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Hunting the Eagles

Written by Ben Kane

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Hunting the Eagles

BEN KANE



preface

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For Selina Walker, one of the finest editors around.

Thank you!

List of characters

(Those marked * are recorded in history)



Romans/Allies

Lucius Cominius Tullus, a veteran centurion, formerly of the Eighteenth Legion, now of the Fifth.

Marcus Crassus Fenestela, Tullus' optio, or second-in-command.*

Marcus Piso, one of Tullus' soldiers.

Vitellius, another of Tullus' soldiers, and Piso's friend.

Saxa, another of Tullus' soldiers, and Piso's friend.

Metilius, another of Tullus' soldiers, and Piso's friend.

Ambiorix, Gaul and servant to Tullus.

Degmar, Marsi tribesman and servant to Tullus.

Lucius Seius Tubero, a Roman noble, now a legionary legate and enemy of Tullus.*

Septimius, senior centurion of the Seventh Cohort, Fifth Legion, and Tullus' commander.*

Flavoleius Cordus, senior centurion, Second Cohort, Fifth Legion.

Castricius Victor, senior centurion, Third Cohort, Fifth Legion.

Proculinus, senior centurion, Sixth Cohort, Fifth Legion.

Germanicus Julius Caesar, step-grandson of Augustus, nephew of Tiberius, and imperial governor of Germania and Tres Galliae.*

Tiberius Claudius Nero, emperor and successor to Augustus.*

Augustus, formerly Gaius Octavius and other names, successor to Julius

Caesar, and the first Roman emperor. Died in late AD 14 after more than forty years in power.*
Aulus Caecina Severus, military governor of Germania Inferior.*
Lucius Stertinius, one of Germanicus' generals.*
Calusidius, ordinary soldier who confronted Germanicus.*
Bassius, *primus pilus* of the Fifth Legion.
Gaius and Marcus, mutinous soldiers.
Aemilius, Benignus, Gaius, soldiers with whom Piso gambles.
Publius Quinctilius Varus, the dead governor of Germany who was tricked into leading his army into a terrible ambush in AD 9.*

Germans/Others

Arminius, chieftain of the German Cherusci tribe, mastermind of the ambush on Varus' legions, and sworn enemy of Rome.*
Maelo, Arminius' trusted second-in-command.
Thusnelda, Arminius' wife.*
Osbert, one of Arminius' warriors.
Flavus, Arminius' brother.*
Inguiomerus, Arminius' uncle and recent ally, and chieftain of a large faction of the Cherusci tribe.*
Segestes, Thusnelda's father, ally of Rome and chieftain of a faction of the Cherusci tribe.*
Segimundus, Segestes' son and Thusnelda's brother.*
Artio, orphan girl rescued by Tullus in *Eagles at War*.
Sirona, Gaulish woman and carer for Artio.
Scylax, Artio's dog.

Prologue

Autumn AD 12

Rome

Centurion Lucius Cominius Tullus bit back a curse. Life had been different – more unforgiving – since the slaughter in the forest three years prior. The smallest thing flung him back into the searing chaos of those muddy, bloody days, when thousands of German tribesmen had struck from ambush, wiping three legions, his among them, from the face of the earth. In this case, it was a heavy rain shower over the city of Rome, and the resulting muck on the unpaved street that spattered his lower legs and caught at his sandals.

Tullus closed his eyes, hearing again the German warriors' sonorous, gut-churning *barritus*. *HUUUUMMMMMMMM! HUUUUMMMMMMMM!* The battle cry, rising from men hidden deep among the trees, had soured his soldiers' courage the way milk curdles in the midday sun. If it had just been the chanting that Tullus relived, it might have been bearable, but his ears also rang with the sounds of men screaming in pain, calling for their mothers, and coughing out their last breaths. Showers of spears whistled overhead, punching into shields and flesh alike: disabling, maiming, killing. Slings cracked; their bullets clanged off helmets; mules brayed their fear. His own voice, hoarse with effort, roared orders.

Tullus blinked, not seeing the busy street before him, but a muddy track. On and on it led, for miles, through lines of never-ending trees and areas of limb-sucking bog. It was littered throughout with discarded equipment and

the bodies of men. Legionaries. His legionaries. Before the surprise attack, Tullus would have argued with anyone who'd suggested that it was possible for his entire command – a cohort of over four hundred men – to be annihilated by an enemy armed mainly with spears. If they had proposed that three legions could be overwhelmed in the same fashion, he would have branded them insane.

He was a wiser, humbler man now.

The brutal experience – and its aftermath – had embittered Tullus too. Because his legion's eagle had been lost, the Eighteenth had been disbanded. So too had the Seventeenth and Nineteenth legions. He and the other survivors had been divided up among the other legions serving on the River Rhenus. The final humiliation had been his demotion, from senior centurion to ordinary centurion. With retirement beckoning, it had been a career-killing blow. The intervention of Lucius Seius Tubero, an enemy of his and a senatorial tribune at the time, had been the final blow that ensured an ignominious twilight to his army service. If it hadn't been for Tubero, Tullus brooded, he might still have commanded a cohort.

'TULLUS!'

He started, wondering who could have recognised him here, hundreds of miles from where he was supposed to be.

'TULLUS!' Even though the street was crowded, and the air was filled with everyday sounds – shopkeepers' competing voices, two mongrels fighting over a scrap of meat, banter between passers-by – the woman's shrill tone carried. 'TULLUS!'

It took all of his self-control not to react. Not a soul in Rome knows me, Tullus told himself for the hundredth time that day. At least, only a handful do, and the chances of meeting any of them are close to non-existent. I am nothing more than a citizen in a sea of others, going about my business. Imperial officials are ignorant of my identity, and don't care what I am doing in the city. Even if they stopped me, I can lie my way out of trouble. I am a veteran turned trader, here in Rome with an old comrade to see Tiberius' triumph, nothing more.

A solid man in late middle age, with a long, scarred jaw and army-cut short hair, Tullus was still handsome, in a weathered kind of way. He was dressed in an off-white tunic that had seen better days. His metalled belt marked him out as a soldier or, as he wanted to portray it, an ex-soldier. Marcus Crassus Fenestela, his red-haired companion, was uglier, thinner and wirier than he was, and his belt also marked him out as a man with military training.

'There you are, Tullus,' said the voice, a woman's. 'Where in Hades' name have you been?'

Casual as you like, Tullus turned his head, scanned the faces of those nearby. The Tullus who had been summoned, by his wife it seemed, was a squat slab of a thing, half his age, but shorter and with twice his girth. The wife was little better, a red-cheeked, bosom-heavy slattern standing by the counter of an open-fronted restaurant. Tullus relaxed, and as he did, Fenestela whispered in his ear, 'A shame that she *wasn't* calling you! You would have been fed, and got your leg over too, if you were lucky.'

'Piss off, you dog.' Tullus shoved his *optio* away, but he was smiling. Their differences in rank had been abraded by countless years of life together – and surviving horrors that few could imagine. Fenestela only called him 'sir' when there were other soldiers present, *or* when he was irritated with Tullus.

The two men continued tracing their way towards the centre of the city. Despite the early hour, the narrow streets were packed. Rome was busy day and night, they had found, but the prospect of a triumph today, in honour of the emperor's heir, had brought out everyone who could walk, limp and hobble. Young and old, rich and poor, hale and sick, lame and diseased, all were eager to witness the martial display, and to avail themselves of the free food and wine that would be on offer.

Past the Street of the Bakers they went, savouring the rich aroma of baking bread, and then Carpenters' Alley, which echoed to the sound of saws and hammers. Tullus paused at an armourer's on Forge Street to gaze with greedy eyes at the fine swords on display. Neither paid any attention to

the offers of business from the tablet- and stylus-wielding men in Scribes' Court. Their gaze lingered on the fine-figured women in the better establishments along Whores' Lane, but they kept walking.

'It was mad to come here,' said Fenestela, shaking his head in wonderment at the imposing entrance to a massive public baths and the huge, painted statue of Augustus that stood outside it. 'I'm glad we did, though. The place is a bloody marvel.'

'To Hades with the official ban, I say,' replied Tullus with a wink. 'A man has to see the city of marble once in his life – *and* a triumph, if he can. After what you and I have been through, we've earned the right to see both.' He spoke in an undertone, the way they had talked since deviating from their official duty, which was to find recruits for their new legion, the Fifth Alaudae, in the province of Gallia Narbonensis, hundreds of miles to the north. After a fruitless few days of shouting themselves hoarse in various towns, it had been Tullus who had suggested travelling to Rome for Tiberius' triumph, the reward for his victories in Illyricum some years before.

To act as they had was not only a temporary abandonment of their mission, but a flouting of the imperial decree laid upon all survivors of the terrible defeat: a lifetime ban on entering Italy. As Tullus had said, however, who would ever know what they'd done? They could be back in Gallia Narbonensis within a month, and working night and day to find the recruits they needed. As long as they returned to their legion's base in Vetera, on the River Rhenus, with the required number of men, there would be no questions asked.

It had been easy to sway Fenestela: like Tullus, he had never visited the empire's capital, or seen a triumph.

'Taste the best-priced wines in Rome!' cried a voice to their left. 'Come and raise a toast to Tiberius, the conquering hero!' Tullus looked. The proprietor of an inn, or more likely one of his minions, was standing on a barrel to one side of the entrance, inviting passers-by inside with expansive waves.

'Fancy a quick drink?' asked Fenestela, stroking his red-and-grey-flecked beard.

'No.' Tullus' voice was firm. 'It'll be no better than vinegar, and you know it. We'd still end up having a skinful, and that would mean losing out on a good place to stand.'

Fenestela made a rueful face. 'Plus we'd need to piss all the time.'

The directions given to them by the landlord of their inn, a low-class, anonymous establishment at the base of the Aventine Hill, were good enough to get them to the Circus Maximus. From there, the man had said, it was a case of deciding where they wanted to watch the parade. On the plain of Mars, outside the city, they would get a good view of the triumphal procession as it assembled, but there was little of the atmosphere that prevailed inside the walls. The main livestock market had good numbers of temporary stands, but they'd have to get there at the crack of dawn to have any chance of a seat. Far more seating was available at the Circus Maximus, but it was a long way from where the crowning moment of the parade would be, and was prone to rioting. The Forum Romanum or the Capitoline Hill itself were the pre-eminent locations, but the density of the crowds at the former bordered on dangerous, and only invited guests were allowed up to the latter. 'Not to say that you're not fine fellows – or that you'd be put off by the risk of crushing or cutpurses,' the innkeeper had been swift to add.

Both Tullus and Fenestela wanted to see the procession from the best possible spot, so they had agreed to make for the Forum Romanum, which they had been impressed by during their sightseeing the previous day. Before long, however, it was clear that the crowds, and then the officials blocking off the streets along the parade's route, would prevent them getting anywhere near their destination before Tiberius had passed by. They needed a guide.

Tullus clicked his fingers at a sharp-eyed urchin who was idling on a street corner. 'You! Want to earn a coin?'

* * *

When he was younger, Tullus had been an optimist, someone who liked to see the best in others. No longer. The shocking revelation that Arminius was a traitor, his savage ambush on Varus' legions, and the shameful treatment heaped on Tullus and his comrades since – by their own kind – had given him a jaundiced view of the world. No one could be trusted, until they had proved themselves worthy. Tullus had dogged the urchin's footsteps, therefore, prepared to be attacked by lowlifes at any point during their journey.

In the event, their guide did not play them false, but led them, swift and true, through a maze of alleys and back lanes to emerge into a street that fed, he said, straight on to the eastern side of the Forum. The stupendous level of noise – cheering, fanfares of trumpets and, from some distance away, the creak of wagon wheels and the tramp of thousands of feet – was proof that the urchin *had* delivered them to the right place, and in time. He gave them a triumphant look, and stretched out his hand. 'My money.'

Tullus handed over the agreed price and muttered gruff thanks, but the urchin was already gone, vanished whence he'd come.

'He knows his way around,' said Fenestela.

'The *denarius* was well spent.' Tullus led the way. 'Let's see where the parade is before we decide where to stand.'

The press grew thick as they emerged on to the Forum. Used to close combat, Tullus and Fenestela eased their way through here, and used their shoulders to good effect there. Neither was above treading heavily on a foot if needs be. Few dared to object to their passage. Those who did soon backed down when faced by Tullus' unforgiving stare. Before long, the pair had moved far enough forward to have a decent view to the left – and the entrance to the Forum through which the front of the parade was just coming – and also to the right, along the Forum to the base of the Capitoline Hill. At the top towered the magnificent gold-roofed temple of Jupiter, Tiberius' final destination.

There were imperial officials everywhere. Ranks of them stood on both sides of the Forum as they had elsewhere, holding back the crowd with their

staffs of office. Now and again, urchins similar to Tullus' and Fenestela's guide slipped between them and capered about in the street, chanting, 'Tiberius! Tiberius!' Laughter broke out among the spectators as the officials tried to catch the raggedly dressed interlopers. The urchins were rounded up in the end, and the sharp cracks they received from staffs ensured their good behaviour thereafter.

The procession drew nearer, drawing the crowd's attention, and that of Tullus and Fenestela. Amid the cheering and shouts, comments and screams of excitement filled the air. 'All my life, I've wanted to see a triumph!' 'You're blocking my view!' 'Shift then, you mouthy bastard. I was standing here well before you.' 'What's that in the first cart?' 'Weapons and armour.' 'Where's the gold and silver? That's what I want to see.' 'And the captives – where are they?' 'Tiberius. Show us Tiberius!'

Tullus was surprised and yet unsurprised by his own rising excitement. After a lifetime in the army, it would have been the crowning glory of his career to march in such a celebration. It wasn't inconceivable that he and Fenestela could have participated. For a brief period they had been commanded by Germanicus, Augustus' step-grandson, during the war in Illyricum. Tullus' old bitterness at his situation soon welled up. Demoted, serving in another legion, his chances of parading in a triumph were non-existent. How far he had fallen since the battle in Germania three years before. He quelled his self-pity with ruthless determination. Forget what happened, he ordered himself. Enjoy the spectacle.

For hundreds of years, triumphs had been the staple display to the Roman people by generals returning from war, but they had fallen out of favour during Augustus' rule. A full triumph had not been held for more than three decades, so even if Tullus had visited Rome before, he wouldn't have seen one. The reason, as everyone knew, was that the only star allowed to shine in the capital was the emperor's.

It was no coincidence that when Augustus had at last allowed a triumph to take place that it should be in honour of his heir, Tiberius. Not that Tullus had any quarrel with Augustus' choice of successor. He had served under

Tiberius in Germania almost a decade before, and the man had been a solid leader, who looked after his soldiers. You can't ask for more than that, reflected Tullus, thinking darkly of Augustus and the merciless order that banned him and Fenestela from ever entering Italy.

Loud metallic clattering announced the arrival of dozens of ox-drawn wagons, containing the weapons and armour of the Illyrian tribesmen vanquished by Tiberius. There were spears, axes, swords and knives by the thousand, and more hexagonal shields and helmets than could be counted. There was huge cheering at first, but it soon died down. One wagonload of arms looked much the same as the next. The applause revived with the next set of displays: carts with free-standing maps of the areas conquered by Tiberius, and three-dimensional reconstructions of the tribal hill forts he had taken, and paintings of the most dramatic scenes of the campaign.

Unsurprisingly, the vehicles full of silver coins and jewellery proved to be the most popular. The lines of sacrificial animals, cattle, sheep and pigs, being led by priests, were also well received. Benedictions rained down on them, asking the gods to bless Tiberius. Tullus was amused by the quieter comments, from the wittier spectators, about which cuts of meat they would like after the animals had been killed.

The crowd's excitement reached fever pitch as the first prisoners came into sight. Rotten vegetables, broken pieces of roof tile and pottery, even lumps of half-dried dog shit were produced from the folds of tunics. A barrage of the hoarded missiles began as soon as the captives came close. Tullus was disgusted. 'They're men, not animals,' he said to Fenestela. 'Brave too.'

'How could I forget?' Fenestela pulled down the neck of his tunic, exposing a red welt that ran across the base of his neck.

'Gods, I remember that day. A spear, wasn't it?'

'Aye.' Fenestela threw a sour look at the warriors in the nearest wagons. Despite the bombardment of objects, they remained proud-faced, straight-backed, even contemptuous. 'It's good enough for the whoresons, I say.'

The crowd's enthusiasm for abusing the tribesmen came to an end as

carts loaded with women and crying children trundled by. People averted their eyes, asked for lenient treatment and muttered prayers. Tullus felt an overweening contempt for the citizens around him. These people are prisoners thanks to a war that was waged in your name, he thought. Face up to it.

He forgot his concerns as the highest-ranking captives came past, among them Bato of the Daesidiates, one of the leaders of the three-year rebellion. Broad-shouldered, tall, clad in full battle array, Bato received the crowd's acclaim by shaking his raised fists so that the chains linking them rang.

'Is he to be executed?' Tullus asked of the man beside him, a well-to-do-looking merchant.

'Tiberius has decreed that he should live because he allowed our troops to escape at Andretium, and he surrendered with honour.'

Tullus hid his surprise. 'He's a generous man, Tiberius.'

'The gods bless him and keep him safe. He has ruled that Bato is to live at Ravenna, with every comfort under the sun.'

'Do you hear that?' Tullus muttered to Fenestela when the merchant had looked away. 'A fucking barbarian gets better treatment than us.'

'Nothing surprises me any more,' said Fenestela with a grimace.

Despite the revelation, Tullus cheered with plenty of vigour as Tiberius appeared in a chariot drawn by four magnificent white stallions. His reaction was mirrored by everyone around him. The air resounded to the noise of cheers, screams and trumpets. Resplendent in the purple tunic and toga of a triumphant general, and with a crimson-painted face, Tiberius was holding a sceptre in one hand and a laurel branch in the other. Fleshy-chinned and long-nosed, he was no beauty, but he looked regal enough on this, his day of days. Behind him stood a slave, his job to hold a laurel wreath over Tiberius' head for the length of the procession.

'TI-BER-I-US! TI-BER-I-US! TI-BER-I-US!' chanted the crowd.

The chance of Tiberius recognising Tullus *and* placing him in context was infinitesimal – they had been introduced once – but Tullus still dropped his gaze as the emperor's heir came alongside his position. He hadn't

expected Tiberius' nephew Germanicus, whom he had also met, to be riding right behind the chariot. Tall, big-framed and even-featured, Germanicus had a strong chin and thick brown hair. He was a striking man under normal circumstances, and in his dazzling gilded armour, he seemed close to a god.

As Tullus looked up, he found himself staring straight at Germanicus, who blinked and frowned. A heartbeat later, he mouthed, 'I know you!'

Tullus froze on the spot, like a new recruit shouted at by his centurion. To his horror, it was now that one of the occasional delays to the procession happened. Instead of riding on, Germanicus remained right where he was. Tullus wanted to duck down, to turn and run, but his strength failed him.

Fenestela had also noticed Germanicus; averting his face, he pulled at Tullus' arm. 'Let's get out of here!'

The physical touch brought Tullus to his senses. Even as it did, Germanicus called out: 'You! Centurion!'

Several thoughts flashed through Tullus' mind. The summons was for him, he was *sure* of it. He could pretend not to hear, look elsewhere and hope that the procession began to move before Germanicus had time to order him seized. He could flee, like a rat surprised by the opening of a sewer cover, and be pursued, or he could stand like a man and acknowledge Germanicus.

Ignoring Fenestela's hiss of dismay, he squared his shoulders and met Germanicus' stern gaze. 'D'you mean me, sir?'

'I do. You serve on the Rhenus, do you not?'

'You have a fine memory, sir,' answered Tullus, wishing that the ground would open up and swallow him. If Germanicus recalled what they had talked about – Arminius' ambush and the annihilation of Varus' army – he was a dead man. Breaking the imperial ban was a capital offence.

'Let's go,' urged Fenestela in a whisper.

'We met there last year,' said Germanicus.

'Yes, sir. I am honoured that you recall it.' From the corner of his eye, Tullus saw Tiberius' chariot start moving. Let me be, he prayed. I'm no one.

'Attend me once the sacrifices have been made. The front of the Curia.'

'Of course, sir.'

Any thought that he might have a chance to escape before the appointed time vanished from Tullus' mind as Germanicus jerked his head, and two Praetorian guardsmen pushed their way through the crowd towards him. Shit, he thought. He *does* know that I'm not supposed to be in Italy, or Rome. 'Go,' he ordered Fenestela. 'He hasn't seen you.'

'I'm not running from those peacocks,' retorted Fenestela, eyeing the Praetorians' burnished armour and helmets.

'Fenestela—'

Fenestela stuck out his jaw. 'I belong with you, *sir*.'

I'm a fool, thought Tullus. A proud, stupid fool. So is Fenestela. We survived everything Arminius and his mongrel followers could throw at us, only to be caught out by one of our own.

He could almost hear their death sentences being read aloud.

The wait outside the Curia – perhaps two hours – felt like an eternity to Tullus. The removal of the prisoners who were to be executed at the base of the Capitoline, the ascent of Tiberius to Jupiter's temple, the shouts from the crowd watching the ceremony there, and the distribution of bread and wine to the crowd passed by him in a daze. Even the arrival of the soldiers who'd marched behind Tiberius, the part of the procession that he'd most wanted to see, could not lift his mood. Miserable, blaming himself for Fenestela's fate, he strode about the Curia, watched by the stony-faced Praetorians.

At one stage, he began to consider killing their guards so that they could escape. It was fortunate that he confided in Fenestela, who was swift to disabuse him of the notion. 'You're not thinking straight. Even if we managed it, which is unlikely given our lack of weapons, we'd have the city's entire garrison after us. I wouldn't give much for our chances after that. Sit tight and pray. That's our best hope.'

Fenestela had never been much for praying, which said a lot about what

he thought Germanicus would do to them. At a loss, Tullus did as Fenestela advised, and kept his peace. He felt like a murderer waiting for his capital sentence to be passed.

Germanicus' arrival, swift and silent, caught him off guard. He had just one cavalryman as escort, but his magnificent armour left no doubt as to his station. Close up, the commanding presence granted by his height and charisma was even more palpable. Tullus leaped to attention, his back as stiff, his shoulders as far back as he could manage. 'Sir!'

'Sir!' Fenestela was like his mirror image.

'Name?' demanded Germanicus.

'Centurion Lucius Cominius Tullus, sir, serving in the Seventh Cohort of the Fifth Legion.'

'Who's this?' Eyeing Fenestela, Germanicus slid from his horse's back with an easy grace. His escort took the mount's reins and led it to a nearby water trough.

'My optio, sir. Fenestela's his name.'

Germanicus gave Fenestela another casual look. 'He's an ugly whoreson.'

I can call him that, but not you, thought Tullus resentfully. 'He is, sir, but he's loyal and brave. I haven't met a better soldier.'

'High praise from an officer with . . . how many years' service?'

'Thirty, sir.' And all of it wasted because of today, thought Tullus.

One of Germanicus' eyebrows rose. 'Why haven't you taken your discharge?'

'You know how it is, sir. The army's my life.' Germanicus' easy tone was giving Tullus hope. It *was* possible that he didn't remember the details of their conversation, that he'd forgotten Tullus had been at the battle where Varus had lost his legions.

'Indeed.' Germanicus paced up and down without speaking.

Tullus' unease resurged.

'It was my understanding that soldiers who'd served in the Seventeenth, Eighteenth or Nineteenth Legions were banned from entering Italy.'

This was said in a low tone, but a chasm had opened before Tullus. Even

though he'd said the Fifth was his legion, Germanicus *knew*. 'I, er, yes. They are, sir.'

'Yet here you both stand.' Germanicus' voice had gone ice-cold. He towered over Tullus.

'Yes, sir.' Hard as it was, Tullus kept his gaze fixed on Germanicus' face.

'Your lives are forfeit.'

'Aye, sir,' grated Tullus.

'Why are you in Rome?'

'We wanted to see the capital, sir, but we wanted to witness Tiberius' triumph even more. Both of us served in Illyricum, sir – it was only for a year, but we were there.'

'The glory of this triumph would wipe away the shame of what happened in Germania.'

'Something like that, sir,' muttered Tullus, who had not fully realised before that this *had* been part of his reasoning.

'Tell me again how the ambush went for you and your men.'

The memories that Tullus had relived not long before were still fresh in his mind. His grief for the soldiers he'd lost, buried as best he could since the disaster, was yet bleeding raw. As for the shame he felt over the loss of his legion's eagle, well, that cut like a knife – and now he would have to vocalise it all. There was little alternative other than to obey, though. Germanicus was one of the most powerful men in the empire.

And so Tullus laid out the suspicions he'd had about Arminius, first fuelled by a conversation that his servant Degmar had overheard. It was a grim litany: Varus' refusal to listen to him – twice; Arminius' lie about the Angrivarii tribe rising against Rome; Varus' decision to act against them, ordering the army off the road to Vetera and on to a narrow forest path; the initial attack, and the unrelenting horror that had unfolded over the subsequent days.

Tullus described the tribesmen's frequent, stinging assaults. The growing number of Roman casualties. The enemy's terrifying renditions of the barritus. The constant rain. The ever-present mud. The way the

legionaries' morale had been chipped away bit by bit. The loss of first one eagle, and then a second – that of the Eighteenth, Tullus' old legion. The realisation that there might be no escape for anyone.

At this point, Tullus' throat closed with emotion. With an effort, he continued, relating how he had – somehow – dragged fifteen soldiers out the bloody quagmire that had been the end of the battle. With Degmar's help, they had made it to the safety of Aliso, a Roman fort. Together with its garrison, they had been pursued to Vetera, their legion's base, but had reached it at last. When Tullus was done, he let out a ragged breath. Those days, the worst of his entire life, were etched into his memory like a deep-carved eulogy on a nobleman's tomb.

Germanicus had said not a single word throughout. At length, he asked, 'How many men survived?'

Tullus scratched his head. 'Somewhat less than two hundred, I think, sir. That's not including those taken prisoner by the Germans.'

Germanicus glanced at Fenestela, whose expression had remained grim during the whole account. 'Well? Did it happen as your centurion says?'

'Aye, sir, except it were worse,' said Fenestela, bobbing his head. 'Far worse.'

Another silence fell, one neither Tullus nor Fenestela dared break.

Tullus threw a sidelong, grateful look at Fenestela, and wished again that his optio had obeyed his order to vanish. Deep down, though, he was glad to have Fenestela there. His optio was the truest of friends, who would stand by him no matter what. Facing the executioners would be their final battle.

But his interrogation wasn't over yet. 'If I recall, you were a senior centurion?' demanded Germanicus.

'Yes, sir. Second Cohort, of the Eighteenth.'

'That's not your rank now.'

'No, sir. I was demoted after the ambush.' Tullus didn't mention Tubero, who had orchestrated his reduction in rank. There was no point.

To his relief, Germanicus made no further comment. 'How many *phalerae* have you won?'

Mention of his awards for valour always made Tullus a little uncomfortable. 'Nine, ten, sir, something like that.'

'It's eleven, sir,' chipped in Fenestela, 'and he deserved every one of them.'

'Thank you, optio,' said Germanicus wryly.

Fenestela coloured and turned his head. Germanicus then studied Tullus' face for so long that *he* began to flush, and had to look away. Pronounce my sentence, and have done, Tullus wanted to say.

'It seems to me . . .' Germanicus paused.

Tullus' heart thudded. He kept his eyes fixed on the ground.

'It seems to me that you did what few others could have done.'

Confused, Tullus lifted his gaze to meet that of Germanicus. 'Sir?' he asked.

'I like to take men as I find them, centurion, and you seem to be a simple man. A brave one too, and a fine officer. I believe your story. To execute you would be a waste of a life. It would deprive the empire of a fine son.'

'I . . .' said Tullus, and words failed him.

Germanicus chuckled. 'You will not be executed or punished for flouting the ban, centurion, nor will your optio here. If I had been in your place, I might also have come to Rome to see a grand spectacle such as Tiberius' triumph, the first of its kind in thirty years.'

'Yes, sir. T-thank you, sir.' Tullus tripped over the words.

'My clemency is not altogether altruistic. The emperor, may the gods bless him, is soon to appoint me as governor of the province of Tres Galliae and Germania. I will have need of good soldiers. Solid officers, like you.' As Tullus struggled to contain his surprise and delight, Germanicus continued, 'The humiliations heaped upon us by Arminius have not been forgotten – no, indeed. I mean to lead my legions over the river, to retake *all* that was lost. I refer not just to territory and riches, but to the three eagles. Will you aid me in this? Will you see that Rome has its vengeance?'

'It would be my honour, sir.' Tullus could hear Fenestela growling in agreement.

'Good.' Germanicus clapped him on the shoulder. 'I will seek you out on my arrival at the frontier. Best return to your duties with the Fifth before too long, eh?'

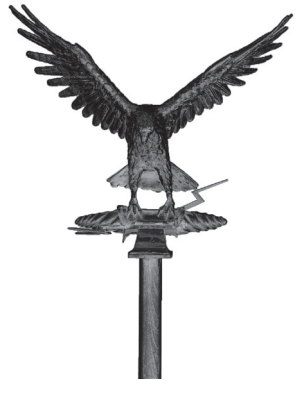
'Of course, sir.' Tullus watched with astonishment as Germanicus called for his horse and rode away. The two Praetorians followed.

Tullus' knees were shaking. He sat down on a shop doorstep while Fenestela all but danced before him. 'Who'd have expected that, eh?'

'Aye,' said Tullus, wondering how one moment an ignominious death could beckon, and the next he could be praised by the emperor's step-grandson and *then* handed an opportunity to retrieve his honour.

Truly, the gods were smiling on him this day. Tullus had a good feeling that they would continue to do so during his quest for vengeance, and his hunt for his old legion's eagle.

PART ONE



Late Summer, AD 14

Near the town of Ara Ubiorum
The German Frontier

Chapter I



It was late summer on the German frontier, and four of the local legions – the First, the Fifth, the Twentieth and the Twenty-First – were gathered in a vast temporary camp near the town of Ara Ubiorum. After an afternoon spent with his men on the windswept parade ground outside the encampment, Tullus made his way to the Net and Trident, his favourite drinking hole in the village of tents that had sprung up nearby. Training manoeuvres and planning for the year ahead had brought half of the province's legions to the same place, not far from the border town of Ara Ubiorum. As was usual, a host of followers-on – tradesmen of every kind, innkeepers, food-sellers, whores, soothsayers and more – had descended soon after, keen for the business offered by upwards of sixteen thousand legionaries.

Tullus' preferred spot in the Net and Trident had been taken when he'd arrived, dry-throated and tired. Without making a fuss – the table at the back wasn't his property – he had taken a seat close by. He liked the 'inn' because its tent was small, hard to find, and close to a good brothel. Its landlord was a retired soldier, an ex-optio; he took no nonsense from drunk customers yet retained a wicked sense of humour. The wine was of decent quality, and the food wasn't bad either.

Prices for both were higher than what was comfortable for ordinary soldiers, so most of its customers were officers. After a lifetime in the legions, that suited Tullus down to the ground. He loved his men, even the reprobates in the century he'd commanded for the last five years, but when

his duties were done, he liked to be able to relax. To say things that he couldn't if ordinary legionaries were about.

Without company at first, he fell to brooding. Things weren't the same as they had been before, in the Eighteenth. How could they be? Tullus had served in it for a decade and a half, had become commander of the Second Cohort, one of the most senior centurions in the entire legion. Curse it, he'd known *every* centurion and most junior officers in the Eighteenth by name. I was a respected man, he thought, and now I'm just a rank-and-file centurion in the Seventh Cohort of a legion I barely know. The fucking Seventh! The majority of the legion's centurions were men ten years younger than he, or more. It was especially galling that these almost-youths were also of superior rank.

A good number of these centurions were courteous enough to Tullus, but there was a group of about a dozen who had taken against him from the start. He had come to recognise all too well their superior looks and snide comments. It went against the grain, but he tended to avoid confrontation with them where possible. There were only so many fights left in him, and Tullus wanted to keep them for those upon whom he wanted revenge – the *real* enemy – Arminius and the German tribes.

The future appeared promising in that regard. Germanicus was governor now, as he'd promised. His need to supervise a new census throughout the vast province meant that there had been no campaign into Germania this year, but in the spring, things would change. According to the camp gossip Tullus had heard, the force to cross the Rhenus would be large – up to eight legions – and there would be little quarter offered to the empire's foes.

Tullus drained his beaker in one swallow, taking comfort from the warm glow as the wine ran down to his stomach. The jug he'd bought was empty too, so he looked about for a waitress.

First to pass him was a skinny woman with awful teeth whose name he could never recall. 'More wine,' said Tullus.

'Yes, sir.' She took the vessel without even slowing.

Best take it easy, Tullus decided as she vanished in the direction of the bar. It could be a long night. 'Water it down, four parts to one,' he called out.

She turned, raised an eyebrow, but returned with a jug of dilute wine.

Time passed. Several centurions and *optiones* from the Sixth Cohort came in, and invited Tullus to their table. After an hour of pleasant conversation, his decision to moderate his intake of wine had been forgotten. He'd had at least another jug, and was thinking that it was time to order another. Fenestela's arrival was most opportune, therefore. 'My round,' he insisted.

Tullus raised his hands. 'Be my guest.'

Fenestela came back with three jugs. 'The place is getting crowded,' he explained. 'It saves having to queue up.' He slid one down the table, towards the other officers, and parked the others between him and Tullus.

They toasted one another, and drank. 'May Germanicus lead us to victory, and to recovering the lost eagles,' said Tullus, and clinked his cup off Fenestela's again. 'May we also kill or take Arminius.'

'Aye. To the spring campaign.'

They drank again.

'Happy with the men?' asked Tullus. He'd left Fenestela to march his soldiers back to the camp, and to oversee their last duties of the day.

'I am. They were complaining about the length of training, and how they wanted hot baths, not cold river water, to clean up in. The usual stuff. The conscripts were whingeing the most.'

'Nothing changes,' said Tullus with a chuckle.

'Piso volunteered for sentry duty again.'

'Thank the gods that we managed to keep him with us, and Vitellius.' The two were a little like him and Fenestela, thought Tullus, complete physical opposites. Where Piso was tall and good-humoured, Vitellius was short and acerbic. That didn't stop them being the best of friends, and excellent soldiers.

'They're both good men.'

'That's certain.' After the ambush, Tullus would have liked to have held on to every legionary from his original unit, but that wasn't the way the

army worked. If it hadn't been for Caedicius, the former camp prefect of Aliso, now a good friend, Tullus would have retained none of his original command. Not even Fenestela. Tullus pushed away the thought. He *did* have Fenestela, and Piso and Vitellius. *That* counted more than his demotion.

The rest of his soldiers weren't a bad bunch, even if some of them – in particular the conscripts – weren't well suited to military life. The conscripts had been forced into the army during the widespread panic in the months after Arminius' ambush, when the emperor's initial request for volunteers to join the army had met with a poor response. Augustus' forcible draft had resulted in thousands of unwilling citizens joining the Rhenus legions. Every unit had a certain number of them, and some more than others. Tullus was grateful that his century had only twenty-five or so.

His bladder twinged. 'I'll be back,' he said to Fenestela. 'Keep my seat.'

Upon his return, Tullus was irritated by the sight, two tables over from his, of four centurions from the Second Cohort and a couple from the First, along with an assortment of junior officers from their units. It wasn't correct to call them his enemies. Relations between them weren't that bad. Adversaries perhaps, Tullus decided. He sat down opposite Fenestela, who had his back to them. 'Have you seen—' he began.

'Aye,' replied Fenestela, scowling. 'The cocksuckers didn't notice me, though.'

'Nor me.' That was the best way, thought Tullus, keeping his head down. He and Fenestela couldn't fight ten men, never mind the fact that such behaviour was considered unacceptable for centurions. He had no desire to end his career in a lower-ranking cohort, or even in the ranks.

'Listen to what they're saying.'

Tullus pricked his ears. As was natural, there was a lot of background noise: loud conversations, singing, an occasional shout, and bursts of laughter. It was fortunate that the two junior officers between their table and that of the group of centurions were talking in whispers. Like as not, they're gossiping about which whorehouse to visit, thought Tullus.

The centurions appeared to be discussing the next year's campaign. 'It'll be good to get out of camp, and teach the German savages a lesson. They've been let away with it for too long,' declared Flavoleius Cordus, a podgy-faced man with deep-set eyes. He was the senior centurion in the Second Cohort, which had been Tullus' position in the Eighteenth. That rankled enough, not least because Cordus was a good officer, and popular in the legion. He was also fond of reminding Tullus that – in his mind at least – it hadn't been right to allow some of Varus' disgraced soldiers into the Alaudae.

'We'll make a better fist of it than Varus,' said Castricius Victor, ranking centurion of the Third Cohort, and Cordus' main henchman. Built like an ox, with the temperament of a wild bull, he was feared in equal measure by his soldiers and junior officers. He was also an arrogant, loud-mouthed boor. In Tullus' opinion, his physical size and bravery had to be the reason he'd been promoted to the centurionate. 'Not that that would be hard,' Victor added with a snort.

There was a rumble of agreement, especially from the junior officers at the table: optiones, *signiferi* and *tesserarii*.

'I'd like to see the tribes try to surprise *us*,' said Cordus. 'The Seventeenth, Eighteenth and Nineteenth must have been sleepwalking to have been ambushed the way they were.'

Their comments revealed how little understanding men had of the massacre in the forest. Tullus battened down his fury. Making a scene would get him nowhere. 'As if the same wouldn't have happened to them,' he muttered.

'I know,' said Fenestela, glowering.

Tullus continued to eavesdrop on his adversaries' conversation. Before long, the topic had changed to the recent unrest among the legionaries. Some of the officers present felt that there was real cause for concern, but they were shouted down by Cordus and Victor.

Tullus had heard officers talking about it before, but wasn't aware of such feelings among his own men. 'You heard anything?' he asked Fenestela.

Fenestela's expression grew cagey.

A little alarmed, Tullus thumped a hand on the table. 'Speak!'

'Calm down.'

Those words would have made Tullus punch most men in the face. He had been through too much with Fenestela, however. 'Tell me,' he demanded.

'There have been meetings. Some of our men have attended. *I* haven't,' Fenestela added.

'What kind of meetings?'

'From what I understand, they're about demanding a rise in pay, and for the older soldiers, how to be granted their discharge. The vast majority of those present are ordinary legionaries. A lot of conscripts, as you'd imagine. The word is that men from the Twenty-First Rapax are involved too, but it may just be gossip.'

'Why in Hades haven't you told me about this before?'

'The meetings mean nothing. They're like the hot air rising off a pile of shit on a winter's morning: smelly but with no substance.'

'I'll be the judge of that. How many of our men are we talking about?'

'A few of the conscripts,' admitted Fenestela. 'Six, maybe ten.'

'By all the gods, Fenestela!' hissed Tullus.

Fenestela made an unhappy gesture. 'Maybe I should have mentioned it before.'

'You should have, curse you. I want to hear every snippet of information from now on, clear?'

'This from the man who didn't tell me of his suspicions about Arminius until the night before we set out for Vetera,' grumbled Fenestela. He raised a hand when Tullus let out another oath. 'All right, all right. I'll tell you everything I hear.'

'Good,' said Tullus, taking a drink and wondering if he was losing his touch. Five years earlier, something like this would not have escaped his notice. Like as not, he decided, it was because he now tended to avoid the company of his soldiers. His reasoning was simple: the conscripts were a pain in the arse, and his other duties – paperwork, meetings with