

Syrian Desert

26 BC

The flies were already swarming, the air humming with their droning dirge, sent up from the underworld to gorge on Death's rich bounty. It didn't take long in this heat for spilt blood to sour and the flies to gather, appearing from nowhere, even in the nothingness of the Desert.

The desert pirates had made their camp near the trade road east of an oasis in the eerie shadow of some ancient ruins of unknown age or origin, abandoned centuries ago and half buried under the sand.

The desert pirates were dead to a man. Scattered around the camp, they didn't have a chance in hell against the cohort of Romans, who had been pursuing them for months.

Fabianus took the camp by storm, with the element of surprise very much in his favour. The pirates had become complacent, thinking that no Roman would follow them here. Well, Fabianus was young ambitious tribune the pirates had badly underestimated. First, he sent his *sagittarii* in to dispatch most of the guards posted around the perimeter of the camp before anyone had a chance to raise the alarm. Then Fabianus charged in with his men, their swords flaring in the darkness. They cut the panicked pirates down with barely an effort, as they ran about the camp dazed and confused, still half asleep. It was a quick job well done, even if he did think so himself.

Centurion Severus reported that the enemy were all dead.

Fabianus surveyed the camp as the rising sun shed its light and heat over the lifeless bodies strewn in every direction, the sand soaking up their blood.

The legate will be pleased when he hears about this, Fabianus thought as he pulled his helmet off, revealing a perfect outline of his helmet in clean skin around his grimy face. He swiped his forearm across his brow, dust and sand abrading against his clammy skin like powdered glass.

'Sir; there's a Roman over here?' said an optio who was crouched down by a body.

Fabianus stepped over to the body. The optio pointed out a legionary tattoo from the Cyrenaica on the dead man's upper right arm. The dead man had Roman weapons and wore Roman *caligae* too.

'Probably a deserter,' Severus suggested.

A gust of desert wind blew a light mist of sand through the camp in swirling whirlwinds. Fabianus squinted his eyes and turned his face away. The canvas of the tents flapped noisily like beating wings and the robes of the dead fluttered briefly. Then everything was still and quiet again, just the sound of his men moving through the camp and their low murmuring voices as they searched for valuables. A cry went out from the perimeter: '*Riders approaching!!! Riders approaching!!!*'

Fabianus and Severus looked round, into the desert, where several riders were materialising from the shimmering heat haze.

'More pirates? *Nomads*?' Fabianus murmured.

As the riders drew closer, they could see them more clearly...

'Romans,' Fabianus said, watching them drawing nearer. One of them wore two swords, a cavalry *spatha* hanging from his side and a Greek *xiphos* strapped to his back, the hilt jutting over his left shoulder in easy reach. 'Deserters?'

Severus shook his head. '*Speculatorii*,' he said lowly. Only *speculatorii* would be so bold as to ride into a Roman cohort as if on their way to a wedding.

'*What the hell are they doing out here...?*'

The guards at the perimeter barred their way and pointed their spears at the riders, and more ran up to reinforce them.

Fabianus loped towards them. 'Let them pass!' he shouted as he lurched through the camp, weaving between the bloody corpses.

The guards righted their spears and the six riders cantered into the camp towards Fabianus. He watched as the mysterious *speculatorii*, paled like phantoms by desert dust sticking to their faces. His gaze settled on the young man with two swords, wearing a *lorica hamata* over an equestrian tunic.

Sabinus slew his horse to a halt. 'Salve,' he greeted as he surveyed the carnage. The Irregulars halted their horses behind him, their narrow eyes roving the camp and legionaries.

Sabinus dismounted and a cloud of dust fell from him as he jumped down from his horse. 'I'm Tribune Sabinus Maximo Cerialis.' He pulled out his tatty and frayed vellum authority and held it out to Fabianus. 'I'm here under special orders from Princeps Caesar Augustus.' He looked over to the slaves, where two legionaries were giving them water.

Fabianus knew that name at once. Sabinus Maximo, the Hero of Ratiaria. 'Fabianus Traianus Petronius,' he said introducing himself. 'Fourth Tribune of the Second Augusta.' He looked at one of his men. 'Fetch water for the Tribune and his men.'

'Are there any survivors?'

'Only the slaves,' said Fabianus. 'They'll be questioned to see if we can return them to their rightful owners, or if we need to free them. They'll all swear they're freeborn or freedmen. They always do, but that's somebody else's problem, not mine.'

Sabinus gestured for his men to dismount. 'Search the camp, you know what you're looking for,' he said cryptically and looked back at Fabianus. 'Are there any Romans among the dead?'

'One who we found has a legionary tattoo from the Cyrenaica...' Fabianus led Sabinus to the body.

'Centurion Dublus,' Sabinus said quietly as he looked at the bloody corpse.

'You know him?'

Sabinus took a cup of water from a soldier and took a swallow. It was as warm as piss and just a vile, but it slicked his dry mouth. 'He was a centurion from the Third Cyrenaica. An Antonian. He was travelling with several others...' He looked at Otho. 'Search him.' He walked towards the captives...

'You killed Titus Eximius in single combat,' Fabianus said.

Sabinus looked at him. 'Was that a question?' He didn't wait for a response. 'The other Romans are aristocrats, Popidius Kaeso, Marcus Rufus, Piso Cosconius, Atlas Navius and Flaccus Amantius, who has no left hand. They were travelling with these pirates...'

Polybius, Barbudius, Otho and the two new Irregulars, Curio and Gallus were checking the bodies and searching the tents, clearly looking for something.

Fabianus and Severus watched them in silence.

Sabinus wandered closer to the slaves, kneeling in the sand around a wagon, bound to one another by lengths chain from iron collars; some of them were close to death, hungry, thirsty, sick and exhausted, practically naked with nothing to protect their skin from the blistering sun, all were afraid.

'There's nothing here,' said Barbudius as he came over. 'There's no sign of them.'

'They must've left,' Otho said, adjusting his eye patch.

'There's no sign that Marcus Rufus or Kaeso and the others were ever here.'

A boy's unbroken voice said: 'Marcus Rufus is dead, lord. The others have gone...'

They turned to the captives and looked at the boy, who was no older than eight or nine years old.

For a dreadful moment, Carthago thought they had a mind to torture him and a look of fear flashed in his eyes.

Sabinus stepped closer and crouched down in front of the boy. 'Tell me what you know, child?' His voice was quiet and friendly.

'They left ten nights ago, lord,' the boy said. 'Piso Cosconius, Atlas Navius, Flaccus Amantius and a bodyguard of twelve veterans of the Cyrenaica and Third Aegyptus, commanded by a man called Kaeso, lord.'

Sabinus turned his head and gave Polybius a look. He looked back at the boy, who was doing his best to hide his fear, but for men such as these wolves of war, fear has a smell as well as a look. 'And Marcus Rufus? What of him?'

'Dead, lord,' the boy said. 'He died from fever after being wounded by the one-eyed man.' Carthago looked at Otho standing behind the Tribune.

'Where were they going?' Sabinus asked.

The boy's reply was instant. 'To Egypt, lord; to Pelusium, where they're to meet a man called Gaius Festus, who is arranging a ship to take them to Italy.'

'How came you by this information, child?' Polybius asked.

'I served their wine,' Carthago replied. 'I heard many of their conversations. I learned their names, so I can remember them for when I kill them for murdering my papa and mama, and stealing me and my sisters to sell us to the desert nomads...'

Sabinus turned to Fabianus. 'Cut this boy loose; I'm taking him with us.'

Fabianus nodded to one of his men to unlock the collar.

'What's your name, boy?' Sabinus asked.

'Carthago, lord, son of Bato Piscinius, veteran of the Tenth Fretensis. I'm freeborn, lord. I was stolen...'

Sabinus wasn't listening; he was more interested in what Carthago might have overheard while he served them wine. He looked at Polybius. 'Find him some robes that fit. Our business here is done. Fill the water canteens and see what food you can find. Otho, the boy can ride with you.'

Otho took a deep breath and rolled his eyes. Why him? He was no nursemaid.

After the neck collar was removed, Carthago stood up and rubbed his neck, sore from the weight and chafing of the iron collar.

Otho mumbled indolently under his breath and grabbed the boy roughly by his wrist with a firm grip and practically dragged him away to a wagon to find him suitable robes. 'Don't give me no cheek, slave, or I'll put you over my knee and beat you until your arse turns mauve.'

'I'm not a slave,' Carthago insisted. 'The pirates murdered my family and stole me. Me and my sisters. They sold my sisters to the nomads.'

'Yeah, yeah. That's what they all say,' Otho said.

'My papa was Optio Bato Piscinius of the Eighth Cohort of the Tenth Fretensis,' he explained, desperate for at least one of them to believe him.

'Yeah, so you keep saying, kid. So, what're you expect *me* to do about it? You're a fucking slave now until the Tribune says otherwise. Now stop your whining.'

'You're the one who wounded Rufus. The cyclops? You stabbed him in the side and he got sick. It was days before he died.'

'Stop your squeaking, boy. I like the quiet.'

'Cyclops.'

'Watch your mouth or I'll beat some manners into you.'

Polybius walked over to Sabinus. 'What now?'

'Now we go to Pelusium. Fortunately, we still have a friend there and if anyone knows anything, Eukleides will.'