeth. He sighed in realization. There could be no other explanation as to why the Regent of the Empire had called him to a private meeting, and then read off the detailed list of his previous crimes. He also knew who it was Antonius Primus wanted killed.

"I want peace within the empire," Primus said earnestly. Despite his own unscrupulous nature, he was tired of fighting against his fellow countrymen and longed for stability in Rome. "And we cannot have a definite peace so long as Emperor Vespasian is forced to suffer rivals. Think of it like when the Divine Augustus had Julius Caesar's son, Caesarean, killed. He declared, 'there can be only one Caesar'."

"Yes, but Caesarean was seventeen," Statius countered. "You want me to kill a boy of six!"

"A boy who will grow into a man one day. And no doubt he will demand vengeance for his father, while claiming his right to the throne. If your sense

of duty, the large donative in this pouch, or the warrant I am about to give you authorizing this necessary—albeit hateful—task is not enough to sway you, then consider what will happen to your daughter, should her father be arrested and tried for murder."

Statius closed his eyes and took a series of deep breaths through his nose. He had acted without scruples so much over the years, that one would think he was a soulless killer. And yet, what Antonius Primus was asking, no, *demanding* he do, was unthinkable. His guts churned. In that moment, he would have rather drawn his gladius and slashed his own neck. Were it not for little Stacia, who he felt was the only good left in his world, he might have done so.

"When this is done," he said slowly, his voice full of venom, "I retire."

"You have my word," Primus replied earnestly. "There will be no record of your previous acts, you will be given a sizeable donative, and yes, you will be honorably discharged and retired from the Praetorian Guard."

Statius nodded and made ready to leave, not even bothering to salute. As he reached the door, he looked over his shoulder. "Just one question. Does Mucianus know what you are doing?"

"Of course he does," Primus asserted. "He could have easily made his way to Rome by now; however, he has left it to me to tie up some of the more…*distasteful* loose ends. He refuses to get his own hands dirty, so he leaves it up to me. And I, in turn, have tasked you with performing the heinous deed. But don't worry, it is my name history will recall in this affair, not yours."



A squad of praetorians had been tasked with guarding the former empress, Galeria, and her family. As her son-in-law, Asiaticus, was dead, that only left her pregnant daughter, Vitellia, and her young son, Germanicus. Galeria had been given leave by Primus to bury her husband, while Lucius' wife, Triaria, had disposed of his remains.

A pair of guardsmen stood outside the main entrance to the house and were surprised when Statius approached them.

"Statius, what gives?" one of the men asked. "You're not our relief."

The guardsman said nothing, but handed the warrant from Primus to the praetorian, whose eyes grew wide.

“Oh, bloody hell,” he muttered. “I am sorry, mate.” Like most praetorians, he had often viewed Statius with a mixture of admiration and contempt, but his heart sank as he read what his fellow guardsman had been ordered to do.

“Stand aside and let me get this over with.”

“Here, I’ll come with you in case there’s trouble.” He let his companion read the order.

“Bugger me,” the other praetorian muttered.

Statius then took the warrant, and with his fellow guardsman, stepped into the house.

Two minutes later, the sound of a boy’s terrified screams were heard, followed by a piercing cry of agony. The praetorian standing outside the house suddenly found himself sweating. He removed his helmet and wiped his brow. He felt ill. As Statius and his companion walked quickly out of the house, the souls of all three men were torn by the wailing screams of a mother’s anguish.



The servant gazed nervously at Antonius Primus, who tossed and turned in a fitful slumber. The young woman took a deep breath and gently shook him by the shoulder.

Primus immediately bolted upright, his eyes wide. He gasped and then shook his head quickly as he tried to compose himself. “Damn it all,” he swore, when he realized it was still the middle of the night. “Why in the name of Mercury’s balls are you disturbing me at this hour?”

“Forgive me, master,” the slave said, with a timid bow. “A praetorian guardsman is here and demands he sees you at once. He is a rather brutish fellow and would not be turned away.”

Primus nodded, knowing right away who it was and why he was there. He waved the servant off and quickly donned a tunic he’d left draped over a chair. Before leaving his bedchamber, he opened a small chest on top of a desk and checked the contents within.

Statius’ expression was grim, his eyes glowing with anger. He thought for a moment that he might break his teeth, so harsh was his scowling bite. His gladius was still drawn and slick with blood; the sight of which terrified the

slaves at the imperial palace. One poor servant stood next to him holding an oil lamp, trembling in fear. He took a deep breath through his nose as he saw Primus walking down the corridor. A slave walked beside him, a couple of steps back, carrying a small chest.

"Guardsman Statius," the regent said. "I take it your duty is done."

"It is done," the praetorian said slowly. "Check the corpse if you'd like. Or you could just step outside; I'm sure his mother's screams can be heard all throughout the Seven Hills."

"Cease with the bloody theatrics," Primus scolded. He then saw the crimson streaked blade. "And put that damned weapon away!"

Statius did as he was told and then stood glaring at Primus.

"I know it was unpleasant," the regent said, with a touch of genuine sympathy. "But at least now it is over. There are no more loose ends, no wayward heirs to try and claim the throne from Vespasian. Here, take this." He opened the chest and pulled out a scroll, which he handed to the praetorian. Statius read the parchment as Primus stood silently by.

Guardsman Tiberius Statius Doro,

Having dispensed with your duties, and after many years of exemplary conduct and service to the empire, you are hereby discharged honorably from the ranks of the Praetorian Guard, and granted the due pension of five thousand denarii. You are hereby free to leave the emperor's service, with his thanks for your long years of duty and sacrifice.

By the authority of Emperor Titus Flavius Vespasian, signed,

Marcus Antonius Primus
Regent of the Empire

"And here is a little added donative for your troubles," Primus said, tossing a small leather pouch to the guardsman.

Statius gave a curt nod and quickly left the hall. As he stepped out into the night air, his feelings of revulsion were suddenly replaced by ones of relief. He resolved to take his daughter and leave Rome that very night, for he could no longer stand the sight of the city. He also decided to sell his armor at the first available opportunity, though he would keep his gladius for

protection. He looked down at the signet ring on his left hand. For a moment, he thought about tearing it off and throwing it into the Tiber, but then decided he should keep it. It would serve as a memento of his past life; a reminder of the great evils he had done, in what he once thought was service to the empire. He would spend the rest of his days seeking atonement, while praying that his daughter would never know of her father's wicked deeds.



During the second week of January, Mucianus finally arrived in Rome. The winter storms across the eastern Mediterranean prevented Vespasian from departing Egypt. It would be some months before Rome could even catch a glimpse of her victorious emperor. Mucianus was immediately recognized as the new imperial regent, while also being granted many honors for his service on the Danube. It was not lost on Primus, or anyone else for that matter, that the senate heaped greater accolades upon his colleague for quelling a barbarian incursion along the Danube, than they did on him for winning the civil war.

On the evening after his triumphant return to Rome, Mucianus found Primus in the formal dining hall of the imperial palace. And while there were a few senators present, most of the guests were military officers.

"Ah, Mucianus!" Primus said, quickly standing up from his couch. His face was a little red, and he appeared to have had several cups of wine already. He waved him over to an empty couch. "Come, join us for this wonderful feast! The larders here are absolutely stuffed with delightful delicacies! That corpulent twat, Vitellius, certainly knew how to eat well."

"I would speak to you in private first," Mucianus replied.

"But, of course," Primus acknowledged with a nod. He then addressed his guests. "Forgive me, my friends. I'll be back in a while. Musicians, play on!"

Since he still did not know his way around the palace, Primus simply found the nearest unoccupied room with a table and a pair of chairs. He was grinning inanely, though he promptly became serious when he noted Mucianus' sober bearing.

"What, am I in trouble?" Primus asked, trying to lighten the mood.

"The emperor sent this to me," Mucianus said, ignoring the question as he handed Vespasian's signet ring to Primus.

"So he did," Primus replied, turning the ring over in his hand. He

shrugged. “I knew my tenure as regent would not be for long, and that it was you he intended to have rule in his stead.”

“You never would have been regent in the first place had you not so brashly attacked the Vitellians without waiting for reinforcements,” Mucianus replied, a trace of irritation in his voice.

“Was it brash? Yes,” Primus admitted. “Had I failed, I would have nailed myself to the damn cross. But it worked. I routed their entire bleeding army and chased them all the way to the streets of Rome! And yes, before you berate me, I will confess the lads got a little out of hand.”

“Plundering is something we do to barbarians and rebellious provinces, not Roman cities,” Mucianus chastised. “And least of all to the capital itself! What happened at Cremona was inexcusable; however, I cannot fault you for what happened here. I will admit that your strategy worked. If the Vitellians had surrendered once they knew they could no longer win, it would have saved the city a lot of needless suffering.”

“So you’re not here to beat me like an errant schoolboy,” Primus said with a grin, which Mucianus finally matched.

“Well, I did rush to the city as fast as possible,” he replied. “I feared the entire palace, as well as the treasury would be completely stripped by the time I arrived.”

“Oh, come now,” Primus replied, feigning hurt feelings. “I am shocked, *shocked* I tell you, that you would accuse me of pilfering from the imperial palace!”

Mucianus raised an eyebrow.

Primus threw his hands up in resignation. “It was only one wagon of trinkets that no one will ever miss. Alright, and a paltry number of slaves to haul it all back to Ephesus for me. As you saw, I did not completely raid the stock of fine silver. Not that the emperor would have minded.”

“Even if you left nothing but a wooden bowl for Vespasian to take his meals from, he would not care,” Mucianus acknowledged.

Primus chuckled, “I sometimes think he’ll have his camp bed placed in the royal bedchambers, as he won’t be able to sleep properly otherwise.”

“And it is the emperor’s business we must oversee,” Mucianus said, becoming serious once more. “I understand the senate has fallen into its typical bickering factions, all seeking to gain favor with the new administration.”

“It’s been a fucking nightmare,” Primus acknowledged. “Vespasian gave

his amnesty a little too freely, I think. The defeated Vitellians, now that they know they're not for the execution square atop the Gemonian Stairs, have become embittered about everything. And even our own factions have fallen into squabbling with each other. I swear, nothing ever gets accomplished. The senate is supposed to rule. About the only thing they have agreed upon is that you be granted *Triumphal Ornaments* for your victories in Moesia. Oh, yes, and they voted to recognize Vespasian as emperor while ratifying the start of his reign as 1 July, although that was really never in doubt. And now I know why I never missed being in that fucking chamber after they exiled me."

"Primus, old boy," Mucianus said, shaking his head. "You are an outstanding general, and one of the bravest soldiers in the whole of the empire. However, you are the worst financier and senator I have ever met."

"And I'm an even worse regent," Primus retorted, tossing the signet ring back to Mucianus. "You can have the bloody thing for all I care."

"I don't wish to be regent for any longer than I have to," Mucianus asserted. "If not for the wreckage of instability the last year of civil wars has left the government, Rome would not require a regent. As it is, given the turbulent seas that preclude travel, I do not expect the emperor to leave Alexandria for at least another month or so. And even then, I advised him to first pay visit to some of the larger eastern metropolises, to secure them in their loyalty. It will likely be June, possibly later, before he even arrives in the capital. At which point, Rome will have been without its rightful emperor for over a year."

"And in the meantime, it is up to us, or rather *you*, to ensure the government is working as smoothly as possible before he arrives," Primus observed. "So what needs to be done?"

"Firstly, we must deal with Vespasian's youngest son," Mucianus replied. "Domitian was hailed as 'Caesar' as soon as he came out of hiding. But he is not emperor, and he needs to have it spelled out to him. As long as his father and brother both live, he never will be Caesar. All the same, he is Vespasian's son, and he is of age, so the emperor will want to get some use out of him."

"So make him your co-regent," Primus remarked. "Keep him firmly under your wing, and then let the emperor decide what to do with him after he finally returns." He then addressed an issue which had vexed him ever since the fighting ended. "With all of the food shortages brought on by the

war, which is compounded by all of the soldiers now encamped near the city, we need someone to better manage grain rations."

"I've already considered that," Mucianus said. "I'm relieving Arrius Varus of his command of the Praetorian Guard and appointing him prefect of the grain supply."

"He won't like that," Primus mused.

"I don't give a damn whether he likes it or not," Mucianus retorted. "He can look at this as a demotion if he chooses. Or he can get it through his head that we need someone of his energy and resourcefulness to ensure the people are fed, rather than serving as a glorified bodyguard. And don't worry, I'll add in a few incentives to make him see reason."

"And what about me?" Primus asked. "The senate may have restored me to my place among them, but you know as well as I, that is not where I belong."

"Agreed. And I think the sooner you are out of Rome the better."

"Great, so make me a governor somewhere," Primus said, with a laugh.

"That's always a possibility," Mucianus concurred. "Hispania Tarraconensis has been terribly mismanaged ever since Galba left. Perhaps we can persuade the emperor to grant you governorship of the province. In the meantime, I think you should go to Vespasian. You can stop off in Ephesus to enjoy some of your newly-won plunder along the way."

"You're too kind," Primus said, standing up from his chair. "Well, if you will excuse me, I am going to celebrate one last night of debauchery in the royal dining hall. You can evict me from the palace in the morning."



That he had won the empire without ever leading his men into battle deeply troubled Vespasian. He was a fighting general, who had always deplored the idea of leading his men from the safety of well behind the battle lines. To have sent entire armies to fight on his behalf, while he remained in Judea and Egypt, was abhorrent. Still, he did what he had to do. And as his most recent injuries, including from when he took an arrow to the foot at Jotapata, reminded him, it was time to let the younger generation do the actual fighting. Vespasian had also turned sixty back in November. He refused to allow himself to feel old, but the pains brought on by years of campaigning and numerous wounds told him otherwise.

It was now early February. Word of his army's final victory had finally reached him in the east. Vespasian would at last sail from Alexandria, and over the next few months tour the eastern provinces before finally returning home. While his armies continued to celebrate their general's rise to emperor, the conqueror himself sat alone in his chambers with little more than a small oil lamp to see by. There was a knock at the door, and though he did not answer, it was soon opened by his son.

"Forgive me if I am disturbing you, Caesar," Titus said, with a short bow.

"*Caesar*," Vespasian replied, shaking his head slowly, almost in disbelief.

Titus noticed a small item he was turning over in his hands. "What have you there?" His father placed what appeared to be a crude carved wooden animal on the desk.

"I think it was supposed to be a horse," he replied, trying to force a smile.

As he saw the carving, Titus immediately understood the reason for his father's somber demeanor. "I remember when Domitilla made that for you," he said. "What was she, six?"

"Seven," Vespasian corrected. "She later said it looked more like a mule. Fitting, given the years I spent trading the unruly beasts." He gave a soft chuckle at the memory. A short silence followed before he asked, "Has it really been more than a year since she departed this world?"

"More than two, actually," Titus replied.

Vespasian nodded slowly. "And do you remember what I told you, when we first received word about her untimely death?"

"You said there would be a time for mourning my sister," the young legate answered. "But that we had our duty to perform, and that we could not allow even the gravest personal tragedy to undermine our commitment to our soldiers and to Rome."

"That duty has been unrelenting," Vespasian observed. "No sooner did we corner these Jewish rebels, then all hell broke loose in Rome. This last year we have been consumed with trying to save the empire while containing the Judean seditionists. But now, I think it is finally time that we can mourn your dear sister."

"Yes, sir." Though Titus had long since shed his tears in private for Domitilla, his father's deportment told him the old general had not.

"Tomorrow I leave for Rome," Vespasian said. "I will be taking Mucianus' advice and stopping off first in Cyprus, Ephesus, and Athens before returning home. So starting tomorrow, until the end of my days, I will

be once more consumed by duty. But you know what I wish for?" Titus shook his head as his father paused and took a deep breath, emotions nearly overcoming him. "For this one night, I wish to be neither general nor emperor, but simply a father…a father who still loves his daughter."

Titus nodded in understanding and left the room, quietly closing the door behind him. He could already see the tears welling up in his father's eyes, and he did not wish to be there when his pent up sorrows of the past two years finally overcame him. Vespasian needed this one night alone, that he may finally heal from the terrible tragedy that no parent should ever have to endure.

Once outside the room, Titus signaled for the guard beside the door to follow him. At the main entrance to the governor's palace, he located the decanus in charge of the current watch.

"The emperor is not to be disturbed tonight under *any* circumstances," Titus said sternly.

"Yes, sir," the sergeant replied.

"Any issues, regardless of the emergency, you come find me," the legate added. "Unless the palace is burning down, no one is to see the emperor this night, and I mean *no one*."

"Understood."

The next day, Vespasian left Alexandria without fanfare or grand speeches. Even Tiberius Alexander was unaware of his departure until Titus met with him over breakfast. It was a rather pleasant morning, and the two men enjoyed their meal out on a palace balcony, overlooking the harbor.

"A pity," Alexander said, "I would have liked to see the old general off." A glare from Titus let him realize his slippage of the tongue. "Beg your pardon, though I think even Vespasian is struggling to think of himself as emperor."

"Him more than anyone else," Titus noted.

"I hope he becomes accustomed to it soon," Alexander remarked. "There will be no rest for him, even though the civil wars are finally over. I did reassure him that I have matters well in hand here. Grain shipments have resumed, and the people have been compelled to see reason regarding the new taxes imposed."

"Strangling a few riotous ringleaders will do that," Titus observed. "Still, Rome's internal wars may finally be over, but the empire is most certainly

not at peace. Those damned traitors, Julius Civilis and Julius Sabinus, still control much of Gaul and Germania Inferior. Did you know they are attempting to establish an independent Kingdom of Gaul?"

Alexander laughed at the absurdity, then said, "A pity that treacherous bastard, Sabinus, bears the same name as your late uncle."

"Well, he's of no relation to us," Titus asserted. "My brother-in-law is massing a large force to deal with the situation. I do hope the rebels come to their senses, especially the faithless legions that rallied to their cause, lest we be required to butcher another damned province!"

Alexander and Titus would become well acquainted over the coming months. Vespasian had sought to reward the Prefect of Egypt for his stellar service to the empire, in no small part for being the very man who compelled the eastern legions to declare him emperor. Vespasian had therefore decided to elevate him into the senatorial class of Roman society. He knew Alexander was an accomplished military leader, with much strategic savvy, who was also a logistical genius. As such, he was named as Titus' chief-of-staff for the upcoming campaign in Judea. With all that transpired during the Year of the Four Emperors, it was easy to forget there was still a rebellion to suppress. There would be no peace within the empire until the fall of Jerusalem.

Chapter XXXVII: Rise of the Artorians

Ariminum
12 February 70 A.D.
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The breeze coming off the sea felt warm and pleasant in contrast to the dark feelings that plagued Gaius. He stood on the balcony of the villa that served as his temporary home. The new governor for Ariminum had allowed the optio to stay on the second floor of his personal villa near the crossroads of the Via Aemilia and Via Flaminia. This was done out of deference to the deceased Lucius Artorius. It was prudently never mentioned that the two Artorian brothers faced each other on opposing sides at the Second Battle of Bedriacum. Gaius had come ostensibly to be with his sister-in-law, though this had proven to be rather awkward. Laura was still young enough to bear children, and it was only natural that she would eventually look to remarry. Though she had loved Lucius, she knew she could never move on while she remained at Ariminum. She left within two weeks of her brother-in-law's arrival.

Four months had passed since his terrible injury, and Gaius was slowly regaining use of his right arm. His hand still trembled slightly and at times felt numb, though he could now hold his gladius without dropping it. His upper arm bore a wide and rough looking scar. Even after all this time, there was a lot of yellowish discoloration beneath the skin. Granted, it was a marked improvement over the deep purple that had enveloped his arm prior. He could not fully bend his elbow before the muscles stiffened up, but this was also slowly improving. He knew he was almost to the end of his convalescent leave, and he would have to prove himself still able to fight on a battle line if he were to save himself from being discharged as unfit.

As he gazed over the balcony on a brisk morning, he saw a rider approaching wearing a dark cloak and red tunic. Even from a distance, he knew immediately who it was, and it brought the first smile to his face in over a month. He was further glad to see the rider stopping her horse just

outside of the governor's villa.

"Aula!" he called down.

She threw back her hood. "Hello, Gaius." She looked up at him, smiling. "It was raining most of the way up here, and I am nearly soaked! Of course, now that I've arrived, the sun has decided to grace us."

Gaius laughed and made his way down the stairs. A servant had opened the front door for Aula. Her hair was damp and disheveled, but otherwise she had her perpetual smile and warm demeanor about her.

"I had to drop off a series of dispatches to the governor," she said. "He told me you were staying here."

"For the time being," Gaius replied. "That is, until this damned arm decides if it's going to ever be of use to me." He grimaced as he held up the injured limb. He forced a grin and embraced Aula, awkwardly wondering if he should kiss her. Even after all this time, he still did not know for certain what their futures would hold.

"Vespasian is undisputed ruler of the Roman world, in part thanks to you," Aula said, as they walked through the gardens.

"I was just one on the battle line among many," he replied.

"I heard about how you disabled the Vitellian scorpions and ballistae," Aula added. "Even if they don't know your name, all of Rome knows of your valor."

"Valor," Gaius replied. "My brother was valiant. It was by the cruelty of the fates that he fought for the wrong side and paid for it with his life."

"Fate had nothing to do with it," Aula retorted. She shook her head, her tone softening. "I am sorry, Gaius. Like my parents, I have always been skeptical as to any belief in the gods or fate. But whether or not they exist, we make our own path, not them. Lucius chose to serve Vitellius, because he felt it was his duty. And it was not fate that killed him."

Her words were harsh, but Gaius knew he need to hear them. And so he simply nodded. "I know. I was echoing my mother's words. She would rather believe the gods took Lucius from her, rather than accept that one of her sons helped bring about the death of the other. Neither of us recognized each other that night. Had one of my legionaries not brought Lucius down with his javelin, it is highly probable he would have felled me with his sword."

"What will you do now?" Aula asked, quickly changing the subject.

"I've been given until the end of this month to get my strength back," Gaius replied. "I will return Judea and help our lads end that horrid

rebellion."

"With all that has happened over the past year, I almost forgot about the Jewish uprising," Aula remarked.

"Thankfully, they have been fighting their own civil war. We were simply keeping them contained to the Jerusalem district while they killed each other off. But now that Vespasian has become emperor, he will no doubt want the rebels finished and Jerusalem claimed as a prize for Rome. I doubt anything will happen before spring, though. The roads there are nothing but dirt paths that become impenetrable quagmires during the winter rains. And given the storms upon the seas this time of year, it will probably be another month or so before the eastern armies can begin returning to Judea by ship." He decided to change the subject from the rather grim undertaking that still awaited the Imperial Army in the east. "But enough about that. What will *you* do now?"

"With Sabinus dead, I really don't know," Aula said. "Primus was sent back to Vespasian, likely because Mucianus could no longer stand the sight of him."

Both laughed at this assessment.

Aula continued, "With the factions now reconciled, and all the powerful patricians—the ones who survived the war—having their own private couriers, my services are no longer needed. Still, Mucianus has promised me an 'important' place at the imperial court once Vespasian returns to Rome."

"I never much envisioned you as a courtier," Gaius remarked. "Though I suppose that is more expected, rather than traipsing about the empire in a red tunic, with a sword on your hip."

"It was an adventure," Aula said, with her mischievous grin. "Today was my last ride as an imperial courier. You know, there were many days I wondered if I would survive it all. Of course, that is probably a daily occurrence for you."

"Sometimes."

The doors leading from the gardens to the entrance hall were opened, and a man wearing a legate's armor was escorted through.

"General Primus, sir," Gaius said, instinctively coming to attention.

"At ease, soldier, at ease," the former Flavian general said, with an easy wave of his hand. He nodded to Aula. "Lady Vale. I take it you told him I was coming?"

"Um, not yet," Aula said, with embarrassment.

“Wait, you knew he was coming?” Gaius asked. He furrowed his brow as he addressed Primus. “Beg your pardon, sir, but what exactly do you need from a legionary optio?”

“I need you to be more than just an optio,” he explained. “Lady Aula here is rather persistent, to say the least. She told me about your brother—the gods rest him—and how he was a member of the equites.”

“That he was, sir. However, our family only had enough money and influence to see to his career path. I had to find my own way.”

“Yes, and done well, too,” Primus recalled. “I’ve only awarded a handful of Civic Crowns in my lifetime, and I think yours will probably be among the last. However, I did not come to speak about the past, but rather the future.”

“Your family are still members of the equites,” Aula explained. “With Lucius gone, and him having no sons…”

“All rights and titles of his are eligible to pass on to you,” Primus finished for her.

“Are you saying that because my brother’s dead, I can now take up the career path of the equites?” Gaius asked, completely perplexed.

“If you want to put it that way, yes. It’s either that or you can return to the legion and pray they don’t find you medically unfit and cast you out of the ranks. Besides, I think your talents are wasted as a ranker on the battle line.”

“What talents are those, sir?”

Primus sighed in partial frustration. “Really?” he asked. “Do I need to spell it out for you? Damn it, my boy, it’s your skill with artillery that the army can best utilize! You ended the Siege of Tigranocerta by lobbing the head of an enemy general right into the laps of his mates. And it was your skill directing catapult fire that allowed us to breach the Vitellian camp at Cremona…well, right up until the damn thing blew apart in your face.”

He then produced a scroll which he handed to Gaius. The young soldier’s eyes widened as he read the orders:

Optio Gaius Artorius Armiger,

You are hereby discharged from the ranks of Legio X, Fretensis, and are reassigned as Tribune of Artillery to the armies in Judea, under direct command of General Titus Flavius Vespasian, the Prince Imperial.

Signed,

Marcus Antonius Primus
Regent of the Empire

"I…I thought you weren't regent anymore, sir?" Gaius asked.

"I'm not," Primus said, with a devious grin. "But that doesn't mean I cannot sign a set of orders and date them to a time when I was still regent. Anyway, you can thank Lady Aula for this. You are to finish your convalescent leave and then get your ass on the first boat bound for Judea. From there you will report directly to General Titus, and help him bombard the shit out of those Jewish zealots who can't seem to figure out they've been conquered. And now, if you will excuse me, I have a ship to catch for Ephesus." He nodded to Aula. "My lady."

Even after Primus left, Gaius stood in a state of shock, clutching the scroll tightly in his hands.

"So that's it?" he asked. "Just like that, and I am now a member of the equites?"

"It is your right to assume the status vacated by Lucius," Aula reassured him. "At least that's how I emphasized it to Primus."

"I hope you didn't have to sleep with him as well," Gaius chuckled.

"Ha!" Aula retorted. "While he is certainly charming and handsome, Marcus Antonius Primus is the worst kind of rogue. Besides, while his wife may not care how many whores or slaves he takes into his bed, the daughter of a patrician she might frown upon." She placed her arms around his neck. "And anyway, I wanted to save my *special* favors for someone else."

Gaius grinned broadly as he took Aula into his arms and kissed her deeply. His life had completely changed. Out of the anguish of tragedy, it seemed he was born into a whole new world. He would be returning to Judea in the next few weeks. He hoped by then he would realize that he was no longer a plebeian from the ranks, but a tribune from the equites. And he would have to leave Aula once more. But now he knew beyond all doubt, that Aula Cursia Vale would be waiting for him.



The seas swelled and waves crashed against the huge warship as the emperor's personal armada sailed into Athens. Among Vespasian's entourage

that accompanied him on his tour through the eastern provinces, and eventually on to Rome, was the venerable General Marcus Ulpius Trajan. Though reluctant to leave the Tenth Legion, he had already extended his command tour well beyond the normal three-year duration. The emperor emphasized the need for his most reliable soldiers to accompany him into the political teeth of the senate.

"And Bassus will do well," Vespasian reasoned, as the two stood atop the large forecastle of the ship. "He proved himself during the Siege of Rome, so I thought he would better serve the empire by taking your command of the Tenth rather than returning to the Danube to sit on his ass for another three years."

"He also understands siege warfare," Trajan observed. "And is an expert on the employment of artillery."

"The fact that he was a Flavian loyalist during the civil war didn't hurt," the emperor remarked with a chuckle. "Still, I would hope all of our colleagues are now loyalists."

"Mucianus will likely sort them out well before we arrive in Rome."

"Given the months it is going to take for us to play political theater in the eastern provinces, I hope he doesn't get too comfortable in his position as regent."

"Give him the consulship and follow it up with making him governor somewhere. He'll be happy."

"Yes," Vespasian nodded. "And speaking of the consulship, I think you should sit in the chair for a suffect term next year."

"A short, suffect consulship would suit me," the general stated. "And if I may be so bold, Caesar, I think you should take a more proactive role in the senate than your recent predecessors. Historically, the senate seems to function better when the emperor is involved in its daily workings."

"And to think I avoided actively serving in the senate as much as possible over the last forty years," Vespasian grumbled, though his face bore a knowing grin. "Since Primus got me elected consul for the full year term, I should at least show up on the senate floor, once we return."

The two men shared a knowing laugh as the ship continued to lurch forward towards the large harbor. An entire entourage from the imperial governor of Greece awaited them, as did the mayors of Athens, Sparta, Corinth, and Thessalonica.

"I'm beginning to think that Nero's time spent on the stage was not such

a waste after all," Vespasian said. "I feel like a damn street performer, having to recite my lines exactly, whenever we meet with any of these damned governors and magistrates."

"Nero was right about one thing," Trajan observed. "This is a new age for Rome, though he did not live to see it. We have closed out one chapter in the history of the world, and opened another. The Julio-Claudians have earned their place in history. Now it is time for the House of the Flavians to do the same. But here, before we dock and have to put on our best thespian performances, I brought this for us."

Trajan snapped his fingers and signaled to his manservant, who promptly headed below deck. A minute later, several men were seen carrying an amphora of wine. Cups were passed around quickly to the emperor and members of his entourage.

"What's all this?" Vespasian asked. "I suppose you are about to give us a great speech in the same vein as Nero?"

"Not quite," Trajan replied. "Mine will be much shorter." He held aloft his full cup, as the emperor and courtiers did the same. Trajan then shouted loud enough for all aboard to hear, as well as those on the docks, as the ship glided up beside them. "A toast to Emperor Titus Flavius Vespasian. The Reign of the Tyrants is now over…Hail, Caesar!"



Emperor Vespasian

Appendix A: Historical Afterward

The following are the known or speculated historical fates of select persons from The Year of the Four Emperors:



Marcus Cocceius Nerva became a prominent member of Vespasian's imperial council, as well as continuing as Domitian's mentor. He was twice elected consul, the first in 71 A.D., where he served as colleague to Emperor Vespasian. His next term came during the reign of Domitian, in 90 A.D. In September of 96, following the murder of Domitian, Nerva was proclaimed emperor by the senate. Unmarried and childless, he quickly adopted a worthy heir in the younger Marcus Ulpius Trajan. He died on 27 January 98 A.D., at the age of sixty-seven. Though his brief reign would last less than two years, he founded the Nerva-Antonine Dynasty, ushering in a hundred years of peace and prosperity for the empire.



Marcus Ulpius Trajan returned to Rome with Vespasian in 70 A.D., where he was awarded a term as suffect consul. During the reign of the Flavian emperors, he served at least four governorships, including Hispania Baetica, North Africa, and Anatolia in what is now western Turkey, as well as Syria. During his tenure in Syria, his political and military savvy prevented an invasion from Parthia. In later years he became a highly respected statesman, loved by many, and always managing to keep above the political fray. In 96 A.D. his son, who also bore the same name, was adopted by Emperor Nerva as his successor. Emperor Trajan became one of Rome's most revered and successful rulers of all time, with the empire reaching the pinnacle of its size and power under his reign. It is speculated that his father died either just before or just after his rise to become Caesar. Emperor Trajan honored his father's legacy on both coinage, as well as naming a city in North Africa after him.



A gold aureus from Emperor Trajan's reign



Marcus Antonius Primus departed Rome soon after Mucianus replaced him as imperial regent. He refused the consulship, even though the senate begged him to accept, and the promised governorship never manifested itself. This is likely because, while Vespasian was grateful to Primus for winning him the empire, it did not change the reality that he was still a terrible administrator and financier. The famous Roman poet and satirist, Martial, addressed four of his twelve famous *Epigrams* to the Flavian general. As Primus was such an enigma, he was the perfect candidate for satire. His date of death is unknown, but as the Epigrams of Martial are the last place his name is recorded, it is speculated he died in the early 2nd century A.D., during the reign of Trajan. Tacitus perhaps best sums him up as, *'Brave in action, ready of speech, clever at bringing others into odium, powerful in times of civil war and rebellion, greedy, extravagant, in peace a bad citizen, in war an ally not to be despised.'*

Gaius Licinius Mucianus remained as regent until Vespasian's arrival in Rome. He was twice elected consul, in 70 and 72 A.D. And while there are no surviving records of his death, since he is not mentioned at all during the reigns of Titus and Domitian, it is assumed he died sometime before 79 A.D.



Tiberius Julius Alexander was sent to Judea to aid Titus in suppressing the Jewish Revolt and capturing Jerusalem. Because he was a Jew, very knowledgeable of the region and its people, as well as an accomplished military officer in his own right, he became the commanding general's chief-of-staff. As some sources state he was Titus' second-in-command, it is possible that Vespasian elevated him into Rome's senatorial class.

Upon returning to Rome, Alexander served as one of the Prefects of the Praetorian Guard, which may indicate that he remained a member of the equites. However, as Titus was given the other position, it makes it unclear as to which of Rome's noble classes Alexander ended up in. Regardless, he achieved a position that was unparalleled by one who was both a Jew, as well as of Egyptian origin. Both carried great stigma in Roman society. In Juvenal's *Satire*, he complains of the Forum's triumphal statues, *'Here some Egyptian had the nerve to set up his titles. At his image it's right to do little more than piss!'* This was a sad example of where xenophobia ran rampant, despite Alexander's lengthy service to the empire. His date of death is not recorded, though history remembers him as the Jewish-Roman who first declared Vespasian Emperor.



Gaius Suetonius Paulinus faded into obscurity, following the rise of Vespasian. As he never held another governorship nor consulship, despite the level of respect Vespasian held for him, it is likely that he had tired of politics and decided to retire to private life. Though his often questioned service as one of Otho's generals cast a blight on his reputation, his defeat of Boudicca and saving of the Province of Britannia would forever secure his place in the annals of history.

Aulus Caecina Alienus was surprisingly welcomed by Vespasian, given many honors, as well as a place at the imperial court. Little else is known about the rest of his life, except that he proved to be ever the conspirer, and in 79 A.D. hatched a plot against the emperor, with the help of a senator named Clodius Eprius Marcellus. Both men were convicted and sentenced to death. Marcellus committed suicide, while Caecina was executed, most likely by strangulation atop the Gemonian Stairs.

Silius Italicus proved to be a political survivalist in the aftermath of Vitellius' overthrow and death. For his efforts to mediate a surrender, Vespasian treated him well. He was named Proconsul of Asia Minor in 77 A.D., which appears to be the last significant post he held. He outlived the Flavian emperors without any further political postings or incidents. During his later years he became a renowned poet and historian. He appears to have been on friendly terms with Emperor Domitian, who he posthumously eulogizes in some of his later works. His twelve-thousand line epic, *Punica*, is one of the most detailed accounts of the Second Punic War still in existence. This was completed around the year 96, just after the rise of

Emperor Nerva.

He retired to the region of Campania, where ill health prevented his returning to Rome for the celebration honoring the ascension of Emperor Trajan. In 103 A.D. he was diagnosed with an unknown, but incurable tumor. He soon after committed suicide by means of self-starvation at the age of seventy-five, maintaining a rather cheerful demeanor until the very end. The historian, Pliny, states that he was the last senator to die who had once been consul under Nero. Today, Silius' legacy is far more tied into his histories and epic poems, leading many of his readers to forget that he had lived through some of the most tumultuous times in Rome's long history.

Quintus Petillius Cerealis was lauded for his valor by his father-in-law, Emperor Vespasian, upon his return to Rome. He was immediately sent to Germania to put down the Batavian Revolt, while being given command of Legio XIV, Gemina Martia Victrix, which had been recalled from Britannia. By mid-70 A.D., he had succeeded in suppressing the Batavians, and the following year he was appointed Governor of Britannia. He brought with him the newly raised Legio II, Adiutrix, and was accompanied by Julius Agricola, who was given command of Legio XX, Valeria Victrix. Together they campaigned against their former allies, the Brigantes in what is now northern England. Though militarily successful, they failed to restore their ally, Queen Cartimandua, to the Brigantes throne.

Cerealis returned to Rome in 74 A.D., where he served his first consulship. He served a second consulship nine years later, where he was colleague to his brother-in-law, Emperor Domitian. And though long since widowed, following the death of his wife, Vespasian's daughter, Domitilla, he never remarried. Tacitus described him as, *'A bold soldier rather than a careful general, and preferred to stake everything on the issue of a single engagement. He possessed natural eloquence of a kind that readily appealed to his soldiers. His loyalty to his superiors was unshakable.'*

Of interesting note: Cerealis' daughter, Flavia Domitilla, was banished to the island of Pandataria by her uncle, Emperor Domitian, on the charge of atheism. This was a common charge levied against Romans who had converted to 'Jewish ways', more specifically the sect which became modern

Christianity. As Cerealis' date of death is not recorded, it is unknown if he was still alive when his daughter was condemned and banished. Since 1595, Flavia Domitilla has been revered as a saint in both the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. Her Saint's Day is 12 May.



Saint Flavia Domitilla

Galeria Fundana and the surviving members of Vitellius' family were shown exceptional clemency by Vespasian. The emperor even helped her recently widowed daughter, Vitellia, to find a suitable husband. Vespasian even paid the dowry for his defeated rival's daughter.

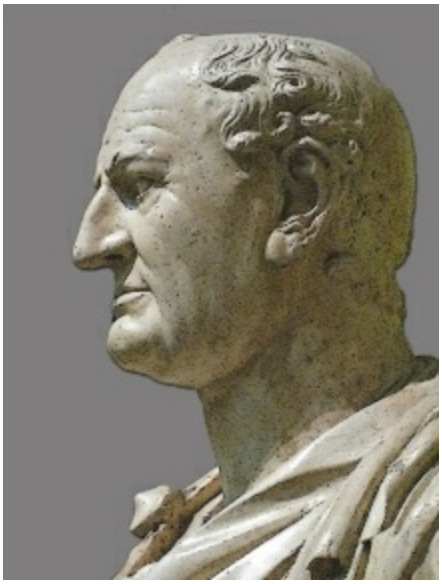
Lucilius Bassus was transferred from Legio XI and sent to replace Trajan as commanding legate of Legio X in Judea. He took part in the Siege of Jerusalem under Titus, and following the war was named commander-in-chief of Roman forces in Judea. He was then tasked with mopping up all remnants of the rebellion, successfully destroying the Jewish strongholds of Herodium and Machaerus. One of these fell when the Romans captured a young and rather brazen defender, stripped him naked, and had him flogged in full view of the defenses. The man's cries were so pitiful, that once he was hung on the cross, the garrison immediately agreed to abandon the fortress, if their friend would be freed.

Bassus had intended to lay siege to the Herodian fortress of Masada; however, in late 72 A.D. he fell ill and died. He was replaced by the venerable Flavius Silva, who took command of Legio X and captured Masada the following year. The massive earthen ramp built by the Romans

still stands to this day.



Flavius Silva



With no other potential rivals, Emperor Vespasian returned to Rome in triumph. He dispatched Cerealis to put down the Batavian rebellion, while leaving Titus to finish suppressing the Jewish revolt. Following the resolution of both, he ordered the doors to the Temple of Janus closed, at last ushering in the much sought after time of peace.

Due to his humble origins, he avoided the ostentatious pomp of many of his predecessors, while his amiable yet strong personality endeared him to both plebeian and patrician alike. He was both frugal and generous in equal

measure, using imperial coin to aid citizens afflicted by natural disasters, rather than to expand his own wealth.

He ruled for ten years, before dying of a fever at the age of sixty-nine. His reign brought about much-needed stability to the Roman Empire, and ushered in the fairly short, albeit historically important Flavian Dynasty.



The Flavian Emperors: Vespasian (69-79 A.D.), Titus (79-81), Domitian (81-96)

Appendix B: 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
Decani – 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

With the stories The Year of the Four Emperors and The Rise of the Flavians complete, the Trilogy of the Great Jewish Revolt can now conclude with,

Soldier of Rome: The Fall of Jerusalem



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