

CHAPTER ONE

General Malitus didn't care for how his day began. He had been roused from a drunken sleep due to the arrival of a frantic messenger. The rider, sliding down from the frothy horse like he'd been born to perform the act, announced himself from the scouting party, one dispatched ahead of Malitus' Legion at Eboracum.

The General sat on a folding bench and frowned as he listened to the report. The messenger, a young man of barely eighteen by the look of him, wasn't familiar to Malitus. His breaths came out hurried, and the youth spoke so quick Malitus reprimanded him twice with sharp words. Head still full of wine, the General tried to even out his thoughts. His mouth dry, Malitus reached for some morning wine. His head throbbed as a dire fear swam in the messenger's eyes beyond the uneasiness of one so low ranked reporting to a General. That fright ran deeper and more primal, Malitus mused, as if the hounds of Tartartus themselves chewed at the puppy's heels during the long journey back to Briton territory. The city of Eboracum, where Malitus' quartered the Legion for the time being, sat near the border of the land of Caledonia where the wild Picts roamed.

"Enough boy," Malitus ordered, weary of the broken attempts to speak and cursing his own swimming mind. "Am I to understand the cause of all your spirited words this morning is that one of the scouting parties has met a rather untoward end?"

The youth nodded vigorously, looking from the General to the two other military men emerging to flank him in the large tent. "Yes, sir. Decurion Arminius requests you come see yourself at once."

Malitus bit down his anger and sipped the wine. His face contorted at the sour nature of it, but this beverage ran typical of what the soldiery drank.

"August," he said aloud and rubbed his brow with his thumb and index fingers.

"August Arminius," said the taller of the two officers, "for all his faults, truly acts as the best cavalry commander and judge of advanced scouts we have at our disposal."

Malitus muttered, "Thank you, Ralta, I know who he is." He turned to the shorter officer on his right and muttered, "A bad end? Are there men dead up there, Quintus?"

The officer shrugged and waved at the messenger.

The youth nodded again, fast.

Malitus sighed loud. "I assigned Arminius to use his men in order to avoid these kinds of problems."

Quintus' brow furrowed, but his look grew intense. "Arminius is a veteran, even if he's a mutt German. He's the best horseman we have and his instincts are better than a hound's."

"Scouts sometimes die, sir," the taller man to his left offered and rolled his eyes at Quintus words.

Malitus turned, glaring at the taller man. "Mind your attitude, Ralta. August has served under me for several years now, and very well." Though he didn't extol the fact, the General understood August and he had never become high-quality friends, but he did hold the cavalry auxiliary leader in high regard when it came to the man's abilities.

Ralta made a fake bow at Quintus. "Forgive me greatly, Quintus Pilate."

Quintus' look at Ralta soured. "Arminius' job was a simple one. He and his detachment were to travel ahead of the Legion proper, out of Eboracum, and serve as not only its advance eyes but also to attack as bait for any locals in the region who were brave enough to go up against Roman might. His auxiliary force in the forward position must be compromised."

Malitus sipped more wine and sighed. "I hadn't actually thought there would be any who

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were foolish enough to try to oppose them, but the Picts of Caledonia are an unpredictable lot.”

Ralta seemed unable to stop smiling as he stated, “The 9th Legion, a battle hardened one, strides to action composed of veterans and men who know death well. I think a few of them have Death nicknamed.”

The General declared, “The 9th prepares to march out of our base here at Eboracum soon to head north again and I won’t have it delayed long. Certainly not by what was more likely the work of a lucky group of bandits than any real military threat. I shall hear what happened to our forces beyond August’s camp.”

The messenger nodded and wanted to back out of the tent, but he stayed put.

Quintus said, “The 9th had better get on the move or they would never reach their intended destination in the time allotted by the emperor.”

Ralta pursed his lips. “Do you think Hadrian will really visit this Isle in the next year? Such a trip for him seems based in words, not actuality.”

Malitus spat a curse, and a mouthful of wine, before saying, “It’s too early to talk wretched politics.”

He quickly moved to the door and left his quarters in the Scamnum Legatorum. His eyes beheld what his ears had heard before, that a bulk of the 9th assembled in the heart of the city, preparing for review, to be told when to march. Quintus Pilate and Ralta flanked him again in the yard of the Praetentura. They were officers upon whom he knew he could depend. The messenger was still present, and Malitus chose to ignore him.

Malitus turned to Quintus. “Ready my personal guard and a small group of your best cavalymen.”

“Are you sure that is wise sir?” Ralta challenged him, his humor faded. “We haven’t heard what happened out there yet. If there is a large force of Picts afoot...”

Malitus glared at Ralta. “When I want your opinion, I will ask for it. I am neither so old nor feeble that I cannot ride or wield a sword.”

The General heard Quintus snicker at the good natured, if edged, rebuke he gave Ralta. If they were not all familiar with each other, then one could almost describe the relationship between Ralta and Quintus as that of blood enemies. Such was often the relationship between leaders of infantry and cavalry. Ralta believed Quintus a pompous showman and Quintus thought Ralta to be a simpleton. Their affections for one another did nothing to interfere with the effectiveness of the 9th’s operations, however, so Malitus tolerated it. The two men were soldiers and had spilt blood together.

Beyond that, they were brothers, though one could not judge them so by their appearances. Ralta, a tall, hard man, his shoulders wide and his jaw sat firmly as if carved in stone. The skin of his arms stretched tight around the masses of muscles underneath it, while Quintus had the appearance of a pampered scribe. He was thin and much shorter than his brother. Anyone meeting his gaze could see the fierce intellect that dwelt within him. He relied on speed and guile whereas Ralta was nothing short of a powerhouse of brute strength and determination.

As Quintus departed, Malitus returned his attention to Ralta, shaking a finger at the giant. “And no, you’re not coming with us either.”

Ralta’s expression was a tightly drawn rictus of rage but Malitus knew the big man would challenge him no further. “As you wish, sir.”

“I need you here to get the Legion moving. We are already behind and cannot afford more delays. The emperor is expecting progress with quelling the Pict threats into Briton since the last trip up north. I’ll not have our reputation tarnished. Channel that fury within you toward the men. It will surely motivate them to move all the more quickly.”

Ralta’s scowl slid into a wicked smile. “I imagine it will sir. I imagine it will.”

“Good,” Malitus laughed, slapping Ralta’s shoulder. “I will not be coming back to

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comfortable quarters soon. I expect you and the greater part of the Legion to catch up to us on the road to this place within a few days. Do I make myself clear?"

"As a sunny day, sir," Ralta acknowledged the command, looking across the sky at two dark birds lazily flying across the open sky. "Severus?" He called out to a centurion nearby, standing at the ready, lance in hand.

"Yes, sir?" Severus answered, still at attention.

Malitus followed in the direction Quintus had headed, but turned his head to hear Ralta ask, "Is it ordinary for ravens to fly in pairs?"

Severus said something about thinking the animals Ralta saw were crows, but the General ignored the rest.

By the time General Malitus and his detachment reached Arminius' forward camp, the sun had already peaked in the sky and begun its descent. August awaited them by the assembled horses and rushed to meet them as they climbed down from their mounts at the camp's edge.

"General Malitus," August saluted him, standing straight. "I had not expected you to come yourself, sir."

"You send a messenger who babbles on out of crazed fear as if the whole of the region had risen in arms against us and you didn't expect me to come personally?" He put his right fist across his chest to salute and smiled. "Perhaps, you're slipping Arminius."

August's face remained rigid, betraying no anger or embarrassment. That the General would only travel with the bulk of the Legion wasn't a bad assumption.

"All this fuss and bother, overtaken by a few barbarians in the night?" Quintus chuckled as he walked along with the General. "Just how many men did you lose August?"

"Nine, sir, veterans to a man. Valintien commanded them," August answered, head up, chest firm, hands at his sides. "They weren't all auxiliaries."

Quintus' smug tone departed his voice. "Valintien? You jest with me! That big animal is dead? He's about as mean as that Porcius beast in your troop." He gestured with his right hand over at the thuggish cavalryman, Porcius, who checked the hooves of his mount, cleaning them out with a fine rod usually used for scouring teeth. Porcius' black eyes, typical of a man from Greece, drilled into Quintus, but went back to his labor presently.

"My, my," Malitus said, eyebrows raised as he glanced from Porcius to August. "There were few men in the Legion that would give Quintus or his brother, for that matter, pause. Valintien was one of them."

"That is a reason for concern, sir. He was one of my best," August replied.

"You of Germanic blood are known for a berserker rage, no?"

August blinked. "Some of our kind are very much so inspired in battle, but we are all Romans now."

Malitus smiled at his self-correction. "True. Very true."

Quintus looked to the forest off to their right and said, "I had once seen Valintien carve a path through the ranks of a barbarian horde, leaving a trail of hairy bodies in his wake. A true loss to us all indeed."

August agreed. "No one knew for sure, but Gaius our scribe of the dead, claimed Valintien had killed over three dozen of the enemy on his own, the last two with only his teeth and bare hands as he had lost his sword toward the end of the battle." August expected no less of his countryman, but didn't say that in front of these hailing from Rome proper. Though all the world soon would be Roman, most were still considered adopted children by those from the Empire.

Quintus turned his gaze to August. "All of your scouts died further up the road?"

"The entire squad of them, sir...but it's how they were killed that's the cause of my

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summoning you, for messaging you about it all.” August admitted. “I can’t give words on the matter, so I felt it best that someone of higher rank saw it for themselves.”

“Well, here we are August,” Malitus addressed him, using his first name. “Lead on then and let us see what horrors you’ve stumbled onto.”

August figured the General knew his tone retained a mocking lilt but doubted he cared. It didn’t take August long to understand Malitus’ ire came when faced with the possibility of the incident causing a delay in the 9th’s long march that lay ahead.

August climbed on his horse and Porcius joined him. Malitus and Quintus accepted fresh mounts from the group and followed along the road. A dozen more men on horseback joined them, but stayed mostly meandering near the General.

As they rode along, Porcius shot August a sideways glance. “So, we’re marching to the north sea to plant a flag for Rome?”

Eyes on the road, August replied, “Looks like.”

Porcius grunted and breathed a few times before he wondered, “And all of those tribes of Picts are just going to kiss our asses as we pass?”

Still emotionless, August replied, “Oh, certainly.”

Porcius burst into laughter and August even cracked a grin.

Quintus shouted up to them, “Care to share the hilarity, gentlemen?”

August called back, “You’d have to comprehend Grecian temple practices to appreciate his jokes about the locals worshipping trees. It’s rude humor, sir.”

Glad for their silence, and for that of Porcius, August studied the forests as they rode. He thought of those in his dreams who watched from there. He shivered and wished more of the Legions were about him, and not just for fear of those workers of magick in the woods.

After they’d gone over a mile, Porcius said, “I wish Ralta had come up.”

“Shut up, will you?” August admonished him, not wanting to hear punitive words from the commanders again.

Porcius yawned and shifted his great girth in the saddle. “He’s a strong guy for a proper dandy, that one. I respect that no matter what his loves in life are.”

August shot him a look that conveyed his desire to nail Porcius lips closed.

Grinning, Porcius drew his fist over his chest in a mock salute to August. “I’ll just be over here dreaming of being a Spartan, sir.”

The afternoon wore on as the cavalry detachment, guided by August, reached the site. Like many stone circles they’d all seen in Briton, this one held a particular pattern of jagged rocks and a few longer slabs not unlike what stood taller out on Salisbury plain, but to nowhere near that scale of breathtaking design.

“Here’s where the massacre happened,” August said, pointing from his mounted position. “In the stone circle.”

Malitus looked at the village up the road, a mere dot on the horizon, then turned his focus on the site.

“Massacre?” Quintus looked around, his face stunned at the term, but his way soon softened. He squinted and mumbled, “No other word to describe this scene, is there?”

The grass and earth, tainted red from the dried blood, were accented with the entrails of the squad’s men strewn about with insane abandon. Insects had formed on the men, but August had left the scene as it lay.

Malitus murmured, “You didn’t alter it much, aye? Wonder the animals didn’t scavenge from the bodies. Look, there’s guts dangling from a lone tree that bends into the circle.”

August said, “I wanted someone to see this as it was left. The men have guarded it in shifts to keep animals out.”

Quintus blinked many times. “Thank you so much.”

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The four dismounted and moved about in the waning light to inspect the carnage. Behind them, the others waited with notched bows and drawn swords.

An arm with jagged, torn flesh lay in the dirt, its fingers clutched, blue, around the sword it held.

Malitus commented, "Some of the men tried to fight back against whatever had swept upon them."

And sweep upon them it had.

Right hand firm on the pommel of his gladius, August waved his left arm about. "Whatever had slain these men had done so with frightening speed from the look of things. The men hadn't had time to form up into any sort of rank. They had been slaughtered where they stood when the battle began, or as close to such as not to matter."

Quintus picked up a piece of a shattered shield. "By the gods, what could have the strength to do this? This shield appears to have been broken by a single blow."

Malitus stared at the terrified expression upon the face of a head that rested only a few steps from where he stood as August spoke up again.

"Do you see now why I called you here?" he asked. "This..." He struggled for a name for the violence around them but settled instead for another sweeping gesture of his hand, "This was not done by men."

Malitus' look slowly turned to August, but no derision or insults followed. He knelt by the man and said the name, "Valentien."

Quintus, though, had no such quizzical looks about him. "Oh come now, Arminius! I know you're not a proper Roman, but surely you aren't suggesting this was the work of some supernatural force?" Quintus spat literally on the nearest stone slab. "Yes, this is horrific and needlessly brutal but have we not seen the like before from the barbarians of these parts? These savages are animals, capable of almost anything."

Before August could respond, something moved in the shadows of the woods nearby. His head cranked toward the movement, and many behind them faced that way, too.

Malitus' finger stabbed towards the running figure. "Stop that man and make sure he's taken alive!"

They heard the twang of bow strings as guards fired arrows. The missiles flew through the night and the figure in the distance cried out as arrows pierced flesh. The archers and men on horseback dismounted and moved to the edge of the forest, hesitating to enter after the crying man they'd shot.

Swords drawn, the four went to join them. As the officers drew near, the regular soldiers dived in the grim forest. They rushed after the man who now lay, rolling about at the edge of the woods, shouting curses amid his cries of pain.

They closed around the man, who made no attempt to do anything but strive in vain to tear the arrow from his leg.

"He's a druid," August announced. "Not a Celt, though. He's a Pict."

Malitus wondered, "Because he's pale of skin and red haired?"

August shrugged as the archers trained fresh arrows on the figure. "That and the tattoos colored on him."

"I don't care if he's a damned Egyptian," Quintus cut in. "Get that arrow out of him so he'll shut up, and drag him back to camp with us. If he saw what happened here..."

"Agreed," Malitus nodded. "We need to know."

Quintus glared at August. "Anyone here speak their tongue?"

August nodded. "My servant Rufus speaks all dialects of Britannia, including the savages of the Caledonii tribes."

"Good," Quintus grunted as he turned away. "You choose your servants well. It is proper to

have a useful slave about, correct?"

While the group had come up to the small stone circle to witness the carnage, August's troop had moved their camp up the road slowly. The soldiers, who hauled the druid out of the trees, dragged him back to August's new camp that camped at the mouth of the village. Even though he'd been staked down spread eagle on the ground, the Pict made no sound.

Quintus walked up, sighed loud to show his displeasure at Rufus' progress in questioning the Pict and asked August, "Where are the locals? I figured they'd be out and watching this like the gawking pigs they are."

Rufus grimaced at his words but August stated, "The village is empty. I thought you'd heard the report I sent along."

Quintus' look intensified on August. "I must've missed that part."

The General walked over to where Rufus sat on the ground beside the prone Pict. "He still won't talk?" Malitus asked the servant.

Rufus bowed his head. "No, sir. This one is rather tight lipped."

"He understands you?"

Rufus took a breath. "I know he does. He doesn't respond in any emotional way to a tongue save for his own. He knows, but refuses to speak."

Quintus raged and swore, but Malitus asked Rufus gently, "What would you surmise about him by his age, appearance and all that? Is this here red haired savage a druid?"

Rufus breathed lightly before saying. "That's a simple term, druid, and is not native to this land of ours. But he truly is of a secretive priest caste, judging by the tats and woad markings on his skin. He's not elevated to a full priest, by the looks of him."

Quintus grumbled, "What was he doing in the woods?"

Arms folded across his chest, August offered, "They pray to trees. Maybe he was worshiping and we disturbed him. It's his home, anyway."

Unamused by August's jeering, Quintus asked Rufus, "Could he have been spying on us? Ask him again."

Rufus wrung his hands together. "That'd be a good guess, sir. I doubt the high priests would go themselves to scout or spy."

Malitus stretched. "Agreed. Still, his silence is infuriating."

Quintus huffed. "You should have listened to me an hour ago and we would have our answers already. Crucify him." His hands balled into fists and he glared at the Pict. "It works each damn time it's tried."

"Have your men do it, Arminius," Malitus ordered with a soft voice. "We can't wait any longer to get some answers. Use one of the trees the druids love so much for it. The 9th should be ready to march at day break, off to the south of us. I want to know what killed those men before Ralta and the rest of the Legion arrive on the morrow."

August took his leave to oversee the crucifixion. Rufus sprang up to shadow him. The sun had set by then. Legionaries dragged the Pict forth to a tree at the edge of the village, presenting him like a prize stag just killed, then dropped him to the ground in a slam meant to stunt him further. Others made ready the means of the crucifixion itself, fetching hammers and nails.

"I know you speak our tongue," Rufus pleaded with the man. "Please, now, tell us what killed our brothers."

August said to two of the soldiers, "Flavius, Mathew, help him stand."

Flavius, a plain faced soldier sporting hair so blonde it ran white, armed up the Pict and held him under his armpits. The other soldier, Mathew, an olive skinned man with black hair, aided him, but remained quiet.

"Careful," August cautioned them at their rough tactics, but felt silly asking his men to be

gentle with one they were about to crucify.

Flavius said, "Sir, the medics say the arrow shattered the bone of this fool's right leg. It was a wonder he hadn't bled out."

Seeing they had patched up the leg so he didn't in fact bleed out, August said in a low voice, "Only the grace of God has kept the man alive so far." August could see the man was weak but his will to survive boiled strong.

The Pict then spat at August, missing by a good distance. He did speak.

Frowning, hands to his hips, August asked Rufus, "What did he say?"

Rufus translated, "*I'll tell you nothing, Roman.*"

August shook his head sadly, and thought that he wasn't much of a Roman.

He waved for his men to begin their gross work. The prisoner's hands were bound to the outstretched arms of the tree, his feet next. August saw the hatred burning in the young man's eyes as Mathew squatted over his bound feet and readied the nail that would be driven through them. Flavius stepped back and let Mathew have that duty. August wasn't surprised by this, as Flavius came from highborn stock in the northern reaches of Italy, while Mathew was the son of dispersed inhabitants from Judea, a few generations removed from the destruction of their temple under Titus. For Mathew, the Legion meant a life. For Flavius, it was a portion of a resume.

"Roman or not," the man rasped, suddenly speaking in Latin, "You will die. All of you will die! Adelaido will crush you all."

The thunk of a hammer striking the head of the spike in the Legionnaire's hand turned the man's warnings into nothing more than screams. The spike drove downward through his flesh, separating the bones of the man's feet as it pierced them. Mathew continued to hammer it in. Two other Legionaries went to work on the man's hands. Flavius held the Pict's chest against the tree and let the others do the hammering in fast.

Flavius said to them, "Get his wrists, Lucius, or hold him in place while Porcius drives them home."

Lucius, a thinner soldier, but far older than the rest, pinned the Pict's right arm in place with a cross body move as Porcius, a stocky, shorter man drove the nail in fast. Porcius possessed arms like a man's thighs and made quick work of the nailing.

August shut out the man's screams. Though not a weakling who couldn't stomach the act, August preferred not to dwell on it. What had to be done, had to be done. A few moments later, the man's body sagged, but the nails held him up fast.

Flavius made a quick bow to August as the men assembled in a line behind him. The three men all stared at him.

Flavius asked, "Sir?"

"Break his legs." August said, looking in the dark forest as the night enveloped it.

Flavius bowed again as Porcius brought out a larger war hammer, a gigantic version of a mallet not used in combat, but liberated from a Celt tribe on Anglesey years ago. It served the purpose Porcius planned for.

August said, "No, Porcius...wait."

All eyes went to him.

"Flavius, you do it."

Flavius' mouth dropped and Porcius grinned for a few heartbeats, then hid his smile.

"Yes, sir," Flavius answered, not protesting, but with no strength in his voice.

Unlike the powerfully built Greek, Flavius had a spot of trouble picking up the huge hammer. Not to look weak, he held it off the earth, firm and nodded for the men to hold the Pict in place. He swung the hammer, smashed it into the good shin of the Pict, and while the man screamed once more, the leg showed no damage.

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Porcius said, "Come along, Flavius. Swing harder. That didn't make a bruise. Put some balls into it."

Hands about the handle of the long hammer, Flavius swung again, this time connecting with the knee cap of the Pict and by the bones that stuck out and twist in the joint, shattered it.

"Good," Porcius grunted in approval. "Hit 'em again. Lower."

As the cracks and screams sounded out in the night, August decided the work complete enough. He spun about and headed back into the camp.

Porcius voice echoed out, "C'mon, yer not man enough to do the other knee the same way. My wine flask says you choke!"

Flavius and Mathew were both laughing at the jeering.

The woods taunted August and he fully expected to see the shapes of people within to turn to leaves if he stared hard. To cure this fear, he decided not to look at the woods, though every bit of wind, crack of a branch or night bird call made his skin blister with gooseflesh.

Malitus and Quintus shared a late meal. A small fire burned in the center of the circle the officers' tents made in the main avenue of the abandoned village. August nodded at the grim faced sentries of the General's personal guard as he passed them.

"It is done," August announced, walking about the two officers. He noted they didn't dine on the hard tack, vegetables and vinegary wine of the soldiers, but what smelled like dried venison and better wine.

Quintus inclined his head in his direction as August took a seat across the fire from him and the General.

"And?" Quintus demanded, but his indignation ran low.

"Nothing," August said. "He has said nothing yet, but Rufus and the men are with him."

Quintus blinked in surprise though he recovered from it quickly. "Give it time."

"He can speak Latin. He's fooling us."

Malitus chewed, swallowed and stated, "He'll be speaking Greek soon." He cleared his throat. "This venison is exceptional."

"Deer are as plentiful as Picts hereabouts." Quintus wiped his mouth. "These priests, these druids, I know they are outlawed by Rome and rightly so, but how are they so bright as to know so many languages? I thought we stomped them out over a century ago."

August took a cup of wine offered by Malitus and said, "They are a learned class, sir. They write nothing down. It's all in the mind. That's impressive in itself. Their own masters are cruel in their initiation so he's probably a hardened man."

Quintus rose, stretched and said, "The cross will loosen his tongue in time. I trust in the cross. The tree is just as good and more fitting in this case."

The words burned unto August's soul, he drank of the cup and closed his eyes.

Long after Malitus and Quintus had retired in assembled tents, August remained at the waning fire. He saw no reason to enter his small tent Rufus had made up. Sleep would not come for him. His blood felt too stirred by the recent events.

Stretching his legs, August rose from the fireside and began to walk about the camp. Again and again, he replayed the dire dream in his mind. Had it been a sign from God? There could be no other answer as he saw the pieces and the deaths exactly as they happened without being present. Was there meaning to it or was it merely what it seemed...a dream to warn him? He prayed, silently, for understanding and guidance. He also wondered just who *Adelaido* was whom the Pict named in his threat.

When he came to a stop, August discovered he had walked to the camp's edge where the prisoner hung; struggling for each of his labored and pained breaths. The man saw him,

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straining to lift himself on the tree once more. As his body reached the peak of the height the man could hoist himself to, he gave an animal-like howl at August. Somewhere in the night, overhead, August heard the squawk of a bird, a crow perhaps, maybe two.

“You want to know?” The man wailed. “I will tell you! I will tell you all!”

August listened to the man’s words as he spoke so furiously, spittle flew from between cracked lips in Latin. Rufus had fallen asleep at the feet of the opposite side of the tree, but awoke and joined August as the Pict spewed the words. August stepped backwards, reeling when the man’s tale was concluded. The man on the cross started to laugh.

A crowd of soldiers had gathered behind August in the night, roused from their slumber by the loud declarations. As August noticed them, only then did he realize the man had been shouting, his words carrying throughout the nearby section of the camp, bouncing off the empty domiciles. Many of the Legionaries were pale at the words. Others appeared on the edge of confusion by their open mouths. There were those who shouted back at the dying man, mocking him pointedly with barbed sayings, but they were few in number.

Quintus emerged from the ranks of the crowd, shoving his way through them.

“You!” Quintus barked at one the Legionaries closest to the cross. “Cut out that man’s tongue! I will hear no more of this superstitious dung.”

Flavius didn’t move, he only stared at Quintus in shock and disbelief.

“I said cut out that man’s tongue. Now!” Quintus ordered again.

At this, Flavius leaped into motion. He scrambled over to the tree and drew his dagger. His right hand shot out, grasping the front of the crucified man’s garments, using them to pull him downward. The man cried out as the nails in his hands shredded his flesh further. Flavius, using the man’s own body, climbed up, trying desperately to reach the man’s mouth. A blow from the Legionnaire’s dagger sent teeth flying from the shot before he was able to clutch the man’s jaws. The dagger’s blade slashed the man’s lips as Flavius drove it inside rough.

Say what one wanted to about being highborn, August thought, Flavius doesn’t screw around in his tasks. He hadn’t let the high class soldier shirk his duties, and Flavius dutifully performed what he had to, but by his expression, he’d rather be fishing.

August felt some revulsion as he watched Flavius, unable to get directly in at the man’s tongue from his position, twist the fine blade about wildly within the man’s cheeks. The blade plunged through the rear portion of the man’s cheek before he finally stopped struggling. His voice, half gagged, half muffled by Flavius’ hold on him turned to harsh cries and then a continued stream of low moans. Blood flowed freely from the mangled remains of his mouth as he tried to suck air in, the man’s head dropping onto his chest.

Like a child seeking affirmation from his father, Flavius whirled about to face Quintus, his job done in full.

Quintus gave a nod of approval and disappeared back through the crowd, heading back into the camp.

Flavius’ smile faded and he gaped at the bloody tongue, unsure what to do with it.

August watched Quintus go. The group of soldiers began to disperse as well. There was nothing more to see and certainly no more words to hear. August lingered long after they were gone, though. At last, he drew his sword and approached the moaning figure on the tree. He eased the sword’s blade up and through the man’s short ribs. The man’s body gave a final jerk and then collapsed to hang limply upon the tree.

As they did most nights about the campfire before retiring, Porcius and few of the fellows were getting drunk. When August approached and meted out stern looks, a few peeled off the pack and yawned, deciding to retire. Porcius, however, sounding moderately drunk on his sour ration of soldier wine, still laughed.

August wondered, "You find humor in this adventure?"

Porcius quickly retorted, "I find humor in everything, save for my dreams."

"You have bad dreams?"

After a shrug, Porcius stabbed at the fire with his spear tip. "I ain't the only one, huh?"

"Why do you say that?"

"I sleep not far from you. I hear you in the night. It happens."

"Thank you for sharing."

Porcius swigged down the last of his wine and stood, belching loud. "I dream crazy things lately, too."

"What about?"

Porcius shook his head fast as if trying to expel the images from his ears. "I dream of women. A lot."

"That's scary? Hah. I didn't think you were that sort of Greek."

"Piss off and die badly, sir," Porcius shot back. "No, of women in the night, women in the woods."

"I see monsters in the woods. I'll trade you dreams."

"You wish. No, they come to me a lot, images of man older gal with reddish gray hair, all kinky and long, gotta lil gal with her, 'bout half her size."

"You don't say?"

Porcius nodded. "They raised a woman from the dead last night."

August near to choked on his flask of wine. "What?"

"Yeah, these two gals prayed and chanted over this big ol' pupil thing, a cocoon like a butterfly, and it burst open, oozing blood and guts...and out rolls this beautiful woman, pale and red haired...nicely built too."

"Wonder why you'd dream that?"

"I dunno, really. I can't say I ever think about such things, or hear about them...well, once I heard a story as a kid about an evil queen that promised to return from the dead for her people. I'm sure it's a folk tale retold lots of times."

"And something brought it up now?"

"Bloody curious, huh?"

August agreed and gave Porcius his flask. The Greek born man proudly sucked it dry and smacked his lips together.

"Better?"

Porcius burped again. "Much. We'll see if the wine keeps the spirits away tonight."

After he lay down, August wished that was possible.