

Chapter 3: *Tirones*

Any regret from the night before about not partaking of wine was immediately dismissed when I saw poor Vibius, who looked slightly green, his eyes rimmed red and his breath smelling like my father's in the morning. We had paid the slave maintaining the watch to wake us two parts of a watch before dawn, despite it being only a short walk to the camp. Neither of us could rouse our respective fathers, which was fine with me, but I felt a pang about not going to the slave quarters to wake Phocas and Gaia. Making our way down to the main room of the inn, we rummaged around until we found a loaf of bread and some oil that was close to turning rancid, and split the loaf, soaking it in the oil. Carrying our portions out the door, we began to make our way in the dark, the few belongings we were bringing with us slung over our shoulders, along with the appropriate token that we were to hand to the soldier at the gate to show that we were now part of the Legion. Walking slowly, neither of us said much. Despite our eagerness, we also knew that we were embarking on something momentous. After all, we were still boys to a large degree, and I would be lying if I said we did not have any fear of what we were headed into.

Arriving at the gate, we stopped a short distance away, not wanting to just walk up on some guard who might be half-asleep and would kill us before our career even started, so we sat on the ground, waiting for the light to become strong enough so that we could approach without fear. While sitting there, we made out other shapes of men approaching, then heard them talking quietly, as the others who enlisted the day before began to show up. Vibius and I smugly but quietly congratulated ourselves for being the first to arrive, making no sound to alert the others to our presence, though I do not know why. Instead, we sat listening, learning about our fellow *tiros* as they talked among themselves.

"So what do you think it'll be like?"

This from a high-pitched, nervous sounding voice.

"It'll be the hardest thing we've ever done," came the response from a grim-sounding deeper voice.

"By the gods," came another, "I can't wait to kill some barbarian scum! I bet I have the most kills of anyone in this Legion!"

Both Vibius and I glanced at each other, and despite barely seeing the other in the gloom, I could tell we were both making a mental note of that voice. We wanted to see this mighty warrior for ourselves as soon as it was light.

"*Gerrae!* That's awfully big talk," replied the grim-sounding voice, which I could just begin to make out as a shape against the slowly lightening sky.

It was hard to tell from my vantage point sitting on the ground, but he seemed to be nearly as tall as I was.

“You’ll probably be the first one to piss yourself the instant one of those barbarians looks at you cross-eyed.”

“Watch your tone, you! I’ve beaten better than you, I swear by Hercules I have!”

This from the great warrior, although I sensed a note of uncertainty, despite the brave words.

“That’s easy to say,” said the other coolly.

“Easy boys,” this came from a previously unheard voice. “There’ll be plenty of time enough for everyone to get as much fighting in as any man could want.”

This voice sounded older, more confident. The others seemed to sense it as well, and consequently there was no more bickering. Besides, the light was growing, so that what were indistinct shapes before took on more definite form, and the areas of the camp that were not illuminated by torchlight earlier could now be made out. At that, Vibius and I stood from where we were sitting completely silent, causing our new companions to yelp in alarm and jump away. I could not help noticing that the one who yelled the loudest was also the one bragging, but I held my peace. No need to make enemies so early, I thought. One day I might be fighting beside that man. Stepping forward, I called to the other men; I could now see that there were a total of six other men standing there.

“*Salve*, citizens,” I called with what I hoped was a tone of friendliness.

They returned the greeting in a ragged chorus.

As I got closer, one of the other men exclaimed, “Gods, you ARE a big one, aren’t you? Remind me to stand next to you Ajax.”

This brought laughter from the others, and I joined in since I had been teased about my size my whole life. The man I thought might be my height was tall, though nowhere near as tall as I was; I had a good two to three inches on him. Standing for a moment, we surveyed each other now that the light was strong enough, but before we could speak, we heard the sound of a call inside the camp, then the gates opened, each half pushed open by a man dressed in armor and full kit.

“Well,” I said, “I guess that means they’re ready to receive us.”

And without waiting, I began walking towards the gate, where a third man appeared, standing in the middle of the gateway, hands on his hips. As we drew closer, I could see that while he was in basically the same uniform as the other two, his helmet was different. He wore a crest of horsehair, transverse across the helmet, going from ear to ear. His face looked like wrinkled leather, the kind one sees after wearing a set of shoes for a long time in all types of weather. In one hand was clutched a stick of some sort, which he was slowly twitching against his leg as he watched us approach. He was short, but very stocky, and once I got close enough I could see that on one arm a livid scar ran from his elbow

all the way down his forearm, slowly twisting until it stopped just above his wrist. I had trouble taking my eyes off of it, but when I did and looked the man in the eye, I saw no welcome in his expression. In fact, if I were to characterize the look on his face, the best I can conjure is to ask you to imagine that a *numen* or other invisible shade is hovering just in front of him, holding a huge, steaming pile of *cac* under his nose, *cac* that only he can smell. That was how he looked at us, and I was soon to find out that my description was not far off from the truth, except that the pile of *cac* was actually us.

“All of you fall in, in a single line starting right here, with the tallest first to my left,” he pointed to a spot with his stick, and I headed that way, knowing already that this would be my spot.

His voice sounded like he had eaten gravel for breakfast, with his tone matching the look on his face, and he obviously was not pleased with what he saw. We struggled to get into the proper order; my part was easy but the others had to gauge each other to determine exactly where they were supposed to be. After a couple of moments, we were more or less settled into a line, and I looked over to my left to see where Vibius ended up. Suddenly, I was slammed in the stomach by something that felt very much like a dagger, except it was blunt and the wind rushed out of my lungs as I dropped immediately to my knees, gasping for breath and clutching my stomach expecting to feel blood, so sure I was that I had been stabbed. Seeing a pair of boots in front of me, much like the pair that Cyclops wore, I looked up to see the Legionary with the stick in one hand, tapping the other end of it into the palm of his other hand as he looked down at me with a sneer on his face.

“Nobody told you to look around, did they you *cunnus*?” he snarled, his voice even more gravelly than before because he pitched it loudly enough for all to hear.

Not sure what to say, I shook my head. Instantly, the stick lashed out, catching me just above my ear, causing stars to explode in my head.

“I asked you a question, boy,” he roared, and now more afraid than any time I could remember in my life, I answered quickly, “No, sir.....I mean, Your Excellency.”

WHAM! Another blow, this time on the top of my head, and now I felt something more than fear, as I began to get angry. Was there no pleasing this man?

“I work for a living, you *cunnus*,” he bellowed at an even louder level, which I had not thought possible if I had not heard it. “I’m no Excellency! You’ll address me by my proper title.”

Suddenly, his voice dropped back to normal, and he continued talking, as if there was nothing untoward taking place an instant before.

“On your feet boy. And look straight ahead, you got that?”

I pulled myself to my feet, a little unsteadily, but before I could answer, he continued.

“Of course, none of you know what my proper title or my name is, because you haven’t been taught such things. So we’ll begin with that. My name is Lucius Favonius, and I’m the Primus Pilus of the Tenth

Legion. I know that the title means nothing to you now, but you'll learn what it means in time. Right now, all you need to know is that as far as you're concerned, I and anyone who wears this," he pointed to his helmet, "are to be considered on the same level as the gods you worship, because like the gods, we exercise the power of life and death over each of you."

I gulped; this was not going exactly as I had seen it in my mind's eye, and I wondered how Vibius was taking this. My gut was still throbbing, and my head still ringing, so it was hard to pay attention, but I knew that what I was being told was important.

"I'll escort you to the *Praetorium*," he turned and pointed at a huge tent, dead in the middle of the camp, several hundred feet away.

Without waiting for an answer, he turned to stride away, with all of us following quickly behind him. When we drew close, he stopped us several paces away from the entrance. Standing in front of it were two Legionaries, obviously on guard duty, and similarly to the Praetor's residence, the area around the tent was a bustle of activity as soldiers and civilians came and went into it. As I was to learn, anywhere our commanding general, the Praetor Julius Caesar, was located, it was always like a beehive.

"You'll hand in those tokens, and you'll then return to that spot outside the *Praetorium*, where you'll get into the exact same line you're in now, facing the tent, and you'll wait for me. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Primus Pilus," I answered quickly, before anyone else had a chance to answer, catching him a bit by surprise.

He looked at me for a moment before giving a harsh chuckle.

"Maybe you're not as stupid as you look, boy."

You have no idea, I thought grimly, but I am going to take your job, old man.

Turning in our tokens to a clerk, we gave our name, which was matched up to the documents that were created as part of our records and sent from the Praetor's residence the day before. On turning in our tokens, we were informed that we were now no longer *probatio*s, but had achieved the lofty status of *tirones*, or *tiros* as we were more commonly called, when of course we were not called all manner of other names. None of us had any idea what the distinction was, or why it mattered, although we would learn, and the difference was actually quite important. As *probatio*s, while subject to some of the rules and regulations governing the army, it was not the complete set, so that if we ran afoul of one of those rules during our brief time in that status, the range of our punishment was limited. The status of *probatio* usually lasted longer because normally the *conquistores* were out in the countryside and would march groups of new recruits to the training camp, but it was not necessary in our case. However, as *tirones*, we were now under the full authority of the Roman Legion, meaning that we could be flogged, or worse, executed for a breach of the rules, if deemed serious enough. We were then presented with another document that we were told to sign, something I found impossible to read because it seemed to be in some sort of language that I did not understand. I would come to master it and read it as easily as I

read any document written in the normal fashion, but it would take some time. Back then, I just signed like everyone else and was informed that this involved our pay.

“So when do we get our pay?” piped up the one I had marked as being the loudmouthed great warrior.

His name was Spurius Didius, and he was also on the tall side, standing third from the end where I stood. He had a sly look about him, always peering about like he was searching for something to steal, which as it turned out, was exactly what he was doing, but that is for later. The clerk looked up in surprise at the question, then burst out laughing.

“Why don’t you ask the Primus Pilus about that?” he replied, and I sensed that this would not be a good idea, something that Didius obviously did not pick up on, as he exclaimed loudly, “I’ll do just that.”

Once we turned in our tokens and signed our documents, we went outside and fell into our positions in line more quickly than the first time. There was just enough time for Vibius to whisper a quick question about how I was doing, and I reassured him that I was fine, if still hurting a bit. However, I was determined that I learned my lesson and would let someone else make the mistakes from here on in. Standing in line again, we waited for what seemed like a full watch and I sensed, as did some of the others, that this was some sort of test, so I made sure to stand as still as I could and not look around.

The waiting turned out to be too much for some, and I heard someone whisper loudly, “Pluto’s cock, what are they waiting for?”

Instantly I heard quick footsteps, followed by the sound of what had to be a stick smashing into someone’s body, then a thud as the man fall to the ground, the unfortunate gasping for air much like I had.

“Did anyone tell you to speak, *cunnus*?” it was the voice of the Primus Pilus.

“N-no, Primus Pilus,” the man managed to gasp.

“Then on your feet, you pathetic piece of *cac*”, the Primus Pilus spoke scornfully. “I didn’t hit you near as hard as I did the oaf on the end, so get up and quit sniveling like a woman.”

The Primus Pilus reappeared in front of us, but instead of turning my head to look again, I watched him out of the corner of my eye. He wore the same expression on his face, except this time he was not alone. Standing next to him, in identical uniform, though without quite as many phalerae, torques and arm rings, was a slightly taller, slender man, who also looked a bit younger. He bore a scar down the right side of his face, from the middle of his ear to midway down his jaw, giving him a look of wickedness, and he too was carrying the same kind of stick as Primus Pilus Favonius, although he stood slightly behind the Primus Pilus.

Indicating the second Centurion, Primus Pilus Favonius announced, “This is Secundus Pilus Prior Gaius Crastinus. He’s the commander of the Second Cohort of the Tenth Legion. You’ll accompany him to the

quartermaster, where you'll be issued your equipment. You'll obey him in the same manner you obey me, or you'll wish you had never been born. Is that understood?"

This time, we responded in a more unified manner, although it still did not impress the Primus Pilus, or the Pilus Prior for that matter. The two Centurions exchanged a quiet word before the Primus Pilus disappeared into the *Praetorium*, leaving us to the tender mercy of Pilus Prior Crastinus.

"Right," he called out, "the first thing we're going to learn is how to go from one point to another without looking like a mob. Understood?"

"Yes, Pilus Prior," we answered.

"The first thing you *cunni* need to know is how to stand correctly," he continued.

I was somewhat surprised; I did not know until that moment that there was a right and wrong way to stand!

As if reading my mind, he said, "As you'll learn, there are only two ways of doing things in the Legions. The Legion way and the wrong way. When you hear the command *Intente*, you'll come to the position that I'm about to show you."

He demonstrated; pulling himself erect, he looked straight ahead, pulling his chin in, with his chest out, his feet together and his arms straight down by his sides.

Holding that position for a moment so that we could see it, he broke the position then immediately snapped, "*Intente!*"

Instantly we tried to emulate the position he had just shown us, as he walked up and down, inspecting us, correcting my comrades with a quick smack to the part of the body that was not in the proper position. His progress was punctuated by grunts and groans as he made his way to me, and I prayed to every god I knew that I had done it correctly because I was still sore from my earlier lesson. Once he reached me, I concentrated on looking straight ahead, despite my natural inclination to look at him. This was one time where my height actually helped, since I could look directly at his horsehair device and not in his eyes. Luckily, he just rapped my knuckles to make me put my hands into the correctly curled position before he returned to the front of our group.

"That is pathetic, truly pathetic," he sighed, with what sounded like genuine sadness, "but since we have so much to do today, we'll have to work on this another time. Now, I'm going to give another command, to tell you to turn to the right. When this command is given, you'll all immediately pivot, like so," he demonstrated by pivoting on the ball of his left foot, while simultaneously turning on his right heel, then after turning, bringing his left foot back to its original position next to his right foot. "You will not move until you hear the last word of the command," he commanded next, which confused me.

How would we know which was the last word?

However, it became clear that this was yet another trick, when he called out, "*Ad GLADIUM,*" putting the emphasis on the second word, causing at least three of the others to turn in the manner he had demonstrated. For some reason I did not move; I think I was already beginning to understand how things worked, or so I thought at the time.

Immediately, the Pilus Prior screamed, "Do not move!" Then he ran over to the unfortunates and roared at one of them, "You miserable bag of *cac*! I said to wait for the FINAL word of the command."

"But Pilus Prior," the man replied, in a whining, wheedling voice that I recognized immediately as belonging to Didius.

Before he could get another word out, however, the thud of the stick smashing into his gut sounded, and I heard him fall, choking.

"But what? There is no but, you *cunnus*, you piece of filth! You'll wait for the command!"

Before Didius could give any response, Pilus Prior Crastinus leaped to the other two, administering the same type of punishment to them that he had doled out to Didius. It turned out that one of them was Vibius, although I did not find out until later, because he was at the farther end of the line, towards what would become known as the "little end."

Once the three recovered and were at the original position of *Intente*, the Pilus Prior again commanded, "*Ad Gladium.....Clina!*"

Immediately, we all turned in the manner we had been taught, except that now, one of our group, while he had indeed turned in the exact manner that was specified, turned to the left instead of the right. This sent Pilus Prior Crastinus into an ecstasy of rage.

"By the gods, what has been sent to me?" he asked rhetorically.

Running over to the man standing facing the one to his left, instead of staring at the back of the man to his right as he should have, I could hear by the tone of voice that this had taken the anger of the Pilus Prior to a new level.

"Are you daring to tell me that you don't know your left from your right?"

"N-n-no, Pilus Prior," came the answer, almost forcing me to look down the line to see who could possibly not know their left from their right.

The response obviously caught the Pilus Prior by surprise as well, because there was silence for a moment, then he asked in a deceptively calm voice, "What's your name, boy?"

"Q-Q-Quintus Artorius, Pilus Prior," came the answer, in a quaking voice.

"Well, Quintus Artorius, seeing as your whore of a mother and slave of a father never bothered to teach you your left from right, let me show you."

SMACK!

“That’s the left side of your face.”

SMACK!

“That’s the right side of your face. Which hand do you eat with?”

“Th-this hand, Pilus Prior,” came the answer.

SMACK!

“That’s your right hand! That’s the hand you’ll hold a sword in, do you understand? So when I give you the command, *Ad Gladium, Clina*, which direction do you suppose you’ll turn towards? No, don’t tell me, point.”

A silence, where Artorius obviously pointed in the right direction.

“Very good, Artorius. Now, turn around and face the way everyone else is facing. And remember, if you obey an order and find yourself as you just were, you were wrong. Got it?”

“Yes, Pilus Prior.”

Once we were faced the correct way, he taught us the command to march, starting on the left foot first, which made sense because it automatically put our shield side first, and would be how we would fight. After a few fits and starts, and more beatings, we finally got it right, then marched to the section of the camp, behind the *Praetorium* but still part of the headquarters area, where the quartermasters were housed in their own tent, almost as large as the *Praetorium*. Inevitably, we bungled the halting when the order came, which was of course by design of the Pilus Prior, to whom we were taking a healthy dislike at this point. After more beatings, and practice of starting and stopping, we were then told to go into the tent, where we would be issued our basic necessities as a Legionary. I was first in line, and immediately ran into trouble because of my size, when I was handed a tunic, the soldier’s tunic, plus a spare and told to try it on. Instead of hanging loosely in the proper manner, it was fairly tight, particularly across the shoulders. The first pair of boots I was handed were too small as well, as were the next few pairs. Finally, after rummaging around, the Legionary assigned as *immunes* for the quartermaster found a pair that almost fit.

“You’ll have to have one of the cobblers outside of camp make you a pair, special.”

“How much will that cost?” I asked, dismayed.

The Legionary shrugged, “No more than a few sesterces, I expect. I wouldn’t know.”

He immediately moved on to the others, passing out their own set of boots, all of which fit, I noted dismally. This was not shaping up to be a great day for me. While the armor I was handed fit, it was also a little snug. Fortunately it was not enough to restrict my movement, and I gave a quiet thanks to the gods for that small favor. Some of the other lads looked lost, and more than one staggered when they

were handed the armor and told to put it on over the tunic. We were told by the *immune* to invest in a padded undershirt that was not issued, but could be made by one of the merchants dealing in such items who were a permanent fixture outside the camp. Handing us our belt and harness next, he showed us how to bunch the mail of our armor above the belt so that it would distribute the weight better. Next came the helmet, and once again I presented a problem, although this was more my problem than for the *immunes*. The helmet fit, except that it fit more tightly than it did on the others, so that the felt padded cap that the others wore was useless to me, at least with its normal thickness. I was sure that this too would require a trip outside camp at the first opportunity. In the meantime, the helmet was riding on my head with nothing in between it but my hair, which kept catching on some of the internal fittings. Because of that discomfort, I resolved that I would cut my hair as short as I could, a style that I wear to this day. Hair may be the pride of a woman, but it is the shame of a warrior, at least that is what I told the others when they teased me about being practically bald. A hidden benefit of shaving my head was that it gave the normal cap just enough room to fit, saving me a few sesterces. Even so, it was still a snug fit but I learned fairly quickly that this was an advantage; it kept the helmet from slipping down over my eyes or turning sideways which was a constant problem for a lot of my comrades. Once the helmets were passed out, we were given our shield, not the real one but the one made of wicker with which Cyclops had trained Vibius and me. Having held a shield many times by this point, Vibius and I had no trouble, something that did not go unnoticed by the *immune*, who narrowed his eyes though he did not say anything. The others had some trouble, handling it awkwardly, not sure how to grasp it correctly. One of the others even dropped his, causing a string of curses to be launched by the *immune*, yet thankfully there was no beating, the Pilus Prior not being nearby at the time.

There were a number of other pieces of equipment; a spade, which was handed to us by the *immune* with a smirk and a comment, "You're going to get to know that piece of equipment very well."

We stared at him blankly, not knowing exactly what he meant, but he was right. Along with the spade came the turf cutter, our *patera* from which we would prepare and eat our meals, a basket to put the smaller items in, the pack and a grinding mill that was to be shared by our tent section, along with spare thongs and other odds and ends. Finally, we were left with just two pieces of gear to be handed to us, and again Vibius and I thanked the gods that we knew what to expect. Alone out of our group we knew that we would not be getting the real sword or javelins that day, just the wooden sword and practice javelins. Therefore, when we were handed our wooden weapons, we made not a sound, which was fortunate, because the Pilus Prior had just entered the tent behind us, although we did not yet know it.

"What's this?" demanded none other than Didius. "Are we children that we don't get a real sword?"

"Exactly," exclaimed one of the others, someone in the middle of the line, a somewhat swarthy lad standing next to someone who looked remarkably similar to him, although not close enough to be twins. "Aren't we good enough to rate having a real weapon?"

For the second time that day, Didius was struck down by the Pilus Prior, followed closely by his fellow complainant, and then was joined by the man that had to be his brother, who out of reflex I suppose had reached down to help him.

“Nobody told you to touch him,” the Pilus Prior snarled.

It was beginning to become clear to us that nobody was going to do anything unless they were specifically told to do so, and I made a mental note of it.

“Sorry, Pilus Prior. He’s my broth...” he did not get a chance to finish his sentence, struck again by that infernal stick.

“And nobody asked you for an explanation you *cunnus*,” the Pilus Prior snapped. “On your feet, the lot of you.”

Once they climbed back to their feet and came to the correct position of *Intente*, which the rest of us had immediately assumed, the Pilus Prior spoke to the rest of us.

“So, is there anyone else who feels like complaining about not being handed a real sword?” he asked in a deceptively pleasant voice. Fortunately this did not fool anyone, even Artorius, into answering. “You *cunni* can barely walk in a straight line, so you don’t really expect that we’d hand you a real weapon, do you? You have a LONG way to go before you reach that point.”

Seeing that we had received our basic allotment of gear, he indicated that we should leave the tent, carrying the gear that we were not wearing in our basket or stacked on top of it, along with the possessions we had brought with us and gave the order to *ad signa*, to get back into our assigned places in line. It did not take us as long fortunately, or perhaps the Pilus Prior had just resigned himself to our ineptitude, so we only had to do it once. Giving us the order to turn to the right again, he started us marching towards the far side of the camp. As we marched we passed by other men, apparently in different stages of training, which I watched only out of the corner of my eye, not daring to turn my head. After a few moments, we reached the far corner of the camp, near the *Porta Praetoria*, the main gate. There were several rows of tents arranged in a square, all of the outermost tents facing the walls of the camp. Immediately behind each tent facing the walls was the back of another tent, whose opening faced in the opposite direction, away from the wall. Across a wide pathway from those tents was another line of tents, whose openings faced in the direction of the tents closest towards the wall. The effect was that there was a series of streets, with rows of tents acting as the houses, although it was much more neatly arranged than most cities. Such is the camp of the Roman army, even to this day. The camp we were at housed a total of four Legions, the 7th, 8th 9th and 10th. Normally the most experienced Legions are placed closest to the walls, but since we were in friendly territory and had no fear of attack, placing was not as important. This was to be our new home for most of the time we were in the Legions.

Indicating a tent, the Pilus Prior told us, “This is where all of you will be living. There are eight of you here; your Sergeant has already been selected, and one man will be joining you shortly. This is your

tent section; look around at each of these men, because they'll be the ones you're living with from here until your time in the Legion is up. Or until you die, whichever happens first."

He gave a short, barking laugh at this, which none of us found particularly amusing. Before he dismissed us to arrange ourselves he gave us one last instruction.

"Before you go in, each of you needs to select one other man from your tent section. This'll be your companion, your closest companion and friend for the time you're in the Legion. He'll be the holder of your will, he'll be the man who watches your back wherever you go. Whenever possible, you'll go together, even when you go out into town, so choose wisely. I'll give you a few moments to do that, then you're to go into your tent, and with your choice in mind, you'll select the spot where you'll be sleeping. The cot that your Sergeant occupies is the one closest to the entrance; you'll be able to tell because it's already occupied with his gear. Now, I'll return in a sixth part of the watch. Or maybe sooner," he said this last with quiet menace, "just to make sure that you're doing what you're supposed to be doing and not already fucking off."

Turning and stalking off, he left us standing there a bit bewildered, if I am to be honest.

The man next to me, the second tallest man who I had judged to have some intelligence, nodded to me, "My name's Sextus Scribonius. You seem to have your wits about you, like me," he grinned as he said this. "What do you say we pair up?"

Somewhat regretfully, I told him that I could not because I already had someone, and since my hands were full I nodded in the direction of Vibius, already walking towards me with a smile on his face. Scribonius was clearly disappointed, but he took it well, especially when I explained that we had been best friends for so many years. Immediately he turned to his left, but that was Didius, with whom he clearly had no intention of pairing.

Vibius whispered, "Well, at least this part is easy. Why don't we duck in now and claim our spots while the rest of them are arguing?"

Which we immediately did, to the protests of some of the others, Didius most notably and unsurprisingly. However, the two brothers, seeing us, quickly followed. I selected the spot across from the Sergeant nearest to the door, with Vibius taking the spot next to me, the second man to the left. The brothers headed for the two cots directly across the doorway from Vibius and placed their gear on them, claiming the space as theirs. They were followed by two others, who claimed the spots at the back, next to the brothers, and it was then I began to notice something that did not make sense. There were a total of eight cots, but there were eight of us already, plus the unnamed Sergeant, and the Pilus Prior had told us that one more would be joining us. That made ten men, but only eight spots. Vibius caught on as well, and we were looking at each other in a puzzled manner when we heard a new voice at the entrance to the tent. We both turned to see another Legionary, wearing a uniform identical to us, with the exception that his helmet had a flowing black horse tail on top of it, the tail spilling down near his shoulders.

“So, apparently someone can count,” he said laconically as he stood in the doorway.

He was a well-built man, in his mid-twenties it appeared, with even features and cool grey eyes that appraised each of us. His gaze lingered on me, taking in my size and he pursed his lips in a silent whistle, but did not say anything to me. Instead, he turned to the whole group and announced, “In case you haven’t guessed, my name is Lucius Calienus, and I’m the Sergeant of this tent section. I was a member of Pompey’s 1st Legion, and was promoted to help fill this Legion out with some men who knew their ass from their elbows. And judging from what I’m seeing in this lot, I might as well kiss my ass goodbye because I’m as good as dead the moment we go into battle.”

This did not set well with me, but I kept my mouth shut.

Calienus walked into the tent, standing in the narrow area between the cots and said, “So I see that you, or at least some of you” he turned to nod in the direction of Vibius and myself, “were catching on that there seems to be a problem with the numbers in this tent.”

Not sure how to address him at this point, we contented ourselves with just nodding.

“Well, you’ll be happy to know that you’re correct in your assumption, so there may be hope for some of you yet.”

Turning to the outside to the remaining man, he motioned him to come inside. Having seen that Scribonius had grabbed Artorius, despite the early signs that Artorius might be a weakling, I assumed that Scribonius must have decided that Artorius was the lesser of two evils. Didius walked in, and I have to say that he looked a little upset that he was not picked, although he did not say anything about it.

Calienus said to Didius, “So you’re the odd man out, neh?”

Didius nodded, and Calienus laughed, but while it was not necessarily a cruel laugh, it still obviously rankled Didius.

“Maybe you’re just slow to make friends. Or,” he became serious, “it means that you’re someone I have to keep an eye on. Either way, you’re out of luck, neh?” Without waiting for an answer, Calienus turned to the rest of us, and explained the mystery of the two missing cots.

They were not missing at all. Instead it meant that at any given time, there would be two men on some sort of duty, at least once we finished training. Even during training, there would be at least one man on watch on our assigned sector of wall, so that at some point, someone was sleeping in your cot while you were out on duty. During training only one would be missing, requiring that someone slept on the ground, but in order to be fair, it was rotated evenly, even Calienus participating. Also, while the sleeping arrangements would change, the area where we stored our gear, under our cots, would remain the same. Didius and the unknown tenth man were given two corners of the tent as their area, making it somewhat inconvenient for them, but was designed to stop gear from being “accidentally” mixed up, a practice that turned out to be a very good precaution with Didius in our tent, although we did not know that then. Once that was explained to us, Calienus showed us the proper way to stow our gear

underneath our cots, taking the remainder of the time allotted to us by the Pilus Prior. I imagine it was a sixth part to the instant when we heard a shrill whistle sound outside. Vibius and I knew what the whistle meant, even if we had never actually heard one, thanks to Cyclops, so we immediately grabbed our shield, put our helmets back on, picked up our wooden sword and hurried outside. Falling into our places at the opposite ends of the line, we were followed in a matter of moments by the rest of the group, who seemed to follow our lead and came out carrying their weapons and shields. They got in line quickly, but none of us were sure how to stand at *Intente* holding our shields or wooden sword. That we assembled in this fashion clearly surprised the Pilus Prior, but he made no comment about it and fortunately, we were not penalized, for whatever reason. Instead, the Pilus Prior showed us how to hold the wooden sword vertically; normally our sword would be sheathed, but since we had not been issued them yet, and the wooden sword would not fit in the scabbard anyway, we were taught this method. Then he told us to go stow the gear in our tents and come back outside.

Once we did so, he marched us over to the forum, which in an army camp is the large clear area next to the *Praetorium* where the Legions are mustered when they are to be issued orders en masse, or some other event occurs that requires everyone's presence. The rest of the time, at least in the early days of the Legion, it was being used by us *tiros* as we were taught how to march and perform close order drill. There were other small groups, along with a couple of large ones, composed of a full Century, normally eighty men. However, in the case of our Legions, and in every Legion raised by Caesar from that point forward, he made a change by commanding that a Century would consist of a hundred men, which was changed back to eighty men by the man now known as Augustus. This was why we had the unusual sleeping arrangements in our tent; normally eight cots were sufficient, since the Century of traditional size consisted of ten sections of men, one section to each tent. Of course, we did not know this was unusual, and would not learn otherwise until much later in our careers. Now, these Centuries were all marching about under the order of their respective Centurions. Assisting them was the Centurion's Optio, the second in command of each Century; we had yet to meet ours because he was working with the rest of the Century. As it turned out, we were the last of the First Century of the Second Cohort to be added, explaining why we were getting the undivided attention of the Pilus Prior and not the Optio. The Pilus Prior had us watch the other groups marching for a moment, and even to our untrained eye, we could see that they were in different stages of training. Smaller groups like ours still displayed a tendency to look like they were shambling along, and they were being "encouraged" with the Centurion's stick more often than the others. It was also plain to see that being smacked with that stick was going to be a regular part of our lives for some time to come.

After a few moments, the Pilus Prior said, "You can see that you'll be spending a great deal of your time just learning how to march in the proper manner, and obey the commands given you while you march. And know this you *cunni*," he finished, "my Cohort will be the tightest, best drilled Cohort in this Legion, or you'll all die trying."

He laughed at his own joke, if indeed it was. For ourselves, we were not sure. The rest of the day was spent marching about, with a liberal amount of bashing with the stick, which we learned was called the *vitus* and is a symbol of the Centurion rank. Up and down we marched, learning the basic commands, and I never suspected one could become so tired from just walking around, yet by the time we were

through, I was exhausted. So were the others if the looks of them were any indication. We marched through at least two watches; the watch is divided into increments of three hours each, and the end of each watch is signaled by the sounding of a horn. I could not tell which horn it was, but as I learned later the change of the watch is sounded by the *bucina*. Either the Pilus Prior thought we had been through enough, or we were at a point where we would not have improved, but either way we were thankful for the break.

We were marched back to our tent and put in the charge of Sergeant Calienus, who informed us that it was almost time for the evening meal, so he spent the time waiting showing us the proper way to stow our gear under our cots. As one might surmise, everything had to be arranged just so, and although he did not have to do so, Sergeant Calienus explained why.

“Let’s say it’s the middle of the night, and you’re all sound asleep, thinking of the women you’re missing back home,” he said, drawing a chuckle from us, which he did not seem to mind. “Then out of nowhere, the horns are blasting and men are shouting because an attack on the walls has started. It’s pitch black, and you have to fall to your defensive station, which” he added, “I’ll show you where it is on the wall on the way to draw our meal. Anyway, everyone’s screaming and shouting, there’s a horrible racket coming from the barbarian horde outside the walls, and it’s utter chaos and confusion.”

While he was talking, he was seated on his cot facing us, except he was demonstrating as he spoke, pulling out first his armor and putting it on as he continued explaining, “So you’ve got just a moment to get your gear on and stand to on the wall, or there’ll be Hades to pay, or worse. What if the breach to the wall happens in your area, because you couldn’t get armed and ready in the proper amount of time?”

By the time he was finished, he had put on his helmet, donned his armor, strapped on his baldric, grabbed his shield and was ready to go, all without looking for any piece of his gear. We were all suitably impressed, and I at least saw the immediate sense of what he had said. As we were to learn, this was the way of Sergeant Calienus; while the Pilus Prior used his *vitus* and the most inventive cursing I had ever heard in my life to that point, Sergeant Calienus talked to us like we were already Legionaries. I supposed it was because he was not as far removed from having been like us as Pilus Prior Crastinus, although I was hard pressed to imagine that Crastinus was ever a *tiro*. In fact, I imagined that he had been born in his armor, fully formed and ready for battle from the day he was born, an image that I was to learn was carefully cultivated by him, and one that I would come to use myself.

Sergeant Calienus marched us back to the *quaestorium*, the tent that is located next to the *Praetorium* and serves the quartermaster, where we were given our flat loaf of *panis castrenis*, had the small stoppered bottle for our olive oil filled, and watered wine put into our flask. Some of the boys looked at what they were being handed with a combination of puzzlement and distaste; for me, it was nothing since I had always been indifferent to food as far as what it tasted like. I did miss my meat, although I did not say anything since that would have exposed my poverty to the others. Over the years I have developed a belief that one reason I was so large was due in part to my father’s lack of success as a farmer. Because we did not have much grain with which to make our bread, we ate more meat than was

normal for most Romans, and I have since seen people like the Germans who are my size and whose diet is composed mostly of meat, which seems to support my idea. Still, it was not something I liked to talk about with the others, so I pretended that I liked the diet of bread and chickpeas just as much as everyone else.

“We get bacon every other day, a nice salted chunk of it, but today's not the day. And you're lucky that we're in camp and only training, or it would be straight water, no wine,” Calienus explained.

Once we were given our ration, we marched back to our tent, where Calienus had us sit on the ground outside, and we began eating our evening meal. While we ate, Calienus gave us more information.

“If I were you, boys, I'd save a bit of the bread and oil for the morning, because we only get our one ration a day.”

Granted, the loaf, which was round and flat and about four inches high by about one foot in diameter was a good size, but I still wondered how we were to survive on this alone, even with the bacon as supplement.

“Once we begin marching, our rations will increase,” explained Calienus, who obviously was a mind reader.

Or, he had once been a *tiro* and wondered the same thing.

“But while all we're doing right now is drill and weapons training, the general doesn't want us getting fat and lazy.”

I did not see how that could happen, but I was content to take him at his word. Calienus then went around the group, asking questions of each of us in order to learn more about them. It was in this manner that I learned the names and basic information of the men I would spend the next several years with, some of them at least. Along with Vibius and myself, there was Sextus Scribonius, the man who stood next to me when we were arranged by height. Scribonius said he came from Corduba, yet he was vague about what his father did or anything else about his family, for that matter. It was a subject that he rarely discussed, and it would not be until many years later that I would learn that he was lying about where he was from, but that is for later. Then there was Quintus Artorius, and his story was a fairly common one, not unlike mine. His father was a blacksmith and they could not get along, so after a particularly bitter argument, Artorius threatened that he would go join the Legion, whereupon his father called his bluff. It was clear to all of us that he seemed to be having second thoughts, an impression that was only reinforced as time went by. His was the nervous voice I heard in the pre-dawn of that day when we all reported. He was also the smallest member of our group, which I do not imagine helped his outlook. The two who looked alike were indeed brothers, Marcus and Quintus Mallius, and it was a common occurrence for all of us to mix them up. Before long they both earned nicknames, but until they did, it was a source of exasperation for all of us. They were sons of a farmer in the province, outside the town of Illurco and were quick to point out that there was a pretty good chance that the olive oil we were dipping our bread in came from their farm, since they had accompanied their father making a

delivery to the army. The brothers decided to enlist because there was a multitude of brothers Mallius. Marcus was the oldest by a year, although they could have almost passed for twins. Both had a cheerful disposition generally, though Quintus possessed a fearsome temper, which got him in trouble more than once during our time together. Next was Publius Vellusius, who stood to the right of Vibius in our line, and up to that point from who I had barely heard a word. His story was similar to Marcus and Quintus, and Vibius for that matter; an excess of sons, with Vellusius being the excess. His father had a farm in the far north-west of the province in Nertobriga; it took him a week to arrive at Corduba and he had gotten a later start like we had, accounting for his relatively late arrival along with the rest of us. He was about as tall as Vibius, but built much more slightly, with a bristle of black hair that seemed to stick straight up, no matter how much oil he used to keep it flat. To me, he looked a bit like a bird, with the same kind of nervous movement and constant peering at his surroundings, as if waiting for a cat to come along, but he turned out to be a good soldier, though, one of the best in our Century. Finally, there was Didius, who had calmed his mouth somewhat, just not enough to suit me or the others. Despite being shorter than I was, he was built similarly to me, and indeed he turned out to be quite strong, perhaps as strong as I was, something I had not encountered before. Perhaps, if I am being honest, that is one of the reasons that I disliked him as much as I did, although if that is true it does not adequately explain the hatred the others held for him before much time would pass from this first day. Still, at that moment, we were willing to give him a chance, despite his bragging and generally unpleasant attitude. Didius told us that he was born to be in the Legions, like his father and father before him, who were great heroes in their own right, although he would outshine them, and the rest of us. I took care to hide my feelings, munching on my bread with what I hoped was a bland expression. Calienus just gave a slight grin, as if he had heard it all before, which he had. Once we were done, he told us about himself. He was 28, and had been in the Legion for ten years, but re-enlisted for the full sixteen year term that Caesar set as the length for this enlistment of the 10th Legion, all for the chance of promotion to Sergeant. He was also *immune*, having skill as an armourer, his father being one before him and teaching him his craft. That meant that he was exempt from most of the other duties, with the exception of standing watch during the night hours, when he would not have been working anyway. Calienus was in Pompey's 1st Legion, a fact that gave him instant respect, and had been with Pompey during his short but sharp campaign against the pirates, recently returning from the war against Mithridates, which was the talk of the Roman world ever since. He fought in over thirty engagements, and was wounded four times, once so seriously that he almost died from the infection. Calienus was a hardcore Pompeian, and I sometimes wonder if things had worked out differently what road he would have traveled. But I am ahead of myself again; forgive me, gentle reader, it is the prerogative of the elderly to sometimes meander. Introductions done, with the light beginning to fade, we continued talking and asking questions of Calienus, all of which he answered with great patience. Finally, the horn blew that signaled it was time to retire, and we entered the tent to make preparations for sleep. Because it was our first night, we were not entered as part of the duty rotation, though that would change the next day when the last member of the tent section joined us. It was just as well; we were all exhausted and I think even if Hannibal himself had risen from the dead to mount an attack on the camp, it would have been impossible to rouse us from our slumber. I do not even remember lying on my cot, and in the morning I awoke in the exact same position in which I had fallen asleep, something that would become a common occurrence over the next few weeks.

The next morning we were roused, again before daylight, to start our day, being given just a few moments to eat what we saved from the night before, then forming up outside the tent. Pilus Prior Crastinus came striding up, with the same invisible *numen* waving the same invisible turd under his nose.

“Well, you *cunni*,” he snarled by way of greeting, “I was expecting half of you to be gone like the sorry specimens you replaced.”

This was a shock; it was the first we heard that we were not just original drafts but instead had replaced others. As we learned the story over the next few days, we were added to the Legion to replace *tiros* in the Second Cohort that failed to measure up, for one reason or another. Rather than sprinkling us into the Centuries of the Cohort that lost men, they instead consolidated by moving the men who were in our Century out to the ones that had missing men. The logic was obvious; at least, once it was explained to us. The other Centuries were all at more advanced stages of training, and dropping in a brand new *tiro* into one of them would have been a hardship that compromised the training of the other Centuries. Instead our Century, the First Century, was selected to be the one to dole out men to make a hole to fill, with members of the First Century serving as replacements for those who had fallen out. Like with most things in the army, once explained it made perfect sense. It was just relatively rare that things were clarified for us, especially as time passed. The more experienced we were, the less it was considered important to at least give us an idea of what was going on or why we were doing something; we were just expected to obey as if the order came from Jupiter’s mouth directly to our ears. Again, if one thinks about it, it makes some sense. By that time, you are indoctrinated in the ways of the Legion. In your first days, you are still more citizen than Legionary, and as part of the process, there is a certain amount of explanation that is given to you. Not much, but a little, which is more than more experienced Legionaries got.

This also explained why we were in the First Century, so we could have the undivided attention of the Pilus Prior, not that we were very appreciative. He marched us over to the forum, and we picked up where we left off the day before, learning the basic drill movements and commands. Over and over, with the word “*Repitate*” ringing in our ears, along with the sting of his *vitus* to help remind us, we marched up and down, up and down. The only break in the monotony was in mid-morning, when the last member of our tent section joined us, having drawn his gear and been escorted by either Sergeant Calienus or the Optio to our tent. He was introduced to us as Marcus Atilius, and he slotted into our line between Scribonius and Didius, much to the relief of Scribonius. Atilius appeared to be somewhat older than the rest of us, with the exception of Calienus, though it turned out to be more a case of hard living. When he joined us, he wore the same look as Vibius the morning before, somewhat pale and a little unsteady on his feet, the result of a particularly festive farewell party, or so we thought at the time. However, we would learn that every day was an occasion for a festival as far as Atilius was concerned. Because he was also behind in learning the basic movements, we were told to run around the camp along the *Via Sagularis*, the road that runs around the inside perimeter of the camp along the walls, while he received personal instruction.

When we all hesitated for a moment, confused, the Pilus Prior snapped, "Well? What are you waiting for?"

"How many times, Pilus Prior?"

This came from Scribonius, which is exactly what I wanted to know, but thank the gods he beat me to it, because it earned nothing more than a smack with the *vitus* and a snarled, "Until I tell you to stop, you idiot."

With that pleasant admonition, we began to run. Being in the lead, I set what I thought would be a pace that everyone could keep up with, yet would be sufficiently quick enough not to earn a beating from the Pilus Prior. However, I miscalculated, badly. While Cyclops made Vibius and I do plenty of exercises that helped our dexterity and overall endurance wearing helmet and armor, he never had us do any running, so very quickly I found that what I thought would be a comfortable pace was putting me into difficulty. However, I was also too proud to slow down, and I continued on, trying to ignore the pain in my side and the feeling that I was breathing pure fire. Leading the way for one circuit, then two, I never looked back, now afraid that since nobody behind me asked to slow down, I was running slower than they would have had they been leading.

It wasn't until I was halfway through the second lap of the camp that I heard a gasping shout, "*Eho Pullus!* By the gods man, are you trying to kill us all?"

Startled I looked around to see Scribonius, his face as red as our new *sagum*, the soldier's cloak, staggering as he caught up to me now that I had slowed down. Looking over my shoulder, I saw to my dismay that the others were far, far behind, barely visible just turning the second corner of the second circuit of the camp. Scribonius, hands on his knees as he sucked in air, began to gag, making me feel horrible, and good all at the same time.

In between retches, he gasped, "Didn't you hear us shouting for you to slow down? I swear that all of us were begging you to slow your pace, but you just ran along like you were Mercury himself."

Despite the fact that I was breathing as hard as he was, and was fighting the urge to vomit as well, I tried to sound nonchalant as I replied, "Really? No, Scribonius, I'm truly sorry. I didn't hear a thing. I just thought I was running at a pace that wouldn't get us in trouble with Pilus Prior Crastinus."

He looked up at me to see if I was joking, but in that at least I was telling the truth; by this time the others had joined us, and all assumed the same position as Scribonius, each of them cursing my name, my father and my ancestors. Even Vibius was angry with me, and I wavered between embarrassment and anger at the invective they were using against me.

Defensively I protested, "I already told Scribonius I was sorry. I didn't realize I was running so fast."

"Well, clean your ears out, damn you," spat Didius, pushing my mood immediately to anger.

“If you can’t keep up, that’s not my problem,” I retorted, and he stood up straight, making a move towards me as if he had more to say, but before he could, Vibius stepped in between us and grabbed my arm. “None of us could keep up Titus,” he spoke sharply, “because you forget that you have these great long legs.”

That it was Vibius talking so immediately deflated me and I apologized again, this time more humbly, which seemed to satisfy everyone except for Didius, who continued to glare at me. That is when I knew that he and I were destined for trouble at some point. To make matters worse, the Pilus Prior happened to look up and saw us standing in a group, and we could hear his booming voice, over all the other noise of camp, and we jumped a little in panic.

“I don’t believe I told you *cunni* to stop,” he roared. “The next time I look around, you had better be running, ladies.”

We looked at each other, and then Scribonius said, “The Pilus Prior didn’t tell us what order to run in, did he?” Shaking our heads, he continued quickly, “Well then, let’s run with the little end at the front, that way we won’t have to worry about Pullus galloping off on us.”

This was immediately accepted, even by me, not wanting to draw the ire of the others any more than I already had, although I now knew that I could run more slowly without being afraid of being seen as weak. Quickly reversing our order, we started up again with Artorius leading us off. Almost immediately we could all see that while this was a good idea in theory, Artorius was so weak and slow the chances of evading the wrath of the Pilus Prior was practically non-existent. Fairly quickly we rearranged yet again, putting Vibius in front, who set a pace that most of us could follow with a moderate effort, except for Artorius. I assumed that the reason he was so far behind was that he was at the little end of our line, but it turned out that not only was he the smallest physically he was the weakest, in more ways than one. We made a couple more circuits before we heard the Pilus Prior yell at us to stop, which we did, heading back to where he and Atilius were standing. Poor Atilius, being the only focus of the Pilus Prior, already had several large red welts on his arms and legs but his face showed no emotion as he stood there at *intente*. It became apparent that Atilius had taken his personal lessons to heart, because he immediately matched us in terms of our skill level. Once more, the rest of the day was spent in drill, and it was a weary group that trooped to the tent. Sergeant Calienus joined us shortly, and informed us that we were going to be put into the rotation for guard duty, starting that night. During our *tiro* period, we would only be standing watch at night so that we could get all the training in possible. The brothers drew the first watch, followed by Scribonius and Artorius, then Vibius and myself. In this manner, everyone would be able to sleep through the night on a cot, although there would have to be some shifting around.

“But as soon as we finish our meal, I’m taking you boys to the bath house,” Calienus told us, wrinkling his nose, “because you stink. And I’m not going to share a tent with a bunch of animals.”

This was my first experience with regular bathing; on the farm we bathed at most once a week, usually on the market day, using a large wooden tub for the purpose, after which Phocas or Gaia would oil us down. Actually, I stopped allowing Gaia to bathe me when I was perhaps ten or eleven, but I

certainly had never heard of bathing in the middle of the week; it was at least three more days to market day! Nevertheless, I quickly grew accustomed to it and to this day I bathe every day, at least whenever possible. Back then though, I was just a country boy who thought such refinements a waste of time. After the meal, Calienus took us to a large tent near the *quaestorium*, where a line of men stood, all waiting for their turn. This was our first time actually mingling with the other Legionaries, and we obviously looked as green as grass because almost immediately we were jeered and teased. When I heard those mocking words, I felt the heat in my face and my anger starting to rise, when a gentle but firm hand on my elbow stopped me; I was not aware, but I had begun moving towards one particularly mouthy man who looked about the same age as Calienus, just softer. Turning, I saw that was in fact who was grabbing my elbow, giving me a stern look as he shook his head.

“Hold, Pullus. You can’t go getting upset when someone runs their mouth at you. Besides,” he grinned, “you are fresh meat, and the boys are just having some fun. Soon enough, you’ll be doing the same to poor *tiros* like you are now.”

I listened and obeyed, except I did not believe him, promising myself that when I was in their shoes, I would not be so callous. It was just one more promise broken in a life full of them. The interior of the tent was lit by oil lamps, and there was a buzz of laughter and conversation, ribald jokes and the kind of complaining that only soldiers can do. There were a couple of dozen slaves who rubbed down each man with oil, then scraped him clean.

Seeing that there were no bath tubs, I looked to our Sergeant and Calienus explained. “No, we don’t have proper baths in camp; that only happens in winter quarters when we build more permanent facilities. Here we just have the oil and scraping.”

Like other things I had been told, it made perfect sense to me. Not only was it time spent, it was a matter of resources; we should not be wasting water on luxuries like baths. Even so, it was refreshing, and I left feeling like a new man, invigorated by the skilled hands of the slave who rubbed down my tired and sore muscles. It may seem like a small thing, yet I firmly believe that one reason we are invincible is because not only are we well-trained, we are well-cared-for and well-fed. There is no doubt in my mind that the rubdowns that we receive help us recover from our exertions more quickly and thoroughly, so that we are revitalized and able to do more work than our enemies, in every phase and facet of warfare.

Just like the night before, I was asleep before I finished lying down, and it seemed but a moment before I was being shaken awake by Scribonius, while Artorius did the same for Vibius.

“Your turn,” Scribonius whispered, and I came awake immediately, something that I somehow managed to teach myself and it has served me well throughout my career. I can be sound asleep, but at a word I am instantly awake. This night, I sat up and copying what Calienus showed us, tried to do the same thing, pulling my gear from underneath my cot from memory. Instead, I immediately dropped my helmet, making a horrible racket and earning me a round of curses from my comrades. Finally stumbling out, I waited for Vibius who managed to equip himself without making a sound, then we headed to the wall that was our sector. I could see in the darkness the same thing happening up and down the wall as the guard changed. Stifling a yawn I climbed the rampart, feeling somewhat ridiculous not properly

armed. I had not yet seen the view from the wall and despite it being dark, there was enough light from the moon and the nearby torches that remained lit throughout the night hours to see the disposition of the outside of the camp. About 30 feet away was a ditch, although from the gloom I could not tell its depth. It was in fact twelve feet deep, different than the standard nine feet, but with Caesar as our general, he favored ditches that were twelve feet deep by fifteen feet wide, versus the nine foot by twelve foot wide standard. This in turn allows for a higher wall, therefore the camp of a Caesar-led Legion was always harder to storm than those of other generals. We stood behind a crenellated palisade made of wood; as I was to learn, two of those stakes belonged to me, and I would carry them everywhere we went, or more accurately our section mule did, along with those of every other Legionary, giving them up to form the wall that protected us. The earthen rampart that I stood on was the product of the dirt that came from the ditch, making the rampart six feet wide. It was tamped down to give us a solid footing and wide enough to allow men to move behind others manning the walls in the event they had to run to a trouble spot. The rest of the dirt formed a ramp leading to the rampart, allowing us to run up to the wall without having to worry about climbing ladders. The Roman camp is second to none of its kind and for as long as anyone could remember, this was how a camp was built, almost every single night on the march, with very few exceptions and only slight variations depending on the threat level. In our long-ago past, some unfortunate army did not go to the trouble and was massacred, so from that time on this was the standard. While Vibius and I stood there, shivering in the damp despite our *sagum* wrapped around our shoulders, we could hear the low buzz of voices from the other Legionaries on the wall. Vibius and I glanced at each other; the Pilus Prior had been very specific about the prohibition on talking on guard duty, but it seemed that there were others who did not get that warning from him, or were ignoring it. However, we were still too new to even consider disregarding the rules at this point, so we just shrugged and turned back to stare out into the blackness.

All I can say about my first turn on guard duty is that I wish the hundreds and hundreds of times that I have done since then had passed as quickly as that one. I think it must have been the novelty, because before I could believe that the proper amount of time had passed the horn was blowing, and I could see a very faint lightening in the sky. Since we stood the last watch, we at least had the advantage of being fully dressed and returned to our tent as the more experienced Legionaries who had the day watch relieved us, giving us the proper password. There is a new password and countersign issued every full day, and our shift would be the last to use the old one. Now, the commander of the guard Cohort would go to each station and issue the new password and countersign. Like the camps, this was done without exception, no matter where the Legion was located; as I would learn, even on the Campus Martius just outside Rome, we would have to learn and remember the password and countersign. I would also learn that the method of relief that we used the night before was not the norm; the relief of the guard, especially when on campaign, is much more formalized and is done by the commander of the guard that shift, who marches the men of the relief to their specific spot on the rampart. Those being relieved then fall into the marching formation, taking the place of the men who relieved them, continuing in formation to the next post, where the process is repeated. Only after a complete circuit of the camp is made do those that were relieved get dismissed to go back to sleep, or resume their other duties. That morning, the others were just getting dressed and while we waited, Vibius and I gnawed on the small piece of bacon and bread left over from the night before. By this time, our third day, we knew

enough to immediately form up outside the tent, and before long the Pilus Prior showed up, snarling his usual cheery morning greeting. Then we went marching off to begin another day.

Thus set the pattern for the next week, where every day seemed to blur together into one long continuous day of marching and the command *Repitate* ringing in our ears over and over and over. Of course, the command was almost always accompanied with the smack of the *vitus*, and although I was a bit farther ahead than the others, as was Vibius, I received my fair share of blows. Our days became measured by the sounds of the tromping of our feet and the blowing of the *bucina* marking the change of watch, yet slowly, we began to at least look like Legionaries, even if the Pilus Prior kept insisting that we were the worst collection of *tiros* that he had ever seen. Finally, the day arrived for which all of us, particularly Vibius and I, had been waiting. The morning started in the usual manner, but we were told to carry our wooden sword, and instead of being marched to the forum, we marched past it, took a right turn and headed out the *Porta Principalis Sinistra*, the side gate on the left hand side of every camp, exiting it and stopping on the other side of the ditches. Arrayed before us were a huge number of stakes, the same type that Cyclops had trained Vibius and me on, and despite Vibius being a few men down from me, I was sure that he was fighting the urge to smile as well. Finally! We would get our chance to show that we were not as raw as the others, and I could feel my stomach twist in excitement at the thought of finally doing something with which I was familiar.

Of course, it was not going to be so easy. They were not going to just turn us loose to start whacking away, and for this task, we were formally introduced for the first time to our Optio, who acted as our Cohort's weapons instructor. He was a bit taller than average and at first glance looked rather pudgy, but as I would learn that was extremely misleading. Although I did not yet know it, he was the only man in the Legion clearly stronger than I was by a good margin. That was not the only deceptive thing about the man; the other impression that one came away with just by looking at him is that he might have been a bit on the slow side. He wore a somewhat slack expression on his round face, with a tendency for his mouth to hang open slightly when he was not engaged. However, once he took up a weapon, he became something entirely different, a blur of motion and controlled savagery the likes of which none of us had ever seen before. Unlike most of the more experienced men he bore no visible marks or scars, which I supposed was a testament to his fighting prowess. Still, I would be lying if I said that the first day we met I was particularly impressed and I wondered if this man would actually have anything that he could possibly teach me after my tutelage with Cyclops.

"This is Optio Aulus Vinicius," the Pilus Prior announced.

Vinicius gave the slightest nod in our direction as we stood examining him.

"He's the second in command of this Century, and he's also our Cohort's weapons instructor. Today he'll begin to show you *cunni* what it truly means to be in the Legions."

Turning to Optio Vinicius, he said loudly enough so that we could hear, "Good luck Vinicius. You're going to need it with this lot." Returning his attention to us, Crastinus finished, "You'll spend the day with the Optio. I'll be by to check on you, so don't think I won't know if any of you are slacking off! All

the marching and drill is fine, but this is what your real purpose is, to fight and kill for Rome. And die, if that's the will of the gods," he added, superfluously in my opinion.

With that ominous warning he left us to the Optio, who was still standing there, not having said a word. It was almost as if he were in a trance, though when the Pilus Prior left the area, he snapped out of whatever fog he had been in.

"All right," he announced, "first thing is for you to gather round that stake right there," he pointed to one a little distance off.

We assembled around it as he took my wooden sword from me, then had us maneuver so that our backs were turned to the other men who were training on the stakes around us. My first thought was that was smart because we were a little distracted watching other men working on the stakes, but as I came to find out, Optio Vinicius also did not want us infected by what he considered the bad habits that the other Cohort's weapons instructors were instilling in their pupils. He held a very high opinion of his abilities, and all I can say is that I am still alive after more than 40 years in the Legions because of what I learned from him, in addition to what Cyclops taught me. There must have been truth to his opinion. Once he had us arrayed like he wanted, he showed us the basic positions that we would use in training. These were exactly the same positions that Cyclops had shown us, making it a struggle to appear interested. Inwardly, I was chafing to get started, yet Vinicius had his own pace and was not going to be rushed by a bunch of *tiros*, particularly a couple who thought they knew what they were doing. He also took time to show us how he wanted us to grip our wooden sword and as I looked at it, I saw that it was not the way that Cyclops had taught us, so I dismissed it as unimportant, confident that once I demonstrated my skill that some quibbling thing like the way I held it would not be an issue.

Finally, after what seemed like a full watch, he had us each stand in front of a stake and he returned my wooden sword to me. Then he walked from one of us to the other, checking our stance, kicking a foot wider here, turning a set of hips there. Finally, he returned to me, and I felt a flush of pride when he looked at my position and found it satisfactory.

Then he saw the way that I was holding the wooden sword but instead of hitting me, he just said quietly, "You're not holding the weapon the way I demonstrated."

"No Optio," I answered, yet I made no move to change, instead just waiting for the chance to show off to him, sure that he would desist from this lunacy.

"And why aren't you holding it the way I showed you?" he asked, as if he were truly interested.

"I...I've had training, Optio, from a man who was in the Legions, and this is the way I was taught to hold it."

I winced in anticipation of a smack of some sort but instead, Vinicius merely nodded.

"You're right, that's the way the majority of the Legions are taught to hold the weapon, but that's not the way I teach it," he explained.

Unsure what to do, I stood there but still did not change the grip.

Sighing, he simply said, "All right, I can see you need some convincing. So, turn and face me and assume the first position."

This was the position that makes us ready to strike, with the blade held parallel to the ground, the arm pulled back, ready to strike and with the hips twisted slightly. That was the position he had told us to get in originally, so I dropped back into it, facing him.

"Now, strike me. As hard as you can. Give me a killing blow."

I was confused and very apprehensive. Confident as I was in my strength and ability, I was sure that even with the wooden sword I would impale the man, or at the very least break his ribs when I struck. If he was worried, he certainly did not seem to be, and he repeated, a little impatiently, "I said, strike me. Give me all that you've got."

As if sensing my concern, he added, "And don't worry, if you land the blow, I'll absolve you with my dying breath."

He said this last with enough sarcasm that it made me angry, so I immediately struck my blow, punching the wooden sword forward hard as I twisted my hips with as much force and speed as I could. To this day, I am sure that if he were any other man, I would have killed him, wooden blade or no. Instead, with a speed that I had never seen before he lashed out with his bare left hand, using a sweeping motion across his body to make contact with the wooden blade before it touched him, sending the wooden sword flying from my hand. Even as my eyes tried to comprehend what was happening, he made his own move, stepping forward to strike me hard in the stomach with the end of his *vitus*, which he held in his right hand. Now I was the one who was sure that I was going to die, despite wearing my armor, and I dropped to the ground as if I had been ordered to fling myself down, so violently did I hit the ground. I am not sure how long I was out; it could not have been that long because everyone was still clustered around me, leaning over with a combination of worry and malicious glee. Vibius looked worried, while Didius grinned like it was the happiest day of his life. Optio Vinicius was the only one not bent over. Instead, he stared down at me impassively, hands behind his back, watching as I slowly crawled to my feet.

"I thought for sure you were dead," Vibius exclaimed, thumping me on the back in relief.

"So did I," I answered honestly, slowly pulling myself erect, my pride fighting to overcome the searing pain in the pit of my stomach where he had hit me. That night, when I removed my armor and pulled up my tunic, I sported a huge bruise as big around as my fist on my stomach, which stayed with me for several weeks, turning all sorts of interesting colors.

"Do you know why I was able to do that?" Optio Vinicius asked politely.

I considered the question. To me the answer was obvious; he was simply quicker than I had been, yet I knew that was not the answer he was looking for, so I thought carefully. Slowly, the answer came to me, and as the look of understanding came to my face, he smiled slightly.

“Because my thumb was exposed,” I answered, and he rewarded me with a nod.

And therein lay the secret. The thumb is the weakest part of the hand. The normal method of holding the sword is by wrapping the hand around the hilt, with the thumb on the outside of the fingers. When pressure is applied in the right direction by a sudden violent force, against the base of the thumb, it is too weak to maintain its position. By wrapping the fingers over the thumb, the thumb is supported and protected. While it is true that if one were to fight barehanded in this manner it would break your thumb, the pommel and guard of the sword provide enough protection to prevent this from happening on those occasions you use that end of the sword in a fight. Despite the obvious evidence I was still not convinced, because there was one disadvantage that I could see. I debated opening my mouth, yet to this point he was almost gentle with us, despite the ache in my stomach, which I had asked for, after all.

“But...” I started, unsure of how to continue, and again I was rewarded with that slight smile.

“But,” he finished for me, “the problem with that grip is that it restricts your blade from moving laterally, so that you don’t have the same freedom of movement. Is that what you were about to say?”

“Yes, Optio,” I answered excitedly, although to be honest I was not sure that was what I was going to say until he did it for me.

He nodded again, and replied, “You’re correct, *tiro*.....?”

“Pullus, Optio. Titus Pullus.”

“You’re correct, *tiro* Pullus that at first your movement is more restricted. But,” he said this with the quiet confidence of a man who knew what he was about, “you’ll regain that with practice. By the time I’m finished with you, nobody will be able to tell how you grip your weapon.”

He turned to the others and finished, “Except that you’ll be alive, and your enemy dead.”

Of course he was right. And it did not take nearly as long as I thought it would. By the end of the second day, I felt almost as comfortable using the new grip as I had the old. The only men who experienced difficulty with it were the men with smaller hands who did not have as much length in their fingers to wrap around their thumb sufficiently. To compensate for this, Optio Vinicius prescribed special exercises for them to strengthen their hands, exercises that once I saw them performing, I began as well. Vinicius had them thrust their hands into a bucket of sand, with their fingers splayed out. Once their hand was buried in the sand, they drew their fingers in as if they were grabbing a handful of sand. It is an extremely effective exercise, and my hands are still strong because of those exercises. Once we became accustomed to the new grip, Vibius and I started demonstrating that we were indeed more skilled than our comrades, a fact that did not escape the notice of Pilus Prior Crastinus. It was toward the end of the third day working on the stakes that I became aware of the Pilus Prior standing nearby, watching me

with narrowed eyes. Unnerved, I struggled to concentrate on my work, the sweat running freely off of me while my arms, having been hardened and conditioned to such labor, still contained a great deal of energy, reflected in my thrusts.

“This isn’t the first time you’ve held a wooden sword is it Pullus?”

The question, posed in what passed for a conversational tone by the Pilus Prior, completely flustered me. Unsure what to do, I stopped, snapped to *intente* and replied, “No, Pilus Prior.”

“Who trained you?” he asked with some interest.

“Quintus Ausonius, Pilus Prior,” I answered, which was immediately met with a roar of laughter.

“*Edepol!* You were trained by old Cyclops himself? He swore that he’d never pick up a weapon for the rest of his life, the bastard.”

I was so shocked that you could have knocked me over with the lightest touch, although I should not have been. Back then, the Legions were still relatively few and small; men such as Cyclops who gained renown were known throughout the Legions. The fact that he was my brother-in-law meant that it never occurred to me to think of him in this manner.

“And how by Pluto’s cock do you know Cyclops?” Pilus Prior Crastinus demanded.

“He’s married to my sister,” which drew another roar of laughter.

“By the gods, he’s married too! Well, maybe there’s hope for an old bastard like me yet,” he chuckled.

And then he did something that amazed me even more. Stepping up to me, he slapped me on the back as if I were a comrade and finished, “Well Pullus. You couldn’t have had a better teacher. I’m going to keep an eye on you.”

And with that, he turned and walked over to Optio Vinicius, who was standing there looking as bemused as I felt. The Pilus Prior whispered something in his ear that I could not catch, but Vibius did. Later that night, Vibius relayed to me excitedly, “You know what that old knob Crastinus said to Vinicius?” Without waiting for me to answer, he continued, “‘Watch out for Pullus, Vinicius’, he said, ‘he may take your job.’”

I felt like I was ten feet tall. Those words, however, had the opposite effect than I expected, though looking back, perhaps the Pilus Prior understood me better than I thought. From that day, I was pushed much harder by Optio Vinicius than any of the other *tiros*, and was subject to scathing critique of everything I did. The night of the incident, Vibius and I discussed the idea that Vibius should point out that he too was trained by the legendary Cyclops but luckily, for him anyway, before he got a chance to open his mouth the next day he saw the lay of the land. Indeed, not only did he keep his mouth shut, he also endeavored to hold back a bit so that he would not be singled out for special attention in the same manner that I was. It seemed I could not do anything right; my thrusts were sloppy, my slashes were weak, my recoveries were atrocious. Indeed, if Vinicius were to be believed, I would be lucky to survive

the first contact of the first battle I was in. If the goal were to take me down a peg, it had the opposite effect. Instead, it just spurred me to work harder and prove him wrong, and I looked forward to the day where we would be finally allowed to pair off.

After a week, we began working with the shield as well, and we were beginning to pick up on the rhythm of training. Everything appeared to work in cycles of a week, with a new skill being added to the training each cycle. That did not hold for everyone, however. It was after the first week of work on the stakes that Artorius was held back a couple of extra days because he was not considered adept enough with just the wooden sword to move forward with the more advanced work. This was when Vibius first started showing signs of being more than just the average Legionary, because he stepped in and offered to work with Artorius in the evenings, after our meal. It would have been perfect if Artorius showed any enthusiasm, but after the first few days, it became apparent to all of us that Artorius' heart was not in learning to become a Legionary. The fight with his father seemed a long-past event; he even admitted to us one night that he could no longer remember what it was about. It is not that he was necessarily a bad Legionary; I just believe that some of us are born to be one thing, others are born to be another, and Artorius was clearly not born to be a Legionary. He did make an effort, so that he was not quite bad enough to be one of the *tiros* dismissed as unfit for duty, yet not only was he clearly the weakest in our tent section, he was the weakest in our Century and may have been the weakest in the Cohort. However, that discovery was still in the future, so Vibius spent his spare time with Artorius, working with him tirelessly. I marveled that Vibius had the energy, because I was still exhausted at the end of every day, but my friend had always been blessed with more vitality, much to my dismay at times.

While the rest of us would sit and take care of the myriad little things that occupy a Legionary's free time while watching Vibius and Artorius, it was during those periods that we got to know each other. For some reason I found that I spent more time with Scribonius than the others, at least during those times I was not with Vibius. He was somewhat quiet, with a thoughtful manner about him, yet I discovered that his placid exterior masked a razor-sharp wit and a sense of the absurd that I enjoyed immensely. Meanwhile, Didius introduced the other boys to dice, and he had to be the luckiest man I have ever seen, or he was an extremely good cheater. Either way, most of the others, with the exception of Scribonius, Vibius and I ended up owing him things like their next day's rations, something that was expressly forbidden for Legionaries to wager. It is also one of the more flouted rules in the Legions my entire time in the ranks. However, Didius was smart, I will give him that. He did not actually take the others' rations; instead, he traded them back for favors, things like mending his gear or standing watches for him. I do not know that the three of us were smarter than the others. I think it was more our mutual dislike of Didius than anything, which meant that of our tent section we were the only ones who never owed Didius anything. Something that he did not like at all.

Also by this point, we had been integrated into our Century in terms of marching and drill, on which we still spent a portion of the day working. Since we were the last to join the Century, we were the very back rank, a fact that bothered me to no end. That meant that the battles would all be over before I got to have my turn, I fumed to myself, and where would the glory be for me? Being the tallest and the biggest in my Century, and one of the largest in the Cohort, I was sure that I would be placed in the front rank. However, the system that has operated in the Roman army for hundreds of years by that point did

not allow for the vanity of a young man. That is how I thought of myself, a young man, despite easily being the youngest in the Legion because of my deception. Later I was to learn that there were several others who were sixteen; they were just older than me by months and in a couple of cases weeks. Even so, I was still sure that I was bound for glory, and I was eager to show what I was made of.

It was not until a full month passed that we began working together as a whole Legion, with every Cohort, and we were full strength for the first time and one of the last Centuries to be so. I am not sure, but I would guess that we started losing men within the first three to four months of our existence, by virtue of illness or desertion, and it is only just now becoming standard practice, 40 years later, that replacements are placed within a particular Legion. However, back then, once we attained our full complement of men, every one lost from that point was one less in the Legion. Even so, it was an amazing sight to see upwards of 6,000 men standing in formation, rank after rank, Century after Century, the Cohorts lined up in their order. We, being the First Century of the Second Cohort were privileged to be fairly close to the front of the formation, giving us a better view of the proceedings when the Tribunes and the other officers gathered together. My height also helped with the view, except when we were in full dress uniform with everyone wearing their horsehair plumes, which was nothing but a damn nuisance. I am as proud of being a Legionary as any man who has ever served Rome, but I was never much for the pomp and polish, and I always hated those formations where some prig of a Tribune or Legate decided to flex his muscle and call for a dress inspection for no other reason than he could. Luckily for us, once Caesar took command and we began fighting, that sort of nonsense was kept to a minimum. Ironically, the times we wore our full dress uniform the most often was going into battle under Caesar, because he believed it help the men fight harder. This I did not mind as much because it had a point to it.

Speaking of Caesar, the occasion of our first full formation as a Legion, carrying all of our gear no less, was also where I first laid eyes on the man. I must say that I was somewhat disappointed. He was shorter than I was by a few inches and somewhat slight, with very fair complexion and features. I did not know it at the time, but no matter how much time in the sun he spent, and he was in the elements as much as we were, he never turned brown the way we did. Some of the boys said it was proof of his noble birth; there were others who were not so gracious, saying it proved that he was womanish and that the rumors of his liaison with the king of Bithynia were true as well. I was not yet confident enough in those days, but before long any man who uttered such nonsense in my presence would have trouble on their hands of a sort that they did not want.

However, that day, I was not impressed to say the least. Caesar mounted the rostra, giving a speech of welcome to us, noting that although we had been here for varying lengths of time, we gathered as a Legion just that day, making welcoming us appropriate. Despite my lack of awe at his appearance, I will say that he gave very good speeches. He was not like some of the patricians that took a turn at leading us, who would talk to us like we were children or spoke to us of high-flown principles and ideals, for which none of us gave a rotten fig. No, Caesar spoke plainly, and I could see that I was not the only one who appreciated it. He did spend some time telling us how we were upholding the finest traditions of Rome, and how under his command we would make our ancestors proud, yet it was not overdone. Such rhetoric is like adding spice to a stew; the right amount, and it makes for a memorable meal, one that

you will tell others about for days to come. Too much, however, ruins it, and while it still is memorable, it is for the wrong reasons. So we stood and listened while he told us that he would always lead from the front, indeed starting that day, then when he was finished he stepped down from the rostra, turning over command to the Tribune in nominal command of the Legion. Such was my first physical contact with the man who would lead us down the path to our destiny.

After he stepped down he strode to the *Porta Praetorium*, the main gate of the camp, and leading us, took us on our first long march. To that point, once we were integrated with our Century and our Century with our Cohort, we had started forced marches, but they were all out a certain distance then back to the camp. All this was done with the goal of building us up to this moment when we were going to put in a full day's march, then make a marching camp for the first time. None of my tent section had been present for the building of the camp that we were staying in at that time, with the exception of Sergeant Calienus; because it was a semi-permanent camp, we had only been involved in work details making improvements. Although we had never stayed outside of the camp at the end of a march, we always carried all of our gear, some of it put in the wicker basket that is then attached to the pack, which we carried over our shoulder using a stick with a crossbar called a *furca*, to which we attached everything. Our shield, in its leather cover, was strapped to our back, our helmet attached to that. We wore our arms and armor, carrying a javelin in our left hand to serve as a staff, while our second javelin we held in the same hand as our *furca*. For the *tiros* it meant carrying the wooden sword, which was attached to our belt with a leather thong instead of a scabbard, and practice pilum, and it was only when we were arrayed in such a manner that we could finally tell exactly how many veterans were among our comrades. It turned out that all of the leaders of each Century were veterans, along with the Sergeants of each tent section and a few *Gregarii* in each Century, so almost a quarter of the Legion appeared to be veterans.

Taking our spot in the column, we were marching in the lead spot just behind the command group, with the First Cohort serving as the vanguard, meaning that we did not have to worry about eating as much dust. This was something that we would learn to treasure, although on this first march we were more worried about how we would bear up, this being our first real test. The fact that just in front of us marched our commanding general, along with his bodyguard, all of whom rode while he walked, did not help with the pressure that we felt. And he set a cracking pace, quite a bit quicker than what we were accustomed to on our other marches, and for once I was thankful for my long legs. Normally, in standard close order drill I had to pay particular attention to avoid stepping on the back of the man in front of me, but with this type of route march we could stretch our legs a bit more. The weather was pleasant; it was still late spring, but my country is warmer than most places, and what felt pleasant to me I have learned is unbearably hot for others, mostly Gauls or people who come from those areas farther north. The first few miles passed easily enough, yet I could see others were struggling to varying degrees, the worst of them being Artorius. Both Pilus Prior Crastinus, and Optio Vinicius roamed up and down the length of the Century, using their *vitus* to encourage laggards. Between them, they must have easily covered twice the distance of our march. My admiration was tempered by the knowledge that they did not carry the same loads that we did, their gear being carried on one of the pack mules attached to our Century. Our tent section not only had its own pack mule but its own slave, a miserable little creature we called

Lucco, who was responsible for guiding the mule to our final destination, wherever that was, among a variety of other duties. We stopped every two parts of a watch for a short break, during which we were allowed to ground our gear yet not allowed to sit down.

“Once you sit down we’ll never be able to get you up,” Sergeant Calienus explained, whose spot when we were in full formation was actually right in the middle of our rank. We were allowed to place our hands on our knees and bend over a bit in order to relieve some of the strain on our back brought on by the weight of our shield and helmet, but that was all. As we would find out later, once sufficiently conditioned we would be allowed to sprawl out in any position we chose, although someone would always be on guard, but until we reached that point we had to content ourselves with standing there. Despite being only slightly fatigued at this point, I could feel the strain of the load I was carrying and wondered how I would feel after more miles. During our rest, most of us talked quietly; Scribonius and I discussed our new general.

“What did you think?” He eyed me curiously as he asked me, yet all I could think to say was, “He gives a good speech. Why, what did you think?”

He frowned, something I noticed that he did a lot, then shook his head. “I don’t know, really. All I do know is that I’ve seen him somewhere before, but I can’t remember where.”

The *bucina* cut our conversation short, and I thought no more about it.

By the time we made our second stop, I was beginning to feel true fatigue, and the weaker men like Artorius were clearly at the end of their tether, barely managing to make it to this point because their fear of the wrath of the Centurions was greater than their fatigue, yet I could not help wondering how much longer that would last. As we rested again I looked over at the general, standing talking to the Primus Pilus of our Legion, who had fallen back to talk to him, I supposed, from his place up in the vanguard. Neither of them seemed to be in the slightest bit fatigued, something that angered me more than anything else. How could they appear as if they were just out for a daily stroll, without a care in the world? Well, I was determined that I would not falter in front of them, no matter what! When we set out for the final leg of our march, I was grimly determined to appear just as fresh as they did now, no matter how much of a sham it might have been. The idea that they would even notice a lowly *tiro* in his private struggle never occurred to me; like all youngsters, I was still of the opinion that somehow the world revolved around me.

It was with a great amount of relief to the *tiros* when we arrived at the site of the evening camp, which the advance party had already marked and staked out. That feeling was short-lived, however, when after just a few moments’ respite we were told to ground our gear, and the real work began. The Centurions and Optios began running about as each Century of each Cohort was assigned with a task. To our inexperienced eyes it was chaos, yet as we were to learn, that was deceiving; everyone had a role to play, and once assigned their tasks, the seeming chaos would disappear.

The Pilus Prior, after a brief conference with the command group, came to us and said without any ceremony, “Right, we’ve been assigned the ditch,” which was greeted by groans from the experienced

men, to which the Pilus Prior snarled, "Shut your mouths, you lazy bastards! Now, I expect the Sergeants to take their tent section and give these fresh young things a quick lesson on what they're to do. I'll give you some time to explain and then," he pointed with his *vitus* to a point a distance away where some stakes were placed, "get to work. That's our section. I'll be around to make sure that you don't make a complete mess of things."

And with that he strode off to do whatever it was that Centurions do while the rest of us worked, which as I was to learn, was to walk about keeping a sharp eye out for the inevitable lagging. Sergeant Calienus stood in front of us. "You'll need your turf cutter and your spades," he said simply, waiting while we pulled them from our baskets. "Follow me," he called over his shoulder once we produced them, as he headed over to the area that the Pilus Prior had pointed out. "All right, what we're going to do is to dig our section of the ditch."

As he talked, each tent section was receiving its instructions all around us, so it was somewhat difficult to understand him over the babble of other voices, but it soon became clear what was expected of us. Our section was going to be one of the ones digging; another tent section was tasked with carrying the dirt that we produced in their wicker basket to create the rampart that formed the internal boundary of the camp. Another group was tasked with collecting our two stakes apiece, which were loaded on our pack mule, to form the palisade. While this was all new to us, this is the manner in which Roman camps have been constructed for as long as anyone could remember, and soon enough it would become second nature for us.

Turning to our task, we first used the turf cutter to cut out squares of sod. These would be used as foundations for some of the structures in the camp, along with serving as the surface of the rampart. Once that was done, we began to dig. Despite my fatigue, this was work that I was used to, but some of the others began having trouble, the most surprising to me being Vibius. However, as he explained later, working as a tanner did not involve the use of a spade or turf cutter. There was one piece of luck, although we would not understand it for some time to come. As I explained earlier, Caesar required the ditches to be deeper and wider across than any other general; fortunately for us, we did not know any better, so the work we were doing did not seem to be any more onerous than what any other Legion endured. It took us the better part of two parts of a watch to make our section of ditch, no more than ten feet of the total, the proper depth and width and we were utterly exhausted, but as I turned around, what I saw amazed me. The wall, made of the combination of our stakes and the spoil from the ditch, was almost completely up in our sector, with the men in that area putting the finishing touches on the rampart. Other parties who went out into the surrounding area came back with enough timber to create the guard towers that are placed on each corner of the camp, and although not finished, their form was plainly visible. Despite the dust, noise and bustling activity, it was clear that we knew what we were about, or at least our leaders did. At this point we were no more than just brute labor, although after a few more of these camps, as we rotated in our duties, we would all learn our parts and by the end of a year, each of us would be able to build one of these camps in our sleep.

Finally finished, we staggered back to our area, at least knowing where we were located in the camp because it was the same as back at our home base. The slaves of each tent section in the Century,

working together, had erected our tents and dragged our equipment into them, placing our gear in our accustomed place, knowing where to put it by the names inscribed on the leather covers of our shields. They had also started a fire, and Sergeant Calienus proceeded to show us how to turn our rations of grain into bread, this being the first time it was not baked for us. Each of us took our ration and ground it in our section's grinder before contributing it to the community pot, where Sergeant Calienus showed us how to make bread, using the *panera* that we had been issued. I know I was looking forward to falling into a deep sleep as soon as we were finished eating, but my hopes were dashed by the Pilus Prior, who came and announced that we were the guard Cohort for the night. We all groaned, prompting the Pilus Prior to walk among us, lashing out with his *vitus* and snarling at us to keep quiet. His progress was marked by the same sounds as he relayed the word to the rest of the Cohort, something that gave us a little solace that we were not the only whiners.

I was never more thankful for Vibius than that evening on watch, because without him I would surely have fallen asleep on guard duty, though I think he was as thankful for the same reason. Even so, a decent number of *tiros* were caught asleep, and if it had happened in enemy territory it would have meant death, but since it was in training it still called for a flogging. Luckily, only one poor soul was selected for that punishment, which was administered when we returned to base camp, only because he had been caught not once but twice. Since it was our first such march, I guessed, the Centurions were content with administering a particularly severe session with their *vitus* to the men caught asleep. In our case, Pilus Prior Crastinus, Optio Vinicius, and even the Tesserarius, a man named Titus Cordius who was our designated man to receive the challenge and password every day, came to check on us at regular intervals. Somehow even Artorius managed to stay awake, by virtue of being paired with Scribonius I expect, so that we were one of the few tent sections who did not have anyone fall asleep.

The next morning, if that is what it could be called, it being at least two parts of a watch before first light, I was as sore as I had ever been during my training with Cyclops, and judging from the slow movements and groans of my comrades, I was not alone. I had used muscles previously unstrained, at least to this extent, and I was hard pressed to determine where the soreness came from, the marching or the digging. Either way, we were awakened by the call of the *bucina*, whereupon we got up and packed the gear that we would be carrying, leaving the striking of the tents to the slaves, who performed this task while we ate our morning meal. We were now going to march back to the base camp, except this time we would not be in the lead. It was our turn in fact to take up the rear; it is in this manner that no Cohort can complain that they are mistreated. Everyone shares equally in all the unpleasant duties in the army, which is one of the things that makes us stronger and bonds us together as much, if not more than, combat itself. There is no glue like shared misery.

The march back was going to be an ordeal, since we were still sore from the day before, the only slightly cheerful thought being that because the camp back home already existed, at least we would not have to dig. At least, so we thought, until we were informed that before we began the march back we were going to go to the spot where we had dug the ditch the day before, and fill it back in. This was not a punishment, because every other Century involved in digging the ditch was doing the same thing. Fortunately it did not take nearly as long to fill it in as it did to dig it. As we marched away, the early morning sky was lit by fire as the guard towers and the wooden structures that were not part of the

palisade made by our carried stakes was put to the torch. It was on the occasion of this first march that we were introduced to this practice, one that if the truth be known, bothered us probably more than anything. On the march during a campaign, we never left a camp intact, and despite the fact we could all see the sense in doing so, it still pained us to see the fruits of our sweat and labor destroyed, every day. Speaking only for myself, it was something I never became accustomed to, despite the hundreds, maybe thousands of times I have done so.

It was on the way back that Artorius fell out of the ranks and despite the curses of the Pilus Prior, could not be induced to keep his place in the march. Finally, he was abandoned, to the disgust of the Pilus Prior, Optio and, truth be known, the rest of us. Weakness is not tolerated in the Legion, and no matter how we might have sympathized to a degree, none of us were doing any more or any less than Artorius. The fact that he was weak physically was not his crime, at least in my mind. It was his mental weakness that I found most damning. I know now that I was being unkind; I tended, and still tend, to view others as if they were me, that they were born as big and strong as I was, and that is not usually the case. It is a failing, the gods know, and I hope that I have mellowed with age. It also did not help that we were the tail end of the column, eating the dust of the rest of the Legion, yet I suspect that he would have fallen out even if we were in our place of the day before. He finally came staggering into camp a full third of a watch after we arrived, and he was warned that two more such failures would result in his dismissal from the Legion, a fate that he did not seem to be entirely unhappy about. Our general, meanwhile, had marched at the head of the Legion both days, never showing any sign of fatigue, and as we were to learn, this was not just a case of Caesar showing off. He would always walk when we walked, and lived as we live, as much as it was possible for him to do so; being a general there are certain requirements when dealing with others that elevate him above the rest of us. However, he ate what we ate, drank what we drank, and in his actions began to form a bond with us that is famous to this day. Never before, even in the days of Pompey Magnus or the great Scipio Africanus, has a general been loved in the way we in the 10th loved Caesar, and the foundation for that love was formed on that first march, and strengthened in the months to come. Although as it would turn out, not all of us shared the same feelings about our general.

Our training continued; we learned the battle formations, the *acies triplex*, the *acies duplex*, down to the formations that only Centuries used, such as the famous *testudo*, which is known and feared throughout the world. Our weapons training continued as well, now with the shield, and we also began work throwing the javelins. Once we got over the slight bump in the beginning of our relationship, Optio Vinicius and I seemed to form a bond. Perhaps he recognized in me someone as devoted to the learning of the skills of arms as he was, yet whatever the reason, I became his star pupil, something that did not please Didius. I was still constantly scrutinized and criticized, but not only had I become accustomed to it, I recognized what it meant. However, along with the status came the responsibility. I was always the subject for the new lessons to be learned so that I took the bumps and bruises first, something that was lost on Didius. He began muttering choice names for me under his breath, loud enough for the others to hear but not me, some of them finding what he was saying witty enough to laugh. Growing more and more in my dislike for Didius, I consoled myself with the idea that soon enough, we would be squaring off one on one with the wooden sword. Then we would see who was laughing.

Proving that the Optio was not oblivious to what was going on, the very first day that we finally had progressed enough that we could begin beating on each other, he pitted me against Didius. Of course, the way it was expressed to us was not that we had progressed, but that Rome could not afford to wait the ten years it would take us to know the sharp end of a sword before we continued in the pursuit of our enemies.

Still, when the Optio beckoned to me and Didius and told us to square off, he whispered in my ear, "I'm not deaf. The only thing I'll tell you is that you're forbidden to kill him. Understand?"

I nodded, but I had to swallow down the lump that suddenly formed in my throat. Despite my confidence, any time you face an adversary that you have never faced before, there is some trepidation. I cursed myself that I had not paid any attention to Didius' work on the stakes so that I would have an idea of his weaknesses, but that vessel was already broken and could not be mended now. For his part, Didius did not appear to be his usual, blustery confident self, for which I was grimly satisfied. Approaching each other, both of us in the first position, I instantly saw that Didius showed a weakness in his grip of the shield, holding it in a slightly tilted manner and not in the direct vertical way that we were taught. I tucked that away, because I had decided that I did not want a quick kill. No, my goal that day was to completely dominate him, embarrass him and leave no doubt who was the master.

Looking back on that decision now, with the blessing of hindsight and age, I wonder if I had been satisfied with just a straightforward end to our bout whether things would have been different. Somehow I think that Didius and I were destined to clash, but the truth is that this might be the wishful thinking of an old man; only the gods truly know. In the moment, however, I slowly circled Didius, taking the role of the attacker, and observing him I could see he was actually afraid.

Grinning, I called out to him loud enough for the others to hear, "Ave Didius. How long will it take me to make you my whore?"

This taunt brought a chorus of gasps and chuckles, and I saw Didius' eyes narrow in anger.

"Why don't you come and find out, you *cunnus*?" he snarled, to which I laughed and replied, "Be careful what you ask for, Didius."

And before I finished saying his name, I struck. Despite the fact I am not as quick as Vibius, I am very fast, deceptively so, probably because of my size. Using the shield I banged into Didius hard enough to send him stumbling back a few feet, while I pressed the attack, slashing with the wooden sword instead of thrusting in the manner we were taught, smacking him hard on the arms and shoulders, causing him to roar in pain and anger. Lashing out wildly, he attempted to restore his equilibrium as I parried his blows contemptuously with my wooden sword, not even bothering to use my shield.

This drew a comment from the Optio, "Careful about showing off, Pullus," he said evenly, "It's sloppy and it can become a habit."

Nodding that I heard him, I relented enough to allow Didius to regain his position, happy to hear that the cheering from the others was clearly in my favor. I decided to use that to my advantage.

“Hear that, Didius?” I asked, while I continued to circle him, “it sounds like your comrades don’t care for you too much.”

“What do I care about those *cunni* for?” he growled, which was met with the howls of derision that I expected it would invoke.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I kept my tone casual, “maybe because one day you’ll have to rely on them to save your life.”

Again, as I finished speaking I attacked, but this time Didius was prepared, managing to bring his shield up to meet mine and we crashed into each other, shield to shield, neither of us giving an inch. He was strong, I had to give him that, and I resolved that I would go ahead and show him that I was indeed stronger. Dropping my hips a bit before uncoiling my whole body, I let out a roar as I did so, and once again Didius went backwards, except this time instead of stumbling he fell flat. Immediately I leaped astride him, putting the point of the wooden sword under his throat.

“You make this too easy,” I told him contemptuously, then stepped away to turn to my comrades, raising my arms as if I were a victorious gladiator.

The blow was completely unexpected, and I dropped to my knees, my lower back on fire from where Didius had hit me hard along the kidneys. I would piss blood for a week from the blow, but he made a fatal mistake in not following it up, allowing me to get to my feet. Spinning around, I was angrier than I think I had ever been to that point, and there was complete silence as we faced each other.

“Who’s the whore now?” Didius taunted with an evil grin on his face.

Looking over at the Optio, he gazed back at me with an impassive face, but almost imperceptibly, I saw him nod. Taking this as permission to continue the fight, I did not bother to talk. Instead, I launched a massive attack, using both shield and wooden sword as offensive weapons, completely disdaining the defense and relying on the fury of my attack to protect me. Didius desperately parried my blows, backing up and giving ground, the only sound the thuds of wood hitting against wicker and wood and our harsh breathing. I was inhaling heavily, yet Didius was positively panting from the exertion of trying to meet my blows and keeping them from landing. Finally relenting, I waited for the moment I had planned when I first saw his telltale tilting of the shield. Now, because of his fatigue, it was tipped outward even more, for which he tried to compensate by pulling the top of the shield even closer to his face. Using a move that I learned from Cyclops and had once used on Vibius, I smashed down on the bottom edge of his shield with my own, pushing the top of his shield even farther out and down to expose Didius’ head, then once again I lashed out, smashing Didius’ nose with a backward slash to the face. And just like Vibius, his nose exploded blood as it was smashed flat against his face, whereupon he dropped his shield and wooden sword, falling to his knees and screaming in pain. At least, I thought to myself with satisfaction, Vibius had not acted like a little girl. Turning and walking back to my comrades, still panting with exertion and blood lust, this time I knew that he would not be getting back up. Our friends were still quiet; half of them seemed to be entranced by the sight of Didius, who was on his knees with his hands to his face, trying to stanch the flow of blood with little success. The others were

looking at me, with expressions that were hard for me to place, a mixture of respect and....something else. Vibius was the only one who approached me, gently taking my weapons from me then patting me on the back.

"As much as I hate him, I do sympathize," he said wryly. "I know what it's like to be hit like that by you."

"I hit him harder," I replied simply, and he nodded his understanding.

"Thank the gods that you did that to him and not me."

Scribonius came up to us with a grin. "Remind me never to make you angry."

The Optio had gone to Didius, trying to help him to his feet, which Didius angrily refused, getting to his feet on his own. Despite his voice being muffled by his hands, we could hear him clearly when he asked the Optio, "Well, are you going to do something? Isn't there some sort of charge you can write against him?"

I was shocked, and apparently so was everyone else. The Optio asked with mild amazement in his voice, "And what, pray tell, would I write him up for?"

"What for?" Didius retorted, "You saw what he did to me. There are rules against striking the face and head in training."

He was right; we had been briefed about the penalties for striking blows to the head and face of a fellow Legionary in training. For a moment, my stomach began to twist.

"There are also rules against striking a fellow Legionary when he's not prepared," replied the Optio calmly. "You had been knocked down, *tiro* Pullus bested you and the bout was over."

"I didn't capitulate," Didius protested angrily, and now I could see that the Optio was beginning to get irritated himself.

"More fool you," Vinicius retorted, "because Pullus had finished you. The fact that you're too stupid to know it isn't his or my fault. Now, follow me to the *medici*."

He turned to lead Didius away, and as Didius was passing he stared at me with undisguised hatred. "This isn't over," he hissed, although it was hard to understand him because he was still clutching his face.

I merely smiled and replied, "Any time you want another beating I'm more than happy to oblige."

He did not say anything else, instead following the Optio to the *quaestorium* where the doctors and *medici* were constantly busy patching men up. Our training is supposed to be bloodless combat, and our battle bloody drills, but sometimes, at least with the former, accidents happened and blood did flow.

As we watched them leave, Scribonius said quietly, "I'd watch your back if I were you."

I nodded, and Vibius answered for me, "I'll be there to do it, don't worry about that."

The pace of training picked up; we began doing a march three times a week, both to condition us and also to teach us how to make a camp, rotating the various jobs of building so that we learned everything we needed to about building one. We also began battle drills, Century against Century, which we all enjoyed the most, despite it also giving us the most bumps and bruises. Slowly but surely we were beginning to look more like a real Legion and not a great gaggle of fools who happened to be wearing the uniform of a Legionary. That was not the message that was being relayed to us by our Centurion, yet even so we could detect the slightest change in his tone with us. We were not raw *tiros* anymore, but not quite full *Gregarii* either, yet for most of us, the idea had become solidified that we would make it to the final swearing in ceremony. Most of us, anyway.

Artorius was still struggling mightily, and while he seemed to willingly put in the extra work to correct his deficiencies, of which there were many, I for one suspected that he was going through the motions rather than putting any real effort into his training. However, when I asked Vibius this question he bristled at the suggestion; apparently he had taken his tutoring of Artorius to heart.

"I believe he's putting everything he has into his extra work," Vibius snapped, his swarthy face flushing darker. "He can't help it if he's not as strong as you Titus. Not everyone is; in fact, few people are, yet you seem to think everything should come as easily to them as it does to you."

That surprised me quite a bit. In my mind I was struggling just as much as anyone else, and this was the first I learned that there was a perception that the opposite was true. I could not hide my surprise when I answered, "*Edepo!* Who says that things come easily to me? I have to work just as hard as anyone else."

Vibius looked at me steadily for a moment before replying quietly, "I know you think you do, but I don't think you have the slightest idea just how much stronger and better you are than the rest of us. Haven't you seen not just us, but the other men in the Century stop to watch you when you're going through the drills?"

I shrugged. "What of it? I'm sure that they're just watching me because I stick out, being so large."

And that is truly what I thought at the time; I had been stared at most of my life because of my size, and it was simply something to which I had become accustomed. Vibius shook his head vigorously, and using his finger for emphasis, pointed to my chest and replied, "That's not why at all, Titus. You make these drills look easy. I know; I hear the other men talking. There are even men betting on how many barbarians you'll kill in our first battle."

Now I was shocked. It is true that men in the Legions will bet on absolutely anything, but I had no idea that the others, including the veterans apparently, saw me in this light. My chest constricted as the thought settled into my mind and I realized the implications of it. Suddenly, I had a reputation to uphold, and I had yet to fight my first battle!

This revelation from Vibius rocked me, so I began surreptitiously watching others when they looked in my direction, trying to discern what their true thoughts were. I began feeling an enormous amount of pressure, whether it was warranted or not and soon found myself fretting about what might happen when we actually did go into battle. There had been rumblings for some time that the Legions were about to move out and begin campaigning. It was already late May, and the campaigning season was open for some time now, meaning a late start for us, but Caesar was forced to spend that time training us because we were a new Legion. Despite that, the word around the fires was that we would be moving soon, and it would be north, into the wilds of Hispania north of the Tanis River, to pacify the remaining tribe in the area, the Lusitani, who had revolted again. To that end, we were finally equipped with our real weapons, the sword that most of us would carry for as long as it lasted, and our two javelins, along with our shield, emblazoned with the symbol of the 10th Legion, the bull. My first thought was how ridiculously light the weapons were compared to the training weapons we had been using, but that is the point of our training. As I examined my blade, still unmarked from where I would work it with the sharpening stone to put as fine an edge on it as I could, I hefted its balance, trying to imagine thrusting it into the body of another man, rather than a stake. Glancing about, I could see all of my tentmates doing the same thing, and I wondered if I wore the same grin on my face.

It was about that time that Artorius fell out of his third march, despite Vibius' almost frantic efforts to help him keep up, even as it caused the Pilus Prior to give Vibius a good thrashing for doing so. It did not help; less than halfway along our march back to our base camp Artorius fell out. We had suspected this as a likely event, it becoming clear to all of us that the effort of the extra training, along with the burden of our normal regimen was steadily wearing him down. He was barely able to eat the evening meal, sitting listlessly and chewing his bread with the same vigor as a cow chewing its cud. The next morning as we broke camp and made ready to begin the march back, he moved like a man sleepwalking, and it was so noticeable that the Pilus Prior came over to him to smack him in the face. That seemed to stir him a bit, and he was responsive when we formed up to begin the march back, then at some point after the first break he dropped from the ranks. Vibius did not notice straight away, but when he did he immediately fell out himself, trotting back to find Artorius, despite the cursed warning directed at him by the Pilus Prior. Optio Vinicius then went back to retrieve both of them and he returned shortly, along with Vibius carrying his own pack and Artorius' as well, trying to balance both *furcae*, one on each shoulder, his face shining with perspiration from the exertion and strain. Artorius was being dragged by the arm by the Optio, who was trying to use encouragement instead of the threats that the Pilus Prior favored. All of this was taking place amid the normal noise and chaos of a march; the dust swirling all around from the tramping of thousands of feet, the clinking and clanking of gear as it bounced against each other, the steady underlying hum of the men talking to each other in snatched conversations, trying to pass the time. I will say that even for me it was hard to breathe and I was higher up than Artorius, so I could imagine how choking it was in his spot, which could not have helped. Looking over at him, I could see that his face was white as chalk, with a clammy look about it that we had learned indicated someone who was having trouble coping with the heat. His mouth hung open as he gasped for air, while his eyes would seem to focus for a moment, as if he was conscious of his surroundings, then begin wavering before rolling back in his head, whereupon he started stumbling again. The Optio would shake his arm, he would snap back to the present, then after a moment would drift off again. It was

almost like he was falling asleep as he walked, something I had never seen before. Over the years, I would be on marches where all of us looked like that, but to that point he was the first to exhibit these signs, and I was morbidly fascinated.

By the time we made it to the second break, Artorius was nowhere to be seen, even when the *bucina* sounded the signal to begin the start of the last leg of the march. Vibius stood to the side until the last moment, looking to the rear of the column before getting another whack from the Pilus Prior and a snarled order to get into the ranks. Vibius was obviously hoping that Artorius would somehow come staggering up, but he did not. Continuing on, we finished the march, almost all of us not very fatigued from the effort except for Vibius, who had carried Artorius' gear most of the way back. The last few miles Romulus and Remus, the nicknames we gave to the Mallius brothers, tried to relieve Vibius of his load, but he would have none of it and in fact got downright nasty about it.

"I don't need any of you *cunni* helping me," he snarled at Marcus, who we called Romulus, and I swear that if Vibius did not have his hands full he would have punched Romulus in the face. For his part, Romulus did not appreciate having his offer spurned in such a manner.

"Prick! I'm sorry I asked," he snapped back, "and see if I ever offer to help you again."

He turned away to complain to Remus about Vibius' brutish behavior, the whole exchange drawing the jeers and catcalls of the men around us, prompting the Pilus Prior to suddenly appear in our midst and lash out with his *vitus*. There were times I really wanted to take that thing away from him and break it over his head.

Artorius was brought in on one of the wagons of the baggage train, a Centurion in the Cohort marching behind it having thrown him in the back. By this time we were already finished with our evening routine, having our bath and meal, and were in fact just a few moments away from the call to retire. I began to treasure these quiet moments around the fire, listening to the wild tales of the veterans and watching the inevitable dice game which was a feature at almost every tent. I always thought it somewhat interesting that men would almost always gamble with other tent sections but not with their own tentmates, unless there was no other choice. The only exception to this was Didius, but he was already starting to be shunned by our section and was therefore forced to look elsewhere. I believe that for most of the men, besides Didius, it had something to do with the idea of not wanting to cause any bad blood between such close comrades. Whatever the reason, the idea seemed to be that fleecing men from other Legions was always best; if not other Legions, then other Cohorts, and if not other Cohorts at least other Centuries. However, many times not even this was possible, and nothing stops a Legionary from gambling, so it was inevitable that there would be disagreements among the closest of friends. Personally, I was never much for gambling. It is not that I had anything against it; I could take it or leave it, not to mention I had big dreams that only a large amount of money would fulfill so it was not a fever with me the way it was with other men like Vibius, who I swear would wager on anything, no matter how ridiculous. For a while, he was trying to make wagers on which of the men in the tent would break wind next, yet soon enough he found out that there was cheating going on, because in the dark one cannot tell whether the sound was true or made by using our mouth and he was terribly put out that we

ruined such an exciting game for him. However, there was nothing exotic this evening; it was dice, and as usual the next day's wine ration was up for wager, something that was strictly forbidden but always ignored, when Artorius came stumbling up. He was not wearing his helmet or armor, carrying them instead, and his head was down as he approached, refusing to meet our eyes. There was an awkward silence as he approached, because we had already been told that since this was his third failure he was being dismissed from the Legion. He came to get all of his gear and return it to the Legion quartermaster, where he would be issued a civilian's tunic and shoes, then given a small amount of money along with a document that he was to carry with him that detailed his disgrace. Because he had committed no crime, unless one considered failing to make it as a Legionary a crime, as I did, he was not punished in any way other than having to carry the shame of his failure back to his family, if he did indeed go back to his family. Many young men were too ashamed to do so, making their way to the nearest big city to try and seek some sort of life there. Despite feeling badly for him, there was also a sense of relief that we would not have to worry any longer about whether or not he would hold up in the trials of combat. It also created some relief to the problem of space in our tent, now having one less body to shift around. Still, it was difficult; we did not know what to say to him, only offering a sympathetic pat on the back instead. While he looked relieved, there was also a new look of fear in his eyes, undoubtedly caused by the dread of what was facing him, the uncertainty of a life that no longer held any particular value to the rest of the world. His only hope lay in his father forgiving him and both of them patching up their differences; otherwise he was all alone in the world, with no real skills. Knowing what I know now, I should have realized that he would most likely turn to a life of crime. He was not cut out to be a highwayman, the type of hard man that lays in wait for unsuspecting travelers. Because of his temperament and his slight build, he probably went into a life of petty crime, stealing what he needed to survive, at least until he got caught. Most of those types eventually do, and ours is not a forgiving society like some of the others I have encountered in my travels. Once he gathered up his gear, Optio Vinicius escorted him to the *quaestorium*, our last view of him struggling to carry all his equipment, with the Optio walking beside him.

Before we went into the final phase of our training, we held the lustration ceremony, a sacred rite that calls for the gods' favor onto the standards of the Legion and the Legion itself. Because of its sacred nature, I cannot speak of it. I will say that it is a rite that is usually performed at the beginning of the new campaign season. However, since we were new *tiros* it was not seen as fitting for us to participate until we were deemed worthy of being called Legionaries. After the ceremony for the rest of the army, we *tiros* were ordered to remain in our places in formation, where we were faced by the Praetor who was standing on the rostra, dressed in his armor and his general's *paludamentum*, the scarlet cloak of general rank. Arrayed in front of him, also facing us, was all 60 of our Centurions, all wearing their dress uniforms, with their phalerae, torqs, and other badges of office and decoration gleaming with the strength of a hundred suns.

"Soldiers," Caesar addressed us, causing a stir in our ranks because this was the first time we were spoken to in this manner, and it took a moment for the meaning to sink in. We had done it! We were being addressed as soldiers by Caesar because that is what we were. All of the pain and sweat of the last

almost four months was as if it never happened, just like the last mist of a bad dream dissolving when you awake because of the brilliance of the new day.

“Today is a great day for you, and for Rome,” he continued, using what I would learn was his oratorical voice, which he pitched higher when addressing large crowds so that it would carry farther.

“You are about to be entered into the rolls of the brave men who have served Rome so well in the past, covering both our eternal city and themselves in glory.”

He indicated the Centurions standing in front of him.

“Perhaps some of you will elevate yourself to the glory and rank of the men you see standing before you. Perhaps not.”

He paused for a moment before continuing in a way that sounded as if he was speaking quietly, yet somehow still pitching his voice loud enough for all to hear, at least in the first few ranks.

“What is certain is that some of you will die, if that is the will of the gods.”

This had our complete attention.

“But if it is the will of the gods that you die, it is still up to each of you to choose how to die. And in dying well, you add even more glory and fame to Rome, to your tribe, to your family, and to yourselves.”

It is a curious characteristic of young men, at least in my lifetime, so I suppose that it has always been so and always will be. As Caesar talked of the possibility of death, while I was at the position of *intente* I still looked at the others out of the corners of my eyes, and I remember thinking to myself, poor bastards, I wonder which of them will die? As I was to learn later when we talked about the speech, every one of my comrades claimed that they had the exact same thought, for it never occurs to the young that they might be one of those unlucky souls who fall before they live to a ripe old age. It is not until one of us actually falls that it becomes real, and from that moment nothing in one’s life is the same. But at that moment we were still young, full of bright hopes and brash courage, and it was the greatest sense of pride I had ever known in my short life when we finished the oath to finally become *Miles Gregarii*, the common Legionary in the service of Rome. We were dismissed for the rest of the day, as those of the Legion who were veterans came to congratulate us. Perhaps the biggest shock was the change in the demeanor of Pilus Prior Crastinus, who was the first man to stand us to a round of drinks at one of the shabby, ramshackle inns that had been thrown up outside the camp.

“Welcome home, boys,” he roared, the color of his face showing a hint to us that he may have started the celebrations ahead of us.

Passing among us, he shook each of our hands, gave us a slap on the back and made some sort of comment about something we did in training that had either amused him or angered him, although he still relayed the latter with a laugh.

When he got to me, he looked up at me and shouted, "Well! Here's the hero! Hasn't seen a battle yet but he already has those Lusitani *cunni* shaking in their tracks!"

I could feel the blush moving up my neck to my face, and I quickly glanced around. Of course, I was the center of attention but I could not determine what the looks I was receiving meant. Some of the men were grinning at me, apparently delighted at my discomfort; some were not smiling yet still looked friendly. There was only one whose countenance I could not mistake; Didius glowered at me, the bruises under his eyes still slightly visible, making him look like he badly needed a night of sleep. Seeing his displeasure made me feel somewhat better and I grinned, first in his direction then back down to the Pilus Prior.

"I certainly hope that I can live up to your belief in me Pilus Prior," I said honestly.

He laughed and replied, "You will, boy. You will. I have no doubt of that. Once I saw you working the wooden sword, I knew that you'd be one to watch. Just save some for the rest of the boys, eh?"

With another slap on the shoulder, he moved on to the next man, leaving me to stare bemusedly into my wine cup. I was glad that he possessed no doubts; that made one of us. Vibius saw my thoughtful expression and came over to me, leaning against the wall of the rude hut that served to shelter all of the carousers who found their way there every night.

"Aaah," he cried cheerfully, "quit moping about, you big ox. You'll be fine and you know it. He's right, you'll probably kill so many of those barbarians that there won't be enough left for the rest of us."

Despite his jovial tone, I was still not willing to give up my contemplative mood.

Shrugging, I could only reply, "I hope it works out like that. But the truth is, none of us really know, do we? I mean," I continued, lowering my voice, "nobody truly knows how they'll react until it happens, neh? So for all I know, I may find that my knees turn to water, and I piss myself like a girl."

Having gotten it out at last, I hurriedly took a swallow of my wine so I could hide my face and shame at having made such an admission.

"That much is true," a quiet voice sounded next to me, and I swiveled my head to see Calienus standing there.

Obviously he had heard what I said, so I saw no point in pretending otherwise. He examined me with a kindly expression, one that I imagined a big brother would use when his little brother came to confide in him some wrong done to him. Without waiting for me to answer, he continued, "Nobody really knows what they'll do the first time they face the enemy, unless they're a liar or fool like him," he jerked his head in the direction of Didius, who had managed to draw a crowd around him, no doubt boasting of the glory he was going to earn. "All you can do is this; rely on your training, and put your trust in the man next to you." Grabbing me by the shoulder, he turned me about so that he could look me in the eye as he spoke. "The rest will come much easier than you think. When the moment comes, trust me, you'll

know what to do.” Turning to Vibius then, he finished, “And both of you need to watch each other’s back at all times.”

“All right, Sergeant, but we haven’t started the fighting yet,” protested Vibius with a laugh, which died in his throat when he saw that Calienus was not joining him. “I wasn’t talking about the Lusitani,” he replied in a voice pitched just loudly enough to be heard over the din but not any farther than where we were standing. “I’m talking about with him.”

He nodded his head, again in the direction of Didius. Perhaps it was a coincidence, perhaps not, but when we looked over in the direction that Calienus had indicated, we both saw Didius drinking from his cup, staring straight at us.

I had never drunk so much in my young life as I did that night, and truthfully, I do not remember much of what transpired. However, I vividly remember the next day, when we were roused by the Pilus Prior, who amazingly seemed none the worse for wear, and was in his normally loud state.

“On your feet you *cunni*,” he roared when he shoved his face into our tent, his customary morning greeting. If we were expecting that the goodwill that he had shown to us the night before would be present this morning we were disappointed. Indeed, as the day progressed it was as if the day before never happened, which we found not only puzzling, but a little disturbing.

Going to Calienus for guidance, he explained to us, “It’s going to be like this a little while longer, at least until we’re blooded. The Pilus Prior is going to keep pushing us until he knows exactly what we can do in battle. If we do well, then you’ll see more of what you saw last night, though not as much.”

I for one, despite understanding what he was saying, still did not like it. We were *Gregarii* now after all; that is what the whole ceremony had been about the day before, and I expressed this to Calienus, who shook his head.

“What happened yesterday was unusual. Normally you’d have completed your four months of training before swearing in, but Caesar’s anxious to move because it’s already late. So he had you sworn in earlier than usual. It didn’t sit well with some of the Centurions, I’ll tell you that.” Before we could ask the question, Calienus added, “The Pilus Prior wasn’t one of them though. I heard him telling the Optio he thinks our Century is ready to go right now. Second Century,” he rolled his eyes and we laughed, “is another story.”

The conclusion of our training was a forced march of all the Legions, the 7th, 8th 9th and 10th, culminating in the creation of two marching camps, followed by a mock battle the next day with two Legions against two Legions, along with the cavalry and auxiliaries, now numbering about another 5,000 men, split evenly between the two sides. Particular emphasis was placed on the changing of formations; from column into line, then moving as quickly back into column as we could, simulating the march to contact, with a battle, then a pursuit of a withdrawing force. The last thing that we practiced was how to stage a fighting withdrawal, and much was made by the Centurions that although we would never likely

use this, it was still good to know. We wholeheartedly agreed, taking their word for it that we would never use it, the veterans among us openly scoffing at the idea.

“I haven’t taken a backward step on the battlefield yet,” barked the Pilus Prior, “and with you bastards with me, I don’t plan on it ever happening.”

This brought a roar of approval from us, and it was clear to all of us that we were ready to march, for real this time, against a real enemy.