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Prologue

Centurion Titus Pollenius mopped his brow as he surveyed the battlefield stretching out around him. The hillside was covered with bodies, heaped together in those places where the fighting had been most bitter. His men were searching for wounded comrades, or gleaning what little loot they could from their fallen enemies. Here and there the wounded cried out pitifully as they writhed amid the carnage. Among the bodies were Roman legionaries in their red tunics and chain mail armour, now stained with blood. Titus estimated that thousands of his comrades had been killed in the battle. Even so, the Roman losses were nothing compared to those of the enemy.

He shook his head in wonder at the men, and women, he had faced earlier. Many had only been armed with knives and agricultural tools and most had no armour, not even shields. Yet they had thrown themselves on Titus and his comrades, shrieking with rage and eyes blazing with desperate courage. None of which had saved them from defeat against the better trained and properly equipped soldiers of General Pompeius, the commander of the Roman armies that had pursued and trapped the enemy.

'Slaves,' Titus muttered to himself in wonder as he stared at the bodies. 'Just slaves.'

Who would have thought that the men and women who most Romans regarded as little more than walking tools would have had so much fight in them? It had been over

three years since the slave revolt began and since then they had defeated five of the legions that Rome had sent against them. They had also burned many of the villas and pillaged the estates of the most powerful families in Rome. Once, Titus recalled, the slaves had even marched on Rome itself.

Looking down he saw the body of a boy, little more than ten years old, he guessed. Flaxen haired and finely featured, the boy's head lolled back over the armour of a dead legionary. The boy's eyes stared into the bright sky and his mouth hung slightly open as if he was about to speak. Titus felt a dull ache of sorrow in his heart as he gazed upon the child. There was no place for children in a battle, he thought to himself. No honour to be had in defeating them, or killing them.

'Centurion Titus!'

He turned at the shout and saw a small party of officers picking their way across the bodies towards him. At their head stood a large figure, broad-shouldered and wearing a gleaming silver breastplate across which was tied a broad red ribbon to indicated is status. Unlike the men who had been in the heart of the battle, General Pompeius and his officers were untouched by blood and grime and some of the younger, fussier, officers curled their lips distastefully as they struggled over the dead.

'General.' Titus stiffened to attention and bowed his head as his commander approached.

'What a bloody business,' General Pompeius observed as he gestured at the battlefield. 'Who would have thought that common slaves would put up such a fight, eh?'

'Indeed, sir.'

Pompeius pursed his lips briefly and frowned. 'Their leader – that Spartacus – he must have been quite a man.'

'He was a gladiator, sir,' Titus responded. 'They're a spe-

cial breed. The ones that survive in the arena for any length of time at least.'

'Did you know much about him, Centurion? That is, before he became a rebel.'

'Only rumours, sir. Seems that he had only made a handful of appearances in the arena before the rebellion broke out.'

'And yet he took to command like a duck to water,' Pompeius mused. 'It is a shame I never had the chance to meet this man, this Spartacus. I might have admired him.' He looked up quickly and glanced at his officers. A smile flickered on his lips as he fixed his eyes on one in particular, a tall youth with a narrow face. 'Rest easy there, Gaius Julius. I haven't gone over to the enemy. Spartacus is, or was, only a slave when all is said and done. Our enemy. Now he is crushed and the danger is over.'

The young officer shrugged. 'We have won the battle, sir. But the fame of some men lives long after they have fallen. If he *has* fallen.'

'Then we shall find his body,' Pompeius replied tersely. 'Once we have that, and display it for all to see, then we will have put an end to any notion of rebellion in the hearts of every damned slave in Italy.'

He swung round to face Titus. 'Centurion, where might Spartacus have fallen?'

Titus pursed his lips and gestured towards a small hummock a hundred paces away. There the bodies were more thickly heaped than anywhere else on the battlefield. 'I saw his standard over there during the fighting, and that's there the last of them fought to the end. That's where we will find him, if anywhere, sir.'

'Good, then let's go and see.'

General Pompeius strode off, treading over and on the bodies as he made for the mound. Titus and the others hurried after him and the scattered soldiers ahead of them stood to attention as the small

party passed by. When they reached the mound Pompeius stopped to stare at the terrible scene before him. The fighting here had been fiercest of all and the bodies were covered with wounds. Titus shuddered, remembering that many of the slaves had fought with bare hands, and even their teeth, until they were cut down. Most of the corpses were so badly mutilated you could hardly have recognized them as people.

The general let out a frustrated sigh and placed his hands on his hips as he climbed a short way forward over the bodies. 'Well, if Spartacus was killed here then we are going to have a hard time identifying him. I dare say we'll not get any co-operation in finding him from the prisoners.' He nodded towards the cluster of figures surrounded by watchful legionaries a short distance from the edge of the battlefield. 'Damn it. We need his body..'

Titus watched as his commander carefully stepped over the twisted limbs and bodies of the dead towards the top of the mound. Pompeius was half way up when a movement caught Titus's eye. A head rose slightly among the bodies, then an instant later the blood spattered figure that Titus had thought dead sprang up behind the general. The slave had lank dark hair and a thin beard and his lips parted to reveal crooked teeth as he snarled. A short sword was clenched in his hand and he rushed awkwardly across the heaped bodies towards the Roman general.

'Sir!' Gaius Julius shouted. 'Look out!'

Titus was already moving as Pompeius turned to look back. The general's eyes widened as he saw the slave rushing towards him, sword point levelled. Titus tore his blade free of the scabbard and raced up the mound of bodies, the flesh giving under his nailed boots.The slave thrust his sword at Pompeius's throat and he stumbled back to avoid the blow, his heel snagging on a body. He fell back heavily, crying out in alarm. The slave clambered forward and stood over the general as he raised his sword to strike.

Titus gritted his teeth and desperately sprinted forward. At the

last moment the slave sensed the danger and snatched a glance over his shoulder. Just then Titus crashed into him with his full weight and the slave's sword jerked from his hand. Both men tumbled to the ground, narrowly missing General Pompeius.

Titus tried to move his sword but the handle barely budged and he released his grip and groped for the slave's throat. The other man's body bucked under Titus and his hands clawed at Titus's arms as he growled with an almost animal fury. The centurion tightened his grip, choking off the slave's noises. As he felt the pressure on his windpipe the slave renewed his struggling. One of his hands grabbed Titus's wrist and tried to prise his fingers lose, while the other felt for his face, broken finger nails scratching at Titus's cheek as they moved up. He clenched his eyes shut as tightly as he could and clenched his hands as tightly as he could. The slave kicked up with his knees in response and his eyes bulged as he clawed at Titus's eyes. The centurion turned his head and pressed it into his shoulder.

The slave's movements became frantic, then suddenly faded in strength, until his hands fell away and his head dropped back. Titus hung on for a moment longer, just to be certain, and then opened his eyes to see the dead man's tongue protruding through his teeth. Releasing his grip Titus rolled away and scrambled back on to his feet, breathing hard. He looked down and saw that his sword had plunged into the man's ribs, that's why he had been unable to move it. The slave would have died anyway.

Beside him the general, weighed down by his elaborately decorated breastplate, was struggling back on to his feet. He looked over and saw the dead slave, and Titus stooping over the body as the centurion ripped his blade free.

'By the Gods, that was a close escape!' Pompeius looked down at the slave's body. 'He would have killed me, but for you, Centurion Titus.'

Titus did not reply as he used the slave's grimy tunic to wipe the blood from his sword blade. Then he sheathed the weapon and

stood erect again. The general smiled faintly at him 'I owe you my life. I shall not forget that.'

Titus nodded his thanks.

'You should have a reward.' The general stroked his chin and then gestured towards the slaves that had been taken prisoner. 'Help yourself to one of them, in my name. That is a fitting prize for saving my life, but know this, Centurion. If you ever need my help again, then you have my word that I will do what I can for you.'

'You are too kind, my general.'

'No. You saved my life. There is no reward too great for such an act. Now choose a prisoner to be your slave – a good woman perhaps.'

'Yes, sir. What of the rest? Are they to be shared among the men?'

General Pompeius shook his head. 'Normally, I would be glad to do so. But every slave throughout the empire needs to be taught a lesson. They need to be shown what awaits those who rise up against their masters.' He paused, and his expression hardened. 'Once you have made your choice, give the order for the rest to be crucified. They will be nailed up along the road from Rome to Capua, where the revolt began.'

Titus felt a cold chill down his spine at the general's brutal command. For a moment he felt the urge to object. The slaves were beaten. Their revolt was crushed. What need was there for such barbaric punishment? But then his training and discipline took over and Titus saluted his general and turned to pick his way across the battlefield towards the prisoners to choose the one who would be spared before the rest were led away to a long, painful death.

CHAPTER ONE

Marcus knew there would be trouble the moment old Aristides came running into the courtyard early one summer morning. Marcus had been playing happily with Cerebus, trying to train the coarse-haired hunting dog to sit, and then lay down at his command. But Cerebus had just cocked his head to one side, tongue hanging out and stared blankly at his young master. As soon as he saw Aristides he bounded over to the old man and wagged his tail.

The goatherd was gasping for breath and leaned on his staff and swallowed until he had recovered enough to speak.

'Three men,' he pointed a trembling finger towards the track that climbed the hill from Nydri. 'Big men . . . soldiers I think.'

Marcus's father was sitting at the long weathered table in the shade of a trellis, entwined with grapevines as thick as his wrist. Titus Cornelius had been busy working on the accounts of the farm and now he lowered his stylus on to the waxed slates and rose from his bench to stride across the small courtyard.

'Soldiers, you say?'

'Yes, master.'

'I see.' Titus smiled faintly before he continued in a mild tone. 'And what would you know about soldiers, old man? Animals, yes. But soldiers?'

Aristides straightened up and stared directly at his master. 'Two of them have spears, and they're all carrying swords.'

Marcus glanced at his father, noting a brief flicker of

anxiety across his face. Marcus had never seen his father look worried before. His craggy face was marked by several scars, relics of his service in the legions of General Pompeius. He had been a centurion – a battle hardened officer – when he had taken his discharge and left the eagles. He had bought the farm on the island of Leucas and settled down with Marcus's mother who was already carrying a child at the time. Since then Titus had made a steady income from a small herd of goats tended by Aristides, and the grapevines that covered his land. Marcus remembered happier times when he was a small boy– but for the last three years. the rains hadn't come – and drought and blight had ruined the crops. Titus had been forced to borrow money. Marcus knew it was a lot – he'd heard his parents whispering about it at night when they thought he was asleep and he continued to worry about it long after they had fallen silent.

The soft shuffle of feet made Marcus turn to see his mother emerging from her room overlooking the courtyard. She had been weaving a new tunic for him, but had abandoned her loom as soon as Aristides had spoken.

'They have spears,' she muttered, then stared at Titus. 'Perhaps they're going into the hills to hunt boar.'

'I don't think so,' the old centurion shook his head. 'If they're hunting boar then why carry swords? No, this is something else. They're coming to the farm.' He took a pace forward and patted Aristides on the shoulder. 'You did well to warn me, old friend.'

'Old?' The goatherd's eyes twinkled briefly. 'Why, I am less than ten years older than you, master.'

Titus laughed, a deep hearty laugh that Marcus had known all his life and always found reassuring. Despite a hard life in the legions, his father had always been good-humoured. At times he had been tough with Marcus, insisting that he fight

his own battles with some of the children down in Nydri, but there had been no doubting his affection.

'Why are they coming here?' she asked him. 'What do they want with us?'

Marcus saw his father's smile fade. 'Trouble,' he growled. 'That's what they want with us. Decimus must have sent them.'

'Decimus?' Marcus saw her raise a hand to her mouth in horror. 'I told you we should have had nothing to do with him.'

'Well, it's too late for that now. I'll have to deal with him.'

Marcus was scared by his mother's reaction. He cleared his throat. 'Who is Decimus, father?'

'Decimus?' Titus sneered and spat on the ground. 'Just some blood-sucking swine who someone should have taught a lesson to years ago.'

Marcus stared back blankly and Titus chuckled, reaching forward to ruffle his dark curls fondly. 'He's quite a piece of work, our Decimus. The richest money lender on Leucas, and thanks to his influence with the Roman governor, he's now the tax-collector as well.'

'An unfortunate combination of businesses,' Livia added quietly. 'He's ruined several of the farmers around Nydri already.'

'Well he won't ruin this one!' Titus growled. 'Aristides, fetch my sword at once.'

The goatherd raised his eyebrows and then hurried inside the house as Cerebus stared after him for a moment and then trotted back to Marcus's side. He stroked the dog's head affectionately. Livia moved grasped his father's thick arm.

'What are you thinking, Titus? You heard Aristides. There are three of them, armed. Soldiers, he said. You cannot fight them. Don't even think about it.'

Titus shook his head. 'I've faced tougher odds, and won. As you know well enough.'

His mother's expression hardened. 'That was a long time ago. You haven't been in any kind of fight for over ten years now.'

'I won't fight them if I don't have to. But Decimus will have sent them to collect money. They will not leave without it.'

'How much money?'

Titus looked down and scratched the back of his neck. 'Nine hundred sestertians.'

'Nine hundred!'

'I am behind three payments,' Titus explained. 'I've been expecting this.'

'Can you pay them?' She asked anxiously.

'No. I have almost nothing in the strongbox. Enough to see us through to the winter, and then . . .' He shook his head.

Livia frowned angrily. 'You had better explain everything to me later. Marcus!' She turned to her son. 'Go and find Castor and Fabius. Tell them to come we need help here now.'

Marcus nodded and made to run for the small arch that led out of the courtyard towards the single room at the back of the house that served as the slave quarters.

'Stay where you are, boy!' Titus called out, loud enough to be heard for a hundred paces in every direction. 'Leave them out of it.'

'Are you mad?' asked Livia. 'You can't fight armed men alone.'

'I know,' Titus nodded gravely. 'But Castor is still lame from that injury to his leg, and while Fabius is strong as an ox, he's almost as stupid as one too. They'd be more of a

hindrance than help if things turn nasty. Now, take the boy and go indoors. I'll deal with it.'

'You'll get yourself hurt, or killed, Titus. Then what will become of Marcus and I? Answer me that.'

'Go indoors,' Titus commanded.

Marcus saw his mother open her mouth to protest, but both of them knew the steely look in Titus's eyes. She shook her head crossly and held out a hand towards Marcus. 'Come with me.'

Marcus stared at her, then at his father and stood his ground, determined to prove his worth to his father.

'Marcus, come with me. Now.'

'No. I'm staying here.' He drew himself up and placed his hands on his hips. 'Cerebus and I can stand at father's side, if it comes to a fight.' He wanted the words to sound brave but his voice quavered slightly.

'What's this? Stay? ' Titus asked, bemused. 'You are not yet ready to take your place in the battle-line, my boy. Go with your mother.'

Marcus shook his head. 'You need me. Us.' He nodded at Cerebus and the dog's ears pricked up and he wagged his bushy tail.

Before Titus could protest, Aristides came out of the house. In one hand he clutched his staff. In the other he held a sword scabbard, from which a leather strap dangled. Titus took the weapon and looped the strap over his head, shifting his shoulder until he was satisfied that the sword hung well, and that the handle was within easy reach. Arsitides went over to the gate and kept watch on the road that led down the slope towards Nidri. Suddenly Titus snatched at the sword handle and ripped the blade out in one motion so swift that Marcus flinched. He let out a small cry. Cerebus growled.

His father glanced at him with a smile and sheathed the sword. 'Easy there, I was just checking that the blade drew swiftly. It's why I keep the scabbard and blade oiled – just in case.'

Marcus swallowed nervously. 'In case of what, father?'

'In case of moments like this. Now, you leave this to me. Go into the house until I call for you.'

Marcus stared back defiantly. 'My place is at your side, father. I can fight.' He grasped the leather pouch and thongs of the sling tucked into the belt fastened around his waist. 'I can hit a hare at fifty paces with this.'

His mother had been watching the two of them. Now she called out, 'For pity's sake, Marcus! Come inside, now!'

'Livia,' her husband cut in. 'You go. Find Castor and Fabius and hide in the storeroom. I'll speak to Marcus. He'll come to you directly.'

She made to protest, then saw the fiery light in his eyes and turned away, her shoes scuffling over the flagstones. Titus turned back to Marcus and smiled fondly. 'My boy, you are still too young to fight my battles. Please, go with your mother.'

But it was too late. Before Titus had finished speaking, there was a sharp hiss from Aristides. The goatherd cupped a hand to his mouth and called out as loudly as he dared. 'Master! They're coming!'