

THE TRIBUNE

A Novel of Ancient Rome

By

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Prologue

A man's life may end and yet begin again, even from one breath to the next. My name is Lucius Aurelius Valens, and I am a soldier in the service of Rome. I know what I say is true.

For it happened to me.

Not so long ago, if anyone else had made such a claim I would have dismissed it as a tavern tale told after drinking too much unwatered wine – or as the product of a disordered mind.

But now...

Now I see the world in a different light. What I once held certain seems more shadow than substance. And what I once would have laughed at as mere superstition has stepped from the heavens into our own mortal world.

I can only tell you what I saw and heard and felt and learned. You must judge for yourselves whether I speak the truth – or whether I have simply lost all sense and reason.

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But first, you must know something of who I am.

I was born in Rome during the twenty-fourth year after Octavian, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, took the title Augustus and became ruler of the entire civilized world. The long and bloody civil wars that had destroyed the old Republic were over. Augustus was still slowly and shrewdly building a new order on the ashes of the old. And my father, a member of the knightly class, was a rising man in that new order.

He had great ambitions for himself and for me, his only son.

To fulfill those aspirations, he saw to my education and used his influence to secure my first military posting – the necessary first step on the road to greater glory. In this, he acted honorably and justly, as any father would.

This I acknowledge.

But I confess that my father and I had little else in common. His life was consumed with business, with profits and investments – and with trading favors to advance our family's interests. He spent his days in pursuit of wealth and the power that comes from wealth.

I did not share his passions.

Even as a boy, I coveted one thing only.

Honor.

Even now, even after everything I have lived through, there is still something in that single, short word that speeds my pulse.

From my youth, I longed to be known as a man of honor – to be respected by friend and foe alike as a man who would do what was right at all times and in all places.

My father considered this sheer folly and fought hard to turn my mind toward more practical and sensible aims. He blamed my mother's father for filling my head with what he called "idle dreams of profitless distinction."

He was right.

My grandfather was already old when he married. He had no sons, and only one daughter – my mother. As a child, I spent part of every summer on his farm, helping with the harvest and listening to his stories of war and the legions.

He was a veteran soldier who had risen through the ranks to become a senior centurion before finally retiring to the farm he had earned with his service. He bore many scars and had earned many awards for bravery.

But his most valued possession was a plain gold ring – a ring given to him by Augustus himself.

"Look at it, Lucius," my grandfather would say on some evenings, as we sat eating together at a table in his simple kitchen. Then he'd hold his hand up to the lamp, letting the flickering light glint off the aureate circle on a finger of his left hand. "It seems such a little thing, doesn't it? Someone like your father would call it just a piece of common jewelry. But it is more than that. Much more. You know that, don't you?"

I would nod, waiting eagerly as always for the old and familiar tale.

Forty years before I was born, my grandfather was a centurion in a legion commanded by Octavian, who was then only nineteen years old. The assassination of Caesar had just thrown Rome and all the provinces into chaos. Most men shifted their allegiances with the prevailing winds, but not my grandfather. He had served Caesar, and he decided to keep faith by obeying the orders of his beloved general's adopted son.

At the time, Octavian had allied himself with the Senate against Marcus Antonius, Caesar's old lieutenant. Antonius had angered him by denying his inheritance and opposing his political plans.

Their two armies clashed in a fierce battle around the city of Mutina in northern Italy.

At one point in the fray, Antonius' troops tore a gap in the legion's line. The standard-bearer went down, pierced by a javelin. Octavian, seeing his legionaries wavering and beginning to panic, snatched up the Eagle himself and held it aloft. My grandfather rallied those closest to him and led them back to the Eagle's defense – arriving just in time to fend off a ferocious attack by enemy soldiers. During the frantic melee, he protected Octavian with his own shield, despite taking several wounds himself.

The next day, as he lay in the hospital tent, Octavian came to see him.

"Well, Marcus Valerius," said the young man who would one day rule all of Rome. "I've come to thank you for saving my life. What can I give you as a sign of my gratitude?"

But my grandfather just shook his head. "There's no need, sir. You owe me nothing."

Octavian chuckled. "I hardly think so. Like any man of sense, I put a high value on my own skin. Tell me what I can do to repay you."

Again my grandfather shook his head. "You're under a misapprehension, sir. I didn't fight to save your life. I fought to save the Eagle – and the honor of our legion."

Clearly startled, Octavian stared down at him in silence for a few moments, then he turned on his heel and left without saying another word.

A week later, though, he sent his gift. It was a plain gold ring and it bore a simple inscription engraved on the inner surface: Honor and Truth.

From that day forward, my grandfather wore that ring with pride.

And now I wear it.

It came to me on the day I came of age. My grandfather, though already in his eighties, traveled to Rome for the occasion. He was thinner than when I'd last seen him, but he still moved spryly and had the same fierce gaze that could cow even my father into silence. After the feasting was over, he called me to his side. Before I could say anything, he slipped the ring off his own finger and placed it on mine.

"This is yours now, Lucius," he said simply, looking straight into my eyes. "My honor is now your honor. Uphold it. Act always in honor and in truth. Never shame me."

I nodded dumbly, too overcome with emotion to speak.

Then my grandfather smiled. "You are my true heir, Lucius. You will be worthy. I have seen it."

He died later that same year – carried off by a fever that took hold in one of his old wounds.

In all the years since, in everything that I have done and refused to do, I have tried to keep my grandfather's last commandment. It has never been easy. And I am sure that I have failed far more often than I would like to admit.

Still, I have always tried to do what is right. I have always tried to speak the truth.

Listen to me now, then, as I tell you a strange and frightening and marvelous story.

Listen.

And, if you can, believe.

Chapter I

I had been on the road from Apamea since before dawn – riding hard to see the aftermath of a massacre.

Sweat pricked under my armor, trickling down my ribs. Though it was still morning, the heat was already intense. Smoke stained the sky above me as I turned my horse off the main road and trotted up a narrow, tree-lined track. Ahead, I could see the walled farm compound that had once been the heart of a large country estate. The black shapes of carrion birds circled low overhead.

It was August in the fifth year of Tiberius Caesar, and it was the height of the summer. Eight years had passed since my grandfather gave me his blessing and his ring. I was a tribune of the Sixth Legion. This was my second assignment since taking the military oath. I'd spent the first four years of my army career along the Rhine, commanding a cohort of light infantry in the endless wars against the German barbarians. Now, I'd been promoted and transferred to the Sixth – one of four legions garrisoning the province of Syria against any attack by our old Parthian enemies.

The confidential reports I'd studied before arriving had described the province as peaceful and prosperous. Our treaty with Parthia still held firm. The nomad tribes along the desert frontier were quiet. The Syrians themselves were said to be placid and happy under our rule. Under those circumstances, I'd expected to spend a restful time wrestling with the details of legionary administration and army law, acquiring more of the skills and knowledge – and influential friends – I would need to advance to higher command.

I was wrong.

Syria was not at peace. It was at war with itself.

The main gate of the farmstead hung loose, battered off its hinges by a ram. The smoke was thicker now.

I urged my mount forward through the open gate. A raven shrieked and soared into the sky as I rode past.

The dead were everywhere.

Mutilated bodies were strewn across the hard-packed earth. Others lay crumpled in and around the adjoining barns, granaries, and slave quarters. Soldiers stripped to their tunics were hauling more corpses out of the splendid stone villa standing at the center of the compound.

Ahead of me, an officer in armor and a scarlet cloak sat on a horse, issuing clipped, angry orders to the men at work.

Smoke from burning outbuildings hung heavy in the still, stagnant air. Its acrid stench burned my throat and stung my eyes. Beneath the pall, clouds of swollen black flies droned lazily above the corpses of both men and beasts – feasting on the torn flesh and dried blood.

I swallowed hard against the sour taste of bile rising into my mouth. My horse, a sprightly Spanish mare I'd named Dancer, whinnied uneasily, unnerved by the grotesque sights and smells all around us. I leaned forward and calmed her with a soft pat. When she was steadier I rode slowly on toward the officer in command, picking a careful path through the scattered dead.

A young woman, probably a serving girl, lay huddled off to one side. She would have been pretty, if it weren't for the cruel sword slash across her face. Close by, an older man, a steward perhaps, sat propped up against a wall. His dead eyes were still full of horror. He'd been stabbed in the stomach by a spear and left to die in agony. A few yards farther on, the bodies of two small children – a little olive-skinned girl and a younger boy who could only have just left his mother's arms – were heaped one on top of the other. Their skulls had been smashed in.

Olive oil from shattered jars pooled on the ground nearby, already turning rancid in the hot sun. Sacks of dried figs and other staples had been slashed open and tossed aside. I could see shards of broken glass glinting in the sun amid heaps of broken pottery and splintered furniture.

It was the same everywhere I looked. More corpses. More wreckage. More senseless slaughter. The villains who'd done this hadn't shown mercy to anyone, not to a single man, woman, or child. They'd even butchered the animals, the pigs, sheep, and goats.

I felt sick.

Death is a soldier's trade. When you go into battle, you either kill or you get killed. Anyone who picks up a sword without admitting that to himself is a fool or a liar. I hope that I am neither.

But this hadn't been a battle. This had been a massacre of innocents. These deaths were without meaning. There was no honor or glory here, only waste and cruelty and pointless destruction.

My jaw tightened. I wanted to find the men responsible for this butchery. I wanted them to know that their crimes would cost them their lives.

I reined in beside the stern-faced officer watching the legionaries at their grim work. He grunted in disgust and yanked the red-crested helmet off his

head in one swift motion, cradling it under his arm. Then he ran a weary hand through his close-cropped, graying hair.

“By the gods, Valens,” he muttered angrily to me. “What a cursed shambles!”

I nodded silently. There wasn’t anything I could say.

The legate, Titus Petronius Faustus, commander of the Sixth Legion, had every right to be furious.

The ravaged estate before us had belonged to a wealthy Syrian landowner, a man of Greek descent named Demetrius. It lay within the territory allotted to our legion, and Demetrius had expected us to defend his property, his life, and the lives of his family and his slaves.

We had failed.

A burly soldier in the red tunic of a centurion sauntered up to Faustus and saluted. “My lads have found a survivor, Legate. One of the house slaves legged it out in time and spent the night hiding up there.” He jerked a thumb east toward a steep ridge rising beyond the sun-baked fields. A thick grove of gnarled olive trees covered the slope right up to its crest.

Faustus nodded impatiently. “Well?”

The centurion, a big, bull-necked man named Domitius Capito, shrugged. “The usual story. He says a band of armed men wearing masks and hoods visited his master last night, demanding money for ‘protection.’”

Listening, I gritted my teeth in frustration. It was a tale I’d heard all too often since arriving in Syria. Gangs of marauders were pillaging their way through the cities, towns, and countryside of the entire province – apparently at will. They were preying on all the richest merchants and farmers. Their victims were approached quietly with demands for large sums of money. Those who refused were murdered, along with their wives, children, and servants, and their holdings were torched.

Demetrius had refused.

Faustus snorted. “This Greek farmer was a fool!”

“Sir?” I asked.

The legate pointed to the carnage all around us. “Where was the sense in inviting this, Valens? Better to lose a little money than your life. Until we run these criminals to ground, this sort of defiance gains nothing for anyone!”

I frowned. I couldn’t deny the sense of what the legate said, but I couldn’t find it in my heart to defame a man who’d died because we had failed to keep the peace. Rome had ruled Syria for more than eighty years. The locals paid their taxes peaceably, and they had a right to expect our protection.

For a moment longer, Faustus stared down at the dead scattered across the ransacked farm. Then he straightened up. “I’ll have no more of this wasteful folly in the area under *my* authority.” He turned in his saddle. “Caelius!”

His scribe, a weedy little man with a pallid face and perpetually ink-stained fingers, trotted up. He was already pulling a waxed tablet and stylus out of his satchel. “Yes, Legate?”

“Take this down,” Faustus commanded. He pursed his lips, pondering briefly, and then began. “Titus Petronius Faustus, commander of the Sixth Legion, sends his warmest greetings to all leading men of the district. While this unfortunate state of emergency persists, I offer you the following counsel... ”

I held my tongue while the legate dictated his letter, but I confess that it was difficult.

Faustus was practically ordering the local landowners and merchants to comply with the bandits’ demands. Oh, he couched his instructions in the most favorable light – promising full restitution once our legion had captured or killed the marauders – but no one hearing this missive could mistake his real message: “Give in or be killed. The legion cannot protect you.”

I could scarcely believe what I was hearing. Allowing these bandit gangs to run rings around us was dishonor enough. But how could the legate admit our failure so openly? It was humiliating. More than that, it was shameful.

If we failed to keep the peace for which we taxed the Syrians, we would be nothing more than bandits ourselves.

My hand curled around the pommel of the sword slung at my left side. I was a Roman officer and a member of the knightly class, the equestrian order. I had *not* come to Syria to witness a feeble surrender to mere robbers and thieves, I thought bitterly. Not after spending four long years fighting against real warriors in the wilds of Germany.

When he finished his dictation, Faustus ordered, “Have that copied and sent out as soon as we get back to camp.”

The scribe nodded and then faded back into the gaggle of orderlies and bodyguards waiting a few yards behind us.

Satisfied, the legate swung back toward the big centurion still standing in front of him. “Very well, Capito. Have your troops build a pyre, then burn the bodies. No sense in leaving anything for the scavengers to pick over.”

“Right, Legate.” The centurion tilted his helmet back a bit and scratched at his forehead. “What do you want done with the slave we found?”

Faustus shrugged. “Bring him back with you. I know a broker who’ll take him off our hands. The proceeds can go to the legion social fund.”

Capito grinned. “Yes, sir. At least that’ll make the lads a bit happier while they’re stacking up corpses.”

The impatience I’d been feeling boiled over. I edged Dancer closer to the two of them so that I could speak without being overheard by the soldiers around us. A good officer may disagree with his commander’s decisions, but he should never do so in front of the troops.

“What about this massacre?” I asked. “Shouldn’t we pursue the men who’ve done this?”

Faustus eyed me grimly. “To what end, Valens? How many times have we sent troops trudging off into the hills? A dozen times? Two dozen? And what do we have to show for it?”

“Broken boots. Sore feet. Sun sickness. And nothing else,” the centurion answered quickly – cutting in before I could speak.

The legate nodded. “Well said, Capito.” He frowned at me. “Chasing these bandits would be a race that was lost before it even began. They have at least half a day’s head start on us. They’ll be deep in the wild lands and out of reach before sunset.”

That was true enough, I realized reluctantly. But there were other options.

“Then give me the troops I need, and I’ll hit them when they move on the next farm,” I said flatly.

Faustus stared at me. “And just how will you do that, Tribune?” His lip curled. “Have the gods granted you a vision denied to us lesser mortals?”

I flushed. “They have not, Legate.”

“Well?”

Dancer shifted uneasily beneath me – agitated by my anger and embarrassment. Her head tossed. I calmed her again, this time with pressure from my knees. Then I looked back at Faustus. “I’ve read all the reports for our district. There’s a pattern to this brigandage, at least out here in the countryside.”

The legate’s frown grew deeper. “Go on.”

“Last night, the marauders slaughtered Demetrius and all his people. We know that they collected tribute from two landowners north of here a few days before that. A month earlier, they burned out an estate even farther north – and robbed another four or five farms in the same area.”

I waited for Faustus to see what I was driving at, but he just sat silently on his horse, still frowning. Strange, I thought. Surely even a blind man could see it.

“These bandits aren’t striking at random, Legate,” I said at last. “They’re working steadily, almost methodically, up the river toward Apamea, toward the city. They move at night – using the waxing moon for light. Knowing that, I’ll wager any amount that their next target is a rich landowner somewhere just south of here. And that they will move within the week.”

I noticed the legate’s eyes flicker toward Capito. The centurion stood rigid, watching me closely with a strange expression on his face. Was it contempt? Anger? Or surprise? I couldn’t decide.

“Petronius Faustus,” I went on earnestly, “we can use this knowledge against them. Give me a cohort of your best troops, and I’ll smash these marauders for you.”

The legate just stared at me. Then he blinked.

The silence dragged on.

At last he said, "Your self-confidence is remarkable, Lucius Aurelius." He smiled, but it was a brittle, false smile. "Before you assume the mantle of my authority completely, however, I think you should consider something."

"Sir?"

He leaned closer. The smile slipped entirely off his face. "This legion – and everyone in it – is under my orders. Not yours."

I stiffened in the saddle. "I have never doubted that, Legate."

"You do remember that you are a junior tribune, an officer of the narrow stripe?" Faustus asked, referring to the slender purple strip on my tunic that marked me as a member of the middle-ranked equestrian order. His own tunic, like that of the senior tribune in the legion, bore the wide purple of a member of the more elite senatorial class.

"Yes, sir." I forced the words out through my teeth.

"And you know that your chief duties are administrative?"

I nodded abruptly.

"Good. Then bear this in mind, Tribune," Faustus snapped. "I do *not* rely on you for military advice. Of *any* kind. Ever. Is that clear?"

My face felt hot.

Strictly speaking, the legate was right. Each legion had six tribunes – one of senatorial rank, the rest of us from the equestrian class. Though technically we ranked above the centurions, we were all aware that they were supposed to be the real professionals. In practical terms, however, Faustus was wrong. Other commanders, especially in the legions along the Rhine, gave their junior officers more latitude and military responsibility.

But I was now painfully aware that whether I was right or wrong didn't matter. I'd seen something important that Faustus had missed. And then, carried away by the power of my own reasoning, I'd wounded the legate's pride by rubbing it in his face.

Domitius Capito sniggered.

I felt a flash of sudden anger at the big centurion.

Capito and others like him were responsible for many of the Sixth Legion's failed attempts to trap the bandits. The patrols they led never managed to find the marauder camps. The ambushes they set were never in the right place. And when the local landowners called for help, the relief columns they commanded always arrived too late to do more than sift the ashes and bury the bodies.

Just like here.

My eyes narrowed as I studied the centurion more closely. He stood lazily at his ease in front of the legate and me – looking up at me with a smirk on his unshaven face.

Capito was the *Primus Pilus*, the First Spear, the senior centurion in the whole Sixth Legion. Along the Rhine frontier and elsewhere in the empire, a legion's top-ranking centurion was always a veteran – the best of the best. He

was the tough professional soldier every other man in the ranks admired and took as a model. I knew very well what a real *Primus Pilus* should look like. My grandfather had held that rank himself.

Alas for the Sixth, Capito set a bad example. He was a great, grumbling oaf of a man – sometimes drunk on duty, often dirty, and always riding on the edge of insubordination. He was also a bully who played favorites and abused the perks of his position.

Custom allowed centurions to accept small gratuities from soldiers who wanted to avoid the more unpleasant camp duties: Cleaning the latrines, night guard duty, and the like. But Capito pushed his demands for bribes far beyond what was customary. I'd heard rumors that he'd squeezed the men in his cohort so hard that many of them had to borrow from Syrian moneylenders just to make ends meet.

The corners of my mouth turned down as I stared at him. I wouldn't have trusted a man like that to lace his own boots, let alone made him the senior soldier of a legion. Try as I might, I could not understand why Petronius Faustus tolerated him.

Of course, I must admit that I didn't like the legate much either.

Faustus was often petty. He loved nothing better than finding fault with his subordinates whenever anything went wrong. He was also fond of boasting about his personal wealth and his close ties to Tiberius Caesar. And nothing I'd seen since joining the legion had given me a lot of confidence in his leadership abilities. Before he sweet-talked Tiberius into giving him a legion, the legate's only military experience had come years before – as senior tribune with the Third Legion in Egypt. Supervising grain harvests and prying taxes out of the poor Egyptian peasants hadn't done much to prepare him for higher command. But I didn't think he was so blind that he couldn't see what a hash Capito and others like him were making of the Sixth.

At least I was beginning to realize why so many of us – all veteran officers and centurions – had been transferred to Syria from the Rhine frontier. Someone high up pretty clearly knew that the eastern legions were dangerously slack and needed sharpening.

The legate's voice broke in on my thoughts. "Since you seem bored with your ordinary duties, Tribune, I'll find you something a bit more challenging." He smiled thinly. "It's time to relieve one of the outpost garrisons along the *harra*. I'm sending a century under Quintus Rufus out there for a month's duty. You will be in overall command. Do we understand each other, Lucius Aurelius?"

"Sir." I met his gaze squarely, trying hard to hide my own anger. I would not give the legate the pleasure of seeing that he'd scored a solid blow. Not if I could help it.

The *harra*, a rugged wilderness of black basalt boulders, marked the southeast edge of the Sixth Legion's territory. We maintained a few small

watchtowers and fortified posts along the frontier to keep an eye on the nomads who wandered the *harra* and the desert wastes beyond. But the tribes were at peace with Rome just now – barring a little harmless sheep stealing here and there. Duty at those outposts in the summer was a mind-numbing daily grind of scorching heat and utter tedium.

Petronius Faustus must have believed that he'd picked the perfect way to punish me for daring to criticize his leadership, even if only implicitly. No doubt he thought I'd come staggering back from the frontier so grateful to be back among the taverns and bathhouses of Apamea that I would keep my mouth shut in the future.

If so, he would be disappointed.

Even as a boy, I'd often spoken plainly without much thought for the consequences. My father and a succession of tutors had tried hard to teach me the civilized art of sheltering the truth inside a web of honeyed flattery. They had failed. I knew the forms, the twists and tricks of subtle rhetoric well enough. But I could rarely bring myself to use them. My grandfather, that blunt, honest old man, would have scoffed at the smooth-talking orators and courtiers of the present age.

So I would march out into the sun-baked desolation of the *harra* as ordered, but I'd be damned if I'd go without trying to do my best for the provincials we were supposed to be protecting.

"I have just one request, Legate," I said as calmly as I could.

Faustus eyed me warily. "Well?"

"Set ambushes on the roads and tracks running south up the river valley from here. That's where the marauders will strike next. I'm sure of it."

The legate forced a short, sharp laugh. "By the gods, Valens! You're like a rutting bull sometimes – just one thought in your mind and no quarter for anyone who gets in your way."

He glanced at Capito, who stood frowning up at me. "You've heard the tribune's suggestion, Centurion. What do you think?"

"It won't work." The big man hawked noisily and then spat on the ground, right at Dancer's feet.

Startled, the Spanish mare tossed her head, but I held her firmly, fighting down a fresh wave of anger.

"Go on," Faustus said.

Capito snorted. "It's typical book-learned tactics. The fancy sort that sound good in camp, and then turn to shit in the field." He grinned nastily at me. "No offense meant, of course, Tribune."

I stared coldly down at him. At eighteen, I'd led my first patrol deep into the dark, dank German forests – slogging through rain-soaked underbrush amid tall trees that seemed to run all the way to the ends of the earth. At nineteen, my cohort of auxiliary light infantry had cut a bigger Chatti raiding party to pieces. At twenty, I'd been the first man over the stockade of a fortified Cherusci village

– and I had the scar across my ribs to prove it. All in all, I'd crammed more real fighting into the last four years than Capito had in a twenty-year career devoted mostly to idleness, debauchery, and bootlicking.

Faustus spread his hands. "You've heard the *Primus Pilus*, Valens. I'm afraid I have to agree with him. I won't deploy detachments willy-nilly up and down the Orontes. The Sixth will handle these bandit gangs in the time-tested manner."

By doing nothing, I thought bitterly, again running my eyes over the burnt-out, bloodstained ruins of Demetrius' farm. An ugly suspicion began taking root in the back of my mind.

The legate settled his helmet back on his head and took up the reins of his horse. Then he turned to me. "I want you on your way to the outpost line by first light tomorrow, Tribune. I suggest you focus your attention on that and leave the marauders to me."

I had one throw of the dice left.

"Do I have your permission to conduct field training with Rufus and his troops?" I asked quietly. "Both on the march and once we've reached the frontier?"

"Field training?" Faustus repeated. He chuckled. "My dear Valens! By all means. For all I care, you can have Quintus Rufus and his men recite Greek poetry and run naked in circles."

He kicked his horse into a walk and rode away, still laughing softly to himself.

I watched the legate go – saying nothing and still wondering whether or not I dared use the freedom he'd unwittingly given me.

* * *

Shadows rippled across moonlit fields, cast by clouds drifting across the vast, black night sky. The land all around lay quiet. The farmers, their slaves, and the beasts of the fields were abed – drowsing after a long day of toil. The rutted track of the local road running south to Apamea stretched empty below me, plainly visible in the light of the full moon.

I moved cautiously a little farther down the slope and dropped to one knee beside the twisted trunk of an ancient olive tree. Low murmurs and the muffled clank and rattle of armor and weapons reached my ears as the soldiers I led spread out along the edge of the grove.

Quintus Rufus joined me, cat-quiet despite his heavy mail corselet and bronze greaves. The tall, red-haired centurion was another veteran of the Rhine frontier. The deadly war of vengeance raids and murderous ambushes waged in the sunless German forests had taught us both a hard lesson: You were quiet. Or you were dead.

I was very glad to have him with me. Unlike Capito, he was a real professional – and I could count on his courage and good sense. Even his speech was a reminder of home. Like my grandfather, he came from the north of Italy, from the region known as Cisalpine Gaul. Both of us counted some of the wild, warlike Celts who'd once ruled there among our ancestors. They'd given the centurion his imposing height and his red hair. I was shorter and darker, but I'd inherited the fierce, pale blue eyes of my own Celtic forebears.

"We're ready, Tribune," he murmured.

"Good." I turned toward him. "The men know their orders?"

"They do." Rufus hesitated. "But they're a bit edgy."

I nodded. That was understandable.

Like all the legions in Syria, the Sixth was under-manned and had more than its fair share of raw recruits. But it wasn't just the recruits who were nervous. There hadn't been any serious fighting in the East for decades and very few of the older troops knew much about real war. Year in and year out, their lives had followed the comfortable, dull, predictable rhythms of peacetime soldiering. They'd grown used to an unvarying round of guard duty, camp chores, ceremonial parades, training marches, and all the rest.

Now, in the blink of an eye, the sixty legionaries of Rufus' century had been yanked away from their cozy routine.

By me.

I'd harried, chivied, and driven them all the way to the little fort on the very edge of the *harra* – covering three days' worth of ground in two grueling days of hard marching. I'd detached the *optio*, the century's second-in-command, and twenty men to garrison the outpost. And then I'd marched the rest of them back again, though taking care to circle around Apamea. We'd spent another two days moving cautiously north through the rough hill country rising east of the river.

I'd chosen to interpret the phrase "field training" with far more latitude than Petronius Faustus could possibly have expected.

Now, exactly seven nights after the bandit gang had slaughtered the Greek landowner Demetrius, I'd brought Rufus and the rest of his men to the base of an olive tree-crowned hill overlooking one of the roads to Apamea. We were right on the edge of a country estate owned by a wealthy provincial named Eumenes.

According to the tax records I'd studied, Eumenes was one of the richest landlords of the local district. So far, he'd been left alone by the marauders plaguing the province.

I expected that to change. Tonight.

I said as much aloud.

"You're sure, Tribune?" Rufus said softly, pitching his voice low enough to make sure no one else could hear him.

I forced myself to nod confidently. “They’ll come, Centurion. They have to. This moon is the only thing that makes travel at night possible. Once it wanes, it’ll be too damned dark for them to find their way along these miserable tracks.”

Rufus grunted, pulled his military cloak tighter against the growing cold, and turned his gaze back toward the road.

Left to my own thoughts, I swallowed hard, wishing suddenly that I wasn’t so stubborn and desperately hoping that my reasoning was sound. The array of facts and logic that had seemed so solid and self-evident in daylight seemed far less imposing and persuasive amid the darkness and shadows. I had staked my honor – my life, perhaps – on what now seemed a patchwork of guesses.

If I were wrong, if the bandits never showed up or if they chose someone else as their victim, the centurion and his men were in for nothing worse than another long, uncomfortable night spent out in the open. But nothing short of complete success would save me from disgrace if Faustus accused me of disobeying his orders.

If I were broken and stripped of my rank, what then? Could I live with that shame? Could I expect my family to bear it, too? Even in these degenerate times, we Romans are a proud people. I knew what would be expected of me. My mouth felt dry. If I failed here, would I have the courage to fall on my own sword?

For what seemed an eternity, I wrestled with my innermost fears, determined to master them. The Greeks who had tutored me claimed that our fates were predestined, already woven into the fabric of the universe. Since this was so, they argued, a man’s measure was in the courage and calm with which he met the twists and turns of fortune.

I snorted softly. Stoicism was a philosophy that offered more consolation in the schoolroom than it did on a lonely, windswept hill in Syria. I decided wryly that I would probably have found more comfort in a wholehearted belief in the gods and goddesses of my childhood. Instead, here I was, caught between two contending beliefs – and wholly allied to neither.

The sudden crunch of hobnailed boots on rocks and gravel – faint at first, then louder – snapped me back to the present. My hearing has always been good.

The centurion started slightly at the feel of my hand on his arm.

“They’re close,” I whispered, checking to make sure my sword slid easily in and out of the scabbard slung at my left side. Despite the cool night air, I could feel the sweat starting to roll down from under my helmet. I picked up the infantryman’s shield I’d borrowed and slipped my left arm through the grip. “Pass the word: Wait for my command, then hit them hard!”

Quintus Rufus nodded.

I ignored the low murmur spreading through the shadowed olive grove as my orders were repeated down the waiting line, focusing instead on the empty, moonlit road just a few yards away. A droplet of sweat fell into my right eye, harsh and stinging. I shook it off, feeling the pulse beating time in my temple, pounding faster and faster.

Suddenly, the road wasn't empty. It was filled with men. Most of them were marching on foot, but a few were on horseback. I leaned forward, straining to see more clearly in the dim half-light cast by the moon and by the guttering torches some of them held aloft. My lips moved as I counted under my breath. Ten. Twenty. Several more. Perhaps thirty men in all. All were armed with swords, clubs, or spears. I could hear the jingle of armor. All wore black masks or hoods to hide their faces.

We had them.

The first sauntering, swaggering marauders passed the boundary stone that marked the edge of Eumenes' land. A low guttural laugh ghosted above the bandit column. The sound raised the hairs on the back of my neck. It was akin to the growl of a wolf – not that of a man.

I shoved my fear aside. Whether they were wolves or men, they were my prey now.

I jumped to my feet, shouting, "Up! Up! Ready javelins!"

With a roar that echoed through the night, Quintus Rufus and his legionaries came pouring out from under the trees. Each soldier held a javelin secure in his right hand, ready to throw.

Our sudden appearance caught the masked raiders by complete surprise. They stood frozen on the rough, moonlit road.

It was perfect.

I felt sudden burst of wild, fierce pride surging through my veins. There's almost nothing more exhilarating than seeing a carefully laid plan unfold in every detail. It must be something akin to the experience of a god looking down from Olympus.

Still exulting, I filled my lungs and yelled, "Javelins! Loose!"

Forty iron-tipped spears whirred through the air and tore into the bandit column caught motionless on the road. Men went down in heaps as javelins found their mark, punching through clothing and armor with ease. Horrified screams and shrieks rose from the wounded and the dying. A horse reared, whinnying in fear and pain, and then bolted off into the barren field on the other side of the road.

Now.

I rapped out my next orders, already moving toward the road – crowding my way into the fighting line. "Swords out! Forward!"

"Forward!" The centurion's deep voice roared out, repeating my order. More voices up and down the line took up the shout. "Forward!"

We surged down the slope and charged into the bandits before they could recover from the shock of our javelin volley.

As I ran onto the road, one of them swung around to face me with a broad-bladed hunting spear gripped in both hands. I slammed the spear aside with my shield and thrust home with my long sword. He groaned, staggered, and then fell onto his face. Blood spilled across the dirt, black in the dim light. The legionary on my left stabbed downward with his shorter, Spanish blade, making sure the bandit was dead. We moved on together.

I caught more blows on my shield and thrust back. All around me, men were dying – almost all of them marauders. I bared my teeth in a tight, savage grin. My men and I were the wolves now, not these bandits. Their masks, worn to sow terror in hapless farmers and tradesmen, were no match for our armor and discipline.

An angry bellow rose above the iron clang of sword on sword, the clatter of shields, moans, curses, and the dull meaty thud of blades driving home into flesh. "Rally! Rally, damn you! Stand and fight!"

I turned toward the voice and saw a burly man on a dappled horse flailing away at the panicked bandits with the flat of his own sword. One of their leaders had kept his nerve.

That was bad. If he succeeded in stiffening their resistance, more of my own men might be killed. The brigands might even be able to break off the fight and escape into the surrounding blackness. I couldn't risk that.

I drove through the press of the melee – fighting my way toward the horseman. He saw me coming and swung his sword down in a vicious, overhand arc aimed at my head. The blade skidded off my upraised shield in a shower of wood splinters and sparks, but the force of the blow knocked me to one knee.

I struggled to stand up, to regain my footing.

The bandit leader forced his foaming horse into my chest, shoving me backward and off balance. I fell sprawling in the dirt. He pulled his mount sideways and leaned far over, his sword arm rising for another lightning-fast slash...

Gods!

I threw my shield up again. Another blow hammered down, driving the shield hard into my shoulder. A wave of pain tore the breath from my lungs.

Panting, I staggered to my feet, levering myself upright with my sword.

Momentum had carried the hooded bandit's horse a few feet beyond me. He sawed frantically at the reins, urging his mount around again for another attack.

I lunged desperately, driving the point of my blade straight into the horse's hindquarters. It screamed and reared, kicking and bucking in agony. Caught off-balance, the bandit flew out of the saddle, and crashed to the ground

right at my feet. Freed of its master, his mount whirled and galloped off into the night.

Still breathing heavily, I leaned forward and rested the bloodied tip of my sword on the fallen brigand's neck. Though he was still dazed, the bandit's eyes widened.

Around us, the surviving marauders began throwing away their weapons – holding their arms outstretched while begging, "Mercy! Mercy, comrades! We yield!"

My men moved in cautiously, swords out and ready to strike if there were any more resistance. There wasn't any. The bandits huddled together like sheep, still pleading for their lives.

"Strip them," I ordered harshly. I indicated the burly man I'd bested. "This one, too."

Two of my soldiers grabbed the bandit leader, yanked him to his feet, and hustled him off toward the other prisoners. I turned away, looking for Quintus Rufus. "Centurion!"

The tall, red-haired man came forward. "Yes, Tribune?"

"Get the doctor down here to treat the wounded. Ours first. The brigands after."

"Sir."

"Then form a detail and have them search the dead. Tell the men to collect every weapon they can find. I don't want to leave so much as a paring knife behind. Understand?"

Rufus nodded and moved off to set my orders in motion. I stood still briefly, fighting off a sudden wave of fatigue. I had too much work to do to rest for very long. Our fight with the marauders had lasted only moments. But I knew from bitter experience that clearing up the mess the skirmish had left behind would take hours.

"Tribune!" The shout came from the soldiers guarding the prisoners.

I hurried over, all my aches and pains forgotten. "What is it?"

They dragged one of the bandits forward. It was the man I'd captured. The hood he'd worn to hide his identity had been stripped off and now the moonlight fell on him – revealing a rough, scarred, broken-nosed face.

It was a face I knew only too well.

The bandit leader standing before me was Domitius Capito, the *Primus Pilus* of our own legion.

I stared at him, feeling sick inside as my own worst fears were confirmed. The brigands and marauders who'd been ravaging this region of Syria were fellow soldiers – soldiers who'd sworn allegiance to Rome and to Tiberius Caesar. Those who should have been shepherds for Rome's subjects had become ravenous wolves instead.

Chapter II

Night had faded into sweltering day before I had a chance to rest.

Now I was filthy. And hot. And weary.

I was sitting on the ground with my back against the trunk of an old olive tree. Flies buzzed in and around its branches, flitting busily between blinding sunshine and the small patch of shade.

To the west, the fields and fruit orchards shimmered, pounded by the merciless rays of the midday sun. Off in the distance I could just make out the brown trace of the Orontes meandering from south to north. Everything beyond the river was swallowed up in a gray haze of heat and humidity.

Nothing moved – except the insects.

A column of ants crawled up and over the bronze cuirass I'd taken off and laid on the ground next to me. Others, either bolder or lost, explored the horsehair-crested helmet I'd set beside the body armor.

My scalp itched suddenly, and I scratched vigorously at my head. Sweat and grime matted the short brown curls my mother had loved to rumple when I was a small boy.

I wanted a bath. Or a cup of cool wine. Or a woman. Preferably all three, come to think of it – and in that order.

I let my eyes close, trying to ignore the dull throb from my bruised left shoulder.

“Lucius.”

I looked up.

A man stood there, peering down at me with tired brown eyes. He was about my own height, but stockier, and powerfully muscled. His black hair, short beard, and carefully trimmed moustache were streaked with gray. His belted tunic, once white, was spattered and stained with dried blood.

His name was Aristides. He was a Hellene, a native of the city of Phillipi. He was my personal physician. And also my friend.

“I’ve done what I can for the wounded,” he said simply. “The rest is up to time and nature – or the gods, if one believes in that sort of thing.”

I nodded. Like many Greek doctors, Aristides turned a somewhat skeptical eye on many of the claims of divine healing made by other physicians and temple priests.

You can lance a boil or pray to Asklepios, he’d often say sardonically, but the wise man prefers seeing a bit of pus on a surgical probe to smelling incense.

Aristides wasn’t an atheist, and he acknowledged the power of the gods over hopeless cases. But he also believed that the gods expected mortals to solve most of their own problems. Like any man of sense, though, he was careful to keep such sentiments private. Most men, whether illiterate or educated, are prey to superstition – and quick to blame any setback or catastrophe on those who don’t share their beliefs.

“What’s the final tally?” I asked quietly.

The exultation I’d felt in my victory had faded quickly once I’d seen the bodies littering the road and heard the groans and sobs of the wounded and dying. Winning a battle is infinitely better than losing it, but military glory carries a fearful price. I’ve known soldiers who can walk through the blood and gore left behind on a battlefield without blinking an eye. I am not one of them.

“Two of Rufus’ men are dead. Four more were badly hurt.” Aristides shrugged. “They may live, if a fever doesn’t kill them.”

I nodded again. Even the slightest injury could turn deadly if a fever took hold. Washing a wound with wine or vinegar seemed to help. So did various ointments of copper, pitch, pine resin, or alum. But once a sword, javelin, or arrow tore your flesh there was never any certainty of survival.

“Can they be moved?” I asked.

Aristides shook his head. “Not with any safety. At least not far.”

“Then we’ll leave them in Eumenes’ care.”

The doctor considered that briefly, then nodded. “It will serve. I’ll prepare a kit of bandages and medicines and instruct his steward in their use.”

“Good.”

Eumenes, the rich Syrian landowner, owed his fortune and possibly his life to the legionaries under my command. Looking after our seriously wounded would be a small price to pay for that protection. He knew what Capito’s bandits had done to his neighbor Demetrius, so I didn’t expect him to squawk. At least not much.

“What about the prisoners?” I asked Aristides. We’d killed half the marauders outright. Of the rest, several had wounds that would kill them soon enough. But we’d still taken a good dozen or so of Capito’s scum alive.

He frowned. “They’re cut and bruised, but they should be able to stumble along on their own two feet.”

He swayed abruptly and only stopped himself from falling by grabbing on to an olive branch.

I sat up straight, concerned. “Are you all right?”

Aristides waved me back with his other hand. Then he chuckled and squatted down beside me, resting on his haunches. “Don’t worry, Lucius. I’m not ill or struck by the sun... just worn out.” He stifled a yawn. “Going without sleep isn’t so easy any more.”

Relieved, I grinned. “I seem to remember a certain Greek doctor who could spend all day treating the sick and still have the energy to chase women all night long. You’re not as young as you used to be, old man.”

“No one is as young as they used to be,” Aristides said dryly. “Not even you.”

I couldn’t deny that. Aristides had been hired as my doctor when I was just a small boy of six and very ill. My family had business interests in the region around his home city, and he’d come to Rome armed with recommendations from some of Phillipi’s most prominent citizens. I think my father – who kept a firm grip on every brass sesterce – would have been happier if he could have found a slave or a cheaper freedman to treat me. My mother, though, stood firm, insisting that I needed the best possible care.

She had been right. I owed Aristides my life.

He’d stayed on after the first crisis passed. At first, only a few new patients had come to him, mostly on my family’s recommendation. But his reputation as a healer and surgeon soon spread, and before long he was earning a tidy living to supplement the retainer my father rather grudgingly paid out.

He’d earned another reputation, too. This one as a lover of beautiful women of all classes, from the lowest to the highest. If any single man could have changed the average Roman’s view of all Greeks as effeminate, boy-loving esthetes, Aristides was that man. There were even rumors that a number of the rich but bored senators’ wives who swore by his ointments and salves were equally enamored of his prowess in the bedchamber. After seeing the quality of the gifts they pressed on him – precious jewelry and rings, carved ivory spice boxes and silks from India, and fine decorated pottery from the best workshops in Italy and Gaul – I tended to believe the rumors.

In twelve years, the doctor had made himself a reasonably wealthy man with a growing circle of grateful and prominent patients.

But when I left Rome to join the legions on the Rhine, Aristides came with me. When I’d asked him why, he’d only smiled and said simply, “I’m your physician, Lucius. I have been since you were a boy. Where you go, I go.”

A cynic might have suspected that some powerful senator had finally tumbled to the fact that Aristides had made him a cuckold. But I am no cynic, at least not completely. I was glad of his company and his counsel, and I’d taken him at his word.

I felt I knew Aristides better than I knew my own father. Certainly, I liked him more.

“When do we march?” he asked. “I’ll need some time to settle the wounded we’re leaving behind.”

I squinted at the sun. It hung close to the zenith. “We’ll wait a bit. There’s no sense in broiling the troops in this midday heat. But I want to cover as much ground as we can this evening, camp overnight, and then move on before first light.”

Aristides arched an eyebrow in surprise. “Why the hurry? Surely we can be back in Apamea in a single day’s easy march.”

“True enough,” I said quietly. “But I’m not taking Capito and the other prisoners back to the Sixth Legion. We’re heading north instead – to Antioch.”

Antioch, fifty miles down the Orontes from where we sat, was the third largest city in all the empire. More important for my purposes, it was the capital of all Roman Syria.

The doctor stared closely at me for a few moments and then shook his head in disbelief. “You don’t look as though you’re suffering from a brain fever. But I can’t think of what else it could be.”

I met his gaze squarely. “I’m perfectly well. And I meant what I said. I’m taking Capito and the others to Antioch. I won’t hand them over to Petronius Faustus.”

Aristides looked troubled. “Don’t let anger cloud your judgment, Lucius. Yes, the legate is a pompous fool. And yes, you disobeyed the spirit of his orders so you could smash this gang of marauders. But he can’t argue with success.”

I only wished that were true.

The doctor leaned closer and lowered his voice. “If you take this matter over his head, though, he can’t turn a blind eye to your disobedience. Humiliate Faustus so openly and he’ll do his best to break you.”

“I know that,” I said softly, staring down at the plain gold ring on my left hand. It felt heavier than I remembered. I looked up. “I don’t have a choice, Aristides.”

The Greek grimaced. “Of course you have a choice, Lucius! Drag Capito right up to the headquarters building instead and watch the legate squirm. Faustus named that piece of filth the *Primus Pilus* of his legion. So make him handle Capito’s disgrace and punishment himself.”

I sighed. This was an argument I’d known was coming. Aristides saw himself as a pragmatic man and often sought to temper what he considered my stubborn pride and misplaced idealism. There were moments when he was probably right to do so. This was not one of them.

“If you caught a fox raiding your chickens, would you take him back to his den and let him go?” I asked him quietly.

The doctor whistled in sudden understanding. “You think the legate had some idea of what Capito and his men were doing?”

“More than that,” I said grimly. “I think they were acting under his orders.”

“Gods!” Aristides swore. He looked even more troubled. “Do you have any proof of that?”

I hesitated, knowing that I didn’t have hard evidence of the legate’s involvement – at least not the kind that would persuade a magistrate in a formal trial. But I was sure that my suspicions were correct. Nothing else made sense. Nothing else explained Capito’s behavior when I’d questioned him.

Quintus Rufus and I had spent half the night interrogating the bandits we’d captured alive. All of them were legionaries from Capito’s own First Cohort. All of them insisted they were just following the senior centurion’s orders. All of them claimed that they’d received only a small share of the loot, and swore that Capito had handled the rest.

I believed them.

Every centurion carries a heavy vine wood cane as a badge of his rank. This cane is also used to punish disobedience and enforce discipline. Ten years of service had made Rufus a master of its use. He could strike any number of blows that could paralyze a man with pain – and yet leave him without any lasting injury.

By the time he was through with them, Capito’s men were only too glad to answer all our questions and too afraid to tell us any lies.

Capito himself was another matter. Marauder or not, he was still the Sixth Legion’s highest-ranking centurion. We couldn’t use force while questioning him – not without breaking every rule and regulation governing the legions. I was willing to bend my orders to do what I thought right, but I wasn’t willing to abandon everything I’d been taught about discipline and good order. At least not yet.

Given those restrictions, I didn’t really expect the bastard to talk.

He didn’t disappoint me.

As we hammered him with our questions, Capito just sat silent, arms bound behind him, staring up at us with red-rimmed eyes filled with rage and hatred.

It was what I didn’t see in his eyes that worried me.

I didn’t see any fear.

And he should have been afraid.

Few commanders in this day and age inflicted the death penalty traditionally prescribed for the more serious military offenses. Most preferred finding other punishments, even for crimes like desertion and gross insubordination. But no legionary legate worth his post could possibly avoid ordering Capito’s head cut off – not if he were convicted for murder and banditry.

The *Primus Pilus* was a bully, not a hero. I didn’t think he was the sort who could sneer at his own approaching death.

So why wasn’t he frightened?

I was afraid I knew the answer to that question. And to all the other questions that had robbed me of so much sleep over the past seven nights. How could so many troops on active service pillage Apamea and its environs without being caught? Why had every other attempt to intercept the “marauders” failed so completely? How could the Sixth Legion’s senior centurion spend so many days and nights outside the fortress masquerading as a brigand without his superiors suspecting something?

Only one answer made any sense at all, no matter how hard I tried to find some other way to make the pieces fit.

I was now convinced that Petronius Faustus, the legate of the Sixth Legion, the officer charged with maintaining law and order in this part of the province, had instead set his own soldiers to work as robbers, thieves, rapists, and murderers.

Aristides was still troubled when I finished explaining my reasoning to him. He took a deep breath and stared down at the ground for a few moments before sighing. “I think you’re right, Lucius. I wish I could prove your theory wrong, and yet I can’t. Still, if Faustus hears of your suspicions, and you can’t produce solid evidence against him...”

His voice trailed off into silence.

“I know,” I said softly. “But I’ve learned too much to pretend ignorance now. My hope is that Capito will break his silence when he realizes the legate can’t protect him.”

“Will you bring him to trial before the governor?” Aristides asked.

I shook my head. I didn’t know Gnaeus Piso, the governor of Syria, but I didn’t like what I had heard of him. Though he was said to be a close ally of Tiberius Caesar, the emperor, his record wasn’t very impressive. Before I was born, Augustus, the old emperor, had named Piso the governor of Spain, but his tax collectors had squeezed the locals so hard and behaved so arrogantly that he’d been recalled to Rome in some disgrace. He hadn’t held a significant post since, and nobody I knew could understand why Tiberius had dropped Syria – a highly prized appointment – right into his aging lap.

“Who then?” Aristides asked. “You need to convince Capito that Faustus can’t save him from the executioner’s sword. And no one else on the governor’s staff wields that much power.”

“I’m going straight to the top,” I said flatly.

A little of the worry left Aristides’ eyes. He nodded approvingly. “Germanicus. A wise decision.”

Germanicus Julius Caesar, the nephew and now the adopted son of Tiberius, had been given full authority over all the eastern provinces two years before. He had his headquarters at Antioch.

I knew Germanicus. And he knew me.

I’d held my first command during the last two years of his punitive campaigns against the German tribes. And I’d acquitted myself honorably

enough to earn his approval. Like the other officers and men who'd served under him on that dismal and bloody frontier, I valued his plain, firmly spoken "well done" higher than any other award or decoration.

Like most young men of my class, I viewed Germanicus as the ideal Roman. Though only in his early thirties, he'd already proven himself an outstanding soldier, scholar, and playwright. He embodied all the traditional virtues that had made Rome great. He was gifted with enormous physical and moral courage. He was also generous, kind-hearted, and most surprising of all in a man who could expect to rule the whole empire one day, genuinely modest.

Now I hoped to use my ties to him to crack Domitius Capito open like an egg. If the centurion had any intelligence at all, he'd know that Germanicus Caesar loathed military corruption and indiscipline above all other crimes. Kind-hearted or not, he'd come down hard on any officer who'd turned his own soldiers into murderous thieves and night raiders. With the very real prospect of an ignominious execution dangling before his eyes, Capito should be eager to confess the crimes of his patron, Petronius Faustus, the legate of the Sixth Legion.

Or so I prayed.

Because I knew that if the centurion kept his silence, I couldn't expect Germanicus to act against Faustus. Whether or not he privately believed the legate to be guilty, he would never condemn him without solid proof.

Two hours later, I led my Spanish mare, Dancer, down the sun-baked slope toward the road paralleling the Orontes. Aristides followed me, pulling a mule piled high with his kit and medical supplies. Quintus Rufus and his legionaries came trudging along behind us. Each man had his shield slung across his back and carried a pole with his pack and mess gear lashed to it. Our prisoners plodded along in the middle of the column, with their heads hanging in shame and despair, and with their arms bound behind them.

The sun still hung high overhead, blinding bright. But the heat was somewhat less intense and it was time we were on the march.

I reached the road and stood for just a moment, deliberating with myself.

Every schoolboy knows the story of Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon. That river was his moment of decision. Leading his army across it marked an irrevocable declaration of war against his enemies in the Senate.

This dry and dusty dirt road was my Rubicon.

If I turned south, I could limp back to Apamea, hand Capito and the others over to Faustus – and then watch in shamed silence as the legate found a way to cover up their crimes. Then, if I did nothing further, I could probably serve out my remaining time with the Sixth Legion, or find a quiet way to transfer to another unit in some distant province.

But if I turned north, I would be declaring war against Faustus and the corruption he represented. I would be tossing the dice in a game with only two possible outcomes: Triumph or death.

I took a deep breath. The sunlight gleamed off my grandfather's ring.
So be it.

I squared my shoulders, gave Dancer a gentle pat, and then swung north,
marching toward Antioch with an easy stride.