

# **Death Beach**

**Invader, #1**

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The invasion of Britannia has been bloody and relentless, and still the barbaric island people have not been fully conquered. The men of the Second Legion have suffered grievous losses in driving back their bitterest enemy, but the worst is yet to come for the beleaguered soldiers. With winter fast approaching, they face a new threat: ferocious native warriors launching coordinated attacks from their secret base on the Isle of Vectis.

In response, the new legate announces a plan to invade Vectis and rout the enemy in what he expects to be a speedy and successful mission. But Horatius Figulus, a junior officer with local knowledge of the enemy, doubts the invasion will be so straightforward. And when the Second Legion encounters fierce resistance on the beach, Figulus and his fellow soldiers suddenly find themselves fighting a desperate battle for their lives...

### **The Organization of the Roman Army in Britannia, AD 44**

Like every other Roman legion, the fighting men of the Second Legion were among the finest soldiers in the ancient world. They were highly skilled, well-equipped, disciplined and subjected to a gruelling training regime best described as 'bloodless battle'. But they were also expected to be able to construct forts and marching camps, build roads and bridges, as well as fulfil a rich variety of peacetime duties in the provinces they conquered. Often spending years at a time on the treacherous frontiers of the empire, the legionary was a soldier, engineer and local administrator combined into one.

One of the reasons for the legions' success on the field of battle was their efficient structure. Each legion had roughly five and a half thousand men. At the

bottom of the structure was the century: the basic Roman military unit of eighty legionaries. Six centuries formed a cohort, with ten cohorts making up the legion; the first cohort was double-size. Commanding this impressive mobile army was the legate—an aristocratic man who was inevitably on the rise in the political circles of Rome. He was served by a staff of six tribunes and a military tribune, all from privileged backgrounds. Below these men were the centurions: the backbone of the legion, gritty officers who each commanded a century. Below each centurion was his deputy—the optio.

## Chapter 1

### Calleva, AD 44

A chill blast of air swept through the headquarters tent as the new legate of the Second Legion strode briskly through the tent flap.

‘On your feet!’ the camp prefect boomed to the officers seated inside. ‘Legate’s arrived.’

The officers fell silent and instantly shot up from their stools, standing to attention as the legate marched past. Lucius Aelianus Celer nodded at the prefect, his hands and face tingling from the cold night air. He had only recently arrived from Rome to assume command of the legion and the miserable conditions of the island had come as something of a shock to him. With each passing day he found himself yearning for the blissful warmth of his native Campania. Shaking off the cold, Celer approached a hide map suspended on a wooden frame at the front of the assembled rows of officers. A junior tribune stepped forward from beside the map and handed him a short wooden cane. Celer glanced at the prefect and straightened his back.

‘Thank you, Quintus Silanus.’ The prefect nodded. Turning to the officers, Celer addressed them in his silky aristocratic voice. ‘At ease, gentlemen.’

An uneasy silence hung over the gathered men as they sat down. Even in the wan glow of the oil lamps Celer could see the anxiety etched across their faces. Less than a month had passed since the Second Legion, under the leadership of his predecessor Vespasian, had defeated Caratacus, king of the Catuvellauni and the leader of those native tribes who had chosen to resist the Roman invaders. After a long and bloody campaign, Vespasian had finally routed Caratacus’s army in a brutal pitched battle. Victory had come at a heavy price, with the Second Legion suffering grievous losses and Caratacus escaping from his captors. It was the end of the campaigning season, winter was on the way and the soldiers would be spending the next few months bottled up in the legionary fort until the new campaign in the spring. Celer cleared his throat.

‘It’s a cold night, gentlemen, so I’ll keep this brief,’ he declared. ‘In the past several weeks, we have received numerous reports of attacks on our positions to the south. Patrols have been ambushed, forts razed to the ground and naval

supply depots sacked. We are not talking about the odd opportunistic raid, but a campaign of coordinated attacks. The situation is so grave that I'm told Greek merchants are now refusing to do business outside of our legionary camps.' That last remark drew a polite chuckle from his audience. Celer paused and half smiled before continuing. 'I know some of us had hoped that defeating Caratacus would bring peace to this benighted land. However, following his escape it appears that our enemies have rediscovered their courage. The Durotriges have taken it upon themselves to redouble their resistance to our inevitable rule. My illustrious predecessor Vespasian may have conquered this territory, but he did not succeed in taming it—a failure I plan to correct.'

Celer turned towards the map depicting that large swathe of southern Britannia which nominally lay under Roman control, extending east from the naval base at Rutupiae all the way along the path of the River Tamesis past Calleva to the edge of the mountainous region to the west. Celer nodded at the map.

'Our intelligence sources indicate that these attacks are the work of Durotrigan warriors operating from the Isle of Vectis.' He pointed with his cane to a wedge-shaped island situated a few miles south of the mainland. 'During Vespasian's lightning campaign across their territory last summer, a significant number of the enemy managed to flee the hill forts. In Vespasian's haste to advance west, however, he neglected to turn back and deal with this rabble, allowing them to successfully withdraw to Vectis.'

Celer turned back to the officers and tightly gripped his cane, his knuckles shading white. He continued.

'From their base on Vectis, the enemy has been able to launch wave after wave of attacks on the mainland, retreating to the isle before our forces can effectively engage them. Gentlemen, it's vital that we subdue Vectis once and for all and stop the Durotriges using it as a base to attack our supply chain along the coast. Accordingly, tomorrow at dawn the Fifth, Sixth, Seventh and Ninth Cohorts will march down to the naval port west of Noviomagus Regnorum. As we speak, a dozen galleys and supply ships from the Britannic fleet are sailing to the port from Rutupiae. Once we arrive, we'll embark the ships, load our supplies and make for Vectis.'

There were low murmurs amongst the men at the prospect of having to fight again so close to the bitterly cold winter months. Several officers exchanged wary glances with one another. A few men on the rear rows muttered to themselves. Celer was unmoved. He raised a hand, swiftly silencing the room.

'Thankfully, Fortuna shines on us. Over the past few weeks, our twenty native scouts have been operating in secrecy on Vectis, gathering intelligence on the enemy. They have reported back that the Durotriges have no defensive fortification to speak of.' Celer chuckled to himself. 'As a matter of fact, they're still constructing a hill fort in time for the coming winter. If we act now, we can take the hill fort before the Durotriges have a chance to complete their defences, rout the enemy and be back in the camp before the first storms arrive.' He regarded his men with a smug grin. 'The advantage will be ours. We'll have strength in numbers. The enemy will have nowhere to run. In addition, an advance fleet of ships has moved into position along the coast, cutting off their supplies from sympathizers on the mainland. All things being equal, Vectis should fall easily. Of

course there'll be the usual nests of resistance to stamp out. Once that's done we can start dividing up the booty.'

The mood inside the tent quickly lifted at the mention of earning a share from the spoils of war. Each officer, Celer knew, stood to make a tidy sum from the captured natives, who would be shipped to Gaul and sold into slavery, not to mention the treasure troves of ornately decorated weapons and jewellery hoarded by the native aristocracy.

'We'll land here.' He pointed with his cane to a notch of land on the east coast of the isle. 'The enemy won't be expecting an attack from the east. Acting on my orders, our scouts have disseminated false information to the Durotriges. They believe we will approach from the more obvious route to the north.' He drew the cane up the centre of the isle, to an inlet running up towards the northern coast. 'The east of Vectis will be mostly undefended, except for perhaps a token presence.'

Celer sought out a face among the throng and rested his gaze on a man seated on the front row. The man had bright blue eyes and an aquiline nose and he wore a fine cloak. 'Tribune Palinus.'

'Sir?' The man looked up and blinked.

'You'll be in charge of the Fifth Cohort. Your men will land first and secure the beach ahead of the main force. Think you can handle it?'

Palinus puffed out his chest with obvious pride. 'You can count on me, sir. I won't let you down.'

'Good.' Celer flashed him a thin smile before turning his gaze on to the rest of the men. 'Now, then. Any questions?'

A centurion at the back raised a hand. He was a short, pale man with dark curly hair and he lacked the scars of many of his comrades. Celer regarded him coldly.

'Yes, Centurion Ocella?'

'Sir,' Ocella began carefully. 'What kind of force are we up against?'

'According to the spies, several hundred at most,' Celer responded casually; he did not want to dampen the good mood. 'All the more reason to move now, before they have a chance to dig themselves in and reinforce their numbers. Of course, I would prefer for us to attack in greater numbers. But as you all know, the legion is thinly stretched as it is after the recent engagement with Caratacus. Some of your own units are badly depleted. They'll be replenished with the reserves recently arrived from Gesoriacum.' The legate tipped his head in the direction of the prefect. 'Silanus has been overseeing their training and assures me the men are ready for battle. Isn't that right, Silanus?'

'Ready as they'll ever be, sir,' the prefect replied guardedly.

'Quite.' Celer gave a sharp nod of his head. Then he handed the cane back to the orderly and straightened his back. 'Gentlemen, conquering Vectis is vital if we're to continue our advances in the next campaign season. General Plautius has ordered us to seize the territory which lies beyond the Durotriges. Some of the tribes in that distant region have already sent envoys to Calleva suing for peace.' The legate smiled. 'It seems our strategy of total war against the Durotrigans has shaken their neighbours. Which is as well, as the Emperor is very keen for this savage land to be pacified so it can start paying its own way.' His expression

abruptly hardened. 'However, we cannot advance west as long as our supply chain to the rear remains exposed to raids. Any more questions?'

He looked round the tent. No one responded and Celer nodded with satisfaction. 'Good.' Then he gestured to an officer seated in the middle of the front row next to Tribune Palinus. All eyes turned to a heavily built man running to fat with a dark complexion that betrayed his southern Italian roots.

'In my absence, Senior Tribune Aulus Vitellius will assume command of the rest of the Second Legion,' Celer said. 'Some of you will already know the tribune from the early days of the invasion. He's recently arrived back from Rome to rejoin the Second. Prefect Silanus has been bringing him up to speed.'

Vitellius smiled slowly at the legate. 'And I look forward to fulfilling my duties, sir,' he said in a deep voice before turning to the officers and fixing them with his icy stare. 'Rome has its pleasures, of course. But I must say it is good to be back among true comrades.'

Celer forced a smile to his lips. 'I'm sure Tribune Vitellius will make a fine commander of the legion in the interim.'

Then he nodded curtly at Silanus and headed for the tent flap. The officers rose simultaneously and snapped to attention as the legate strode stiffly out of the tent. Vitellius and the legate's orderlies followed close behind. Once the legate and his entourage had departed from the tent, Silanus stood the officers down with a gruff reminder that they were to collect their written orders from the legate's secretaries before returning to their units to brief their men.

The officers filed out of the tent and emerged into the icy evening. Although it was not yet winter the weather had already taken a turn for the worse, a grim reminder of the long, hard months to come. As the officers dispersed towards their various barracks, Centurion Ocella snorted angrily.

'Wonderful,' he muttered to his optio. 'Just bloody wonderful.'

'What is, sir?'

Ocella stopped in his tracks and glared at his newly assigned subordinate. He was a physically imposing man, broad-shouldered with taut, hardened muscles that threatened to burst out of his uniform and a pinkish scar above his right eye. With his wild hair and stubbly cheeks, he had the makings of a competent if unremarkable soldier, Ocella considered. But he made a poor optio. He was hopeless at the day-to-day paperwork and administrative duties required of a junior officer. Whoever had originally promoted him to the post must have been desperate, Ocella decided, or plain mad. Now he was stuck with the burly Gaul. His last optio had died of an infected leg wound sustained in the battle with Caratacus's army, and the legate had taken the unusual step of imposing the optio upon him, denying the centurion the usual custom of promoting his own man from the rank and file. A fact which only increased his disdain for the man in front of him.

'What the hell do you think, Figulus?' Ocella snapped haughtily, bracing himself against the brisk wind. 'This mission. What with this foul weather and a sea crossing, it's taking quite a risk. And for what? To deal with a few pathetic stragglers on some remote isle.' He muttered a curse under his breath and looked away. 'Meanwhile the Fourteenth and Ninth Legions get a taste of the real action

to the west and north.’ He glanced quickly back at his second-in-command. ‘More spoils of war to be had there too, I’ll wager.’

Horatius Figulus pursed his lips. Despite his commanding officer’s strong words, Figulus saw an unmistakable glint of fear in the centurion’s eyes, and his voice wavered noticeably as he spoke. Figulus had been a soldier of Rome long enough to recognize Ocella as a ceremonial soldier, the type of officer who preferred kit inspections and nights of drinking, gambling and whoring to proper soldiering on the battlefield. As with all such commanders, Figulus sensed that Ocella was driven by a need to prove himself in front of his comrades, whatever the cost.

Figulus shrugged. ‘I reckon we’ve got bigger worries than the size of the booty, sir.’

‘Oh?’ Ocella cocked an eyebrow. ‘What do you mean?’

Figulus scratched his beard. ‘The Durotrigians are the hardest warriors in all of Britannia, sir. If there’s many of them camped on Vectis, they won’t give up without a proper fight. Hill fort or no hill fort.’

‘And what makes you an expert on the Durotriges, hmm?’ Before Figulus could reply, Ocella stroked his chin and added, ‘I suppose being half Gaul, you’re practically related to these savages.’

Figulus bristled slightly at the insult but bit back on his anger. Although his father had served in the auxiliary cohort long enough to earn Roman citizenship, raising his son to be the same, Figulus took quiet pride in his Gallic roots. He’d spent his childhood in the town of Lutetia in his native Gaul, the grandson of a notable Aedui, before joining the Second Legion at the age of eighteen. If anyone in the legion ever accused him of split loyalties, Figulus was quick to reply that he considered himself more Roman than most Romans. But while his devotion to his comrades was never in question, he knew that the truth was slightly murkier. He felt his Gallic ancestry deep in his blood, and he kept the memory of his roots alive by learning the native language, which was similar to Gallic. Over the past few weeks in Calleva, he had become fluent in the local dialect. Some of the rankers joked or gently teased him about his Gallic forebears; Ocella preferred to make thinly veiled digs. Figulus refused to rise to the bait and answered politely.

‘Not only that, sir. I fought them. Last summer. Under Vespasian. We drove them from their hill forts, one by one. They put up a fierce struggle, I can tell you. Even the women and children. They’d rather die than surrender.’

‘Really? You heard the legate’s briefing. The hill fort is incomplete, their supplies have been cut off and they won’t be expecting an attack from the east. What could possibly go wrong?’

Without replying, Figulus looked towards the defensive perimeter of the timber fort. Beyond it lay the town of Calleva, a large sprawl of thatched roofs visible above an earth rampart. The Second Legion had returned to the fort next to Calleva after the recent campaign and yet the town was already beginning to follow Roman custom. New streets had been laid out in a Roman-style grid. Numerous taverns and brothels were open for business. Some of the local aristocrats even dressed like Romans. To Figulus’s eyes, the pace of change in this part of the province was remarkable.

Even so, he felt his chest tighten with tension. He glanced back at Ocella. 'I wish I could agree with you, sir. But take it from me. Conquering Vectis is going to be a lot harder than you think . . .'

## Chapter 2

### Isle of Vectis, Five Days Later

A full-throated scream pierced the damp air as an arrow flashed past Figulus, striking the soldier next to him through the neck. The man jolted and his head snapped back, blood fountaining out of his mouth as he fell into the water with a crash of spray.

'Form up on the beach!' Ocella bellowed to his men as he reached the shoreline ahead of Figulus. 'Form up, for fuck's sake!'

As the soldiers jumped over the sides of the galleys and into the icy waters below, they came under immediate attack from archers perched on the chalk cliffs either side of the narrow beach. Arrows rained down on the soldiers in a constant deadly hiss. Some were struck down as soon as they hit the water, their arrowed bodies sinking beneath the surface, arrow shafts jutting out of their necks and torsos. Others clasped wounds as they frantically limped towards the shore along the sandbar, the shallow water running red with blood.

Figulus waded past the dead and the dying, his neck muscles clenching with anger. The landing had been a disaster. At dawn the twelve galleys had launched from the naval base at Noviomagus and made for the east coast of Vectis, their decks heaving with soldiers. The lead four galleys had run aground on a sandbank a short distance from the shoreline, with the men on board forced to leap down from the decks and wade through freezing water almost up to their necks. The rest of the fleet was left floundering further out at sea as the trierarchs gave orders for the ships to navigate around the grounded vessels, delaying their arrival. Figulus glanced back and saw the soldiers huddled on the crowded decks of the galleys, forced to watch their imperilled comrades scramble ashore.

He looked ahead as the survivors of the Sixth Century waded towards the shore, rallying around Ocella. Driving rain spattered against their helmets in a rhythmic din, the men weighed down by their armour, short swords and shields. Their woollen tunics were soaked through, adding to their weight. As Figulus pushed on through the shallow water he felt something cold brush against his stocky leg. He glanced down and saw the limbs of a pale body beneath the surface. Several arrow shafts protruded from his chest and his dull eyes were wide open, his face locked into an expression of silent agony. Figulus nudged the dead soldier aside with his shield and hurried ashore, dodging arrows, his hobnailed boots squelching on the wet sand.

A scene of grim horror confronted him on the beach. Everywhere he looked soldiers were writhing on the ground, the lapping waves washing faint veins of blood upon the wet sand. Maimed men were struck again by arrows as they

clawed their way towards their comrades higher up the beach. Pinned down by the missiles raining down from the cliffs, the survivors of the first wave to land had been unable to form up and provide an effective shield for the freshly landed troops, who were picked off at will by the archers positioned on the cliff tops. A few scattered soldiers had managed to form up on the crescent-shaped beach. As arrows thunked into the sand around him the optio felt a bitter rage clamp his heart. Once again, a ragtag army of Britons had succeeded in inflicting terrible casualties on their Roman foe.

‘Get over here!’ Ocella screamed to Figulus as the century formed up in a rough circle, hefting their shields above their heads to protect them from the missiles pouring down on them. ‘Today, Optio Figulus!’

As the optio ran on, the air came alive with a furious, wind-like whoosh, and a stream of arrows arced through the gloomy sky, hailing down on the isolated men of the Fifth Cohort to a chorus of pained cries. An arrow pierced through the arm of a man in front of Figulus. The legionary released his grip on his shield and pawed at the pointed tip sticking out of his flesh as he sank to his knees in despair. The Gaul hoisted his shield above his head. There was a brittle clang as a missile clattered against his shield boss. Figulus lost his footing as he tripped over a splayed corpse and he crashed to the ground, splashing head first into a puddle of gleaming blood beside the body of a wounded soldier. Blinking salty droplets out of his eyes, Figulus quickly picked himself up and scrambled on. He looked back past his shoulder as a cluster of arrows stabbed the sand a few steps to his rear.

In the next instant Figulus quickly drew up alongside his centurion, his heart thumping ferociously inside his chest. Ocella shot him a scolding look.

‘What the fuck kept you?’ he snapped.

‘Sorry, sir,’ Figulus grunted. ‘Dropped my lucky charm.’ Seeing the centurion’s quizzical expression, he unclenched his left fist to reveal the silver medallion depicting Fortuna. ‘Almost lost it in the surf.’

Ocella was momentarily lost for words. ‘You nearly got yourself killed over that?’ He shook his head in disgust. ‘Bloody Gauls... Forget it. Look, there’s no time. We’re in the shit. Those archers have got us pinned down and the cohort’s in complete disarray. Most of our ships are stuck out at sea. Only the Fifth’s managed to land, together with one squadron of cavalry, and there’ll be no support from the warships until they get round that cursed sandbar.’

Figulus followed his line of sight as Ocella nodded out towards the sea. A bank of dark cloud loomed above the galleys grounded on the rocky outcrop. Beyond them several more warships rocked back and forth on the deep swell of the sea. Among these ships he spotted a larger vessel, a quinquereme, with a long purple pennant fluttering from its mast. Figulus recognized it as the legate’s ship.

He turned back to the centurion and cleared his throat uneasily. ‘Gods only know when Celer and the rest of our lads will get ashore.’

‘A token resistance,’ Ocella muttered under his breath. ‘That’s what the legate promised. Look around you. What the hell’s token about this?’ He pointed out the archers huddled on the cliff.

Figulus tightened his grip on his shield handle as he scanned the beach.

‘Where’s Tribune Palinus?’ Ocella barked. ‘He’s supposed to be in charge here.’

‘There, sir,’ a soldier to the right of Figulus shouted. ‘Palinus took the cavalry up that way.’ He pointed to the west. The gently sloping beach led up to a bank of shingle, and beyond that stood a low but sheer cliff. A series of small tree-lined gullies were cut into the cliff, providing natural exits from the beach. The beach itself was bounded at either end by rising cliffs, the shore cut into the coast like a notch carved into a block of wood.

Ocella snorted through his flared nostrils. ‘Typical bloody Palinus, showing off as usual. Idiot thinks he’s the new Caesar.’

At that moment the air exploded with a hail of dull thwacks and sharp clatters as javelins replaced the shower of arrows. A shrill scream carried across the damp air as a javelin punched through a soldier’s mail armour, goring his flesh. Another soldier on the outer line of the formation howled in anguish as a javelin slammed into his boot just beyond his shield. Blood instantly coloured the sand around his foot. The soldier released his grip on his shield and reached down to clasp his wound. A handful of arrows clattered into the shingle and one plunged into the nape of his neck and the man collapsed in front of Figulus with a gasping cry.

‘Take cover!’ Ocella roared at his men. ‘I SAID TAKE COVER!’

The men hunkered under their shields as the missiles continued to clatter down on them, crashing off the edges of shields like giant hailstones smashing on a tiled roof. Then Figulus heard a whirring sound as slingers added to the barrage and slingshot struck the Romans’ shields and helmets with a deafening rattle. The odd cry told of a javelin punching through a shield and impaling its target, or a lead shot shattering a soldier’s bones. But for the most part the shields offered the soldiers a solid defence against the frenzied wave of missiles. Figulus felt his shield shudder and heard the sharp crack of splitting wood as a Celtic javelin slammed into it, the tip punching through the wood a mere few inches from his face. He gritted his teeth, his forearm and bicep muscles aching from the strain of keeping his shield raised above his head. He was now drenched in sweat despite the cool weather as the physical and mental stress of battle began to take its toll.

‘Hold your ground!’ Ocella yelled. ‘They can’t keep this up forever!’

In the next instant the stream of missiles abruptly ceased, and a still silence fell on the beach. There was only the relentless hiss and suck of the waves on the shore and the screams of wounded men crying for help. Figulus peered over the metal brim of his shield at the cliff top to the north, watching intently as the archers retreated from view.

‘Maybe Palinus has scared them off,’ Ocella mused. ‘The glory-hunting fool. He’ll take all the credit, as usual.’

Figulus grunted as he wrenched the javelin free from his shield. ‘Pity. And there I was looking forward to getting stuck into the lot of ’em.’

‘Maybe not,’ a legionary next to him muttered darkly.

Figulus glanced at the man who’d spoken. He had a prominent scar running down the side of his face and purpled cheeks from years of hard drinking. He’d been one of the first men to introduce himself to the Gaul after his transfer several days earlier. Titus Terentius Rullus was one of the veterans of the Sixth Century.

‘Eh?’ Ocella snapped. ‘What do you mean?’

Rullus nodded at the widest draw cut into the cliff. At once the centurion and his deputy swung their gazes in the same direction. Figulus spied something

moving towards them from the treeline at the crest of the draw. As the object bolted out of the murky gloom and down the face of the cliff, the Gaul realized it was a striking white horse, galloping towards them at a furious pace. Then he noticed something else and felt a cold fear clamp over the nape of his neck.

‘Shit,’ he growled. ‘That’s Tribune Palinus’s horse, sir.’

The horse drew closer, and reared up as it reached the bottom of the slope. Figulus and the others saw blood streaking the animal’s flanks.

‘Looks like the bastards have done for Palinus,’ Rullus muttered.

A menacing war cry sounded from somewhere beyond the trees at the top of the cliff. Just then a long line of muscular figures lined up on the crest of the main gully, their woad-stained bodies dimly visible in the shadows. Each warrior brandished a long sword which they thumped repeatedly against their round shields in a gesture of defiance. Some of the Durotrigans intoned strange chants, inciting the native gods to help them crush their sworn enemy. One of the men jabbed his thrusting spear at the sky and Figulus felt his stomach churn as he caught sight of the tribune’s severed head mounted on the tip of the spear. Then the native trumpeters sounded their war horns to rally the troops to battle. The braying notes had the desired effect and sent a cold chill through Figulus and his comrades.

‘Durotrigans,’ said Rullus. ‘Hundreds of ’em by the looks of it. Must have cornered Palinus and his mates when they reached the top of the cliffs. Poor buggers.’ He turned to the Gaul. ‘Looks like you’re going to get your wish after all, sir.’

Figulus tightened his thick fingers round the grip of his short sword and grinned at the Britons lined up on the hilltop as he called out to his men, ‘If the bastards want to play rough, then they’ve come to the right men!’

## Chapter 3

The wild war cries of the Durotrigans instantly cut out. There was a moment’s pause and then the warriors began storming down the cliff towards the cohort assembled on the beach, swarming through the long grass covering the gully in dense tufts, their lime-washed hair flowing behind their broad shoulders. Swallowing his fear, Ocella swiftly turned to address the century.

‘All right, lads! Spread out! Form a line. NOW!’

At once the soldiers broke up from their solid defensive formation and brought their shields down in front of them in a single smooth motion while Ocella moved to take up his position on the front line. Many of the soldiers had abandoned their javelins in the struggle to get ashore, and Figulus herded those who were still equipped with a throwing weapon towards the rearmost rank so that they could launch their missiles over the heads of their comrades. Then Ocella ordered the front rank of men to draw their weapons and the air was filled with the sound of grating metal as swords were unsheathed from scabbards. Similar orders were

given by centurions up and down the beach as the men of the Fifth Cohort prepared to face the warriors bearing down on them.

‘Javelins ... ready!’ Figulus bellowed.

The men to the rear of the century lifted up their weapons so that they gripped them horizontally across their shoulders.

The dark great mass of Durotrigians had reached the bottom of the cliff and were charging across the shingle beach less than a hundred paces from the Romans. Their line stretched in a loose formation across nearly the full length of the beach and at this distance Figulus could make out that some wore mail vests over their tunics. Their straggly beards were visible beneath their helmets and strange patterns were painted on the front of their shields. Most of the enemy were bare-chested, and a handful wore nothing, to express their contempt for their Roman enemy. A few of the warriors were armed with war spears, although most brandished the heavyweight long swords so beloved of the Celts.

The Durotrigians swept across the shingle beach in a mass formation, some men racing ahead of their comrades. Figulus looked on as the gap between the Romans and the enemy rapidly closed, waiting to give the signal for the men to hurl their javelins at the onrushing Britons. The timing had to be perfect. Throw too early, and the spears would fall short of their intended targets. Too late, and the Durotrigians would be on top of the front rank before the iron heads struck home. Now the warriors were so close that Figulus could see the wild looks in their eyes, their mouths gaping as they shouted their war cries.

‘Release javelins!’ Ocella thundered.

The men at the rear simultaneously hurled their missiles forward at the Durotrigians. The javelins arced through the grey sky at a high angle, plunging moments later into the line of warriors a short distance ahead of the century, the long iron shafts punching through the crude round shields. The front rank of Britons toppled as if they had slipped on ice. Some men went down at once. Others stumbled on, clutching shafts protruding from their torsos, before they were thrust aside by the frantic charge of the enraged warriors following them. One naked Briton shrieked as a throwing spear plunged into his groin, blood splashing down his legs and on to his feet.

But even as the wounded Durotrigians fell away, the next line of warriors was instantly breathing down the necks of the men in the front line. Ocella thrust his sword arm in the direction of the enemy horde. ‘Forward!’ he shouted.

The Sixth Century advanced in line with the rest of the cohort, each centurion sticking rigidly to the tactics that had served Rome so well in countless battles against its barbarian foes. The clash of steel against steel rang out as the opposing forces rippled into each other. The legionaries covered their torsos with their shields and thrust at the throats of the enemy with their short swords in the manner they had practised endlessly in the bloodless battle of training-ground drills. Fighting shoulder to shoulder, their shields forming a solid wall against the enemy, the men thrust at the savage warriors opposite them with precise stabs aimed at the most vulnerable points on the body: the throat and upper chest. For their part, the Durotrigians tried to swing their long swords, forcing them to open up and expose their bodies to the Romans.

Figulus shouted for the men of the second rank to ready their swords as they waited for their chance to take the position of any soldiers cut down ahead of them, swiftly plugging any gaps in the shield wall. Men were dropping at an alarming rate. The surgeon's orderlies scurried up and down the line, removing the severely wounded to a safe distance down the beach. Those who could not be saved were dragged aside and left to writhe in agony on the sand, screaming for their mothers as they bled out, clutching at their wounds in vain attempts to stem the flow of blood.

As the legionaries pushed forward, someone shouted a warning and a new wave of missiles hurtled down from the cliff looming over the right flank of the Roman line. There was a cry of agony as one of the men of Figulus's century went down, his thigh pierced by an arrow.

'Rear rank! Raise shields!' Figulus roared, and the men on either side instantly lifted their shields to form a solid screen above them, protecting themselves and, to a lesser degree, the men of the first line. Some of the enemy missiles fell amongst their own warriors, who shrieked at their hideous wounds while their companions hurled themselves against the wall of Roman shields. Peering past the shoulder of the man in front of him, Figulus saw one Durotrigan, sweeping his sword before him, barge through a gap in the line. He was cut down by one of his own javelins before he could get stuck into the legionaries. Ocella, who had retreated from the front line and was frantically shoving men forward into the gaps, turned to Figulus in horror.

'What the hell are they still shooting at us for? Don't they realize they're hitting their own men?'

Figulus hissed in frustration. Despite the peril to their own men the Durotrigans' arrows and javelins were whittling down the Romans. More and more gaps were beginning to open up in the front rank now as the line began to waver. Soon the enemy warriors would be able to push the Romans back by weight of their numbers. He drew Ocella's attention to the tribesmen on the cliff.

'They're killing us, sir. We have to get off the beach.'

Ocella shook his head. Sweat flowed down his reddened face. 'Our orders are clear. We hold the line here until the other cohorts can land and reinforce our position.'

'If we don't do something, there won't be any line left to hold.'

'We make our stand here!' Ocella insisted. 'Here!' He took a step closer to his deputy, lowering his voice. 'Question my authority like that again and I'll have you up on a charge.'

Figulus bristled with rage. The Sixth Century was in grave danger and its commanding officer, gripped by indecision and anxiety in the heat of battle, was more concerned with punishing his subordinate for a perceived slight. Ocella turned away from him with a sneer. As he did, a lead shot from one of the slingers glanced off his helmet. Stumbling backwards, Ocella let out a light groan, his eyes rolling into the back of his head as he slumped to the sand. Figulus cast a look at the unconscious officer. Bright red blood trickled down his face. An orderly crouched beside the centurion and examined him quickly before turning to Figulus.

'He's out cold,' the orderly said.

Figulus hesitated a moment and it was Rullus who spoke first. 'Looks like you're in charge, Optio ... sir.'

'Right, then.' Figulus nodded, tightening his grip on the handle of his shield as he shaped to take up his place on the front rank and take the fight to the Durotrigans.

'We've got to put a stop to those archers somehow.' Rullus nodded at the men injured by arrows lying on the shingle behind them. 'At least then we'd stand a fucking chance.'

Figulus hesitated, blinking blood and sweat out of his eyes. 'How?'

The veteran pointed to a muddy gully cut into the cliff running parallel to the cliffs. 'If we can get a small party to work their way up there, we can teach the bastards a lesson they won't forget in a hurry.'

An appreciative grin crept across the Gaul's grim face. 'Just the job. Take charge here, Rullus.' Then he signalled to the thirty or so men still in the second line and jabbed his sword at the cliff. 'First three sections! On me!'

The blood rushing in his ears, Figulus led the soldiers around the century's right flank and charged up the beach towards the cliff. Several Durotrigans caught sight of the Romans manoeuvring past them and broke away from their comrades in an attempt to cut them off, lunging at the soldiers with their long swords. Figulus punched his shield at a charging warrior, the iron boss smashing into the man's face with a dull crunch. As the Romans crossed the shingle beach and scrambled up the gully, the Gaul could feel his calf muscles aching from the exertion, his lungs burning with the effort.

He pushed up the steep incline and at the crest of the cliff he turned towards the huddle of natives lining the cliff edge. The Britons' attention was fixed on the fight taking place along the beach as they rained arrows, javelins, slingshot and even small rocks at the Romans. Figulus felt a hot thrill run through him as he prepared to cut down the unsuspecting barbarians.

'Stay with me!' he ordered his men. 'When we go in, hit 'em hard.'

As the legionaries rushed along the cliff top, one of the Britons glanced round and saw them. His eyes widened with panic and he turned back to his companions to alert them to the onrushing soldiers. At once the Britons turned away from the cliff edge. A few managed to release their javelins at a low angle, but Figulus and his men were already upon them and the soldier to the right of the optio gasped as a shaft smashed into his knee. In the next moment the Romans charged into the native warriors. The Britons snatched at their hand weapons, a motley assortment of axes and knives, quite useless against the broad shields and armour of the legionaries. Step by step Figulus and his men forced the enemy towards the edge of the cliff.

Figulus peered over the top of his shield and saw the glimmer of a javelin shooting towards his neck as a Briton thrust at him. The optio deftly parried the attack with his damaged shield. The warrior snarled as his weapon glanced off the curved edge, angling away from his target and opening up his torso to attack. Figulus took grateful advantage, stabbing the man through the chest. There was a sickening crunch as the blade tip punched through soft flesh, skirting off hard bone. The Briton released his weapon with a shudder as Figulus ripped his sword free and the man fell at the optio's feet.

Those Durotrigians who had survived the initial attack now found themselves trapped between the Romans and the sheer vertical drop of the cliff. Figulus urged the men around him to keep pushing the enemy back. To his left he spotted a naked Briton clamping his hands on the top edge of a legionary's shield in an effort to wrest it from his grip. Figulus spun to face the warrior, stabbing him through the throat before he could claw at the terrified legionary, and there was a soft crunch as Figulus's blade tip scraped against the man's jaw.

With one last effort the small party of Romans pushed forward and the remaining Durotrigians began to plummet to their deaths on the rocks below. Some clawed at their companions, dragging them down as well. One clasped his hands round a legionary's knee as he lost his footing, pulling the despairing Roman to his death with him. Only a handful managed to scabble free along the cliff edge but they were quickly set upon by the Romans, thirsting to avenge their comrades who had been cut down by the missiles raining down from the cliff. There would be no prisoners taken today.

As the last of the enemy on the cliff top was cut down, Figulus glanced around, his chest heaving as he surveyed the scene. Below he could see dozens of contorted bodies broken on the rocks. Lifting his gaze to the shingle beach, Figulus watched the men of the Fifth Cohort pressing forward and he felt a surge of relief at the sight of the rearmost natives turning to flee from the bloodstained shingle. Within a matter of moments the Durotrigians were beating a pell-mell retreat back up the shingle beach as the last few warriors turned their backs on their slain comrades and ran for their lives.

Out on the waters of the cove one of the warships loaded with catapults had managed to navigate around the grounded galleys. The trireme headed towards the shore, oars rising and cutting the sea in continuous rhythm. Up on the deck the men prepared the catapults to shoot at the retreating enemy. Figulus heard the distant shout of an order and several sharp cracks carried across the water like whiplashes as the catapults unleashed their stone balls, arcing over the heads of the cohort and crashing through the fleeing Durotrigians. The crudely shaped stones shattered skulls and spines like giant fists. More of the enemy were struck down by a final volley of iron-headed bolts shot from ballistas mounted on the deck of the same warship. The surviving warriors, casting terrified backwards glances, managed to scramble off the beach and out of sight, leaving behind a scene of slaughter. Some of the legionaries tried to pursue them but laden with heavy armour they quickly gave up and hunched over their shields, gasping for breath.

Figulus led his men back along the cliff edge to head off any enemy fleeing towards them, but there was nothing left for his men to do. The battle was over. As the remainder of the Fifth Cohort emerged from the gullies, the soldiers set upon those natives too injured to escape. They were in no mood to take pity on their vanquished foes and killed the wounded Durotrigians where they lay. Figulus saw several legionaries surround a warrior who was on his knees. The men cheered as they took turns to plunge their swords into his body, one after the other. The warrior remained defiantly upright even as he choked on his own blood. Figulus fought off the urge to intervene and looked away.

Bodies and discarded equipment covered the beach. He was surprised at how painfully thin many of the dead Britons appeared to be. Everywhere he looked he saw protruding ribcages and gaunt faces. Conflicting emotions swirled inside him—as they always did in the grisly moments after a battle. As a soldier in the service of the Emperor, Figulus was acutely aware of the fact that the warriors he slew in battle were Celtic men. Just like his forefathers.

‘A bloodbath, sir,’ Rullus said as he drew up at his shoulder, his faded grey eyes surveying the beach below. ‘Never seen anything like it. They were just throwing themselves at us. Some of them had nothing but their bare fists. Against sharpened steel!’

‘It’s hard to believe how much they hate Rome,’ Figulus said quietly. ‘It would be better for them to surrender. They must know by now that they cannot defeat us.’

He fell quiet for a moment, then remembered something and directed his gaze towards the cliff.

‘Where’s the centurion?’ he asked, scanning the lines of men.

Rullus tipped his head at the column of wounded men herded on the shingle beach. ‘Down with the other casualties, sir. Doesn’t look like he’ll be waking up for a while yet.’ He hesitated to go on, glancing left and right to make sure no one was listening. Then he leaned in close to Figulus and lowered his voice. ‘Word to the wise, sir. You’d do well to watch yourself around the centurion. Ocella used to be an officer in the Praetorian Guard, before he transferred to the Second.’

‘Why would he give up a cosy position with the Guards to transfer to Britannia?’

Rullus shrugged. ‘Maybe it wasn’t his choice. Maybe that’s why he gives us so much grief.’ He sucked his teeth and added, ‘The last lad in your boots didn’t last long. He was sent back to Gesoriacum to train new recruits. Take it from me, sir. Ocella’s not someone you want to cross.’

## Chapter 4

The last galleys beached on the shore as a purple dusk settled over Vectis, the sea glistening like thousands of dazzling sword points in the dying light. The skies had cleared while the deck hands unloaded the supplies that would feed and equip the army. Throughout the afternoon teams of oarsmen had laboured to clear the triremes run aground on the sandbar. Standing up to their waists in the freezing water, they pulled on ropes tethered to the prow of each ship, dragging the vessels over the bar and refloating them one by one. While the triremes were pulled clear, the rest of the fleet made its way carefully towards the beach in the late afternoon.

Men from each century of the Fifth Cohort were detailed to carry out the grim task of clearing the dead from the beach. A note was made on waxed slates of the name of each dead legionary to present to the centurions to tally up the casualties. The injured were treated where they lay, while a field hospital was set up in the camp being constructed a short distance inland of the cliff. The dead were gathered up and placed in lines, ready for the pyre that would be constructed to

cremate their bodies after firewood had been gathered. Each corpse was relieved of its armour, weapons and boots. These were then sent on to the quartermaster's office to be repaired and placed in stores, ready to be reissued as the need arose.

On the orders of the legate, the Durotrigans were heaped below one of the cliffs and left as a stark reminder of the price paid by those who defied Rome. Their weapons and equipment were removed too, so that they might not fall into the hands of scavengers, who might then sell them on to Rome's enemies.

With his force ashore, the legate dispatched cavalry scouts to search for signs of the enemy further inland while the cohorts at last moved up from the shore, leaving the cliff behind, the memory of the beach-fighting seared into their minds. The fatigued men cleared the scattered thickets on the ground beyond the shore and bent to the arduous task of constructing a marching camp in the face of the enemy. First they dug a twelve-foot-deep outer ditch using their entrenching tools. Then they heaped the spoil from the ditch to form a ten-foot-high inner rampart. This was surmounted by sharpened wooden stakes lashed together with leather ties, designed to act as giant caltrops in the event of an enemy assault.

Once the defensive lines had been completed the men set to work laying out their tent lines. With the legion and its baggage train securely enclosed within the marching camp, the soldiers at last filled their empty bellies with rations of steaming hot salted pork and barley gruel. As night closed in, the men retired to their eight-man goatskin tents. They sat round camp fires warming themselves and their damp clothes, swapping lewd jokes, playing dice, trying to take their minds off the grim memories of battle. Those men on fatigues were assigned the arduous task of cutting logs from the edge of a nearby forest to construct a funeral pyre for their fallen comrades.

Once Figulus had fulfilled his duties for the day he joined Rullus and his section at their camp fire and warmed his hands. He had checked with the Second's surgeon to see if Ocella was recovering but the centurion was rambling incoherently, his head rolling from side to side as he lay on a thin bedroll spread on the ground. Figulus had hoped the man would have recovered his wits enough to resume command of the Sixth Century and let his *optio* return to his lesser responsibilities. As things stood, it looked as if Figulus was saddled with command for the next few days at least – a situation he resented, for he considered himself a common soldier at heart, and cherished the camaraderie of his fellow rankers. But at least he would be spared the centurion's fussiness in the meantime. Ocella was an efficient officer who prided himself on the presentation and orderliness of his men. Any sign of tardiness was met with a cold glare and a harsh disciplinary charge. Life under Ocella was particularly challenging for Figulus and Ocella ruthlessly seized on every little mistake he made, berating him over a speck of dirt on his polished belt buckle at kit inspection, or the slightest error in his record-keeping. Privately Figulus suspected that Ocella resented him for his much greater experience of fighting on the field of battle. Perhaps Ocella saw him as a threat to his authority. With a heavy feeling in his heart Figulus realized that unless he could resolve his differences with the centurion, his days with the Sixth Century would be numbered.

Rullus and the other legionaries huddled around the camp fire in silence, their faces illuminated by the glow of the flames. Figulus could see the numbed

weariness in their expressions and decided to do something about their mood. 'Now, then,' he said with a forced grin. 'Who wants to see a magic trick?'

Rullus rolled his eyes. 'Gods. Here we go again!'

Figulus turned to Rullus and winked. 'This one really works. I learned it from a Cilician merchant back at Rutupiae.' He searched the faces of the men around the camp fire. 'All I need is a volunteer.'

'An idiot, more like,' Rullus chuckled.

'I'll do it, sir,' the legionary seated opposite Figulus offered.

Figulus regarded the slender, youthful-looking legionary. Gaius Arrius Helva was one of the new recruits who had been assigned to the Sixth Century the day before they marched from Calleva. He had that mix of naivety and cockiness common to all the new recruits for a short period after they arrived in Britannia – before brutal conflict with the enemy turned them into battle-hardened veterans who couldn't wait to leave these shores. In the short time that Figulus had been with the Sixth Century he'd come to know Helva only slightly; but there was something about the new recruit that he found encouraging. He was eager to prove himself worthy of his comrades and his enthusiasm for army life contrasted starkly with the weary, cynical air of many of the older soldiers.

Figulus took a coin from his purse. 'Right then, lad. Give us your palm.'

Helva dutifully thrust his hand towards the optio with his palm facing up. Placing his hand on top of the legionary's, with his own palm facing down, Figulus then produced the coin, showing it to each man around the camp fire in turn before placing it firmly on top of his hand.

'Now,' he began. 'You can clearly see that this here coin is on top of my hand, yes?' The men nodded. 'Well, what if I said I could make this coin pass through my hand and into your palm?' He was looking at Helva as he spoke. The legionary stared at him with wide-eyed disbelief.

'Through your hand?' he repeated. 'That coin? It can't be done. Only the gods are capable of such things.'

'Gods ... and rose oil salesmen,' Rullus muttered. 'Four sestertii says it won't work.'

'Deal!' Figulus responded eagerly.

He counted to three. Then, with his free hand raised high above his head, he intoned the words the Cilician had taught him and slapped his hand down on top of the one clasped over Helva's palm. He waited a moment. Helva leaned forward expectantly as Figulus slowly peeled his hand away from his palm. Even Rullus, in spite of his obvious scepticism, craned his head to get a better look.

'Empty!' Rullus declared, slapping his thigh. 'I knew it!' He rubbed his hands gleefully. 'You owe me four sestertii, sir.'

'Bollocks!' Figulus frowned. 'But—I don't understand. I did exactly what the merchant told me to do. I said the right magic words and everything.'

'Pay up, Gaul,' Rullus replied jokingly.

Cursing his luck, Figulus reached into his purse and dug out four coins. He could ill afford the loss, since he had managed to squander the bulk of his modest savings on dice. He found that he had an inexplicable urge to keep playing the game. Each time he lost, he'd walk away in a sour mood, swearing to Jupiter that he'd never gamble at dice again. And yet the following day Figulus invariably found

himself back at the gambling table, in the dark corner of some questionable drinking hole, wagering away yet more of his hard-earned pay. Only recently he had lost a full month's salary playing dice in Calleva, losing twenty straight games in a row – a result which led him to strongly suspect that his wily opponent had been cheating.

'Optio Horatius Figulus?' a voice barked.

Figulus spun round as a man stepped forward from beyond the tent lines. From the plume on his helmet, Figulus identified him as one of the legate's personal bodyguards. The man looked directly at Figulus as he spoke. He'd spotted the staff of office, unique to the rank of optio, lying on the ground beside him.

'That's me,' he replied.

The bodyguard nodded. 'The legate wishes to speak with you.'

'Now?' Figulus glimpsed Helva and Rullus exchanging puzzled looks in the dim glow of the camp fire. 'What for?'

The bodyguard's face gave nothing away. 'Right away, if you don't mind, sir. The legate's a busy man.' He gestured to Figulus to follow him and promptly marched down the main alley leading towards the centre of the camp.

What could the legate possibly want with him at this late hour? wondered Figulus as he followed the bodyguard past the barracks and the grain stores. Outside the tents of the field hospital he spied a small line of shrouded bodies. A short distance beyond, they reached the legate's headquarters, a large tent erected at the intersection of the two main routes running through the camp. A pair of guards stood watch outside the tent, with the legion's military standards resting in racks on either side. The soldier escorting Figulus approached the open tent flaps and the two guards nodded at their comrade and stepped aside.

'In you go, sir. Legate's waiting for you,' the bodyguard said tonelessly.

The sweet tang of heated wine filled his nostrils as Figulus entered. It was pleasingly warm in the tent. Braziers in all four corners burned brightly, insulating the quarters against the foul British weather. In one corner stood a low table with a platter of cold meats heaped on top, and a brass jug filled to the brim with wine set in a retaining stand over an oil lamp. Thin wisps of steam rose from the jug. A large campaign table occupied the middle of the tent, surrounded by half a dozen padded leather stools.

Legate Celer was sitting behind the campaign table, his brow heavily furrowed in concentration as he read from a waxed slate on the desk in front of him. Figulus stood awkwardly in front of the legate for what felt like a very long time but was no more than a moment or two, taking in the luxurious surroundings of the legate's tent. It was a world away from the trappings of a common soldier and inwardly the Gaul felt terribly out of place.

At last Celer glanced up. Figulus gave a stiff salute. The legate regarded him with his cold blue eyes.

'At ease, Optio.'

The legate had an air of self-regarding superiority characteristic of all Roman aristocrats, a confidence verging on arrogance. Figulus had seen men like him occupying the senior tribune ranks: the sons of wealthy aristocrats dispatched to Britannia to fulfil their military service for a couple of years before returning to Rome to pursue a lucrative career in public office. Some such men had little

interest in the business of soldiering and displayed an alarming lack of concern for the long-term stability of the province. They cared only about where their next jug of Falernian was coming from and catching up with the latest gossip from the bathhouses and theatres of Rome. Figulus feared that such a man was now in charge of Rome's finest legion.

'Figulus, isn't it?' Celer asked.

'Yes, sir.'

'And you're half Gaul, I understand from your records. My friends in the imperial palace tell me they're letting your people become senators. In Rome. Imagine that! Gauls debating politics. The world's gone mad.'

Figulus kept his lips pressed shut and stood very still as Celer glanced down at the waxed slate on his desk.

'The Sixth Century did the legion proud on the beach today. By all accounts, the Fifth Cohort would've been overrun by those damned Britons had it not been for the Sixth's charge up on to the cliff.'

Figulus shifted his weight, unsure whether the legate expected a reply. After a moment's silence Celer continued.

'I'm told your centurion sustained an injury.'

Figulus nodded. 'Took a blow to the head, sir. He's laid up in the field hospital. Surgeon reckons he'll be back on his feet in a day or two.'

'This legion has lost too many officers lately,' Celer remarked sourly. 'But the plain fact of it is, Ocella isn't here and as his subordinate you are the next in line of command. The Sixth Century showed admirable initiative on the beach, a quality it will need again for this next task.'

Figulus frowned. 'What task, sir?'

Celer stroked his chin calmly. He had the politician's knack of answering a completely different question to the one being asked. 'Is it true that one of the last acts of my predecessor was to pardon you from a charge of desertion?' Figulus froze in horror but before he could respond, Celer went on. 'Not to mention that the legate also dropped charges of aiding and abetting the escape of condemned soldiers.' He paused, regarding Figulus with his icy blue eyes. 'Those are serious offences. They carry a severe penalty.'

He left the threat hanging in the warm air. Figulus felt his stomach tighten into a painful knot. 'I was only trying to do what was right, sir. An officer I respect and a bunch of other lads were wrongly condemned to death by decimation. I couldn't stand by and let them get battered to death. It wouldn't have been right.'

'Yes, yes,' Celer replied impatiently. 'I'm well aware of the details. It's all here in the accompanying report. As is the reason given for the pardon. Apparently you played a vital part in the defeat of Caratacus.'

The optio shrugged. 'I did my duty, sir.'

Celer pushed the waxed slate aside and leaned forward across the desk. 'You might think you can live off past glories in this army, Figulus, but I don't give a damn what you did under Vespasian. This is my legion now. And you're going to have to prove yourself to me. Understood?'

'Yes, sir,' Figulus responded through gritted teeth.

'Glad to hear it.' Celer smiled briefly. 'Now, to the mission. As you know from the earlier briefing, our objective on Vectis is to put an end to the Durotriges' pitiful

little resistance. The day after tomorrow we shall resume our march westwards, once the rest of the cavalry have arrived, and attack the hill fort the enemy is in the process of building. I doubt the assault itself will present much difficulty to the men. I find it staggering that these brutes continue to place so much misguided faith in their primitive defence works.'

Figulus bit his tongue. It was a widely held view among those men new to the Second Legion that the hill forts of the Durotrigians had been easily conquered. The Gaul, however, knew differently. The Second Legion had fought hard to take those forts, and but for the leadership of Vespasian and the resolute efforts of the soldiers, they might still be in the hands of the enemy. Only a fool would believe that the Durotrigians had been easy to conquer. He watched Celer carefully as he reached for the silver goblet half filled with wine on the desk and took a swig. The legate set the cup down and delicately wiped his lips on the back of his finger.

'Make no mistake, Optio, I intend to crush every last pocket of resistance on Vectis.'

'Yes, sir.'

'There is, however, a problem.' Celer exhaled deeply. 'We've received intelligence that a number of prisoners are being held on the isle. They were captured on the mainland a few months ago. They're being held not far from here. Our native scout, Magadubnus, learned of their predicament. According to him, the Durotrigan chief holding the prisoners wants to make a deal with us.' A smile tickled at the corner of his lips. 'Their lives in exchange for food.'

'Food, sir?' Figulus wondered. 'Not silver, then?'

The legate nodded. 'I know. Pathetic, isn't it? But understandable. We've cut off their supplies and the islanders cannot feed the refugees from the mainland as well as their own people.' Celer leaned back in his chair and smiled. 'So the Durotrigan chief is offering us a deal. And you, Figulus, along with a small party of your men, are going to make the exchange.'

## Chapter 5

A frigid silence filled the legate's tent as Celer rose from his chair and approached the low table bearing the meat and wine. He lifted the brass jug from the retaining stand and refilled his goblet to the brim.

'The prisoners were part of a detachment sent down to Vindocladia,' he began. 'Reinforcements for the vexillation fort down there. The men never arrived. A scouting party found the commanding officer and scores of dead soldiers dumped in a nearby stream. Twelve men were unaccounted for. At the time, we presumed they had been sold into slavery, or burned alive in one of those infernal wicker men.' The legate swirled his goblet in his hand, eyeing the contents. 'I should say they're lucky to be alive.'

'If you say so, sir,' Figulus replied guardedly, his cheeks blazing with rage as he recalled his own period in captivity at the hands of Caratacus: manacled in a filthy animal pen, tormented by his captors. He'd escaped without being subjected to the

cruel and unusual tortures for which the Britons were known. Others, he knew, were less fortunate. If the soldiers were indeed alive, the Britons were unlikely to have spared them any mercy.

‘How can we be sure that they’re holding the prisoners, sir?’ he asked.

By way of reply Celer set the goblet down on the low table and picked up a leather pouch next to the oil lamp. He tossed the bag to the optio. Figulus caught it and opened it. Inside was a lead tag, stamped with the seal of the Second Legion. It was of the type worn by Roman soldiers on the march, so that their corpses could be identified if they died. Holding the tag up to the light from the flickering braziers, Figulus could make out the name of a soldier engraved on the reverse, along with his rank and century.

‘There are eleven more signaculums just like that one,’ Celer said. ‘They were handed to Magadubnus by the Durotrigan chief as proof that he’s holding the prisoners. We’ve already checked the names on each signaculum against the records of the missing soldiers. They correspond. So we may be fairly certain that the chief is telling the truth, and has the men in question.’

Figulus looked at the legate. ‘Magadubnus has been communicating with this chief, then?’

‘He’s acting as an intermediary on our behalf. Negotiating between the two parties. The Britons trust him about as much as we do, I suppose. Magadubnus learned about the prisoners shortly after he landed on Vectis a few weeks ago, pretending to be a Durotrigan warrior in order to gather intelligence on the enemy. He heard about the prisoners, and learned that the chief might be willing to cut a deal with us.’ Celer laughed at his own comment. ‘At which point Magadubnus approached the chief, with my permission, to open negotiations.’

‘The local warriors won’t be too happy when they find out.’

‘Of course.’ Celer smiled briefly. ‘But with everyone going hungry, I would think that the chief’s hand has been forced rather. Perhaps the thought of several Roman cohorts sweeping through his village also had something to do with it. For what it’s worth, we’ve also promised the chief that we’ll spare his village.’

‘And he’ll take our word for it?’

‘He has no choice. He can negotiate with us or else his people will suffer certain death, either through starvation or at the end of Roman swords.’

‘How much grain are we talking about, sir?’

‘Four hundred modii. I understand the natives have a crude mill in their village. The grain will provide them with enough bread and porridge to keep them alive through the winter, although quite frankly such a diet sounds miserable. But I think you’ll agree such an exchange is infinitely preferable to losing good men in any direct attack on the village—not to mention the risk of the villagers executing the prisoners before we could rescue them. Besides, these men are highly decorated soldiers of the First Cohort. The cream of the legion’s crop. General Plautius was particularly distressed to learn of their abduction.’ He smiled to himself before going on. ‘Returning them safely to the ranks will please the general. And it’ll be a splendid boost to the morale of the legion, don’t you think? Quite a coup.’

‘Of course, sir,’ Figulus responded diplomatically, though something about the legate’s demeanour told him that Celer was far more concerned with impressing General Plautius than improving morale among the rankers.

‘In time,’ Celer continued, ‘once we have laid waste to Vectis, the rest of those barbaric Durotrigans will quickly recognize the error of their ways and surrender to us. Soon every other tribe on this miserable island will follow. Then, finally, we shall have peace in Britannia.’

Figulus stayed silent. Celer’s aristocratic mind, educated in the certainties of Roman superiority, would not allow for the notion of anything less than absolute victory. Only after a year or more on the ground would he finally grasp the depth of the hatred that the natives felt for Rome. They might defeat the Britons on the battlefield, Figulus thought, but that was as far as any victory would go. He stood without speaking while Celer paced back to the desk and shoved the clutter to one side. He rolled out a vellum map of Vectis. Figulus stepped forward and leaned in for a closer look as the legate pointed with a slender finger to a position on the western fringes of the island.

Celer said, ‘The village where the soldiers are being held captive is approximately half a day’s march from our present location. The terrain is quite navigable, save for a few marshes. Once you reach the village you will oversee the exchange with the chief. If he tries it on, making requests for extra grain or any such nonsense, rough him up a bit. Remind him that he’s obliged to abide by the terms of our mutual agreement. Then all you and your men will need to do is unload the grain, account for the prisoners and return them safely to the camp. Should be easy enough.’ He pointed a finger at Figulus. ‘You’re to leave at once.’

Figulus jolted with surprise. ‘We’re to go tonight, sir?’

‘But of course,’ Celer replied evenly. ‘Moving under cover of darkness will help you avoid any Durotrigan scouts roaming the land. Magadubnus knows the land well. He’ll guide you safely around any nests of Durotrigan warriors. The exchange is set for dawn. If you leave right now you should make it in good time.’

Figulus stared at the map. He could already anticipate several problems. Even if he and his men managed to avoid the Durotrigan scouts, any one of the surrounding native settlements carried a threat. It would take only one local to stumble upon their position and soon they would have an army of Durotrigans hunting them. Then there was the physical condition of his men. They had been up since the early hours and in the space of a single day had battled seasickness, fought on the shores of Vectis, cleared away and buried their dead comrades and constructed a marching camp. Physically they were beyond the point of exhaustion. Many of them were probably already asleep. Figulus could almost picture the looks on their tired faces as he told them they would have to slog through hostile terrain in the middle of a cold, damp night.

‘In the temporary absence of Centurion Ocella, you’ll assume command of a detachment from your century. Take forty men with you. I’ve drawn up the necessary requisition for the grain which you can present to the quartermaster.’

‘Yes, sir.’ Figulus paused before adding, ‘We might run into trouble on the return march, sir. Marching in broad daylight with the prisoners, we’ll be an easy target for any nearby Britons.’

Celer grimaced. 'Forty soldiers ought to suffice for a rearguard action if you do encounter any resistance. Besides, by then most of the Durotrigans ought to have rallied at the hill fort. I understand that many of them are making their way there in an attempt to hasten its completion before we attack. The fools.'

Figulus gave a slight nod of the head, unconvinced by the legate's reassurances but unwilling to risk annoying him further by pressing the point. Clearly Celer would not spare him any more soldiers and it would be fruitless to pursue the matter. 'Where will I find Magadubnus, sir?'

'He's in my bodyguard's tent. One of my clerks will send for him. I'll arrange for him to report to your tent immediately. Now, if that's all...?' Figulus nodded and Celer smiled thinly at him. 'Dismissed.'

Figulus saluted the legate, turned and left the tent, filled with apprehension at his task. So far in his military career, he had managed to avoid responsibility, content with his lot as a second-in-command, preferring the company of legionaries to mingling with the coterie of senior officers. Now suddenly he had been handed the burden of command, and the weight of it as he made his way back to his quarters felt like a pair of heavy marching yokes on his shoulders. The success or failure of the looming mission rested entirely with him, and hinged on whether he could prove himself a good leader of men as well as a fearless soldier. For the sake of the men under his command, and the prisoners held in the village, Figulus knew he could not afford to fail.

## Chapter 6

'Load of bollocks if you ask me,' Rullus grumbled as Figulus joined him on the outer perimeter of the tent lines. A gap of sixty feet separated the neatly ordered tents from the rampart, the distance carefully measured in order to ensure that the men in the marching camp were well out of range of any missiles thrown by the enemy. Beyond the sentries manning the main gate Figulus could see precious little except a mute dense blackness.

'We shouldn't be making deals with the Britons,' Rullus went on. 'That grain's for us, not some scum village chief.'

'What would you suggest, Rullus?'

'Attack 'em.' He slammed a fist into the palm of his hand. 'Hit 'em with everything we've got. Take no prisoners.'

Figulus rolled his tongue around his teeth before flashing a toothy grin. 'It's a nice thought, I'll give you that. But they've got our lads. They could kill them at any moment. It's less risky to give them what they want.'

'Afraid you're wrong, sir. The only reason we're not destroying the village is because it benefits the legate.'

'How so?'

'Think about it, sir,' he said, tapping the side of his nose. 'The legate returns the prisoners to Rome, he gets all the plaudits and puts a smile on the faces of those Greek freedmen running the imperial palace. That's all Celer gives a shit about. He

doesn't care that by negotiating with the enemy and giving them a reward we're encouraging them to kidnap more soldiers. Next time, it could be us.'

Figulus craned his neck at the sky, eyeing the thin wisps of fog lurking over the coast. 'Could be worse, I suppose.'

'Oh?' Rullus remarked tersely. 'How'd you figure that one?'

'At least it's not raining. The weather gods favour us.'

'There's that famous Gallic sense of humour again,' Rullus remarked wryly.

Figulus smiled back. 'Take it from me. When you grow up in Lutetia, you can't take life too seriously. We're an amphora-half-full lot, my people.'

Rullus grunted and Figulus turned his attention to the soldiers standing in a line in front of the perimeter. As soon as he'd left the legate's tent he'd briefed Rullus on the mission, instructing him to round up the fighting men in the century who were in the best physical shape—men still capable of holding a sword and marching a dozen or more miles without dropping out, even after the strain of the day's battle. Now Figulus examined the faces of the men in front of him and realized with a jolt that only a handful of the men chosen for the task were scarred veterans. The years of waging war in Britannia had decimated the ranks. Most of the soldiers standing in line were young soldiers, new to the Sixth Century and the province. Quite a few were younger than Figulus himself; and even though he was only twenty-one years of age, he was painfully aware that his experience made him one of the century's veterans. He recognized most of the faces, although a few were unfamiliar since he'd not yet had the time to get to know each ranker.

His eyes settled on an unfamiliar soldier standing at the end of the line. The man had a thick beard and his burly frame swayed heavily on the spot. Judging from the glazed look in his eyes the man was inebriated. Figulus marched over to him.

'You. Name.'

'Sextus Porcius Blaesus,' the soldier slurred. He made a half-comical, half-pitiful salute. He let out a loud belch and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Figulus gritted his teeth, a hot rage sweeping through his veins at the sight of the drunken legionary. As he glowered at Blaesus, Figulus dimly recalled seeing his face before but he couldn't quite place him.

'You're drunk,' he said.

Blaesus raised his hands in protest. 'I had a little drop after the evening meal,' he replied defensively. 'That's all.'

'It's "sir" to you,' Figulus responded sharply, balling his hand into a tight fist. 'I'm acting centurion for the time being, so you'll address me as "sir" like every other man in the century. Got it?'

Blaesus mock-bowed. 'My humble apologies ... sir.'

Suddenly Figulus remembered where he'd seen the man before. He clenched his jaws in rage. 'It's you...'

Blaesus grinned. 'What's that, sir?'

Figulus stepped closer and jabbed a finger at the man's chest. 'I thought I recognized you from somewhere. The *Thirsty Greek* tavern. In Calleva. You're the bastard who cheated me at dice! I want my money back!'

There was a glimmer of recognition in the legionary's glazed eyes. Blaesus quickly composed his face and flashed a weak smile. 'Forgive me, sir, but I'm afraid you are mistaken. I can assure you I wasn't cheating. Never have done.'

'I lost twenty games straight,' Figulus thundered. 'No one's that unlucky. You owe me a hundred and fifty sestertii.'

Blaesus fixed his smile. 'What can I say, sir? I won that money fair and square. When it comes to the dice I've got the magic touch. I didn't cheat.' He placed a hand on his heart, adding, 'I swear on my mother's grave.'

'Your mother was a whore!' a scrawny soldier joked from down the line. Several other soldiers chuckled. Figulus saw Blaesus's expression instantly darken. In a raging blur of movement he spun away and lunged at the soldier, charging into him with his head forward like an enraged bull. His opponent gasped in pain as Blaesus's shabby pate slammed into his stomach, knocking him off his feet and badly winding him. The man landed on his back with a grunt and before he could scramble to his feet Blaesus pinned him to the ground and lashed out at his face with his fists. The other soldiers now formed a rough circle round the two men, yelling their support for whichever of the two they favoured.

'What did you say?' Blaesus snarled as he clamped his hands round his opponent's throat and squeezed. 'WHAT DID YOU FUCKING SAY?'

'Get off me, you drunk!' the man yelled, thrusting a hand into Blaesus's face in an attempt to gouge his eyes out.

'All right, that's enough!' Figulus boomed, barging past the circle of cheering soldiers and wrestling Blaesus away from the stunned soldier on the ground. But Blaesus was powerfully built, even bigger than the Gaul, and Figulus struggled to control him as Blaesus roared in anger and tried to break free. Rullus raced into view and grabbed Blaesus by his other arm, and together he and Figulus managed to drag the fuming man away from his dazed opponent.

'The man's an animal,' the soldier sputtered nasally as he tried to staunch the blood streaming out of his nostrils. 'Bloody Germans.'

Rullus spoke to Figulus in a low voice. 'Manius Silo. He's a troublemaker, sir.'

'I swear on Jupiter's cock,' Blaesus growled at Silo, his broad chest heaving, 'I'll make you sorry you were ever born.'

Figulus looked at Blaesus and arched his eyebrows. 'You're a German?'

Blaesus clenched his jaws. 'Half, sir,' he replied, quickly sobering up. 'I was born in Argentoratum. In the village next to the Second Legion's fort.' Then he lowered his eyes in shame. 'My mother was a tart, sir. She did a brisk trade with the soldiers at the fort. When she died, I was adopted by a centurion and raised with his family. As soon as I was old enough, I enlisted in the Second.'

Figulus nodded sympathetically. Now he understood why Blaesus had snapped at the other soldier in a blind rage. It didn't excuse his behaviour, but Figulus knew all too well what it felt like to be an outsider in the legion. He was aware of the insults muttered behind his back, the disparaging remarks about Gauls and the distrustful looks of comrades who questioned where his loyalties truly lay and for a brief moment he even forgot about the earnings Blaesus owed him.

'Half German I may be,' Blaesus added, 'but I've spent my whole life surrounded by the army. Got a centurion for a father and the Second Legion in my blood. Sir.'

He puffed out his chest in pride and cocked his chin at Silo. 'More than some of this lot, I'll wager.'

Figulus bit his lip. Strictly speaking he knew he ought to put Blaesus on a charge. Fighting between soldiers was prohibited in the legions, and as an officer he was expected to enforce the stringent rules. But his soldierly instincts told him that Blaesus was a good fighting man and would be handy if they ran into trouble. There were precious few such men left in the century; if he disciplined Blaesus, booting him out of the detachment, he would be replaced by a less experienced soldier. On the other hand, if Figulus forgot the issue for the moment and only dealt with it on their return, he risked looking weak in front of the men. Besides, it would not be good to go into the mission with tension simmering under the surface. Figulus made a decision, cleared his throat and looked sternly at Blaesus and Silo in turn.

'One more word from either of you and I'll have you both on a charge. Got it?'

'Yes, sir,' both men mumbled quietly before resuming their places in the line. Satisfied that he'd dealt with the situation, Figulus turned to the other men. 'That goes for all of you. The next man who steps out of line will be on fatigues for the next month with no pay. Am I clear?'

'Yes, sir!'

'I can't hear you!' Figulus bellowed.

'YES, SIR!'

'Better.' Figulus fixed his gaze on the soldiers. In spite of the hardships they had endured and the treacherous mission they were about to undertake, none of them displayed a trace of nerves, and Figulus felt a surge of confidence at the sight of these brave fighting men. He took a deep breath and prepared to address them for the first time as their commanding officer.

'Right then, lads. As you've probably heard, Ocella is currently laid up in the field hospital. That means I'm your acting centurion for the time being. Titus Rullus here will be acting optio. We'll be marching through the night. If I catch anyone slacking off you'll be in a world of shit.' He paused, scratching his backside as he tried to think of something else to say. 'There'll be absolute silence. We're heading into enemy territory and we don't want any unwelcome attention. The scout'll steer us clear of any trouble but I don't want you lot taking any chances.' He paused again. 'And, er, watch yourself. Your average Durotrigan might look as thick as cow shit, but they're crafty buggers. There's plenty of dead Romans who've underestimated them in battle.' He stopped and shrugged. 'Anyone got a question?'

An awkward silence hung over the detachment. A soldier coughed loudly. Rullus shifted on his feet. Stiffening his neck, Figulus filled his lungs and bellowed, 'Sixth Century, fall out!'

At his command each legionary grabbed his grounded javelin and trooped towards the main gates, where three ox-driven wagons, weighed down with baskets from the grain stores, waited to set off. Beside the wagons stood a spindly, bald-headed man dressed in woollen breeches: Magadubnus, the native scout who would be accompanying the soldiers on the march. As Figulus watched the men file past him, he noticed Helva lagging behind. The legionary's sidebag had fallen from his belt, spilling its contents over the ground.

‘Get a bloody move on, soldier!’ Figulus barked.

Helva frantically shoved his rations back inside the sidebag and hurried along. ‘Yes, sir.’ He grinned at Figulus before adding, ‘Can’t wait to get stuck in, sir. Kill me a Briton or two. That’ll impress the girls back home.’

Figulus cocked his head at the legionary. ‘You’ve not killed anyone before?’

Helva shook his head. ‘But I used to do plenty of hunting on my father’s farm in Campania, sir. I hunted all sorts: hares, wild boar and deer. Slaying Britons can’t be much different.’

‘If you say so, lad,’ Figulus replied flatly, reminded of his own misguided enthusiasm when he’d first signed up to life with the Second Legion. ‘Now, how about you focus on keeping pace with the march and worry about killing Britons later.’

Helva nodded and hurried on to take his place alongside his comrades. As the small column of men and wagons filed beyond the picket lines, Figulus noticed Blaesus and Silo exchanging vengeful stares. There would be bad blood between the two men for a while. He made a mental note to himself to keep an eye on both soldiers during the operation. With a final glance past his shoulder, Figulus watched the flickering lights of the marching camp fade into the darkness. Then he faced forward and led the soldiers into the dark shroud of the night.

## Chapter 7

As the soldiers marched through the marsh, a thin fog descended over the isle, covering the ground in a fine cobwebbed mist. Gradually Figulus’s eyes adjusted to the dark, and what had previously been a shapeless dark mass now betrayed the faintest of details: a sloping hill fractionally lighter than the night sky, the waters of a distant bay softly gleaming under the wan moonlight. In an effort to lighten the load, Figulus had decided that the soldiers would not carry the usual marching yokes or apron belts. Instead they were equipped with only their shields, swords, spears and armour. Their meagre rations, consisting of chunks of leavened bread and vinegared water, were stashed in their sidebags and waterskins respectively. Magadubnus led the way, moving a few paces ahead of the foremost soldier with a deftness that belied his years, periodically stopping to assess his surroundings, his eyes studying the natural dips and rises of the land. Although he trusted the scout’s instincts, Figulus worried that they were veering hopelessly off course. If the detachment found itself on open ground when dawn broke, they would be horribly exposed to the Durotrigan scouts combing the land.

As well as the ever-present fear of attack, the men had to contend with the treacherous nature of the terrain. Figulus kept his eyes fixed to the ground, watching out for any obstacles that could trip up the unsuspecting soldier. On a march through hostile territory, far from the comfort of the marching camp and the field hospital, a twisted ankle could be just as fatal as a stab wound from an unseen Briton. The pace of the march was unsteady and every so often one of the wagons would get stuck in the waterlogged ground. Then the entire column had to

stop while teams of men set down their weapons and toiled to prise the wheels free from the quagmire.

Figulus was acutely aware of every sound in the night air: the thick squelch of sodden mud beneath his boots and the hoots of distant owls. From time to time he would glance to the side, straining his eyes at some distant scrub or gloomy copse, convinced that he'd seen a figure moving among the endlessly shifting shapes of the dark. Figulus knew that it was simply his eyes playing cruel tricks on him, painting silhouettes where there were none. But he could not quite shake off the disturbing sense that the small column of Roman soldiers was being watched. As they ventured deeper into the heartland, he grew certain that the enemy was lurking nearby.

A few hours later the sky lightened close to the horizon and the twinkling stars began to fade. Figulus stifled a yawn. His eyes felt heavy, as if they were filled with sand. Remembering an old trick, he reached for the leather waterskin hanging from his belt, removed the cork stopper and tilted his head back, tipping a few drops of vinegared water into both his eyes. The liquid stung sharply and his eyes ran from the burning pain. But it had the desired effect and snapped him out of his weary stupor.

'What do you reckon, sir?' Rullus said quietly as he narrowed his eyes at Magadubnus a short distance in front of the column. 'Do you trust him?'

'Magadubnus?' Figulus rubbed his eyes. 'Don't see any reason why not.'

Rullus grunted. 'Wish I could say the same, sir. Don't forget he's a native. Backstabbing is a way of life for these scum. All the tribes and factions they have, sir, forever fighting each other over land and women.' He lowered his voice, careful to make sure that the scout could not overhear them. 'You grow up surrounded by enemies, you learn to have eyes in the back of your head. That's what makes the Britons worse than the Germans. Take it from me, I've fought plenty of both.'

Figulus considered the veteran. 'You used to be on the Rhine frontier?'

'I joined not long after the legion transferred there. Tribune Vitellius's uncle was the legate back then. Used to see his nephew running around the legionary camp as a boy. Now he's in charge of the whole bloody legion. Or what's left of it on the mainland, anyway.' He shook his head. 'I've spent twenty-two years in the legions, all told. More than half my life, sir. One more campaign, then I'm due for retirement.'

'What'll you do then?'

Rullus considered for a moment. 'To be honest I haven't really thought about it, sir. The legion's all I've known since I stepped into the recruiting office in Tusculum as a fresh-faced young lad. Maybe I'll buy a plot of land somewhere. Settle down with a nice tart and a vineyard of my own. Who knows?'

'Here in Britannia?' Figulus asked.

'Gods, no!' Rullus looked horrified. 'Who'd want to live in this shit hole?'

'Ah, it's not all that bad,' Figulus replied cheerfully. 'The weather's shit, I'll grant you. But there's plenty of good meat and decent beer to be had, and the women may be ugly but they aren't half bad in the sack.'

'Spoken like a true Gaul.'

Figulus grinned. Before he could respond, the column abruptly drew to a halt and he looked ahead to see Magadubnus had stopped. Figulus moved stiffly down

the line, his legs feeling twice as heavy as they had done at the start of the march. He had no idea how much further they had to go.

‘What the hell have we stopped for this time?’ Silo complained to the man next to him as Figulus brushed past. Figulus shot the legionary a cold look before moving to join Magadubnus a short distance to the side of the column. The scout stared ahead, scanning the dense forest in front of the Romans.

‘Thought I saw something,’ Magadubnus said in thickly accented Latin, turning to meet the Gaul’s questioning gaze.

Figulus felt a stab of anxiety in his chest. ‘Where?’  
‘Ahead.’

Figulus squinted at the darkness and grunted. ‘Can’t see anything.’

‘Evil spirits here, sa,’ Magadubnus cautioned. ‘We must move on, quickly.’

Figulus sheathed his sword, forcing his tensed muscles to relax. He gave the order for the men to resume the march and strode a few paces ahead of the column, with Magadubnus pacing at his side.

‘You look more like one of us than a Roman,’ the scout observed as they trudged through the dense forest. ‘You’re not from Italia, are you?’

Figulus shook his head. ‘I was born in Lutetia.’

‘A Celt from the Aedui tribe?’ There was a note of surprise in the scout’s voice and he stared at Figulus curiously. ‘If I may ask, how did you end up in the service of Rome and her legions?’

Figulus pursed his lips and stared ahead. ‘My grandfather, Parisiacus, was a warrior in the tribe. He took part in the revolt against Rome. But they were beaten and...’ His voice faded and he closed his eyes for a moment.

‘What happened?’ Magadubnus asked in a whisper.

Figulus turned to the scout and exhaled deeply. ‘He died. He spent years hiding in the forest.’ He waved a hand at the surrounding woods. ‘Similar to this one, come to think of it. I only saw him once, just before he died at my parents’ home. Sickly pale and close to death, he was, lying on a bedroll. He cursed Rome with his last draw of breath.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Magadubnus said quietly.

‘After that, most of the men in our town sided with Rome. They knew they had been defeated, and there would be no going back to the old ways. My father served in the auxiliary cavalry. Saw action in Moesia and on the Rhine. Did his twenty-five years and got his Roman citizenship. He raised me to be the same. Other children grew up on stories of Vercingetorix, but I heard stories about the great soldiers in the legions.’ He shrugged. ‘It sounded like a good life. You get a decent pay—more than I’d earn back home, at least—and you get to see the world. The day I turned eighteen, I enlisted.’ Figulus glanced at Magadubnus. ‘What about you?’

Magadubnus feigned puzzlement. ‘What about me?’

‘Why are you helping us fight your own kind?’

Magadubnus thought for a moment before replying. ‘I used to be a farmer,’ he said. ‘Lived in a village, not far from Vindocladia. It was a hard life, but an honest one. Then one day the warrior prince came to our village, rounded up every young, able-bodied man and pressed them into service. To fight the Romans, they said. They took my firstborn. I never saw him again. There was no one left to pick our

crops. They withered and died, and many people in the village starved. One year later, the prince returned. This time he took my youngest son. He died too. Now our village is gone. Our people are left with nothing.' His voice quivered as he added, 'The Durotrigians blame the Romans for bringing war to our land. But they are the ones who chose to fight, who refuse to sue for peace. Rome did not take my sons from me, my crops, my wife. The Durotrigians took these things. Many times I have been asked, why do I fight for Rome? I do not care for Rome, Gaul. I fight because I despise the Durotrigians.'

He looked quickly away and Figulus felt a sudden pang of pity for Magadubnus. Through no fault of his own, the scout found himself in an impossible position, forced to choose between working for the men who had invaded his land and the warriors who had killed his family. Even if the Second Legion did eventually succeed in subduing the Durotrigians, Magadubnus would have to live the rest of his days in fear of reprisal from the warriors he had betrayed. And yet Rome relied on such men for victory, the disparate network of informants, scouts, spies and interpreters who were instrumental in providing the legions with vital intelligence on the strengths and weaknesses of their enemies.

They followed a rough track through the forest, twisting between dense thickets of ash trees and hawthorns. By now the fog had settled into a dense veil and took on a luminous glow in the pre-dawn light. Figulus ordered the men to keep silent, fearful that any sudden noise might reveal their presence to any nearby Durotrigan forces. No one said a word as they marched on through the forest. The silence was broken only by the cracking of twigs underfoot and the snorting of the oxen to the rear of the column as they pulled the creaking wagons along the trail.

A short while later the column emerged from the forest. It was past dawn now and the fog gradually lifted to reveal a wide plain nestled between a series of gently sloping hills. Magadubnus drew to a halt and pointed towards a minor settlement two hundred paces away. 'Here,' he said. 'The village, sa.'

Figulus ran his eyes over the place. A shoddily constructed palisade encircled the settlement, with scores of the cone-like thatched roofs of Celtic huts visible above the sharpened wooden stakes. A rough track ran directly from the edge of the forest to the gate at the front of the village. Thick palls of woodsmoke drifted lazily up from fires burning within.

Rullus joined Figulus. 'What now, sir?' he whispered.

'This way,' Magadubnus said, gesturing for them to continue towards the gates. 'We meet the chief. He is waiting for us, sa.'

Rullus pulled a face and spat on the ground. He glanced at Figulus, a deep frown creasing his brow. 'Bollocks to that. We should make the exchange out here in the open, sir. It should be on our terms, not his.'

Magadubnus shook his head. 'I'm afraid that is not what was agreed with Legate Celer. Grain first. Then prisoners.'

'I don't like it, sir,' Rullus protested.

Figulus considered for a moment. As far as he could tell, there was only one gate leading in and out of the village. If he agreed to enter the settlement, once his men were gathered inside they could easily be trapped. Then Figulus reminded himself that these people were hungry and desperate civilians, driven to

negotiating a deal with their hated enemy in order to stave off starvation. He doubted such people would pose much threat to forty armed Roman soldiers.

‘Very well,’ he told Magadubnus.

‘But, sir,’ Rullus began.

Figulus cut him off. ‘We don’t have any choice. Their chief has the prisoners. He can set whatever demands he wants.’ He turned back to Magadubnus. ‘Send for the chief. Tell him we’ll move the grain wagons into the village as soon as he gives the word.’

With a quick smile, Magadubnus turned and scurried down the track. Figulus watched him as he darted inside the village. Several moments passed. Then he reappeared at the gates alongside a frail-looking man with flowing grey hair and a wispy beard, accompanied by a pair of bodyguards. He waited hesitantly by the gates while Magadubnus signalled for the Roman column to approach. At once Figulus turned to the men and gave the order to proceed towards the village, and the still early morning air was filled with the soft thud of boots on grass and the tinkling of metal pendants swaying from each soldier’s belt. When Figulus reached the gates, Magadubnus stepped forward and gestured to the man at his side.

‘May I introduce Brigotinus, chief of this settlement.’

Figulus acknowledged the chief with a curt nod. ‘Acting Centurion Horatius Figulus of the Sixth Century, Fifth Cohort. These are my men. I’ve been sent by the legate, Lucius Aelianus Celer, to fulfil our side of the bargain.’

Brigotinus raised an eyebrow in surprise at Figulus’s command of his native tongue. ‘You speak the language of my people. I’m impressed. I was led to believe that the Romans do not bother to learn the tongues of the people they wish to rule over.’

‘Not all of us are the same,’ Figulus replied.

The chief grunted. With his stooped posture and sunken cheekbones, the chief cut a pathetic figure. From the numerous scars on his torso Figulus reasoned that Brigotinus had once been a proud warrior. But age and years of hardship had reduced the chief to a pale shadow of his former self. Brigotinus smiled at Figulus, parting his lips to reveal a set of crooked yellow teeth which reminded the Gaul of the gravestones he’d seen in the native burial sites scattered across the mainland. The chief muttered something to Magadubnus in his native dialect.

‘What’d he say, sir?’ Rullus asked.

Magadubnus replied for the chief. ‘Brigotinus wishes to reassure you that the Roman prisoners are in good health. He says they have been treated well. He hopes this will convince your legate to protect his people from the Durotrigan warriors.’ Magadubnus leaned towards the Romans and lowered his voice as he spoke in Latin. ‘Between ourselves, the chief is worried about reprisals. Should the warriors learn of this exchange, they will surely punish these people and raze the village to the ground.’

‘Why in the hell would the Durotrigans do that?’ Rullus spluttered. ‘They’re all Britons. That means they’re all on the same side.’

‘Not quite,’ Magadubnus corrected. ‘We Durotrigans are not a single tribe, but many smaller tribes based around blood ties. The refugees from the mainland belong to a different tribe to the villagers.’

‘But you’re all fighting Rome,’ Rullus replied tartly.

‘True,’ the scout conceded. ‘But I assure you, Roman, our peoples have been fighting each other for much longer than your men have been on our shores. It is true that the invasion has united the tribes in opposition to Rome. But if the warriors discover that the prisoners have been traded for food, they will spare no one. They will treat the villagers as harshly as if they were Roman soldiers. Perhaps worse.’

Rullus grunted sceptically.

‘Magadubnus is right,’ Figulus put in. ‘The Durotrigians loathe traitors even more than they hate us. If they find out what Brigotinus has done, they’ll torture and kill every one of the villagers.’

‘That’s not our problem, though, is it?’ Rullus retorted. ‘Our mission is to oversee the exchange and bring home the prisoners safe and sound.’

Figulus nodded reluctantly and shouted the order for the column to march into the village. He posted Silo and another soldier, Postumus, on watch beyond the entrance, reasoning that the two soldiers could send for help if there was any sign of danger. And by putting Silo on sentry duty, Figulus could keep him away from Blaesus and avoid the bad blood between the two men spilling over into a physical confrontation. Figulus followed Magadubnus through the village, keeping his palm rested on the pommel of his sword. Magadubnus seemed agitated, Figulus thought. His eyes were constantly darting left and right as he scanned the hills flanking the village, as if looking for something.

A crowd of hungry-eyed men and women gathered outside their wattle and daub huts to greet the Romans with icy stares and looks of utter contempt. Figulus noted that many of the villagers were even thinner than the warriors he’d encountered on the beach the previous day. Children stopped playing and stared. Several villagers cast their hungry eyes over the grain wagons at the rear of the column and for a moment Figulus feared that the column might find itself besieged by the starving crowd. As he picked his way through the natives it suddenly occurred to him that there was none of the usual bleating of livestock common to Celtic villages. Then he caught sight of a dog being spit-roasted over an open fire and his stomach churned. The people had been reduced to slaughtering their domestic animals for food. No wonder the chief had been so willing to negotiate for the release of the prisoners, Figulus thought. His people were on the cusp of starving to death.

Magadubnus stopped in the middle of the village in front of a large roundhouse with a cattle pen to the east. To the side of the settlement stood a dozen storage huts, where the grain supply was traditionally kept during the harsh winter months. These huts now stood empty, attesting to the desperate situation the villagers found themselves in. Brigotinus turned to Figulus and nodded at the wagons.

‘Tell your men to unload the grain here. Once my men have checked that every modius of grain is accounted for, we will hand over the prisoners.’

Figulus shook his head. ‘I want to see the prisoners first.’

Brigotinus’s wizened face folded into a deep frown. ‘That was not what was agreed, Roman. I suggest you do as I say.’

Figulus replied in the chief's native tongue. 'I take orders from my centurion, my legate and the Emperor of Rome. Not the likes of you. And I won't allow my men to begin unloading the grain until I've seen proof that the prisoners are alive.'

The chief sighed wearily. 'Very well. As you wish.'

The chief gestured to one of his men. As the villager trudged towards the cattle pen, Figulus allowed himself a slight sigh of relief. The exchange was almost complete. Once his men had finished unloading the grain and the prisoners were fully accounted for, his detachment could begin the long journey back to the marching camp. He licked his lips at the thought of his warm tent and the hot evening meal waiting for him upon his return.

The bodyguard had almost reached the pen when a shout pierced the air.

Figulus snapped his gaze towards the entrance. He saw Silo and Postumus scrambling past the huts and sprinting towards him, their eyes wide with terror and their faces drained of colour. Postumus reached him a few steps ahead of his comrade, sweat running down his brow.

'What is it?' Figulus demanded.

'Must be a hundred of them, sir,' he said between sharp intakes of air.

'Who?' Figulus barked, suddenly furious with this man. His flustered demeanour was spreading panic amongst his fellow soldiers. 'What the hell are you talking about?'

Postumus caught his breath. 'Durotrigans, sir. Armed.' He pointed to the hill beyond the walls of the settlement. 'Came out of nowhere. They're heading right for us.'

Figulus felt the hairs on the nape of his neck stand on end. Beside him Brigotinus visibly trembled, the colour draining from his face. 'Betrayed!' the chief whispered icily. 'We have been betrayed!' He glowered at Magadubnus.

The scout shifted on the spot. Figulus was about to question him when a shrill cry split the air and he swivelled his gaze back to the entrance just in time to see several javelins launch over the palisades and rain down over the village. A javelin impaled Silo through the back. The legionary spasmed and let out an almost inhuman cry of agony. His cries were swiftly drowned out by a throated roar coming from beyond the entrance. The men of the Sixth Century simultaneously looked up from the stricken legionary and saw a teeming mass of Durotrigan warriors a short distance from the settlement, charging towards the entrance.

'Where the fuck did they come from?' Figulus growled as he unsheathed his sword.

Brigotinus balled his hands into tight fists at his side. 'Someone must have told them about our plan. They have come to punish us.' There was a look of fear in his eyes. 'They're going to kill us all.'

## Chapter 8

There was no time for Figulus to form up the men. By now the Durotrigans were only a few paces short of the entrance. Then they were sweeping into the village in

a frenzied blur of movement: thickset men wearing homespun trousers and spiked-up hair. Some of them were armed with thrusting spears, others wielded long swords or broadaxes. One of the warriors surged ahead of his comrades and brought his broadaxe down on the nearest villager in a heavy swinging motion. The man let out a hideous shriek of pain as the axe head slammed into his skull with a dull, wet crunch. The man fell away, blood squirting out of his skull as the warriors stormed past his lifeless body and fanned out across the settlement, their faces twisted into raging snarls.

‘On me!’ Figulus shouted to his men at the top of his voice. ‘NOW!’

His words were drowned out by the screams and shouts coming from the panicked villagers as the Durotrigan warriors set upon them, cutting them down in a mad flurry of hacks and slashes. Terrified women grabbed their children and ducked into their huts in a desperate attempt to hide from the enemy. At the same time the main body of Durotrigans charged directly at the Roman column forming up in the middle of the settlement. Steeling his muscles, Figulus trained his sword point towards the swarm of onrushing Britons and filled his lungs.

‘Sixth Century!’ he bellowed. ‘Charge!’

He raced towards the enemy, tensing his grip on the handle of his shield, his men charging alongside him. As Figulus drew closer to the seething horde of warriors he could feel his heart thumping inside his chest. Gripping his sword firmly in his right hand, he lunged at a heavysset Briton with an iron torc wrapped round his thick neck. The warrior brought his sword down towards the Gaul’s neck with a snarling roar. Figulus quickly hunched behind his shield, blocking the attack. A shudder travelled up his forearm as his opponent’s blade hammered against the iron rim of his shield. Now Figulus pushed forward, stabbing up at the Briton’s throat with his short sword. The warrior saw the gleaming sword point driving towards him at the last moment and deftly sidestepped the blow, hissing through gritted teeth as the blade nicked his shoulder, slicing through muscle and grating against his shoulder bone. The man fell back a step, clasp ing a hand to his wound and cursing the Gaul in his native tongue.

Shaking his head clear, the warrior launched himself at Figulus again, this time aiming a kick at the bottom edge of Figulus’s shield, tipping it forward so that the Gaul’s upper torso was exposed to the enemy. The warrior angled his blade towards the Gaul’s neck. Figulus quickly dropped to his haunches and avoided the thrusting blade by just a few inches. As momentum carried the warrior forward half a step, Figulus sprang up on the balls of his feet and plunged the tip of his blade into the man’s groin. The warrior gasped. Blood instantly stained his trousers. Then Figulus gave the blade a twist, carving up the man’s internals and drawing a keening sound from his throat. The Gaul wrenched his weapon free with a loud grunt. He felt a hot thrill run through his veins as the Durotrigan keeled over.

Sweating heavily, Figulus glanced around at the battle raging inside the village. The Roman soldiers had by now formed a solid formation either side of him and were attacking the Durotrigans with a concerted series of shield thrusts and swordstabs. At that instant a panicked shout came from the right flank and Figulus glanced across his shoulder to see a marauding band of Durotrigans charging out from behind the grain huts. With a feeling of dread tingling down his

spine, Figulus realized the warriors had crept round the edge of the settlement unseen. Now they fell upon the Roman soldiers with savage intent, cutting the closest men down in a lightning-quick flurry of hacks and wild thrusts. Amid the confusion Figulus spotted one soldier being struck down by a Briton with a wolfskin draped round his neck. The Briton rolled the legionary on to his back and raised his long sword above his head before jamming the blade down with a throated roar. The Roman screamed for help. His cries were instantly silenced as the sword tip plunged into his gaping mouth.

Seized by a sudden rage, Figulus immediately charged at the Briton, skewering him in the flank. Figulus could feel the tip glancing off his ribs as it punched through his lower chest. As he watched the warrior fall away, he heard a faint low hiss behind him and glimpsed a dull glint out of the corner of his eye. Figulus half turned to see a giant of a man clasping a broadaxe in a two-handed grip. At the last possible moment he deflected the blow with his shield, and there was a violent crack as the axe head split open the shield and buried itself in the wooden surface. With a snarled grunt, the Durotrigan wrenched his broadaxe away, ripping the shield from the Gaul's stunned grip in the same brutal motion. Deprived of his shield, Figulus stabbed his opponent in the thigh. The Briton showed no sign of pain. Instead he kicked Figulus in the stomach, knocking him off his feet. He felt the air push out of his chest in a painful rush as he landed on his back, his sword tumbling from his hand.

He looked up to see the warrior looming over him and caught a whiff of his foul breath as the man bared his crooked teeth. His scarred lips formed a twisted, sinister smile. The Durotrigan slowly raised the heavy broadaxe above his head to deliver the fatal blow. A cold fear ran through Figulus. He was going to die here, in this pitiful corner of the empire.

Then he heard a growl from behind the warrior. The Briton heard it too and began to turn. Figulus glimpsed a flash of steel driving towards the man's broad shoulders and saw Blaesus plunge his sword into the nape of his neck. The Durotrigan convulsed as the sword punched out of his throat in a single brutal thrust. He wavered on the spot for a moment, blood spewing out of his mouth while his dimming eyes lowered to the steel tip protruding from his throat. He pawed uselessly at his wound. Then Blaesus pulled his sword free and the Durotrigan's legs buckled. The man collapsed in a bloodied heap beside Figulus. Blaesus loomed over the fallen Briton, his chest heaving as he searched for the next enemy to kill.

'Come on!' he thundered at the top of his voice. 'Which one of you bastards wants it?'

Another warrior set upon the legionary but Blaesus reacted in a fast flicker of movement, tearing into the Briton and slashing open his belly. Then he charged at a third Durotrigan, head-butting the man before he could thrust at him with his sword. Blaesus was seemingly Hades-bent on defeating the flank attack by himself. The Durotrigans, accustomed to the Roman tactics of a solid wall of men crouching behind their shields, were stunned by the sight of Blaesus tearing into their ranks and they scattered. Figulus grabbed his sword and shield and scraped himself off the ground. He charged forward to join Blaesus and the two burly soldiers fought side by side to repel the enemy attack.

‘Hot work, sir!’ Blaesus said with a grin.

‘Going to get hotter.’ Figulus cut down another warrior. He looked up, searching for another enemy. An icy grip of fear clamped round his neck as he looked back at the roundhouse. ‘Shit! The prisoners!’

Three Durotrigans had managed to slip through the melee and were now racing towards the pen. Figulus grabbed the nearest soldiers in the line, Helva and Postumus, and gestured towards the pen. ‘You two. With me! Now!’

A putrid stench emanated from the willow-weave walls of the cattle pen as the three men drew close. Fighting the impulse to gag, Figulus wrenched the gate open and stormed inside. He saw the burly Durotrigans charging towards the manacled prisoners, their sword points glinting in the murky light as they shaped to execute the stricken Romans. While Blaesus and Helva fell upon the others, Figulus sprang forward on the balls of his feet and slammed his shield into the closest warrior’s back. There was a satisfying crunch as the shield crashed against the base of his spine. The Durotrigan let out an anguished grunt as the force of the blow knocked him to the hay-strewn floor. Figulus leapt forward before the man could reach for his fallen sword, stabbing him between the shoulder blades.

Past his right shoulder he caught sight of Helva locked in a desperate struggle with another Durotrigan. The Briton had kicked away the Roman’s shield and sword and his scarred hands were clamped round his enemy’s neck. Helva struggled for breath as the Durotrigan pushed him back against the pen wall. In a flash the young legionary reached a hand down to his belt and, snatching at his dagger, stabbed the warrior several times in his flank. The Durotrigan kept on trying to strangle his enemy, even as blood gushed out of his stomach. Helva continued stabbing the man repeatedly. After a couple more breaths the Durotrigan fell away, snarling and cursing at the Roman, his teeth stained with blood. Figulus raced over and ended the warrior’s life with a quick thrust to the neck. Helva stood rooted to the spot, staring down at his shaking hands. His cockiness faded away, replaced by horror and revulsion at the dead man at his feet.

‘I killed him,’ Helva said quietly. ‘I killed a man.’

It was then that Figulus noticed the terrible state of the prisoners. Their frayed army-issue tunics hung like rags from their skeletal frames, their skin was thinly stretched across their gaunt faces. The squalid pen reeked of urine, shit and sweat. Merely drawing breath within these walls was enough to make Figulus want to retch. The straw was soiled with blood and faecal matter. Iron chains bound each prisoner’s scrawny ankles and wrists, with a long chain linking the men together. Some of the prisoners were missing teeth, Figulus noted grimly. One man had several stumps in place of his fingers. The Gaul shuddered at the thought of the unimaginable suffering these men had endured over the past few months. He quickly counted the number of prisoners—twelve—and turned to Helva.

‘Looks like all the prisoners are here. Help these men outside, lad.’

Helva nodded distantly.

‘Now, Helva!’ Figulus thundered.

While the two legionaries helped the captives to their feet, Figulus turned and hurried outside of the pen. He spotted the bloodied bodies of several villagers

nearby and a fist clenched his heart at their needless suffering for their perceived betrayal of the wider Durotrigan cause. He raced past the sprawled bodies and charged towards the fighting. By now the men of the Sixth Century, spurred on by the actions of Rullus and Blaesus, were pushing back the Durotrigans, who were beginning to tire as the ferocious opposition to their attack began to take its toll. The ground underfoot was slick with blood and Figulus almost slipped on the greasy surface as he took his place in the formation alongside Rullus, thrusting his sword into the eye of a Durotrigan a few inches opposite his shield.

To the rear of the warrior ranks Figulus spied a man riding up and down on horseback. He was dressed in a long black robe with a hood pulled low over his pale face, shading his features. A Druid, Figulus realized with a shudder. The Druid appeared to be in command of the Durotrigan troops, urging them on. Despite his repeated exhortations the warriors were giving ground, weary and terrified by the ferocity of their Roman opponents. Figulus felt his chest swell as the Romans edged ever closer to victory. He bellowed orders for his men to hold formation as they continued to push the enemy back. As yet more of their companions were cut down, the Durotrigans to the rear started to turn away from the fight, fleeing the village.

‘Come on, lads!’ Figulus roared, struggling to make himself heard about the rasping clash of steel on steel. ‘We’ve got ’em on the back foot! Let’s finish the job!’

Seeing their companions retreating, the main body of the Durotrigans finally broke and ran. The skirmish turned into a chaotic free-for-all as the Roman soldiers swiftly descended on the fleeing Durotrigans, killing many before they could escape. The Druid defiantly held his ground by the entrance, ordering his men to stand and fight. But his orders were largely ignored. The remaining warriors were torn between obeying their Druid commander and dying an honourable death in a flicker of Roman sword points, or suffering the indignity of retreat. Most chose the former, and Figulus and his men eagerly gave the warriors their wish and cut them down. Realizing that all was lost, the Druid jabbed his heels into the flank of his mount and raced away from the battle with a handful of warriors running at his side.

Figulus felt his forearm muscles ache from the strain of battle. He turned to Rullus. ‘You’re in charge here. Kill any wounded. We can’t afford to take any prisoners back with us. Once you’re done, order the column to form up and prepare to fall out.’

Rullus blinked sweat out of his eyes. ‘Where are you going, sir?’

Figulus tipped his head towards the retreating Druid. ‘Some of those bastards are escaping. Can’t have that now, can we?’

Rullus grinned. Figulus gathered a handful of soldiers and set off in the direction of the Druid, blood pounding in his veins. He was sweating profusely in spite of the chill weather and as he hurried along he could feel his leg muscles aching from the exertions of the past several hours. He willed his weary body on, gripped by a compulsive desire to capture the Druid and kill him, spurred on by the image of the slaughtered women and infants. A short distance ahead the warriors jogging alongside the Druid abruptly stopped, turning to confront the pursuing Romans while their commander bolted up the hill on his black mount.

‘You’re mine!’ a stocky Durotrigan wielding a wooden club barked at Figulus.

He lunged at the Gaul with surprising speed, dodging a quick stab from Figulus before kicking his shield away and smashing his club against the side of the Gaul's helmet. Figulus saw white for a brief moment and a jarring pain rattled through his skull. He barely had time to regain his balance before the Durotrigan clubbed him again. A sharp pain exploded through his skull as the iron band wrapped round the end of the club struck his cheekguard and Figulus stumbled backwards.

He shook his groggy head clear. He tasted something warm and salty in his mouth. Spitting out blood, Figulus thrust his sword at his opponent. But his movement was slow and clumsy and the Durotrigan easily sidestepped his tired attack before shaping to club him a third time. This time, though, Figulus anticipated the move and, summoning one last shred of energy, he managed to deflect the blow with his shield before bringing it crashing down on top of his opponent's bare feet. The man howled in agony as the iron shield edge crushed his toes. Now Figulus followed up in a flash, launching a powerful thrust at the warrior's midriff and sinking his blade into his stomach, plunging it in all the way to the handle. The man spasmed. Figulus ripped out the blade. Blood gushed down his front and splashed his toes. Figulus looked around for another enemy. But there were none left to kill. The other soldiers had made short work of the Durotrigans, killing them with ruthless efficiency. Only the Druid was left.

The sound of hooves clomping on wet earth reached Figulus's ears. He snapped his gaze forward just in time to see the Druid galloping towards the crest of the hill. Anger burned inside him. The Druid was already too far away. He was going to escape, and there was nothing Figulus could do about it. At the top of the hill the Druid abruptly reined in his mount, drawing the horse to a halt. He pivoted in his saddle and looked back at the Gaul, smirking as if taunting him. His cloak hood had fallen from his head, revealing a hideously disfigured face with a crop of hair the colour of chalk. Then Figulus noticed a mark on his pale forehead: a dark ink tattoo of a crescent moon. The Druid scowled at Figulus before twisting back round in his saddle and jabbing his heel into his horse's flank. He promptly disappeared from view down the other side of the hill. A pair of soldiers started to run after the Druid but Figulus thrust out a hand and shook his head.

'Too late, lads,' he panted. 'We're too late. He's gone.'

He trudged back towards the settlement, a leaden feeling weighing heavily in his chest. He should have been basking in the warm glow of victory. After all, his men had survived an ambush, the prisoners had been rescued and he'd saved most of the villagers from certain death. But instead he felt only a sharp pang of disappointment. The Druid had escaped. Dozens of the villagers had been slain. His own men had sustained numerous casualties. They had been lured into a trap and had paid a terrible price.

Reaching the entrance, he sought out Rullus and found the veteran by the main roundhouse, busy organizing the surviving soldiers into a marching column. Several of the men had sustained wounds in the battle, and Figulus ordered those men who were fit enough to stand to take their place in the line. Those who were too badly maimed to continue on foot were carried on makeshift stretchers to the rear wagon. Figulus issued instructions for the grain baskets to be unloaded in order to make space for the injured soldiers. Some of them were in such a poor

state he privately doubted whether they would survive the journey back through the marshes.

‘We should leave now, sir,’ said Rullus once the wounded soldiers had been lifted on to the wagon. He pointed to the hills. ‘It won’t be long before the ones who legged it send for reinforcements.’

Figulus nodded. He scanned the village, frowning. ‘Where’s Magadubnus?’

Rullus cocked his head at two soldiers manhandling the scout between them. ‘One of our lads caught the bastard trying to escape, sir. Grabbed him before he could get away.’

Figulus scratched his cheek. ‘But—why was he running?’

‘Obvious, isn’t it?’ Rullus snorted. ‘He was the one who led us into this trap, sir.’

‘Liar!’ Magadubnus raged as he overheard the veteran. The soldiers steered him towards the rear of the column. ‘I swear upon all the gods, I’m not working for anyone except your legate!’

Rullus spat. ‘Someone told that lot we’d be here. And it wasn’t the chief who sold us out.’ He glowered at the scout and turned to Figulus. ‘I’m telling you, sir. This one’s working for the enemy.’

Magadubnus trembled. He looked at Figulus, his eyes wide and pleading. ‘Please. I beg of you. I had no idea it was a trap. You must believe me—’

‘Lying scum,’ Rullus interrupted. ‘We should kill him now. Get it over and done with.’

Figulus considered. Despite his suspicions, there was no tangible proof that Magadubnus had conspired with the Durotrigans. After all, the man was one of the legate’s trusted scouts. Could he afford to kill the scout on a mere suspicion? He shook his head briskly.

‘We’ll let the legate decide what to do with him when we get back,’ Figulus said. Then he cocked his chin at a soldier whom he knew to be the most sadistic in the century. ‘Tiberius Culleo.’

‘Sir?’

Figulus gestured to the scout. ‘Keep a close eye on this one.’

Culleo grinned. ‘With pleasure, sir.’

Brigotinus approached. ‘What about my people?’ He waved a hand at the huddle of shivering villagers. ‘You can’t just abandon us here, Roman. You know that the warriors will come back after you leave. We gave you the prisoners as agreed. Now you must help us in return.’

Figulus stared coldly at the village chief. ‘I’m sorry, but there’s nothing else for us to do here. I have my orders. I must return to the camp with the prisoners at once. We can’t stay here and defend your people.’

Brigotinus looked aghast. ‘But when the Durotrigans return, they’ll kill every last one of us. No one will be spared.’

‘The deal was for the grain,’ Figulus replied.

Brigotinus laughed weakly. ‘Grain is no use to us if we are dead, Roman.’

Figulus clenched his jaws shut and glanced at the villagers, their expressions blank with mute horror at the carnage they had just witnessed. In his heart he knew he couldn’t just leave these people behind to their grim fate. Sighing, he turned back to the chief.

‘You can accompany us back to the camp. I can’t say what will happen to you and your people when you arrive there, but at least that way you’ll be safe from reprisals from the Durotrigians.’

‘And leave our village? But ... this is our home. Our livelihood.’ Brigotinus pointed towards the grief-stricken villagers. ‘What will my people do? Where will we go?’

Figulus shrugged. ‘It’s better than being carved up by the enemy. If you don’t believe me, ask them.’ He nodded at the dead villagers slumped across the muddied ground.

The chief shook his head bitterly. Then he swallowed his pride and said, ‘Very well. I will tell my people. We will come with you.’

Then Brigotinus turned his back on Figulus and returned to the villagers, ordering them to take whatever meagre possessions they owned and prepare to quit the village at once. Figulus felt his tensed muscles relax, knowing that he had done the right thing. He anticipated that the legate would severely reprimand him for bringing civilians back to the army camp. But he could live with that.

Once the villagers were ready and the grain had been loaded on to one of the native wagons, Figulus sounded the order for the party to move out of the settlement. The Roman column led the way, with the native tribespeople following in close file behind. They marched at a good pace, eager to put as much distance between themselves and the enemy as possible. Soon the abandoned village was shrinking from view.

As the column approached the forest, Figulus glanced back at the hill. He’d seen the Druid’s tattoo of the crescent moon before. He knew it was the mark of the Dark Moon Lodge, a secretive sect of Druids who peddled a fanatical hatred of Rome and inspired amongst their followers an unbelievable fanaticism in battle, teaching that they would be reincarnated if they fell to a Roman sword. The Druids of the Dark Moon had inspired a defiance unlike anything else Rome had encountered in the province. Most members of the religious order were believed to have been killed during the campaign across the south-west the previous summer. But if the Druids of the Dark Moon were thriving once more on Vectis, Figulus thought grimly, then the men of the Second Legion were in grave danger.

## Chapter 9

A wash of desolate grey clouds hung low in the sky as the detachment from the Sixth Century approached the marching camp in the late afternoon. It had started to rain not long after the men had left the native settlement and they had trudged on in grim silence through the forest and the marshes, their feet slithering in the freshly churned mud, the rain tapping against their helmets and splattering their faces in a relentless icy blast. Figulus could not remember being this tired before in his entire life. Every muscle in his body screamed for rest. But he kept going, driven on by a steely determination to reach the safety of the camp before

nightfall, and as the skies darkened, the weary men of the Sixth Century dragged their aching bodies past the earthworks surrounding the camp.

A short while later the detachment, accompanied by the villagers and the captured scout, crossed the picket lines. Palls of dark grey smoke drifted lazily up from fires burning inside the camp and Figulus licked his lips at the prospect of a hot meal followed by the warm embrace of sleep in the modest warmth of his goatskin tent. At the main gates he identified himself to the officious duty centurion, who waved the men through. Magadubnus was handed over to the legate's bodyguards, and the duty centurion ordered Figulus to present himself to the legate's tent immediately. Meanwhile the freed captives were taken to the field hospital to be fed and clothed, and the villagers were ushered into a guarded compound normally used to hold prisoners of war awaiting interrogation. Many of the villagers cut despondent figures as they trudged into the compound under the stern gaze of the Roman guards. Their livelihoods had been destroyed and they now faced the harsh prospect of rebuilding their lives from scratch. With a sad shake of his head Figulus reminded himself that the invasion had affected countless thousands of villagers just like the ones before him, all because of the ruinous decision of their tribal leaders to wage an unwinnable war against the legions of Rome.

He marched up the main thoroughfare towards the legate's tent. The sun was beginning to set, silhouetting the tent lines against the purple wash of the sky. The bodyguards posted outside saw Figulus approach and promptly stepped aside. The Gaul brushed past them and entered through the tent flap.

'Have a seat,' Celer announced sharply from behind his trestle table. Figulus sat stiffly down on the stool and watched Celer drip wax from a heated wick on to a scroll. An acrid stench lingered in the air as he pressed his ring finger into the melted wax, sealing the document with the insignia of the Second Legion. Then he blew cool air on the wax to harden it and handed the sealed document to a clerk waiting patiently to one side.

'Fetch me the Falernian,' Celer said. 'The good stuff.'

His beady eyes followed the clerk as he hastily marched out of the tent. Then he turned to Figulus, leaning back in his chair and placing his slender hands behind his head. He nodded at a waxed slate on his desk.

'The duty centurion has just informed me of the success of your mission. I understand that the prisoners have been returned safe and sound.'

Figulus nodded tentatively. 'Yes, sir.'

'Splendid.' Celer flashed a broad grin at the Gaul. 'I'd say this rather calls for a celebration, don't you think?' He cleared his throat. 'Although I understand that you ran into some trouble at the village.'

Figulus nodded. 'It was all going to plan until a party of Durotrigan warriors showed up just as we were about to complete the exchange, sir. It's clear the enemy got wind of the chief's plan. They showed up to put a stop to it.'

He related to Celer the Durotrigan ambush in as much detail as possible. The legate listened without interrupting once, still as a Greek statue. When Figulus had finished, Celer steeped his fingers on the desk and narrowed his eyes at the Gaul.

‘I see. Thank you for that, ah, vivid account, Optio.’ Celer placed his hands flat on the oak table surface and sighed heavily through his long sharp nose. ‘As for our, ah, friend Magadubnus, we’re putting the interrogators to work on him as we speak. They’re good at their job and he’ll tell us the truth soon enough.’ He drummed his fingers on the desk and frowned. ‘At least the native’s apparent betrayal explains one particular mystery.’

‘What’s that, sir?’

‘How the enemy came to learn about our plans for the invasion of Vectis. We’ve been searching for the culprit high and low. We never suspected it would be a scout who’d served us so well in the past. But it makes sense. If Magadubnus has indeed been betraying us to the Durotrigians all along, he would have known the precise spot where we intended to land the men.’

Figulus gritted his teeth. ‘That’s why there were so many of the bastards on the beach yesterday.’

‘Once Magadubnus has confessed, and mark my words he will, we’ll crucify them. Tomorrow at dawn. All of the scouts.’

‘All of them, sir?’ Figulus repeated in disbelief.

Celer’s facial muscles twitched with anger. ‘We must send a warning to anyone who dares betray us to the enemy.’ There was an unsettling calm and coldness to the legate’s voice as he spoke. ‘This bloody province. Traitors everywhere you look. You can’t trust anyone. Not even your own scouts, it seems.’

‘But what will we do without scouts, sir?’

Celer smoothed out his features and smiled faintly. ‘We’ll recruit some replacements from the villagers. You insisted on bringing them back with you, so we may as well find some use for them. They know the territory well enough; they ought to be able to do a reasonable job. As for the others, we’ll question them for further information on the enemy. Any intelligence would be helpful at this juncture, considering that we can’t trust any of the intelligence provided to us by Magadubnus or his fellow scouts.’

‘What will become of the villagers, sir?’ Figulus asked. ‘Once they’ve served their purpose.’

Celer shrugged. ‘We’ll ship them back to the mainland for resettlement. There’s no use in keeping the villagers here.’ He smiled. ‘Apart from the ones we choose to act as scouts, of course. They can stay with the legion for as long as we need them.’

Two orderlies entered the tent, one bearing a silver tray with a brass jug and a silver goblet, the other carrying a platter of cold meats and honeyed figs which he laid down on the side table. The Gaul cast a wistful look at the food, his hollow stomach rumbling with hunger. It had been almost a full day since he’d last eaten a proper meal. As the orderlies exited the tent, Celer rose from his chair and poured a generous measure of wine into his goblet. Then he raised his cup and toasted Figulus.

‘To the successful return of the prisoners.’ He took a swig of his Falernian and smacked his lips. ‘You have proved yourself an excellent soldier once again. It’s a shame there are precious few men of your quality left in the legion, or we might already have conquered Vectis.’ Celer paused, toying with the cup in his hand for a long moment. Then he smiled and went on, ‘Not that you will be here for much

longer. Since you clearly have a taste for such tasks, I've chosen you for a special mission.'

Figulus felt his pulse quicken as he stared at the legate. 'What do you want of me, sir?'

Celer set down the wine goblet. 'First, I would like to know something. Do you speak the native tongue?'

'Well enough,' Figulus replied with a shrug. 'Most of the local dialects are fairly close to Gallic, sir. I can understand most of what's being said. May I ask why, sir?'

A curious smile played out across the legate's face. 'An ability to communicate with the locals will prove useful in this particular instance. In fact, it makes you the ideal man for the task.'

'What task, sir?' Figulus asked.

'I received a letter yesterday, shortly before we departed from Noviomagus. A letter from one of Emperor Claudius's imperial envoys. Fellow by the name of Numerius Scylla. He's recently arrived in Britannia in the company of an exiled Durotrigan king. Trenagasus, I believe his name is. Heard of him?'

Figulus shook his head.

The legate clicked his tongue as he rummaged through the paperwork on his desk, locating the papyrus scroll buried amidst a pile of official documents. He quickly scanned the text. 'According to Scylla, King Trenagasus has been living in exile for several years. Courting friends in high places in Rome. Apparently he's returning to this island in order to stake his claim as the rightful ruler of the Durotrigans. Quite why a man would wish to forgo the pleasures of Rome for the deprivations of Britannia is beyond me, but there you have it.'

'Sorry, sir, but there's no such thing as a rightful leader,' Figulus retorted. 'Not among the Durotrigans, at any rate. They're not like the other tribes. No individual rules over them; they hate the idea of being under someone else's thumb. That's one of the reasons they're so bitterly opposed to us.'

Celer squirmed at this uncomfortable truth. 'Be that as it may, Scylla is planning to travel west to Lindinis with Trenagasus, with a view to installing him as king before the year is out. The idea, I gather, is to create a broadly pro-Roman council to head the Durotrigans and begin the process of Romanization of the peoples, thus warding off the threat of the natives rising up against Rome in any great numbers. Or something like that.' He waved the document at Figulus. 'It's all here in the letter, though I can't say I see much point in trying to civilize these drunken, hairy-arsed locals.'

'What's all this got to do with me, sir?'

Celer slid out of his chair and paced over to the side table. He grazed casually on the food. Figulus felt his stomach growl with hunger. 'The envoy has requested that I send him a small detachment of men to accompany them,' Celer said, popping a honeyed fig into his mouth. 'Given his imperial connections, it's vital I send him good men who are up to the task. I can't fob him off with a few wet-behind-the-ears recruits. Especially with Vitellius watching my every move.'

'Vitellius, sir?' Figulus repeated.

Celer nodded irritably. 'The tribune is extremely well-connected. My every move, no doubt, is being reported back to the imperial palace. So you can appreciate that

I need the best men for the task. This is where you come in. Given your background, your knowledge of these people and the land, I'd say you're the right man to lead the detachment. Wouldn't you?'

There was a long pause as Figulus took this all in. Celer scoffed down a few more figs. 'Escort duty, sir?' Figulus asked, struggling to conceal his disappointment.

'Escorting a representative of the Emperor, no less,' the legate corrected. 'It won't be easy, of course. Far from it. As I'm sure you're aware, the land west of Calleva is rife with bandits, and our ports have been coming under increasing attack. You will have to keep your wits about you and above all protect the envoy and the king at all costs. If either of them comes to any harm, I'll get a personal bollocking from the Emperor. And you know what that means, don't you?'

Figulus swallowed. 'Sir?'

Celer tightened his smooth features into a menacing look. 'I will personally see to it that your career in the Second Legion will be finished. I'll have you thrown into the nearest mine with the slaves. Am I understood?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good.' Returning to his desk, Celer sat down and began shuffling papers busily. 'I've already seen to the necessary details. You'll leave first thing tomorrow morning and sail back on one of the galleys to Noviomagus. From the port you'll make your way to the estate of the local king, Cogidubnus. Scylla and Trenagasus are currently guests of his. I believe Cogidubnus has a large, if rather modestly furnished, dwelling. Although not for much longer.' He chuckled. 'I gather we're building him some extravagant palace, at great cost, as a reward for his unswerving loyalty to Rome.'

Figulus rubbed his jaw. 'What about Ocella?'

Celer sucked his teeth. 'Your centurion will remain behind on Vectis. He'll resume command of the century once he's fully recovered from his injuries. I dare say he'll kick up a fuss about losing some of his men to what amounts to a glorified bodyguarding detail, but I'll arrange for some of the new recruits to be transferred to the Sixth. That ought to shut him up, at least for a while.'

Figulus shifted, unaccustomed to hearing a legate discussing another officer in such terms in front of his subordinate. Celer ate the last of the figs as he went on.

'You'll take two sections with you. You'll need to source some supplies in Noviomagus for your journey, since Lindinis is several days' march to the west. Upon your arrival, you'll present yourself to the commander of Batavian auxiliaries manning the vexillation fort there. Any questions?'

Figulus thought for a moment then shook his head firmly.

'Good.' There was a long pause as Celer fell silent and drummed his hands on the edge of the trestle table. 'You are aware, are you not, that Ocella has put in for a transfer back to the Praetorian Guard?'

Figulus looked startled. 'I had no idea, sir.'

Celer shrugged expressively. 'He'll probably get his wish, too. I'm told he has plenty of friends in the imperial palace. No doubt they will pull a few strings. But his request, should it be approved, means there will be an opening for the position of centurion.' The legate leaned forward. 'I can tell that you're a promising soldier. Your success in retrieving the prisoners is ample evidence of that. Prove to me that

you're equally capable of leading the men, and perhaps a promotion may await you on your return to the Second Legion.'

Figulus drew up sharply. The mere thought of being a commanding officer of his own century filled him with dread. Leading the detachment on Vectis had done little to dispel his fears that he was not up to the task of being a centurion – that he was a better soldier than an officer. He'd assumed his current leadership duties safe in the knowledge that in a day or two Ocella would be fit to resume his command. Now he was being ordered to lead another detachment for several weeks, or perhaps even longer. He quickly composed his features and nodded dutifully.

'Yes, sir. I won't let you down.'

Celer eased back in his chair and smiled broadly. 'Glad to hear it. You may leave now, Figulus. Best of luck.'

With a stiff salute Figulus turned on his heel and ducked out of the tent. The sun had almost fully set by now, leaving a faint pink glow on the horizon. The moon shone starkly in the dark sky. A team of soldiers were cutting up blocks of wood in preparation for tomorrow's crucifixions. Figulus shuddered and looked away. Past the baggage train he saw the guards posted outside the compound where the villagers were being held. A pair of clerks were interviewing each villager in turn while a bodyguard from the legate's staff selected the fittest men for scout duties. As Figulus paced back down the main thoroughfare towards his century's tent lines, he spotted Rullus, Helva and Blaesus seated round a camp fire. The air was filled with the aroma of cooked meat as the legionaries sat in a semicircle and greedily ate their evening meal.

'Here, sir. Saved you some,' Rullus said, handing the Gaul a mess tin filled with steaming sliced sausage mixed with hunks of bread.

Figulus stared at his meal for a moment, his belly aching with hunger. 'We're leaving Vectis.'

Rullus looked surprised. 'So soon?'

'First thing tomorrow.' Figulus scooped a chunk of soaked bread from the mess tin and swallowed it hungrily. Soon the warm food in his belly began to revive his tired spirits and between mouthfuls of food he recounted the details of the assignment: bodyguarding the imperial envoy and the exiled king on their journey west.

Rullus pursed his lips. 'Lindinis,' he mused in his gruff voice, before shaking his head wearily. 'I heard that place is in a bad way. A friend of mine served there a few months back. He said the natives were causing no end of trouble. Cavalry scouts going missing, convoys ambushed ... all sorts, sir.'

'Great,' Figulus muttered. 'Bloody great.'

The four men fell into a comfortable silence for a moment before Blaesus spoke up. 'Well, sir,' he said, clearing his throat, 'I don't give a shit about the envoy or some exiled king, but you can count me in.'

Helva straightened his back. 'Me too, sir.'

Rullus remained tight-lipped. Figulus turned to him, smiling grimly. 'What about you, Rullus? You can stay here on Vectis if you wish.'

'And put up with Ocella?' Rullus scoffed. 'With all due respect, sir, fuck off.'

Figulus grinned. 'Spoken like a true Gaul.'

The four men laughed easily. Then the veteran's expression turned serious and he looked past the men towards the crucifixes being assembled in the middle of the camp. 'I'll tell you one thing, though. This isn't going to be an easy task. Not the way things are going with the Durotrigans.' He glanced back at Figulus with a glint of anxiety in his eyes. 'Something tells me we're in for a long, hard winter, sir.'

