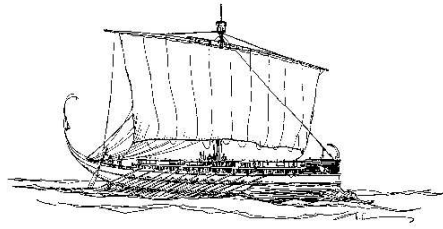


THE PEREGRINE'S ODYSSEY



THE PEREGRINE'S ODYSSEY



BURNT OFFERINGS
A NOVEL OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

MICHAEL KLEINFALL

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The Peregrine's Odyssey / by Michael Kleinfall

First Edition—2019

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Lynette and Holly

The Family Segusaiavus

Tertius (17-99) & Cerys (21-76)

Julius (42-68)

Meghan (47-78) & husband (35-?)

Gaius (50 - 119) & Fionna (c.50 - 128)

Marcus (51-103) & Argenta (51-105)

Gaius (70-?) & Isolde (75-143)

Marcus (71-145) & Flavia (75-128)

Gaius (76-132) & Octavia (80-150)

Eiriol (73-?) & Delwyn (63 - ?)

Morwyn (72-131) & Angwyn (69 - 118)

Marcus Minor (80 - 106)

Daughter (73 - 81)

Marcus II (76 - 81)

Fionna-bastard son (63-104)

Gaius (70-?) & Isolde (75-143)

Gaius (76-132) & Octavia (80-150)

Marcus (71-145) & Flavia (75-128)

Daughter - stillborn (d. 90)

Octavia the Elder (101 - ?)

Marcus Junior (95 - 155)

Gaius Sagittrarius (97 - 167) & ?

Octavia Minor 'Freckles' (107 - ?)

Marcus II (99 - 157)

Gaius Junior (110 - 153)

Flavia Minor (102 - ?)





Voyage of the Epona:
May 95 – June 97



THE PEREGRINE'S ODYSSEY

Beloved, do not be surprised that a trial by fire is occurring among you, as if something strange were happening to you. But rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that when His glory is revealed you may also rejoice exultantly. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let no one among you be made to suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as an intriguer. But whoever is made to suffer as a Christian should not be ashamed but glorify God because of the name. For it is time for the judgment to begin with the household of God; if it begins with us, how will it end for those who fail to obey the gospel of God?

1 Peter, 4:12-16

To silence the rumors about the burning of Rome, Nero ordered the accusation of certain persons hated for their abominations, commonly called Christians. This name came to them from Chrestos who, under Tiberius, had been tortured by the procurator Pontius Pilate. For a time, this hateful superstition was repressed, then broke out anew, not only in Judea, cradle of the scourge, but in Rome, whither every kind of atrocity of infamy flows from all over the world. Those who confessed their faith were arrested; then, on their directions, a crowd of others, not so much for having set fire to the town as for their hatred of the human race.

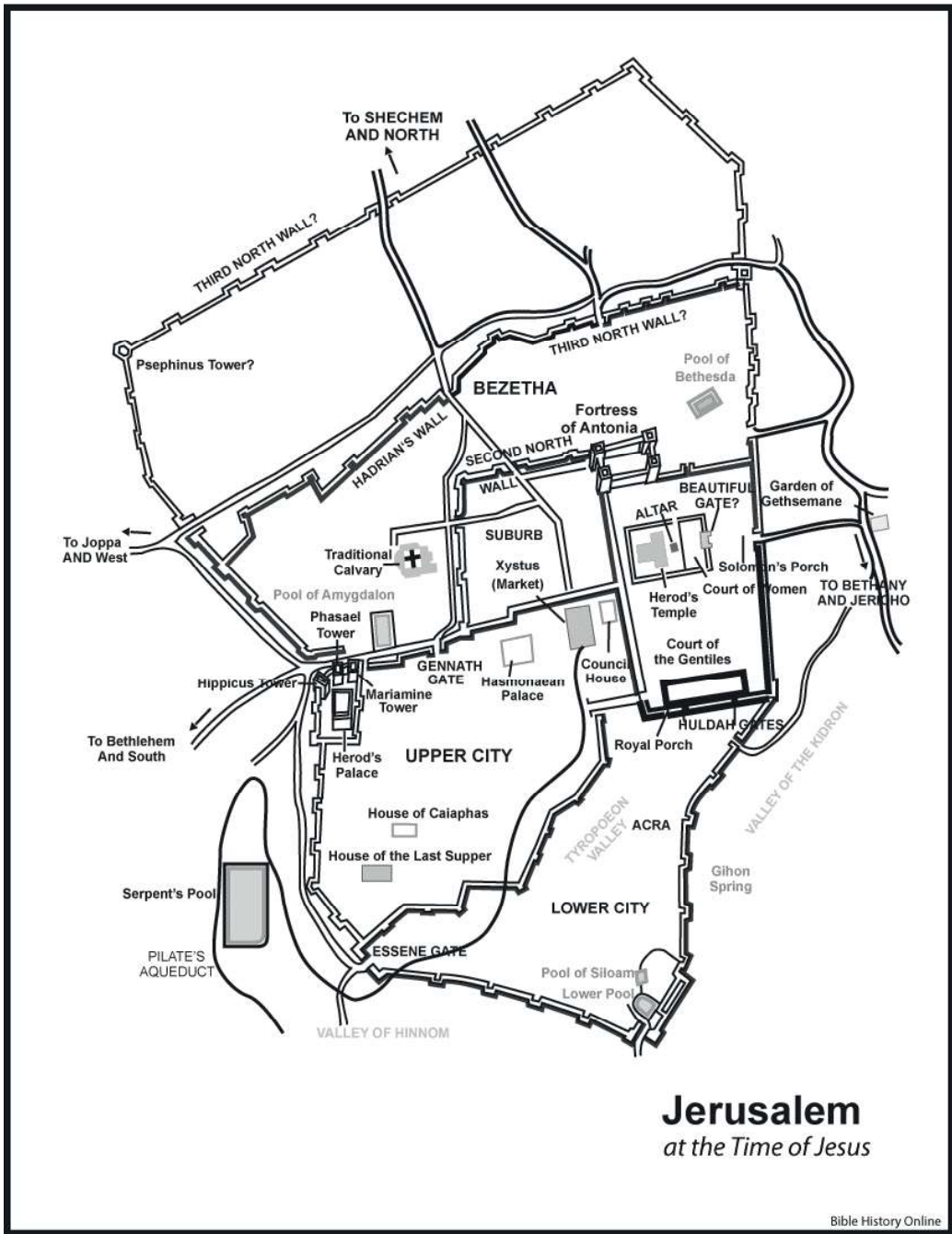
Tacitus, Annals: XV.44

Nero had the Christians tortured, a people addicted to a new and guilty superstition.

Suetonius, Lives of the Caesars, Nero XVI.3

PROLOGUE

THREE HILLS



I

On Mount Olivet Jerusalem, May 30 AD

Ignatius—watching and listening

Y oung Ignatius woke with a start. He had slept fitfully all night. Dreams of storms, caravans attacked by Arab brigands, his father wounded or killed. . . . His father had been away for months in Arabia and Egypt as far as Alexandria. He should return any week with the caravan from Petra. But no journey through the vast desert was safe from misfortune, whatever the cause. Ignatius worried. He always worried until his father was safely home. He missed his father.

Voices below, rising from across the narrow street more the size of an alley, had jarred him from his restless sleep. In the stillness of early morning, the muffled voices sounded as if they were but an arm's length away. Kicking the tangled linen sheet aside, he shuffled to the window, squinting as he peered down at the house across the way. Three men huddled close, whispering. He recognized one he thought to be among a group of Galileans who came and went at odd times. He had watched them for weeks. Their furtive demeanor attracted his attention, his curiosity growing by the day.

It was not quite daybreak. The dark night sky was giving way to a violet haze that hinted at the rising sun. The early morning was cool this spring day of May. The days had been gradually warming and today held the promise of another lovely day in the Judean hills.

Ignatius and his cousin Ya'aqov would have much to do as the holy day of *Shavu'ot* (Pentecost) approached, little more than a week hence. Pilgrims were streaming into the city, most pitching tents outside the city walls. Their numbers were much smaller than last month during *Pesach* (the Passover). How great the crowds had been! Hundreds of thousands had come from all corners of the world—from his homeland of Syria and the provinces of

Asia, Greece, Egypt, Africa, Rome and Italia—for the greatest of the high holy days.

Ignatius had traveled to Jerusalem months earlier with his father from their home in Antioch. He had seen many great festivals as one would expect in the leading metropolis of the eastern empire, a city little less in grandeur than Rome or Alexandria. These pilgrims descended on Jerusalem, a small Palestinian city not on any major Roman highway. Faithful observant Jews came, Gentiles as well, merchants, tourists and the curious. The thousands of tents surrounding the city seemed like a vast field of multicolored mushrooms. At night their campfires lit up the countryside like stars fallen from the heavens. For a young boy it was a magical time.

Ignatius was having great fun with his cousin, one year older than his twelve. They explored the countryside, helped his Uncle Shimon at market (they too were a family of prosperous merchants), and stuffed himself with his aunt's cooking (his mother had died many years ago and how he missed a mother's cooking), all the while daydreaming of his father's journeys and adventures to exotic Alexandria and mysterious Petra. One day soon he hoped to go along.

Recalling Passover Events

In the days leading up to Pesach a dramatic incident captured young Ignatius' attention—a near riot and the trial and execution of a Galilean rabbi from Nazareth.

The rabbi, called Yeshua, and his Galilean followers came into the city that week of Pesach. Ya'aqov informed his cousin that the rabbi was hated by many of the Scribes and Pharisees of the Sanhedrin, especially by the high priest Caiaphas. The story was that for many years Yeshua had traveled throughout the country attracting many followers, and his preaching increasingly challenged the religious authorities. Their animosity grew more intense. Over the course of the week, the rabbi created disturbances in the precincts of the great temple, the holiest place in Israel and the entire world. On one occasion attacking some of the merchants, upsetting their market tables. Yeshua's enemies were outraged. But they had a solution to this dilemma. The key was a turncoat among the rabbi's followers.

Ignatius understood little of this beyond the undeniable hostility that existed between these Galilean Jews and the Jerusalem priests. His family was not deeply religious, observing little of the Law and its traditions.

Marcellus, his father, was a prosperous merchant. His lucrative trade in spices and luxuries consumed his days. Religious practice was secondary. And, Antioch was home to many religions—who could say which was true? So, Ignatius and his family were *Ame-Haaretz*. In the eyes of many they were no better than the Gentiles. They were *Syrian* Jews, definitely not “real” Jews.

On the eve of Pesach, an informer betrayed the rabbi’s whereabouts. The Nazarene was arrested, interrogated and condemned by the Sanhedrin. Later that night, Caiaphas brought him to Pontius Pilatus, the Roman procurator of Judea, seeking to have the blasphemous pretender executed. Pilatus had come from the governor’s palace at Caesarea. When in Jerusalem he resided at the Fortress Antonia, the Roman *praesidium* which abutted the Temple precincts. During these religious festivals, he brought additional legionaries to maintain order in the city. The Jews, especially those in Jerusalem, chafed under their Roman overlords, and with hundreds of thousands packed into the small city, keeping order was always the Roman’s greatest concern.

The conflict between the upstart *mashiach* and the Sanhedrin came to a head that night, the Friday of Pesach. Caiaphas, along with many of the priests and elders and a large group of their followers, demanded that Pilatus condemn the Nazarene for treason—Yeshua was a false *mashiach* who claimed to be the “King of the Jews.” This, they argued, was undeniably treasonous to Caesar’s majesty, unquestionably a capital crime. Under intense pressure from the priests and their vociferous followers, Pilatus reluctantly consented. The city was in an uproar. With the holy Pesach mere hours away, the rabbi and two others were taken outside the city walls to Golgotha, the “hill of the skull,” and crucified.

Then there was the strange weather that afternoon—a sudden dark overcast, strong winds, and what was felt to be a minor earthquake. Earthquakes terrified Ignatius—Antioch experienced many. The earth shook, cracked open, buildings would break and collapse, the noise was dreadful... and just when you thought it might all be over the ground shook again. One might think all the daemons of Hades had loosed their anger on puny mortals. Ignatius did not like earthquakes.

Days after these extraordinary events, soldiers guarding the tomb of the dead rabbi inexplicably left their post. The tomb was found empty. As later reports would have it, the Nazarene’s followers had stolen the corpse. An incensed Pilatus had the entire guard detail executed for desertion.

Meanwhile, the priests and the palace guards were searching for the Nazarene’s followers. Caiaphas sought to eliminate the last vestiges of these

troublemakers. Syrian legionaries, particularly brutal because of their hatred of the Jews, patrolled the crowded city. There was an edginess that was palpable. Eventually, as the holy days passed, most of the pilgrims, tourists and merchants departed for their homelands. Jerusalem settled into a prosaic ordinariness. The followers of the dead rabbi lay low.

But Ignatius knew where they were...

Ignatius and Cousin Ya'aqov

The house across from Uncle Shimon's that teased young Ignatius' imagination belonged to a family friendly to the executed rabbi. The rabbi was *mashiach* to some, wonder-worker, magician, faker to others, and troublemaker to most. His more zealous followers stayed here often. They had celebrated the Pesach Seder here the night the Nazarene was arrested. Now the Galileans found sanctuary here. What little talk there was in the neighborhood about them was guarded. No one wanted trouble with the authorities. That included Uncle Shimon.

This was a "well-to-do" neighborhood on one of the lower streets in the western quarter of the city. Not far away, higher up the hill, were the homes of the chief priests—Caiaphas and his father-in-law, Annas. The hunters and the hunted were not far separated. Though they were in other ways...

Ignatius noticed that the dead rabbi's followers would come and go in pairs or three's, never the entire group who were many dozens. He came to recognize quite a few.

Occasionally he would speak with one of the younger ones, Yochanan, who, it was said, was very close to the rabbi. Of all the Galileans, Yochanan was the friendliest to young Ignatius, as one closer to his age. He would smile and say hello whenever the two met. For Ignatius it went little further than a sheepish greeting. Ignatius' reticence stemmed from his natural shyness, but also due to common deference to adults. More than anything, he knew these Galileans remained in perilous standing with Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin. Rumors persisted that the Galileans had stolen the rabbi's body to "prove" Yeshua's prophecy that he would come back to life. The rabbi still alive? Who could believe such nonsense? Ignatius had seen him crucified. No one survived that.

As Ignatius stared down at the men huddling around the entry porch, the sky slipped its velvet blanket and a pale, golden glow painted the eastern sky

over Mount Olivet.

The call of the morning watch echoed from the Temple ramparts, followed by long notes of silver trumpets heralding the first hour of a new day.

Soon the streets would be busy with the bustle of merchants opening their shops and women carrying water jugs to the fountains. Above all were the daily temple rites and sacrifices that spoke to the everlasting covenant between the One God and his Chosen People.

Suddenly, lots in his wonderings about the scene below, Ignatius felt arms grabbing, hugging him from behind.

“Ignatius, who are you spying on? What are you doing up so early? I’ve watched you at the window since dark. What’s going on?”

“Ya’aqov!” He twisted out of the arm-lock and hissed, “Let go... some of the Galileans are back. See? Look... there are two others, the one they call Ta’oma, the short, funny looking one, and Shimon-Kephas. He looks like a bear. I think he is their leader. I wonder what they are doing... if the temple guards see them...”

“None of our concern,” said his cousin. “Let’s get something to eat. Father said we have much to do today... more pilgrims and tourists coming for *Shavu’ot*, more business at the market.” He tugged at Ignatius. “*Come on...*”

Shrugging his cousin off, Ignatius turned back to the window. Another two had joined the others.

I wonder, thought Ignatius. The tiny group was quite excited, talking rapidly and waving arms energetically. *Good thing we are far from the temple and that it is so early.* Again thinking, if the temple guards should pass by and recognize them...

“Ignatius! Come eat.” That was Ya’aqov’s mother, Ruth, calling him. Ya’aqov had already scurried downstairs.

“Yes, aunt, coming...” Ignatius had just decided—why he could not say—he wanted to find out what these Galileans were up to.

Breakfast Gathering

The custom of the Jewish people was two meals, one at mid-day and evening dinner. However, Shimon, Ya’aqov’s father, enjoyed his food, if measured by his rather large stomach which lifted his robe almost to mid-calf. So, a small meal was had to start the day. He gathered his little flock of children

to say morning prayers and to assign chores to the older ones.

All seven children and Ignatius were seated on two benches, a long table between. As the weather was mild, they gathered in the inner courtyard under an awning.

Uncle Shimon surveyed his flock, nodding with pleasure as he counted. “All my pigeons are here: Ya’aqov, Binyamin, Aharon, Leah, Miriam, little Ruth, Johanna... and our beloved cousin Ignatius.” He smiled affectionately at Ruth. These morning gatherings reminded him of the Psalm, *Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the recesses of your home; your children like olive plants around your table. Behold, thus is the man blessed...*

“Well, who speaks this morning for our family?”—Although he did know — “Leah?”

“It is my turn today, father.” A wide smile lit her round face. She loved to lead the morning prayer.

Everyone clasped hands and the slight olive-skinned girl with the lustrous dark hair began:

*Let us sing the souls in every name, And the Name in every soul.
Let us sing the soul in every name, And sacred name of every soul.
As we bless the source of life, so we are blessed.*

Then all joined in—father, mother and the children:

*You are Holy, Your Name is Holy,
And each day holy beings sing Hallel to Your Name.
Praised are You, Eternal, the Holy God. Amen*

As they sat Shimon clapped his hands and a young servant girl, Sara, brought trays of fruit, bread, goat’s milk and water.

“Thank you, Leah. Beautiful.”

“So... *Shavu’ot* comes soon and we have much to do. Girls, help your mother and Sara. Binyamin, Ya’aqov... Ignatius... you boys come to the market. You can help clean and organize the store. Be there no later than the third hour. I have business to attend to and will meet you then. And don’t be late! Much, much to do...”

Licking his fingers after making a third fig disappear, Shimon turned to his nephew.

“Ignatius, I expect your father’s return before the festival. A scout from the caravan arrived last night. They are only three days out. I hope you both will stay for the holy day. Your father should have a good deal of business here, and your return to Antioch all the more profitable. It would be a blessing to share the holy days with you both, considering he departed for

Alexandria before *Pesach*. We pray to make a good Jew of him yet!”

“I have missed him,” said Ignatius, “but I have enjoyed my time here with you. It has been exciting, so many pilgrims and all that has gone on...” He would not say it, but he would be glad to have his father safely back.

“Ignatius and I have become good friends,” Ya’aqov said. “He’s become a brother to me. He has even learned more of the Scriptures...”

“I may teach my father some Scripture and he will teach me business—a good trade!” laughed Ignatius.

The buzz of the table chatter continued throughout the morning meal. Finished, the little flock of “pigeons” flew off to begin their day.

“Remember, boys—at the third hour,” Shimon reminded. He patted a satisfied belly, picked up his skirts, kissed Ruth and departed.

“Ignatius,” said Ruth, “Sara will be very busy helping me this morning. Would you please take those two jugs and fetch some water? It would be so helpful.”

Ignatius glanced aside at Ya’aqov while agreeing, “Of course, Aunt. I will... right away.”

Ruth and Sara left the courtyard. Ya’aqov turned to his cousin. “Shall I come along? There are *two* jugs to fill. You might need help if you get... uh, diverted?” He smirked, thinking of Ignatius’ earlier window-watching.

“I can manage, and *if* I need help, I’ll ask Yochanan-Mark or one of his friends.”

“Your fascination with those Galileans might get you into trouble, maybe us as well. The priests might not be very understanding, should you be caught or seen with them. And then, what would father do? What might happen to him? You should think of these things. Father is an Ancient, a member of the Sanhedrin, and a respected merchant. Such a thing would be an embarrassment at least. Many of the priests would not be so forgiving if they believed we had something to do with those troublesome Galileans... They had that rabbi crucified for blasphemy, remember?”

“I’m just going to get water...” Ignatius looked at his cousin with feigned innocence. An idea was forming, one he kept to himself.

As it happened, Ignatius’ curiosity about the “troublesome” Galileans was satisfied... somewhat...

Curiosity Satisfied?

Ignatius and his cousin were nearly inseparable over the past months.

Ya'aqov had taken him under wing as they explored Jerusalem and the countryside. Today their tether was broken. Ruth had chores for Ya'aqov at home. So, Ignatius set off down the Street of Sycamores, lugging the first jug to the fountain by the pool of Siloam. As he left the house, two of the Galileans, Ta'oma and Yochanan, were sitting on a bench deep in conversation. Yochanan looked up and greeted Ignatius as he passed by. Returning a short while later, a third man, who Ignatius did not recognize, had joined Ta'oma and Yochanan. "We should leave soon" he heard one say. Not wanting to miss anything that the Galileans might do, he rushed inside leaving the jug near the kitchen. "I am off again," he called out, grabbed the second jug and rushed back to peer out the door. Seeing Yochanan and four others walking off toward Siloam, Ignatius followed.

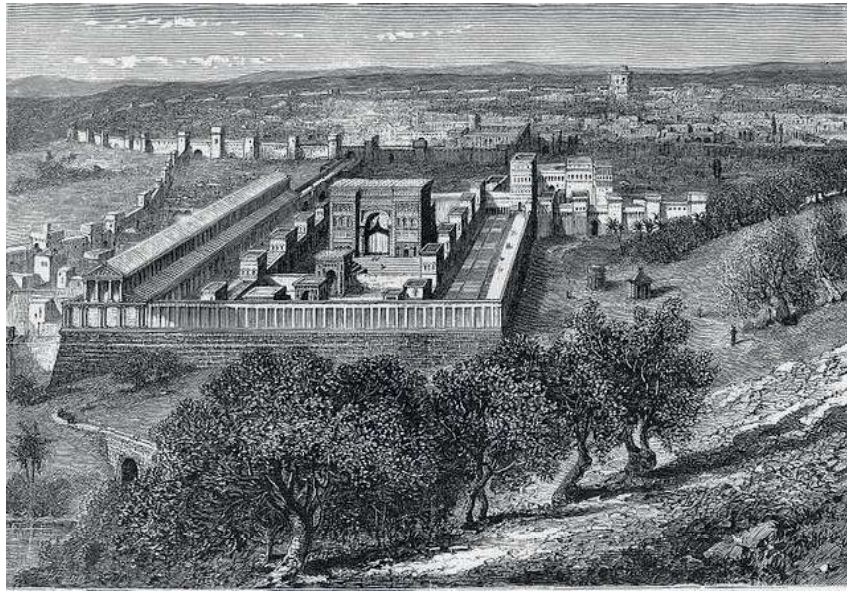
Near the pool was the Fountain Gate, one of the exits to the Hinnom Valley which formed the southern border of Jerusalem. Outside the gate the small Galilean band turned left on a cart path that skirted the Valley of Kidron in the shadow of the long, towering eastern city wall. A stream flowed down this valley fed by the spring rains. Come summer it would be dry, but now it flowed gently, bubbling over the rocky ground with the last of the season's rain. Ignatius remained a discreet distance behind his quarry. The men had stopped talking and pulled scarves up to their faces so as not to be recognized by any palace guards they might encounter. They continued along this path, crossing the brook and then along the lower slope of Mount Olivet until they came to the gethsemane, an olive press.

Here they were in the shade of the olive trees, numerous along this part of the mountain. The Galileans had walked this path countless times, perhaps today remembering the last time they walked it with their rabbi on that fateful night of *Pesach*. The sun was climbing higher over Olivet. In the cloudless azure sky, its rays washed the upper wall of the temple platform, walls that soared over one hundred feet above the Kidron.

There was a steady stream of pilgrims making their way along this path towards the city gates. Ignatius wormed his way through or around them, oblivious to the empty jug he still carried. He was fixated, wanting, somehow needing, to discover what these Galileans were about.

At the gethsemane they were joined by another small group of their fellow Galileans, another six or seven led by the one called Kephas. They stopped briefly, embracing one another with greetings of obvious joy, though Ignatius was at enough of a distance to see but not to hear. This larger group crossed to the Bethany Road which curled up the slopes of

Olivet. Ignatius was, he hoped, shielded by the occasional groups of travelers coming down from Bethany.



As they climbed close to the crest of the mountain Ignatius still had them in sight, while keeping, he believed, a safe distance behind. He took a quick glance back over his shoulder and looked down at the holy city of Jerusalem. They were well above the walls of the city. The towering sandstone walls, the white alabaster marbles of the temple and its massive golden doors gleamed brightly in the morning sun. It was blinding if you stared too long.

Suddenly the Galileans broke away from the road and angled northwards along the crest. From the opposite direction, off towards Bethany, another small group, men and women, joined the larger group. Ignatius guessed they were now about thirty to forty in all. As they walked along the upper heights of Olivet, pine, olive and cypress trees gave way to more open spaces—rolling mounds covered by the green grasses and wildflowers of spring. The sun emblazoned the greens, yellows and lavenders of the meadow. It was stunningly beautiful. The young sweet-smelling fields of flowers gave off a heady perfume. Ignatius breathed deeply. It was intoxicating, heavenly.

Empty jug in hand, time completely lost to him, Ignatius continued to follow, now maybe a few hundred feet away from Galileans. The group proceeded down a slight depression. As he approached the top of the rise, he could look down at them. He stopped. If he continued on, he would quickly find himself in the midst of them. He knelt by a small outcropping

of stone. It was a convenient spot to watch whatever this gathering, now stopped in the hollow, was about.

There was a slight breeze which was pleasantly cool. The climb up the mountain had been warm in the morning sun. Ignatius set his jug down and watched from behind the outcrop which was higher than his height standing. The breeze wafted the sweet perfume of the wildflowers and grasses. If he was not so taken with the group below it would be nice to lie back against the shade of the boulder and drift away with the morning. He closed his eyes for an instant...

That reverie quickly ended. Ignatius blinked and noticed a man, a tall man, in a bright white robe standing on the opposite rise, looking down at the men and women who stood below in the hollow. He could see the man clearly. They were somewhat at the same level. The man raised his right hand in a gesture of greeting and smiled at his audience. They all looked up at him. It was apparent he was the one they came to see. But where he had come from Ignatius could not tell.

Ignatius was transfixed. Partly obscured by the outcropping, he remained kneeling and leaned slightly to his left to better see the entire scene, and hopefully not to be seen. Not that he shouldn't be here. After all, any number of shepherds could be about. But none were. They were in a world of their own. Ignatius had a fleeting thought that if Yochanan saw him, or any of the others, he might be chased off, an unwelcome intruder.

But everyone in that gathering was intent, enraptured by the man above.

There was a stillness, a quiet blanket of expectation. The white-robed man began to speak, his voice carrying down the hill and across the natural amphitheater.

“Children, I have...”

He looked across at Ignatius—he had seen him despite his rocky shield. Ignatius' heart pounded. The man smiled and continued speaking. Ignatius was mesmerized. The intense brown eyes of the stranger seemed to bore in on him. A stranger? Who was he?

Ignatius, held nearly breathless by his penetrating gaze, suddenly thought back to the horrific crucifixions that day of *Pesach*, the two pathetic criminals and the sad-looking rabbi, beaten and bloodied. Surely this man had not been one of the three as the Galileans claimed. It could not be. His mind must be playing tricks on him. Was this man some kind of magician that could suggest such thoughts in the minds of others? He shook his head as if trying to break a spell.

He could hear some of what the man was saying though little of it made any sense.

Snatches of words floated across the divide: "... you will receive power... you will be my witnesses..."

The man raised both arms, palms outstretched towards his audience, his robe whiter than white against the crystal blue sky. The crowd remained quiet, totally absorbed while he had been speaking.

Then the most amazing thing happened. Ignatius, not quite believing or understanding what he was seeing, would often recall this day in later years. A small low cloud passed over the crest where the man stood, obscuring him but an instant; and then the cloud was carried away by the breeze. The man was gone.

Two other men, similarly garbed in white robes, had appeared. They walked down the slight slope from where the man had been speaking, and after briefly addressing the small assembly, turned, went back up and over the rise and were gone.

Ignatius now stood and watched as the crowd broke up into smaller bands, excitedly conversing with one another.

Ignatius just stood, watching, wondering. The young Galilean Yochanan and a few others walked close by. Yochanan looked at Ignatius and smiled.

"Well, my young friend, did you see what you came to see?" He chuckled, started to walk on with his friends, then turned, laughing and said, "Don't forget your water jug." And he and the others started their journey down from Olivet.

Ignatius returned home with his water, suffered a scolding from his aunt for his tardiness, dodged Ya'aqov's persistent questions about the Galileans, and was reunited with his father a few days later. They spent *Shavu'ot* in Jerusalem; and soon after father and son returned to Antioch.

He never saw the Galileans again.

II

In the Cebenna Gaul, May 68 AD

Julius “Bellator”, the Warrior

It had all gone terribly wrong...
Twilight was blurring his landmarks. Still, he could make out hazy shapes off to the west, the familiar foothills of the Cebenna Mons. Tomorrow he would cross the River Arar and be in home territory. Those hills drew him on, they were his beacon. It would be much easier traversing than the rugged Jura's he left behind on his escape from Vesontio. He was a hunted man. He was putting Vesontio far behind as quickly as he could manage, slow and difficult at best considering his weakening condition. Escape—it had all gone terribly wrong...

Julius Segusiavus was known by many of his friends as “Bellator.” He had taken that *cognomen*, or nickname, which meant “warrior.” That was how he fashioned himself since he was a boy. His family name, Segusiavus, was taken from his clan name. For centuries family and clan had been horse warriors as were many Celtic tribes in the now Roman provinces of Gaul. As he approached manhood, he aimed to realize his dream and become a cavalry soldier in one of the Roman auxiliary units.

His father, Tertius, not only discouraged Julius, he adamantly opposed this notion. Tertius considered it a foolish pursuit that might endanger family and clan.

Julius was his oldest son, destined to become the next chief of the Segusiavi. And the next head of the family and the family's many business enterprises. The family was of ancient Celtic nobility. The family had prized Roman citizenship since the times of Julius Caesar. And the family was immensely wealthy. There were many good reasons, Tertius argued, not to risk the family's position and wealth. That, he often reminded his son, was

how it was “destined” to be.

Then Julius’ world changed in the early months of Nero’s fifteenth and what was to be his last year as emperor.

Nero’s recent years were completely devoted to pursuits that traditional conservative Romans, the upper class of senators and old noble families, found excessive, degrading and lacking any virtue. He was a profligate and an embarrassment.

His seemingly insatiable appetites had an even more unacceptable cost: increased taxes and property confiscations. Indulgences cost money, substantial monies.

Scolds and opponents plotted treason. Nero brushed them all aside with sentences of exile and execution.

Nero fiddled on, without change or remorse.

The latest to challenge the debauched emperor was Gaius Julius Vindex, an aristocrat from the Gallic province of Aquitania and of senatorial standing. At this time, he was governor of the province of Gallia Lugdunensis.

An historian writing a hundred years later wrote glowingly of him:

There was a Gaul named Gaius Julius Vindex, an Aquitanian, descended from the royal race and by virtue of his father’s status a Roman senator. He was powerful in body and of shrewd intelligence, was skilled in warfare and full of daring for any great enterprise; and he had a passionate love of freedom and a vast ambition. This was the man who stood at the head of the Gauls.

This was the man who excited Julius, rekindling the dreams of a young horse warrior.

Vindex incites

Although Julius “Bellator” was a Roman citizen, he considered himself a Celt and Gallic patriot above all else. Even above his station as the scion and heir of the family Segusiavus. When Vindex finally had his fill of Nero and set in motion the wheels of war and revolt, Julius eagerly embraced the call to arms.

Vindex had given an impassioned speech earlier in the year at Lugdunum, calling for change, for a new emperor. Crying out for revolt.

Julius recalled some of those words, later epitomized by that same historian:

... Nero has despoiled the whole Roman world,
... He has destroyed all the flower of the senate,
... He debauched and then killed his mother, and does not preserve even the semblance of sovereignty.

Many murders, robberies and outrages, it is true, have often been committed by others; but as for the other deeds committed by Nero, how could one find words fittingly to describe them? I have seen him, my friends and allies, — believe me, — I have seen that man (if man he is who has married Sporus and been given in marriage to Pythagoras), in the circle of the theatre, that is, in the orchestra, sometimes holding the lyre and dressed in loose tunic and buskins, and again wearing in general-soled shoes and mask.

I have often heard him sing, play the herald, and act in tragedies. I have seen him in chains, hustled about as a miscreant, heavy with child, aye, in the travail of childbirth — in short, imitating all the situations of mythology by what he said and what was said to him, by what he submitted to and by what he did.

Will anyone, then, style such a person Caesar and emperor and Augustus? Never! Let no one abuse those sacred titles. They were held by Augustus and by Claudius, whereas this fellow might most properly be termed Thyestes, Oedipus, Alcmeon, or Orestes; for these are the characters that he represents on the stage and it is these titles that he has assumed in place of the others.

Therefore, rise now at length against him; succor yourselves and succor the Romans; liberate the entire world!

Vindex sent letters to all the western governors of the empire. He appealed to their patriotism to displace a tyrant and return authority and dignity to the “Senate and People of Rome.” Vindex did not seek the purple for himself. Rather, he championed Sulpicius Galba, governor of Hispania Tarraconensis, as the most worthy candidate to be emperor. He was a man of accomplishment, of noble lineage, and widely respected by the Senate and the military. In Vindex’s eyes, Galba was the antithesis of the corrupt Nero.

Vindex next levied nearly 20,000 recruits from many of those tribes of Gaul who resented Nero’s oppressive taxes and confiscations. His hastily formed forces besieged Lugdunum hoping to persuade the city, loyal to

Nero, to capitulate.

In May the legate of Upper Germany, Verginius Rufus, and his legions crossed the River Rhene and camped outside the city of Vesontio. Vindex broke off his siege and marched to join Rufus believing Rufus had come to join the cause.

Rufus had received one of Vindex's letters. However, like most of the other governors, he had been discreetly non-responsive. Rufus was loyal to the fatherland. And, by extension, to the emperor, no matter what his personal feelings and opinions might be. He would not be treasonous; he had no appetite for it.

Vindex still held hopes of converting Rufus to the cause. He had advised Galba that he could provide 100,000 soldiers—a fanciful figure intended to reassure Galba and to incentivize the Senate in Rome. Politics, timing and appearances were crucial in this ultimate high-stakes game. Vindex optimistically sought an alliance with Rufus and his legions as part of that promise. He would be disappointed.

Vindex's raw recruits approached the outskirts of Vesontio. They encamped in an open plain across the oxbow of the River Doubs which curled around the town. Vindex went to meet with Rufus in hopes of collaboration. What ensued was a confusion of intentions, or simply the false hopes of each party.

Rufus' superior force of five veteran battle-tested legions and supporting German auxiliaries suddenly attacked the Gauls. Later, some claimed, out of pure hatred of the Gauls and the prospect of booty. They overwhelmed an inferior, less disciplined and smaller army.

It had all gone terribly wrong...

Disaster at Vesontio

Julius Bellator led his company of Gallic horse warriors to the fields of Vesontio. When the Roman legions unexpectedly attacked, Julius, the naïve and idealistic nationalist, and his comrades were caught off guard. This army of levies, poorly organized and little trained, fought like the tribes of old—full of energy and passion, but easily overwhelmed when confronted by Rufus' disciplined, battle-tested legionaries. Like the tribes under Vercingetorix or the more recent rabble of Sacrovir, the Gauls were massacred.

It had rained steadily a few days before that fateful day of late May. The

battleground was soggy. Julius' cavalry, instead of being positioned on the left flank, were caught in a confused melee mixed in with infantry. Maneuvering in the sucking mud was difficult, hampered by foot soldiers trying to hold back the steady onrushing *testudo* of Romans. Julius' horse caught a foreleg in a soft spot of tangled roots, buckled and snapped the leg. In the din of steel on steel, screams and yells, Julius heard the sharp crack of the break. His horse pitched forward and Julius fell on his back. He rolled over, kneeling, and grabbed a round shield lying in the mud. The Romans were pressing on all sides. He slipped as he fumbled with the shield, sensed a blow coming from the legionary in front of him. He warded off a chopping blow aimed at his neck. But his attacker's sword carried such force it glanced off the awkwardly turned shield and cut deep into his upper left arm. Julius staggered, fell, and, as the legionary was about to finish him, a Gaul behind him speared the legionary with a javelin. Julius was woozy from the blow and loss of blood, his arm numb. He turned his head slightly to keep his face out of the mud and passed out. The last sound he heard was the distinctive trilling whistle of a Roman centurion. The Romans began receding in formation. The battle was over.

Julius had survived the onslaught, but barely. The sounds of the whistles faded in the distance, the noise subsided, giving way to an eerie quiet, pierced only by the moans and crying of the wounded and dying. Julius cautiously turned his head ever so slightly. Seeing the Romans now off at a distance, he pushed himself up and staggered away from the dark muddy field stained with crimson, stumbling over mangled corpses and around the wounded. Few others were standing. Horses lay among the bodies or wandered hesitantly about, whinnying with fright and confusion.

Julius had idealized the glory of a warrior. He wondered, half in a fog, which of his gods, Lugh, Epona, had turned their backs on him. Nothing remained but get away. Quickly—if he wanted to live.

Seeking sanctuary

Usually one could make the journey on horseback from Vesontio down a good Roman road to Cavillonum, then down the Via Rhenus to Lugdunum in four days, about a hundred eighty miles as the crow flies. Six days, maybe seven, on foot. Julius knew the country well. As a boy he had hunted the forests of the Jura and Cebenna for deer and boar with his father Tertius and his brothers Gaius and Marcus.

But he had no horse. So, he walked, or, more accurately, staggered along. He was weak from the deep cut to his arm. Better at least it was his left arm, not his sword arm. He had torn away some of his breeches and fashioned a bandage. The wound still seeped. He was hungry and tired. He was also a traitor to Rome as were all failed revolutionaries. Julius kept to the forests that blanketed the base of the Jura's. The Alpes rose majestically behind, their snowy glacial peaks separating Gaul from the high country of Gallia Cisalpina. He had been walking for days, angling towards Lugdunum, towards home, avoiding roads patrolled by Roman legionaries and their scouts. If caught, he would be executed by strangulation, clubbed to death or crucified. No mercy—a warning to any who betrayed Rome.

The night before, under cover of a moonless sky, he forded the Arar a few miles north of Lugdunum. How many days had it been? He had lost track. Still hungry except for a handful of berries and mushrooms. Becoming more delirious—his wound was infected, it smelled rank. It hurt to move the arm, even a little. He needed a doctor soon, medical care. Having crossed the river, he should be safer in the familiar foothills above Lugdunum.

It would have been quicker to go directly into the city. No, that was no longer possible. He could not chance going unseen to the family *domus*. The city was unshakably loyal to the emperor. Nero had been a generous benefactor. Four years ago, the leading citizens, among them his father and grandfather, sent one million sesterces to aid the rebuilding of Rome after the “Great Fire.” A few years later Lugdunum suffered a devastating fire. It ravaged the lower residential and port neighborhoods where the Arar and Rhodanus rivers joined. Nero reciprocated with a gift of over four million sesterces. The Lugdunese were grateful to their generous patron, *pater patriae*. Besides these recent gestures, before the coming of Julius Caesar, the practical and business-minded Gauls of the Rhodanus had long been allied to Rome thanks to this river of commerce. The Lugdunese were not in a mood to forgive Vindex or any of his followers for subjecting their city to his rebellious enterprise. So, Julius the traitor could not be seen in Lugdunum—never again.

But he could find his way to the family villa, the Villa of Three Crows, a half-day's ride in the hills above Lugdunum. The villa was immense, built in typical Roman style and fortified with high walls. He would find sanctuary there.

Three Crows was the stronghold, the home, of the Segusiavi; while Lugdunum was the base of the family's mercantile enterprises. He would be

safe there. He was family despite his father's vigorous opposition to his allegiance to Vindex. The overarching family doctrine was *always* political neutrality: be "good" citizens, mind your own "business"—in this case, businesses. Emperors and governors come and go, often by deadly or unpleasant means. Be loyal, if only under appearances. To be sworn to Vindex could jeopardize all the family had built over many generations. Wealthy, powerful individuals who betrayed the emperor were executed or exiled, property confiscated. So, his decision to join Vindex was anathema. No Segusiavi would betray or oppose the emperor, justified or not. Tertius had made forcefully clear what should have been understood, especially to one of his sons, his eldest son, his successor. Join Vindex, the family cannot, will not support you.

It was near dusk. Julius was now perhaps a half-day from the villa. His arm throbbed, he could barely move it. It had become more infected by the day. It was making him nauseous, and he was sweating continuously. Steel gray clouds darkened the evening sky. It would rain tonight. He made a crude lean-to shelter of fallen branches of oak and pine. He had barely enough energy to cut smaller limbs with his sword. Fortunately, since his escape he had encountered no bears or wolves. At night he had no fire. If they had smelled him, they had left him alone. Epona, absent in battle, was now guiding him safely home. Still, he had nothing to eat except the little he could forage. At least there were streams and rivers for water. But he desperately needed his wound attended to. Tomorrow he would be at the villa.

In the morning hours after first light he woke. The rain had stopped during the night. The sky was clear. The sun was warming this late spring day. The ground steamed. He was cold though, his tattered clothing soaked. The branches of his lean-to had kept little of the rain off. He leaned on his sword to push himself up. He was so stiff. He could barely move.

Home beckoned—a fire, a bath, clean clothes, sleep... He pushed on. A familiar sign—he saw the little stream whose rivulet trickled by an ancient oak. In its wide gnarled, crusty trunk was a carved out hollow for a shrine, the Celtic horse goddess Epona, the family deity. Here, every spring the druid offered prayers and sacrifice for the welfare of the Segusiavi. This sacred grove, this *nemeton*, was but an hour's walk from the villa. A shaft of sunlight filtered through the trees, its ray cast a soft golden glow on Epona. He staggered towards the shrine. *Epona... give me strength, Mother...* so close... He knelt in front of the shrine. Closed his eyes to finish his prayer.

Warmth suffused his body, a bright light radiated from Mother's face... then blackness.

He had almost made it.

Render unto Caesar

Two days later, the fifth of June, eleven days after the defeat of Vindex at Vesontio, two of Tertius' men hunting in the woods near the Epona grove found Julius.

They made a crude litter and carried the body back to Three Crows. Tertius was grooming a horse when they entered the compound. The litter, the look on the faces of the two men—Tertius dropped the brush and hurried to see, sensing this was not good. He looked down, pulled back the cloak and saw his son's sallow face. He closed his eyes, swallowed hard. He loved his son. They had parted in anger; he felt Julius a fool. Vindex had led a fool's errand—he lacked the resources, the legions, and the allies to challenge Rome. Vindex paid the inevitable price. Word had reached Lugdunum that following his defeat, Vindex had done what most traitorous generals do, he committed suicide. And Tertius' son, he too paid the price for his dream of unrealized glory.

Tertius knelt, reached out and caressed the cold face. "My son... dead. May the gods welcome him... until they send him to his next life." He caressed Julius' face. "*Vale*, farewell, my son," he whispered. "Bellator... foolish, courageous warrior..."

Next day, father, mother, family, friends and servants returned Julius to the sanctuary where the Segusiavi were buried. On a necklace of fine gold chain was a silver coin that Julius had worn for the past months, a silver *denarius* minted by Vindex to pay his troops. One side was stamped with the *corona civici*, the laurel wreath of victory, and SPQR, *Senatus Populusque Romana*, the Senate and People of Rome. And on the side facing up:

HUMANI SALUS GENERIS

Salvation of the Human Race

Earth closed over the body, the shield, the sword, the coin.

Julius had rendered all to his Caesar.

Within days of these events, on June 9, 68 A.D., the emperor Nero, having lost the support of the Senate and many legions, having fled Rome

and in hiding at one of his estates, fearing for his life, committed suicide. That same day Sulpicius Galba was proclaimed emperor by the Senate and the People of Rome.

III

Gods of the Byrsa Carthago, May 95 AD

The Epona

Marcus Segusiavus raised his hand, two fingers at his lips, and blew his uncle a kiss.

“Vale, farewell,” he called, watching the ship glide away from its moorings.

His uncle, Gaius, standing tall near the prow as was his habit, looked back, vigorously waving, a smile broad as his weathered face, and shouted out a hearty good-by.

Marcus lingered for a few moments at the edge of the quay. It was early, the first hour of the day. His uncle’s last day in Carthago. He pushed his way through the swarm of dockworkers and seamen loading and unloading the hundreds of ships that clogged the two merchant harbors, the better to see and be seen. The *Epona*, his uncle’s new galley, dropped oars and made way for the channel that opened out to Mare Nostrum — “Our Sea,” the Romans called it.

It was a beautiful ship. Recently built to meet Gaius’ specifications, long and sleek. The hull was painted black over the pitch; it had a mirror-like sheen. The concave prow with brass-plated cutwater knifed through the sapphire water, spray sparkling like two wings on either side. Twenty pairs of oars rhythmically propelled the craft away from the docks. On both sides of the prow were raised, carved images of a racing stallion, heads stretched forward, manes trailing, painted a golden yellow. Ship and horse melded as one, racing to some unseen finish line far beyond the horizon. This device honored the horse-goddess Epona, the family’s protectress, for whom the ship was named. Aft the poop deck the “goose-head,” in the shape of a gilded horse’s head, curved forward from the sternpost. From prow to stern

the whole effect was rakish.

Marcus waved again. “Vale, farewell,” he whispered. He knew many years would pass before seeing his uncle again.

Leaving the harbor, he hurried up the foot of the hill called the “lesser” Byrsa to gain a farther view. The ship had entered the channel that led to the open waters of Mare Nostrum. Marcus nodded in concert with the precise syncopated rhythm of the oars. It was a beautiful thing to see, he thought proudly. Like all crews of the Segusiavus merchant fleet, their sailors were trained to Roman naval standards. They doubled as quasi-marines, warriors as well as seamen. Every man had a shield and weapons. In the ship’s hold were two scorpions, bolt artillery that would give any pirate second thoughts. The *Epona* was not a typical helpless merchantman.

Climbing the last few blocks near the top of the Byrsa, Marcus halted. From this height, under the welcome shade of a fig tree, he could see the mast being raised, rigging being secured. When she reached open waters, the large square sail would be raised. Aided by following winds, the *Epona* would head northeast, leaving behind the Sinus Carthagenensis, round Mercurii promontory, then turn southeast, hugging the African coast towards her next destination of Leptis Magna six-hundred miles distant. If favorable winds held, Gaius would make port in seven days. Carthago to Leptis was the third leg of her maiden voyage since leaving the port of Massilia two weeks ago.

The first stop had been Ostia, Rome’s coastal port. Marcus’ father, Marcus “the Elder,” managed this important statio. It was second in importance only to their home base in Lugdunum. Shipments of countless luxury items sated the appetites of the upper classes and well-to-do of Rome: perfumes, spices, jewels, glassware, fine textiles, exotic woods and furniture, papyrus, foodstuffs, animals, slaves... For their wealthy clientele, money was no object. Segusiavus et Filii profited immensely from these imports. Much of the wealth of the empire was concentrated in Rome. It was the greatest of consumer cities. After a brief stopover, Gaius and young Marcus departed for Carthago, the second leg of a lengthy itinerary.

Gaius and the *Epona* would circle Mare Nostrum. At Leptis he would unload a cargo of Gallic wool, cured pork and much sought-after red tableware. The next destination was Alexandria, provincial capital of Egypt and second largest city in the empire. He would buy many of those luxury goods and the valuable papyrus. It would be a lengthy stay; then on to Seleucia-Pieria, the port of Antioch in Syria—all, hopefully, before the end

of the sailing season in autumn.

It was in Antioch, and the following spring in Ephesos in Asia, that Gaius was looking to fulfill a long-held dream—opening a *statio* in those two large and prosperous cities. The family’s business interests would circle *Mare Nostrum*. They would have a mercantile “empire” as Rome had a political empire.

This grand plan would take the better part of two years before Gaius returned with his ship and treasure to Lugdunum. So, Marcus “the Younger” well knew he would not see his uncle or his family for many a year.

Slowly the ship shrunk to a bug-like spec. Marcus could almost see the sail filling out—the gods had blessed them with a strong following wind. Within minutes the ship disappeared from view.

Marcus was left with his thoughts.

Marcus and Flavia

Marcus was not left alone.

In this, his twenty-fourth year, he returned to Carthago from the family seat in Gaul, the Villa of Three Crows, with his pregnant wife, Flavia.

She was the daughter of a prominent businessman in Leptis Magna, a merchant in olive oil. Her father, Gentilius, a retired general of the XXII Deitariana Legion, had close ties to the deified Vespasian, father of the current emperor Domitian. He had been rewarded for his loyalty with a substantial land grant of profitable olive groves. Shared trading interests brought the two merchant families together many years earlier, the fruit of Gaius’ frequent trading journeys around *Mare Nostrum*. The marriage was a desirable union of two of the younger generation of prominent equestrian families, the Romano-Gallic Segusiavi of Lugdunum and the Capellae of African Leptis.

Marcus’ young wife of twenty years was favored with Roman roots on her father’s side and native Punic on her mother’s. Gentilius gave her a strong soldier’s resolve and a keen sense of analysis. Well-read and educated, she could have been a philosopher. From her mother, dark olive skin, almond-shaped eyes, the pupils a dark brown that looked almost as black as her long jet hair. She was, to Marcus’ Celtic eyes, exotically beautiful. He adored her. Both eagerly looked forward to the child that would forever cement this union.

Segusiavus & Sons—Africa and the Annona

Marcus and Flavia traveled to Three Crows the previous year following their marriage in Leptis Magna. They wintered over as the sailing season had passed; and waited for spring and the completion of Gaius' new "flagship", the *Epona*, in its final stages of construction. It was also the time for the traditional family council. Tertius, Marcus' grandfather, patriarch of the family, headed the council. Gaius, his father, Marcus the Elder, and the overseers of every *statio* attended. It was a time for serious business planning and a family reunion. Flavia's parents and step-brother also came to the villa.

The council decided that young Marcus would reside in Carthago. He would manage and develop their trading interests in Africa. Marcus had long been groomed for this position. Most important were the valuable grain transport contracts with Rome. Africa and Egypt were the "breadbaskets" of the Roman metropolis, a city of almost one million. The majority were plebs, poor commoners and slaves. The imperial food welfare program, the *annona*, had, for centuries, fed much of Rome's citizenry.

Tertius had guided the family's entry into this trade. It sparked the impetus to expand their merchant fleet. Large sailing galleys were required for the transport of this sizeable bulk commodity.

Decades earlier, Tertius had dealings with the emperor Claudius. Claudius, as *Fortuna* would have it, was born in Lugdunum. The emperor visited his birthplace on many occasions, most notably during the campaign in Britannia. On one of those visits, Tertius and other prominent citizens welcomed the emperor, as was customary for the provinces' tribal chiefs, city elders and magistrates. Claudius had long been concerned with stabilizing Rome's grain imports. Periods of shortages often caused riots among the massive numbers of the lower classes who expected to be fed. Memories of the Servile Wars never left the minds of Rome's ruling elite. Claudius offered a solution—tax relief and other financial benefits for private merchants who would build grain transport ships and sail them, thus insuring this most valuable and vulnerable food supply. And peace and stability in the capital city. Tertius accepted the offer, seeing the potential dividends.

Segusiavus and Sons quickly expanded beyond their established riverine and coastal trade. Beyond the shores of Hispania, Gaul and Italy, the grain transport contracts widened their trading territories across the sea to Africa, to Egypt, and recently the Red Sea, and further up the eastern provinces of

Syria and Asia Minor—the present destinations of Gaius and the *Epona*.

The City of Carthago & the Byrsa

Marcus ended his climb on the heights of the Byrsa.



If he could magically look back in time, what would he see?

Three centuries ago he would be in the center of a seemingly impregnable citadel, built atop this hill. It had been much higher. Byrsa was Punic for “citadel.” It had resisted many an invader, even for a time the increasingly powerful and hostile Romans. Marcus knew his history, and he remembered that...

Scipio Aemilianus had razed the Punic city of Hamilcar following the last of the Punic Wars 250 years ago. Carthago and Rome, mortal enemies for centuries, waged a contest to the death for supremacy of the western world. So fearful was Rome of the persistent Carthaginian threat that Cato the Elder, the most prominent senator of his time, stridently ended every meeting of that august body with the constant call, *Carthago delenda est!* — “Carthago must be destroyed.” And so, it came to pass.

Marcus knew the story of Hamilcar’s wife, Hanno. Carthago’s demise was imminent. The Romans breached the lower walls. Flames rose to the heights as the city was being torched. In desperation, she sought to resurrect Hamilcar’s faltering courage with one last and terrible sacrifice to her gods,

Ba'al and Moloch. She offered her two small children to the flames, then herself. Child sacrifice was the ultimate gift. Her gods ignored her. And Carthago fell. He could picture in his mind the desperate Hanno flinging her children into the gaping mouth of that fiery furnace. He shuddered, unable to imagine sacrificing the child he and Flavia so eagerly awaited. To this day rumors persisted that the natives had never abandoned infant sacrifice, their ultimate sacrifice. If this were so, were some still hoping for Roman deaths and a purified Punic resurrection? The thought passed.

The hill had been higher in those days...

The site remained desolate for decades. With the passage of time, the vision of Julius Caesar and then that of his adopted son Augustus saw the potential for an enduring presence, a Roman colony, reaping the bounty of African resources. The Romans built this new Carthago, Roman Carthago. Over the past century and now in the reign of the emperor Domitian, Carthago became the second city in the west of the Empire, the "sister" of Rome, Soror Civitas.

Roman engineers leveled the Byrsa to a veritable plateau. Hundreds of thousands of tons of earth moved to infill the lower parts of the city. This highest and central hill from ancient times overlooked the city of Carthago and its precincts. On this crown were the proconsul's Praetorium, the basilica, the curia, all the principal administrative buildings of the African capital. Here stood temples to the gods of Rome—Jupiter Optimus Maximus, Minerva; and the gods of the natives—Baal, Tanit, Juno Caelestis. The temple of Aesculapius contained a public library and record office.

There were also many private mansions. Surveyors laid out the streets which radiated down to the other quarters. They were narrow and lined with houses six or seven stories high, and because of the hot climate many carried some distance below the level of the ground. The finest road was that of the money changers, Vicus Argentarius; another, Platea Nova, carried a flight of steps rising to the Byrsa. Others were named from temples, Vicus Saturni, Via Veneria. To gain relief from the harsh African sun, many streets were planted with rows of olive-trees, and some groves in the city were used for worship according to the old Phoenician custom.

The suburbs were bejeweled with splendid horti, the parks of the richer citizens. Across these, west of the city, a magnificent aqueduct, the longest in the world, brought water from the mountains of the interior.

This was Marcus' Carthago.

Marcus in charge

Winded from his lengthy climb, Marcus bent down and grabbed his knees. He had sprinted most of the way from the harbor to the forum atop the Byrsa. He sank on a bench tucked in one of the many porticoes. It was barely the second hour and already the heat was building. He dabbed the sweat from his forehead with a kerchief. The portico was shaded by a wide plane tree. The spray from one of the many fountains provided an illusion of coolness.

Uncle Gaius was gone. Amid the early morning crowd of officials, businessmen and the merely idle, Marcus sat and considered his new life.

Husband and father-to-be—the first, he prayed, of many sons.

Equally important, he now headed the African statio of Segusiavus and Sons and their small but valuable fleet of grain carriers.

Well prepared as he was over the recent years by his father, uncle and grandfather, he stood on his own. Life would be centered here, far from the family home in Gaul, far from the Villa of Three Crows. A thousand miles distant.

He gazed out at the azure sea northward to the horizon. His thoughts sailed far beyond to the next landfall of Sicilia, then Italy, and yet farther northwest over the Alps to his native land of Gaul, up the valley of the Rhodanus to Lugdunum. Finally, on to the villa in the foothills above the city where he was born, spent his youth and learned the family business, gaining the experience and maturity of age that brought him to Carthago.

He felt a sudden, overwhelming sense of smallness as he watched the black shape of the *Epona* fade from sight. He thought of his Uncle Gaius' unyielding aura of confidence, his irrepressible enthusiasm as he stood tall saluting his nephew with that big grin, long blond hair blowing in the wind, then turning away, surveying his own horizons. Gaius the wanderer, Gaius the peregrinus, the romantic traveler who always returned with stories and gifts, mementoes of far-off places...

Marcus smiled and realized he too shared this sense of adventure and responsibility.

Draco

“Marcus!”

Marcus turned to see his wife's step-brother making his way across the busy forum.

“Draco...” Marcus was surprised to see his brother-in-law. Not pleasantly surprised. He forced himself to conceal his tepid acknowledgement.

“Ave, brother!” Draco said, extending his hand.

Draco was a tall, thin weedy creature, dark-skinned like his sister Flavia with the same black hair, short and curled in the Roman way. A smooth wedge-shaped head, flat nose and wide-spaced narrow slits for eyes. Dressed in his customary black, a linen tunic and pants edged in maroon, his appearance was what his name suggested, a serpent. A slippery, unctuous type his uncle Gaius warned. Marcus agreed.

Few considered him charming. A cool, practiced demeanor could not disguise a distance he maintained from nearly everyone, except Flavia and Gentilius, his uncle and father by adoption. Flavia was one of the few who felt warmly towards him. Ten years older than his step-sister, he seemed younger than Flavia. And more sympathetic when one considered her natural feminine instincts and basic kindness. Marcus could not warm to him and kept his own cool circumspection, much as he did with his own cousin, Gaius “the Younger,” his uncle’s oldest son who, unlike his father, a man peculiarly aloof and distant.

Draco’s coolness masked a calculating detachment. Early in life he practiced a rigid self-control. This discipline both protected and served any end to which he aimed. Scruples did not hinder him. Through his adopted father’s connections Draco found a place in the courts of the emperor Domitian. He served his “Lord and Master” in two important ways: First, as a tax farmer in the rich coastal plain of Africa Proconsularis, home to three of the wealthiest cities of Tripolitania—Oea, Sabratha and Leptis Magna. He rigorously enforced the Jewish tax, the didrachma, in the province. The emperor’s insatiable need for revenue to pay his legions, especially his Praetorian Guard, his extensive building projects and his personal appetites, guaranteed a healthy income for a productive tax man.

Far more important, Draco’s natural talents were suited to Domitian. Draco was a delator, one of the many shadowy eyes and ears of the emperor that reached into every corner of the empire. An information gatherer, sinister advisors feared by most of the Senate, by many of the patrician class and the wealthy. This untrusting, suspicious ruler had many enemies, real and imagined.

Marcus’ uncle Gaius and his father Marcus the Elder frequented Rome pursuing the family’s trading interests and keeping good relations with

government officials. Much could be heard and learned. The African delator was well known. But not well liked. The suspicious emperor and his informers were two of a kind, to be regarded with extreme caution. A whispered word that tickled the emperor's ears might be construed negatively, could prove dangerous, fatal. Recently, the unpredictable Domitian executed a senator for nothing more than a flippant remark about a pork dish served at a banquet. Caution and keeping an arm's length from any emperor had always been a cardinal precept in all Segusiavi dealings with the court or officials close to the emperor. This was more apt than ever. Young Marcus was cautioned—you are married to the sister of an informer. Their counsel was simple. "Don't trust Draco."

Marcus recovered from this sudden and unwelcome appearance.

"So, Draco, we, Flavia and I, thought you still to be in Rome..."

"Yes, so I gather. I have just come from paying my respects to your lovely wife." Draco's eyes hardened ever so slightly.

Always sizing up his man, thought Marcus.

"I arrived late yesterday from Leptis, spent time with father before coming to Carthago on business. Matter of fact, I am on my way to see the proconsul..."

He rarely misses an opportunity to emphasize his connections...

"My dear sister was gracious enough to extend a dinner invitation. We can visit then... haven't seen much of one another since you took your bride home to your family..." A thin, taunting smile stretched across his face, as though sensing Marcus' discomfort. "Until this evening..."

Draco was quickly off before Marcus could utter a single word. Just like him to do all the talking unless probing for some bit of gossip or information. Draco for dinner. Now that Gaius had sailed, he desired nothing more than to spend a quiet, restful evening with Flavia. Alone. No house guests, no entertaining. It had been but a week since their return from Gaul. His uncle's presence delayed what he craved—a day of quiet. In this he was much like his father—soft spoken, introspective, more Roman in that way than an effusive Celt. It must be a trait of our side of the family, the opposite of the outgoing, demonstrative Gaius's, father and son. Or his grandfather Tertius, the first to travel the world, showing the way for Gaius the peregrine, the wanderer... going wherever business could be had. Family comparisons aside, he asked for nothing more than to settle in their new home and focus on their African business.

They had been away all winter. At long last they were back—home—in

their new villa on the Byrsa mount. It had belonged to Draco's family. When Draco's father died years ago, the property passed to his brother Gentilius as part of an inheritance. Over the years Gentilius added to the house, making it a more elaborate, worthy of a "Man of the Mount." Like most of the villas here, it was built on several terraced levels. Gentilius used the house when in Carthago on business. When Draco came of age, Gentilius allowed him the use of the house, but kept ownership. Then Gentilius surprisingly gave the house to Flavia and Marcus for a wedding gift, part of the dowry. If Draco objected, inasmuch as it had been his birth father's property, he never said. Draco applauded his step-father's generosity with typical cool detachment. Spending most of his time in Rome when not collecting taxes or performing other services for the emperor, any resentment was carefully concealed.

Marcus spent an hour in the curia offices then returned to the harbor to check on the loading of the grain cargo, had a few words with his crew supervisor, and finally home for a nap before the evening dinner. It was not a restful nap.

Dinner with Draco

The winter in Gaul had been severe, snow lasting into late spring. Carthago this early summer was unusually hot. It had been since their return. In the early morning Marcus wilted from the heat, shimmering off the bay as he watched Gaius' ship glide out to sea. By evening it had turned balmy as the sun melted away behind the western hills of the Carthaginian peninsula.

Dinner was served in the peristyle. Dozens of decorative brass lamps glowed, the light reflecting off a tiled pool. At its center a nymph poured water from a conch shell, burbling merrily. Delicate netting above rippled in the light breeze while keeping annoying flying things at bay.

The dinner was a delight. Flavia learned well from her mother. She outdid herself with a menu of African and Celtic dishes.

She wore a near diaphanous dress of pale-yellow silk, imported from Seres. Delicate cream-colored sandals of the softest kid leather with silver bosses adorned her small, perfectly manicured feet. Her jet-black hair was folded up in back, held in place with an ornate silver comb. On her arms were two silver serpentine bands. On her right middle finger, a delicate gold ring, an oval ruby, a horse etched at the center—her wedding ring, a token from her Gallic husband. Marcus found it challenging not to constantly

drink in this beauty, a woman that would make a Persian prince faint with desire. Sensing his attention, Flavia smiled coyly.

The dinner over, reclining on couches, the little dinner party nibbled on chilled fruits and watered Italian wine. Marcus setting down a silver goblet, stretched. A perfect evening, he thought, were it not for Draco and his friend.

Draco was dressed in his familiar black. Tonight, he chose a light silk gown embroidered with intertwined vines of iridescent green, little leaves suggesting the heads of serpents with forked tongues of crimson. A child of Medusa—Marcus considered that Draco purposely promoted this affectation.

His companion was Quintus, the proconsular centurion, commander of the governor's guard. A stout, muscular man with classic Latin looks, skin deeply browned by years of campaigning and dressed in a simple tunic with the scarlet trim of his rank. While Draco was soft and smooth in his speech—his Punic accent caused certain words to have a hissing quality suggesting the unctuous style that Gaius noted—Quintus was formally correct, appropriately deferential. He spoke little, politely to Flavia and only to Marcus when following Draco's lead.

After the initial pleasantries upon arriving and the mundane chatter while dining, Draco smiled his thin smile. The pink tip of his tongue touched his lower lip ever so slightly accentuating the "s" of Marcus.

"You have been invited by the governor to sit with him at the games tomorrow." He delicately rolled a grape between his fingers. "He hopes to begin a long and close friendship."

Marcus sighed, looked longingly at Flavia. Time, a little time for us, if it pleases Juno he prayed.

"Draco, I am honored of course. But, why me? A common merchant... I am hardly of rank or position to sit with him..."

"Come now, brother."

Marcus hated that insincere familiarity.

"The Family Segusiavus is one of the more prestigious equestrian families in all of Gaul. Nobility. 'Friends of Rome,' allies of the Divine Julius if I correctly understand your family history..."

"You flatter me, brother. Such an honor is more due my father, my uncle or Tertius. We have served many emperors for many generations. Still, I do not have my father's stature, much less Tertius'..."

"You are too modest. You are the head, the overseer for your family's

business in Carthago, all of Africa. Your grain contracts are of great importance to Rome. All things considered, you are now, as it is known in Carthago, one of the 'Men of the Mount,' and so a friend of the court. There are many reasons why his Excellency seeks your friendship. Take it on my word, Marcus, he is keen to see you tomorrow."

Draco turned to Flavia. "Not that it need be said, but you as well dear sister."

Flavia knew Marcus had not been enthusiastic for this sudden dinner party. "Husband, I know you are weary from all our travels these past months, as am I, but surely, we can, we ought to accept the governor's hospitality. No?"

"My wife, my dearest Flavia, says much with a few well-chosen words. Of course..."

"Excellent!" Draco cut Marcus short with another thin smile. "Quintus will inform him of your acceptance later this evening."

Marcus acquiesced with a slight nod of his head and a forced smile. He aimed an arched eyebrow at Flavia, mocking thanks.

"Did you hear," continued Draco, "that the amphitheatre has recently been completed? The upper level I mean. Except, that is, for some artistic detail. With the completion of this third level, Carthago has one of the largest amphitheatres in the empire. These games are a fitting celebration of Roman magnificence and munificence." Lifting his wineglass with a satisfied look, he addressed all:

"So, a toast to our emperor: Domitian, Dominus et Deus, Our Lord and God."

All lifted their glasses to a chorus of "Domitian."

"Lord and master," offered Marcus. It was a small, perhaps petty, challenge to Draco. Marcus didn't care.

Draco smiled, "Lord... *and God*."

The Amphitheatre

Violet twilight faded into the black of night. Stars pierced the dome of the heavens; a waxing moon bathed the courtyard while the cozy party chattered away...

On the far side of the Byrsa, west of the forum with its grand edifices and temples, out of view of the villa of Marcus and Flavia, the imposing amphitheatre cast a ghostly shadow.

The amphitheatre was a large oval of fifty wide arches, each on marble columns. Three arcades rose above the podium and subterranean levels. At each level were carved figures of animals, craftsmen, and the winds in human form. Marble animals stood over each door, and above every arch in the upper arcades was a polished cartouche. It was an architectural jewel.

The *ludi*, games, had been underway for two days. One day remained. As Draco alluded, the city was celebrating the completion of this edifice. Gladiatorial contests took place in the morning. Midday, *noxii*, prisoners condemned to death, were given up to wild beasts. The memory of human sacrifices lingered from Carthaginian times. A religious character attached to these executions—male victims were sometimes dressed in robes like the priests of Molech-Saturn, women in those of the priestesses of Ceres. As at the great Flavian amphitheatre at Rome, the gates of the arena were named *Libitinensis* and *Sanavivaria*, the Gates of Life and of Death; from the former dead gladiators were carried out in a procession headed by a figure representing the God of Death, armed with a hammer.

The games were the grandest that any could recall. Tickets were bought and sold for large sums. They came from distant parts of the country for these spectacles—the population of Carthago doubled to the delight of innkeepers and merchants. Most everyone was having a grand time.

While the “Men of the Mount” ate well and those in the lower quarters less so, in the bowels of the amphitheatre neither moonlight nor starlight penetrated. Torches lit passageways where caged, starving animals, lions, bears, bulls, growled, barked and cried. Cells of hungry, frightened, beaten prisoners huddled in their fouled rags. The smell of unwashed, bruised and bleeding bodies hung in the stale, still air, mixed with the fetid odor of buckets overflowing with excrement and urine. Guards making their rounds kept scarves round their faces to mask the smells of fear and death. No feasts for these condemned—a meager bowl of gruel, enough to keep them alive for the next day’s entertainment. In their last hours they would be pushed and prodded out of their cages, herded up the ramps then into the arena for a last look at the light of day. By nightfall their misery would end—impaled by spear and sword, eviscerated by starved, hungry beasts; burned, beheaded, limbs severed; by whatever means the game-masters could devise for the demanding crowd’s enjoyment. They will have passed through the Gate of Death.

Dinner with Draco—Part Two

The barest of breezes signaled a welcome reprieve from the weeks of desert-like heat, wafting a perfume of rose, jasmine and orange. Wisps of clouds floated across the face of a rising, shrinking moon. The fine netting of the awning undulated. A young slave girl teased a gentle melody on a lyre. The table talk ebbed and flowed touching on topics mundane, silly, thoughtful—life in Gaul, Flavia's delight on her pregnancy, decorating their new home...

Servants cleared the remaining dishes; more wine was drunk. Draco filled the cups. He was in no hurry to leave. Marcus wished he and Quintus would vanish with a wave of his hand, but it would be impolite to rush his wife's brother out the door. After all, they had not seen each other for months. And who could say how the enigmatic Draco might react. Resigned, he stifled a half-yawn.

Flavia noticed of her husband's fatigue.

"Marcus, dear, this child..." patting her belly, "and his mother, her mother, need their rest. I think we shall retire and leave you men to yourselves. Come quickly if you can.... So, a good night to you all—Quintus, brother...."

Quintus rose, bowed slightly and expressed his thanks, adding, "May the gods give you and the child a heavenly rest."

"Graciously put Quintus. Words worthy of a poet, fitting for such beauty," said Draco. He embraced his sister. "Good night, love," and kissed her close to her mouth.

Marcus glared at this suggestive intimacy.

Flavia bent to embrace and kiss Marcus. "Sound sleep, dearest," he whispered, smiling and brushing his hand against the softness of her cheek. Flavia and her two attendants slipped away.

"Well, this has been a most pleasant evening Marcus," said Draco. "Good food, excellent wine, enjoyable conversation. Now that Flavia has retired, I thought we might talk of somewhat more serious matters." He filled the glasses again.

"The emperor has been most generous to his African subjects..." Draco caught himself, "... the citizens of Africa—improving roads, building baths, improving water supply, and, yes, completing the amphitheatre. It has been a serious draw on the fiscus, the imperial treasury."

"Generosity has its price. As you know, I have strict responsibilities to insure proper collection of taxes. One area of deficiency continues to be the

non-payment of the didrachma, the Jewish temple tax. It has been many years since the noble Titus razed Jerusalem. Jews, slaves and freemen alike, have spread throughout the empire. They believe that since their temple no longer exists, they should be immune from the tax. That is utter nonsense. It is their duty as citizens to pay the tax. It is a crime to avoid payment. And more, it is an affront to the majesty of Rome and his Excellency, Domitian.”

Marcus was no longer bored with his unwanted guest. This harangue puzzled him. Where was Draco going with this ramble? Draco was too clever by half to allow wine to loosen his tongue. Draco... delator...

Draco continued, “It’s common knowledge growing numbers of more privileged Romans... and others... have found this pestilential religion attractive. Yet they claim not to be liable for the tax even though they engage in these Jewish practices. Practices that our beloved emperor finds offensive... that he deems are contrary to our traditions, and, therefore, inimical to good order. We have a double-edged sword here. More Jews, more Romans taking up Jewish ways...”

“Your pardon, Draco. Allow me to interrupt,” said Marcus. “How does this concern me? Or our families, yours, mine? Yes, we are Gauls and have our traditions. But we are also loyal Romans, responsible citizens. Your family has ties to the emperor’s father, Vespasian...”

“All of that is true,” resumed Draco, “but there is more to this...”

The Cruel Guard

The guard was making his rounds through the underground labyrinth of the amphitheatre. Shadows danced eerily in the feeble, torch-lit passages. The “big cats” as he called them were pacing and roaring, hunger no doubt, deliberately underfed. No matter. Tomorrow they would eat their fill. “Dinner” was literally around the corner. He trudged on, bored with this mindless, monotonous duty.

As he passed by one of the prisoner cells, one filthy wretch pushed his face through the bars, pleading, crying out, “I am not one of them... I had nothing to do with them... I killed no one... I am not a Jew. I am a Christian, a Roman, please, I beg you...”

The guard glared at this ranting fool and rapped his baton against the bars. “Shut up! You would say anything now. You wouldn’t be here if you weren’t guilty like the rest.” He laughed hoarsely, spitting through his yellow-brown teeth. “Who do you think I am? The governor? Your advocate? Ha!

You fool.”

With that he punched the end of his baton into the man’s face breaking his nose. Blood and mucus ran over his cracked lips, down his chin. “Be quiet!” Laughing again, “You’re keeping the cats awake. Your troubles will be over tomorrow. Pray to your god, he’ll be waiting for you.”

The guard’s laughter trailed off as he turned and disappeared around a corner, the miserable idiots quickly forgotten.

Dinner with Draco — Conclusion

“Last month, while you were in Gaul,” continued Draco, “there was a troubling incident in the Bagraidas, on one of the imperial farms. A sizeable gang of slaves—mostly Jews—started a riot. They savagely beat a foreman, and others... freedmen and house servants brutally murdered. They set fire to corn fields then fled into the hills.”

“That’s right,” added Quintus. “Fortunately, the fire was quickly contained, so damage to the crop wasn’t too extensive. It didn’t take long to catch the bastards. They really had nowhere to go. No one in his right mind would shelter them. Jews are not well regarded here...”

“This is what I am getting at,” said Draco. “The Jews are a problem... it’s a problem not only here in the Carthaginian pertica, and it’s not limited to this incident. I see it in the Tripolitania. Other provinces make similar reports. Such disturbances happen even in Rome. I’ll say it again, far too many Jews refuse to pay the didrachma. And Romans, privileged Romans, Romans of senatorial and patrician families, are increasingly involved in Jewish practices. Some Jews, called Christiani, are especially superstitious and atheistic. They do not give the emperor the respect that is due him... They do not worship Roma. Jew slaves agitate and murder. The fate of Jerusalem should have been a lesson to all of them—*maiestas*, the dignity and majesty of Rome and the emperor is a proper virtue, a duty of all loyal citizens... for all subjects.”

“Tomorrow the games conclude. The fate of these Jew criminals awaits them at the last event of the day. The governor intends to make a strong statement that these murders will not stand. No agitation of any kind. Every governor understands that his primary responsibility is to keep his province ‘settled and orderly,’ *pacata atque quieta*. And I can assure you our governor will do whatever is necessary to maintain order.”

“Again, Draco, I don’t understand how this concerns me,” said Marcus.

“No one in our family has any such involvement. Nor am I aware that any of our slaves, servants, freedmen, anyone in our household or any of our employees has anything to do with the Jews or their religion.”

Marcus wished this curious and uncomfortable conversation to end. It was of little interest and seemed pointless. Unless there was some unspoken purpose... Probing? Dangling bait, but to what end? If Draco knew as much about his family as he suggested, then surely he knew about his uncle Julius who had thrown in with the rebel Vindex? Julius died in that foolish enterprise, and his name was rarely mentioned in family gatherings. Julius chose wrongly and paid the price. He was not a monster, not like the perverted Nero that he fought to replace with a nobler man. A tragedy best left buried in the past. Draco might be devious in this meandering conversation, his friendship disingenuous... might, might, might... It would pay to be careful and cautious with this slippery snake.

“My dear brother,” said Draco, irritating Marcus yet a little more. “I mention these things because I have seen first-hand in Rome the displeasure of the emperor falling on the most noble and those seemingly most innocent. This Jewish plague has contaminated the emperor’s own family. Last year the consul Flavius Sabinus was executed; the year before, Arrecinus Clemens; and just two months ago Flavius Clemens, all close relatives of Domitian. Oh yes, and his niece Flavia Domitilla exiled.”

“If the emperor perceives threats from those closest to him, is it not prudent that we ought to be more, shall I say, careful? A word in the emperor’s ear can be fatal. You have dealings with many of importance. When friends, associates become contaminated... For your sake, and Flavia’s, be aware. I say this because Flavia is dear to me, as are you, her husband.”

“Thank you, Draco. Your concern and advice are appreciated. Understand this, I am not political. My interests lie in business. And I don’t frequent the court at Rome...”

“So, you do not. Just remember this—the court of Rome is wherever the emperor is or wishes it to be. Our governor is an extension of his hand.”

Draco stopped, looked thoughtful, and suddenly got up from his couch.

“With that Quintus and I will take our leave. I wish you a pleasant night. It has been a most enjoyable evening as was the company and conversation. We shall see you tomorrow at the games.”

Marcus walked his guests to the door, his farewell a sober one. As it closed behind them, he shook his head and let out a sigh.

Thank the gods—gone at last. What to make of this peculiar conversation? Draco was a known confidant of the Praetorian Tribune, an influential and powerful man close to Domitian. Beyond his duties as a tax collector, Draco was in some shadowy way the eyes and ears of the emperor. The business about the Jews was distasteful, but the implied warning deserved consideration. Whatever his purpose, Draco was not to be trusted. Flavia might be too young, too innocent, too close to see past Draco's solicitude. Still, she is more perceptive than she lets on....

These jumbled thoughts and questions were too much for his fatigued mind.

What I really need is a week's rest, see the grain ships off, concentrate on business and prepare for the new baby—a son he hoped.

The long, unwanted party over, he went to his wife and bed. He pushed aside unwelcome thoughts of tomorrow's games.

At the games

Thirty thousand delirious spectators crammed all three levels of the amphitheater. Not an empty seat to be found. Awnings shading the crowd rippled in the breeze. Every hour perfumed spray washed over the revelers. The governor and emperor provided a public feast to cap the last day of the festivities. Underneath the purple and gold bordered awning shading the governor's box a steady stream of servants brought meats, cheeses, and fruit on silver platters and wines in silver ewers. Food and drink whetted the appetites for the life and death contests in the arena.

After the opening procession brassy blasts of trumpets, cornu and tuba heralded the start of the day's program. The morning saw the gladiatorial contests—thirty pairs today. Attilius, the great Italian champion, winner of fourteen laurel wreaths, dispatched the local favorite in an amazing five minutes. The crowd was amazed at this incredible display. Next came the venatio, the animal hunts: tigers, panthers, bulls, bears, crocodiles, ostriches. Amusing pairings brought roars of laughter from the crowd. Then the noxii were herded in. Lions made sport with the condemned prisoners. More merriment as terrified men and women vainly tried to outrun or hide from the predators. Milder temperatures seemed to energize beasts and gladiators throughout the day. The governor stood and waved following each event and was raucously cheered.

Evening arrived. If the spectators were exhausted or jaded, they found

new life, anticipating the advertised, never-before-seen, dramatic finale. It said so in the program.

Wagons stacked with corpses and remains of the dead and dying exited through the Gate of the Dead. Other carts followed, slaves shoveling fresh sand over the bloodied ground. They started from the center of the oval in widening circuits. Each cart pulled a wide rake that smoothed the new sand. With practiced precision the sand carts completed their work. The groomed arena was ready for the final grand act. Thirty posts stood in a circle in the center of the arena. Faggots were stacked by each “tree.” A miniature replica of a city forum on a high platform rose above the circle of trees. The stage was set. The best held for last.

Below the arena, guards herded the remaining prisoners from their dark dungeon. They were last of the Jewish rioters, the last sacrifices to the gods of Carthago and Rome, and to the genius of the emperor. They were pushed, prodded and whipped. They entered the arena through the Gate of Life. Were it not for the music and the roar of the crowd, one might hear sobs and praying as they emerged into the evening twilight. A few like the man with the broken nose whispered, “Father in Heaven, holy is your name... forgive us... save us from the evil one...” Their prayers were drowned out by bugles, horns and drums of the orchestra announcing their entrance. The drunken crowd roared. A water organ trilled a bouncy tune.

In the half-light between dusk and night torches and concealed lamps lent an exciting and mysterious aura to this scene. Those who were about to die appeared as specters in the dancing, artificial light.

The crowd stomped and screamed, “Death for Jews! Animalis! Noxii!”

The music blared to a crescendo. A chariot raced into the arena. In the chariot were two torch-bearers dressed as Gorgons. It made one full circle, the torches waving madly. The crowd was crazed. The chariot of fire then swept along the line of trees, setting ablaze a ribbon of the crucified. The flames licked higher and higher, ready to devour the fake forum with tongues of red and orange.

The spectators stood as one and applauded wildly. Draco joined in. He was enjoying himself immensely. Marcus less so.

Amid the tumult, he turned to Marcus, and, still clapping, shouted, “A pity Flavia was feeling unwell today.”

“Mother with child,” Marcus replied. He was not applauding. “Some days she has a touch of the birthing sickness.”

“Understandable. Not the last time, I’m sure. Nonetheless, it pleased the

governor you could share some of this day with him. He anticipates a growing, a fruitful friendship.”

Marcus grimaced and nodded. He loathed these games and purposely delayed coming until mid-afternoon. He gained little satisfaction watching animals kill each other, starved to make them even more agitated. Of course, it was staged, a “hunt” to satisfy a crowd’s blood lust. Two gladiators were paired for “fair” fight; a reasonable test of skill with arms. There was enough killing when fighting a war—that was noble, glory to the victor. But professional killers or wild animals playing with these poor Jews? He never quite understood the peculiar fascination for these games. Not that he would admit.

Three days of games ended with the crucifixion and torching of the Jews.

Draco had a strange, far-away look in his eyes. “I am reminded of Nero after the great fire at Rome. Shortly before our time as I recall. Nero claimed the fire was started by gangs of a Jewish sect... Christiani, I believe they were called. He had those criminal atheists crucified along the Appian Way, the road leading into the city, torched to light the way. It would seem this little drama was designed as a reminder, a warning—the Jewish problem again, you see...”

Marcus had had enough. “It’s late. I should see to Flavia. I do have a full day tomorrow...”

“Of course, of course,” said Draco. “I am delighted you have returned home. I hope to visit again soon. Tomorrow I return to Leptis. Again, please consider our talk of last evening. Good night Marcus.” Smiling sweetly, he added, “A kiss for my sister.”

Motioning to his bodyguards, Marcus departed.

At home Marcus paused in the atrium. He regarded the tiled mosaic in the entryway. He had never paid it any attention. Inscribed on a pastoral background:

VENARI LAVARI LUDERE RIDERE

HOC EST VIVERE

TO HUNT, BATHE, PLAY AND LAUGH

THIS IS TO LIVE

Marcus grimaced at this idyll—not for those wretches in the arena today.

Moloch had his burnt offerings. Was it enough to satisfy the god of fire? Would the Punic god favor a Roman Carthago?

The amphitheatre was empty, a palpable stillness hung like a shroud. Slaves had cleared away the remains, new sand poured. Clouds that had shaded the crowds and gave relief from the heat of the day opened in the night and drizzled steadily. The skies wept on the smoldering remains of the crucified. Rain washed away the blood. All was clean again.

The Lonely Emperor

This same night, far across the sea, far from the shores of Carthago, hundreds upon hundreds of miles distant, a skinny-legged, pot-bellied, balding emperor wandered the halls of his palace high on the Palatine Hill overlooking the city of Rome.

He had had the rooms built at odd angles to one another and surfaced in highly polished white marble. Domitian ascended the dais and sat in the curule chair. In these darkest hours of night, alone, sleepless, the ruler of the empire shivered, pulled his purple edged cloak close about himself, fidgeting with its edges. Heavy-lidded, bloodshot eyes flicked from side to side, seeing only himself in his hall of mirrors. The ruler of empire sat, the hours melting away, tortured imaginings if tonight was the night an assassin's knife might strike.

A whispered sigh, barely audible, "No one loves me." So soft, so plaintive, not even an echo to answer.