

The Eternal Mercenary

Casca, #1

by Barry Sadler, 1940-1989

Published: 1979

*** **

Table of Contents

One ... thru ... Twenty-Seven

* * * * *

This is a book of fiction. All the names, characters and events portrayed in this book are Fictional and any resemblance to real people and incidents are purely coincidental.



He was galley slave and gladiator, warrior and vagabond, living by his wits and his skills as a fighting man. For he was Casca—the eternal mercenary, the soldier condemned to fight forever.

One

Nha Trang, Vietnam, 1970

A flight of three Dust Off Med Evac helicopters was bringing in the remnants of an infantry platoon that had been ambushed a little south of Nui Ba Den two hours before.

The Cong had really ripped their ass on this one, but had screwed up by hanging around a little too long—long enough to get caught between a unit of the First Cav and a company of South Korean Rangers. The copters were bringing out the broken and dying humanity that had been the American platoon, the dead and wounded Cong were left to become part of the mud.

Such are the benefits of a modern nation's technology the Americans were even now being placed in an air-conditioned hospital clearing room at Nha Trang where rosy-cheeked young nurses could tell them how brave they were and how proud they made the free world with their noble sacrifices (and on occasion the nurses might sacrifice a little of themselves by sleeping with such wounded heroes but only, of course, if they were officers).

Colonel Robert Landries, tall and ascetic looking, the senior surgeon of the Eighth Field Hospital, personally supervised the sorting of the wounded by the degree of severity. He was assisted in this humane endeavor by Major Julius Goldman. The two directed which men would receive immediate treatment and which would have to wait—or take second best from some of the orderlies.

Goldman was examining one of the head wound casualties when he stopped suddenly, straightened up, shook his head as if confused, and called to Colonel Landries.

"Colonel, you better come over here and confirm what I'm looking at—or get ready to put me in the rubber room."

Landries swore at him, "I have been ready to do that ever since you were assigned to this unit, but I'll look."

Landries made his way over to Goldman, stopping occasionally to give instructions about the disposition of a particular patient, or to answer a question from one of the braless nurses (The heat made bras develop a rash, so Landries had authorized the only braless uniform in Indochina).

"All right, Goldman, what the hell are you mumbling about now? Have you finally pickled your brain with specimen alcohol?"

Goldman nodded, consternation written across his face. "I hope that's all there is to it, Colonel. At least it would explain this." He indicated the prone figure lying before them.

The casualty was a stocky, powerfully built man, not unusual as human beings go. What was unusual about him was the wound. According to all the known laws of medicine he had no right to be living.

Around the corners of the battle dressing on the left side of his head the brain itself could be seen. Protruding from the exposed brain was a piece of shrapnel, a shiny sliver of Russian steel about a quarter of an inch in diameter sunk to an unknown depth in the exposed vital organ. The open area of the brain was about four inches long and three inches wide and ran up to where the part in a man's hair would normally be. This section of the skull had just simply been blown away, an adjoining section was held on by a flap of skin. A Chinese-made 60-mm mortar, firing Russian ammo, had obviously scored a direct hit.

Landries bent over to take a closer look at the wound and the shrapnel. Blood covered the man's face and the tails of the battle dressing holding the bandage to his head. Landries squinted, looked closer, took out his glasses, and looked again.

"My God," he exclaimed, face paling, as he turned to Goldman. "What?"

Both men turned their attention to the exposed brain.

A wound like that, in the incubator climate of Vietnam, meant almost certain death, or, at the very least, that the man would be a vegetable if he lived. But this wound was different. God, how different.

Slowly, but surely, as the two surgeons watched in disbelief, the open wound was taking steps to protect itself. The slender piece of shrapnel was being isolated and encapsulated by what appeared to be the same kind of calcification process that isolates TB bacilli in the lungs. For TB, it was known as a ghom complex, but what the hell this was something else. The dura mater, pia mater—the meninges—protective coverings for the brain and spinal cord, were making slow but *visible* progress growing back over the exposed regions of the brain. *Visible...* Good God! Landries turned to Goldman. "Get this man prepped and into surgery immediately." His voice rose to a piercing shriek. "Move! Get X-rays of every centimeter of this man from every angle—and do it now!"

The nurses and orderlies jumped at the commands, but Landries's voice still followed them. "I want blood work I want urology and hemoglobin. I want every damned test this place can make—and some it can't. Move, you slugs! If this man dies I will transfer every one of you to the paratroops and send you fine young ladies to clean open sores at a leper colony. Move, damn it, move!"

He turned to Goldman.

"Goldman, you found him—so you can stay with him every second of every hour until I can personally relieve you."

The major nodded and followed after the wounded man, telling the aides to get an IV started. He ordered the nurses to get the man cleaned up and into isolation, told them he wanted sterile technique to be observed, that if any of them contaminated any of the specimens taken from this man there would be hell to pay.

They took the soldier quickly to a bed in the isolation room of the hospital. The only other patient in the room was an elderly Viet farmer in the final stages of a bout with typhus, no longer contagious, so Goldman had the orderlies throw him out with a gift of fifty American dollars. The sudden windfall delighted the old man, and he quickly grabbed his few meager belongings and sprinted out the door like an Olympic hurdle-jumper as if he feared these crazy Americans would change their minds and take the money back. He went through the main gate so fast the A. P. standing guard shook his head in wonder at the old timer's agility. As the nurses and orderlies stripped the wounded man, Goldman called for an IV of sterile saline to be started stat. For the first time he now looked at the man's dog tags to check his blood type. O positive. No problem there. The most common type of blood. Vital signs were next. The man's temperature was 97.9—almost a degree lower than normal. It shouldn't be lower than normal; he should be running a fever. Respiration: 18 to the minute. A little rapid, but not bad. Pulse: slightly faster than normal. Blood pressure: 140 over 90.

Normal.

But there was nothing normal about this; nothing about the wounded man was as it should be...

Goldman left, taking the man's dog tags and wound tag. Again he read the legend on the dog tags: "CASEY ROMAIN—TYPE O-POS—PROTESTANT."

It told him nothing about who the man was. He stopped by his chief orderly's office to drop off the wound tag.

"Get this man's medical records in here ASAP and tell the commanding officer of his company to get me his 201 file. Also, I want all information on his personal history and background. And have it for me by tomorrow afternoon."

The chief orderly had a bland look in his eyes, so Goldman went on: "Sergeant Ferguson, you have been bragging about how you talked your way into a cherry assignment here. I am not particularly fond of your ass anyway, so I am going to tell you that if you don't have that info for me by tomorrow I have just the place for you. There is a Special Forces camp on the Laos border that has lost its last three medics from KIAs in the last month, and it looks like the shit is really going to hit the fan there. If you don't deliver that information for me, you will find yourself reassigned as their Temporary Medical Specialist by 0800 hours day after tomorrow and on your way to join the Green Berets by noon.

"Good-bye, Sergeant."

As Goldman turned and left, Ferguson sat there in shocked silence. He had thought of himself as secure in this safe slot, and now this lousy Jew doctor was on the verge of screwing everything up for him. Another three months of dealing penicillin and other drugs on the black market and he would have enough to set himself up with a nice little bar when he got Stateside. Ferguson rubbed his nose,

round, beer belly and then ran his hands through his thinning, mouse-colored hair, grunted disgustedly to himself, and reached for the phone. His survival was at stake. Green Berets! Who in his right mind would want to be assigned to duty with those madmen?

Shee...it! If those suckers weren't being attacked, they were always out looking for trouble.

No, he thought, I will get all the trash he wants, but I'll have my day,,,

When Goldman returned to the isolation ward, Casey had been cleaned up and was lying nude beneath a set of clean white sheets. His body had been scrubbed down until it glowed a rosy pink.

Goldman inspected the head wound again and swabbed it down with an antiseptic solution. The progress of the membranous lining in its attempt to recover the exposed brain tissue was now obvious to even an untrained eye. Even more startling was the fact that from a very close examination it was clear that new bone was being grown around the perimeter of the injury.

The major pulled the covers down from Casey's body to get a look at the rest of him. He whistled softly under his breath. Casey's body was covered with scars, many of them deep, and others with puckered edges as if they had healed irregularly by themselves. The wounds were a blend of old and fairly recent, but many of them had faded almost white from age, and others seemed to have crisscrossed several times until it was impossible to tell which was the oldest wound.

Goldman called for an orderly to take Sergeant E-5 Casey Romain to the X-ray room for his series and to keep an eye on his vitals. If there was any change, Goldman was to be notified immediately.

In the meantime he would go and get ready for surgery.

By the time Casey had been X-rayed, Goldman and the colonel had finished their scrub and were waiting for their patient to be rolled in along with his plates.

Placing Casey under the sterile sheets, Colonel Landries again inspected the wound and remained silent for a moment before saying to Goldman: "Has there been any sign of infection?"

"Negative," responded the major. "There is no sign of any infection at all. We should have his blood work in a few minutes. Perhaps that will tell us more."

The two doctors stood discussing the possible explanations for their strange patient's condition until the X-ray plates were set up on the display. They went over the plates one after another, and then repeated themselves, consulting the X-ray tech's report on the unusual conditions present in the patient. One particular item caught their special attention. A thick mass of tissue in the patient's left thigh surrounded a piece of foreign matter of unknown nature. Because of the angle from which the X-ray was made it was difficult to make out exactly what the object was. They decided to go in for it after they tried to remove the piece of shrapnel from the brain.

As Landries prepped the area around the head wound and painted it with antiseptic, he commented that the shrapnel seemed a little longer than it had been when they brought Casey in. Taking a pair of forceps, he gently tugged at the piece of metal. Almost without any effort on his part it came free from the surrounding brain tissue.

Casey was obviously in no distress, so Landries told Goldman to go after the unknown object in the thigh.

Surgery over, the two doctors retired to the coffee room, Goldman taking the object he had removed from Casey's thigh with him. While Landries sipped hot black coffee, Goldman removed the membranous tissue surrounding the object. Slowly the form took shape ... until there could be no doubt as to the object's identity... an arrowhead. A metal arrowhead.

Landries spilled his coffee as the object was dropped in front of him on the table. Picking it up, he turned to Goldman.

"Bronze?"

Goldman nodded,

"Goldman, your hobby is ancient history. When would you say the last time an arrowhead like this was made?"

Goldman took the piece from Landries, turning it over and over in his fingers.

"Colonel, this is handmade and not cast. It resembles very closely some of the bronze artifacts I've seen in museums in Jerusalem and Istanbul. You know, I went there with my uncle, the one who's the curator for the Judaic Arts and History Museum in New York."

He was silent for a moment, looking thoughtfully at the arrowhead.

"How old? Oh, I don't know. It looks a lot like some of the arrows I have seen from the period of, say, 300 BC to AD 400. They didn't change very much among most of the primitive – and some not so primitive—tribes during that time. Bronze was still very popular—and a lot easier to work than iron.

"Doctor Landries, that man in there, Romain. Those wounds on his body look like they were made by edged weapons like he had been sliced up by swords and axes. We have treated almost every conceivable type of injury since we have been here, and nothing—I repeat, nothing—even remotely resembles those wounds. The blood work on him is normal except for one thing: his white blood cells are hyperactive. The phagocytic action is unbelievable. I set a smear of his blood in with a preserved sample of the old Viet's—the old man who had the typhus—and Romain's WBCs attacked and destroyed the typhus bacilli as if they were at a picnic. That's the reason there is no sign of infection in his body. Furthermore, there are no detectable foreign organisms present in his system other than those that are necessary for the maintenance of life. Colonel, I do not believe that a harmful bacteria or virus can survive in Romain's body. He doesn't even have any cavities."

Landries nodded. "Anything else?"

Goldman hesitated a moment and said, "Yes ... I injected two cc's of a whole blood sample into a guinea pig, and the animal died in convulsions less than ten seconds after the injection: Sergeant Romain's blood is poison, deadly poison."

Landries shook his head, tired and confused.

"We are faced with something outside our experience, Major, and I am not sure I really want to find out what it is. You stay with him and monitor him until midnight, and then give me a call, and I'll relieve you."

The next shock came in the quietness of the isolation room where the orderlies had brought Casey after surgery. Major Goldman had been sitting by the bed, studying Casey's face in the single light of the bedside lamp. There was nothing

unusual in Casey's features. His age was indeterminate. He could be anywhere in the late twenties to the late thirties.

Goldman closed his eyes and nodded. The exhaustion of the day crept over him, dragging him unaware into sleep. He dreamed ... but it was one of those dreams that wake one with a jerk as though falling.

Casey was moving restlessly on the bed, beginning to mumble to himself, jerking his head back and forth as though denying some accusation. And for the first time Casey spoke, the words coming forth clear and unhesitatingly though his breathing had been troubled up to this point.

Latin!

Not the Latin of the textbooks. Casey was speaking the Latin of the Caesars. Perfectly. Fluently.

As a doctor and historian, Goldman realized immediately that what he was hearing was something only a few classical scholars could speak with any ease. Goldman knew them all by name – and Romain was not one of them.

He bent closer and listened. His eyes grew large with wonder, and then he gently nodded his head as understanding finally came...

The time to call Landries came and passed, and still Goldman sat and listened to the words of the man on the bed.

Listened and wondered ...

Two

Major Goldman sat beside the bed of the man whose ID tags read, "Casey Romain," watching his patient and listening to the sounds of the air conditioners straining to keep the hot night away.

Air conditioners in a war zone. Time progresses...

Goldman sat quietly, occasionally taking the vital signs of the casualty on the bed. A timeless unreality hung in the room like strange music probing the edges of the doctor's mind, the ironic symphony of some incomprehensible deity who blended the air conditioner noise with the rales—the crackling, rattling breathing—of the man named Casey and periodically punctuated both with volleys of distant artillery fire crumping its way through the surrounding mountains in search of an unseen enemy.

A vague uneasiness troubled the doctor ... as though there were a presence in the room.

Watching the still figure on the bed, Goldman let his thoughts run over the events of the past day and night, troubled and amazed by what had come from the mouth of this strange man whose body was covered with scars, whose wound should have been fatal. He had no right to be alive.

Casey moved slightly as if dreaming. The rales slowed. Goldman focused on the sleeping man's face, and a stark clarity burst in the doctor's consciousness.

I know you, he whispered silently within his brain. *I know who you are. There have been legends written about "the one who must wait." I know that you are him,*

that you are the one who waits for the Coming. Yes, Sergeant First Class Casey Romain, I know who you are.

He was not prepared for the real words. When they came, clear and loud, they were like a splash of ice water across his consciousness: "you do, do you? You really think you know me, Doctor?"

Casey had sat straight up in the bed, nude from the waist up, that scarred body a shocking sight in the room. But it was not the scars that caught Goldman's attention, it was Casey's eyes. They had an overwhelming power over Goldman. He could not tear himself away from that glowing gaze.

"You really think you know me and know what I am? Then look closer, Doctor, and see that which no man but me has seen in almost two thousand years."

Hypnosis? Goldman's mind told him there was hypnotic power in his patient's eyes, a power he could not tear himself away from, but even in the thinking his mind seem to split, one part alert and knowing the reality that was happening, the other part...

The deep, demanding voice of Casey blended with the glowing eyes, a unity in Goldman's brain he could no longer separate. He felt himself being drawn into the eyes, felt himself falling through clouds of clearing mist...

There was an interim when Goldman felt himself falling out of one plane of reality into another, when he could see buildings drawing closer. *As though he were in an airplane making an approach for a landing.* The details were confused... dirt roads, adobe walls... a paved stone road... stone walls... flat topped buildings... narrow streets... stone, stone, stone... a sense of eternity as though this place had been here before the beginning of time and would be here forever... trees a grove of olive trees... rising ground.

And then one enormous, gleaming white, dominating structure, massive, beautiful... as though God, Himself, had polished the stones. *The Temple? Was this the Temple? Great God in Heaven! No wonder my people remember...*

Goldman wavered between reality and the vision. It seemed for a moment that the vision was gone... He was drawing close enough to see the people and he was seeing them with twentieth-century eyes... like a scene from a *Cecil B. De Mille* movie... men in robes... a wrapped head covering ... turbans? ... riding asses and camels... a marketplace where vendors cried out for the attention of potential customers. The people were familiar. He felt as though he knew them.

Were they Arabs? Then...

He looked up.

The Temple!

Bearded long-haired men, arms lifted in prayer, their voices becoming intelligible as they wailed the ululating prayers of the Hebrew...

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one..."

My God! It really is the Temple! said the consciousness that was Goldman.

"Yes," came Casey's voice, almost unwelcome to the doctor. "It is the Temple of the Jews that you are seeing now, learned Doctor. The Temple of the Jews. Watch and learn the truth of this day and what it means to me, I, Casca Rufio Longinus, soldier of the legions of Imperial Rome in the reign of the great Tiberius..."

The words boomed in Goldman's brain, and the transition was complete. He stood on the stone pavement of a Jerusalem street, in the land of his people, in the time of his people. *Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one God.*

The greater reality enveloped him.

Three

Damn all Jews!

It was not what Pontius Pilate, Procurator of Judea, would call your best quality day. There had been the matter of this Jesus. Pilate suspected that he had been outmaneuvered by the wily Herod, that fat slob, and forced into a position where it was politically expedient to follow the wishes of the Jewish leaders of Jerusalem; he had ordered another of those madmen that this insane land produced in a seemingly endless stream to be crucified along with a couple of petty thieves. A pity, in a way.

Seemed like a pretty decent fellow. As he had told the Jewish priests, "I can find nothing wrong with what this man has said or done, but it is the policy of Rome"—Pilate loved laying the imperial gobbledegook on the natives—"to allow as much latitude as possible to the local authorities in the administration of laws involving their customs and religions as long as those laws and religions do not conflict with the administration of the Roman order."

He had added what he thought was a nice theatrical touch: he had called for water and washed his hands ostentatiously. "He is yours. Take him and kill him." And then, with a distinct trace of contempt: "The decision is yours, not mine."

Leaving the forum, he returned to the cool interior of his chambers. Pausing at a bust of Tiberius, he mentally queried the marble figure: "Why me? Why Judea? What was wrong with Greece? Or even Spain? What did I do that you had to banish me to this realm of the insane? All these Jews are mad—with their unseen god and religious restrictions on what they can eat or drink or touch. I shall write to you again, my Emperor. Perhaps now you will let me return home—or at least transfer me to a province where all I have to deal with is an occasional border war with some normal barbarians. At least I can understand their motives and will know how to deal with them. But here I have not only the Jews, I have Herod, Claudius's friend, to contend with—and he is damn near as crazy as the rest of this mad population. I really believe the fat little shit is beginning to think he is part of the power structure of this place. I may have to slap him down, even if it does piss Claudius off."

Claudius. For some reason Tiberius tolerates that spastic prig and listens to him. Well, enough. I am through for the day, and I'm going to forget all this. I don't know why I aggravate myself over one more lousy half-mad Jew.

But there was something about him: What was his name? Yeshua ... Jesus. That's it, Jesus. He seemed to expect all that happened. It didn't upset or surprise him. He just accepted it as if he had more important things on his mind.

Enough. I think I'll try out the new shipment of Falernian from Rome and get blind, staggering drunk.

Jews.

He headed for the wine room.

The Judean sun had passed its zenith, but the day was just now at its hottest. The streets leading to the place of execution were lined with crowds of people waiting to see the so-called "Messiah."

The Jew strained under the burden of carrying his cross, his face covered with blood from the crown of thorns on his head. To protect him from abuse from the orthodox Jewish population, a squad of Roman legionnaires walked with him. They grumbled under their breaths at this piece of extra duty they had drawn.

The decurion in charge of the unit cursed at the sweat rolling down his own back and soaking the leather armor surrounding his chest and abdomen. *The thing to be thankful for was that the armor wasn't metal. At least the local centurion had enough sense to know that in this climate metal armor was almost unbearable for normal duty days.*

The decurion had six men in his escort squad: two Syrians, a Gaul from Messilia, one member of the Tuetonii tribe of Germans, and two men from the northern Latin provinces. All of them shared the common belief that Judea was the armpit of the Empire.

Cursing and beating the locals away from his charge, the squad leader led his group toward the place of execution, a mount called Golgotha, the Place of the Skull.

The skinny Jew was stronger than he looked. He made it part of the way, but after he had fallen a couple of times, the decurion drafted one of the onlookers, a big husky black man, probably a visitor from Cyrene, and put him to carrying the cross. *Damn tourist.* The decurion wanted to get the job over with so he could get back to the barracks and clean up for tonight's date with that little dancer from Armenia.

Even with the black man carrying the cross the journey seemed interminable, but finally they trudged their way through the dust and garbage up to the hilltop, leaving behind most of the spectators. It was just too damned hot for the crowd to hang around; only a few hard-core hangers-on stayed for the final spectacle—they and the women. Surprisingly, there were several women.

When they reached the place of execution, the decurion took a deep breath and told the two Syrians to go ahead and get the Jew put up properly and for them to use the spikes he had brought along as well as the usual ropes. His orders were that the Jew was not to live any longer than necessary because it was always possible that some of his followers might start some trouble. The soldiers were to make sure that, after the example had been made and the local leaders were satisfied, they were to finish him off before anything unpleasant happened.

The Syrians quickly stripped the robe off the Jew and laid him unresisting on the cross, one of them humming a child's song as he tied the man to the cross. The Jew was mumbling something under his breath, praying or something. As the two Syrians went about their job, the Jew kept his eyes closed and only opened them when the first spike was driven through his right wrist. His body writhed, and a moan burst from his cracked and drying lips. This was repeated when his

other wrist and legs were nailed, and then all the squad got together to draw the cross into an upright position and drop it into the hole that had been dug for it. Jesus gave one long moan during this operation and a short cry as the cross thumped into the bottom of its hole.

The legionnaires quickly tamped the earth down around the base of the cross and sat down to take a break, passing around a flask of raw, half fermented, local date wine. It wasn't much, but it was the best they could afford since it was still a week until payday.

Then they crucified the two thieves, one on either side of Jesus.

The sun was moving westward and beginning to grow large and red. The decurion thought of tonight's date. The other men in the squad were throwing dice for the Jew's robe. The decurion watched them for a moment and made up his mind.

"Shit, there ain't no reason for all of us to hang around here for this. You guys throw the dice. The three low points stay and finish up. The rest of us are going to take off."

The shortest Latin had just put his cup and carved bone dice back in his kit bag after the gamble for the robe. Now he pulled them out again. The three who lost were the two Syrians and the big tall North Latin, Casca. Casca, at five-foot-ten, stood at least half a head over the others.

He tried to buy his way out of this job, offering to take guard duty for any of the others their next turn up. There were no takers. It was just too damned hot to hang around. He would just have to take his lumps and sweat it out.

As the rest of the squad marched wearily back down the hill, the Jew on the cross moaned and asked for water.

"Water?" Casca grumbled. "That will just keep you alive that much longer." Laughing, he poured some of the sour wine onto a rag tied to the end of his pilum and held it to the mouth of the Jew. Jesus sucked eagerly at the sour—almost vinegar—wine, and passed out.

Casca and the two Syrians sat and waited.

The two thieves died.

The Jew was quiet. At least they didn't have to listen to him moan or pray. These Hebrews were always moaning about something their God said or did—or praying for Him to come save them from the wicked Romans. Hell, they had a lot less trouble under the laws of Rome than they did when they ran their own country. There was no satisfying some people...

Casca grumbled as he sat at the base of the cross and tried to catch a little sleep. The two Syrians were throwing dice, gambling against their next payday. Casca dozed fitfully, sweating inside his leather jerkin, sweat filling his sandals, the sweat burning a sore place where the sandals had rubbed a raw spot between his toes.

Casca slept.

How long he slept he did not know, but he came suddenly violently awake, skin crawling with premonition.

Something was going to happen...

When Casca opened his eyes the skies were dark as though night had come and a storm was at hand. He felt disoriented; memory and present reality jumbled in

his mind. Time no longer seemed to flow in a straight pattern but halted, backed up, stepped forward. *Damn Jew wine... musta gotta hold of a bad batch...*

He remembered dozing fitfully, sweating inside his leather jerkin, the sweat burning. His opening eyes were sticky from sleep and sweat; that seemed real enough. The night was almost on them.

Had he slept that long? All the spectators had left except for a couple of women and a few of the Jew's followers. But there was something odd as hell about the night. Below him, Casca expected to see the lamps being lit around the doorway leading to the temple of the divine Jupiter. And the beginning wind should be picking up the smell of cooking food. But there were no lamps. And the stirring wind smelled... Hell!... odd...

Casca drew himself erect and beat the dust off his legs, glancing at the two gambling Syrians. One of them was ticked off because the other had just clipped him for his next pay—as well as the Jew's robe. Casca ignored the bickering soldier and stood in front of the Jew. Looking up, his eyes met those of the self-proclaimed "Son of God."

"Well, Jew, it's about time to get this over with."

At the sound of Casca's voice, Jesus raised his eyes to the darkening sky and cried out. As best Casca could make out the words, they were: "O my Father, why hast Thou forsaken me?"

He seemed to choke back a sob, as though embarrassed by his own outburst.

Casca drew his red army cloak about him. The night had taken a sudden chill as the freshening wind began to build.

"Why has your father forsaken you?" he said to the Jew. "You fool. We are all forsaken from the time we first draw a breath. No one lives forever. Stop that whining and prepare yourself to die like a man, and stop calling for your father to help. It's too late for anyone to help."

The wind whipped stinging bits of sand against his legs, and thunder rumbled in the distance.

Casca picked up the spear where it was leaning against a rock. The wind was becoming fierce, and he had to squint his eyes against the force of the building storm. Small drops of rain were beginning to touch down, making puffs of dust jump from the dirt at the foot of the cross. The two Syrians covered their heads with their cloaks for protection.

Casca took his spear and stood close to the cross.

"It's time to get this over. I'll try to make it as painless as possible."

The Jew clenched his teeth, his lips pale. Casca drew back slightly and with a smooth thrust ran his spear up against the last rib on the left side, aiming for the heart. He missed, and withdrew for another lunge.

The skies broke open. Black clouds seemed to suck the very light itself from the earth. Wind and rain howled around them as if the elements had gone mad. Fluid and blood poured forth from the wound, and drops of blood splashed against Casca's right hand.

Jesus opened his eyes and looked on the Roman's face.

Fear ran through the bowels of Casca. He had never seen a face like this. The intent and tremendous power of the Jew swept over him as though it were a part of the raging storm.

"Soldier, you are content with what you are. Then that you shall remain until we meet again. As I go now to my Father, you must one day come to me." The Jew's voice blasted its way into Casca's mind. The two Syrians did not appear to hear or see. "Soldier. You are content with what you are. Then that you shall remain... until we meet again..."

The wind screamed. Casca stood in shock and fear, the Jew's blood on his hand mingling with the falling drops of rain. Unthinking, Casca wiped his hand across his mouth, and one drop of blood touched his tongue, and Casca screamed. He doubled over in cramps. What felt like liquid fire raced through his veins to his brain, setting his whole being on fire. And still the others noticed nothing.

Casca fell to the ground and lay there whimpering while his whole body was racked with sobs. Slowly the pain ebbed away, leaving him weak and frightened.

What was it the Jew said just before he died?

Until we meet again... "

Four

The pain slowly flowed from Casca's body, like a great draining off of his essence. He pulled himself to his knees and looked into the face of the man Jesus.

"Dead?" he asked. "Are you dead?"

Pulling himself erect, his mind not understanding what had transpired, Casca knew fear, deep fear of the primeval kind that lives within the manbeast of all human beings, elemental fear.

A woman came to him, her face in shadows, a wisp of brown hair showing as the storm winds blew her garments about.

"Soldier, may I have my son? Can we take him now?"

As Casca drew himself together the fear slowly faded, flowing out with his pain. The Jew was dead, and dead men harm no one.

Croaking out the words, Casca told the woman, "He is yours. Take him and be damned."

The woman looked questioningly into his face, and a subtle change which frightened Casca came into her voice. "Damned, did you say? You will learn the meaning of that word a thousand times over, Roman, conqueror of the world. You will surely learn what it means to be damned."

Casca turned from her. A cold river of uncertainty raced through his bowels, leaving him chilled. But he was what he was.

"Take him, witch, and begone!"

The woman motioned to her friends. Gently they removed the body and the man they called Josephus began the death wail of the Hebrews.

Casca called to the Syrians to get their things and move out. While they were doing so, the decurion returned bitching. "What the hell are you up to?" he asked Casca.

"I had to stay and see this job was done properly."

"Properly, my ass. What's to do with crucifying a couple of thieves and a madman? Is everything all right?"

Seeing the men and women wailing over the body of Jesus, the squad leader took a close look for himself. Catching Casca's eye as he straightened up, he said, "Just checking. You got to make sure. You know how sneaky these people are." Turning to the Syrian legionnaires, he barked, "Are you two still shooting dice?" Seeing the Jew's coat under the arm of the darkest Syrian, the decurion took the cloak from the Syrian, grumbling to himself. "If I have to come all the way back up here, I'm not leaving empty-handed." Ripping the cloak into quarters, he handed a piece to each of the soldiers, saying: "Here's your wages for the day. Maybe you can clean some of the crap off your gear with these. Because there's going to be an inspection tomorrow by the garrison commander, so let's get the hell out of here. Our job is over."

The wind mounted another blast as they faced down from the north side of the hill and started back, not making any effort to get in step. Casca turned his head for one last look. The Jew's followers were cleaning the body. Cataclysmic bursts of lightning and thunder rolled over the city, shaking the very ground as though an earthquake had struck. Even the curtains covering the entrance to the Temple were ripped by the wind.

With the rain beating at his face, Casca, keeping his own counsel, followed the others back to the barracks, dripping wet, the taste of fear still coppery and bitter in his mouth. The night beat at him, seeming to follow him purposefully through the narrow streets.

Only when he entered the familiar surroundings of his barracks was he aware that the real night had not come yet; it was what should have been late afternoon. That was why there had been no smell of cooking food. The storm had turned day into night. But why? *These thoughts are too much for me. I'm only a simple soldier ... but why didn't the others see the Jew talking to me, hear what he said to me? And what did he mean? Too much to think about.*

Casca lay on the straw-filled cot, not even taking his wet gear off. And he slept. Outside, the stone wall surrounding the Roman encampment presented a bulwark against the hostile elements of the local population, but there was nothing to protect Casca's mind from the hostile waves of thought that assaulted him. Over and over, he saw every moment of the crucifixion.

Over and over, he saw the Jew's face, terrible in its intensity and power. "*Until we meet again...*" Over and over, he heard the Jew's words. They etched themselves into his brain, like acid. "*Until we meet again...*"

The storm passed with the night. Dawn came, cool and clear. A breeze blew in from the unseen and seemingly very distant ocean, rustling through the fronds of the date trees outside the barracks. Casca was pulled from his restless sleep by the curses of the barracks chief rousing the men for breakfast. It was the hour of the dawn, and day was upon them. While the others went for food, Casca stayed behind and cleaned his gear.

The decurion had said there would be an inspection today; his gear looked like crap from having slept in it without cleaning it before he went to sleep. He wiped and oiled his leather chest armor, working the oil in it to keep the leather supple and easier to wear. The familiar task comforted him.

He dropped into the routine of polish and rub, not thinking, and it was pleasant not to think. When he had finished his chest coverings, he did his sandals, noticing with a slight sense of wonder that the sore spot between his toes was gone.

Examining the spot more closely, he saw that already the flesh was completely healed ... with no trace of redness remaining. Odd! ... but he dismissed it from his mind, and returned to cleaning the rest of his gear, using the scrap of cloth from the Jew's cloak that the squad leader had given him to clean his sword and spear.

Casca was proud of his abilities with the sword, especially with the Gladius Iberius as some called the Roman short sword. Personally, Casca did not think that it came as a modification of those long butcher knives so popular with the Spanish Iberians. He had a theory that it came from the gladiators' use of short swords. The spectators at the Arena liked to see their favorites fight at close range. Only for special contests were long swords such as the Germans used permitted. For the legionnaire, the short sword was best. When the legion locked shields and formed the square, the short sword made it easier to stab under your shield, over it, and around the sides when the barbarians were crowded up against the living wall of the legion. The long swords of the barbarians just got in their way. When they got too crowded, there just wasn't enough room to swing them properly.

Casca laughed mentally at the remembrance of one monstrous German at least six feet in height who in his battle rage killed at least a half dozen of his own tribesmen swinging that long sword—the size of a tent pole—and bellowing for Odin to give him strength. He had been killed by the legion company cook who had crawled between Casca's legs and stabbed the big German through the navel with a kitchen knife and then scurried back to his pots, content to leave the glory to the combat elements of the century.

The other troops returned from breakfast. The two Syrians, Kleton and Achron, came and sat down across from Casca, the dark one rocking back and forth, his hands around his knee.

"It was a strange thing yesterday," Achron remarked, "was it not, Casca?"

Casca nodded, and the Syrian continued.

"After you crapped out on us and went to sleep, it got interesting for a while. Several of the Jewish priests came over from their Temple to harass and mock the one on the cross. Then the Jew promised one of the thieves that he would go with him. I don't know where they thought they were going to. But it was interesting, was it not? But, Casca, where did you learn to speak Hebrew? I didn't know you could even understand it, much less speak it"

Casca stopped his rubbing, raised his face, and said quietly, "I can't."

"But I heard you answer the Jew's statement about his father forsaking him. You talked in Hebrew."

Casca looked Achron directly in the eye and said, "No. The Jew spoke Latin, as clear as we are speaking it now."

The other Syrian said, "You are both wrong. He spoke Aramaic. It is the tongue of my native village. He spoke it perfectly."

Casca stood, his neck swelling with anger. "Enough of this. I don't want to hear any more about the Jew or what language he was talking. I don't care. It is over and done with. Now let me alone before I break your faces."

Turning from the two Syrians, Casca went outside and put on the rest of his gear. The trumpeter was just sounding reveille, and the legionnaires were being called to form the ranks of their centuries, each century being broken down into ten squads of ten men each. Casca liked the orderliness of the Roman army. Every man and everything in its place. One hundred men to a century, two centuries to a maniple, three maniples to a cohort, and 3,600 men to a legion with two centuries per legion as service troops. When Augustus became emperor, there were sixty legions, but now, after his long and efficient reign, there were only thirty eight active legions watching over the Pax Romana. The legion was the queen of battle; any legion that lost its eagles was forever disgraced until the eagles were returned. Had not Augustus forced the Parthians to return the captured eagles of Crassus and Antony?

So, as Casca stood in the ranks, he felt the unity surrounding him, the sense of strength from being part of something great and powerful. His commander stood in front and called them to attention and gave his orders. The standards were raised. Casca's century drew swords and beat in time against the shield faces, repeating the cry, "Ave, Tiberius Imperator! Ave!..."

It was a glorious moment.

Casca almost forgot the words of the Jew.

Almost.

Five

For Casca, the memory of the day of crucifixion faded into the routine of garrison life. The days were full, but uneventful. His hours were busy with the regular training cycles of his unit. Their commander had lately got a bug up his ass, and the general consensus was that the old bastard was bucking for a promotion; he had the troops out constantly, doing facing maneuvers and close order drill.

Casca didn't mind. He enjoyed the routine of it all. The century's morale was good, and it was pleasant to work up a good sweat in mock combat, hacking at each other with lead-weighted wooden swords. That, and a couple of hours of chopping at a wooden post to build up your sword arm, pretty well wore a man out. But he wasn't so tired that he couldn't enjoy a few of the gentler pleasures of life. After all, he was a fine figure of a man... in his prime... not yet thirty. His light brown hair and gray-blue eyes had brought him something of a reputation as a ladies' man among his comrades.

Even the wife of Pilate, the beautiful and cultured patrician, Lady Procla, had smiled at him more than once. His body was smooth and well-muscled, with only enough scars to show that he was a veteran and thereby to be treated with respect by his peers. The most obvious scar was one that ran about the length of a lady's little finger from the side of his right eye to just above his mouth. It gave him a slightly sinister look that had turned on more than one seemingly reluctant maid. And if the darling ladies chose to think it was a wound of valor, who was he to

disillusion them and hurt their feelings by telling them that a whore from Achea had sliced him up when he tried to short-change her after she had done her best for this noble hero of Rome?

No, it was certainly better that he let the little dears think of him as a brave and valorous soldier brutally scarred in battle against the barbarians of the dark German forests. Definitely better. He had gotten no complaints about his amorous capabilities. Perhaps his body was a little too thick and heavily muscled for the patricians, but it served him well enough when the fight got thick. He was glad to have those extra pounds of muscled-up beef. They gave him power and had helped him more than once to cleave the helmet of an enemy of Rome—and in the process save his own ass. Casca was never exactly sure which was the more important: his duty to the legion, or his concern for his own hide. He suspected the centurion would have a different opinion from his own on that, but on one thing he knew all the soldiers in the legion would agree—what it was like in combat.

There was something about battle that meant the same for every soldier. When the blood started flowing hot in your veins, and the legion formed the square and began to march against the enemy... like a juggernaut of flesh and steel... you lost yourself in the feeling of the whole, you became part of a thing separate from yourself, and yourself became less important than the belonging. And the belonging was awesome and great.

You were caught up in the movement and surge of battle. Then the killing rage and lust for blood that came when your leaders gave the cry, "Let loose the legion!"... The order to break ranks and pursue the retreating and faltering foe...

That was the time of the blood lust and the slaughter... when one might strike down a dozen—nay, even two dozen of the retreating, demoralized foe.

For some reason, when the barbarians felt the battle was lost, they usually just gave up; giving only minor resistance even when they knew they were doomed. Strange...

Yes, Casca felt good. Life was good. Tonight he and his squad would be a guard of honor for King Herod's party. *Guard of honor*, he chuckled inwardly. *Honor? The only reason Pilate would send any of his men to Herod's palace was to remind the simpering degenerate who was the boss.*

Not even Achron's news that the body of the crucified Jew was missing from its place of entombment disturbed him. Casca was a reasonable man and had a bit of formal education. He could even read—something which would guarantee him a soft spot in the orderly room if he had too much trouble with Sporus the decurion.

No, if the Jew's body was missing, it just meant that his followers were trying to keep the cult alive. It's no big deal.

There was nothing to disturb the tranquility of Casca. He had even escaped the bout of dysentery that had struck down most of his century for several days earlier this week. The latrine was for a while the most popular place in camp—and the hardest—to get into. Only Casca had been untouched.

Tonight, when he stood guard at Herod's palace, he would look striking in his new cloak and cuirass—chest armor. He had just bought a new set off a recruit whose rich merchant father had made a payoff and had gotten his darling child out of such rough company after the silly shit got drunk and enlisted. Casca had helped the boy a time or two, so the youngster let him have the cloak and armor

for next to nothing—which was about how much money Casca normally had, unless he did a little moonlighting now and then as bouncer at several of the local wine shops.

The legion didn't think much of Herod, but if things went well tonight, Casca could leave the palace with a few extra shekels. Herod was known to be a big spender and to tip well. Casca's squad had the early duty. They should be relieved before the party got really rolling and everyone got stoned. That was the time to get out. The new guard mount would have their hands full trying to keep the noble ladies from ripping their armor off and screwing them right there. That was no place to be if you had any sense at all. The legion commander would flay the skin from the back of any of his men who let themselves be compromised. That old fart had about as much compassion and sense of humor as a pit viper with hemorrhoids.

Casca was after safer game tonight. That hot little dancer from Armenia had promised to dance for him alone after she got off from work. The memory of her flashing body whirling faster and faster as her stomach sucked in and out... undulating and twisting... her breasts set high and glistening with sweat and perfumed oil ... made him almost drunk with anticipation. *Tonight's the night...* He hummed a familiar popular song to himself. The only fly in the ointment was Sporus, his squad leader. That tough old fart had the hots for the little dancer, too, and had been paying part of her rent. But what the old boy didn't know couldn't hurt; Sporus would be sergeant of the guard for the late shift tonight while Casca was sampling the wares of that luscious little she savage.

The guard mount began making its way up to the hill upon which the palace of Herod was built. As they left behind the narrow streets of Jerusalem, the smell of food cooking in the palace wafted over the dusky air, making their mouths water. After enduring the less-than-exciting menu of their company cook—boiled barley and rye and stewed pig did little for the taste buds, but it was filling, and where so many starved that was not a small thing they anticipated the rich food of the palace banquet as though it were the fare of the gods.

And yet...

As the unit marched up past the villas of the rich and titled, disturbing thoughts nibbled at Casca's mind. Here were the lavish estates... with gardens... and many slaves to keep away anything unpleasant. For the rich, it was the best of all lives. Anything could be had if you could pay. Women, slaves, palaces, power were all on the auction block to go to the highest bidder. For the poor soldier, none of these things. Unless...

There was always the hope of war taking place, in which case the soldier's lot could be loot and spoils. One lucky break, and a man could be set up for life. That's all it took, one lucky break. Until then—

Oh, the hell with it. Wonder what Herod's palace is like inside?

Six

Casca was properly impressed. One hell of a place to stand guard duty...

This palace of Herod Antipas was all that the mind of an Asian despot with almost unlimited wealth could wish for. The richness of the decorations and the brilliance of the dress of Herod and his guests made the few Romans present look lackluster and dull by comparison, for the Roman evening dress could in no way equal the splendor of Herod's finery—or even that of his personal guards. His bodyguards were all dressed in matched sets of armor, the expensive brass fish-scale kind that looked like liquid gold when they moved. Their helmets were of steel, with a chain-mail mesh of brass covering the back of the neck and the shoulders. Damn pretty-boy types. They were all mercenaries from Greece. Herod was shrewd enough to understand the degree of affection in which he was held by the indigenous populace; as foreigners, the Greek mercenaries would give their loyalty directly to him.

Envious of the Greeks, Casca waited out the time.

The entertainment progressed through the evening. Jugglers and clowns performed through the first eight courses of food. As the evening wore on and the wine took effect, several of the guests made use of the vomitorium, some because they were sick, others to empty their stomachs so that they could eat more. The tempo picked up. Performers from Numidia and Egypt danced; they seemed more insane beings than dancers as their oiled bodies writhed over the marble floor and twisted into the semblance of monster serpents with human features. Casca and his troop stood firm, trying not to be too obvious in their distaste for the parasites and sycophants for whom this gaudy display was intended. The troopers were legionnaires. They would maintain their proper attitudes, reflecting the discipline of the Roman army. Damn all civilians.

The time approached for the relief to come on duty, and Casca sighed mentally, impatient for his relief. He was ready. A hot spot from the rigid attention position had settled into a burning throb just below his left shoulder blade. That, along with that bitch niece of Herod's, was beginning to make things a little tough for him. The niece, Salome, had been in there showing the guests how to really dance. One thing about her, she could throw that ass around faster than anything he had ever seen ... and then pull her stomach in until it looked like her navel was going to rub up against her spine. Casca could feel the pressure building in him. *Tonight*, he promised himself, *that little Armenian of Sporus's I've got lined up is going to get more than she bargained for...* damn. He was about to burst with frustration.

Damned right. That Salome slut is one hot piece of goods... and she is driving Herod crazy. The fat fart was on his knees, begging her to lay with him. Said he'd make her a queen. The fool actually slobbered in frustrated passion. That bitch had her hooks in the old boy, but good. During one part of her dance she had used Casca as a support to twine herself around—and also to aggravate Herod. She had rubbed up against Casca, trying to get some reaction out of him. Casca felt a certain degree of satisfaction out of his maintaining his cool so well under duress.

Casca would have felt a lot more satisfied with himself if Salome hadn't snuck a feel on him and found out exactly how much she had worked him up. That slut was an accident waiting to happen, and Casca was glad to be getting out of there

before the party got real rough. You could feel that it was going to get worse before it got better.

Good! Here comes the relief! The changing of the guard mount took only a moment, and Casca, as assistant squad leader, formed up his troops and took them out as rapidly as possible. Now for that little Armenian dancer.

The night was in full swing by the time Casca had been released from duty for the rest of the evening. Although Verianus, Sporus's assistant, had warned him about messing around with the Sarge's girl, Casca paid no heed. After what Salome had done to him he was not about to let something like Sporus's hurt feelings interfere with his getting some of that good Armenian pussy. That luscious thing had one of the prettiest heart-shaped asses he had ever seen...

The tavern was crowded with a blending of the humanity to be found in this region... legionnaires from around the world... merchants from Asia Minor... and even some of the desert dwellers with their flowing robes and wrapped headdresses. The Arabians gave the Roman Casca an unfriendly glare, but they were smart enough not to start anything. The Tenth Legion had a reputation for kicking ass and killing, a reputation that was well-deserved. The troopers of the Tenth were all around about as tough a group of men as you could hope to have in any army. Most of them were tough guys and troublemakers who had been shipped out here to get them out of their original outfits.

Judea was commonly known to be a punishment tour—but it beat the normal punishment for minor infractions such as fifty strokes with a reed cane across the soles of your feet for not rising fast enough when an officer entered your barracks. No, there were worse things than Judea... and it would not last forever.

Casca glared back at the Arabians and took a seat close to the door, his back to the wall. Most old soldiers sat the same. Cover your back was one of the basic laws for survival in an occupied country. You could never tell when a case of liberation fever might strike one of the locals and have him or them try to remove your liver with a fish knife.

The little Armenian still had one more show to do before she could take off, so Casca just kind of sat there and laid back, letting his mind and senses absorb the sounds and color. Jerusalem wasn't the best liberty town in the Empire, but it did have a lot of different types come through it, and that was entertaining if you were a people watcher. Right now he was getting off on watching Rheza doing her number on a tourist. The dummy really believed that he was turning her on because she smiled at him while dancing.

It never changes... but tonight's my night. While old Sarge protects the honor of Rome, I'll be doing my number for Astarte.

He had just enough wine to mellow him and make the night seem warmer than it was as he and Rheza made their way through the narrow, winding streets. A beggar called to them: "Alms. Alms, noble Roman. Alms for the lame." He showed an incredibly filthy leg twisted under him, obviously a terrible deformity, and Casca ignored him completely.

As Casca and Rheza passed out of earshot, the lame man stood, spit at the back of the noble Roman, and nimbly moved on to a more likely place.

As they walked, Rheza's breast formed a sweet, warm spot against Casca's side. He put his arm around her and pulled her close, taking advantage of a doorway to get in a little preliminary loving.

Rheza jerked her body against him and sank tiny white teeth into his lower lip and slipped out of his encircling arms. Teasing, she ran away from Casca, not fast enough to lose him, just fast enough to get him aroused. "Little she-devil," he gurgled through a leering grin and took off after her.

They played their game until she ran into the doorway of the building where she lived. The old man watching the doorway for the tenants while they were out gave a knowing smile at seeing the Roman soldier follow the dancing girl up to the second floor where her room was. The smile was toothless, but the old man leaned back against the wall to dream of long lost youth, long gone but not forgotten. Women he sighed in his mind... They are the only thing really worthwhile.

Entering Rheza's room, Casca closed the door behind him and took from his pouch his flint and iron striker. He struck off on a piece of flint and lit the oil lamp in the room. The light of the single flame cast a soft red glow over the place. Casca caught his breath as Rheza slipped out of her clothing and let it fall to the floor. She was well aware of the power she had in her body. Casca removed his tunic, still watching her, comparing her to Salome. She didn't come out too bad.

He reached out for her.

This time she didn't run away, but melted into him, letting her body mold itself to him. Casca reached behind her and took one firm cheek of that lovely ass and began to squeeze ... while she tried to strangle him with her tongue.

Then—

"What the hell is this, you slut?"

Where the caved-in door had been, Sporus's bearlike frame stood, his face livid with rage. "Casca, you son of a bitch, I am going to rip your arms off and beat you to death with the bloody stumps. But first I am going to carve you up a little." Sporus pulled out his hideous knife, a slick poniard-type blade, one meant for stabbing, not slicing.

Casca stood there in shock.

"Hey, wait a minute, Sarge. You don't want to cut me. Hell, there's nothing serious going on here. We're just friends. And you're supposed to be on duty."

"Friends, my ass, you sneaky traitor. I got off early when I had to escort a prisoner to the stockade. The night officer said I could take off—and now I find you two taking it off. Well, right now, young soldier, you are going to pay for messing with my woman—and then I am going to slice her ears off so she won't ever listen to anyone else's bullshit."

Sporus lunged, making a low upward slice to the belly.

Casca stumbled back, his feet caught in Rheza's clothing, and fell, Sporus on him like an enraged beast. Almost without realizing it until the pain hit, Casca knew he had been stabbed. The blade was sunk to the hilt in his stomach, and the pain was like fire.

Sporus let loose of the blade and stepped back.

Both of them knew it was a death blow.

Looking down at the handle of the knife protruding from his abdomen, Casca at first felt a sensation akin to embarrassment... then a rage came over him.

"Kill me, will you?" he screamed. He reached down with his right hand and pulled the blade from his gut, crying out in pain and rage.

Sporus stood there, stunned by what was happening, and then started to back out the door...

Casca leaped on him, and sank the blade into Sporus's throat, opening the esophagus. Sporus fell down to his knees, his hands around his throat as if he were trying to close the wound and keep from drowning in his blood, but his lungs filled with the red arterial blood from his carotid artery, and, eyes not really understanding, he slipped into darkness, the rattling sound of his death breath, beating on his ears as he died.

And Casca fell down beside Sporus. He knew he was bleeding inside, that the blade had severed the great artery that runs along the spine behind the stomach. He was a dead man, and he knew it.

Lying there on the dark floor he felt the weakness coming over him. His mind said, *I am going to die*. But... a cold shiver of fear... and something else... raced through his veins. He heard a voice, the voice of the Jew:

So you shall remain until we meet again...

Seven

Rheza gave one short squeaking scream and sat down in a corner of the room, her hands over her mouth, in semi-shock.

Sporus lay dead, looking as though someone had given him another mouth.

Casca lay moaning and mumbling to himself, his hands over his gut as if trying to squeeze the pain out of his stomach.

Rheza's eyes clicked up in panic as a shadow entered her doorway, then another.

Verianus and the Syrian stood in the room.

In silence Verianus checked Sporus to see if there was anything he could do, but when he got a good look at the slit throat he turned to Casca, rolled him over, and pulled Casca's hands away from his stomach.

"You dumb shit. I told you to leave that slut alone. You knew how crazy old Sporus was for her. I tried. When Kleton here told me that Sporus had come back to barracks and changed into civvies, we got here as fast as we could. But too damn late. By Moloch, you're a greater ass than I would have believed. Did you have to kill him? Move your damn hands away. How can I see if you keep getting in the way?"

Casca gurgled something unintelligible about a crucifixion.

"Casca, old boy, I can't tell too much, but if the wound's not too deep, you'll be all right. If it is deep, you're a dead man. Which might be the best thing for you anyway. The CO's going to hit the roof when he hears about this. Kleton, go and get the vigiles and let's get this over with. Casca, you clot, if you live, the old man's going to burn your ass. You know he's been bucking for a promotion, and crap like

this does not look good on his record. Goddammit, man, why did you have to kill him? I know you're a better fighter than that."

Casca burred something like "...*till we meet again*..." "What the hell is that you're mumbling? I'm not going anywhere. But if you live to be court-martialed, you will be."

The vigiles arrived, and, as most policemen would in such circumstances, the first thing they did was to search the girl. It should not have taken as long as it did, seeing that she was already naked when they started, but Rome demanded that its military police be efficient. The repeated handling brought Rheza back to her senses, and she began to enjoy herself a little. The senior MP pinched her on the butt and whispered in her ear, "Later?" Rheza nodded and rubbed her ripe tits along his arm. After all, a girl needed a protector. Sporus was dead, and Casca was going to go to jail—or die—either way he was out of the picture. Besides, a Roman policeman could be very handy to have around when some customer felt he had not received his proper change...

Finishing the necessary search of the girl, the senior MP turned to Verianus. "Okay, what's the deal?"

Verianus laid it on him in as few words as possible.

Checking Sporus's cadaver, the lawman made one short whistle. "Really laid him open, didn't he? Reminds me of that stiff we found over by the Temple of Mars last week." And then speaking to his buddy, "Doesn't it to you, Toninus?" He explained to Verianus, "Someone laid open a visiting politician from Sarmatia. He had the same look on his face, too. You know, like he was a little embarrassed... Well, enough of this bullshit." He pointed to Casca and asked Verianus, "Is this one going to make it?"

He got a noncommittal reply.

"Okay, then you two guys haul his ass out of here and over to the stockade. They'll take over there, and we'll get your statement and write up our report for the provost marshal in the morning."

The Syrian and Verianus finally got Casca on the shoulders of Verianus after dropping him on his head once. They switched off, taking turns carrying him the three miles to the stockade where they turned him over to a not-too-sympathetic jailer. The jailer checked Casca over and told the two to toss him on a pile of straw in the orderly room, that he'd have the medics check on Casca when they came on duty in the morning. This was done, and the sweating and cursing Verianus and his Syrian helpmate were by this time regretting slightly that Casca had not died in the dancer's room.

Casca lay unconscious on the straw, the only thing alive about him an occasional groan... and his dreams... those haunting memories that kept returning. Storm clouds raced through his thoughts as they had in that cursed darkness during the crucifixion. The pain was almost more than he could bear. But inside his subconscious he knew something was happening that shouldn't happen—his body was healing. The bleeding inside had already stopped. The artery was growing back together. The spilled blood in his abdominal cavity was being absorbed into the thin walls of the mesentery and recirculated back into his system. But the pain was still there, though just now it was settling into a dull, throbbing ache.

He gave one long groan, which woke up the dozing guard with a jerk. The sleazy-looking jailer bore an amazing resemblance to a ferret—right down to the beady, bulging, red-rimmed eyes. He gave the wounded man one dirty look and dropped back off to sleep, oblivious of the new set of oversexed body lice that had just copulated their way up the long journey from his unwashed feet along the calves of his stringy, hairy legs and into the curly, matted hair of his pubic region, there to join a number of their relatives—including a few diehard fleas who would have rather been on a decent dog.

The night passed as all things must, and the dawn brought an enraged commanding officer to the stockade at the early hour of cock's crow.

The noble and ambitious commander of the garrison, one Tigelanius by name (who claimed a distant relationship to divine Julius on his mother's side), was pissed off. He roared through the orderly room and scared the hell out of the jailer when he kicked the stool the slug was sitting on out from under him.

"Where is he?" he bellowed.

Looking around, he spotted Casca asleep in the straw.

With one smooth motion he reached the side of the sleeping man and booted him in the butt.

"How dare you kill one of my non-coms! You piece of insubordinate garbage! You know what that looks like on my personnel records? It looks like I don't have any discipline!"

Casca raised up, still sleeping and confused. All the time the patrician Tigelanius was roaring at him he looked at and touched the spot where the poniard had entered his stomach. There was no more pain, and the wound was closed. Only a thin red line showed where the blade had penetrated.

Tigelanius caught where Casca looked. Pointing at the scar with his baton, he screamed, "Is that the 'almost deathlike blow' Sporus inflicted on you? Shit! I've cut myself worse than that shaving."

Tigelanius was livid, his face white with anger. Calling to the jailer to bring a couple of men, he had Casca bound and ordered one hundred strokes of the cane, to begin with fifty for each foot—but Casca was not to be crippled; if they had to, they could let him have a break and do it in increments.

Turning to the filthy jailer, he bellowed "Get this man into chains! What the hell is he doing running around loose? You slime bucket, clean yourself up, or you'll share everything he gets – and do it now! I will inspect this facility in two hours, and it had better be spotless. And that goes for the torture chamber, too. It's a pigsty in there. How the hell do you expect a decent man to work in those surroundings? Now, do it—now! And bring this insubordinate piece of garbage to me after he has been stroked."

Damned enlisted men. Didn't they know how important his promotion was?

Eight

Casca offered no resistance to being chained and manacled. He was still half in a stupor. He looked dazedly down at the heavy manacles, but the meaning of them could not reach his brain. He felt doped. He did not exist.

The two troopers led him to the stocks where he was laid on his back and the sandals taken from his feet. The older trooper looked down at him and spoke, the words coming through the fog of Casca's consciousness:

"Man, I am sorry about this, Casca, but you heard the orders, and you know that if we don't do the job right, the old man will put us down there with you. So, no hard feelings. There's nothing personal in this."

The trooper's voice was quiet, and the tone familiar, and because of that, realization came to Casca, and he was acutely aware of what was going to happen to him. But he did not let it show in his face as he watched the troopers get ready.

Taking one of the two whiplike four-foot rods, each about the thickness of a forefinger, the first trooper whished it back and forth in the air a couple of times to get the feel of it, and then handed the other one to his comrade. His face twitched in distaste for what was about to occur, and he said to his associate, "Let's get this over with, Corio."

The troopers took position, one on each side of the stocks, took off their helmets, and got themselves set.

Casca said nothing. Now completely out of the stupor, he knew full well the extent of the forthcoming pain, having been on the other end of the whiplike rods more than once, and having seen what that pain would do to even the toughest trooper. By some odd trick of the mind he seemed to feel the pain before the rods even touched his feet, and it took all the strength of his will to fight down an impulse to scream wildly.

He could feel his heart racing madly. Had he been merely a casual observer this punishment might not seem particularly harsh, but Casca, like every legionnaire, knew the reality. The mere threat of the rods would set any legionnaire's pulse to racing madly.

Whish! The rod arced through the sunlight.

Casca's body arched in a spasm of agony as the first stroke of the rod hit the soles of his bare feet. The pain was unbearable. And then again. And again. The whipping rods flashed in the air. The pain passed the realm of reality and became one continuous blur of fire. His body jerked uncontrollably with the lashing. His teeth bit through his lower lip. The salt taste of his own blood was almost a relief.

But there was no relief. It would go on forever. Then it was done.

No more did the flashing rods come down.

But still the pain continued to mount. He thought he had experienced the worst, but this pain, was even greater, building with the swelling of his tortured feet. The insteps were swollen to at least three times their normal size and were a deep purple in color. It seemed that the skin would burst open under the internal pressure of the bruised tissue.

The two legionnaires assigned to the punishment detail wiped the sweat from their foreheads, undid' the stocks, and carried Casca back to the stockade, to the cell that the jailer had assigned him.

Casca lay in the straw, curled into a fetal knot. His body twitched with uncontrolled nervous reactions. Time stopped.

After a while he began to edge his way across the filth-encrusted floor toward the water jug in the far corner, moaning to himself, trying to keep from crying aloud. He pawed clumsily at the water jug, like an animal. He lifted the terra-cotta vessel to his cracked lips. The small flow of the precious liquid was like the ambrosia of the gods. Sitting up, he tilted the jug and carefully poured a few drops onto his feet. The coolness of the lukewarm water on the inflamed feet started another spasm of pain, but he poured more, and the cooling relief began to spread through him.

He took another swallow of water from the jug.

He became himself again, but self-drowned in a wave of grief and confusion as his mind searched for an answer to what was happening to him.

Shit! The whole deal was absurd. *What the hell is this? Are the gods out to screw me? I have always been a good and loyal soldier. What's turned the world upside down? Why have all these things happened to me? Why? Why?* He was alone in the cell, but a face came up into his consciousness. *That Hebrew... Yeshua... Jesus... whatever he was called. Nothing has been the same since.*

He moved restlessly, and as he twisted his legs, a small stone on the floor touched one of his feet, sending a fresh spasm of pain lancing through his feet and legs, and a moan broke through his lips. The pain which until then had settled down to a deep, hot throbbing was instantly freshened. But a curious thing happened. He was more concerned with the questioning in his mind than with the pain, and he regained control of himself.

He would have to face it. His world was over. *The tribune is going to expel me from the legion...* The thought was shocking to Casca. *How could it happen to him? Why? Why are all these things happening to me? Have I become something that I wasn't? Then, who am I?*

He was lying in the dirt of the stockade cell, and it was not the best place to wrestle with fate, but the thought of leaving the legion was the most appalling thing that had ever come into his mind, and here it was, bolder than the rat that stared contemptuously at him from the opposite corner. Being a legionnaire was his life. It was what he was. It was the core of his being. *I could handle the punishment of the penal battalions, but to be thrown out of the Tenth...*

The rat was joined by two others. They crouched in the dark, eyeing Casca... like the three Fates...

But Casca had no mind for rats. He spat at the three. "Piss on you," he said ... and closed his eyes and dreamed of the glories of the Roman legions.

From that time as a child in the Tuscan hills, when he watched the Tenth pass through on their way back from Gaul, Casca had wanted to be a legionnaire. And his Uncle Tontine had served with the great Julius when Julius put down the rebellion of the Belgae tribes on the far banks of the Rubicon... was there when the most fierce of that tribe of warriors, the Nervii, fell upon the Seventh and Twelfth legions and almost destroyed both as effective fighting forces, killing all their officers.

Now, those were days of glory!

The Nervii had hidden all their women and children in the deep forests of the land and had fallen on Caesar with a force of over sixty thousand tribesmen. They routed his cavalry, which was unsuited for duty in these dank woods, and

surrounded the Seventh and Twelfth legions. Caesar himself was forced to take up a shield and strike against the barbarians like a common soldier. When the Tenth legion came upon the scene and saw the danger to Caesar, they attacked with such vigor that they turned back the Nervii even though they were outnumbered more than twenty to one. With the example of Caesar's courage, they fought like madmen. Yet, even with Caesar leading them, they could not force the Nervii from the field of battle.

Those brave and fanatical fighters died where they stood. Out of the sixty thousand who fell upon the Seventh and the Twelfth, less than five hundred lived to see the night. And only four of the Nervii leaders survived. For this victory the Senate ordered that sacrifices and celebrations should be held for a period of fifteen days to honor Caesar and his legions. Never before had a votive of this size been awarded.

Casca let the thoughts of his mind flow back through the years of his own service. The army had been his home, not just symbolically, but, after his family was wiped out in a pestilence, in reality as well.

The scene came up in his mind of his leaving... *flames... the smell of burning straw...* the crackle of the blaze. After he had made his final offerings to the Lares and the Penates, the household gods, he had set fire to the roof of his house—as the town wise women had said he should—to destroy the evil spirits within.

It was the last time he had listened to the advice of women. He had turned his back on them and the village and walked to Livorno where he enlisted in the service of the Empire. His was a man's world from then on. What was it the Jew had said? ... *You are what you are... that you shall remain.* What the hell was wrong with being a soldier?

From the beginning it had been a good life for Casca. The days of training and discipline were like a tonic to his mind. His hours were too filled to allow much time for grief over the loss of his family which, like all normal men, he had loved dearly. Now the service was his family, and Casca, like others before him, discovered the joy of discipline. *Shit! What could civilians know about the order and discipline of military life?* ... Almost before he knew it, he had finished his basic training and was being assigned to the Seventh, stationed on the frontier separating the Germans of the Marcomanii from the Helvetians. He liked the duty, for Casca intuitively grasped the importance of military force. The legions of Rome were all that prevented a continuous war from being waged between these ancient enemies. Yes, it had been a good duty. Here he had tasted his first blood in the heat of battle, and here he had learned the wisdom of his leaders' training programs.

Like the power of the Roman square...

On a one-to-one basis, in a fight against the monster Germans, the German had the advantage. The Roman was much smaller and weaker, and the great sword of the barbarian would usually win out; one German could always defeat one Roman. But when the square was formed, and the legionnaires had the support of their comrades, training and discipline won out time and again against vastly superior odds. The barbarians lacked discipline, and when the battle began, many of them became afflicted with what they called the "berserker rage" in which it was not uncommon for them to use "the fountain of Tyr," one of their war gods. When a

barbarian had his forearm or wrist lopped off, he would point the spurting stump into the face of his enemy, trying to blind him for just enough time to take another soul to Valhalla with him and would die crying out for Tyr and his Valkyrie to take him... *Odd folk, those damn barbarians.*

The legion was the mother and father of battle, a point of certainty, home. No matter which legion you might be assigned to, you always knew what to do and where everything was. Every legion laid out its camp identically each time. It would be no different in Egypt than it would be in Sarmatia or Britain. A soldier of the legion always knew where he was supposed to be because the constant training and close order drill were designed to make the soldier's response automatic. Drilling, marching... and digging... There was a saying that, if you were going to be a good legionnaire, it helped to have gopher blood. Often, the most important item in the kit you carried would be your shovel—and the gods help you if you lost it. The legion had survived many a surprise attack because regulations said that a unit must always, according to plan, lay out its defenses before retiring for the night. The picket lines must be laid out and the ditches dug and properly prepared with sharpened stakes to ward off a surprise attack. For a commander to be caught in camp without these measures being taken was to invite disaster.

Because war was killing...

Killing...

Casca shivered at the thought of his first kill.

Nine

They were encamped below Coblenz, just a little south of where Caesar had crossed the Rhine twenty-three years before, and they faced, across the river, the descendants of the same group of people Caesar had vanquished in his surprise raid into heretofore untouched Germany, the Suevii. The night was moonless, and a dense fog covered the black, ominous land.

They did not know that the Suevii warriors were floating silently across the river on logs.

After crossing the river, the barbarians maintained strict silence all that night and into the morning, making no attempt on any of the legion's positions or sentries, keeping completely out of contact. Only the barbarian scouts observed the Roman positions. They waited...

With the dawn the legion broke camp and took up positions for the march to the rendezvous point where they would join the main army for spring maneuvers. Casca remembered that dawn ... crisp... cool... a low ground fog remaining from the night's heavy fog, lying in the hollows and gullies. A great day to be alive. Killing was the farthest thing from his mind.

The legion formed up into its marching order on the road they had built in the spring of last year. The day would be a good one, just cool enough to keep from getting overheated on the march, and all the men were in good spirits. The Tribuni Militarium were each at their assigned positions, but the cavalry had not yet taken

up scouting position. The equestrians were in good spirits, and so were their mounts. The horsemen gamboled and joked before getting into orderly ranks.

That momentary slackness, when the pickets were called in and the cavalry was not yet in position, cost many lives.

The Suevii waited only until the legion was clear of the stockade. Then, with no warning or battle cries, they rushed silently like the forest wolves they resembled and inserted themselves between the Romans and the legion's former sanctuary.

A startled legionnaire in the rear sounded the alarm just seconds before a boar spear tore off half his head.

The other hidden elements of the barbarian force, some fifteen thousand strong, fell upon the mounted nobility, and, almost without breaking stride, they separated them from the main body. Five thousand screaming Suevii placed themselves between the horsemen and the legion. Another ten thousand immediately threw themselves upon the point and rear of the Seventh, while a third element tried to break through the center and divide the legion into separate pockets that could be more easily destroyed.

In this they did not succeed.

At the first indication of danger, the legion center turned as if on instinct. Even before the first flight of arrows fell on them like deadly rain they were facing the barbarians. Following their training, they placed themselves in formation. The officers called out the orders. The center held against the first wave of screaming Germans thrown against the living wall of troopers.

The Germans fell back, leaving several hundred of their brethren on the damp morning earth either dead or being put into that state by the legionnaires. The legion would take no prisoners at this stage. Even a wounded dog may bite, so, before the next attack could take place, the legionnaires sliced the throats of all the wounded barbarians.

This took less than three minutes. They were already forming into the defensive square with the rest of their comrades. The legion was formed—but without the cavalry.

Casca had watched as the young nobility had been separated and had been carved up as the Suevii broke upon them. Many of the Germans carried long poles with metal hooks on the end, like the poles used by boatmen to gaff large fish. With these they had pulled the cavalry from their saddles so that they fell stunned to the ground where other barbarians had fallen upon them and cut their throats. Out of four hundred brave young men less than twenty made their way to the safety of the square. There they cried with rage and shame, and more than one threw himself upon his sword rather than face the disgrace which they had invited upon themselves. The living found themselves places in the living wall and faced the Germans with dark hearts and a need to kill.

After the first assault, the Germans drew back. Casca took a good look at his enemies. They seemed as if they were from another world... big, hairy men with blond hair to their shoulders and fierce mustaches that reached below their chins. Many had flaming red hair and full beards. Their armor was of a motley variety, but limited by the owner's wealth and personal likes... oxhide shields... wolfskin headdresses... horned steel helmets... captured Roman shields from battles going back over two hundred years.

The great swords of the barbarians took two hands to swing and could cleave a man to his navel if hit. These and the axes were their favorite weapons. Casca had been told that the Suevii were masters of the axe, and he saw that it was true. Many of the warriors carried a half dozen or more throwing axes, and they also had the heavy battleaxe for close work. These did more damage than the swords when they faced the legion wall.

The Germans stood all in a mass waiting for the next attack to begin. They worked themselves into a killer-berserk rage, beating their shields in time, letting a tremendous growl begin low in their throats and then build into an ear-piercing shriek, a wild howl like that of enraged wolves. Several of the Germans could not stand the waiting and without any assistance from their comrades threw themselves upon the Roman wall. There the legionnaires almost absentmindedly dispatched them. Then the attack began.

They came running low to the ground, resembling the beasts of the forests whose skins they wore. Wave after wave of arrows preceded them, and many ran into the flying shafts themselves in their eagerness to kill.

Casca stood. He saw that his shield mate beside him was grinning weakly. He himself felt a sudden desire to urinate. He wanted to run, but it required less courage to remain where he was than to break ranks and be dishonored by his comrades, and he realized then the truth of something his Uncle Tontine had once said, that many heroic acts were accomplished by fear...

The Suevii were upon them.

Battleaxes flashed in the morning sun. The barbarian devils' faces were red with the lust for blood. They crowded in upon each other in their haste to kill Romans. A legionnaire three men down from Casca was pulled from his position by one of the hooks used on the cavalry. With one flashing swipe his head was off and hoisted onto a spear head and thrown back into the square. But the soldier's spot was filled before he had even been pulled completely out of it by a second rank member. The wall was intact.

Casca struck and struck, parrying blows from spear, axe, and sword. His arm grew leaden. And yet the barbarians continued to throw themselves mindlessly upon the shield of the legion. But the square had shrunk. Over a thousand legionnaires lay dead, their bodies being mutilated by the barbarians. Still the square held. Casca was wounded twice, once when a spear pierced clean through his shield and about two inches of steel entered his chest just below the right clavicle. His shield mate cut the head of the spear off with his gladius and pulled the spear head from Casca's shoulder in less time than the telling of it took. The other wound was from the glancing blow of a barbarian axe that sliced a clean opening along Casca's left rib cage. Metal armor was at a premium here; leather was only good for light work.

Then it stopped.

The Germans were pulling back, leaving a thick, stacked-up mass of bodies behind them. They had enough. They were retreating toward the river.

Relief was evident in the face of the Roman commander. Q. Matinius Corolioni knew that his men could not have held out much longer. With a great sense of satisfaction he raised himself up into the saddle of one of the few surviving horses, waved his sword over his head, and cried out:

"Let loose the legion!"

Now the real slaughter began.

The legion ran for the Suevii, cutting them down. Many of the barbarians begged for their lives. But none were spared this day. The memory of the young men of the cavalry was still too fresh for the Romans to take prisoners. They killed Germans all the way back to the river.

Casca struck and struck until he thought his arm would drop off. Then he dropped his shield and switched to his left hand, cut and cut, slicing down every fur-garbed body and horned helmet head that came his way.

One, a beautiful boy of no more than sixteen, went on his knees and begged for his life with clasped hands. Casca felt nothing more than a sense of dullness as he grabbed the boy by his shoulder length blond hair and forced his head back, exposing a throat not unlike that of a maiden. He drove his short sword completely through the neck and out the back, the blade slicing between the spinal vertebrae. The boy's head almost fell off. Only a single strand of meat held it onto the body. The boy warrior lay on the earth, his body twitching in the uncontrollable response that comes from sudden and violent death.

And for just a moment time stood still for Casca. The thought ran through his brain: *If I had lived out my life in Tuscany... If I had married and had a son... like this one...*

But only for a moment. He raised the bloody sword—and went after more Germans.

Then they were at the river, and Casca ran waist deep into the water to continue the slaughter until there were no more to slash and only the archers were continuing to make kills, sending their arrows into the backs and heads of the swimming and wading barbarians.

Casca backed up to the edge of the river and lay down face first to drink, unmindful that the water was turning red around him. That burning thirst, that only men in combat know, was not to be denied. A German's body floated by him, and the dead hand gently nudged his face, but he paid no mind. He drank the deep drink of exhaustion.

Fifteen thousand Suevii had crossed the river that morning. Less than three hundred returned to their home villages that night. Before the women even could begin in earnest their death wails and cries for vengeance, many of the widows were offering themselves to any of the surviving warriors that would have them so that they could have more babies who would grow into men and avenge the fallen warriors of the Suevii. Before the next several dawns another thousand barbarian soldiers were being carried in their mothers' bellies, growing for their turn at the Roman wall...

Ten

Casca awoke, his body wet with sweat.

He was back in the cell at the stockade in Judea, but time was still confused for him. He remembered the three rats, but the dreams had come upon him as reality. There was the taste of fear in his mouth.

How much time had passed since the stroking had taken place? The tribune had said he would see him when it was over. Pulling himself across the floor, Casca looked out the cell door to where a ray of light was coming in from one of the apertures that provided what little air there was in this place of horrors. From the angle and intensity of the light it must be almost dusk. Then he had slept for hours.

He looked at his feet. The swelling remained, but, surprisingly, the pain was almost gone. Surprisingly? "...until we meet again..." The words of the Jew haunted him. *What has happened to me?*

He got to his feet, found he could stand, and limped back to the bed of straw against the farther wall. But before he lay down he looked at the skin of his feet again. Though the light was now dim, it seemed that even the battered flesh was now healing. Impossible!... Taking the index finger of his right hand, he dug his strong nail into the tender flesh of his left forearm, dug it in deeper until the blood flowed freely. The pain was as nothing compared to what he had been through. He dragged the nail halfway up the arm... and stopped. His mouth dropped open as he saw... *saw in the part darkness...* the bleeding cease before his eyes, the pain leave, and a scab form.

Casca cried out, "No! No!" and he beat his head against the cell wall in terror and confusion.

The jailer, hearing the outcry, rushed to him. Seeing Casca apparently trying to beat his brains out, he called for help, and, with the assistance of two guards, was able to get Casca put into restraints that would keep him from doing any further harm to himself.

If the bastard died before Tigelanius judged him, there would be hell to pay.

Casca slept all that night, a troubled and uneasy sleep, a dark time that alternated between despair and mental agony.

But the night ended.

In the morning he was trussed and cleaned and brought before Tigelanius, Commander of the Garrison of Jerusalem.

Tigelanius sat in day dress, not wearing his uniform. He was wrapped in a toga of state, one with the purple border to show his touch of royal blood. His sword was beside him. Beside him, also, a scribe stood, with the charges written down. Two other officers of the Tribuni Militarium stood as advisers to the court.

Turning his cultured and sensitive face to the accused, Tigelanius looked at the prisoner in distaste. Making a wrinkle in his nose, he said, ascetically, "You still stink" and ordered the officer of the day to have the jailer given ten lashes. Turning his attention back to Casca, he called for the scribe to read off the charges...

This done, Tigelanius asked Casca if he had anything to say in way of defense before sentence was passed.

Casca said nothing. He stood motionless, his mind full of wonder. Today the scab on his arm was gone, and only a thin pink line showed where he had dug out enough meat to fill up a thimble.

Tigelanius made a motion to the scribe. "Note that the accused has nothing to offer in his defense." Rising to his full height, the tribune stood in front of Casca. "You, Casca Rufio Longinus, are hereby relieved from the rolls of the Tenth Legion, and your name shall be stricken from her rolls of honor. Your awards for valor are taken from you and do not exist. As of this moment, you are no longer a person. You are the property of the emperor and are to be sent to the copper mines in Achaia. There you will be permitted to serve your emperor, and Rome, for whatever time you have to remain on this earth. You are dismissed."

And, turning away from the prisoner, he made the comment to one of the witnessing officers: "Now, let's get on to some important matters. Mettelius, how many will you be bringing to dinner tonight beside yourself and your lovely lady?"

Casca was stripped down and issued a loincloth and robe in place of his legion dress. His manacles were replaced by simple leg irons, and the medallion with the likeness of Tiberius on it was put around his neck. To be caught without the medallion being worn as it should be was to be killed immediately.

He was hooked up into a coffle of some twenty other slaves who were to be sent to the same copper mines in the distant southern provinces of Greece. There they would dig the greenish red ore from the side of the mountains until they died.

They were marched the fifty kilometers from Jerusalem to the port of Joppa. There they were loaded on a bireme, a twin-banked coastal ship that would take them to the port of Cenchrea.

The crossing was uneventful, but the quarters were crowded and the food scanty. They were fed once a day and watered twice, but there was no unnecessary cruelty. The Romans did not torture their slaves needlessly, just as most people would not beat their domestic animals without reason.

One small squall had several of the slaves throwing up, but Casca did not seem to be bothered by it at all, and indeed the food seemed to be enough for him, too. At least it seemed that he had less trouble adapting than many of the others. They credited that to his being a former legionnaire and therefore used to diet restrictions. Only one man died on the voyage, a merchant who had been foolish enough to be caught with rigged weights when he was selling supplies to the garrison at Samaria.

The ship made all the coastal stops along the rim of the Mediterranean toward Greece, stopping to let off passengers at Caesarea and Tyre and taking on a cargo of wool at Sidon. At Sidon they also picked up the governor of Cyprus and took him on to Paphos. His Excellency had been to a conference of governors at Antioch, and like all such politicians on an expense account had made a little side trip to meet with some old friends in Sidon for a couple of weeks before returning to his governmental duties on his own miserable little pigsty.

From Crete, the bireme made a straight approach to Rhodes for a two-day stop during which Casca and the others were allowed to exercise themselves on deck (the crew used them to help load a cargo of skins and other items into the hold next to the slave section). The ship made one more stop at Ephesus, and then it was onto Cenchrea at Achaia, the southernmost province of Greece, home of the legendary Spartans and supposedly a former resting place of the great Ulysses. All in all a nice tour for tourists, but damn little fun and games for slaves.

During the voyage Casca had his first real taste of what it meant to be a slave. No longer a man. Not even human. Just property. But being property had some surprising overtones.

They were not put on the oars because they did not know how to row properly, and it would take too long to train them. Those on the oars were a combination of slaves and free men working for hire. The slaves were not beaten except when one was caught slacking off—and then not enough to cripple him. After all, slaves were property and worth something. Even if they were not good oarsmen, they could still be traded in for new stock. But a disabled slave brought nothing. So, as long as the slaves did their jobs with no trouble, they were treated relatively well—if being ignored could be called good, and Casca realized that it could.

After the disembarkation at Cenchrea, the slaves destined for the mines were separated from the others and hooked into a new coffle and headed up into the hills where the mines were. They trudged along, quickly learning to keep in step with each other so as not to stumble. Casca found that the rhythms of slavery came quick and easy... not letting yourself think was another way to stay sane.

Unthinking, the coffle marched like some crookedly jointed centipede up into the rocky hills of Greece toward the pits where they would spend the rest of their lives underground, digging copper for the wealth of the Caesars and for the profit of the proconsul governing there. By now the chains had cushions of calluses to rest upon and no longer ate away at the skin. Pads of calluses would develop in other areas, too. They could smell the mines before they reached them. The sound came also, but it was the smell that came first. After the relative cleanliness of the galley, the smell of thousands of sweating, unwashed men assailed their nostrils. The first slaves they saw were carrying baskets of red earth to the dumping ground. They seemed part of a seemingly unending line of dirt-encrusted humanity. Like the legendary worm that ate itself, they never stopped. They were one continuous great circle of misery. Here the whips cracked frequently on the backs of the slaves. These were the expendable ones. The mine superintendent needed a certain death rate just to have room for all the newcomers he was being sent. He had complained to his superior in Athens at this constant overload he was forced to contend with, and how difficult it was to maintain a balance. He had cut their rations to a third—and still the animals wouldn't die fast enough. Now, here came a new batch. Where the hell was he to put them? The latest war had thrown thousands of slaves on the market, and they were a glut. He got all the rejects... the troublemakers and murderers. Damn top management... don't know what they're doing.

Casca was numbered in by the number on his slave tag, and he was chained to his new work mate. The leg irons here were longer than they had been on the march. A slave in the mines needed a little more slack.

Casca and his mate were assigned to a pit on the northwest side of the mountain. He was lucky. Here he would at least have some fresh air and sun. Below, in the shafts that ran down a thousand feet below the surface, the slaves might not see the light of day again for the rest of their lives.

Casca fell into the routine of his job and soon learned how to avoid the overseer's whip. The one third rations did not seem to bother him very much. What he didn't know at the time was that his system's metabolism was simply

adjusting itself to whatever intake it was receiving and making the most efficient use of it. Casca had a bowel movement less than once a week, and then it was small. Everything he ate was turned to energy. His body grew dark from the sun. His muscles became bands of steel. He not only did his own work but much of his chain mates' chores as well.

The days turned into weeks, and the weeks into months, and yet he worked, and his chain mates died. He had gone through three of them and was now with his fourth. Four years had passed, and he grew ever stronger. Yet, even with careful planning, he could not avoid entirely the lash of the overseer, and his back looked like a street map because of the thin scars of the whip. But he survived while others died.

And always the Jew's voice came to him when he was attached to a new slave by the iron umbilical cord: "*Until we meet again...*" There were times, too, when the voice came to him in his sleep... when he would curl up in the little hole he had dug for himself and his chain mate for protection against the worst of the storms that periodically raged over the island.

Casca kept silent, talking little to his mates or the others around him, but they knew something about him was different. And after a time even the overseer began to stop by and touch him for a bit of luck.

But that was before he was sent underground... and The Horror began...

Eleven

For Casca, the years assumed a sameness that was torture in itself. He was unable to differentiate the passage of time other than through the change of seasons, and each seemed to last forever. Always he dug deeper and deeper into the bowels of the earth, always deeper and deeper...

In his seventh year he was sent underground.

The surface overseer had become uneasy when Casca was around. The other slaves died or grew emaciated or sickly; Casca did none of these things. The only thing that he had in common with the other prisoners was the covering of filth and encrusted dirt and clay that only came off his body when it rained. He looked less human than animal—more, a mechanical thing of earth as timeless as the soil itself.

The emperors in Rome changed. Politicians and heroes rose and fell. And still Casca toiled.

He grew sullen and quiet, an object of wonder and fear to the other slaves. His beard was almost to his waist and matted with knots and tangles. He would have become a total beast, insane and nonhuman, but it was his mind that saved him. He used his imagination to keep from going mad. Eleven chain mates he went through and still he remained unchanged.

When he first went underground, the overseer of his shift wondered at this strange man. Under filth, Casca's age was indeterminate, but his strength was unreal. He could do the work of three, and he could lift more than any two other

men in the mines. Casca was a solid knot of sinewy muscle and tendons. He always got his full share at feeding time. No one cared to challenge him for his choice of a sleeping place. Casca could have been the boss of the underground if he had so chosen. But he did not. The overseer wondered why. He could not read Casca's mind.

Casca was trying to figure out his fate, spending hours, days, every waking moment, trying to comprehend his plight. The enormity of it... *I cannot die. The Jew won't let me. Then, if I cannot die, all I have to do is wait. Everything changes in time, and, I have all time to myself at least all time until, as the Jew said, 'Until we meet again.' Meet again? Perhaps he is in the next shaft; shoring up the sides with timbers. But I will get out of here. An opportunity will present itself It would do no good to attack the guards and try to escape. They would just overpower me and put me in chains. No, I must get my way to the surface again. Down here, there is nothing but the prospect of being buried alive—*

Buried alive! ... The thought slammed into his brain.

Buried alive!...

He could not die!

If he were buried alive, it would be for all eternity.

Now the days of real horror began.

There was always a very good chance of being buried alive in the mine. It happened often to others. Periodically tons of earth would claim a slave. Stay here long enough, and it would happen to him. And he had all of time itself, not just the short lifetime of these others who had been buried alive. The thought of being buried alive for eternity drove Casca almost mad... the thought of lying, unable to die, under tons of earth was a horror that consumed his hours.

It would not go away. It preyed on his mind... like some monstrous animal gnawing at his brain. *Out. Out. I must get out!* Before the mine caved in on him.

In the seventh year of the Emperor Gaius Nero the cave-in came.

There was little warning. Casca was working in his shaft, not far from his overseer, Lucius Minitre. Ironically, it was one of the few times when he had forgotten his obsession momentarily since the vein of unusual rock they were working had caught his interest.

The rumbling started... the shifting of the earth overhead.

There was an almost unbearable feeling that came with the change in air pressure. Millions of tons of earth and rock began to settle.

The slaves froze.

For one seemingly eternal but uncertain moment time stopped. Then the roof covering two hundred feet of tunnel dropped, crushing the lives out of forty slaves.

The fall of the first roof started a chain reaction that spread through the other galleries. Throughout the network of tunnels the screams of panic-stricken men echoed one upon the other as the walls grumbled and heaved around them.

Minitre, the overseer, was not a particularly brave man. This was just a job to him. He hid himself behind one of the slaves cowering in a side passage.

Casca paid little attention to the overseer. His own chain mate lay beside him with only part of his head visible under the boulder that had relieved him of the honor of toiling for the glory of Rome. It had also relieved him of two-thirds of his brain case. Casca was wondering how to get free from the ankle chains that bound

him to his dead mate. The overseer was only a few feet away, cowering, his hands over his head and his face to the dirt floor. His eyes were closed tightly, and he knew nothing except the depths of his fear. Now Casca took a look at the overseer and saw the short knife in the belt of Lucius. A broken piece of timber lay close by. Casca reached over, hefted the lump of wood in his hand, turned rapidly, and knocked the overseer into the bliss of unconsciousness.

Taking the small blade, he went to work cutting his chain mate's foot off at the ankle. The job took longer than it should have due to the dullness of the blade and the smallness of the knife, but finally he cut all the way through, having a particularly rough time with the ankle joint. He had to cut through the tendons so that he could get to the other side, and that meant working the blade back and forth in the socket. For a moment he thought the blade would break, but it held, and he was through to the other side.

Casca was free of his chain. *Well enough*, he thought. *I didn't like him much anyway. Talked too much. But he was chained to me. I wasn't going to cut my own leg off... not yet, anyway. He looked at the unconscious overseer. I may have my way out of here lying at my feet.*

Wiping the sticky blood from the amputation off on his dusty beard, Casca bent down and put the shift overseer on his shoulders and began to make his way out of the depths and up to where the sun waited. He carried, pulled, and crawled with Lucius past sealed-off tunnels where men by the dozen were dying or already dead, knowing that only one thought was running through the minds of the trapped slaves: Would the mine superintendent think them valuable enough to try and save—or would he just requisition some more slaves from the penal colony on Cyprus?

Casca ignored all pleas for help. One man grasped at his feet, begging to be helped to the surface. Casca kicked him in the face to break his grip. The man cried through sobbing lips for pity, "Don't leave me to die!"

Casca sneered at him. "Fool, is that all you have to worry about?" Taking the small knife from his waistband, he tossed it to the terrified slave. "Here is your way out. Use it and be free. It's more than I can do." He turned away and began his trek back the surface.

Crawling and dragging his unconscious burden over rocks and rubble, he at last reached the entrance. The full light hurt his eyes, nearly blinded him after all the time in the dimness underground, but to him it was a glorious sight for it lit the way to the pits.

As he forced his way out among the crowd of slaves trying to reach safety, a great rumble began deep in the mine, one that grew and grew, louder—and deeper in tone. The growing rumble finally burst its way to the surface in a great spout of dust and flame.

Somewhere deep below a gas pocket had been ignited by one of the flickering torches, and level after level of the mine fell in on itself, carrying hundreds of men to their deaths beneath the falling rock. He had escaped just in time.

Now he broke through the jam beyond the entrance, past the overseers with their whips and the guards trying to get the slaves into a semblance of order. Twice someone tried to help him with Lucius, but Casca strongly rebuffed them with kicks and curses. Lucius was his. Laying the overseer down, Casca arose and

tried to keep his balance. The world was moving. He felt a strange sensation, like seasickness, from the swaying the earth was doing in response to the great explosions still going on.

Then all was still except for the cries of the panic-stricken and the injured. While he cleaned off the face of Lucius, Casca mused to himself: *How strange it is that people in the worst possible conditions will strive to maintain their pathetic lives rather than take the easy way out!* Perhaps it was that no one really knew what happened in death that made them cling so tenaciously to their miserable existence. *Damn fools.* The world was full of them.

Lucius opened his eyes.

The first thing his clearing vision saw was the frighteningly hairy face of Casca in all its filthy, dirt-encrusted splendor.

"What...? Where...?"

Casca soothed him, saying in gentle tones: "You were struck by a falling timber, master, and, remembering your kindness, I could not leave you to perish as did so many others in the falling rocks and flames. I carried you out here to the light."

Memory returned to Lucius. The last thing he recalled was covering up his head while the earth seemed to fall in around him. But this slave, the one they called "The Old One," had saved him. He would not die. He would live to eat and drink and make love. And this slave was responsible. Lucius Minitre felt a deep swelling in his bosom. A surge of brotherly love came sweeping over him. This great hairy beast had remembered his kindnesses... and everyone, even his wife, said he was too good-hearted. This man had brought him out of the bowels of the inferno. Lucius could hardly keep from hugging Casca—and would have if the years of accumulated filth had not left their mark. Casca stank.

Rising to his feet with the help of Casca's strong arm, Minitre said to one of the lesser overseers:

"See that this man is assigned to surface duty. Let him work with the cooks. And see that he is cleaned up."

Casca gloated inside, chuckling to himself. *I made it. I'm outside again. How long has it been?*

His question was answered, but not immediately. They showed him to the stream where he was allowed to scrape and rinse most of the filth from his body. A razor was loaned to him while the owner watched with careful eyes and an armed guard stood by. Casca cursed and moaned as the dull brass razor pulled clouts of hair and skin from his face and neck.

But the beard came off. Then the guard handed him a clean tunic, making the comment that the mining superintendent liked to have everything topside clean—including the personnel. Casca, remembering his times in the legion, felt a twinge of nostalgia.

The guard noticed Casca's slave tag and took a closer look. "By Mithra, man. Tiberius has been dead for over thirty years. You must be at least sixty, but you don't look it. By the gods, whatever they fed you in the mines damn sure agreed with you."

Laughing to himself at his small joke, the guard returned Casca to his new quarters, a barracks-type hut with a wooden bed and a straw pallet all his own. By

comparison with what he had known for the past decades in the mines it was all sheer luxury.

Decades! The thought staggered Casca's imagination. He had been here for the length of a normal life-time, yet—

He remembered the face that had stared back at him from the small bronze mirror of the man whose razor he had borrowed, his face, the beard gone. Now he rubbed his hand lightly along his cheek as if to reassure himself that what he had seen in the small mirror was true. So many years, yet his face was essentially the same. Perhaps leaner. Perhaps more craggy looking. But he did not by any stretch of the imagination look his true age of—

The slave medallion! I must get rid of it...

Going to the outside, Casca returned to the pit area and began helping the other slaves aid their comrades, both the living and the dead. In this service he exchanged medallions for a more recent one, one that bore the likeness of Claudius. The dead slave he swapped medallions with did not complain...

The next few days were spent in a general cleaning up of the mine area. During this time Casca learned much of what had happened in the outside world since his banishment to the nether regions of Achaia. Some of it brought back old memories. The emperor that had followed Augustus was Tiberius. Casca had served under his command for a time in Gaul. He remembered Tiberius as a good soldier and a steady man, but, according to what he was told, while Tiberius had started out well as an emperor, he had turned into a tyrant in his last years.

The slaves who told Casca this were the old ones, in their late fifties and early sixties. Only they could remember back that far, and they were a special class of slaves. They had survived because they were indispensable to their master's comfort-household slaves, cooks, masseurs, poets, teachers. Here they served the governor and his family at his big villa out of sight of the mines. There they went every morning before dawn, returning to the mines area when the governor had no further need of them. It was not like serving some of the great houses of Greece or Rome, but it beat the pits by far, and, after all, they were criminals, guilty of such enormous crimes as petty theft or showing a little temper to their masters. Sometimes when one lived in the great houses one forgot that one was not a person and as such was not entitled to such things as opinions. Well, that was the way the world was. Casca had no intention of changing it. Not that he could—

All the slaves agreed that the worst thing that Tiberius had done—even worse than his paranoid proscription—was the naming of the mad dog Caligula to the throne. The best thing about Caligula's reign was that it only lasted four years before the Praetorian Guard finally had enough of the damned sodomist, killed him, and put his uncle, Claudius, on the throne. They liked Claudius. The old man was—surprisingly enough—a quite competent administrator. Yes, they all agreed, old man Claudius was a gentleman—even if the rest of the patrician families and the nobility felt he was somewhat republican in his tastes. The old man had done right well, all things considered, but it was rumored that his second wife, Agrippina, had poisoned him so that she could put her son on the throne—her son Nero that the old man had adopted. Odd thing, this emperor business. It seemed that even for the good ones, being Emperor of the most powerful empire

in the history of man carried with it certain occupational hazards: the rulers lately seemed not to enjoy a great deal of longevity after taking power.

So, today Gaius Nero was Imperator. So far his reign was going quite well. The more knowledgeable slaves thought that was because he was following the guidance of his mentor, Seneca, and listening to the advice of Burrus, head of the Praetorian Guard, on foreign affairs. They had helped the young Nero from making too many critical errors. They, and his mother, kept a tight rein on things. Well, it was nothing to Casca. Let the emperors come and go.

It did not take long for Casca to settle into the routines of his new job. After the mines this was almost unbelievable luxury: bathe once a week... see the sun... feel rain on his face instead of dirt.

Lucius Minitre tried in every way to make Casca's servitude easier, and he even developed a certain fondness for the tough-looking former legionnaire. One morning, taking him aside, the overseer motioned for Casca to sit on a bench with him and share a bowl of wine.

"Casca, you saved my life, and I won't forget it. I cannot set you free, but I can be of help in making your life more bearable." He stopped, took a sip of the wine, and cut it a little with a touch of water from an earthenware pitcher. He tried another sip and nodded, pleased with the mixture. Clearing his throat, he continued: "I have been here for eight years, and I heard stories about you from the man I succeeded. He was here for fifteen years, and he said that you had been here long before he came." He peered at Casca through uneasy eyes and asked: "Why do you live?"

Casca did not answer.

The overseer continued: "You do not appear to be very old, but you must be. I know that the medallion you originally wore was not that of Claudius. But I will tell no one. Have the gods some special interest in you? Or did you find a way to keep the ravages of time away?"

The man turned his eyes away, a little frightened by his daring and his assumptions. Keeping his eyes averted, he poured another drink for himself and Casca.

Casca felt a great relief run through him. At last he could speak of his torment. So he told Minitre the story of himself and the Jew.

The overseer did not laugh. Everything Casca said he believed. After all, was not the world filled with magic and sorcerers?

Casca finished his tale. Lucius Minitre sat silent, his eyes wide. Casca looked at him and grinned a crooked smile... the first time he had smiled in over twenty years. The unfamiliar usage of facial muscles gave him a cramp.

"It is remarkable," Minitre murmured. "You will live forever. You will never die. Or at least until you meet the Jew again, and who knows when that will happen? Perhaps never."

"But if what the Jew said is true, I have to get free. I cannot endure eternity in chains. Something must happen so that I can get my freedom, but the Mediterranean is a Roman lake, and without money I have no real chance of escape."

Lucius Minitre thought for a moment. He was thrilled to be this close to one who had been touched by the gods—even a Jewish god. He told Casca of the

growth of the Jew's cult... how it had spread. Even with persecutions and mass killings in the arenas they seemed to grow in numbers... and prosper. There were even followers of the Jew here in the mines. Not many, mind you, but there were several. You could tell them by their constant praying and singing which only stopped when they were given a touch of the lash. But, why couldn't the Jew be a god? After all, the divine Augustus was made one just after he died. And now, so even old Claudius had some worshippers. And what about Tiberius? He had made his mother a goddess, complete with a temple of her own and priestesses.

Casca smiled. Thoughts ran through his mind:

Gods and priests... blessings and curses. Well, if I am cursed, I'll make it pay. I have had enough of being pushed around. If live I must, then by all demons and foul spirits of this world, live I will.

Twelve

"Minitre," Casca began, his voice low, his manner conspiratorial, "we have to get me out of here. There must be some way I can get my freedom and become a man again."

"All men want to be free."

"Yes, but I have had years to think about my condition. If all the things we think are true are as we see them then I have a lot to worry about."

"But why should you worry? Surely, all you have to do is wait. All things change in time—and in your case it appears you have plenty of that on your side."

Casca laughed bitterly. "Wait, you say. Man, my years weigh as heavily on me as they do on any man. But what I fear has more to do with something else than just time. Think what it would be like for me if I tried to escape and were captured. The punishment for an escaped slave is anything from crucifixion to being impaled with a sharpened stake run up the rectum. Think what that would be like for me if I am unable to die."

Minitre's face paled. He took another hasty swallow of wine, most of which ran down his windpipe. He choked, coughed, and his face turned red. Casca pounded him on the back until he could get his wind again.

Wheezing, he said, "I never thought of it that way. Of course you're right. We must set you legally free. But how?" He gulped a swallow of wine, then thought out loud: "There aren't many ways a state-owned slave may receive manumission. The province governor in whose charge the slave is assigned may grant freedom on special occasions for service to the empire. Then, of course, there are the periodic sales of government surplus slaves in those regions where they are overstocked. Somebody could buy you and give you your freedom. The only other way is for a gladiator to win the wooden sword in the arena—but you aren't a gladiator."

He pulled at the wine again. A light came into his eyes. "Suppose we got you to the surplus sales. If you were auctioned off, perhaps I would be able to buy you and set you free myself. That would be something to tell my grandchildren—how I

was fortunate enough to give an immortal his freedom." Minitre fairly glowed with the thought. "Truly," he said, "the days of miracles and wonders are not over."

The sight of this round, red-faced little man's sincerity and eagerness to be involved in what he thought of as the business of gods touched a long forgotten note in Casca, and he laughed. Not at Minitre, but for him. The sound of laughter was alien to his own ears.

"Minitre," he said, "waiting for a government sale may well take years to come about, and even then we couldn't be sure you would have the price. After all, I am a pretty healthy hunk of beef, and you would be in real trouble if they sold me by the pound." Laughing, he touched Minitre's shoulder gently. "No, my friend. We must find another way."

They sat thinking quietly. Minitre scratched absently at a flea. The damn things were everywhere and were just one of the curses of this goat-ridden peninsula.

Minitre sat up straight, his eyes sparkling in his cherub-like face. "I have it! The governor. You will save the governor's life, and he, in gratitude, will set you free. It is simple, is it not?" He swelled with pride at his solution.

Somewhat laconically, Casca asked: "And just how are we going to bring that about, my friend?"

Minitre looked long and seriously at Casca. His voice, when he spoke, implied that his feelings had been hurt a little.

"You may have lived here a long time, Casca, but while you were in the pits I was outside, and I have learned a few things. You leave the planning of this to me. I have it all figured out. You were a soldier, were you not? So you can use weapons. And you are certainly the strongest man I have ever seen. The years in the mines have turned you into nothing if not a great heap of twisted muscles lying on top of twisted muscles. We will use your training and your strength to set you free. Believe in me. I have found a way." His manner and voice strengthened with determination. "You go back to the slave barracks, and I will see you in the morning."

The look of confidence on the overseer's face spoke to Casca. Standing, Casca put out his hand, and the two shook in the manner of friends and equals.

Casca had found a friend.

That night, while the slaves slept, Minitre went into the port of Cenchrea. Visiting one den of iniquity after another, warding off whores and pimps, he finally found those he searched for, and, in muted conversation in the rear of a dingy tavern otherwise filled with the dregs of waterside humanity, he made his deal with those he had found. They talked and planned until cockcrow said it was time for Lucius to return to the mines. The day shift was coming on duty shortly, and he must be there.

Minitre had just arrived back at the mines as the slaves were being fed. He caught Casca's eyes and nodded slightly, smiling all the while. Casca felt a sudden surge of hope. Minitre had obviously found out something or done something to advance the cause of his freedom. He hardly even tasted the gruel and hard bread. His thoughts were on when he could next talk to his friend and find out what had transpired.

But there was work to be done. He checked in with the assignment supervisor and was sent to the surface pits as a waterbearer for the slave crews. The day grew

long, but the sun felt good on his bare back as he went about his job carrying the goatskin bag of water to the thirsty slaves. It was a dull yet somehow pleasant routine: he went from man to man until the bag was empty, then made the half-mile walk up the hill to where the spring was. He would refill the bag and repeat the action over and over until the day ended. Casca steeled his mind against the misery of the slaves. Compassion was a commodity he could ill afford right now.

Besides, he had never been a particularly sympathetic type to start with.

The sun of Greece continued to burn him darker and darker. Only his scars showed up in lighter color. While he worked his mouth was set in the semi-smirk that the whore's knife had left on him long ago.

The day passed. The endless worm of slaves continued to feed on itself until the whistle of the pit overseer sounded the shift change.

Casca returned to his barracks and waited his turn at the troughs where he could wash off the day's dirt. Then, alone, he ate his last meal of the day, lentil soup with just the hint of the taste of goat in it. And then, again, alone, he sat outside the barracks listening to the old men inside discuss the ways of the world and their viewpoints concerning the relative importance of the scheme of things. Casca savored this time to himself and waited for Minitre.

He let his eyes search the heavens while the cool air of the Mediterranean wafted over him. The constellation known as the Pleiades was clearly visible. After the years of being chained to somebody the luxury of being alone was something to be savored in full.

The bobbing form of Minitre came in sight on the trail leading down to the barracks. The chubby man wheezed his way up the small grade, sighted Casca, and waved. "Vale, soldier," he called softly and motioned for Casca to follow him.

Lucius led them to a clearing far enough away from the barracks that there would be no chance of their being overheard.

"Listen to me," Lucius whispered. The excitement in his voice was contagious. "It's all set."

Casca started to interrupt, but Lucius waved him silent. "Let me finish. Day after tomorrow you will be assigned to the detail going into Cenchrea to bring back supplies. Also, the governor will be in town at the same time. He goes there every few days to spend some time with his mistress. He leaves early—but not as early as we will—and gets to Cenchrea just before midday. When he gets to his whore's house, thugs will jump him in a robbery attempt, but they will be foiled by the efforts of a valiant former legionary who comes to the rescue and saves the governor's precious skin. There. Do you like it?"

Casca mused over it for a moment. "It's a simple and direct enough plan, Lucius, but what about the thieves I'm supposed to fight? Do I really fight them, or is it all just a setup?"

Minitre fairly simpered. "You fight them, you great hulk, and I hope you kill all of them. These are the ones who clipped me out of a month's pay with crooked dice, and if you knew the hell my wife put me through, you would kill them as slowly as possible. This is my chance to get even. They think I am doing this for part of the vast sum of money I told them the governor would have in his purse. By all means take out your frustrations from the last fifty or sixty years on them, my friend. I will arrange for you to be near the whore's house when the governor

visits her. Leave the details to me. Er... On second thought, make sure you kill all the thieves. It wouldn't do for any of them to talk about me afterwards."

Casca nodded. "Exactly how many of your former friends will I have to kill, Lucius?"

Minitre laughed. "Only three, soldier, only three..."

Minitre left Casca to his thoughts and started home to his wife and squalling brats, a prospect that dampened his enthusiasm considerably. *Casca doesn't know what it is to suffer. He should live with the burden I have for a while. Hydra's nine heads, that woman's tongue could make these Greek goats give cheese instead of milk. If only she wasn't so much bigger than me I would give her a sound thrashing and gentle her.* He chuckled to himself. *I wonder if I could talk her into being in on the robbery?* He laughed out loud at the thought. Casca would have his hands full with her.

The next day seemed to drag interminably. When it was finally over, and all, Casca had to wait through was the night, that, too, seemed to stretch out forever. But then it was predawn, and he was taken out and fed and put into a line with thirty other slaves for the four-hour march to Cenchrea. The overseer doing the most shouting as they formed up was Minitre. Their escort was a squad of overage legionnaires who were waiting on their retirements to come through. The soldiers weren't too bad and didn't give anyone a hard time as long as there wasn't any trouble.

The day broke cool at first, giving the body a chill. But that soon passed as the sun rose. Casca noticed the signs of Greece's past glory in the ruins along the line of march. How old were these ruins? How many centuries had passed since these places were abandoned? What of all the people who had walked in the magnificent halls and courts that these ruined stones had been? *Gone ... all gone!* He wondered to himself if he would live long enough to see the same thing happen to the greatness that was Rome.

The smell of Cenchrea reached them before the sight of the port. The wind was right, and the salt scent of the sea and the pungent odor of drying fish assailed their nostrils a full half hour before they saw the whitewashed walls of the city and the ships lying at anchor in her harbor. There was nothing special about Cenchrea. It looked the same as any other town on the Mediterranean coast. White buildings with tile roofs were predominant, but there were a few larger private homes on the hillside where the local merchants lived.

When they reached the harbor, Lucius turned the other slaves over to the harbor master's assistant, but he kept Casca with him on the pretext of needing him to carry packages of items for the governor's house.

The two made their way through the winding street to the residence of Crespas's mistress. Taking Casca to the shadowed side of the street, Lucius sat with his back to the thoroughfare so that none could see his face. "Watch for a tall man with thinning hair and a staff of black wood," Lucius told Casca. "That will be the governor. The thieves will be close on to him when you see him." Minitre indicated the direction from which the governor would come.

The two waited in the shadows, eating cheese in small nibbles as men were wont to do early in the day before going to work. Nothing unusual about them ...

except perhaps the thickness of Casca's arms. But who would notice? It was a good plan, and Casca felt comfortable with it.

They waited.

Then there he was.

Crespas the governor.

He was walking surely and confidently; with long strides, over the cobblestoned street, his black wood cane clicking on every other step. As Casca watched the governor approach he also saw the movement of others in the shadows of the buildings opposite him. Gathering himself together, he prepared for the assault on Crespas. Minitre saw the tensing and nodded.

Then it happened.

The thugs ran out of the alleyway and threw themselves on Crespas. The governor yelled, "Thieves!" and quickly the thieves learned that the black cane was for more than looks as he brained one with the knobbed end and was swinging on another when the larger of the thieves leapt on his back and dragged him to the ground. "Help! Help!" he cried.

But before the larger thief could drive his blade into the back of the downed governor, a vise-like grip clamped around his wrist and pulled him up. The man snarled like a dog. "Get away," he hissed. "This is none of your business."

Casca grinned a death's head leer at the man and raised him clear off the ground. The thief's comrade, a ratty little man with a fish odor, started forward to help, but the black cane of Crespas knocked the little bastard back into the wall of a house. Casca raised the larger thief overhead until his arms were fully extended. The thief cried for mercy and begged to be put down. Casca laughed deep inside himself until it burst forth in a roar. "Put you down? Aye, that I will, you piece of slime." And saying this, he dropped the man's back onto his neck, putting one arm around the thief's throat and the other one over his upper thighs. The thief's spine rested on the knotted muscles of Casca's neck. "I'll let you go," Casca said—and pressed down with his arms. The great muscles of his chest swelling, he took one deep breath and heaved. The thief gave one quick, short cry as the sound of his spine snapping broke through the air like a pine branch exploding in a fire. The man was dead before he hit the ground.

Crespas and the little thief watched this display of strength in stunned silence. The thief was too much in shock to resist when Casca reached for him. As Casca's calloused hand went around his neck, the legionary said softly, "Nothing personal, you know, but no witnesses. Oh, and Lucius Minitre said to tell you that he was all paid up with you men now." Casca's fingers closed, and the little thief's neck crumbled under the crushing grip. His eyes bulged. His face turned black. And he died.

Crespas looked up at the slave who had saved him and saw the medallion. "Are you one of mine?" he asked.

Casca nodded.

Crespas raised himself up, looking Casca over closely. "Thank you, slave. You will be rewarded for this. By the gods, you're a fine specimen. Can you use a sword?"

Casca nodded again, unsure of what to say to the man who held the key to his freedom.

"Open your mouth," the governor said unexpectedly.

Casca did as he was told, and Crespas bent over close and looked inside. "The best way to check a man's health is to look at his teeth," the governor said, not so much in explanation as in the manner of a pedagogue lecturing scholars. "If the teeth are rotten, so is the man's health. And yours, my fine Hercules, are in excellent shape."

Minitre had by this time appeared and with the proper amount of bowing and scraping got the governor's attention. Crespas turned to him and asked: "Is this slave in your custody?" Minitre quickly affirmed that Casca was. Again Crespas walked around Casca, poking and prodding as if he were a horse he was contemplating buying.

"Good enough," he finally said. "Have him assigned to my household staff. I want him in new clothes and presented to me in my villa tomorrow evening. I have something interesting to propose to him. Enough. Take him and begone. Oh, by the way, have the local vigiles clean this carrion up, before they start to stink."

When they were out of sight of the governor, Minitre grasped Casca's hand in joy. "We did it! He's going to set you free! Man, we have done it!"

Casca joined in the joy of the moment... but something dark in the caverns of his brain bothered him... he could not tell what it was.

Minitre did as the governor ordered, informed the vigiles where to pick up the bodies, and returned with Casca to the mines to prepare him for his audience.

Thirteen

"Lucius, do you think we did it? Will the governor set me free?"

Minitre smiled, content with the day's deeds. "Certainly, Casca. When you are presented to him tomorrow, he will most certainly give you freedom in recognition of your saving his precious hide and ridding his province of two desperate criminals."

Casca looked closely at the overseer. He had grown used to Minitre's liking for flowery speech, but it did seem that the man's answer had been just a little too long... almost as though he were trying to convince himself that there was no doubt.

"I don't know, Lucius. Did you see the way he looked me over? I think he has something else on his mind."

"What?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, don't worry about it. Just because he looked you over doesn't mean anything. Men like him think all the rest of the human race are cattle. That's all there is to it." The contentment was genuine.

"Well, I don't know. Maybe you're right."

"Sure I'm right."

They made their way back to the quay where the rest of the slaves were involved with unloading supplies for the mines. Without being told, Casca joined in the job

while Minitre played his role of supervisor. It was not that Casca was all that eager to work. The truth of it was that this was a good way to get his mind off the excitement of the possibility of freedom being so near.

The job was done in a couple of hours, and the slaves started back up the road to the mines. Casca and Minitre were silent, each lost in his own thoughts and interpretations of the day's events. Neither felt any remorse for the dead thieves.

They arrived in time for the evening meal. Each slave went to his assigned barracks, rinsed off, took his bowl and spoon, and ate from the communal pot. In his excitement, Casca tasted nothing that he ate and only vaguely acknowledged that his stomach had anything in it. When he went to his bunk and lay down, he fell asleep almost instantly, as if anxious for the coming dawn.

But his sleep was a troubled one. Several times that night he awoke, returning to a restless slumber that made the night seem longer than it was. Tomorrow would bring freedom. After all the years of being pushed around he was about to reap the reward of asserting himself, of setting in motion a chain of events that would change his destiny. He was tense, uptight. He didn't want to blow this one. The damn night would never end.

But the next day finally came. Casca was given a fresh tunic, ordered to clean up, and told to present himself at the governor's house. Now that the time for action was at hand, some of the tension left him. Besides, Minitre came and wished him luck. The man's round, cherubic face was aglow with pleasure.

"Vale, Casca. Fortune go with you this day..."

But once at the governor's villa, the uneasiness that had been hidden below the level of Casca's conscious mind surfaced. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but there was something about the whole deal that didn't feel quite right. For one thing, the villa was a very imposing place. Crespa had managed to turn this portion of Greece into a miniature Rome and had established a proper Roman domus complete with running water piped in from the hillside. The atrium was handsomely laid out with marble benches and copies of several classic Greek statues. Obviously Crespas was a man who enjoyed the creature comforts... and he was a patrician.

A patrician. Damn it, maybe that was it. Casca had not had what you might call your standard buddy-buddy relationship with the patrician class. And the last patrician who had played a part in his destiny was the snot-nosed son of a bitch Tigelanius who had booted him out of the legion and thrown him into slavery. Tigelanius was long dead now. Casca hoped the worms that had eaten him had died, too, of indigestion.

Careful, though. *This* patrician, Crespas, held the key to his freedom. He could not let Crespas know he had any prejudice against patricians. Hell, he'd swear before the temple of every god in the Empire that he loved patricians—if that was what it took to get his freedom.

So he followed dutifully after the old slave to whom he had presented himself, Crespas's steward, a slight and meek elder who had served—he had told Casca—Crespas and his family for over forty years. There had been pride in the old man's voice then, but he was silent now as he brought Casca to Crespas's study. Casca could sense something more than deference in the old man. Fear?

It was obvious that Crespas was going over the progress reports from the mines and adjacent areas, probably for the last quarter, and apparently he knew exactly what he was doing. Casca decided that here was a man who knew how to turn a profit, and again the uneasiness haunted him. The study had an air of cold efficiency about it... inhumanity...

Following the steward's example, Casca stood with bowed head, until Crespas motioned for him to approach closer to his desk. Reaching up, he took Casca's medallion from him and compared the number with a master list on the desk. When he found what he was looking for, he lifted cold eyes to Casca and studied him intently for an impossibly long moment. There was absolutely no expression on his face. To Casca, it seemed made of marble; the man's thoughts were as impossible to reach as those of a statue. But he had come this far for his freedom, and not even the gods themselves were going to make him back down. He returned the stone stare with one equally as impassive.

Still it bothered Casca. When he had taken the dead slave's medallion, he had not thought about the possibility of a master list. What if Crespas made something of it? He did not relish the possibility of being at the patrician's mercy.

But Crespas said nothing. Instead, he instructed the steward to go bring him certain files, and, while the old steward was out of the room, turned his attention to Casca.

"Your name, slave?"

The manner of speech immediately set Casca down off his anxiety high. The tone said, No freedom today. It brought up memory of the brutal efficiency Crespas had used in crushing the skull of the first thief with his cane. Casca let his voice become that of the, typical slave:

"Casca, master."

"Well, Casca, yesterday you did me a service, and I may be of a mind to reward you for it. By the look of you I can tell you are one who is familiar with violence. Several of those cuts on your hide look to have come from bladed weapons. Am I correct?"

"Yes, master."

"Good. You also know your place. That pleases me. We will get along. I am going to take you with me when I leave this pigsty and return to Rome. While there, I will enter you into a school for gladiators."

Gladiators? It took all of Casca's willpower to prevent any expression from showing on his face. But he lowered his head in submission.

Looking steadily at Casca, Crespas said, "You wish your freedom, do you not?" He did not wait for an answer but went on in the same cold, level voice: "Of course you do. Anyone can see that you are not cut out to be a good slave. And with those muscles of yours, some day you are going to give whoever owns you a lot of trouble—if you don't end up killing him. So, Casca, what I propose is this. I will buy you from the state—as a province governor I have that prerogative—and I will take you to Rome. I will pay for your training in the school of my choice. You will fight for me for three years in the arena. At the end of that time I will grant you your freedom. And, of course, as you know there is always the chance you could be given the wooden sword. It doesn't happen often, but it does happen. Now, if you agree to this, I will put the terms in writing and have them so notarized and a

copy given to you." He paused. His eyes, sharp and deadly as a gladius, went through Casca. But when he continued, his voice had the same level, flat tone... as though he were giving orders to an animal. "But if anything happens to me, and I should die before our agreement reaches its conclusion, you will not go free. You will be sold on the block to the highest bidder. By this action I am sure you can see that I am trying to provide myself with a little insurance against your trying to achieve your freedom early at my expense. Do you agree to these terms?"

Casca raised his head and looked directly into the eyes of Crespas. His voice hollow, he said, "Yes, master, I agree."

Crespas stood and straightened his tunic. "Good. It shall be done, then." The old steward returned with a box from which Crespas took several documents. "These are the legal instruments necessary for the transfer of your ownership to me." He quickly filled in the necessary information with his reed quill pen and signed them, affixing his seal. "It's done. You belong to me. I will have the other papers pertaining to our agreement drawn up by this time tomorrow, and we will be on our way to Rome within the month. Now you will return to your quarters and remove all of your personal possessions from there. You will come back here, and my steward will assign you quarters. Follow his instructions while in this house, and we will have no problems. In anticipation of your agreement, I have already prepared orders releasing you from the mines." Handing Casca a small, rolled scroll, he said, "Give this to your overseer, and he will release you. Do you understand everything?"

Casca nodded.

"Good. Then be about your business, and I will tend to mine."

Once the slave Casca was out of the room, Crespas allowed himself the luxury of a smile. *A nice piece of business.* He glanced at the master list of numbers lying on his desk. *Now, the name on those manumission documents...* It was, of course, most unlikely that Casca would survive three years in the arena. But, if he did...

Casca walked slowly back down the hill to the mine holding the scroll in his hand and trying to assimilate all that had transpired. He was still in a state of confusion when Minitre came up to him.

"Well, how did it go? Are those your manumission documents? Did he give you any money? What happened? Tell me, man."

Casca smiled his crooked grin. "I told you that son of a bitch had something up his sleeve. He bought me and is going to make a gladiator out of me."

"A gladiator?"

"We're going to Rome next month when he is relieved of his duty here. But I do have a chance for freedom if I serve him well and kill enough people in the arena." He chuckled softly. "Well, one thing, little friend. I am leaving the mines, and that is a definite improvement. Right now I am to get my things and go back to his domus and work there until we leave Greece."

Minitre was stunned. His face screwed itself up, and Casca thought, for a moment the little overseer was going to cry.

"Damn it! It's not fair. He should have set you free. Anyone with a smidgeon of honor would have."

Minitre's concern touched Casca, and he put his arm around the little man's shoulders. "Don't worry. It will all work out. As you said, I have time on my side."

Go home to your wife, Lucius. You have done well by me, and I will never forget it. You are the first friend I have had in fifty-five years. That is not a small thing. Go home, friend, and do yourself a kindness and beat your wife."

The month passed uneventfully. Casca was well treated in the household of Crespas. The old steward was kind, and the other slaves were afraid of him because of his size and great strength. Minitre came often to sit and talk with Casca. Minitre brought Casca up to date on all that had happened in the Empire since he had been enslaved. Casca had come to the conclusion that such knowledge would help pave the road to his freedom. He had to be current on items of everyday knowledge. If he slipped, and his true age was discovered, the game would be over and the punishment unthinkable. During the days Casca spent his time limbering up his sword arm in the courtyard back of Crespas's house. There he would spend hours hacking and gouging against make-believe enemies, the warmth of the sun on his back pleasant, the feel of the sword in his hand giving him confidence. This was something he understood—and it was his way to freedom.

Unseen by Casca, Crespas often watched, grinning in self approval. Yes, he had the man figured out all right. With any luck at all the slave would make him a nice piece of change in the games. This one had all the earmarks of a winner. He had the skill, and the deep look of determination that came across the brute's face as he hacked at the wooden posts, evidence of the intense desire of Casca for his freedom, told Crespas that he had the motivation. Yes... a nice piece of change.

They sailed. Minitre was at the dock, waving farewell, pleased with himself. After all, he had participated in a great adventure. Even better, he had taken Casca's advice and beat the hell out of his wife with a stout rod. Surprisingly, instead of counterattacking, she had become instantly meek and anxious to please. Yes, life was indeed more bearable... and interesting.

Casca looked forward to the voyage. The galley they were sailing on was a military bireme, twin-oared, a lot different from the trading ship that had brought him to the mines. Here all the rowers were slaves and chained to their oars; if the ship went down, so did they. The hortator who beat the time looked to be a Gaul from the size and coloring of him. He beat the time on his log drum with a smooth precision that spoke of years of practice. The measure was given. The beat began. Smoothly the oars of the slaves sliced the gray green waters, and the galley put out to sea. The steady thumping of the hortator's gavel beat a rhythm that Casca felt echoed in his own pulse. The slaves would pull until they were in the open sea and the wind could take over.

Casca was put with Crespa's other personal slaves in a forward hatch. There they made beds as best they could.

It was a fair day, and clear, with the wind coming in from the deserts of Arabia across the Mediterranean, the wind that blew straight toward Rome. It would be an easy voyage. For Casca, the sea road to Rome—and the arena—was clear.

Fourteen

Twelve to fifteen days the journey would take, depending upon the winds and the weather. Time enough for rest, Casca thought. He watched the myriad islands of the Cyclades slide by to port and starboard as the galley pushed its ram-fitted nose through the wine-dark sea. It was pleasant to watch the islands and breathe the fresh air of the sea they covered from horizon to horizon. They were like an enormous convoy of strange ships floating on the dark water under the clear blue sky. Like an honor guard of vessels the gods had sent to speed him off on his voyage to freedom.

He smiled inwardly at the childish thought. It had been so many, many years since the images of a child's imagination had played in his brain that this one nonsensical conceit was like a lonely stick of driftwood bobbing on the enormous sea. Well, then. A good omen. Somewhere deep in his mind something was telling him that freedom would come. But he did wonder what the hell the other slaves would think if they knew what had been—however briefly—in his mind.

He would keep to himself during the voyage. Again, as when he was first brought to Seriphos, he felt no trace of seasickness, though, even in these calm waters, the malady had struck many of the other slaves. The gentle roll and slight pitch of the galley served only to give his mind an ease of thought as he rested.

They left the islands. By dawn of the second day at sea, when he went on deck, he could just make out astern the outline of Achaia, the southernmost tip of Greece. They moved out into the islandless waters of what the Greeks called the Ionian Sea, a four-hundred-mile expanse of ocean separating Greece from her conqueror and student, Rome.

The wind failed only twice in ten days. Then the sound of the hortator's gavel pounded the measure and the slaves fell to the stroke. The lash was used sparingly on this ship. The captain had a good set of oarsmen and intended to keep them in good health as long as he could. Only two died on the voyage. One got it from a bleeding disease that loosened his teeth until they fell out. The other casualty resulted from the captain's trying to knock some brains into the head of an oarsman who kept fouling up the stroke; instead the captain knocked the brains out of him when he rapped the fellow's head firmly with his baton. A slight miscalculation concerning the thickness of the slave's skull. It was thinner than the captain thought. Of course, the baton was of hardwood and capped with a silver knob...

Casca had determined to keep to himself during the voyage, but that did not prevent him from observing the other slaves. In the hold where the privately owned slaves were kept there was the usual blending of peoples and races. But one slave was unusual and specially interested him.

He had never seen the like before. The slave was a small man of indeterminate age. He could be anything from forty-five to sixty-five; a wispy gray moustache and beard accented his features. It was hard to tell because of the color of his skin which had a gold cast to it under the sunburn. His eyes were similar to some Casca had seen among travelers from the east who had come to the markets in Jerusalem, except that they seemed more slanted, giving the man a sleepy look. His body was lean and well-muscled.

But it was as much what the man did as what he looked like that made him so damned odd. Every morning and evening he went through a strange ritual of exercises, weaving his body about like a serpent, taking on odd positions and then holding the positions for long periods of time while he performed strange breathing exercises—letting the air hiss out between his teeth and then inhaling and sucking his abdomen in and holding the breath.

Even odder was the way he acted around the other slaves. The little man was quiet and well-mannered, never giving offense when he did not get the choice bits from the pot and even smiling and thanking the bastard who gypped him for being so good as to leave him what he did. Damned curious. Maybe there was something to that bit about a man's brain being touched by the gods.

As the days wore on, Casca watched the other slaves bit by bit take greater and greater advantage of the yellow man until he could no longer contain his curiosity. That night, after the evening meal, he moved to the side of the little man and asked:

"Why do you let them treat you so, yellow man?"

The brown eyes in the slanted epicanthic fold looked steadily at Casca. There was no trace of fear in the man. Whatever was done to him was not done because he was afraid.

The yellow man smiled, his even white teeth shining in the dim light. "Not tonight, my monstrous barbarian. Sleep tonight. Tomorrow I will answer your questions, for it is as the Lord Confucius said that to teach is to learn. Tomorrow we will both learn more."

As he lay on his pallet that night, Casca thought about the strange little man with the flashing eyes, but he finally gave up trying to fathom what the yellow slave meant and, giving a grunt, rolled over on his right side and let the creaking of the ship's wooden sides lull him to sleep.

And when the new day came with its sameness to all the other days of the voyage he had practically dismissed the yellow man from his mind.

Until the evening meal, that is.

The slaves' rations were lowered down to them in a large black kettle, one that—from the look of it—had seen service in the fleet for at least a hundred years. All meals were prepared at the only place on the ship where a fire could be lit, an open area covered with sand, a brass brazier serving as stove. Fire was the single most feared disaster on board the galleys.

With the kettle lowered, the slaves stood in line to dip their rations out of the pot and into their personal bowls. Naturally Casca took his place in the front of the line. He was the strongest, and the strongest always feed first.

He took his bowl of meaty fish stew to his bunking area and sat cross-legged and ate, dipping the pieces of fish out with his fingers, occasionally smacking his lips over a morsel.

A commotion by the pot drew his attention. The yellow man was having problems.

He had awaited his turn at the pot patiently, content to be the last in line, even to the extent of giving an elderly slave a spot in front of him—and bowing politely while he did it.

When he had taken his own serving—and there was precious little left at the bottom of the pot—two of the younger slaves decided to have some fun with the little man. One was a young man of perhaps twenty, fair-haired and with pleasant enough features—though a close look would show a mean set to the mouth. The other was of mixed blood, perhaps Greek and Persian. The half-breed was large and strong, and had more than once thought about challenging Casca for the first position. He had, however, apparently seen something in the legionary that told him to leave well enough alone, so Casca had not had the pleasure of whipping his ass. But the yellow man was something else—and fair game.

When little slant-eyes had taken his bowl and started back for his area, the blond young slave tripped him, knocking his food to the floor. The blond and the breed thought this great fun and suggested that the yellow one eat his food from the floor like a dog, seeing as how he was obviously an animal of some kind, perhaps even a new type of monkey.

The yellow man arose from the deck. Smiling, he wiped the stew from his saffron-colored robe and turned to face the two men. Bowing, he asked politely:

"Honored sirs, is it your intention to continue harassing me? Have I done anything to offend you? If so, I regret it most sincerely as it was unintentional. I wish you no harm. I only wish for you a joyous life filled with harmony."

The breed couldn't believe his ears. Then he began to laugh.

"Harm? You wish us no harm? You yellow toad, I'll teach you what harm means."

Casca had started to get up and put a stop to the action when the yellow man caught his eyes and motioned for him to sit back down. Well, it was none of his business if the little man wanted to get his head broken open by those two thugs. Casca shook his head and went back to eating, but he watched.

The Greek breed continued to talk to the yellow man. Liking the sound of his own voice, he began describing the type of parentage it must have taken to sire such as little slant-eyes.

The yellow man sighed as if weary and reconciled to this defilement and any others the two might wish to heap upon him. But he did lower his hands into one of the strange positions Casca had noticed when he exercised.

It got the breed's attention. "What is this?" he demanded, reached out one long arm and grabbing the little man on the shoulder. But before he could register what was happening he was flying through the air. He landed on his back on the deck a full ten feet away, with an audible *Thunk!* as the air blew out of him.

The yellow man had barely changed position. Now he turned to face the downed man, bowed, and asked in the politest of tones:

"Will you please do me the great service of letting this unfortunate one be left in peace? I wish you no harm." His yellow face showed no trace of mockery. The man was completely sincere. "Please do not force me into that which is unpleasant."

The half Greek lay on the deck for a moment, stunned. Then his breath returned, he got up, and with a growl threw himself at the yellow man, hands extended, going for the throat.

The slant-eyed one pivoted on one foot, turned his body away as if to run, and with a twisting motion swung his rear leg up and kicked the Greek in the throat, setting the man back down on the deck trying to breathe. When the breed came at

him, so did the young blond. While the yellow man's foot was still in the air, the fair-haired youngster swung a fist at the yellow man's face—only to find it wasn't there. Slant-eye's hand made a pass, and the youngster's body did a complete turnaround, facing back the way he had come. By the time the Greek had hit the deck the yellow man had the youngster on his knees from the rear. With a sigh of regret, he formed a strange fist and tapped the youngster just behind the ear. The young man fell forward onto the floor, unconscious. He would probably have broken his nose in the fall had not the yellow man caught his head and gently lowered him to the deck.

Slant-eyes turned to the other slaves. "I apologize for this unpleasantness, but it was unavoidable." Kneeling down, he put the scraps of food back in his bowl and, taking a scrap of rag, began meticulously cleaning the floor where his food had fallen. When he had finished, he stood, faced the others, and bowed.

Casca's mouth was hanging open. *What the Hades was that?* I have never seen anything like it. Gulping the rest of his food down, he wiped his mouth with the back of one hairy hand and made his way to the side of the yellow man.

Thumping himself down beside the yellow man, he asked: "What kind of man are you, anyway? I know I asked you that yesterday, but you didn't answer, and after what I just saw you do to those two bravos I think I would like to know more about you. Will you tell me?"

The little man looked long and steadily past Casca before he spoke. "I am Shiu Lao Tze." His voice was soft and gentle and lying in its undertones was a feeling of being pleased with himself that was oddly pleasant to hear. But abruptly his voice sharpened. "Why do you concern yourself with me, soldier?"

"I am no soldier!" Casca spat back. "I am a slave like you."

"You are a soldier... regardless of what your present state may be. We are what we are from the time of birth and cannot escape it. You are a soldier. You may be many other things also in your life, but, as the great wheel turns, you will return to what you really are." The gentleness was back, a timeless gentleness, yet he looked deep into Casca's eyes.

The gaze of Shiu Tze made Casca uneasy, and his own voice took on a sharp edge. "And what are you, little man, if not a slave?"

"I am a humble follower of the great sage Kung Fu Tsu, Kung the Philosopher—or, as your learned men call him, Confucius. I follow his teaching and rules of living."

"Not another religion," mumbled Casca. "That's all this world needs, another group of gods to finish driving man crazy."

Shiu Tze laughed gently. "No, my big-nosed barbarian. Kung Fu Tzu—or perhaps I should call him Confucius; that will be easier for you to say with your uneducated tongue—Confucius is not a god. He is a way of life that can bring peace and joy to all men.

Curiosity settled in on Casca. The little man had a magnetic appeal for him. "And what is that way, Shiu Tze?"

"It is the path of enlightenment. My master, the sage Confucius, has only one primary law to live by and that is not to do to others what you do not want them to do to you."

"Is that all there is to it?"

"There are the Analects and five Ching of his teachings, but it is not a religion as you have with your panoply of gods. The great sage lived and walked the earth over five hundred years ago. He is no god, but his teachings can give you peace of mind. My religion as such is that. The members of my order believe that the soul lives on as long as a man's descendants remember him, so as I honor my father, my sons must honor me until the time of my rebirth. And then, if I have achieved merit, I shall be born again as a man. If not, it will be as a lesser being, or beast, until I pay enough penance."

"Religion," Casca grumbled. "Enough of religion. I want to know how you did what you did to those two dummies over there." He indicated the two toughs who were even now consoling themselves with the idea that Shiu had hit them with a club when they weren't looking. In another hour they would believe their own lie.

Shiu laughed, a tinkling sound, as of wind chimes. His voice had a surprisingly lilting quality to it.

"Very well, O mighty warrior. What you witnessed was no more than the way of the open hand. It is an art many of those in my brotherhood practice. You see, our code forbids the use of weapons, but we are not so stupid as to believe that absolute passivity will solve every situation. So, when all else fails, we go the way of the open hand. It came to us from across the great mountains along with the teachings of another great sage, Siddhartha Gautama, called the Buddha. Many of his followers were masters of this art, and we learned from them and have changed it to suit ourselves."

"But," Casca broke in, "How does it work? You're so much smaller than those two, yet you handled them as if they were babes. How?"

Shiu laughed again... "I like you, barbarian. And because I like you and believe that basically you are a good man, I will tell you of the way of the great circle. For every movement there is a counter movement. You use your opponent's strength and weight against him. While this journey lasts I will instruct you in the Way, but in exchange for this, you must also let me tell you of the way of Confucius in the hope that I may attain greater merit for my efforts. Agreed?"

Casca was not particularly interested in the religion part, but that other. "Agreed," he said.

As he reached out to shake on the deal he noticed for the first time that Shiu's hands were odd looking. The two large knuckles on each hand were much greater in size than they should have been and were covered by a thick pad of callus. Another pad ran down the edge of his palm. And the little man's hand was as hard as Casca's—even after Casca's years in the mines.

For Casca, the rest of the trip was much too short. The time spent with Shiu taught him more about life and people than all his other years combined. Even the little man's philosophy of life would have been pleasant to believe in. However, Casca knew that it was not his way. His fate was forever merged with the sword. As for Shiu, Casca liked and respected the little man.

Shiu's hands and feet were faster than the eye could follow. Yet he claimed there were others even faster than he, that masters in this art in his home country of Khitai could snatch arrows from the air, such was their proficiency. But, laughing his tinkling laugh, he said, "Do not concern yourself with that, big nose, for you will not reach that level in the short time we have together. That is the

undertaking of years, and I fear you are too old to begin. One must start as a child to learn properly, but you will learn enough to make you a master among your peers. For, is not a one-eyed man king in the land of the blind? You will not learn all, but perhaps it will be enough for your purposes."

Casca was fascinated by the ritual-looking motions of the forms that Shiu went through. After a couple of days he could see that they were not just forms for mental discipline, but actual movements and strikes of deadly efficiency.

Shiu concentrated on teaching Casca only those techniques easiest to learn. They exercised these for ten or more hours every day. The other slaves thought they had gone insane with mad dancing and whirling.

As for Crespas, he left Casca to his own, only calling to see him now and then to make sure he was eating properly and wasn't getting sick. A wise man took good care of his stock—and Casca could be worth thousands.

Crespas knew nothing of the little yellow man.

Fifteen

The day before landfall began with deceptive peace. It was hard to imagine that violence and danger might occur before the voyage ended. For Casca and Shiu the morning was tranquil. They stood on the foredeck enjoying the cool breeze. To the starboard the red-tiled roofs of Rhegium were reflecting the rosy glow from the morning sun, the contrasting whitewashed sides of the houses making a pleasant and relaxed picture. To port lay the huge island of Sicily over which Rome and Carthage had battled and where also were Greek colonies that had been founded over seven hundred years before, the oldest of which was Naxos, too far to the south for Casca and Shiu to see. The galley glided along, gradually entering choppiest waters as they came into the Straits of Messina. But the bronze-tipped ramming prow was slicing its way closer and closer to Rome. By late tomorrow they should make landfall at the port of Ostia.

The oar slaves lay with the oars to hand in case the wind behind failed and the waters of this narrow stretch turned treacherous. But at the moment, all was peace and calm.

Casca turned to Shiu, letting his eyes take in this strange and unusual man who was so surprisingly gentle for one with such great fighting capabilities.

"Shiu, I asked you before, and you said you would say later. We have only this last day and night before we land and we are separated. Tell me. I wish to know. How did you come to be where you are? And what are you? Who is it that you are being sent to?"

Shiu smiled gently, the wind whipping his robes as if trying to fill them as it did the rigged sails of the galley.

"Very well, big nose. Sit and listen. I come from the province of Tsi, near the great river of Hwang-ho. There I was raised in the teachings of my master, Confucius. I studied with my brothers at the monastery. When the elder brothers deemed I was worthy, they sent me out to teach the way to the unenlightened.

"I took only my beggar's bowl and staff. Many provinces did I travel to, spreading the word. I have seen wonders you have not dreamed of.

"But I also discovered I have a great curiosity to see even more. And because of that curiosity I found myself taken captive by pirates on the way to the kingdom of the Khmer."

The morning sun reflected like silver coins off the channel as Shiu paused to collect his thoughts.

"My hulking friend, there is no need for me to tell you of all that has happened to me over these last fifteen years. That would take more time than we have left to us on this journey. Suffice to say that I have been sold and resold, given my freedom and made a slave again and again—yet always the path that fate has selected for me has led to these barbarian lands.

"I have had many masters. For the most part they were kind enough, and several have chosen to follow the Way. I have spent the last five years teaching the sons and daughters of the governor of Rhodes, for I have a small gift for numbers and music. However, my philosophy is not what the governor of Rhodes found congenial. His eldest son was beginning to take interest in my words. To preclude his son's acceptance of the Way, the governor, a kindly man, has made a present of me to a friend of his. I have heard of his friend; he is a wise and noble man of learning. It is to his house I go."

"Well, dammit," grumbled Casca, "who is he?"

"Seneca is the honored man's name – Seneca."

Casca was silent for a moment. When Lucius had updated him on history and politics the name of Seneca had often been mentioned. Seneca, he recalled Lucius as saying, was one of Rome's leading minds. He had been the teacher and adviser of Nero when the young emperor first assumed power. Of late, however, Nero had been going his own way and listening to none but those who pleased him. Well, it was none of Casca's concern. He would never meet Nero.

Now the Pelorus promontory was coming in sight and the sea roughening. The captain called on the slaves to take oar and assist in the last of the passage through the Straits of Messina.

"We will have only one more night at sea, my young friend. Our time at sea is short, and we should make the most of it in learning. I call you young, for so you appear, but... I have been to many lands and many places. I have met the great and the small. Most of the pitiable group that we call man fit into niches of one kind or another. Even I fit into one. But you are an enigma to me. I don't quite know how to place you. Can you help in answering this? Forgive me if I am asking too much, but, as I told you, I am cursed by overweening curiosity."

Smiling, Casca leaned close to the yellow man. "There is an answer, Shiu, but I don't think now is the time for the telling. Perhaps after we land we will have the chance to talk together once more."

Shiu gently accepted Casca's reticence to talk of himself. "Good enough, long nose. If you choose not to speak, you have your reasons. Let it suffice that I believe you are basically a good man—within your own rules, that is. You are not cruel without purpose, neither do you use your great strength against those who are weaker. Also, your wish to come to my aid when the ignorant ones forced themselves on me shows a certain moral structure. But I believe you are one who

is hounded by his own existence, that you have yet to gain control over your destiny—or even to know what it shall be. But, enough. We will leave things as they are. I accept you without restraints."

Shiu rose to his full height. Claspng his hands together, and holding them inside the long sleeves of his robe, he bowed.

Crespas, coming on deck, noticed the yellow man bowing to Casca but thought nothing of it. As with Casca and Shiu, the morning was tranquil for him. His memories of the voyage so far were pleasant. He had been content to wager his palate against the money of the galley captain by naming the different wines of the empire set before him. So far he had won three and lost one, but in this kind of contest he couldn't really lose. The wagers were small and the wines for the most part quite good, especially the Falernian, of Rome. Not Rome exactly, but it was grown in the hills between Rome and Neapolis to the south. Also, there were vintages that were almost as pleasing. The Mamerian of Sicily and the Greek Chian and Lesbian were worth the tasting just for the differences.

Ah! The thought of good wine and good food filled Crespas with a happy glow, and he anticipated tonight's supper. As the galley neared its destination, small boats would approach, Crespas knew from past experience; the sailors would be crying out what they had to sell... sea urchins and turbot fresh from the waters... and oysters. Crespas' mouth fairly watered at the thought of fresh raw oysters in a fish sauce, washed down with the Tarter Mamertine.

Good! The pleasures of civilized company again... and food fit to eat, not the goat smothered in garlic that those miserable goatherds had so constantly tried to palm off on him these past years. This homecoming was long overdue.

Still, the last three years had not been without profit. The mines on Siphnos had not been completely worked out by the Greeks. Besides the copper ore, there were occasional pockets of silver. Even gold had cropped up now and then. The bulk of this went into his own purse, after, of course, a reward to the overseer who brought the finds to him. One had to still wagging tongues.

But... tomorrow... Rome... and my villa... home again!

Crespas sighed, luxuriating in anticipation.

He had entirely forgotten Casca and the little yellow man.

But two men on the galley had not forgotten Casca and Shiu.

The two thugs had seen Shiu bow to Casca. The breed cursed quietly. The younger one asked, "tonight?"

"Tonight. When the sea gets rough."

"But what if they don't show on deck?"

"They will." By Mithra, damned if he would be cheated out of his revenge. Even the gods would not be that unfair. There had been no chance to even the score so far. The two had continued to give Casca and Shiu dark looks and cursed at them beneath their breath when they were in the vicinity of the yellow man, but only once had they given it the old try. A few days earlier the two of them had approached Casca and started to chew his ass out for taking up with the yellow man, but at the sight of Casca swelling up in anger—his neck and face turning dark with rage, his great arms flexing—they had beat a hasty retreat. The incident had served to cement their hatred for Casca, and they now included him in their curses and plottings.

"Tonight," the breed repeated.

Strong winds billowed the sails out and drove the galley on north, north to the port of Ostia. The waters grew appreciably rougher as the evening approached and the Tyrrhenian Sea turned dark. When full night came on, the island of Aeoli was far astern to port, and the seas were even rougher. But the wind was steady, pushing them to the north at a good clip, and the captain chose to ride the wind after giving orders for everything loose to be battened down. All fires were out. No oil lamps were to be lit tonight. The risk of fire was too great, and the captain was a careful man. As for Casca and Shiu, the prohibition of lamplight made little difference. They weren't used to having lamps at night anyway. Oil was a luxury saved for the rich and well-to-do, not for lowly slaves.

Casca and Shiu took their meals and ate apart from the other slaves as was now their custom. The two thugs gave them dark looks, but Casca ignored them, and Shiu seemed not to see. Tomorrow would be the end of the voyage. Neither would probably ever see the two thugs after the landing. They ate and prepared for the night.

The wind freshened and the sea roughened. The galley pitched and yawed. Those in the slave sections tried to sleep. Some succeeded, but the tossing only served to make Casca restless. He arose from his pallet, wrapped his cloak around him, and started for the upper deck and fresh air. As he climbed the ladder leading to the surface, a figure below made himself known.

"Shiu!"

"Go on, big nose, I am right behind."

The two walked carefully along the deck to the starboard side of the galley. Italy lay somewhere in the dark. The wind hummed through the lines, pressed the billowed sails, and the galley drove on through the night.

Shiu faced the stern, letting the sea breeze blow cold in his face and spray settle into his thin beard and moustache. "Aiiiee, big nose. This is much better than lying below in that dungeon. Here at least we can breathe free air—even if we are not free."

Casca grunted as he was wont to do when he couldn't think of anything to say, enjoying the brisk wind. The only sailors on deck were those needed for the care of the ship. They were mostly Cyprians or Egyptians, experienced men who could be counted on in an emergency. The wind was strong, but there was no real danger, though the roughness of the sea was enough to make landlubbers uncomfortable.

There was, however, another danger much more real.

As Casca and Shiu enjoyed the open expanse of the dark sea, two figures made their way to the deck. These kept stealthily to the shadows, moving slowly and cautiously. The two bullies were determined to even the score tonight, for the rough sea would be an ideal time. If two landsmen went over the side into the churning waters, surely there could be no suspicion of foul play.

The younger man moved forward, his breath seeming to rasp in his ears, anticipation building in him, his pulse quickening. It was his first such kill. The older man was more settled and at ease. A basic streak of cruelty needing to be fed, combined with the need to reinforce his own image of himself, drove him to this act of murder. He had killed before in the dark, once even under very similar

circumstances to this while working on a cargo ship out of Crete. There the seas, like these, had covered his deed forever.

No moon covered the dark sea. The only light came from the phosphorescent glowing of the ocean froth, flashing and disappearing, winking out like strange-shaped fireflies.

Despite the night chill, the face of the young man was covered in sweat. He could barely make out the Greek beside him. He touched the Greek's arm with a hand that was questioning, eager, trembling. The shadows of Casca and Shiu loomed indefinitely before them, but in the faint light of the phosphorescent sea it was obvious that their backs were turned, and the wind was covering any sound the two assassins might make. The time was now. The half-breed gave his comrade's hand a forward jerk, and simultaneously they moved forward, arms out, hands reaching to shove...

They were only two steps away...

Shiu tensed. A velvet shadow, he turned and caught the young one's outstretched hands, pivoting inside the young man's reach. Gently he set his hip against the thigh of the young man and with a smooth, turning lift threw the youngster flying over his head and out over the railing.

The next thought in the young man's brain was the feel of the sea reaching up to meet him. A large swell of the black waters seemed to open for his body. Near silence. Only a gurgling sigh. The waters took him down, closing over him, surprising in their warmth. His mouth was open for a scream that never came, for it was instantly filled with the Mediterranean. He had no sense of weight. In the dark, salty water there was no up or down. Panic began to touch his brain, but then was dulled as the sea flowed into his lungs and the warm, wet black claimed him forever.

His comrade was not as fortunate.

When Shiu turned, it alerted Casca, and he caught the Greek breed by the arm and throat. Casca's instinctive soldier's training took over. The lessons he had learned from Shiu came automatically. Without consciously willing it to happen, he used a forward leg trip and drove the Greek to the deck, still holding to the breed's throat. In the corner of his eye he sensed the flying shadow of the young man and Shiu turning into the basic defensive posture, feet set in a strong horse stance, hands positioned.

Holding the Greek down, Casca recalled a technique the old one had showed him—but not to completion. *Shit*, he thought, *I might as well see if it works*. Switching hands on the Greek's throat to keep him from screaming, Casca formed his free hand in the blunt extended finger striking attitude. Taking a deep breath, he compressed half into his lower abdomen, then let the retained air escape in bursts, giving a compressed hiss instead of the normal *kiyi!* Then Casca drove his fingers straight into the area just below the center and to the left of the solar plexus. As his fingers went deep, he turned them up to the heart. With a quick vibrating pumping action, he worked his hand back and forth, the action of his strike creating a shock wave that threw the half-breed's heart into convulsions.

The great muscle missed a beat... then another. It tried to correct itself, but another shock wave hit it, and the tissues tore inside. The heart ruptured. The Greek opened his mouth. The veins in his neck extended out of all proportion. His

chest swelled. His back arched and his feet drummed a rhythm pattern onto the deck, momentarily waking one of the oar slaves from sleep. He died, face black, and a ruptured heart draining inside.

Casca rose, grunted as he picked the man up and let his body slide over the side into the deep. He turned to Shiu, his voice pleased.

"It works. By Hades, Shiu, it really works. When I hit him, I could actually feel his heart against my fingertips. That is really, really a great technique. Already you have given me something which could mean more to me than I could ever repay you for. You are a genius."

Shiu's gentle smile was invisible in the darkness, evidenced only by his soft voice. "Do not get overexcited, you great hulk. It is unfortunate that we were forced to use the art to kill, but, it had to be done; these two would have come to a bad end anyway. We have probably saved some innocents from their unkind attentions. As to being a genius—"

His grin spread wide enough for Casca to see it in the dark. His voice rose with his comic lilt. "As to being a genius, that's true, big nose, that's true."

Sixteen

The slaves banked the oars, and the galley glided up to the stone wharf. Her lines were grabbed by waiting longshoremen, and quickly the vessel was secured in her mooring.

First to disembark were the passengers. The slaves were put under guard until their owners could pick them up, but Casca was taken immediately by Crespas to a waiting chariot with two horses hitched to it. As Crespas took the reins he called out for his steward to see to his possessions and hurry them on home. Casca's possessions consisted of what he had in his pack, a small bundle containing his bowl, his spoon, and a fire starter kit—a ball of lint, a piece of iron, and a small block of flint.

Crespas showed himself to be quite adept at handling his team of horses. He took a great deal of pride in his ability to handle both men and horses equally well. Apparently in his eyes the two were equal. Slipping the reins so that they snapped the rear ends of the horses, he took off with a jerk and clatter. The metal-rimmed wheels rattled over the stone roadway, and they sped rapidly away from the great port.

The Via Ostia was the most direct road to Rome, but Casca was not to enter Rome this day. Holding to the sides of the car, he tried to keep his balance. Never before had he ridden in a chariot. The speed they ran at was breathtaking. At this rate they could cover the almost twenty miles to the outskirts of Rome in less than two hours.

As Casca had been hurried to the chariot, he had caught one quick last glimpse of Shiu giving a small wave to him as the yellow man was led off with the other slaves to wait for their masters to come for them. Inside his tough hide Casca felt for the second time a sense of loss. The first was leaving the overseer Lucius

Minitre. He thought momentarily of Minitre, kindly, portly Minitre, not at all suited for the job of bossing slaves in the mines. Minitre had been his friend. And so had this man from the east, this Shiu from beyond even the Indus River who had come into his life and brought him more knowledge about feelings and life in just a few days than he had learned in all his years in the pits where life was a passing commodity.

Crespas was in his element, racing behind a pair of fine geldings on the road leading to the center of the world. "All roads lead to Rome," he shouted at Casca. "Rome has built over fifty thousand miles of major roadways and a hundred thousand of secondaries. The Empire is united by these roadways. Every day the provinces are filled with the comings and goings of tourists and merchants. Since the reign of Tiberius there have been no serious threats to the Pax Romana, only occasional border skirmishes. Periodically Rome might suffer a setback and lose a battle or two, but only on the frontier. The heart of the Empire itself is inviolate."

The harangue stunned Casca, not so much for the information, but that Crespas would choose this time and place for such a learned discourse. Had he misjudged patricians? He had always thought of them—Crespas particularly—as mere greedy exploiters of men below them in the social order. Could they really have an understanding—and concern—for the Empire? It was a side of Crespas that he did not expect to exist. Yet, even here there was a harshly brutal edge to the patrician. With anyone else such a long address might have implied a certain camaraderie. With Crespas there was an undertone of such implied aristocracy that left no doubt whatsoever as to Casca's place. Crespas could have been talking to cattle. So Casca wisely made no response.

Besides, the recklessly speedy chariot ride was scaring the hell out of him...

Just outside Rome, Crespas turned off to the left, heading into the small hills between the Via Ostia and the Appian Way. This road led to Lanuvian to the south where the presses made the fine Falernian for Rome. Within sight of the Appian Gate, a short stroll across the road from the temple of Mars, was the school. A school for death. This one was run by a fellow patrician of Crespas, one lictor Abascantus, who, like Crespas, preferred to leave the management of this particular business to his stewards and slaves. Business had been good.

Even though for the most part the control of gladiators in the schools was in the hands of the emperor, there were still enough privately owned and operated schools to show a good profit. But they had to be careful. Ever since Spartacus had raised such hell with his escaped gladiators and criminals the state kept a close eye on all schools.

Crespas drove through the entrance way to the walled enclosure, passing armed guards. Looking neither left nor right, he brought the horses to a sudden stop, nearly throwing Casca from the chariot.

"Out," came the short order to Casca, and Crespas indicated for Casca to stand to the side.

The dust had not settled before a house slave had the reins in hand and was standing respectfully by. The schoolmaster saw the approach of the chariot—and quickly moved to attend the drive. The master came wearing the dress of the Galli, heavy swordsman. Bringing his sword to the salute position across his chest, he called out:

"Vale. I am the lanista of this school. I am Marcius Corvu at your service, sir."

Crespas nodded in approval. Apparently he liked the man's looks... tough... his carcass well-scarred from many fights... heavy- muscled... confident. His face contained several deep gouges and scars, and Corvu wore his hair cropped close to the head, the gray resting on his square-boned skull like a tight cap.

"Greetings, Corvu. I am M. Decimus Crespas. I wrote to my friend Abascantus about my bringing a slave here for training. I presume you have been made aware of this?"

"Indeed, sir. We have been expecting you anytime for the last week." He pointed his sword at Casca. "Will this be our new *tiro*?"

Crespas nodded in the affirmative. "Because of his size and muscular development I thought that either the school of Galli or that of the Mirmillones would be best for him. And as my friend and colleague Abascantus owns this establishment, I have opted for your school of the Galli."

Corvu walked around Casca, looking him over closely. He ordered Casca to raise his arms, bend over, show his teeth, and flex. Then, without warning, he drove the pommel of the short sword into Casca's gut. Casca grunted with the impact, and the round butt left an imprint in his stomach, but he did not go down as Corvu expected.

Turning back to Crespas, Corvu said: "You have made the right choice, noble sir. This one has the earmarks of a fighter, and he is tough. The guts are the weak point for most men, yet he took that blow well enough. You are right; he is much too large to be a Retarii or Thraces. No, he definitely belongs in the heavyweight class, and here we specialize. I myself fought for over ten years in the arena and have won the wooden sword twice as a Galli."

Corvu was not above blowing his own horn. Besides, he wanted this potential client to be aware of his expertise.

Crespas nodded. "Yes, I have seen you fight on more than one occasion, my good Corvu. That is the final factor in my determining to place this slave with you. Take him now so that I may be gone to my home. Remember, the slave is mine, and I will not have him crippled in training, and he is to be fed the best you have. You may, of course, beat him, but not to the point of crippling. He is mine, and I have an investment to protect. Train him well, and I will see that you do not lack for some form of appreciation from me."

Raising his hand, Crespas mounted the chariot and gave one quick "Vale," turned the chariot around, yelled that his steward would drop by later to arrange the billing accounts, and disappeared in a clatter, heading with all haste to his home, only a mile away and like the school, outside the walls of Rome.

"Your name, slave?"

Casca caught Corvu's eyes, looking directly into them, his own blue-gray eyes seeming even lighter as they forced Corvu to look away. In irritation Corvu repeated his question and whacked Casca with the flat of his blade.

"Speak, slave."

Controlling himself, Casca replied, "I am Casca Rufio Longinus."

"Were you a soldier?"

"Yes."

"When and where, slave?"

"It does not matter. I am here now. That is enough."

Corvu looked closely at him. "Slave, you have a lot to learn. Here I am the master, and I hold your life in my hands."

Casca said nothing, merely smiled.

Corvu became angry at himself for, not being able to impress this insolent slave properly, but he held his rage.

"Enough! You will learn before we are through who is the boss here."

Thinking to himself that Corvu was probably right, Casca followed the lanista as he led the way across the enclosed compound and into the training area. Here men were fighting with both sharp and dulled blades. Most of the trainees were slaves, but Casca understood that there were a number of auctoratti, men who voluntarily put themselves in bondage to the school for a specific period of time in exchange for being, trained—and fed while training—for the arena. All were big men, tough men. Most were in their late twenties or early thirties, hard men who had been around, and they looked good to Casca's professional eye. Whatever the schoolmaster Corvu might be, he was right about one thing—he did know his job.

They walked across a miniature arena. Casca understood that here private shows were sometimes staged. Corvu would use these private affairs to thin his ranks of bad material. Those who couldn't cut it were culled here—and at a profit. Calling a gladiator, Corvu turned Casca over to him and told the man to show Casca the ropes and familiarize him with the rules of the school.

So... this would be his home! Casca looked around him.

Walls surrounded the compound, and on them were several men patrolling with spears and bows. Private guards to discourage escape. There were two sets of barracks: one for the slaves who had to be locked in every night, the other for the freemen who on their own took up the job of fighting for money. The latter—and a few special slaves—were granted the freedom to come and go. Casca was put in the locked barracks.

He was here.

Tomorrow he would begin to learn the trade of the arena.

The word "arena" meant sand. Sand where men and beasts tortured each other and died for the pleasure of Rome.

Seventeen

The days rolled by and became weeks. The weeks flowed into months.

And Casca became more and more proficient at the fine art of slaughter.

At the school, retiarii—the net and trident men—were brought in for mock battles so that the trainees could learn how to deal with them. The Thraces were lighter-armored, and not as heavy as those of the Galli school. The Thraces relied upon their greater speed to achieve victory. For the most part they wore winged helmets. Corvu knew his business, Casca acknowledged. Bringing different styles into the training activities did make a difference.

As Casca progressed, he was moved to a different area of the barracks. Corvu kept his gladiators together by their degrees of skill. As a man progressed, he was advanced, and thus given more status in the eyes of his colleagues.

Casca grew quicker and quicker and rapidly climbed the ranks. He trained constantly—and when no one was looking, on the rare occasions when he was alone – he went over the movements that Shiu had shown him. He repeated each of them every chance he could get until they became instinctive, requiring no thought, only action when needed.

Unknown to Casca, one did watch him.

Crysos, a Sicilian slave, tended to the needs of the gladiators, washed their clothes, brought them posca, a bitter mixture of vinegar and water, to rinse their mouths out with when they got overheated, cleaned up the barracks, and emptied the chamber pots. It was menial work. Crysos was a man who wanted more, but he had not the strength to make it for himself.

In Casca, though, he saw someone different from the others. Instinct told him the big man might provide the answers to his own problems, so he studied Casca intently. The difference between Casca and the other gladiators was marked. As they grew in strength, they also grew in pride and meanness. Not Casca. He stayed to himself and tended to no one's business but his own.

And there were those odd practice sessions on which Crysos spied.

While too small to fight himself, Crysos was smart enough in the ways of combat to realize that the motions Casca went through practicing the art of Shiu Tze were not being done for fun. Casca was in deadly earnest. So... whatever the big man's secret, it meant power.

Therefore Crysos gradually made himself helpful to Casca, at first in a hundred small things. He bided his time, not pushing. And bit by bit Casca grew friendly.

When the prostitutes were brought in twice a month, Crysos would always select a nice clean one for Casca. He did not want Casca to catch anything, particularly the pox.

Casca was not unaware of what Crysos was doing. Although he would never come out of his cell when the women were brought, when Crysos brought a sweet young thing to his cell he didn't have the heart to send her out to those animals. So in kindness he kept her for the night.

He felt a small degree of gratitude for the consideration Crysos was showing. But why? *That little greasy bastard is not doing this all for nothing*, Casca said to himself this night as the last whore left for the walk back to town. *He has a reason. One thing I have learned in this life anyway, if I have learned nothing else: men do not do anything for free. Even Tzu had his price of wanting to teach about his faith and code. There is always some kind of price to pay, and you can bet your ass Crysos has one in mind.*

He put the thought from his mind and concentrated on his training.

Whack! Whack! Whack! repeated over and over—the constant chopping at a wooden post to strengthen the arm. Then came dodging and twisting between a series of swinging spiked steel balls, any one of which could smash his brains out if he were unwary enough to be hit; these taught the use of rhythm and of peripheral vision—seeing from the corners of the eyes. And on the agenda, were exercise and running, situps and pushups—constant training more intense than

anything Casca had ever known in the legion. But, by Mithra, it felt good to be alive ... and the art of Tzu helped in ways he would never have imagined when it came to handling spears and sword. *Damn!* He owed the yellow man a lot.

The other gladiators of the Gallic school were unsure of what to make of Casca. His refusal to associate with them they put down to being stuck up and arrogant. As for Casca, he figured that the less he had to do with people on a day-to-day basis the better chance he had of keeping his own condition a secret. Besides, he didn't particularly care for his current comrades in arms. Most were slaves who had been such troublemakers that their masters had sold them off to the school. A few were captured barbarians for whom the life of a gladiator was infinitely preferable to that of even the most pampered slave kept by some rich matron. They were warriors, so to them it was better to die with sword in hand under any circumstances. Besides, it still gave them the opportunity to kill Romans.

The Gallic school also boasted a number of true professionals who lived inside the walls of the school with their families and children. Most were free men who had chosen this way of life for the money. These lived fairly well. Others, who could be free, still chose the sands of the arena as their place of employment simply because they liked to kill. No more, no less. Casca had seen their type in the legion, also. These were the ones who were always just a little too eager to start some trouble—or to finish off prisoners. They volunteered for the execution squads, and in the legion did the clean up work on the battlefields after the fighting was over.

Killers pure and simple. Often with an exaggerated sense of their own importance, a conviction that they were the elite.

One of these in particular really got under Casca's skin.

Looking him over, Casca grumbled to himself in his normal manner, *If that big black bastard bumps me just one more time in the chow line, I'm going to rip off that oversized piece of skin he is so proud of and shove it down his throat. I don't like Numidians, anyway. They may be people, but I have never had one for a best friend. I don't trust them.*

Jubala, the object of his attention, thought likewise of Casca. He was a huge man with shiny black skin, a shaved head, and filed teeth. His face was scarred with tribal markings, and his hide was so black there were purple undertones. He hated Romans, Greeks, Jews, and Scythians. As a matter of fact he didn't particularly like anyone very much, and the lighter their skin the more he hated each. Though he had won time and again in the arena the victories had never gained him acceptance as anything more than a big black animal. Even the oversexed Roman matrons who used him from time to time used him as a beast and let him know that he would never be anything else. They screwed him. He didn't screw them. He was the one chosen. He didn't do the picking. The wooden sword had been denied him time and again.

In the world outside he was nothing, but here in the school he could do just about as he pleased with the tiros. The new students were in terror of this black monster with the filed teeth and shaven skull. The new students only. Jubala left the other professionals alone. He knew if he started any shit with them they would even up the score in the arena. But the new students were safe meat, and he made the most of his opportunities to harass them. Jubala had crippled a couple

of tiros when he had been sent into spar with them, so Corvu only let him work against ones who could take it just those who were almost ready for the arena. And even they were in awe of Jubala and impressed with his magnificence.

All, that is, except this loner Casca...

But if Jubala watched Casca's progress with envy and hatred, Corvu watched with approval... and greed. Corvu knew the real thing when he saw it, and Casca had the makings of a great fighter. If Casca survived his first few matches, perhaps he would become one of the big drawing cards, those who fought only a few times a year for special occasions. The school's percentage on a fighter like that—even if he were owned by someone else—would be substantial. After all, the school normally received twenty percent for booking a fight, and with one like Casca he could get fifteen or twenty thousand sesterces a match with no problem at all. For that matter, maybe more, particularly if he could figure a way to get the public on Casca's side and rooting for him.

The patrician Crespas had told Corvu that Casca had signed an agreement to fight for three years. Even if he were set free, he would still have to live up to that contract. So, at the worst, they had three years to work him—and they could make a lot of money in three years. But, who knew? Casca might well become one of the professionals who continued to fight in the arena as a way of life. Once he got a taste of success—and the money, fame, and women started coming to him—he wouldn't be too anxious to give it all up and go back to being a nobody. Corvu had seen it happen many times. Once a man received a little public acclamation and money he would be a rare bird indeed to trade the dangers of the games for a life as farmer with squalling brats. No. He had a good chance to make a very profitable deal on the former legionary.

So Corvu took no chances. He worked Casca harder and harder, giving him no break at all, constantly harassing, constantly training. He was determined that Casca would be a winner. When they took the troupe on tour for several fights in the provinces, Corvu had Casca do some of the warm-ups, fights with dulled swords and not to the death. This was to give Casca a chance to get over any stage fright he might have had otherwise. In addition, the games in the provinces served to give the tiros a chance to work as a team and to watch the professionals at their trade. Soon they would be ready for the games at Rome. That was where the real money was...

Casca worked and hacked that damned post until he thought his arms were going to break off. But if that weren't bad enough already, Corvu fastened strips of lead wrapped in leather around his forearms to strengthen them, ten pounds to each forearm. The first few days of working out with these left Casca with spasms of shooting pain racing through his arms, neck, and shoulders. But after a week the pain was gone, and the weights felt natural. When he took them off, it felt as though his fists could fly, they were so light.

Crespas came to several of the small fights in the outlying towns to watch. Pleased with Casca's progress, he queried Corvu on when the slave would be ready for the big time.

"Soon, lord. Soon. A few more of these warm-ups, and he will be ready for a main event. You picked a good one there. Would you consider selling him?"

Crespas shook his head. "Not just yet. But speak to me after he has had a couple of fights. Then I may have a better idea as to his real value. We can talk more then."

Jubala watched the treatment Casca was receiving with growing envy and deepening hatred. Once he, too, had received the same attention. Now he knew that Casca was being groomed for high things, and it ate at his soul. He had received the same grooming and had failed to reach the heights where he could spit on all these puny pale-skinned jackals who had dared to treat him as an animal. If this one did...

Like a beast of the desert or jungle, Jubala watched and waited. Patience was a necessary virtue for survival in his tribal lands. He waited and prepared. He made sacrifice to his gods, those terrible beings of the night and the jungle. Two days before, when he had been permitted to go out on the town, he had cornered a young blonde prostitute of no more than fourteen years...

He felt a shiver of pleasure run over him as he relived the moment when after he had taken his pleasure of her and she lay at his feet whimpering and bleeding she had looked up through tear-streaked eyes and asked for the denarius he had promised. Jubala felt a sexual thrill run over him as he remembered picking her up from the floor of her dingy room by the Tiber and covering her mouth with his hand while he took his knife and slowly slid it into her stomach, savoring her pain and death spasms as he drew the blade up slowly, ever so slowly, her back arching so that her intestines spilled out on the floor. He sacrificed to his gods, and in the ritual of his people he had ripped out her still-beating heart and eaten it while she still trembled... *Good, he thought, good. And, Roman dog, before our time is through I will eat your heart, too... even if after killing you, I must...*

Today he had bumped Casca while in the food line, but instead of Casca backing away, he had jabbed his elbow in Jubala's solar plexus with a force that had almost knocked the black man down. He would have responded immediately, but he was out of breath from the blow. Casca had merely said, "Sorry about that," and gone on as if nothing had happened. If Jubala's face hadn't been so black, Casca would have been pleased to see the rush of blood to it as Jubala fought to contain his rage. But there was nothing to be done about it at the moment; Corvu had just come in and was watching.

Neither could know that Corvu had mused: *Those two are going to kill each other off one day. I had better keep them apart for a while. But, if they are going to do it, I might as well make a profit out of it. Who has a birthday coming up and will be wanting a party? Think I better look over my list of former patrons and let them know we may have a special coming up...*

In the meantime, Jubala never missed a chance to impress Casca with his size and strength. He was half a head taller than Casca, and the muscles rippled under his black hide like serpents.

Shit, Casca thought, that black's trying to work on my mind. Well, I got news for you, boy. That bullshit don't play with me.

And when Jubala noticed the Sicilian slave Crysos sucking up to Casca, he thought, *Good. That may be the way to get the big Roman's goat. He likes the Sicilian.*

But there were other matters first. He remembered the prostitute. *You... I must go to your grave and dig you up so that I can feed on you...* It would not be the first time Jubala had followed the ways of his fathers. He was content to wait.

It would not be long...

Eighteen

Shiu knocked on the portal leading to the interior of the Gallic school. The guard answering did not know what to make of the strange yellow man with the wispy beard and moustache. Shiu smiled pleasantly at him through the bars.

"Honored sir, may I speak to your proprietor?"

He bowed as he spoke, and in the eyes of the guard he looked for all the world like an old carving of ivory that had turned golden with age, but with dark eyes that sparkled with good humor and pleasure.

The sentry called for the lanista.

Lashing his whip to make a few of the new tiros get out of the way, Corvu came to the gate. "What is it? And who—and what—are you?"

Shiu bowed again, his saffron-colored robes folding themselves gracefully over his thin frame. "I am Shiu Lao Tze, honored sir. As to what I am, that is not so easy, for are we not the sum total of all our parts? And, like you, I have many parts. At this time it is my pleasure to be the friend and servant of a great man of this city, the honored Seneca, adviser to the imperial Nero." Shiu hissed between his teeth, showing respect to the name of his master. "Noble sir, what I wish is to be permitted to speak with one of your students. We met on the ship coming over from Greece, and recently my master heard of him at a contest near his villa in the country. Therefore I have this day, with his permission, come to speak to my young friend, the man called Casca. Is this possible?"

Normally, Corvu would have denied permission for any of his students to have visitors, but the combination of Seneca's name, this yellow man, and his own curiosity about Casca was too much. Telling the guard to open up, he took Shiu to where he could watch both him and Casca, and then sent for Casca. Corvu withdrew after being properly courteous to his visitor. One never knew just who it was who had power... He went to where he could observe the two unobtrusively.

Shiu sat at the bench provided for students when they were allowed to take a break from their training and rest a moment.

A loud bellowing soon brought him to his feet.

Grinning from ear to ear, the overmuscled Casca bore down on the delicate looking Oriental like a ramming galley.

"Gently," laughed Shiu as Casca enveloped him in his bearlike arms and whirled him off the ground, round and round. "Set me down, you great oaf. Have you learned no respect for your elders? Set me down, you big-nosed barbarian."

Finally Casca put the yellow one down, and they sat at the table. "You dare to call me a barbarian, you shriveled-up old prune? And I could tell you something about what you said about having respect for your elders. But, enough. Have you

been well? I have thought of you often these last months. Is your master kind to you?"

Shiu laughed, the bell-like tinkle that always delighted Casca just to hear it. "Yes, you great one. Yes, and yes again. My master is kind and wise. From the first moment we met we became soul mates and have spent many pleasurable hours in conversation. Indeed, my master is such a great respecter of learning that he felt it was impossible for a slave to argue freely with his master, and, as we were having a most interesting discourse on life and the merit of living, he set me free so as to feel no hindrance on either part. I am a free man again."

Casca beamed at his small friend. "That is good to hear, Tze. I am happy for you. You are a good man—if a little weird."

"So, big nose, it is enough. I am well and have a good life for the present, and I am content for the time being. Now, how goes it for you? You look well. Those monstrous bulges under you look even bigger than they did when we were on the ship together."

Casca raised his arms and flexed them, making his great muscles bulge out to the straining point. He laughed deeply. "Aye, little one, I'm healthy enough. They feed their stock good here. But while I may look like just a bear, I have also learned more than you think, and a good portion of what I have learned is thanks to you. I know, for instance, that my strength cannot overcome a little man from the distant East who I should be able to break in two with no trouble at all, and I know also that I have got to start using my mind to change my condition. My strength is only a tool for that purpose. I have never been a very intelligent man—but then I have never had to be. My life was simple, and I had need of very little original thought. Now I am learning, and I will continue to learn all that I can. I may be a slave to other men, but from you I have learned that I do not have to be a slave to myself and to my own ignorance."

Shiu nodded, pleased. "It is good that you are on the path to becoming a whole man, big nose. For the time being you do what you must, but by thinking and using your thoughts you may change what it is you are required to do. Every time you can change your life a little you gain that much control over your destiny. I still believe, as I said on the galley, that you are a man pursued by his destiny. Yet, you yourself may be the searcher, and you may one day find what it is you search for."

As the two talked, the sun passed its zenith. Unknown to them, Corvu was watching. Jubala, from where he exercised with the tiros of the second degree of proficiency, also watched, puzzled by the yellow man and wondering what value he had to the tough soldier. Perhaps he would find out. Casca's pleasure at the old man's coming was the first real sign of excitement that he had shown since coming here. The old one had some real value for him...

Corvu finally came over and broke it up. "All right, Casca, back to the posts and finish up your day. And you, sir, I hope I have been of some service to you. If you wish to see this man again, please come any time. And give my regards to your master, the honorable and noble Seneca."

Shiu bowed, and Casca returned to the interminable chopping at the post, first giving Shiu one last squeeze that looked as if it could cave in his ribs. Shiu thanked Corvu for his kindness, and, yes, he would speak to his master about the

kindnesses shown to him by the Gallic school and its senior instructor and mentor, the noble Corvu.

Shiu Lao Tze seldom visited, the games. The few times that he did come, the reason he gave was that he wanted to see for himself the emotional structures and responses of people under these conditions. Twice was enough. From then on he visited Casca at the school or—when Casca had a day off—at the baths where they would go and talk. The public baths were one feature of Roman life that Shiu heartily approved. He said the vapors were conducive to meditation. When he and Casca had the privacy to do so, Shiu would brush up on what he had taught Casca of the way of the open hand—but never in public. Casca wanted the technique kept to himself. There would probably be a time when it would save his ass again as it had on the ship.

Seneca was kind enough to honor Shiu's request that he send a note of thanks to Corvu regarding the kindnesses shown his friend. He added that he would mention the name of the Gallic school to Caesar when next they met. This guaranteed a continued welcome for Shiu. There was little difficulty in arranging the days off; Crespas had said that it was all right for Casca to be given occasional liberty in town, and Corvu had noted that the big man was a whole lot easier to deal with and that his attitude was better if he did get some liberty.

Meanwhile, Jubala watched all that went on, and his heart was as black as his face. *One day*, he promised himself, *One day, white dog...*

Casca was nearly ready. He would have fought even sooner, but Corvu was saving him for a big festival that was coming up. There was sure to be a full house then, and the emperor would be certain to be there. If he liked what he saw, the fortune of the school was made.

Finally Corvu announced that Casca would fight in the great Circus Maximus with the other first-line fighters. Casca felt he was ready, but Corvu intensified his training even more the last few days. Casca lifted weights and ran and swam to build up his wind. He knew full well that a man out of breath was the most vulnerable.

In the excitement of his coming debut it was difficult for him to believe that what had happened to him had really occurred. The words of the Jew, the things of the past—all seemed a mere dream that he had imagined many years ago. Only when he received a cut did it all come back to him... and the terrible danger of it. Several times he had to reopen his wounds to make the healing process appear normal. After all, they did *burn* witches and sorcerers...

Crysos became even more attentive to Casca, saving him choice cuts of meat from the mess hall, cleaning his cubicle until it was spotless.

"Crysos, what the hell do you want from me?"

The blunt question took the little Sicilian by surprise. But, looking Casca straight in the face, he said in the strongest voice he could muster: "I want to serve you, and by so doing serve myself. You are going to fight soon, and I want to be your partner. I have some money set aside. That I will wager on your winning, and split the profits with you. Let me serve you. Promise me that when you attain your freedom you will arrange for me to get mine, too. I can tell much and help you. Do we have a deal, master?"

"By the brass balls of Jupiter, you have guts, Crysos! And if you are willing to put up the money, I will strike that bargain with you. Even if I can't win the wooden sword, there is always the chance that we might win enough money to buy ourselves out of this place. Good enough. Crysos, from this time on we are partners, and you are my man. Shake on it."

Crysos was almost pathetically eager to grab the muscled wrists of Casca. He had found what he had been searching for ever since his father had sold him into slavery twenty years before to pay off some gambling debts.

During the weeks that followed, Casca grew to have a fondness for Crysos, but another interest was there also, though unknown to Casca and Crysos. Jubala watched, and also waited... for just what, he did not know, but time would tell... it always did...

The night before the festival Crysos came and sat in Casca's cubicle, and the two talked long, each taking the other's measure. Casca found that beneath the weasel-like exterior of Crysos was a man with an amazing degree of knowledge and experience, knowledge that he would need in times to come.

The oil lamp's light flickered across the features of his new partner and Casca finally called an end to the day, sending Crysos off to place his bets on the games tomorrow.

Yes, he thought, just before sleep took him, *tomorrow the arena.*

Nineteen

Before dawn the gladiators of the Gallic School were pulled from their cubicles, fed, and assembled for the march to the Circus Maximus. The first glow of the morning light was breaking as they made their way to the city of Nero. They entered through the Asinarian Gate, passing the great aqueducts of Claudius and Marcian. To the north the temple of Isis and Serapis was barely visible through the morning mists, but the chanting of the priestesses was clearly heard, a strange lilting melody honoring their goddess of the Nile. The melody caressed forgotten edges of Casca's brain, but his conscious thoughts were all on what this day would bring.

Corvu led them finally to where the Appian Way and Via Ostia met at the south end of the Circus Maximus. The crowds were already gathering, and many were already being shown to their seats by the locarii. Most had baskets with lunches and suppers in them. And surprisingly enough, even this early, prostitutes of both sexes were doing a pretty fair business under the arches and passages leading to the arena.

The first thing that hit Casca as they entered the passageways leading to the barracks like area where they would be outfitted was the smell... the smell of the beasts in their cages, and the smell of the humans in theirs.

There was a sameness to them now, but that would change when the beasts were let loose on the humans.

The deep, rumbling cough of the lion merged with the higher more catlike, cry of the leopard. The beasts knew that this was a day different from any other. Some primal instinct told them that there would be blood, soon, very soon.

A breeze picked up, and Casca could smell the waters of the Tiber, only a hundred yards away.

Each gladiator was unto himself, alone with his thoughts...

Bread was brought. Not the panis sordis of the common people but the fine, sweet, yeasty white bread of the rich, silgineus. Casca had never tasted it before. He let his mouth fill with the sweet taste of it, letting each bite melt by itself. Then, like the others, he washed it down with posca. No wine until after they fought... which meant that many would never taste wine again for this day would be their last.

An auctoratti from Dacia turned to Casca and smiled quietly, his voice low and soft. "Soldier, does this have the same feel as before going into battle?"

Casca turned to him, his gray eyes serious. He let his back slide down the stone wall until he rested on his haunches and looked up into the face of the Dacian.

"Yes. There is a sameness to the waiting." Taking a short swallow of the bitter posca, he rinsed his mouth and spat. "But here we fight not for a cause or for each other. We fight for the amusement of the beasts outside, those people in the seats. They're the ones who should be in cages. But we will go out there and kill each other off for their pleasure. And ours, too. For the gods help us. Man was made for battle, and when the fight starts you can't help but be drawn into the killing. But there is something out there we can win."

The Dacian knelt beside him. "What's that, soldier?"

"The wooden sword," Casca stated through half-clenched lips. "The wooden sword is out there. If we can please the beasts that judge, freedom could come today. And for that freedom, Dacian, I would kill you and everyone else here gladly. That is our fate—to kill or be killed. As with the great beasts of the jungle—eat or be eaten. And this day, Dacian, I will feed."

Still on his knees, the Dacian backed away from Casca, fear running over his skin, running over the crawling flesh. He turned his eyes away. He left. He gave thanks to his gods that he would not fight against that madman today...

The morning's entertainment began with mock battles between naked old men and midgets cavorting and thumping each other with wooden swords and flails made of animal bladders. These were followed by more forms of mild entertainment, including a lottery in which the winners won prizes of young slave girls and money.

But these were only the preliminaries.

The time for the sacrifice arrived.

Trumpets blared, echoing through the giant U-shaped structure of the Circus. The seventy-five thousand in the stands went silent. The priests entered, walking with stately strides to the shrine running down the center of the Circus. Here were the altars to Jupiter and Mars. The priests led out a pure white bull for the sacrifice, its horns covered with gold foil and with garlands of flowers draped around its neck—but with a ring in its nose by which the priests led it. The bull's eyes rolled from side to side, the red rims showing, as though he sensed that this was no normal day. The deep smell of blood lying covered by the clean sand made

its way into the bull's flaring nostrils. But he felt no real fear. All his life men had tended gently to him, brought him the best of fodder, and washed him every day. From the time of his calving men had been gentle to him.

Then it happened.

His legs were bound, and he was thrown on his side.

The bull gave one short, startled bellow before the slicing blade of the priest severed his great artery. The dumb brute's mind had not really registered what had happened, his body had not stopped its death tremor before his entrails were out and were being inspected for omens. The priests then removed the bull's heart and set it in the flaming altar before Jupiter and announced—as always—that the omens were auspicious and the games could continue.

The audience roared its approval. The entire company of the day marched around the Circus so the people in the stands could get a good look at them. Gladiators in the dress of a dozen nations appeared. Retarii with their nets and tridents were followed by a group of condemned prisoners from Germany who had been taken while raiding the northern provinces. Sleek and black Numidians rode ostriches and the striped horses of Africa. Cages of lions and leopards rolled by. Slave girls scattered flowers and garlands from baskets. Choruses sang paeans to the glory of Rome and her gods.

Late to enter the arena were the *bestiarii*, those who would fight the animals. Some were armed with swords for killing bears. Others carried the stout boar spear with its iron circular guard about midway on the shaft. The guard was to prevent the boar from sliding on down even after it was speared, and getting to the *bestiarii* with its flashing tusks. The beast men took up positions while the rest of the day's entertainers returned to the cool interior of the Circus to wait their turn on the hot sands. The preliminaries were over. Now the games would begin in deadly earnest.

A great rumbling came from the crowd as the beasts were let loose in the arena. Nearly a hundred and fifty animals raced into the open. Some, like the deer, fled with wild, flashing eyes. Others methodically stalked their prey. The great cats slunk low and stayed to the wall sides as a house cat would have. Bulls, antelopes, hyenas mixed in confusion. Several wild dogs with firebrands tied to their tails were let loose, helping to drive the beasts into a frenzy. The cries of "Kill! Kill! Kill!" echoed from the chambers and arches of the Circus.

And kill they did.

Men and animals.

Slaughter...

Casca caught one quick look outside and saw a leopard dragging a boy off to a quiet corner where it could enjoy its meal. While he watched, the beast began eating its victim's face. Casca turned away in distaste. This was not the business of soldiering he knew. To kill was natural... but to feed the beasts was not.

One spectacle followed another. In one pleasant diversion a great number of condemned criminals were let loose in the arena to kill each other off—and then lions were released to kill and eat the survivors. One insane depravity followed another, glutting the Romans' senses... Beneath the arches and alcoves, the whores' trade tripled... The slaughter continued past midday, with only short breaks while attendants spread fresh sand on the floor of the Circus and raked it

smooth. Fine entertainment. Seventy-five thousand spectators... *Sick damn bastards*, Casca thought... and turned his attention to his own group.

Corvu briefed them on the day's schedules. They were to fight as a team. There would be fifty of his men in the traditional dress and armor of the Secutoris, with the fish symbol of Gaul on their helmets. They would be matched against a like number from the Dacian school dressed as Thracians with great curved swords and short brass bucklers as shields. The curved Thracian sword was longer than their own gladius iberius, but it had disadvantages to it—particularly where the straight thrust was concerned.

Casca's mind strayed from the briefing. Another smell had joined the existing odors of blood and animal sweat that permeated the entire structure. Now the scent of excited humanity wafted down from the stands, the smell of excitement and sexual arousal. Casca could see the looks of depraved passion on the faces of the people in the stands above. Only the vestal virgins in their box seemed to make any attempt to maintain some form of dignity. They would be disdainfully observing all that took place as if it were a burden on their sensibilities when they would much rather be at a clean and pleasant temple praying.

And, at the opposite end of the arena, the gladiators of the Dacian school would be listening to a briefing likewise. This would be a fight where only the victors of the winning side walked away.

The moment had come.

The games master signaled. Trumpets blared. The senior gladiators held the front ranks. Casca and the others picked up the step and marched into the arena, Corvu's voice following after them, exhorting them to remember the honor of their school and give a good show.

Each school marched across the arena, turned, and faced the Emperor's box. There the divine Nero was playing with the breasts of his newest paramour, Acte, a pleasant blonde girl of perhaps nineteen, a street whore who had screwed her way to the top. Nero sat with his hand down her stola oblivious to all that was transpiring until Burrus, the prefect of the Praetorians, called his attention to the men below. Removing his hand from Acte's breast, he made a small face and turned to the hundred men below on the shining sand. As one voice, the gladiators cried out: "Hail, Caesar. We who are about to die salute you!" Gaius Nero acknowledged their salute with a wave of his hand and motioned the games master to get on with it.

The men from the two companies squared off and sized each other up. Casca locked eyes on a tall Greek and assumed the basic defensive posture rather than the attacking attitude, letting his actions say that he was unsure and giving the big Greek the impression he had the mental edge on him.

The gladiators closed.

His scream was already in the air when the sword arm of one of Casca's teammates went down before the curved flashing blade of his Dacian opponent. The victor did not have time to finish off his victim before he, too, was down with both hands holding his belly trying to keep the large intestines from falling out onto the sands. The men swirled and milled, changing opponents again and again.

Casca kept his eyes on the Greek, letting the Dacian beat him back farther and farther from the main battle, away from the larger group of killing men. By

separating himself from the mass, Casca knew the audience would be watching him more closely, which was proved by the jeers from the crowd, the calls of "Coward!" and the demand that he fight. They also encouraged the Greek to finish this swine off. The curved blade of the Greek repeatedly pounded on Casca's protecting shield. The Greek was seemingly trying to beat him down through sheer exhaustion. That curved blade kept hacking gouges out of Casca's shield, sending aching vibrations running up his arm. One of the Greek's teammates started to come and help finish him off, but the Greek waved him away. He wanted no help with this kill. Good, thought Casca. Good. Let the others waste each other. *If I just hold on to this one until the odds are reduced, then...* The crowd screamed and wagered on their favorites. Several women had already bet themselves into slavery and were even now at the feet of their new masters. Others in the stands stood with glazed eyes in sexual excitement as ecstatic shudders ran through their bodies... as though they were making love and were in an uncontrollable climactic response...

The time had come. The two teams were evenly matched; there were about twenty men left standing. Casca grinned at the Greek, his teeth showing below his protective nose guard. "Greek!" he called. "Freedom is just a wooden sword away!" He took his helmet off, letting the crowd see his face. The act alone made him stand out from the rest. He threw the helmet at the astonished Greek and went into a low, leaning position, his blade extended out, the flat side up. He motioned the Greek to come closer.

"Come here, lover of boys," he mocked. "Come on, hero."

He feinted a short thrust and sliced a small gouge from the Greek's left shoulder just enough to piss him off.

The Greek roared and fell on Casca like a whirlwind, raining one blow after another. The crowd was screaming its approval. Casca let the Greek almost hover over him, and then, with one quick, clean motion, he turned his body sideways and leaned away from the Greek... almost as though he were going to try and run away.

The Greek bellowed with pleasure and went at it even harder. He beat at Casca's shield, trying to get around it. Then, as Casca completed his turn away, his left foot was between the legs of the Greek. With one quick, clean motion he jerked his foot up into the balls of the Greek, striking with the back of his heel.

The audience roared with laughter as the Greek looked startled and tried to throw up even as he went down. The audience knew then that Casca had been playing with them and with his opponent, but the Romans had a good sense of humor and bore no grudges. Cheerfully they turned thumbs down on their previous favorite. The Greek was doubled up on the sand, holding his balls. Casca raised his blade and turned to the emperor for the signal. Nero was laughing so hard at Casca's trick that he nearly choked on a piece of pomegranate. Still coughing, he motioned for the kill.

Blade raised, Casca stood over the Greek. The man's eyes asked for nothing. He bared his neck for the blow. "Make it clean, Roman," came his choking voice. "Make it clean."

Casca nodded, his face shining with sweat. "Clean it will be, Greek. I give you peace." There was a whishing sound followed by a thunk! and the Greek's head

was off. Arterial blood spurted on the much-stained sand. Casca then raced to where his teammates were still engaged and began lending assistance to them, getting them organized. As they cut a man down they would band together to finish off the next... until the Dacian school's team was no more. Only the dead and dying littered the ground. Some were permitted to live, even though defeated, if they had fought well. The victors were thrown money by those who had wagered on them. A few cried out for the wooden sword to be given to Casca for his tricking the Greek, but not enough cried out for it, so the request was ignored by the Emperor who went back to playing with Acte's breasts while the Praetorians watched over him.

The survivors made their way back into the cool interior of the Circus, holding their wounds and calling for wine. The arena attendants were out dragging off the bodies of the fallen, using long poles with hooks.

Casca's teammates congratulated him on his victory. Crysos came to him and unlaced his greaves and the straps holding his armor on. "See, master," he said, "I told you that you would win the favor of the crowd. Freedom is not very far away. Even now they know your name and will be watching for you in future games. Fight well and use your brains and we may both be free from this house of carrion one day. We are fifty sesterces closer. I doubled our money." Sponging Casca down quickly, Crysos went about his duties tending to the others, bringing wine and posca to those who called for it.

Every, now and then a scream punctuated the heavy atmosphere as the physicians used their favorite remedies: cauterizing a wound with a red-hot blade, or, if there was a stump, smearing the open and raw wound with hot pitch. This gentle treatment always sent the patient into a fit of screaming until they passed out—which was not long in coming. While they worked, the physicians would argue among themselves the various aspects of their profession ... and was the latest theory correct about laudable pus and the benefits that good healthy pus had on healing.

The men who could walk were marched in loose order back to the school. Those who could not were brought back in donkey carts. For them the games were over, but the roar of the arena followed their footsteps to the outskirts of Rome.

The games continued into the night, and Rome exhausted herself like some great whore on blood and slaughter.

Twenty

Casca's first entrance into Rome on leave had been a moment to remember. For the preceding months he had been curious about the city behind the walls. He had heard tales, naturally, but once through the Ostian Gate the impact of the largest city on earth was almost more than his senses could take in at one time. True, he had heard that were it not for the grain ships bringing constant cargoes of food from the African provinces, it would be impossible for the great city to maintain her one million-plus inhabitants, but those had been just words to him. Now to

see with his own eyes the great sprawl of the teeming city was to realize that it was impossible to imagine how many people one million were. *Damn!*

He made his way through the winding streets asking directions now and then. The swarm of humanity was unbelievable... merchants selling goods that had come from as far away as Britain or Mauretania... jewelers in the Street of the Jewelers hawking wares that decorated the breasts and fingers of the rich with pearls and precious stones... butchers selling chopped lamb and goat for the tables of the city... There was no beef. It was seldom used for anything except the sacrifices.

He passed the Tiber wharves and saw stevedores shouldering the grain of Egypt into warehouses in preparation for the daily dole to those who possessed citizenship. He headed east toward the Forum, his well-muscled hide drawing more than one interested look from the Roman ladies, but right now he was too involved with the immensity of the city and its myriad people to take advantage of the obvious opportunities. He passed along the Agiletium, a street running just north of the most corrupt street of the city—and therefore of the world—the street called Suburra. He made a mental note to go back there later. A couple of the establishments might be fairly interesting... That had been the first time. This day he knew where he was going. Resisting the entreaties of the barbers to make his face anew—they were known to intentionally dull good razors—Casca made his way finally to the baths of Sura. Here slaves were permitted to use the facilities as long as they did not make a scene and gave priority to the freeborn and the nobility. The hour was fast approaching midday. Wending his way inside, Casca found the steam baths. Removing his tunic, he put it in one of the small cubbyholes provided for such and entered the bath. There in the corner, sitting quietly, his slanted eyes closed in contemplation while he breathed deeply of the vapors, sat Shiu.

As Casca approached, he said, without opening his eyes, "Welcome, big nose. It has been a long time, and I have missed the sight of your oversized body trying to fit in normal space."

"Tze, you slant-eyed old viper, can't you ever say anything straight out?"

Tze laughed. At the familiar tinkling sound Casca realized how much he had grown to like the yellow man, and how much he had missed him.

They were alone in the steam room. It was pleasant to let the vapors reach deep into their lungs, to enjoy the cleaning process of sweat. Shin Tze sat placidly, hands around his knees, slowly rocking back and forth, looking as if he had an eternity to do nothing but enjoy his thoughts and senses. For a long while the two were silent.

Casca had fought many times since last they met and had acquired some small measure of fame. It was satisfying in a way for the people on the streets to know his name and face, to come and touch him for luck. It was pleasant to see his name written on the walls of the city, but for how long? Shiu's presence here reminded him of the yellow man's teachings, that nothing is forever. Not even as the most famous gladiator of Rome could he continue indefinitely. For one thing, there were the problems he had with wounds that healed too fast. Fortunately he was very, very good with the blade and had not yet been dealt a blow that should kill, but one day he would be... and then what?

Lying down on his stomach on the stone benches, he turned to face his friend from the far land of Khitai. "Shiu. You wanted to know about me once. I think that now is the time. Perhaps you can help."

Shiu merely nodded, his eyes still closed, but Casca knew he heard. "Okay, my so-called ancient friend. This is it in a nutshell." And for the next three hours Casca unfolded his tale—to the delight and amazement of Shiu. Casca only stopped the telling when someone came into the room. He was able to run the newcomers off with an evil look and a hint that he was not above robbery or murder—nothing specific, just sinister innuendo.

Casca finished the tale, bringing Shiu up to date on everything from Crysos and his arrangement to the deal that had been made with Crespas the patrician.

Shiu sat silently for a moment. Then, for the first time since Casca had started his tale, he locked his merry, ever-questioning eyes on his muscle-bound friend. Hissing between his teeth in the manner of his race when an important thought passed or came to them, he performed kowtow, the bow of obeisance.

Straightening up, Casca said a little irritably: "Now, what the crap is that about? Is that all you can do? Can't you say anything?"

Smiling, Shiu raised his head. "Big nose, I was honoring you for your long life. Remember that in my land age is greatly respected. You are one of the oldest men that I have ever met—especially to look so young."

"Don't you believe me?"

"Yes. Of course I do, my friend. But your condition makes for some very interesting questions."

"What questions, you yellow weasel?"

"Ah! Weasel is it, you monstrous pink ape? So be it. Listen to the weasel, and it may be we both may learn more. You say your condition is a gift from the Christian's demigod, Jesus. One must look closely at gifts from gods. They are not always what they seem. Consider, my friend. What will be the long-range effect on your development? Your crucified god said 'As you are, so shall you remain.' In what way? Will you always be as you are in tastes and temperament? Or will you, like the silkworm that turns into a moth, become more than your beginnings? I have believed for some time that men change in their attitudes as their bodies change with age, that the aging process causes certain things to happen inside that make us different at different ages. For example, an old man does not like loud noises while a child cannot get enough of them. Our tastes in food and—ah!—our tastes in women change with age.

"But apparently you do not age physically. Will that apply also to your other senses and assets? It is fascinating. I must give a great deal of thought to your problems before I dare make any suggestions.

"But one thing I will leave you to think on is this: Go to the East one day. Beyond the Indus, to Khitai, to my land. There you will find wisdom that has been saved for centuries and passed from one scholar to the next, each adding his small contribution to the total. You will find there men to help you ease your burdens, and you will help by adding to the knowledge of the world. What you have told me now demands that I must return home after these many years. This knowledge of you must not be lost. When I leave, come with me, for while you are older than I, I feel as a father to you, and I have an embarrassing amount of concern for you and

your well-being. Indeed, big nose, it might be said that even with all your ugliness, your pale fish skin, your oversized muscles and monstrous nose, I love you like a son. Come with me to Khitai, to the monastery of my brothers. Perhaps with all our minds together thinking on your condition answers may come."

Casca turned his head and wiped his eyes. "Damned sweat makes the eyes water," he grumbled. Putting one arm around the shoulders of Shiu, he said: "When I am free, I will come with you. Wherever the road leads, little father, I will go with you to your homeland. Maybe you are right. Maybe we can learn more about myself and others in the process. For example, right now I am not sure I would want to change my condition if I could. Life is beginning to look pretty good for me. If I am not maturing in the manner of a man of age, at least now I have enough money to be able to afford some things I never could before."

"You know what I mean: good wine, good food... and a lusty assortment of wenches, eager to render unlimited services to my poor body." He smiled. "And I don't think I am over muscled. Also, my nose is not too big. It's just that yours is too small, and your face looks like someone had slapped you across your nose with a shovel. There! I have been wanting to say something to get back at you for all that 'big nose' crap for months."

Shiu smiled, then chuckled, and finally the two were laughing as though both were totally mad in the steam-filled room.

They were dressed and left the baths by way of the caldaria. On the street, Shiu made his farewell and disappeared into the crowds. Casca decided to reward himself. Hailing a passing litter, he had himself carried back to the school as if he were of the blood royal. *By the gods!* Life could be good. Perhaps things weren't all bad. *After all, I have only a little over two years to go, and for a man of my longevity, that's nothing. I just have to be careful, that's all. Just be careful...*

Casca's fortune continued to ride high. One victory in the arena followed another. One by one, the great champions of the games fell to his blade. Soon his was the name that was scrawled most on the walls of public buildings and houses. Women sighed for him and his embrace, sent their slaves with gifts to entice him to their villas. Some he accepted, but mostly he preferred wenching on his own. The highborn ladies were a little too strange in sexual fantasies for him. He was pretty much a straight-ahead type of person, and those damn group activities they were always trying to get him into were a little too much for a country boy's taste. Not that he was averse to such things as a little healthy ass slapping in the heat of passion when he was well-mounted in the saddle. And even a good bite wasn't all bad. But ... about all he got from diddling Rome's leading ladies was the fun of watching them go through their routines trying to excite him, to get him all worked up. *Shit! They were pathetic.* They had no idea at all of what it took to get him aroused. If Salome were still alive she could have made a fortune teaching these high-class whores how to use their equipment. But then, the ladies of the East—Asia Minor in particular—always seemed to have an edge over those from the North. *Indeed... those tantalizing beauties of Syria and Persia knew their tricks all right...* Just thinking about them was enough to set him off and running for one of the better whorehouses that specialized in imports.

Cryos was ecstatic.

Their winnings were mounting to a small fortune. True, the wooden sword had so far eluded Casca's grasp, but the money was rolling in. Already they had over twenty thousand sesterces set aside at a local banking house. If you had to be a slave, it was better to be a Roman slave. You could at least have your own money—even have slaves of your own. Now, if Casca would agree, he would approach Corvu and ask how much it would take to buy his freedom. Surely Corvu would let him go for a couple of thousand.

There was no way to deal on Casca yet. His owner was making a killing at the games, and there was no way to get him to let Casca go before the agreement ran out, but, as a freeman, Crysos would be better able to advance both their positions in the outside world and be ready for the day when Casca was set free.

The only fly in the ointment was Jubala...

That big Numidian watched them closer than anyone. Not even Corvu had kept a closer eye on the two than had he. There was something strange about Casca, and he was going to find out what it was even if it meant tearing off Casca's limbs one by one like he was a fly. Strange... For openers, why did Casca never show the weakening effects of wounds?

Jubala had not fought, of course, in the same contests as Casca. At the moment he was being saved for a particular special where, in the fanciful costume of Africa, he would fight against mounted Arabs. For this he had chosen his favorite weapons, the light lance and the long curved sword of the desert. He would have looked forward to the special in anticipation, but Casca's victories continued to be bitter in his mouth. When he thought of the big Roman his lips drew back in a sneer, showing his pointed white teeth in a shark's grin.

Every time Casca fought, Jubala's hate for the white-skinned devil grew more intense. In frustration he would leave the school to seek another victim to feed himself and his gods on. The Tiber was capable of holding and hiding an almost limitless number of bodies in its whirling waters and eddies. No one looked too close at a corpse. If one washed up close to a residence, the owner just had his slaves push the remains back into the mainstream where the currents would take them on past Ostia and out to sea.

But the dark looks Jubala gave Casca were not unnoticed. Crysos was aware of them. And several times Jubala had tried to get him to speak of his partner. No dice. One thing Crysos knew—and knew for certain—was how to spot a con, especially a bad one. He kept his distance from Jubala and tried to stay close to Casca when the big black was around. But it made things somewhat awkward for him. He had repeatedly warned Casca about Jubala, saying there would come a time...

Casca grinned in agreement. "No sweat, Crysos. I know what's happening, and so does Corvu. Me and the black will settle things before much longer. For now, just keep away from him."

Twenty-One

Casca continued his run of good fortune in the games, fighting not only in Rome but going also on several tours to the surrounding cities, as far south as Neapolis and as far north as Bononia. His fame gathered fans and admirers. He was becoming one of the great gladiators.

The rules of the arena were simple. You followed orders. If you were fighting someone from an opposing school you had the option once he was defeated of taking his life or sparing him. Only when the emperor was present did that right of life or death pass to him. The mob would try to influence the gladiator's decision by crying out "*Mitte!*" (Let him go!) or "*Iugula!*" (Jugular!). However, the decision not to kill a downed opponent when you had the chance was considered foolhardy. When next you met, he might be the one to finish you off.

Jubala had developed his own ring of admirers and fans—and never did he spare a victim. His followers knew that they would always be treated to a climactic ending. Jubala would stand nearly naked, his black hide gleaming with sweat as his great muscles rippled. When he himself was wounded, many of his fans were driven to ecstasy by the sight of him licking his own red blood, so much in contrast to his black skin... licking his blood from his wounds like an animal... Jubala killed as most men make love, with passion and need.

And his almost insane hatred of Casca continued to grow. Every time they met now, or locked eyes, he tried to put all his hate out ... like a tidal wave that would drown the big Roman. Yet Casca only laughed, mocking the black man's strength and refusing to recognize Jubala's greatness. Jubala knew better than to have a fight within the confines of the school, for, though he was popular with the crowds, he was still the property of the school. Corvu had warned him that if he started any shit, Corvu would personally see to the castration of the offending party and let the beasts of the game feed on him while he was tied.

The only thing more important than owning a profitable fighter was maintaining order and discipline. If just once the gladiators thought they could get away with making decisions, who could tell where it would lead? As a businessman, Corvu would much rather finish off one of his own men himself as an example than to have a troublemaker around who could cause him grief later. Old Crassus had been right when he had six thousand slaves crucified along the Appian Way from Capua to Rome. They had revolted and had been led by gladiators. Corvu would not let that kind of shit happen from his school—and Jubala knew it.

But if Jubala could not get at Casca, he could get at Crysos.

The Sicilian was a worthless slave. Corvu might have him whipped for killing a house slave, but that was all that would happen—and he would not be whipped badly enough to be crippled. Did not every man have a weakness? Whatever Casca's weakness was, would not Crysos know? Jubala knew that Casca went through strange exercises alone in his cubicle when no one but Crysos was present. Were the rituals magic? Did he use Crysos as some kind of training aid. It must be working because Casca won, time and time again.

So...

Jubala cornered Crysos.

Crysos felt his breath cut off. His lungs jerked as he tried to breathe, but whatever was covering his mouth and nose was too tight. He felt his eyes roll up on his head... and all went dark.

Jubala took Crysos from the interior, hallway where he had caught him to the enclosed training area that was used on rainy days. Here none could see what was going to transpire. Gagging his now unconscious victim, he tied Crysos to one of the chopping stakes. He knelt, nearly invisible in the dark. The only light was from a high-set window, the pale, weak glow of the outside moon.

Crysos stirred, then woke. Confusion and panic hit him. Where was he? And why? *Why am I hanging here?*

Jubala waited, giving Crysos's fear of the unknown time to work before making his presence known.

Crysos tried to yell, but the rag in his mouth reduced his efforts to a choking cough, almost inaudible despite his frantic strain. He closed his eyes, trying to hold down the panic. When he did open them, he almost fainted. The first thing he saw was the pointed teeth of Jubala only inches from his face, glowing in the dim light.

Jubala reached up, and, took Crysos's arm in one black hand and released it from the bindings.

"Little man," he demanded softly, "what is the weakness of Casca? What is it you do in his cubicle? What are the tricks he uses to achieve victory? Tell me, and you live. Refuse, and there are worse things than death."

The heaviness of Jubala's speech, the steady pounding of the words, left no doubt as to his intent. Crysos shook his head up and down until Jubala untied the gag.

But Jubala kept his hand on Crysos's throat in order to stop any cry for help before it began. Again he demanded: "Are you going to tell, little man?"

Crysos was jellied with fear. In the past months Jubala had missed no chance to intimidate or abuse him. Time and again he had been cornered by the black and threatened with everything from being maimed to worse—or offered a bribe of money. Up to now he had somehow always found the strength of will to refuse Jubala's demands, or had been able to break away and run to where Casca was, or to a spot near some of the other professionals. He had friends among them, and had made it a point to do favors for the toughest. But now... now Jubala had him.

"Will you talk, little man?"

Crysos's eyes filled with tears. He cleared his throat as the gag was removed, the taste of bile in his mouth coming from fear. He had run out his string. He opened his mouth.

Jubala waited, certain now that he had broken the little Sicilian.

Crysos cleared his throat again—and spit a chunk of phlegm directly into the face of his persecutor.

Jubala grinned. He made no effort to wipe off the spittle running down his face. He retied the gag.

"Good enough, little man. When you are ready to talk, just nod your head, and the hurting will stop."

Crysos groaned to himself and prayed to all the gods of everywhere to give him strength to hold out. Surely Casca or one of the guards would come by before much longer... surely they would.

Jubala went to work. First the arms. Then the legs. Bit by bit he worked through the dark hours, and only when the first glow of the predawn shown

through the little window did he stop and release the body that had been Crysos the slave. Wiping his bloody hands across his chest, he regretted that he would not have time to feed on his kill... but there was always Casca. *Soon now. I don't need what the little man could tell me anyway. I am the better man and the better fighter. Casca will fight me... soon.*

When the body of Crysos was found, and Casca went to look at it, the moan that came out of him threatened to tear down the walls. Instinctively he knew that Crysos had been murdered because of him. "Jubala!" he screamed. "Where are you?"

The others backed away from him. Casca cried again for Jubala and headed for the barracks area where the black lived. But before he reached the door the world for him suddenly went dark in a flash of lights and dull pain...

Corvu stood over Casca holding a lead-weighted baton. Calling to his private guards, he ordered them to chain Casca up and also to bring Jubala to him in chains. This was all the bullshit he was going to put up with. Those who wanted a fight, well, he would let them have it, but, by Baal, they would do it his way and not disgrace his school.

Jubala stood, hands and feet manacled, his head erect. He was filled with pride... like a wild beast from the country where he was sired... the essence of primitive force.

"All right, you animal. You are going to get what you want, a shot at Casca. You two will be the featured event in the next imperial games. Until that time—and until this is all over—you will be chained every night in your quarters. Casca will be done the same. You will train and eat separately. Any attempt to even talk to each other will get you fifty lashes—and you know I can lay them on."

When Casca calmed down enough to talk, he received the same information and agreed.

The games came soon enough, and both men were ready for them. They had trained with greater determination than ever before. The blood feud between them had been widely advertised, and the bets were being made hot and heavy. Most were on the side of the monster black because his sheer size and ferocity seemed to give him an edge.

The games began as had most of the others, with the bloodless fights first, and then a special of women gladiators fighting to the death against dwarfs and other women. Then came the tubas and trumpets heralding the beginning of the mass fights. The gladiators marched into the arena escorted by their managers and trainers. The mob on the podium screamed their pleasure. The musicians played louder and louder but were eventually drowned out in the clamor. They continued to play anyway. After all, that was what they were being paid for.

The gladiators paired off. Some were in the ancient style of dress of the Etruscan Samnite with feathered, crested helmets and square, arm-length shields. Others wore the varied dress of the Gallic school or of Thrace. These were being harried by a team of *retarii* working together. The fights went on. From the crowd would come the mixed calls of "*Hoc Kobet!*" (Now he's had it!) and "*Yebera!*" (Strike!). Once a gladiator was down he would raise a finger of his left hand and ask for mercy. It was seldom shown.

When the mass fights ended, the slain were dragged off by litter bearers dressed as Charon, the boatman of the River Styx, and the call went forth to Casca and Jubala to prepare themselves. There was a short intermission while the arena was raked and freshly sanded.

Casca's owner, Crespas, sat in the preferred section near the imperial box. He was amusing himself with some of the writings of Cicero, the prim person who had been such a pain in the ass to the divine Julius. This Cicero did have a way with words. Even he approved the games of gladiatorial combat as a way to build character and courage. Here in front of Crespas was Cicero's very statement on the matter, and Crespas hoped to make a present of this document to Nero. It was well-known that the emperor fancied himself a patron of the arts and literature. The scroll was quite explicit. Crespas read it again, feeling a certain reluctance to part with it, even though to do so would advance him with Caesar. Cicero wrote:

Look at the gladiators, who are either ruined men or barbarians. See how men who have been well-trained prefer to receive a blow rather than avoid it. How frequently it is made evident that there is nothing they put higher than giving satisfaction to their owners or to the people... What gladiator of ordinary merit has ever uttered a groan or changed countenance? Such is the force of training, practice, and habit.

Crespas sighed again. Tears of admiration came close to forming in his eyes. Such noble words! Cicero certainly knew his people—even if he was a republican...

The games master announced the Casca-Jubala fight as a grudge match between two champions of the same school. They had been kept apart until the time for their entrance. Now Corvu told the two to keep their distance from each other until they were given the signal to fight by the emperor. Jubala and Casca sized each other up, Jubala feeling pleased and confident of his victory, Casca feeling only dark black rage inside. *Revenge. That's what I want, and that's what I'll have even if I have to tear this damned place down to get it.*

The trumpets blared, and Corvu gave the signal to the new men to advance to the imperial box. Keeping a sideways eye on Jubala, Casca marched with him, but ten feet apart, to the position in front of Gaius Germanicus Nero. Once again they gave the salute: "Hail, Caesar! We who are about to die salute you." With raised swords they waited for the emperor's response.

Nero leaned over and looked closely at the two men. His light blond hair was crimped in the manner of the athletes he most admired, the charioteers. He was bull-necked, with a barrel chest and weak legs. The beginnings of a reddish-gold beard showed the inheritance from his father's side of the family, the Ahenobarbi. He had been adopted by Claudius and given the name of Nero at the adoption.

Running his eyes over the two protagonists, he smiled delicately. "You, Numidian. You are absolutely gorgeous. It would be a shame if you let this barbaric-looking person defeat you." He wagged his finger in warning. "Your emperor has wagered on you. Don't disappoint me." He sat back, straight in the curved chair and waved his handkerchief. "Go on with it."

Casca roared and threw himself on the black, his sword a blinding whirl of steel. He smashed with shield and struck with blade, beating the Numidian back and almost ending the fight in the first few seconds.

But Jubala regained his balance and locked shields and swords with Casca. Their helmeted heads rammed against each other, Jubala whispered in a voice that only Casca could hear: "Your little man Crysos died well enough for you. He told me nothing. But I still had the satisfaction of using him like a woman. In your name I told him I was doing it. He screamed like a woman, too."

A pain shot through Casca as he broke from the clinch and tried to hammer the Numidian down. Jubala slipped under the guard and sliced a thin red furrow along Casca's rib cage. "First blood to me, Roman dog," he sneered. "When I kill you, and they bury you, I am going to dig you up and eat your heart."

Casca lost all sense of reason and became a human whirlwind. The audience gasped in shock. They had never seen the likes of these two mad men leaping and whirling around each other as if in some insane danse macabre. Jubala was better than Casca would have believed. The Numidian took everything he could throw at him and came back for more. Casca knew that if he received a bad enough wound he would appear dead. The danger of being found out was greater for him than the fear of death was for Jubala. But Casca took another deeper cut along the outside of his thigh and went to his knee. The pain flashed... and settled into a throb. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Shiu in the stands, hands folded, a calm expression on his face. He was watching Casca intently as if trying to send him a message.

The teachings of Shiu Lao Tze came back to Casca.

Calmness returned. He rose from his knees and, using his shield like a hammer, beat Jubala back until he had some breathing room. The sweat from his helmet was almost blinding him. To the stunned surprise of the spectators, Casca took his helmet off, showing his face to the crowd. He threw the helmet at Jubala. It hit, bounced, and rang off the black's shield.

Then he threw his shield at the Numidian so hard it almost knocked Jubala to the sand. And finally he took his sword and presented it in a salute to the Roman audience. "For you!" he cried. "For you I dedicate this kill with my hands." And he threw the sword into the stands. The crowd went insane. Several women climaxed in their excitement and tried to throw themselves to the arena below. Only the prompt attentions of the guards prevented them from achieving their purpose. Jubala grinned beneath his helmet, and Casca matched it with a grin of his own. The massive Circus Maximus was silent. Even the emperor was leaning over the railing in concentrated study. Never had anything like this happened in the history of the games.

Casca went into the deep horse stance, hands positioned in knife and hammer positions. Jubala laughed and lunged. Casca wasn't there. As Jubala lunged, Casca whirled and gave the smashing reverse roundhouse kick with the heel of his right foot, striking Jubala between his shoulder blades and driving the wind out of him. A quick cry of surprise ran through the people in the stands. This was something new. Jubala whirled and tried to close, using his shield. Casca gave a forward snap kick that knocked the sword out of Jubala's grip and then grabbed the edge of the black's shield and, using it as a lever, grabbed the face guard of Jubala's crested helmet. Putting his right foot in the center of the Numidian's stomach, he rolled backward, throwing the black in an arc to land solidly on his back some ten feet behind him. Casca came up still holding the helmet. Jubala lay

bleeding from his ears where the forcible breaking of the helmet's straps had almost torn his ears off.

As he tried to rise, Casca came up and gave a flying drop kick straight into his face, knocking him to the sand again. Jubala couldn't register what was going on. *What had happened?* Casca picked up the gladius Iberius and stood over Jubala. Grabbing the Numidian's right arm in a grip that locked the black's elbows immovable, Casca held him, giving a drawing motion that forced Jubala to his knees. The pointed teeth clenched in pain from the armlock. Casca said softly, "Open your mouth and say, ah." He kicked Jubala in the balls with enough force to completely smash the two testicles. Jubala opened his mouth to scream, and Casca placed the point of the sword in the gaping mouth, between the pointed teeth. "Die, you piece of shit, die!" He shoved, pushing the three-inch-wide blade out the back of the black's skull just above where the neck bones connected to the head. Jubala's eyes widened in terror. The blade stuck, and Casca began to twist it slowly back and forth in the bone to break it loose.

The last sound Jubala heard was the terrible squeaking sound of the bones in his head being torn apart. The bones themselves amplified the sound into a piercing crescendo that ran through his consciousness. With a superhuman effort he stood up in his death spasms and tore the grip from Casca's hand and stumbled wildly around the arena, trying to scream, the blade of the sword in his mouth and about ten inches of it sticking out the back of his head, the longer part of the sword waving up and down as if he were trying to signal for something. He fell to his knees. The darkness was coming. His gods were near, the terrible dark gods of the jungle.

Casca kicked him over onto his back and took the handle of the sword and twisted and jerked it out of Jubala's mouth. With a quick slice he removed Jubala's loin cloth. Another slice that merely burned in a distant manner for the dying brain, and Casca put something warm and wet in the Numidian's mouth. "You son of a slut, I promised myself that I'd do this some day."

Jubala died in the sand while the mob screamed their approval. "The sword! The sword!" they screamed over and over, crying for the emperor to honor their hero. Grudgingly Nero gave in. It was not wise to offend the public when they were this worked up... even if he had lost a lot of money on the black... Casca stood in front of the imperial box, the Praetorian Guard, gorgeous in their dress uniforms, flanking the emperor Nero. The emperor said: "Here is your freedom." He showed the wooden sword to the crowd first. They roared their approval. Nero graciously gave in and threw the piece of wood to the sand in front of Casca. "Take it. You are free."

Crespas sighed deeply. *Well, well. He actually did it. So be it. I have made a nice profit on him, and nothing lasts forever. Piss on Nero, that Greek lover. I'll keep this book of Cicero's for myself. Nero really wouldn't understand it.*

Casca raised the sword to the crowd. Money was brought to him on a silver platter, and coins rained down on him from the excited audience. Several rich ladies offered their homes and wealth to him if he would give them one night to lie in his arms. Never had Rome seen such a fight. Never had the arena been graced with the likes of this godling, this son of Mars, the avenger.

Casca was free. Shiu smiled secretly to himself and left.

Casca was free, but the bitterness was still there in his mouth. *We made it, Crysos. Wherever you are, we made it. You are free from your world, but I have not yet finished with mine...*

Twenty-Two

That night Casca wandered the streets of Rome, the hero of all. He drank and ate as a king might. There was nothing denied him. He spilled his seed into the bellies of faceless women as if trying to find something that could not be, and he thought the blind thoughts of futile rage and pain. Nor did he stop with that night. He stumbled through the streets, sleeping where he stopped. Two days. Then three. The pain would not leave... and all around the smiling faces of the mob... even worse, the degenerate nobility, those of the equus, the knighthood. Supposedly the honor of Rome rested with them. The thought came into his befuddled mind just at the fatal instant when he was standing before a bust of Nero.

He looked at the slack jawed head of the glory of Rome. The wine fumes were settled firmly in his brain, and good sense was not to be found. He had enough. He spoke to the bust:

"You, a god? You fat slug, I'm more a god than you are. You and Rome can't do anything to me. I will outlast all of you with your palaces and money and fine clothes and simpering manners. You sick, pathetic imitations of men, at least I am a real man and a better one than you and your kind will ever be. This for your godlike power, Caesar!" Reaching down, he picked a wet, slimy handful of the gutter that ran along the street. Staggering, he went to Nero's bust and rubbed the loathsome excreta onto the face of the emperor of Rome and was still rubbing when the vigiles knocked him out with their staffs and dragged him to the dungeons.

The scene had been watched.

A noble witness had seen all this transpire and would testify against this blasphemer and traitor. After all, M. Decimus Crespas could do no more. Besides, there was always the chance that Casca might be sold on the block and he could repurchase him. If not, well, men like Casca were too dangerous to have running around loose anyway. Crespas did have certain duties and obligations to the Empire.

When Casca awoke, he had the feeling that a flock of diseased Egyptian vultures had spent the night nesting in the roof of his mouth. Rinsing his mouth at a convenient bucket after kicking several other occupants out of the way, he went over to a corner and sat, trying to figure out what had happened. Bit by bit, recollection returned. *Oh, no*, he mourned. *They are going to put it to me now. Shiu was right. It seems as if everything goes full circle. I'm back again, but this time it's worse than when Tigelanius did it to me. This time I've insulted the emperor.*

One of the inmates was busy scratching a symbol of some kind on the dungeon wall. Curiosity moved Casca over to look. "What the Hades do you think you are doing?"

The man turned and looked at Casca. His face was calm, his eyes almost blissful. The filth on him and the rags did not seem to bother him at all.

"I make the mark of my master, the Son of God."

Casca looked more closely at the scratchings on the wall.

"A cross? Is that your sign?"

The man looked up as though he could see through the ceiling of the dungeon to the heaven above. The aura of a fanatic surrounded him. "Yes, my lost brother. The sign of the cross upon which our Savior gave his life for us, the cross where He died that we might be saved."

"Oh, shit," came Casca's response. "That's all I need to make my day complete, another one of you Jew mad men." He started to turn away, but the man grasped his tunic. "Listen to me brother, for we are all brothers in the blood of the Lamb. Christ died for you, too. He died that you, too, might be freed from your sins. Has no one ever told you of our Jesus?"

"Who did you say?"

"Jesus."

"The crucified one?" Damn! This hangover was giving him hallucinations.

"*The Crucified One!* Do you know our Jesus, brother?"

"I have met him," Casca answered dryly.

"Then the Lord bless you, brother. Will you be permitted to join me and those of my brethren who are going to be martyred in the name of the Lamb?"

Casca looked at the damn fool. What he started to say he kept in his own mind: *Personally, I would rather eat a lamb—in fact, I could eat at least two of them right now.* But there was no point in saying anything to the old fanatic. He wrenched his way out of the soon-to-be-sainted one's hands and went back to his corner to wait whatever the fates might decree. *Damn. I can't get away from the Jew, even here in Rome, in a jail. They have his so-called sign scratched on the walls. What's the big deal about him being crucified? You'd think he was the only one it ever happened to. I'm more concerned with what's going to happen to me.*

He had not long to wait. A sharp-looking trooper of the imperial household guard appeared and told the jailer to bring forth the gladiator known as Casca. Taking Casca by the arm, he had him firmly re-manacled and even his legs chained. This trooper had seen Casca's last fight and had no illusions as to the dangers of the prisoner. As soon as they were outside Casca could see that it would soon be midday. The guard and another four Praetorians escorted him. They took him by way of the Clivus Victoriae, the victory ramp leading to the imperial buildings on the summit. There they made their way past disdainful and aristocratic looking senators and politicians. Casca's appearance was obviously not a welcome sight in these sanctified surroundings.

Two Praetorians stood at the arms ready position in front of a pair of ebony and gold doors that led to the inner sanctum of the empire, the personal quarters of the emperor Nero. The doors opened silently on well-oiled hinges, and Casca was immediately thrown to the ground, face first, before he could even get a good look around the place. But in the fleeting moment he had seen several faces that were

vaguely familiar, and one he knew for sure—the wife of a senator. She had given him fifty gold denarii for one evening. She had garlic breath, but nice legs.

He was dragged to the foot of the couch upon which Nero reclined.

Raising a topaz lorgnette, the glory of Rome peered at Casca through one eye. Nero rose and went to the marble throne, adjusted the cushions to ease a sore spot where he had a pimple starting on the left cheek of his ass, settled himself as best he could, and lounged back, guarded by the great golden eagle mounted over the throne and by the Praetorian Guards. "Tigelanius," he called, "come here."

Tigelanius? Hell, he'd be dead by now, thought Casca. He dared to peer up and saw a gorgeously attired general approach. Yes, this Tigelanius did resemble his Tigelanius. *Perhaps the one in Jerusalem had sired this one—or it could be his grandson. Anyway, they both have that same nasty look that means nothing good to me.*

This Tigelanius had taken over the Praetorian Guard after arranging for Burrus to be retired. He had risen to the Equus and to the position of commander of the Rome garrison through years of careful plotting and bribery from his plebeian roots as a horse breeder and trader on Sicily to the side of Nero. It was no small accomplishment. He always claimed that he had noble blood and had even taken the name of the Roman who supposedly shacked up with his grandmother while on leave in Sicily. She had said he was a famous and noble soldier from the Eastern provinces. Pointing his finger at Casca, this Tigelanius said:

"Lord, here we have the one who spat upon the honor you were gracious enough to show him. The report is here in full and witnessed by no other than his former owner and the vigiles who apprehended him in his act of desecration and blasphemy."

Normally, Tigelanius would have handled something like this himself, but it made Nero feel as though he had control of things if occasionally he was permitted to pass down a judgment or two.

Nero stroked his sprouting beard with oiled, perfumed fingers. "Indeed?" he squeaked. His voice was too high to be effective. "What are the charges exactly? What did he do and say that he is brought before Rome itself?"

Tigelanius read the charges, telling of the desecration of the bust of Emperor Nero, and even worse—how Casca had claimed that he was more of a god than Nero and would outlast both Nero and Rome.

Oh, shit. They got me good, thought Casca.

Around the room the imperial toadies gasped at this blatant blasphemy. Nero had been leering at the form of Casca, stroking the head of a beautiful boy child beside the throne—to the obvious distaste of his wife sitting to the rear and reclining. When he heard the charges, Nero pulled a plug of hair out of the head of the young boy, stood up, kicked the boy away, then cursed because he had hurt his toe when he kicked the boy. He gave a short hop. His ingrown toenail made his eyes water. He turned on Casca.

"You ugly person, you! I was kind to you and set you free, and this is the way you repay me! I even lost money on you, you ugly person. You are really a distasteful-looking wretch with all those bulging muscles." Nero felt a series of goose bumps run over his spine in spite of himself as he looked at the massive form of the kneeling Casca. "You will learn that I am your god!" His voice began to

reach for a piercing crescendo. "I am your god!" he repeated, "and I will judge you." Gaining a modicum of self-control, he sat back down, froth speckling at his lips, his face flushed and spotty. "You miserable dung heap." He motioned for the guard to raise Casca's head so he could see his face.

Suddenly Nero's attitude changed, and his features took on a smug, almost prim look... as if he knew a secret. Folding his toga daintily over his arm, he looked down at Casca. "I could have you torn to pieces by the beasts or burned alive a little every day for the next three or four years, but you have already said that you will outlast either myself or Rome. Well, then. You must be immortal, and as such you couldn't die, anyway. Therefore, my invincible warrior, since there can be only one immortal in Rome—and I already have that honor and since I shall not kill you, as that would not do any good, I am going to let you live in my service and Rome's. Yes. You shall serve me as an oar slave on the imperial galleys for as long as you may live. Your sentence is for life."

His body shook with pleasure at his joke. Tears of joy came into his eyes. "A life sentence for one who cannot die!" The hall rocked with the laughter of the senators as they followed their master's lead. "For life, you ugly person, for life! Take him away."

Casca was kicked and beaten away from the presence of the lord of Rome, Gaius Germanicus Nero...

Twenty-Three

Stroke, stroke, stroke came the beat of the gavel of the hortator. Endless times it seemed Casca followed these orders. His body moved with the efficiency of a well-oiled machine. There was no wasted effort or motion, only the giant muscles rippling over his back. His beard reached to his chest as he rowed in sync with the other slaves.

The galley sliced the waters of the Mediterranean on her patrols and missions. The snap of the slave master's whip was a familiar sound that would jerk him from his sleep and automatically send his arms reaching for the oars. He served on the same ship until after the great fire when Rome burned. They were at sea, and the flames of the city were seen from the port of Ostia where the navy stood by ready to perform whatever service it might be ordered to do, but nothing came of it. Nero blamed the Christians; and Casca, when he heard the story, didn't put it past them. If they thought their judgment day was too long in coming, they just might try to hurry it up a bit. Anyway, Nero was the best friend they had because for every follower of the Jew he killed, two more seemed to spring up. Nero probably single-handedly doubled the number of Christians in the empire.

Two more ships Casca went through before the word of Nero's death came. Casca chuckled as he thought: *One down, and an empire to go.*

But if the news of Nero's death pleased Casca, it pleased the man next to him on the oars even more. This man had been a merchant who had failed to give a proper accounting. He loved to talk of his friends in high places and how they

would soon set him free now that Galba was emperor. He delighted in the telling of Nero's history—probably because he also delighted in hearing the sound of his own voice. Casca listened. There wasn't much else to do when they lay at anchor. The merchant's voice assumed that slightly superior tone that some priests and lawyers use—or that women have when talking to people they consider their inferiors. The essence of his story was:

"Well, all things considered, Nero started off well enough. But the incipient degeneracy that he had kept hidden while under the control of his mother Agrippina soon vanished once he had the reins of power in his hands. He had been known to murmur to his friends that his mother needed to have her tongue stilled, so he did just that and had her murdered along with Britannicus, Claudius's legitimate son. Claudius had never renounced the boy even though the fact of his being sired by Claudius was open to conjecture, especially after Claudius had the mother killed for her infidelities.

"Unlike Claudius with his somewhat austere tastes, Nero leaned toward the opulence of decadent Greece and the Orient. By exercising the treason law he kept down any opposition to him, and he plundered the rich families through a form of imperial blackmail. But he soon had the empire in turmoil with uprisings against him in Britain led by Queen Boadicea eventually being crushed. However, other disturbances arose in ever-troublesome Parthia, and a disastrous defeat at Rhandeia led many provincial governors to rise against him, including Vindex in Gaul and Galba in Spain. Nero's last success was the detection and destruction of a plot against him by Gaius Piso, but at last even the Praetorian Guard could stand no more of the insanities and depravities of their sworn emperor, and they abandoned him. The simple act of their leaving him without their protection was enough to end his reign and he was forced to flee from Rome.

"Nero sought sanctuary, but found none. Everywhere his enemies were searching for him, and no friends could be found. In a poverty-stricken farmer's hut he fell upon his knife and, with the help of a slave, died in filth and poverty. The last of the Julio-Claudian emperors left the empire in rebellion and civil war." The merchant finished his tale with obvious relish.

Casca felt a small sense of satisfaction at the news of Nero's death, but then a thought struck him, and he laughed out loud, startling his oar mate. "What was it Nero said, there was room for only one immortal, and he already had that honor?" Casca laughed again, bitterly, drawing the oar master's attention to him and getting him another light dose of the lash in order to keep his mind on the oars. They were casting off. The drumming beat of the timer striking the drum with his mallets settled into his brain like a pulse throbbing in his temple. He let himself fall into the pattern, losing all track of time until the orders came to ship oars and the sails were run up so that the silent wind could do the job of the hundred and sixty slaves below. The oarsmen then collapsed over their oars, the old-timers controlling their breathing and letting their bodies relax, the new slaves often throwing up at what seemed to be the impossible strain of sending a hundred tons racking through the ocean with only men's backs for power. Casca recalled well the first galley he had slaved on. The oar master was a bitter and petty man who took pleasure in the pain of his helpless charges. On that galley Casca had added

to his collection of thin hairline white crisscrossing scars on his back, scars that spoke reams about his years of service.

On one voyage his heart had jumped into his throat when he heard a familiar tinkling laugh come from the upper deck above. Shiu was on board! Straining his ears, Casca caught the words of the yellow man telling of his returning home to tell his brothers of the wonders he had seen and how there was one special person that he had met and loved like a son and hoped one day would find his way to Khitai...

Khitai... the word seemed like a dream to Casca. *Good journey, old friend, Casca thought. It's best if you don't know where I am. But you are right about things repeating. One day I will go to Khitai, and if you are not there, then there will be as you said one like you. Who knows? If I live long enough, perhaps I will see you in your reincarnation, for surely you would not come back as anything other than what you are now. Vale, old friend, vale...*

They let Shiu off in Antioch where he followed the path of the great Alexander to the Indus river. Once there, the way to his home was open.

Casca was on a bireme out of Antium when Vesuvius blew and smothered Herculaneum and Pompeii beneath tons of ash and lava. The ashes reached the bireme far out at sea and turned the ship into a filthy mess of wet ash and powdered pumice that invaded everything from the pores of their skins to the, food they ate. They sailed into Pompeii, amazed to see that the sea had pulled back and left the wharves bare to the sand. People by the hundreds tried to crowd on deck, but only those with permits issued by the harbor master were taken aboard. The rest had to take their chances that other ships were on the way and would reach them in time. Some did. But not all... The two cities died.

And Casca lived to see another four emperors pass. From time to time he was moved from one side of the ship to the other so as not to let him get lopsided from rowing on only one side. His captains passed his story around, but most did not believe it, thinking it only an exaggeration. No one knew how long he had really been rowing since his papers had long since been lost or destroyed. But he was a slave and a strong one, and as such they really did not care as long as he could pull the twin-banked oars.

The fear greatest in the mind of Casca was the same one that had haunted him in the mines of Greece: being buried alive, this time in water. What if the galley were sunk and he was chained to the oars? He would be unable to free himself until the chains rusted away.

But, could he drown?

The answer came in a storm off Tergeste when his ship was smashed upon rocks and the bottom torn out of her. The waves rushed in, smothering all and dragging the ship down. The sounds of her breaking up were like a woman—or horse—in pain, as the timbers tore in two or were twisted in small pieces and smashed on the rocks. Casca found himself under water. The chains holding him down to his bench were free as the bench itself was torn apart. The waters closed over him, and the blackness came. His last thought was: *Perhaps I can drown...*

But consciousness returned to him, a consciousness where he was on the beach throwing up. His mouth was full of seaweed and sand, his chains were wrapped around him, and the storm still raged. But he was alive and on the beach. And

alone. Pieces of his galley were strewn all about him. Casca's lungs gave a heave and water poured out of them in a flow. They emptied, and then with a spasm sucked air back in. His beard and hair were a tangled mass, looking amazingly like the seaweed surrounding him.

Pulling himself erect, Casca looked to the sea and down the beach. The rain whipped his face as the storm continued its efforts to destroy the land. Raising his chains to the storm, he cried out: "Well, damn it, here I go again. The wheel turns once more. The circle repeats."

He made his way from the beach. Passing a fisherman's shack, he looked in. The place was empty, but there were a few rags of clothing lying on a cot. They were infinitely better than the soiled loin cloth he had been wearing without change for the last four years.

It was in the last year of the reign of Domitian when Casca's ship foundered on the rocks and freed him from the oars, but time now had little meaning for him. Season followed season, year after year, until the days and the decades were all one. Sometimes it seemed to him as if time itself was compressed; at other times it was exaggerated; but he did what he had always done—lived by the sword, one way or another. The only pattern was that he was always a mercenary, whether as a soldier, or as a bodyguard for a merchant, or as a guard for a petty prince. He preferred the money of the merchants to the chancy and risky favors of the princes.

He even put in some time as a pirate operating out of the Kikladhes island chain off Greece—near where he had served in the mines. His prowess with the sword and fantastic strength made him welcome wherever it seemed there was going to be trouble—and he usually found it. But he always moved on, afraid to stay in one place too long lest someone question his youthful appearance and draw conclusions that could be dangerous for him.

For a time he was chief of a tribe in the Caucus mountains. He had killed the former chief in an argument over a herd of goats. But again, while the life style there was simple, the elders started looking at him a little strangely since he seemed to show no sign of aging. And when the youngest and most beautiful woman in the tribe offered him everything his heart could desire if he would just share his secret of continuing youth with her, he knew that it was time to move on without any good-byes, and he did. By ship out of Poti, he sailed to Varna in Thrace, taking with him the treasury of the village. It wasn't much. Most of the village wealth was in goats, but there was enough silver to tide him over for a while.

And so he came to Pela.

He was outside the city, taking his time, enjoying the Greek spring, when the smell of smoke came close on him. In those rocky hills, that usually meant not a forest fire but a house. Casca hiked his pack up higher on his back and began to trot toward the spiraling column of smoke he had spotted. Cresting a small rise, he threw himself flat and took in the situation. Bandits were looting a house, and right now two of them were trying to get the legs apart on a female they were holding to the ground. Even from Casca's vantage point her legs looked good, but... *None of my business*, he thought, and started to back away out of sight. But he stopped for one more look at the woman.

"Shiu was right," Casca grumbled to himself. "I'm a damned do-gooder. One of these days I'm going to get my head beat in for sticking my big nose where it doesn't belong." Dropping his pack, he took his sword from its scabbard and looked over the situation. There were two holding the woman down while a third was piling up the house possessions they wanted to take. *Well, might as well get it on.* Casca began trotting down the rise, slowly at first, then faster. The two were intent on getting some ass and didn't look up—until the slapping sound of his sandals told them he was almost on them. One rose up, an embarrassed look on his face, and Casca's blade took his head off. Without any hesitation he turned and lopped the right arm off the man just trying to get his loincloth back up. The one looting the house got one look at what was happening and took off for high ground, trying to put as much distance as possible between himself and that madman.

The woman, Neda, was not ungrateful, and her husband had been killed by the bandits. Also, Casca was still a pretty good-looking man if one liked them a little thick and rough. Neda knew how to gentle him, and Casca worked the farm. The nights sitting with his woman were good, and he knew the first contentment of his life. The farm prospered, and soon they bought the four adjoining parcels of land and had ten freedmen working for them. The years were good. Casca had discovered love. Neda was the first woman he had ever really loved, not merely used. More, for the first time he knew the power of a woman's love, for Neda loved him as much as he loved her. Life was an idyll. Not only did he know the pleasure of her magnificent body, but there was a thrill in simply watching her walk. Her hips rolled with each step in a way only she could. In a crowd of a hundred women he could recognize her from the back instantly just by that sweet, tantalizing roll of hips. But even idylls have their endings.

The time came when he found her looking at him strangely. Traces of silver had begun to appear in her own hair, but none in his. When she asked him how he kept from going gray he knew that the end of his first and only home was in sight.

So the night came when he lay with her for the last time and took her with a gentleness that would not have been possible before he met her. He gave her the full measure of his love and lay in the dark, listening to her breathing, her head on his chest. He could imagine her dark eyes closed, a small smile on her lips as she slept the deep sleep of a woman who knows she has been loved with all the intensity of soul a man can know. Her long, soft, brown hair smelled of the sun and fields, fresh and clean. It was a dream-light blanket covering them both. Casca leaned down and kissed her softly, fearful that she would wake. He eased gently out of the bed and crept out of the house and crossed the fields to where the foreman of his workers lived with his woman. Waking the man, he gave him a letter for his woman, then turned his face to the East. He was walking away from the only woman he had ever loved. Where would he go? There was word that there would be another war with Parthia. His face darkened. The wheel would turn once more.

The foreman gave her the letter the next day, and it read:

Woman. All things must end. As I came to you from the hills, so I have to continue the journey I am on. Know that all is in your name, and the property is

for you, and the money. I have need for little, and took only enough for my journey.

Know that I have loved you as I have never loved anyone or anything in my life—and I am older than you think. But I am driven, and cannot escape my fate. A great and wise friend of mine once told me that he believes everything is a great circle. All that was, will be again, and when one dies he will be reborn in the future. If he is right, then if the gods are kind, perhaps when the circle turns far enough we will meet again. I love you now, and will love you a thousand years from now.

I am
CASCA

The legion accepted the services of one so ably qualified without question. In his time in Greece, Casca had acquired new identity documents, so there was no difficulty there. He was immediately inducted. The fact that he was in need of no—or at the least, little—training, was welcomed, and Casca prepared himself for a time in the legions of Rome. Here at least he knew the routines and how to deal with most of the problems that would come.

He had enlisted in Sidon. From there, after a refresher course, he was sent to join the army of the general Avidius Cassius in Damascus. He had returned to the legions and the eagles of Rome. Marcus Aurelius was emperor, and it was one hundred and fifty years since the Jew had been crucified in Jerusalem. Casca was amazed when he looked at his reflection in the brass mirror when he shaved. *Well, old boy, you don't look a day over one hundred and forty. I have outlasted them all. Even Jerusalem has been destroyed and the temple of the Jews torn down, yet I remain. The emperors of Rome turn to dust. How many have come and gone since my birth? Let me see. Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero that slug, Galba, Otho, Vitellus, Vespasian, who started the war on the Jews, and then his son Titus who finished them off and scattered them throughout the world, Domitian, Nerva, Trajan (now there was a hell of a man), Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, but now that Lucius is dead there is just Aurelius—Eighteen emperors have come and gone, but I'm still here and the, same. At least, I think I'm the same. How would I know if I have changed. Anyway, who cares?*

Twenty-Four

Casca watched his commander. Avidius Cassius was gazing out toward the desert, a look of intense concentration on his hard face. He seemed a living copy of the stone bust that might be made of him should this campaign succeed and the emperorship be within his grasp. That's what generals thought about, wasn't it? What they would get personally out of a battle? *Shit!* Was there any real difference between a general and a trooper? For the soldier, rape and plunder? For the general, laurels and honor... and riches? *Oh, hell no.* Sure, you thought about what you could get—but wouldn't a general also plan the battle? Plan the whole

campaign in this case? What was it like to be a general? What went through a general's mind? The thought sniffed idly at the edges of Casca's brain: *The Jew said that what I am, I shall remain. Did he mean I will always be a trooper and never a general? But would I want to be a general? Would I know what the hell to do if I were a general? If I were Avidius Cassius, what would I be thinking of right now?* He looked at the stone-faced bastard, but he could read nothing in the marble features. *Hell, that's his job. Mine is to do what I will be told.*

Avidius Cassius was indeed thinking about the campaign, and his mind was a complicated pattern of history, facts, possibilities, problems, and plans. Across the desert lay Parthia, the enemy he intended to conquer—and one not to be taken lightly. The Parthians themselves were direct descendants of the great empire of Persia that Xerxes had led so magnificently. Then, when the great Alexander's generals divided his empire among themselves, Ptolemy had taken Egypt and the Seleucids had taken Persia. Thus the Parthians combined the best of the Greek and Persian world in their armies. For hundreds of years they had held off the Roman eagles. Many times the Roman armies had invaded—and even destroyed Ctesiphon, but like the phoenix of their legends, Parthia always rose again. And again. Only the Germans equaled the Parthians for the amount of trouble they gave Rome.

Details of the Parthian military organization ran through Avidius's mind... formidable heavy cavalry... the cataphracti... wearing armored scales and armed with the great lance, the contus, using shock tactics to break their enemy lines. These were the wealthy and the nobles for the most part. The bulk of the Parthian cavalry was made up of horse archers of great skill in shooting and riding. Now those bowmen... *Destroy them and...* Inwardly Avidius smiled.

This campaign had been well-planned. The legions of Rome had gathered at Bostra and Damascus. There were contingents from Thrace and Africa. Even three cohorts of the Tenth were present for the campaign, being temporarily assigned to "the praetor Avidius Cassius." *Well... praetor now... who knows what the future will hold?* The strength was there. Cassius was not about to repeat the mistakes made when last he came to Parthia and had to share command with that head-in-his ass bastard who had fucked up that campaign. This time he was in sole command—and that would make the difference.

Already the native contingents of Armenia had, in response to his message of aid, sent their forces across their borders and were harassing the Parthians from the north. Even now they were holding the city of Amida under siege while auxiliaries from Cappadocia and Galatia, with the aid of several Roman cohorts, were attacking Europa. This should serve to split the forces of Parthia and draw them off in several directions. Now it was time for him to play his hole card. He would take his legions and native auxiliaries and cross this great desert before him on a direct forced march. Five hundred miles as the crow flies and they would reach the valley of the Euphrates. For weeks now Avidius had been sending out units into the desert, laying in caches of water and food. Now he was ready. Once he gave the command to form the legions they would march thirty miles a day and come in from the south, just north of Babylon, and attack Ctesiphon from the rear while the bulk of the Parthian armies were involved with trying to relieve the sieges of Amida and Europa.

Avidius Cassius gave the command to form the legion, and the army entered the great desert. The Arab auxiliaries rode their camels wrapped in their voluminous robes, their faces covered by scarves to keep the sand from their mouths and noses. Avidius had learned much from his last venture into the hostile regions of Parthia. He was an ambitious man, lean and sharp-featured, and his brain was just as lean and sharp. He understood that his soldiers would have to be in the best condition possible if they were to have any chance for success after the desert crossing. Therefore all armor was taken and put into carts and on the back of the pack animals. The soldiers were issued robes not dissimilar to those the Arabs wore. Only the troops assigned to flanking duty and point were in armor—and these troops were changed several times a day. They entered the desert, and scorpions and snakes were trampled under the heels of twenty thousand Romans and their allies. Avidius had planned well. The miles rolled by, and few in his charge were lost to the sun or to thirst. Only sixteen hundred would die in the twenty days of the march.

Casca lost himself in the familiar routine of the march. Like the others, he tried to ignore the omnipresent force of the sun beating down like a hammer from the heavens. The army marched head bowed, concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other as though this was their only mission on earth. Each knew that to be separated from the column was to die. It was up to them to keep up the back-breaking—and mind-breaking—pace that Avidius had set. Stragglers were left behind, and few ever showed up again. They were either killed or sold into slavery by the bands of bandits and scavengers who followed after the Romans like hyenas waiting for the leftovers and scraps. But even they stopped following after a week. The desert was too much.

Several camp followers had attached themselves to the legions as such have done since time immemorial. Many were the favorites of officers who had brought them along for their own comfort and pleasure. Avidius had them all strangled the fourth day of the march when he saw how much of his precious supply of water they were using. Since none would survive the four days' walk back to the last outpost, either dying alone or suffering the ugly death or slavery they would get from the scavenging bands that trailed after the army, Avidius considered his order to kill them an act of kindness on his part. Besides, dead they could say nothing of any plans they may have heard about.

And so the army marched, feet dragging and tongues beginning to swell. But just before the ordeal became unbearable they would reach one of the caches, and the dole of water and grain would be made. It was not enough to satisfy, only sufficient to sustain life, but that it did.

On the long march Casca again kept his own counsel, his mind trying to make some sense out of his existence. What was it Shiu had said... that life is the great circle and that what was will be again, and nothing is destroyed, only changed? *The legion. I have returned once more, yet nothing has changed in the years since last I fought for Rome. Everything is the same. The talk, the desires, the fears... The years have changed, but not man... and not me. I still feel the same as I did when I served with the Seventh in Germany. Even the duties are the same. Well, shit. If I am condemned to live, you would think at least that I wouldn't get so thirsty or hungry. I know that I don't get sick as the others do when things get rough and*

there's a lack of food and water. But I feel all the thirst they do... and the hunger. Right now I could eat the south end of a north-bound hyena.

The days passed. The country changed to a surrealistic landscape of rock. And finally the word came back from the front column and ran along the thirty miles of marching soldiers: "The Euphrates! We are at the valley. The river is in sight."

The desire to run for the river overcame many of the soldiers, but they were beaten back at Avidius's order. He would allow no intimation of any kind of panic or disorder. Forcing his troops into line, rank by rank, he marched them toward the river Euphrates. There they put their faces into the alluvial waters that had fed the first empires of earth. Casca, like the others, drank deep, filling his belly until it seemed it would either burst or throw up. It did neither. When they had drunk, Avidius Cassius ordered camp to be set up and foragers to be sent out. From here on they would wear their armor and follow the rules and regulations of the conventional order of battle.

Ctesiphon lay fifty miles away. Two days' march, and they would reach their objective. But first, a day's rest...

The legions formed. The outriders were sent racing ahead to stop any warning of their approach. All villagers and other persons in the path were herded into retaining pens to prevent their informing the capital of the approach of the eagles and their allies.

It was amazing what one day's rest could accomplish. With that one day the Romans had reconstituted themselves and were even now looking as formidable as if they were parading on the Field of Mars in Rome itself.

The foragers returned, driving cattle and sheep before them. Wagons were sent out to loot the villages of their stored grain. The Roman army would feed on the land, and if in their path they left starvation for those of the land they crossed, well, that was just the way it was... and always had been. Eat, or be eaten.

Avidius sent his Arab contingents racing ahead of the main army. They reached and isolated the city of the Greek kings, Seleucia. The Arabs kept the inhabitants inside the walls, and no messenger reached Ctesiphon. Just a few hours across the Tigris the lights of the great temple of Zeus gleamed in the evening, the fires on his altar symbolizing eternity. The light cavalry of the Arabs performed its task admirably. The slower foot soldiers of the legion advanced, escorted by their heavy cavalry. That night the legion rested within eyeshot of Ctesiphon and made ready for the crossing of the river. Confiscating all boats and barges, before dawn broke they had established a bridgehead on the other side and had begun the crossing. Time after time, like strange water-borne beetles, the small boats and skin coracles of the native fishermen served Rome, transporting soldiers. The horses and livestock were herded across under their own power.

It would have been a miracle for the Roman forces to be able to reach the walls of Ctesiphon without being observed, but through the planning of Avidius they did reach within striking distance. The city faced the Romans before any help could reach the Parthians from the distant battlefields of Europa and Amida. There the forces of Parthia were embroiled in a bleeding fight with their Armenian enemies, Romans, and Cappadocians. Even as Avidius approached Ctesiphon, the defeated Parthians were withdrawing from the battle around Europa, and that city was in Roman hands. The Parthians had achieved greater success against the Armenians

who had not had the benefit of Roman troop support to stiffen their lines and serve as a model. The Armenians were reeling back to their own border in panic, pursued by the heavy cavalry of the Parthian empire. Yet even their defeat served the purposes of Avidius Cassius well enough. All these actions had drawn off the majority of the armed forces of Parthia. By the time they could return to their capital it would be too late. Even if they came faster than expected, they would be exhausted and worn out from their trials and battles. Avidius was confident of his victory.

Casca watched the preparations for the coming battle with a detached eye. Gradually, though, an unusual and oddly upsetting feeling began to possess him. It was as though he were someone else watching the scenario of his life being endlessly repeated. Even the simplest routine things took on an oddly misplaced, unreal tinge. The pilum on his shoulder and the wicker container full of light throwing spears—even the small steel heads and bamboo bodies of the spears themselves—seemed to be slightly unreal... as though he were watching a circular dream that went round and round. He wondered if he were going mad.

The army drew near to the city and finally invested it all around. Avidius Cassius sent this message to the city elders:

Hail, citizens of Ctesiphon.

I am Avidius Cassius, praetor and consul of Rome. I make you this one offer—and no more.

Send out your men to fight, and we shall settle this as men of war should. Your armies in the battles to the north, at Europa and Amida, have been destroyed. How else should I be here before your walls unopposed? Surrender the city, or send out your men to do battle. If you agree to surrender, I give you my solemn oath on the honor of Rome that none in your city shall suffer or be sold into slavery. There shall be no rape or pillaging. But if you refuse, again on my honor I swear that every living thing in your city shall perish, even unto the beasts and vermin. I shall level your city to the earth and sow the ground with salt so that nothing may ever live here again. That is my word and my honor. Surrender, or come forth and do battle. You have until the first light of dawn to make your reply. And then all shall die.

I am

AVIDIUS CASSIUS

Commander of the Roman Forces in Parthia

That night the legion dug in around the only entrances to and from the city. Casca sat watching the walls, wondering what the next day would bring. Would the city surrender? Or fight? Most of the Parthian cavalry was away to the battles in Europa and Amida, but there were still the city guards and many veterans who remained behind. The city should be able to muster at least thirty thousand men. *Well, we'll find out in the morning...* Casca made a meal of dates and barley ground together and washed the whole down with a mouthful of water from the Tigris. Wrapping his cloak around him, he found a soft spot on the earth and curled up after shifting around for a few minutes and moving some small stones out of critical spots.

He slept the sleep of soldiers the world over. The night passed while the Roman guards walked their perimeters. One sang softly of his girl at home and would she wait for him while he was away... an old story to be endlessly repeated. Casca slept lightly. Any unknown sound was enough to jerk his eyes open instantly for a quick look around. Then, just as fast, they would close and he would be asleep again.

Instincts are hard to lose, and well before the final hour Casca arose and prepared himself and his gear, wiping down his armor and giving his sword one last honing. The scraping sound of the honing, whispering through the dark predawn, was echoed by many others doing the same thing.

The army of Avidius was filled with veterans who had plied their trade from Spain to Numidia and beyond. The only thing that Casca noticed as being different from the legions of Augustus, with whom he had served, was that there were a great deal more men from the barbarian lands serving in the legion—Germans and Sarmatians, even blue-eyed Celts from the tiny isles called Britannia. Shaking his head, Casca wondered what had happened to the valor of Romans that they now showed an ever-increasing need to bring in barbarians to fill their armies. Didn't the idiot politicians know that they were training and supplying leadership for those whom they would have to fight some day? True, not all of these foreigners would return home, but some would, and when they were back with their home tribes they would teach them the Roman manner of fighting—and when that happened the day of Rome was numbered. When the order and discipline that made Rome great was common to the barbarians of the north, they would swoop down and feed on the decaying carcass of a corrupt nation that no longer deserved to rule. Thinking back on the ruined temples and other relics of the forgotten cities he had passed on his way to Cenchrea so many years before, he again wondered if he would live to see Rome in ruins.

Going to the river to rinse off his face, he heard the voices of the soldiers talking. As he passed one group, a trooper called out to Casca, holding up a goatskin wine sack: "Kamerade, willst due eine trink haben mit uns?" Shaking his head no, Casca returned to his company area, but he grumbled underneath his breath: It may not be much longer. When the language of the legion is German, how long can Rome endure?

Dawn rose over the plains of Persia. Here had marched conquerors whose once-mighty armies now were dust. Here the land had known the tread of Alexander's Greek phalanx as they passed on their way to lay the world at the feet of the young Macedonian. Now the inheritors of his empire, Rome and Parthia, met again. At first light the forces of Parthia marched out the great gate and formed their lines facing the Romans. Rank after rank, they bristled with spears and with the fearsome laminated bow that could drive its arrow through all but the thickest armor. The forces of Parthia waited, their faces calm and determined. They knew the choice they had made: victory or death. Inside the city the altar fires were being lit and the priests were sacrificing to their gods. Not even Baal Amon was neglected. He received his measure of blood. Kettle drums began to roll, and the city's dogs began to howl in the way of premonition that animals have of coming violence. Parthia faced Rome.

Avidius was no tiro. He had planned everything to the last detail. He formed his infantry into four ranks deep and placed his cavalry on the Parthian left to keep them from being able to break into the open and maneuver.

The Parthian general called out to Avidius:

"Roman! Do you hear me?" His Latin was heavily loaded with a Greek accent. "Roman, hear me. We have accepted your terms. It is not within our rights to surrender the city without a battle being given, but we have seen you, and you are not greater in number than we. So in response to your ultimatum I give you mine. Lay down your arms and leave our country, and you will be spared. Go back the way you came, and you will live. Stay, and you will die. We are warriors, as are you. The only favor I ask is that this day's business be handled as such, with honor. We are here. Romans, what is your answer?"

The Parthians opened ranks. Their legendary bowmen stepped forward, the bows half drawn back, ready to raise and fire in an instant and drive those deadly feathered barbs, into the hearts of their ancient enemies.

Avidius gave one quick command, and the legion formed the testudo, the maneuver named after the tortoise shell because the shields of the legionnaires were placed over their heads and to the front and sides, forming a strong shell surrounding their bearers.

As the legion formed the testudo, the Parthians let fly their arrows. Some found their way into the faces, throats, and stomachs of the Romans and their allies, but not enough. Having faced the Parthian bows before, Avidius had prepared for them and had issued hides of leather to cover the shields of the tortoise. These helped stop the amazing penetrating qualities of the Parthian bows. As the legions formed the shell, they opened their ranks for an instant and behind was Avidius's secret weapon. One hundred rapid-fire ballistae had been assembled in the night by his engineers. They had been carried with great secrecy on special mules and camels all the way from Antioch where they had been made in secrecy and in that manner transported to his forces just before they had moved out from Bostra and Damascus.

The ballistae looked a great deal like the Parthian bows as their crews winched back the horsehair windings that would let the heavy darts fly forth with enough force to go through two to three men at a time. The first volley left over five hundred Parthians dead in the dust, most of them the irreplaceable bowmen. Before the Parthians could respond to this surprise tactic, the light cavalry of the Arab contingent attacked their left flank with their own flight of arrows, followed by a smashing charge of the Roman heavy cavalry. This forced the flank of the Parthians back in on itself. Avidius, using what he called the swinging lever principle, applied his heaviest pressure to one flank and thus compressed it back, creating congestion and making it difficult for the Parthians to have any kind of cohesive control. Step by step the Romans forced the Parthians to a spot between the walls of Ctesiphon and the banks of the Tigris.

The special four-rank formation that Avidius had ordered now proved its value. A man on the line was good for only about fifteen minutes constant fighting before he was exhausted. The four-rank formation anticipated that. As one rank became tired, the centurion in charge would watch carefully for the moment to signal the change of ranks. Like a magician's sleight of hand, when the trumpet blew the

second rank would step forward and take the place in line, letting the men they relieved go to the rear to become the fourth rank. This way, each man had only fifteen minutes to fight out of each hour. The constant supply of fresh troops was too much for even the valorous Parthians, and the pressure began to show on them.

Casca was in the second rank when the fight began. He held himself back. *Damn it, I am not going to get involved. I'll just do what I have to do to get by. I am not going to get emotional...* But the ranks behind began beating on their shields in time with the drums, the flats of their blades resounding like a pulse beat as they hammered their way into Casca's brain. *No! I am not going to do it...* Even as he said *No!* his gladius came up as if with a mind of its own, and, like a child breaking down, Casca let loose a primal cry and began beating his shield harder and harder, wanting his turn at the wall of flesh facing him. Then the centurion in charge of his maniple gave the order, and, like a beast, Casca raced forth into the gap, his sword flashing in the morning light.

They fought and fought. The ground became slippery with the blood of thousands, and men died because they lost their footing and were trampled to death in the bloody clay mud. Many drowned, their mouths filled with blood that had collected in pools into which they had been unlucky enough to fall face first and had never been able to get up because the crazed men above them stood on their bodies trying to find a better footing.

And Casca cried.

Tears flowed down his face as he fought and killed, fought and killed, and killed again. His face struck terror into those who confronted this insane crying Roman. When his rank was signaled to step back, he refused. Unconscious of the order, he stayed in the front line, chopping and hacking. Time and again blows struck him, tearing holes in his armor, gouging chunks of meat from him. Then there came a burning in his left thigh. Looking down, he saw an arrow shaft sticking out of his leg. Roaring in rage-filled anguish and mental grief, he grabbed the shaft and pulled. The barbed head remained inside, but the gut bindings used to hold the bronze arrowhead to the shaft came loose under his tugging, and the shaft came out. A Parthian noble, gorgeous in bright Tyrian purple, threw himself bodily over the head of some of his countrymen to get at this mad Roman. Casca caught him as he came over, and with one hand he squeezed the life out of the noble while at the same time smashing the brains out of a wounded Parthian bowman with his shield. He regained his sword and hacked away.

The butchery continued through the day. Only chest-heaving exhaustion forced Casca to stop his personal slaughtering. He lay behind while the ranks of the Romans forced the Parthians back. Back against the river and the walls. Casca lay and sobbed, his mind whirling with images and patterns he could not understand. The battle was almost done. Raising himself, he stumbled over the battlefield, stepping heedlessly over the bodies of the dead and dying. Crying still, he screamed out loud, but no one paid any attention to him. Madness in one form or another was not unusual in battle.

"Is this all there is for me?" he cried to the unanswering heavens. "Is this what I am condemned to repeat over and over, never ending? Is this what I really am, a beast fit only for butchering his own kind?"

But there was no answer from the sky, darkening now with a coming storm.

The last of the Parthians was dead or in chains.

The wailing of the women in the city was an eerie testimony to the devastation outside the walls. The noble Avidius Cassius had promised they would be spared and not sold into slavery if their men came out. At least they and their children would be spared that. But their men were dead.

The arrow in Casca's leg burned like the acid in his soul as he worked his way mindlessly across and away from the battlefield. He sobbed, and stumbled with tear-blinded eyes.

It was over.

For now, at least, it was over...

Twenty-Five

Dark clouds raced low over the plains of Parthia. Streaks of lightning shot from them like shining lances spearing the raped earth beneath. The waters of the Tigris reflected rust-colored lights.

Blood, Casca thought. *Death*.

He climbed wearily to the top of a mound and sat upon a pile of once-sunbaked bricks, now lead gray in the stormlight, and looked across the plains. The roof of a house showed that the mound he sat on was covering a ruined building from the mists of antiquity. To the southeast lay ancient Babylon, abandoned, forsaken all these centuries, knowing the footsteps of only a few shepherds. *Eternity...* Casca looked at his hands. They were covered with blood that was turning black from exposure to the air and drying on his skin. The arrowhead in his thigh had settled in with a dull throbbing. He raised his grime-streaked face to the skies. The storm clouds were great cumulus stallions racing toward some unknown infinity. As they crowded together, the dark deepened. In the flickering light and shadows that preceded darkness he looked out upon a scene that could only have come from a tortured mind. Below on the plains were forty-five thousand men locked in an obscene caricature of humanity, holding each other in contorted positions of death. Broken spears, and gear littered the earth as far as Casca could see. For what? He looked toward the cause, that great city.

Ctesiphon was no more. The flames of the burning city reached up with black, greasy fingers to the stormy sky. The screams of the inhabitants blended with the roar of the flames. Ctesiphon was being put to the sword and to the torch, her remaining people marched off into slavery—after the soldiers had first taken their pleasures, for is not rape the right of conquest? And what purpose do women serve other than that of servicing men? Those too old were put to the sword. The children were loaded into carts for the long journey to the slave markets of Syria where they would be auctioned off.

The Parthian commander, surrounded by his dead followers, lay on the field, his mouth filled with dirt. The noble had died in spasms, biting at his wounds and the earth like a mad dog. At this moment his favorite wife was opening her legs and

letting a squad of legionnaires take their pleasure with her in the hope that she and her children would be spared. The king's sons had already been quickly put to the sword—even to the babes. The best way to stop a royal line from cropping up to give trouble later was to wipe it out completely and the Romans were practical men.

Four thousand surviving warriors were chained together and were even now passing over the horizon, the cries of their women still ringing in their ears. Ctesiphon burned. The Roman eagles were triumphant. Only a small detachment remained behind for mopping up operations and to occupy the capital for a while. What remained of Ctesiphon would serve as a forward base and headquarters. The bulk of the army was already on the march for the glory of its general.

While the city burned, another flame was born in the brain of its conqueror. Warmed with pleasure over the victory, Avidius Cassius considered his worth as a senator and leader of Rome. He reflected the true value of Roman honor; it seemed only natural that the thought would come: *Ave Avidius, Imperator!* The spark caught in his mind... *Imperator!*

There were no sparks in Casca's mind. He turned his eyes upon the forty-five thousand dead men littering the field of battle. Other battles, other dead. How many scenes like this had he lived through? How many more could he face? Dead men... their corpses littered the ground as far as the eye could see. Horses... they screamed like women, their shrieks rising in the stormy air until, one by one, a member of the mop-up squad would mercifully slice the beast's throat, letting its rich blood join that of its human master in feeding the hungry soil beneath. Scavenging soldiers... Romans walked over the field below him, looting the bodies of the vanquished enemy. Parthia was no more. Killing the wounded was the final act of this dreadful scenario. Forty-five thousand men... eyes wide and staring... accusing the gods and forces that drove them... their mouths black gaping holes filled with silent screams... hands frozen in the act of clawing to reach the heavens... or digging into the torn earth as if seeking comfort. Dead. Dead. Dead!

Dead... dead... all could kill, all could be killed—all but me! The thought came screaming into Casca's mind.

Enough!

Taking his torn and bloody armor from his chest, he raised his voice to the now-thundering skies above. The memory of another day and another storm washed over him... How long ago? Two hundred years? Fat drops of rain fell to the ground. Distant thunder rumbled its way closer.

Tears streaked Casca's face, and the years of his anguish rushed up into his throat and burst forth in a soul-ripping cry. Drawing his gladius from its scabbard, the blade notched and dull from the day's slaughter, he cried out:

"Yeshua! Jesus! Jew! God or devil!"

His own voice seemed to be one with the thunder. Raising himself erect and holding the sword to the heavens, he cried:

"In the name of pity, let me die! What I did to you those long years ago in Jerusalem was as nothing to what you have done to me. I have been punished a thousand times over. You are the one without pity or compassion. The love your followers preach is a lie. You are far more cruel than me or any man. You have died—let me do the same!"

With one final great inarticulate cry Casca turned the blade to his chest. His muscles straining, he doubled over and drove the two-foot blade straight through his heart, and a foot of the Roman short sword stuck out his back, the soldier's blade almost cutting his heart into two pieces within his chest. The pain screamed through his nerves.

He called for death to take him, to give him peace, and, as he felt his life force ebbing, draining from him, a sense of gratitude warmed his brain. "Death," he whispered through blood-flecked lips, "welcome... welcome."

The sword moved in his hand.

No!

No! came the panic-stricken thought, no!

The blade was being forced back out from his body and from his heart.

"No!" he screamed.

Silently, slowly, irresistibly, the blade was forced out of his body. He fought as he never had to keep the blade inside him, but he was losing the battle.

He was losing his death.

Now the blade was completely out of him. He could feel the torn heart already mending itself.

Casca stood, his face to the now-thundering skies, rain breaking over him in a torrent, and cried out, sobbing in grief:

"Let me die! Damn You, let me die! How long must I endure?"

A cold shock grabbed his brain. The voice of the Jew came from the thunder and struck his consciousness with the words:

"...until we meet again."

Twenty-Six

Goldman opened his eyes, and the blur between dream and reality vanished. There was no mistaking where he was; the click of the air conditioning coming on and beginning its interminable throbbing was familiar enough proof he was sitting in a hard, government issue chair in the hospital room at Nha Trang, Vietnam. Yet, his clothes were soaked with sweat, and a chill went through him as the cold air moved in the room.

And there was another, more important, detail that was not right.

The hospital bunk was empty. Casey—Casca—was gone...

A cold wash of fear ran over Goldman. Momentarily his mind filled again with the sights and sounds and smell of that last great battle on the Parthian plains.

Or was it the smell of blood coming from the hospital morgue next door? There were, of course, rational ways to rule out hallucinations. *After all I am a doctor, forcing the emerging panic back to the dark where it came from.* He made a controlled unhurried visual survey of the room. It was precisely as he had remembered it. Nothing whatever had changed except that Casey was no longer on the bed. And, considering where his chair was placed, no one could have rolled a stretcher into the room and taken the wounded man while he slept. He looked at

the bed. Had the man never been there in the first place? No. There was the indentation a body would normally have made, and the top sheet was pushed aside much as it would have been if Casey had simply gotten up of his own accord and left the room.

Goldman bent over the bed and absently ran his fingers lightly over the surface. He felt a lingering trace of warmth. He looked back at the door. Closed. Feeling a little foolish, he bent down and looked under the bed. He could see all the way to the shadowed wall. Nothing. He made a careful search of the entire room. Empty of any human life other than his own.

Odd. Damned odd.

He snapped the fingers of his right hand. He could hear the sharp noise distinctly. He moved his hand against the light. No. He was in full command of his own senses, a rational human being.

Yet...

He opened the door and stepped out into the hall and found himself stumbling, his body functioning as though all the energy had been drained from it. The lethargy weighed down his limbs as he made his way down the long hallway to Colonel Landries's room. He felt a little as though he were drunk—but he had no memory of drinking. As he passed the mess hall, an outside door opened, and he saw that dawn had almost come. He checked his watch: 0430 hours. Solid reality. Inside the mess hall the cooks were cussing out the Vietnamese kitchen help. Normal. Familiar.

He beat on Landries's door.

"What the hell is it now?" came the grumbling sleep-filled response from inside.

Goldman pounded again.

"All right: All right! Knock off the noise. I'm coming."

Landries opened the door. He was wearing only Bermuda shorts, and sweat trickled down the thin gray hairs on his chest.

"Goldman?" He saw something in his surgeon's eyes. "It's Casey, isn't it? He's dead?"

"Dead?" Goldman laughed. "Dead? Casey dead? No, Doctor, that is the one thing he's not." He roared with laughter that bordered on the hysterical.

They were in Landries's office, the door locked, and the bottle of Jack Daniel's whiskey nearly empty on the desk. Both men had been oblivious to the passage of time.

"That's all of it, Colonel," Goldman concluded. "That's it. His bunk is empty, and he is gone. I don't know if perhaps I am not relieved that he is."

Landries moved his glass between his thin, artistic fingers. Silence hung in the room. Finally Landries reached for the bottle, divided the remaining whiskey between his glass and Goldman's, and threw the empty bottle in the wastebasket. The gesture had a kind of routine finality to it... as though the whole matter was settled.

Landries took a long pull from his glass, letting the sweet burning of the Tennessee sipping whiskey settle into his stomach. "Perhaps you're right, Goldie"—it was the first time he had ever called Goldman anything but Goldman. "Perhaps it is just as well. So... We will just turn it over to the military police as an AWOL from the hospital report and hope that's the end to it. Somehow I don't

think the MPs are going to find him. And, as for the records, both you and I know how often medical records get lost or destroyed in a war zone. I've raised enough hell about it in the past. Well, I wouldn't be surprised if the same thing happened to Casey's records. All his records, including his 201 file you sent for. No, Goldie, I wouldn't be the least bit surprised at all if that happened. Would you?"

Goldman nodded in agreement.

"Now, as for the whole thing," the colonel continued, "what we saw and what he told you—that is another problem." He was silent a very long time. "Any suggestions?"

"No."

"Then let's just assume that it's none of our damned business and let it go at that."

"Agreed."

"However..." A slow, slightly malicious smile began to form at the edges of Landries's mouth. "Next time I corner the chaplain I think I'll have some interesting questions to put to him."

Twenty-Seven

On the Sinai Peninsula an American-made half-track roared and grumbled its way over a bank of sand dunes and settled into a wadi at the base of a small outcropping of rock. The driver wheeled the vehicle around, locking one tread so that it would spin in tight circles, the act of a hot-rodder that the young Israeli soldiers in the back thoroughly enjoyed. They yelled their approval, their tanned faces flushed with the excitement of victory and success. As the half-track spun, the Star of David was clearly visible on its side.

The only soldier not exuberant or laughing was the squad leader, but the young Israelis did not hold this against him. They considered themselves lucky to have such a leader. Perhaps he was a little too dour and sober at times, but they all agreed that he had an uncanny instinct for doing the right thing at the right time. That instinct had saved their asses more than once in this last bout with the Egyptians in their Russian-made armor. Yet, they really knew nothing about the squad leader. He was one of those who had come from nowhere to aid the Israelis in their struggle against the Arabs; Israel in turn had asked no questions.

The Israeli troopers quickly dismounted and fanned out to take a careful look at the area and the surrounding terrain features. The radioman had already set up his equipment and was prepared to send or receive. The squad's assignment was important; twenty miles to the west, on their right flank, the Egyptian forces were reeling back in confusion and panic after an initial success; the half-track's crew was to keep the Egyptians in sight and radio back the Egyptian position. Along with other units similar to theirs they were to keep the Egyptians canalized into as narrow an area as possible. This would make it easier for the Israeli Air Force to pick the Egyptians off. The secondary mission of the half-track squads was to take care of stragglers once the main body of the Egyptians had passed. They would

either kill them or herd them back into the cauldron of sunburned sand and rock that was Sinai.

Evening was coming when the squad satisfied themselves that the area was secure. The driver of the half-track, a smiling, curly-haired young man of twenty, unslung his 9mm UZI submachine gun and squatted in the sand. Grabbing a handful between his fingers, he let it fall in separate streams to the earth. He looked up at his squad leader and said—in a voice that had Brooklyn all over it: "Shit, man, ain't there nothing out here but this?" He threw the last of the sand down. "This ain't no fun, man. I wish to hell I hadn't let my old man hype me on that return to Israel jazz. I wouldn't be out here now trying to blow up a bunch of ragheads." Pausing, he licked his dry lips. "I wish we had more water. It might get thin if we're out here too long."

The squad leader turned to him. The man's face was as rugged as these ancient hills. He oriented his square-set body to the north, waited a moment as though considering something the young driver could not know, then pointed. "There used to be a spring at the base of two hills about two clicks from here," he said. "It never ran dry. It's probably worth checking out later."

When he took his helmet off the scar by his hairline showed white in contrast to the deep tan of his face. The thin scar running down from his right eye to the corner of his mouth was almost invisible as it molded itself into his crooked grin.

The cocky young driver looked at him. "Is that right? You been out here before?"

Before Casey could answer, Isaac, the rabbi's son, called the squad to evening prayer. After all, it was the Sabbath.

Casey watched the young warriors pray to their God in the evening light, the sun letting red streaks break over the Sinai. He heard again the sound of the ancient Hebrew litany coming from the throats of these young men: "It is written in the Law: for the Lord your God, he is God of the gods, and Lord of the Lords, the great God, the mighty and the terrible... and it is written afterwards: He doth execute the judgment..."

Casey stood still, letting the terrible isolation of this, land envelop him. He answered the Brooklyn Jew's question in a voice that was just a whisper that only he heard:

"Yes. I soldiered out here a long time ago. A very long time ago..."

