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This is a work of fiction, although all reasonable attempts have been made to verify and maintain accuracy regarding major historical events, the accuracy of competing historical commentaries over 2000 years old will often vary. Please enjoy this manuscript in the spirit in which it was written, a novel which attempts to expand and illuminate the history of the early Apostles and the Glory and Majesty of our Lord and Saviour Jesus the Christ.
Emmanuel. Selah.

NOTE: Please refer to the footnotes and dictionary at the end of the manuscript, which explains Roman Legionary ranks, weapons, formations and Latin translations for rank and equipment.

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I would like to thank my father and children, all of whom are inspirations in their own different ways. Shout out to Julia for inspiring me to keep going forward and branch out into new realms. To the men and women of our Armed Forces, everywhere around the world, ready to answer the call at a moment's notice, to endure separation from family, friends and loved ones, and to make the ultimate sacrifice for God and Country. To me, a hero is not a sports figure or a musician. Role model, maybe, but not a hero, a hero is someone who selflessly and knowingly places themselves in harm's way, for the selfless concern of others, and our Armed Forces undoubtedly fit that mold. And lastly but certainly and completely not leastly, our Lord and Saviour for being the inspiration to millions and showing us what sacrifice, true love and passion for humanity can achieve. Without the enduring sacrifice of Jesus, this book would have literally no reason to exist at all. We are unworthy of His sacrifice but redeemed only by His marvelous and unmerited Grace, and by His death, burial and resurrection.

Amen.

Pete Anderson was born in New Jersey in 1966, and now resides in the greater Baltimore area. His previous publication experience under corporate banners includes automotive and medium truck repair manuals, technical assembly, installation and repair manuals and machine engineering and design. This is his fifth book, and fourth work of fiction.

Author's Notes:

I. All of the military hardware in this novel is real or taken from fragmentary historical documents. Some items of Roman weaponry and their exact uses are unknown or obliquely referenced in historical accounts or treatises, and we have incomplete records of these accounts and military actions. I have done my best to maintain a fair semblance of accuracy and historical respect.

II. Pliny the Elder was commander of the Roman fleet garrison at Misenum, in 79AD when Pompeii, Herculaneum and Stabiae were completely destroyed by the spectacular and deadly eruption of Mount Vesuvius. Pliny ordered the fleet to put to sea in the Bay of Naples, to evacuate survivors, and an unknown number of residents were saved by their daring and heroic exploits. His heroism also cost him his life. The facts of this tragic and deadly three-day period come down to us via eyewitness notes from his nephew, Pliny the Younger, posted to his friend Cornelius Tacitus. They were rediscovered in the sixteenth century after being lost to the ages for almost fifteen hundred years.

Section I, Jerusalem, contender for the title of "the Eternal City."

Luk 19:41 And when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it,
Luk 19:42 Saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things *which belong* unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes.
Luk 19:43 For the days shall come upon thee, that thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side,
Luk 19:44 And shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation.

The Gospel of Luke the Apostle,
the Nineteenth Chapter,
original King James Version – circa 1611.

---- Passover, Jerusalem, 33 AD ----

Jesus bent down and picked up a small flinty rock, then gazed towards the center of town with a stricken look. His slightly weathered and dusty cheeks were cleansed by the tear that slid from his brown eyes and dropped unheeded to the sand that His very hands had created billions of years before.

"The day shall come when not one of these stones shall stand upon its neighbor," He stated with infinite sorrow.

Bewildered, the Apostles could simply stare and attempt to comprehend the import of such an earth-shattering and tragic statement. Having traveled with their Lord and Rabbi for over three years, they had rarely seen Him display such heaviness and sorrow. Most of them thought back to Lazarus' death and Jesus open grief and weeping at the loss of His good friend. But Lazarus was raised, and grief was turned to joy. But not so on this sorrowful day.

"But Master, " Peter deigned to ask, "how should this be so? The Temple has stood since the time of the Fathers."

Peter, being the most impetuous of the disciples, was almost always ready with a wit or a sharp word to answer something he saw as wrong or indefinite, but here, right here, right now, he could come up with nothing either. He looked from face to face, seeing the grief and horror etched into every face

echoing his own, and could do nothing more but look down as his own tear slid unheeded to be caught and cherished by the same stony ground. Dropping the stone that He had held in His right hand, Jesus moved forward and the cheering and adulation became overwhelmingly noisy and boisterous as they entered the Holy City.

----- Jerusalem, March, 70 AD -----

Titus Flavius Vespasianus Augustus, from the lofty heights of his favorite and majestic chocolate and tan dappled heavy war horse, surveyed the ground and with a practiced soldier's eye, picked out strong points and potential disasters. Nearly bald and somewhat overweight, and not what most women would consider handsome, some would dismiss him at their own peril, for his less than stellar looks disguised the mind and heart of a born and battle hardened soldier and tactician, blooded in the first Judean war; a man who had made few mistakes in his lengthy career. Probably a good thing for his continued health, for in the armies of the Empire failure was not looked upon kindly and could have disastrous consequences, both professionally and personally. Much more attractive and popular with the ladies, nodded Tiberius Julius Alexander, another battle-hardened and competent soldier; his friend and second-in-command, a commander who right now was less than pleased at their progress and current location. After readjusting his heavy ornate bronze and tin battle helm, and scratching at his ear that was sweating heavily under the oppressive Judaean sun; he leaned in so the troopers behind would be less likely to overhear, then advised his commander in something just slightly more than a Claudian stage whisper.

"Sir, we should have the men break for the day and begin digging in. The sun is westering and this ground promises a hard fight to establish a proper camp stockade."

Titus again surveyed the uneven and dusty, tannish-grey rock strewn ground, then answered.

"Tiberius, your concern is duly noted, I do not intimate any immediate threat here, and at any rate the possibility of digging a proper palisade in this gods-forsaken land is well nigh next to impossible anyway, at least without oxen and plows. This is most certainly not the Campus Martius. We will assemble the ballistae as a perimeter and post watchfires and a twin-deep row of roving guards on the flanks to protect our tents. It will suffice."

Unable to shake a slight trepidation that still gnawed at the back of his brain, Tiberius assented with a curt nod of his comely head.

"It shall be as you order."

He wheeled his magnificent greyish roan and bellowed.

"Centurions, form up on me !!!!!!!"

Watching from the city wall, Simeon bar Joseph observed with chills cramping his back. Four legions of Roman soldiers approached the city, their roaming Aquiliferi flicking from place to place, the Aquila visible as tiny golden and scarlet pinpricks, too far away to make out clearly but visible none the less. Surrounded by the V Macedonia, XII Duodecima Fulminata and the XV Apollinaris on the west and with the X Fretensis closing in inexorably from the east, the city waited in rapt trepidation, the currently fulminating internal civil war becoming almost moot when faced with the slow but unstoppable and savage might of the encroaching Legions. 60,000 hot, angry and determined Romans and Auxilarii now prepared for the assault and sack of Jerusalem, the most High and Holy City on Earth to those of the faith under Yahweh.

Pilus Posterior Centurion Quintus Maximus Varo turned as his subordinate, Princeps Prior Centurion Glabrionius Augustus Sartius hurried up, his lorica squamata and metal accouterments jingling in his haste. Catching the late day sun that blistered down from a cloudless Judean sky, his silvered helmet reflected the powerful setting golden orb and blinded Quintus for a second as he turned to look away. Hardly possible to be more different in physical appearance, Quintus the prototypical,

chisel jawed and muscled Roman, Glabrionius; despite his best efforts at avoiding such, carrying the more rounded and less-chiseled form of his Iberian ancestry, were like twin brothers of different mothers, in mind and spirit. Forged in the heat and chaos of battle and blood, their friendship would span decades and endure thousands of miles of forced marches; but right now that friendship was a touch strained.

"Glabrionius?" Quintus queried while his eyebrows nearly met in the middle. "Are the men settling in?"

His answer was a curt nod followed by a glower.

"The Tribunus Laticlavus is really getting up my backside. Half the time it doesn't seem like he's listening when the Legatus issues orders, I know he's the Praefectus, but I hate being contravened when I've already passed down the Legatus's wishes and then he countermands them. It makes me look bad and the Legatus incompetent." To counterpoint his frustration he growled under his breath, like a caged bear.

"Paulus knows his business and the men all know that. Legatus Tiberius trusts him implicitly, and we are about to head into some seriously nasty fighting, this will be house-to-house and we need to be clear-headed and prepared. Put it aside. Am I clear?"

Quintus stared at the distant walls of Jerusalem with the practiced eye of a veteran of many sieges and realized that this would not be a city that would fall easily or bloodlessly. Many of his compatriots and friends would lie dead or severely injured before this was all over. Being a professional soldier, the thought of death didn't overly concern him and he simply shrugged, then turned back. The mobile engineering corp that all major Roman formations traveled embedded with, would figure out the weak spots and exploit them without mercy or hesitation.

"Glabrionius? Did I miss your affirmative answer?"

"No Sir, I'm clear Sir." Glabrionius answered a bit more testily than necessary.

"Yes, I thought so," Quintus answered; his mind already drifting to the days ahead and how best to breach or destroy the formidable walls impeding the attainment of their goal.

For a few seconds his mind drifted home to his shapely and beautiful Iberian wife, Mercedes, waiting patiently with her cousin and their two sons and daughter, awaiting his safe return. She was also Glabrionius' third cousin. His arms ached to hold her again and feel her curves, softness and warmth, but with the steel of a hardened trooper, he could cast no more thoughts for passion, home or simple pleasures right now, such thoughts could lead to indecision or distraction; things that could quickly lead to injuries, death or disaster, especially for a commanding officer. He said a quick and silent prayer, then turned back. He wondered what Glabrionius would make of his extracurricular activities, for the god that he offered his quick and silent prayer to wasn't one of the impotent in-fighting and inbred, squatting deities of the Seven Hills of Rome or the unknown god of Athens and Corinth (NOTE 1), but the maker of the universe, Yehowah to him in Latin or Jehovah in Hebrew. Mercedes' cousin Mediana, a fairly recent convert herself, had introduced him to the intricacies and amazements of the Lashon Ha-Kodesh and of the Torah, the Holy Writs. His insatiable appetite for information, learning and wisdom had accomplished the rest. Christianity was beginning to spread, even to Iberia; and his wife was still unsure about what her beliefs were in some avenues, but she watched with wide-eyed pride and admiration as her husband, already a strong, and forceful yet fair and respected leader of men in battle, became a forceful yet closeted apostle of Jesus. Her cousin could barely contain her joy and they stayed up long hours into the depths of night, with Quintus away on training or expeditions, after the children were fast asleep; expounding and arguing the meanings and intents of some of the more obscure Holy texts.

He had also never forgotten the story related by his father, also a Centurion, of his neighbor, a Centurion as well (for soldiers of rank are often billeted or housed in a common area or neighborhood, this being in Capernaum at the time (NOTE 2)), that Centurion Paulus had sought out Jesus of Nazareth when his servant was sick unto death, and he had requested the great Rabbi to heal his dying servant. Jesus had answered that he would come to his home but Paulus, in his faith, had answered 'not

so Rabbi, but yet speak the word and my servant shall be healed'. And so it had come to pass that very day. Quintus firmly believed that that slight seed, that slender root of faith planted by his father, had come to be watered and fertilized by Mediana's example and ministrations of her most precious and holy faith, as a tiny sprout struggles in the rocky and dry desert sand to beat nature and thrive. He worked diligently to walk uprightly and be found blameless in the sight of his Creator.

Some would find an enormous contradiction in a professed convert attacking the Holiest City on the planet for those of the Jewish faith, but he saw it simply as an exercise in punishment, a satrapy had rebelled, Roman and protectorate citizens had been injured and killed, and so the guilty shall be punished. Cut, dry and clear. So no conscience issues gnawed at his mind or attempted to cloud or alter his judgments as it might with some other men, in some things Quintus was almost child-like in his exercise of the value of black-n-white thinking. Somebody messed up, he got his backside paddled. He personally now commanded seven thousand of the close to sixty thousand men that were even now preparing to administer that big stick.

----- Ashkelon, on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea , 31 AD -----

Gulls wheeled and cawed, frantic and frustrated at being driven off from the piles of freshly caught bluish-silver tinted fish lining the wharf, some still fitfully flapping their lives away. A blazing sun burning from a nearly cloudless azure sky and reflecting mercilessly off the mirror-flat equally azure water, tormented the fisherman struggling to get their catch sorted and prepared, while staving off said gulls, the flying rats of the Med.

Simon Peter, the son of Simon the tanner and his wife Marisa, struggled to keep the gulls at bay while his uncle Lucius, the fleet's owner, bellowed out orders to scurrying and overstressed fisherman and sailors. Having made just less than a fortune but much much more than a good living from the abundance of the Mediterranean and shrewd investments in ships and good captains, he watched his fifteen year old nephew learn the ways of managing and leading a business. Having lost his parents four years before to the wrath of the sea, Simon now learned his trade and earned his keep with his stern but favorite uncle and his rowdy band of captains and sailors. Moping his tow-haired brow with the back of a fishy-smelling hand, Simon quickly turned a hardened eye to the merciless sky and neared to cursing it, then snapped back to gaze at the 50 foot high and 150 foot thick walls of the fortress-city, Ashkelon, his home since his parent's passing. Longing for the cooler dampness of the inns that lounged listlessly against the inside perimeter of the city's matchless rough-hewn stone walls, even at only fifteen he was quickly beginning to appreciate a shadowed seat, a hunk of heavy dark bread, a trim of well-grilled fish and a quick pitcher of ale (or two). Realizing sadly that that hour would be slow in coming, he set his mind back to his task and ignored, only partly successfully, his rumbling stomach. Lucius' firm and unwavering belief was that the only way for a man to 'learn the ropes' of managing and leading a prosperous and growing business, was 'from the ground up', so no slack for anyone, regardless of blood-ties. Simon understood this in his marrow but his stomach often wanted to start a long and bloody argument. As the end of the day's labours finally began to be clearly seen, Simon let out a gusty sigh and stood up straight to work the painful kinks out of his already stressed spine. He heard a few faint 'clicks' and 'pops' and groaned quietly. Not wanting to disappoint his uncle, he never displayed weakness in public, of any sort, consciously. Lucius, being a shrewd and learned observer of men, knew that he was covering but to his credit made no outward notice of any sort, leaving him his dignity and teen-age pride intact. Finally hearing Lucius' signal, he gratefully turned and headed towards the 150 foot long barrel-vaulted tunnel that led through the city wall and into food and a welcome and cooler respite. Catching up to Lucius, his uncle threw an arm around his broadening shoulders and arched his eyebrows slightly as he realized his reach had to expand.

"Well there Simon, the leisure in the summer sun is packing some fine muscle onto that bony frame of yours", he chided mockingly but lovingly. Simon could no doubt now take him at arm-wrestling or

just about any other physical sport, working the docks hard had left him tanned, lean and chiseled. Answering in the same vein, Simon tossed back,

"Well there Uncle, perhaps all this leisure is making me too soft. Perhaps a captaincy could firm my resolve some."

"Well now indeed," his uncle responded, "you know what, my youngest current captain is 32 summers there, me boy. Ye have a bit of doing to catch him yet, I believe. Now perhaps a first-mate or purser could be more the speed"

Simon harrumphed, then brightened as they neared one of his uncle's favorite watering-holes. He could smell fresh bread already and his stomach nearly arrived before he did.

Lucius slowed for a second and stroked his wispy beard with a gnarled, sun-bleached hand.

"About that, as ye say, perhaps its time to let the kestrel flee the nest. The Pharaon is taking a load of amphorae of wine and olive oil to Paphos on Cyprus and then will head out to Lasea on the southern coast of Creta. Interested?"

"Only if I'm shipping out as captain." Simon responded cheekily.

"Attitude like that'll get you paying for your own supper tonight, me boy. Captain, no, purser should be probably doable. On the Pharaon the purser is second only to the first-mate and the Captain, where it pertains to orders of business. As to seafaring, they rule with an iron fist and will brook no disagreements. Clear?"

"Yes uncle, quite clear. Now I only have one question."

"And that would be?"

"When do we sail?"

"Well spoken, me boy, well spoken indeed. Let's set aside business for the moment and fill our bellies happily. In the morning we will firm up your plans."

Simon's grin illuminated the entire shadowy inn.

----- Jerusalem, March, 70 AD -----

Quintus made his nightly rounds, as he always did while on campaign, verifying his men were settled in and prepared for the long days ahead, dispensing pats on a shoulder or a kind word that brought more than their measure of comfort to the Milites Gregarii and Auxilarii, the common foot-troops that would heft the major burden of fighting, bleeding and dying in the days to soon come. Quintus had learned many years before that with just a few kind and well-considered words, a Century would be ready to follow a commander to the shores of the river Styx and into the underworld while cheering him on lustily.

Satisfied that all was in order, he decided to forgo a few hours of his own sleep and visit the tents at the far end of the "cross", the camp formation where the Machinatii, or army corp of engineers, bedded down. Hearing voices quietly debating and seeing that all the lamps were still burning, he eased his way in and nodded a silent greeting to the Optio, sub-Optio and machinators busily discussing ballistae fortifications and fire points to cause maximum damage and mayhem with minimum risk to the ballistae operators. Being an open and unarmoured machine, the operators would be vulnerable to return fire by arrow and sling from the Jewish traitors. To pass a few minutes while they worked, Quintus removed his Gladius from its finely tooled and beautifully engraved and silvered leather scabbard, pulled a whetstone from a pouch in his armour and began to rework the already gleaming edges.

The Optio Paulinius glanced over to where he was working and motioned with his finger.

"Quintus, gift us with your tactical eye. Since you have been hanging about and making our lives miserable, at least provide something useful to the conversation." he said with a wry smirk twitching his scarred lip.

"Paulinius, I may make you regret your overextended faith," he retorted. Paulinius smirked wider.

Sobering somewhat, Paulinius responded a bit more seriously, "Quintus, you know this is going to be some warm work. The Jews may be revolutionists but they are intelligent, brave, cunning and well

led. They also know this land better than the back of their hands. There will be much blood spilt on both sides, help me minimize that loss. Here are our maps, do us the honour of examining our tactical plans and formations and point out any deficiencies you may observe. You are as old as any man in this room and though you may not be a formally trained Machinus, your advise has been vital in the past in avoiding 'unpleasant' situations. Advise us again.” he requested with seriousness.

With equal gravity he responded,

“Paulinius, I have a wife and three children awaiting my safe return, as I know that many of you do. Anything that will shorten this campaign and minimize the casualties on either side is a worthy endeavour.”

He offered up a quick and silent prayer to Yehowah for a sharp eye, a quick mind, a resolute heart and a strong and steady arm, then turned to the maps and began to critically examine the battle formation and armoured deployments.

----- Ashkelon, on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea , 31 AD -----

Gulls wheeled and cawed, frantic and frustrated at being driven off once again and denied any chance at larcenous behaviour regarding fish scraps. This time Simon Peter wouldn't have cared if they had carried off the gun'nels, he was shipping out and not as a cabin boy or yeoman, but as a man of command. The weight of that expectation settled on him heavily as he watched his uncle turn and make his way up the dock after waving him off. The gorgeous and glassy blue water of the Mediterranean slipped by the hull, appearing to part almost by magic at the behest of the heavily carved and partly gilded bowsprit icon.

The Pharaon, at a length of approximately 65 cubits and a maximum carrying capacity of 2700 amphorae, set sail with a just under maximum mixed cargo load of amphorae and pithoi, of grain, grapes, olives, olive oil, dates, cheese and fine wines, bound for a first landfall at Paphos.

A day out, the sky began to darken ominously and some of the sailors looked nervous. Perhaps because of some of the cockiness of youth, and some just sheer inexperience and bravado, Simon didn't feel quite as nervous and wondered what all the to-do was really about. When the waves began to approach the size of small houses he became educated very quickly. Day turned to the color of dusk and the glassy-smooth and welcoming Mediterranean became much less welcoming and a lot more threatening. The birds that had been shadowing them before were now nowhere to be found and the captain and steersman began to fear for the solidity of the side-oars that allowed the great ship to be steered. If one of them broke and the ship heeled to point its bow parallel to the waves, with her heavy cargo and great weight, she would turn turtle, capsize and founder. Simon found himself grabbing any convenient cleat or grip-point as the great ship wallowed and groaned under the weight of the cargo below and the conflicting forces attempting to turn her in three directions at once. The captain had somehow miraculously retained a general idea of their course and location, and was now heading for the nearest landfall that he felt would be beneficial, the small port city of Zakros on the eastern shore of Crete. Carefully making his way toward the small cabin that served as the vessel's bridge, Simon turned to look aft and watched with great unease as he observed the deck planks rippling like a slow-motion river as the great stresses bending and wracking the mighty ship's ribs and spars offered up a visible testimony to their unstoppable force. Moving forward without looking, a sailor popped up from below just as Simon was passing him and bumped shoulders briefly. The sailor reported ominous news, that several of the hull seams were beginning to part under the constant battering and the Pharaon was taking water. The captain ordered Simon to help below and try to get the cargo stabilized and the leaks slowed. Simon followed the sailor, Zacheus, belowdecks and set to work. A particularly large wave just about then happened to catch the hull at a bad angle and overstressed several components at once. One of the two great steering oars snapped just underneath its mountings and simultaneously several massive amphorae of olive oil broke loose and crashed over, one cracking open and adding its oil to the sea water already beginning to fill the bilge. The sailors feared a fire if the spilt olive oil were to be ignited by a

rogue illuminating torch or lamp. Simon ran back to the deckhouse and quickly reported the situation to the captain, who if possible, looked even more grim, then returned below just as quickly to attempt to lend a hand in damage control. Just as he finished descending the ladder and turned to see how things were progressing, a loose amphora weighing several hundred pounds, having snapped its mountings and heeling over, caught and crushed his leg between itself and the hull. Simon heard his leg snap in several places and almost immediately passed out from the overwhelming pain that rocketed up his leg and into his spine.

When he awoke, he was still in extreme pain but also completely confused as to his current situation and whereabouts. The storm seemed to have passed and he was also almost sure that he was no longer aboard ship. He could hear the captain's voice nearby and he attempted to sit up. From behind him, a willowy hand restrained his shoulder, and he felt that the hand seemed much lighter than a sailor or dockworker.

He turned and looked up and into the most blue of eyes that he had ever encountered in his young life, and his heart skipped a beat, or perhaps two. She smiled slightly and chastised him in stilted Greek.

"You must not try to move. Your leg, it is very bad, be still, still you must not try to move."

"I understand. My name is Simon, thank you for caring for me, I was injured when a bad storm hit our ship. Is the rest of the crew here too?"

"Simon," she answered in a voice as sweet as the tunes of a lyre, "your ship is safe. Your captain Valerian is beloved of the gods, after a great battle and damage, your ship came to us broken but floating still. One of your crew is dead, he was" she paused for a second as she searched for the right word."smashed yes, crushed by one of your giant carriers."

"Pithoi," he corrected automatically and smiled.

"Yes, Pithoi." she echoed and looked away shyly. "I am Lysandra."

"Lysandra, yes," he rolled it over his tongue as he would some sweet and delicious treat.

"Lysandra, the ship, she belongs to my uncle. Will she sink, do you think?"

"No Simon, the gods have favored you and your crew today. Your ship is broken but will stay floating. I have seen many ships come while I have lived here, and some much more cracked? broken, than yours. I believe it can be fixed, in some time. But not quickly."

"So that would mean we would have to stay here a while." Simon answered.

"Yes, it would," Lysandra replied and again looked away shyly. Simon was sure he had never seen a more beautiful girl in any of his fifteen summers. His musings were interrupted by the return of captain Valerian.

"Simon, me boy," he boomed, "I see you have met our young angel, Lysandra, and unless my ears deceive me, Aphrodite and Eros are planning your future for you already. Settle down there, young buck."

Simon grinned and observed that as Lysandra reddened in embarrassment, her beauty was only the more enhanced.

"Simon, I have work, I must needs to leave now. I will come back to see on your leg."

Reluctantly Simon broke off his fingers from her hand and nodded.

"I apparently will probably still be right here when you return."

Valerian took a look at the crude splinting on Simon's leg and whistled softly.

"Well, my friend, I believe that you are going to have yourself a nice permanent limp, I'm no physician but I've seen enough mess to know a little about broken and fixed. That one's really broken."

"Captain, how is the ship?"

"Tis truly a blessing by the gods we arrived alive. The hull is damaged in several places, seams sprung, half the sails are ripped or gone and the forward mast is cracked and wrapped together. The port-side steering oar snapped off clean at the mountings. If we had lost the other, we would right now be having this conversation in the next world. Neelius is dead, he was hit by a Pithoi and crushed, and died soon after, and we have a few other injuries but yours is by far the worst. I am going to try to get

word to your uncle, we will be overdue in Paphos soon and I'm sure that we were not the only ship beaten and left for dead by that gods-cursed storm. That was a bad one, rightly enough and I have rarely seen the likes of it outside the open ocean. We will harbour here for a bit, I think that should suit you quite well."

Simon looked back toward the direction that Lysandra had disappeared in and grinned.

"I'll manage," he retorted wittily.

----- Iberia, 39 AD -----

The fresh smells of wildflowers and clean mountain air greeted their nostrils. The tread of hobnailed Roman caligae squashing same said wildflowers into fragrant ruins echoed off the surrounding hills and stones as the "civilizing" might of Rome came back to visit Iberia.

Tracing her ancestry many centuries back to the Interamici tribes of Celtic stock, Mercedes lived as did most of her people, in a fortress-like walled and defended city (Oppida) pre-dating the Augustine wars of 26 BC. Now a vassal state of Rome, her wild, strong and brave warriors were used throughout the Empire to supplement indigenous Roman troops on campaign.

In her childhood, noted for her wild character and great beauty, Mercedes had been pledged to the Coventina, the Galacian deity of abundance and fertility. With her parent's death in a local raid from an unfriendly neighboring tribe, she was taken in and cared for by the administrators of the Coventina sect, who brought peace and prosperity to their region, as best they could. With another wave of Roman raids and tributes accomplished, Mercedes had been taken at a young age from her homeland by a Roman garrison and in the course of time had eventually been introduced to a young tribune named Quintus. Initially he had been fascinated by her wild beauty, quick wit and untameable spirit; she had longed to see him painfully skewered on the end of an Iberian pike. But with time and thoughtful ministrations, he had been fortunate enough to show her that although he might be gruff and martial on the outside, he could just as easily turn that boundless energy and regimented intellect to love and charity. When she finally gave her heart, she was shocked at how completely and forcefully she had surrendered again, to the might of invading Rome. For his part, he would have died a thousand cruel and lingering deaths to protect her from any harm, he loved her so deeply it hurt. They were married in a sacred grove near Rome a year later, in one of his rare lay-overs between making the world safe for Rome and Rome safe for the world.

Several years after, through some mysterious adventures, her cousin Mediana arrived in their outpost near Rome and came to stay with them just as Mercedes was with child. In time Quintus came to love her as well and could never be more pleased and relieved; that when he was away on campaign, his beloved wife and precious children had someone near to watch over them when he could not be physically present to do so.

Quintus awoke with a start, the name 'Mercedes' a dying whisper on his lips, a singular and confusing event to him. Not a man given over much to an active imagination, as most professional soldiers are not, the fact that he had been seeming to have some sort of nightmare was quite rare and unusual enough, but to not remember more than fragmentary bits and also having a heavy feeling that his beloved wife was somehow involved, unsettled him way more than he would ever admit, even to himself. Thousands of miles away, there was no possible physical way that he could ever hope to arrange written communications with all that he held most dear in this dangerous world, before the siege began, so his adopted cousin's advice bounced into his head. 'Quintus, never forget that Yehowah is not fashioned by hands or constrained by mortality, time or distance. He is everywhere and nowhere at once, and listens for our faintest cry. It is not unmanly to admit weakness or fear in the face of an Almighty God, He came to Earth for our infirmities and weaknesses, and He bore them all and paid the ultimate price with His blood, body and life. When you need, call to Him, he will stick closer than a brother" he could hear Mediana's voice carried on the wind and swept softly away. Although still somewhat of an unfamiliar and foreign act to him, he bowed his head in the near-dawn dimness and

prayed quietly for strength, character, courage and good fortune for himself in the coming battle, and for the safety, happiness and well-being of his family so many many miles apart. He didn't pray for himself because he feared death, a soldier of Rome did not welcome it but did not run from it either, like marching, eating or training, it was just another component of a soldier's life. He prayed for himself solely to return home to children who needed and adored him and a wife who would trade places in a heartbeat if she had the ability. As he finished, he closed with a heart-felt plea,

'Yehowah and Jesus, the Great and only God of the Heavens, shield those that my death would only be the one thousandth of what I would give to protect. Amen.'

He briefly dropped back into a somewhat listless sleep and it seemed like only moments later the bugle calls for revelie rang through the Roman camp, and the jingle of men awakening and the neighing of heavy war horses rent the still morning air. The siege and sack of Jerusalem drew nearer with every passing hour.

----- Paphos, on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea , 31 AD -----

Simon awoke hoping that Lysandra would again come to call, because he knew his time on Paphos was growing short. After two weeks, an epistle arrived for him and the captain. His was in a separate sealed envelope, bearing the stamped wax signet of his uncle Lucius, a measure usually only reserved for official documents and organs of statehood. He opened it carefully and read it twice through, then sighed.

'My dearest Simon, my heart is saddened to hear of the great storm and death that has befallen your voyage, but leaps to the gods above that all others including yourself were spared greater harm. I have secured a huge order of sundries and have shipped out the Queen of Sheba and the Queen of Persia to meet you at Paphos and take half of the remaining crew on board. This order will secure our fortunes and futures for many years to come, it is so large that only the two most massive ships in my fleet could hope to be up to the great task. You are to remain behind with the Pharaon until such time as she is fit to sail. I do this because I do not have the resources currently to have the entire crew of the Pharaon dry-docked and billeted without productive gains. You will remain with the captain and a few other hand-picked crew because of my complete faith and trust in your honesty, integrity and work ethic. I miss your parents dearly and hardly a day passes that I do not wonder why the gods choose to cut down mere mortals in the prime of our times, when there are but children left behind to mourn us, but the fates are sometimes capricious and it is not our minds to understand their plans and desires. I am sure that without any doubts, if your parents were yet here to see this day, they would be besides themselves with joy and pride at the fine man that you have grown into. I wish I could take more credit for this!' at this point Simon chuckled out loud ...!' but I, and they, had very little to do with it in all sincerity. Like a fine ship or a perfectly forged weapon, we have only released the potential inside. Captain Valerian is one of my best and I trust him implicitly, he has forgotten more about sailing and shipwrighting than I shall ever learn, but he is still but one man, and will require help. He cannot be in more than one place at one time, but do not tell him I said so, for he will argue loudly and strenuously til the heavens collapse around you both. I know this is a big commission and you have not yet seen sixteen summers but you are given my signet order to be his right-hand man and to speak on my behalf barring only his judgments. My prayers to the gods for the safe delivery of our cargos and your speedy recovery and return, I rue that I am unable to come to you directly but I am sure that we shall be reunited soon, the gods willing. With sincerest affections, Uncle.'

Simon thought briefly about his parents and the day that the tidings of their loss had arrived home, and a single tear tracked down his cheek, but only briefly; and he grabbed the cane that he now used to make his way around and standing to his full height of three and nine-tenths cubits, he arched his back slightly and pushed out his chest. Unashamed of such a display of unfettered braggadocio, he whispered 'Father, Mother, Uncle, I shall not fail you or I shall die trying.' Then he limped out to the shoreline,

ignoring the shooting pains in his still knitting leg, and headed toward the Pharaoh to see what the days progress should entail. Unbeknownst to him Lysandra had watched from a small window of another room and smiled, her heart leaping and breaking simultaneously because she knew that she had fallen hard for this tousle-haired sailor from a strange land and that very soon he would be returning to said strange lands. Having watched him read the missive now folded into his pocket, she realized that it must contain some important news and that partings would be only hours or days away.

Several days later, as promised, the Queen of Persia and the Queen of Sheba arrived to pick up the remnant of sailors. More than twice the length of the Pharaoh and with a cargo capacity over three times as great, most of the islanders had never even imagined a vessel so massive, let alone seen one and the arrivals brought a great stir and excitement to the typically more stoic inhabitants. An immense and festive feast was thrown and much wine and food shared before the huge vessels prepared to depart.

Having bid the enormous vessels good speed, Simon took a rare break from his duties and walked hand-in-hand along the shoreline with Lysandra, quietly discussing what the wide open world and the unseen but bright future might bring to them both. In only days, he was sure that he had found by fortune and good fates, the one perfect love of his young life, and when it finally arrived, his leave-taking was both difficult and heart-wrenching. Only an hour out from shore, he missed her terribly already, and turning to look past the sternpost, he imagined he could still see the very point of the rocky coastal promontory, like a granite lighthouse guiding him home.

--- Jerusalem, Early September, 70 AD ---

Titus Flavius Vespasianus Augustus, from the lofty heights of his favorite and majestic chocolate and tan dappled heavy war horse, surveyed the ground and with a practiced soldier's eye, noted the incredible death and destruction that had been mercilessly meted out to the rebel Jews. The Holy place of the Hebrews, their Temple of David, had been completely destroyed by a massive fire that had spread from other areas of the city, a desecration that he had wished to avoid, but did not particularly mourn. Ash and smoke still fouled the air and the smell of burnt human flesh was all around him in unavoidable concentrations. Raining down from the leaden skies like an untimely early snowfall, as he unsuccessfully attempted to brush dirt and ash from his finely polished armour, he knew that he would be given a Triumph, a Bacchanalian celebration of epic duration and proportions, on his return to Rome; but even to a professional soldier, such death and abject defeat brought a quiet sigh to his heart. He shook his head almost imperceptibly, just once, at the thought of such a day visiting Mother Rome. After all, he could concede, to the rebels they were simply protecting their homeland from a godless foreign invader, and had the roles been reversed, would he have fought to the death as most of the 70,000 defenders had? He vowed that he would have, then moved on. Bodies of defenders and civilians lay broken and bleeding everywhere, in places in heaps too high to do anything but skirt around, and the Romano-Jewish historian Josephus ben Matityahu (Titus Flavius Josephus), would later claim the count at over 1,100,000 total killed, injured or run off and 97,000 taken as slaves for the greater glory of Caesar and Rome herself.

Having forcibly crashed their way over and through three successive permanent and make-shift defensive walls erected in terror and desperation, the Legions had visited unequalled devastation to the recalcitrant Jews and made a loud and clear point of not defying the Mother Empire. Titus had anticipated taking the Temple intact and dedicating it to Caesar and the Pantheon, but such was not to be and so on his orders the three highest and most magnificent towers, the Phasaelus, Hippicus and Mariamne were spared, as was part of the Western wall, to act as protection for the permanent garrison that would be left behind, and to serve as an unmistakable example to Rome's enemies and anyone else who perhaps considered such rash action. Oppose the Apis Bull, and you get the horns.

Even as he turned to slowly pick his way back toward the remnants of the gate known as Beautiful, slaves and survivors attempted pitifully and fitfully to extinguish the blazes still flaring at random, and