

## Chapter 1

It was market day in the open square beneath the Roman Senate and the temples of the gods. The stalls and shops of the Forum Romanum were packed with citizens of Rome. Clothed in hues of yellow, blue, and rusty red, the buyers and sellers seemed to be a human flower garden swaying in the wind.

The crippled eight-year-old boy, wooden sword in his belt, bobbed above the crowd as he rode high upon the shoulders of the Ethiopian slave named Jono. Small hands were clasped on the ebony giant's forehead.

The boy drew his sword and raised it to point at arches, porticos, and pillars. "Jono, my trusty warhorse, we must be ready to fight! Cherusci warriors hide among the trees!"

The child's name was Philo, which meant "love." He was the grandson of Tiberius Caesar by his illegitimate daughter Claudia. So Philo was descended from a shopgirl and the emperor of Rome. His roots had sprung from the common folk. Because of this, the boy captured the people's interest and affection.

Philo was also much beloved by his mother. Claudia, a

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red-haired beauty, had the cheerful humor of her mother and the education of her royal father. It was whispered among the nobles that Claudia was the only worthwhile thing to come forth from the corrupt tyrant.

At the age of eighteen, Claudia had fallen in love with a commoner and thought to run away with him . . . far away. They would live a peasant's life in Gaul, perhaps. But Caesar had discovered her plot and married her off to Pontius Pilate, an ambitious member of the equestrian class. Philo's birth had followed soon thereafter.

This afternoon, shoppers waved at Philo as the cavalcade passed. Heads tipped together. Lips murmured inside cupped hands. Curious eyes followed as the tale of the common-born mistress and the illegitimate daughter was repeated. Old scandal became the new entertainment of the day.

Claudia peered out at her son through the curtains of her sedan chair.

Jono hefted Philo higher upon broad shoulders as Claudia's retinue of porters and bodyguards wove through the crush.

As they neared the seller of spices, she called, "Come, Philo, ride inside with me, where it's safe."

Philo surveyed the temples and bustling market stalls. "Please, Mother! Soldiers do not ride in sedan chairs. Father is at the wars fighting. I want to ride my horse too." He patted Jono's head. "Steady, Jono, old boy. There are Cherusci bandits lurking in the wood."

Jono grinned and obligingly pranced and whinnied.

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Claudia asked, “Is he all right up there, Jono?”

In a deep, rumbling voice, Jono answered, “Yes, my lady. I am too large a horse for any barbarians to attack. Philo is well out of reach from harm.” Kind brown eyes gazed at her. “It is a good thing for the young master to ride upon his horse and guard his mother.”

Philo had been born with a clubfoot. The midwives suggested to Pilate such an embarrassment could be easily snuffed out. Claudia heard their whispered conspiracy and, like a lioness, rose up from her bed and fought for her baby’s life.

Though Pilate was ashamed of his son, Claudia became Philo’s champion. He had the best tutors. He could read both Latin and Greek. Mathematics came easily to him. Daily classes included art and music.

Twice Philo had played his lute for his aging grandfather. Caesar pronounced his grandson clever and talented, though he could not walk without crutches.

All Philo wanted, truly, was to be a soldier like his father. Now that Pilate had gone north to conquer the last wild enemies of Rome, Philo considered himself Claudia’s protector.

The great capital of the Empire was a pit of violence, corruption, and political intrigue. Claudia wanted only to raise her son in the vineyard country house of her husband’s Ponti estate.

She did not look forward to this unexpected meeting with her father.

Black-cloaked Praetorian guards surrounded the palace.

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A centurion met Claudia and escorted her in. The windowless great hall was as dark as a cavern. Without being told that his noisy play must cease, Philo shivered, tucked away his weapon, and clung even more tightly to Jono's neck.

Lucius Sejanus, head of the Imperial guard, emerged from an inner recess. The smile he offered never reached his eyes. "Ah, Lady Claudia. Prompt as always, I see. Your father is waiting for you."

Two steps forward and Sejanus held up his hand. "Let the slave and the boy remain here." It was an order.

Claudia got a quick, fearful nod of agreement from her son.

Sejanus led her to the door, flung it aside, and remained outside as she entered. The door slammed shut behind her. She was alone with the great man.

The office chamber occupied by Tiberius was filled with maps. A mahogany table in the center of the room spilled parchments etched with mountain ranges, rivers, and forests onto the marble floor. The Roman emperor, a tall, gray-haired man with a hawk-like nose and piercing gray eyes, raised his head and peered nearsightedly as if he did not recognize his daughter.

Tiberius let his gaze remain too long on her face. He drank her in. "So . . . you. In the flesh, still beautiful . . . more beautiful than before."

Claudia lowered her gaze. "My father."

He frowned. "Ah, yes. Claudia. Her daughter. You are so like her. For a moment I thought your mother had returned from the grave."

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“If only she would.”

“I dreamed of her last night. Your mother . . . my Sarah of the wine merchant. My first love. My beautiful Sarah, my Hebrew mistress . . .” His eyes again grew misty.

“She came to you in a dream?”

“And across a wide gulf she commanded that I bring you and the boy here to the palace.”

“Did she give a reason?”

“No. I thought perhaps her Jewish God had revealed something . . . regarding me. Or regarding you. Or your husband. Or the child. But she did not tell me why she came. Only commanded that I remember in all that you are my daughter.”

Claudia stood in silence. The fact of Tiberius’s paternity brought her no joy. In a world where politics was the true religion of the Empire, there was always danger in this relationship, no matter how distant she was from court.

“So here you are.”

“Was she . . . happy, Father?”

“Your mother, long dead to me and to you, seems to have found some other kingdom to dwell in. And she is concerned that you and the boy are safe. Protected from my disapproval.” Tiberius shrugged. “I will not argue with the dead.”

“Disapproval? Of what?”

Summoning her forward, Tiberius impatiently swept aside a heap of charts, then jabbed his thumb downward at the one he sought. “There. Latest news. A decisive battle is expected there soon. Your husband”—Tiberius spat the

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word with some disdain—“has been given an important task. He may attain some glory from it, or he may get killed. Either way, your lot will improve.” Tiberius shrugged again. “You know how Rome is. Thought you should be warned so you don’t hear it first from a fishmonger.”

“Yes, thank you.” Claudia dipped her head.

“He hasn’t been much of a husband, but then he isn’t much of a man, either.” Softening his voice only slightly, the emperor offered, “Want to move into the palace? You and the boy? If things go badly, there may be riots.”

“I . . . no . . . thank you. We are fine at home.” Life in the palace in Rome was not as depraved as when the emperor vacationed on Capri, but she would never willingly bring Philo into the court.

“Well enough.” Tiberius’s finger started to trace a wavy blue line on the parchment, and his attention followed. “Let Sejanus know if you need anything.”

Claudia shivered when the Praetorian commander’s eyes lingered on her as she exited the office chamber. She was grateful when she, Philo, and Jono were once more in the bright sunshine. Even then they were halfway home before she felt warm again.



The world was mottled in shades of dark green and drab brown. Overhead, sunlight flickered through the leafy canopy, but none of it reached the roots of the massive trees. The forest the Cherusci called home lay shrouded in darkness, even at midday.

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Here on the far northern boundary of the Roman Empire, it was late autumn. Unseen, robins called to each other in muted song. A black woodpecker hammered out a rhythmic clatter, then fell silent.

More silent than the birds, silent as the shadows, a hundred Cherusci warriors lurked unseen beside a narrow trail. Their hair was wild and matted. Twigs and leaves stuck from wiry beards until the fighters appeared no more than spindly bushes . . . armed with axes, bows, and spears.

They waited for the right moment to spring their trap for the next Roman intruders.



Pontius Pilate, seated on a gray horse, glanced up as a pair of starlings flitted back and forth across the muddy track. The sable-colored birds did not brighten the somber scene.

The distant echoing thump of drums pulsed in unison with the hobnailed tread of a Roman legion. Pilate's Roman cavalry troopers awaited orders. "Come on, then," Pilate urged. "Don't you hear it? The army is already on the march."

"Your pardon, Tribune," the returning scout cautioned. "The storm, sir. A tree down. The path of the stream altered, washing out the road."

"The route is . . ."

"Blocked, sir," the scout reported.

"Then we go around!" Pilate gestured with a silver-handled whip. "That is another trail, yes?"

A Praetorian officer, the leader of Pilate's bodyguard,

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spoke up. "Tribune Pilate, General Severus ordered us to avoid Cherusci territory. No skirmishes that would delay our mission."

"We must not be delayed, sir," a second Praetorian emphasized. "Centurion Marcus Longinus and our brothers hold the front line. Alone."

"We backtrack to the planned alternate route," the first suggested.

Pilate protested, "When the main battle is about to be joined? When an hour could decide everything? Remember, without blood there is no glory."

A grizzled trooper several yards away muttered to his comrade, "As always, our blood, his glory," but Pilate decided to ignore the treasonous words . . . for now. Greater events were in play.

"The shorter route," Pilate commanded. "Now." Then in a concession to caution, he grudgingly added, "Send out four scouts. We'll move carefully, but with speed!"

The subordinate officers exchanged grim looks but thumped their chests in salute. There could be no other response to a command from Caesar's son-in-law.

The chosen path was only barely shoulder-width across. The column of four changed to single file. The distance between the mounted men increased when Pilate impatiently trotted ahead of the rest.

The trail dwindled further. At first aiming northeast, it doubled back on itself, then ascended a rocky knoll. Underfoot the surface changed from clay to gravel. As it grew steeper, hooves scabbled for purchase. Heavily armed

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troopers leaned forward over the withers of their mounts. A towering oak on the crest of the hill was home to a flock of croaking ravens. Past the tree the road's direction changed again, dipping into a narrow defile.

"Where are those scouts?" Pilate scowled. "They should have reported in by now."

Two miles into the scarcely passable forest, the column was strung out over a half mile of narrow gorge. With barely room to turn, each man could view his comrades immediately before and behind, but no others. A pair of ravens rasped at each other from opposite sides of the ravine.

Just as the last trooper passed the summit of the knoll, the oak shuddered and toppled sideways. Gaining momentum and noise, the giant tree crashed into and crushed three more trees as it thundered across the trail, blocking it completely.

The echoes of the shattering oak had not died away before being replaced with the whistle of slingstones. Faces streaked with black grease and eyes wide with murderous intent, Cherusci warriors appeared from behind every boulder and stump, like demons emerging from the pit itself.

A dozen Romans, struck by that many fist-sized rocks apiece, toppled from their saddles. Cherusci axes chopped down screaming men and horses alike.

A black-fletched arrow zipped within an inch of Pilate's nose. Struck on the haunch by a stone, his horse reared and plunged, threatening to unseat him.

"Turn! Turn and fight!" he ordered. But how? Short

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swords and lances were of no use against arrows and rocks that buzzed like angry hornets.

“Flee, Tribune,” the chief bodyguard shouted. “Ride for your life!”

Confronted by an ax-wielding giant of a barbarian, Pilate’s gray stallion launched into parade ground canter. Front hooves churned with fury, and the horse knocked the Cherusci warrior aside.

A stone from a sling grazed Pilate’s forehead, bloodying him. Another struck squarely in the back of his helmet. The protective gear saved his life, but the blow left him dazed while the horse carried him out of the battle.

An arrow struck and lodged in the mount’s right hind leg. A Cherusci spear, flung from atop a fallen tree, wounded the horse near the same spot. Bleeding profusely, the gray never slowed until facing the climb up another hill. There it pulled up lame.

Looking over his shoulder in terror, Pilate beat the horse with his braided whip, demanding, “Keep going! Go!”

Behind him the noises of battle still raged. Shrieks of pain from barbarian throats proved the legionaries were giving a good account of themselves. Pilate dismissed the thought he should return to the fight.

At the top of the next hill, where the path at last snaked out of the canyon, loomed a pair of standing stones. They flanked the trail like a triumphal arch honoring his escape. Pilate once more demanded the horse continue moving and, haltingly, it obliged.

Coming abreast of the boulders, Pilate congratulated

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himself on pushing through to safety. He was relaxed in the saddle when another pair of warriors leapt at him from either side and brought him crashing heavily to the ground.

Hands tied behind his back, Pilate was led with a noose around his neck to the Cherusci chieftain.

“Can we kill him now?” one of the young warriors inquired.

“Cut his throat?” the other suggested.

The chieftain backhanded one, and the other ducked out of reach. “This one’s worth more alive. See the silver buckles on his uniform? Ransom we’ll get for such a one.”

“That’s right, ransom,” Pilate hurriedly agreed.

The barbarian cuffed Pilate into silence. Peering more closely, he roughly wiped the blood from Pilate’s face. “I know this man. Kin to Caesar himself. Take him to my tent and tie him up.”