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Claudius

Written by Douglas Jackson

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CLAUDIUS

Douglas Jackson

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Roman Britain at the time of Claudius

Prologue

Britain AD *43*

The scarlet of their tunics spread across the land like a bloodstain.

From his position on the crest of the hilltop he could see the tight, disciplined column moving steadily through the trees. He tried to gauge their numbers. Thousands certainly, perhaps as many as ten thousand. And these were only the advance guard.

His spies had given warning of their coming but he had travelled days beyond his own frontiers to see for himself. The legions of Rome. They had been here once before, when his father was still a boy and Julius Caesar led them across the sea, but they had soon

left, laden with gold and hostages. Some primal instinct told him that this time they were here to stay. The warriors of Britain had long forgotten the legions' power and their fearsome potential, but he had remembered the old tales – and learned. Any refugee from Gaul knew he would receive a welcome among the Catuvellauni, and it was the way of the Catuvellauni chief to question such refugees, gently, about the threat that had driven them from their lands. Now he could see that threat with his own eyes and he felt an unfamiliar stirring low in his belly. So this was fear?

'Lord? It is time.'

He looked over his shoulder to where his escort waited, hidden below the skyline. Ballan was right. If they stayed longer they could be trapped by the auxiliary cavalry which undoubtedly accompanied this force. But his eyes were drawn back to the marching column and the occasional glint of sun on burnished armour. In the serene quiet of the morning he could hear the faint notes of horns. Even at this distance it sounded alien. Aggressive.

'Lord? Caratacus?' Ballan's voice was louder and more urgent. He was pointing to a saddle between two hills about a mile away, where a dozen small specks had just come into view. Horsemen. Another few minutes and they would be cut off.

'Go,' he shouted, running down the slope and vaulting on to his pony. Caratacus, king of the Catuvellauni, rode north to prepare his people for war.

I

Rufus felt soft lips caress his cheek, barely disturbing the three-day stubble. He had been asleep for only a few hours, except that the chill from the damp earth seeping into his bones meant it hadn't been real sleep, more a dozing just beneath the surface of waking. Not sleep, but at least rest, and he needed rest after a long day on the march. For a moment he resented the attention, but he had dreamed so long of a woman's touch, a woman's tenderness; of hair the colour of spun gold and the texture of silk . . . He opened his eyes and looked lovingly into two hairy nostrils.

'Bersheba,' he groaned, pushing away the long, sinuous trunk that nuzzled his face. 'It can't be time to feed you already.' He turned over and pulled his cloak closer around him, but his tormentor returned,

plucking insistently at the heavy cloth. He sighed and sat up. He might as well give in now.

She was standing over him, and he could just discern the faint outline of her massive bulk against the first hint of dawn that painted the sky a cadaverous, purple-bruised grey, the faint light reflecting liquid brown eyes filled with timeless wisdom. Bersheba had been his charge for almost seven years now, first under the psychotic Caligula – four terrible years he wished he could erase from his memory – and latterly in the more benevolent service of his successor, Tiberius Claudius Drusus Nero Germanicus. The Emperor's elephant. And why, he asked himself for the hundredth time, are the Emperor's elephant and her faithful slave stranded in this strange and dangerous land when the Emperor himself is a thousand long miles away in Rome?

He struggled to his feet and walked to the bullock cart to collect Bersheba's feed and the little red apples she loved. Gaius and Britte were still asleep among the hay. He smiled down at his son and listened to the soft, regular breathing with a pleasure only a father could know. Gaius was tucked in close to the big slave girl who had been his wet nurse since his mother's death at the hands of the man the world believed was also Caligula's killer. Rufus was one of only two people left alive who knew the true story and that was the way he intended it to stay. In a few minutes Britte would rise and prepare the oats for their only proper meal between now and nightfall.

Within the hour, they would harness the bullock cart and march another twelve miles.

It had been like this for a week. A relentless trudge across a rolling landscape of forest and downland as the soldiers of four legions sought to bring the tribes of Britain to battle. The whole army, forty thousand men from the furthest corners of the Empire, could sense their general's frustration. Aulus Plautius Silvanus had promised his Emperor a swift victory, but all he had to show for his efforts were a few burned-out huts and the heads of a dozen British warriors taken in the endless, futile skirmishes that hampered his progress. Rufus gave thanks he was positioned with the baggage train of the Second Augusta, in the centre of the miles-long Roman column, and unlikely to be involved in any fighting. He had warned Narcissus that Bersheba wasn't meant for war. Why had he trusted that scheming Greek?

The unexpected call to arms had come two months earlier, in the sheltered little park by Bersheba's barn on the Palatine Hill. It was the day he'd met Claudius's freedman when Narcissus had returned from the coast of Gaul, where Plautius had gathered his forces for the invasion of Britain. The balmy days of April had given way to the hard-edged heat of May, and the Mediterranean sun bounced off bone-hard ground and radiated from the gleaming white marble of the great Corinthian-columned palaces. Both men's lives had changed markedly since

Caligula's death. Rufus was still a slave, but one who held an honoured position in the imperial household. Narcissus was the Emperor Claudius's trusted adviser and wielded the kind of power only granted to potentates. But Rufus knew he tired of the constant demands on him as Claudius's eyes and ears. Tall and bald as a pullet's egg, the ageless Greek looked thinner and more careworn, but his eyes were the same deep azure blue and had lost none of their hypnotic intelligence.

'I must be too many people now, Rufus, far too many. Negotiator, diplomat, counsellor and enforcer. All things to all men,' he had complained soon after the Emperor inherited the throne following his predecessor's untimely, but well-merited, death. 'Life was easier with Caligula. At least then all I had to worry about was staying alive.'

Claudius had honoured Plautius, the irascible governor of Pannonia, with command of the invasion because he was one of the few military commanders he trusted. Aulus Plautius was related by marriage to the Emperor and owed his position to that bond. He was renowned as a disciplinarian and legendary for the savagery with which he had put down the insurrections of the mountain tribes under his rule. The soldiers he led were the finest the Empire could provide. His shock troops were the élite Twentieth legion, five thousand battle-hardened legionaries who had learned their trade on the upper Rhine penning the German hordes east of the river. The Second

Augusta and Fourteenth Gemina had joined them on the march from their bases further upriver. Ninth Hispana travelled furthest, from the upper reaches of the Danube, where they had been headquartered for almost thirty years. The four legions were reinforced by auxiliary units hand-picked for their fighting qualities: cavalrymen from Germany, Thrace and Gaul, tough little Syrian bowmen gifted by their king, and Batavian light infantry who could swim like otters. It was a mighty force. But there was one problem.

'The whole army was on the verge of mutiny. The men of the Ninth were at the heart of it; they said they refused to leave the known world. The known world!' Narcissus spluttered. 'We have traded with the tribes of Britain for a hundred years. The sailors of the invasion fleet know the waters of the south coast better than they know their own. The Ninth have been headquartered in Pannonia for so long they have put down roots. A legion should be moved every ten years if it is not to become part of what it has conquered. They did not want to leave their cosy barracks and their pretty mistresses. They thought if they could hold out for long enough Plautius would give in and send them home and call for another legion. Emperor Claudius feared they would make him a laughing stock and he blamed me.

'But now they will sail and, yes, the credit is mine, although it cost more than I like to remember, including my dignity.' Narcissus shook his head ruefully. 'The Ninth are good soldiers, but they are led by a

weakling. Once they began making demands the cancer spread to disaffected elements of the other legions, the way it does if you don't put the hot iron to it. Plautius was behind me, of course, and I exempt the Second from my tale of woe. Their commander, Flavius Vespasian, is a different animal: intelligent, a true disciplinarian and as hard as granite. He will do well, Rufus, mark my words. The usual bribes didn't work. The rot had eaten too deep for the tribunes to remind the legions of their loyalty. In the end, I had to give them what they wanted. Land.'

He had promised Plautius's legions that, when the conquest of Britain was complete, each veteran would receive a grant of prime land to go with his pension and scroll of thanks on his retirement.

'They kept me waiting for two days,' the Greek continued. 'At the end of it, when I demanded an answer, they laughed at me, said they would be happy to take orders from a former slave, and cried, "Io Saturnalia." ' Rufus smiled. Saturnalia was the winter festival when slaves were served by their masters, and he could imagine Narcissus's reaction to the jibe. But the Greek was unperturbed. 'It was I who had the last laugh. Now all they need is a favourable wind and they could be in Britain within a week.'

Rufus congratulated him, but he could read Narcissus well enough by now to know that there was more to come.

'I promised them something else,' he admitted. 'They were pleased with the gift of land, but it needed

just a little extra to tip the scales. I assured them their Emperor was with them in spirit and as a token of his regard he would send with them his most treasured possession.' Rufus listened with growing unease. Narcissus was looking beyond him now and the familiar 'harrumph' from over his left shoulder told the young slave what was coming next. 'His elephant.'

It was madness! Rufus had argued and pleaded. He even threatened. But Narcissus only stared at him with the puzzled expression of a father confronting a recalcitrant child. 'Did not your Emperor create you a member of the Praetorian Guard?' he demanded.

'Yes, but . . .' Rufus distinctly remembered the words temporary and unpaid. He had worn the dark tunic and silver breastplate on the day Bersheba pulled the golden statue of Caligula's sister, the goddess Drusilla, to its place on the Capitoline.

'And was that order ever revoked?'

'No, but . . .' How could it be revoked when the man who had given it was long dead?

'Then you are subject to military authority, as Bersheba is subject to the Emperor's authority. Deny that authority at your peril.'

'I cannot go,' Rufus insisted.

'Will you disobey your Emperor?' Narcissus demanded in astonishment.

'What about Gaius? Who will look after him while I am at war?'

'Ah,' the Greek said in that perplexed way of one who had just remembered something terribly

important he should never have forgotten in the first place. 'Arrangements will be made. Your son shall accompany the invasion.'

Now Rufus's hand stole to the lion's tooth charm he wore at his throat as he looked down at the sleeping three-year-old. Gaius had weathered the sea voyage better than his father, along with Bersheba, who, standing four-square on her bridge pile legs in the cramped hold, had proved the most natural sailor of them all. The little boy's face was set in a tight-eyed frown, but it was still possible to discern the fine-boned features that had made his mother such a beauty. Rufus felt the pain of guilt like a half-healed knife wound when he thought of his wife. Livia had been the lead acrobat in a troupe of dwarf entertainers and Caligula had conducted the wedding ceremony as an entertainment to amuse his guests. Their relationship had been short and tempestuous and ended on the day Gaius was born. Had he truly loved her? He couldn't hide from the answer. Not enough.

Reluctantly, Rufus shook his son awake and Gaius moaned peevishly until Britte spooned cold porridge into his gaping mouth as if she was feeding an orphaned jackdaw. Around them was a buzz of what at first appeared chaotic activity as thousands of men were nudged and kicked awake by their officers, accompanied by the familiar dawn chorus of coughs, farts and muttered complaints.

The legionaries were bivouacked in eight-man

sections. As they gathered in their ranks, ten of those sections combined to make a century, which then formed on those already in position, six centuries creating the 480-man cohort which was the basic fighting unit of the Roman army. Each legion consisted of ten cohorts plus a cavalry troop 120 strong. Decurions pushed and bullied the individual soldiers into position, while the centurions, identifiable by their distinctive cross-plumed helmets, struck out with their gnarled vine sticks and shouted themselves hoarse until the disorganized mass became a tight-knit formation in marching order and ready to do battle. Watching the Second Augusta assemble, Rufus was struck by the difference between these men and the polished Praetorian Guards he had known in the palace. Their arms and armour were well used and equally well cared for, but the real difference was in the men of the Second themselves. They had a hawk-like confidence that set them apart. Where the Praetorians were well fed and softened by years of barrack life, these were creatures of the wild. To a man they were lean and wiry, unburdened by an ounce of spare flesh, and their faces were burned nut brown and the texture of old leather from constant exposure to the elements. They toted the crippling load of their personal equipment on five-foot poles over their left shoulders. In their right hands they carried the *pila*, the two throwing spears they would use to slow a charging enemy. They called themselves Marius's Mule, after the old general Gaius Marius,

father of the modern legion and the man responsible for the sixty-pound burden they carried. But it was said with pride. They were hard and uncompromising. Invincible.

Rufus picked up his son and Gaius squealed as he was swung into the cart to take his place among the hay and the mealy bags from where, each day, he seemed to see the world with new eyes and greeted each experience with a fresh wonder. His cries made Britte laugh – a soft chuckle that seemed too gentle for her broad, pink-cheeked face – and her dark eyes twinkled with innocent pleasure. Like Rufus she had been taken as a slave while still a child, in a punitive raid on one of the tribes of central Gaul. She was as tall as most men and almost as broad in the chest as Bersheba. Rounded was the best word Rufus could think of to describe her. Round breasts, a round belly and a round backside that quivered when she laughed. While Britte took her place at the bullock's side, Rufus climbed on to Bersheba's shoulders and a few minutes later they were on the move. From his perch high on the elephant's back, he had an elevated view of the surrounding countryside as the column snaked its way across the grasslands and trackways of southern Britain. The land, bathed by a summer sun much gentler than the one which turned Rome into an oven at this season, was a carpet of greens so vivid and varied that he could never have described them all. Dark green water meadows shot with the white of wild flowers, emerald-green stands of young

beech trees, shadowy green clearings, bright greens and dusty greens, greens that shone like silver and greens that were almost brown. He was no farmer, but such lushness told its own story. This was a rich land. A land that would support anyone prepared to turn the earth, work hard and defend what they grew. Italia, with all its abundance, was a desert by comparison.

He had heard they were in the country of a tribe called the Cantiaci, but there was little sign of their presence. The column passed farmsteads where not even a dog barked. Pasture that should have supported a dozen animals was empty, and fields were left unworked. It was the same in the small communities they came across. Occasionally, a half-wild cat would cross their path, but there was not a sign of a human being.

'Look!' He turned at a shout from one of the baggage slaves and stared towards a distant ridge where a group of tiny figures was just visible. As he watched, a horn sounded a series of harsh notes and a squadron of auxiliary cavalry galloped eastwards to see off the threat. The enemy.