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Opening Extract from...

The Legion

Written by Simon Scarrow

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THE LEGION

SIMON SCARROW

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1

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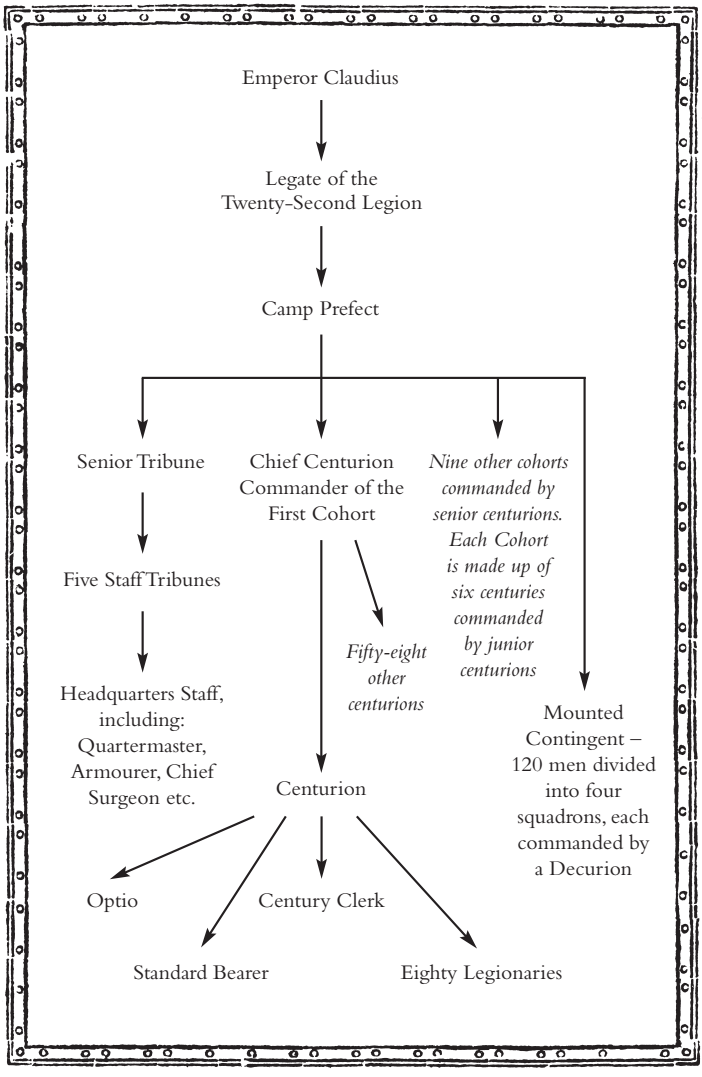
The Roman Army Chain of Command



The Organisation of a Roman Legion

The Twenty-Second Legion comprised some five and a half thousand men. The basic unit was the century of eighty men commanded by a centurion with an optio acting as second in command. The century was divided into eight-man sections which shared a room together in barracks and a tent when on campaign. Six centuries made up a cohort, and ten cohorts made up a legion, with the first cohort being double-size. Each legion was accompanied by a cavalry unit of one hundred and twenty men, divided into four squadrons, who served as scouts and messengers. In descending order the main ranks were as follows:

The *legate* was a man from an equestrian rather than a senatorial background, as was the case with legions outside Egypt. The legate would command the legion for several years and hope to make something of a name for himself in order to enhance his subsequent political career.

The *camp prefect* was a veteran who would previously have been the chief centurion of the legion and was at the summit of a professional soldier's career.

Six *tribunes* served as staff officers. These would be men in their early twenties serving in the army for the first time to gain administrative experience before taking up junior posts in civil administration. The senior tribune was different. He was destined for high political office and eventual command of a legion.

Sixty *centurions* provided the disciplinary and training

backbone of the legion. They were hand-picked for their command qualities. The most senior centurion commanded the First Century of the First Cohort.

The four *decurions* of the legion commanded the cavalry squadrons and hoped for promotion to the command of auxiliary cavalry units.

Each centurion was assisted by an *optio* who would act as an orderly, with minor command duties. Optios would be waiting for a vacancy in the centurionate.

Below the optios were the *legionaries*, men who had signed on for twenty-five years. In theory, a man had to be a Roman citizen to qualify for enlistment, but recruits were increasingly drawn from local populations and given Roman citizenship on joining the legions.

Lower in status than the legionaries were the men of the *auxiliary cohorts*. These were recruited from the provinces and provided the Roman Empire with its cavalry, light infantry and other specialist skills. Roman citizenship was awarded on completion of twenty-five years of service.

The Imperial Roman Navy

The Romans came to naval warfare rather late in the day and it was not until the reign of Augustus (27 BC – 14 AD) that they established a standing navy. The main strength was divided into two fleets, based at Misenum and Ravenna, with smaller fleets based in Alexandria and other large ports around the Mediterranean. As well as keeping the peace at sea, the navy was tasked with patrolling the great rivers of the Empire such as the Rhine, the Danube and, of course, the Nile.

Each fleet was commanded by a *prefect*. Previous naval experience was not a requirement and the post was largely administrative in nature.

Below the rank of prefect the huge influence of Greek naval practice on the imperial fleets is evident. The squadron commanders were called *navarchs* and commanded ten ships. Navarchs, like the centurions of the legions, were the senior officers on permanent tenure. If they wished, they could apply for transfer into the legions at the rank of centurion. The senior navarch in the fleet was known as the *Navarchus Princeps*, who functioned like the senior centurion of a legion, offering technical advice to the prefect when required.

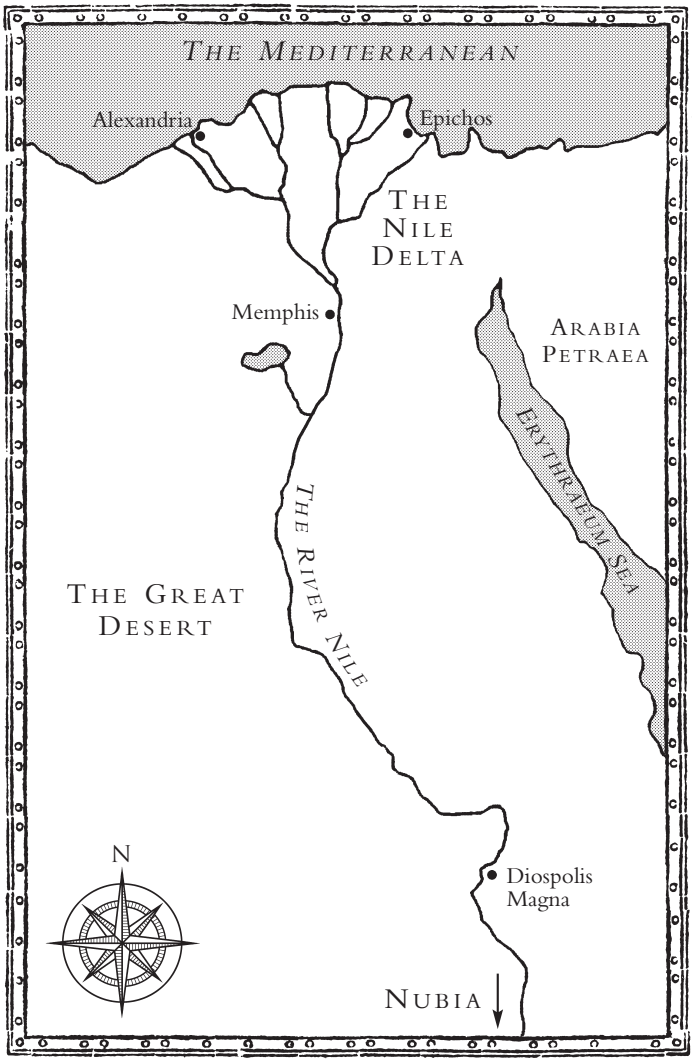
The ships were commanded by *trierarchs*. Like the navarchs, they were promoted from the ranks and were responsible for the running of individual ships. However, their role did not correspond to that of a modern sea captain. They were in charge of the sailing of the ship but,

in battle, the senior figure was actually the officer in charge of the ship's complement of marines.

As far as the ships go, the most common class of vessel was the small patrol galley, usually termed a liburnian. These were propelled by oars or sails and had a small complement of marines. In the same class was the bireme, somewhat larger and more capable of holding its own in battle. The larger warships, the triremes, quadrimes and quinquiremes, were something of a rarity by the age in which this book is set, relics of a bygone age of naval warfare.

The Mediterranean Area of the Roman Empire

The Roman Province of Egypt in the First Century



CHAPTER ONE

The commander of the naval supply station at Epichos was having his morning meal when the optio in charge of the dawn watch made his report. A light drizzle – the first rain in months – had been falling since first light and the optio's cloak was covered with droplets that looked like tiny beads of glass.

'What is it, Septimus?' Trierarch Philipus asked tersely, dipping a hunk of bread into a small bowl of garum sauce in front of him. It was his custom to walk his rounds of the small fort and then return to his quarters to have his breakfast, without interruption.

'Beg to report a ship has been sighted, sir. Heading along the coast towards us.'

'A ship, eh? Just happens to be passing along one of the busiest sea lanes in the Empire.' Philipus took a deep breath to cover his impatience. 'And the marine on watch thinks that's unusual?'

'It's a warship, sir. And it's making for the entrance to the bay.' The optio ignored the sarcasm and continued to deliver his report in the same deadpan voice that he had used ever since the trierarch had taken command of the outpost nearly two years ago. At first Philipus had been delighted at the promotion. Before, he had commanded a

sleek liburnian warship in the Alexandrian flotilla and had grown heartily sick of the stifling lack of opportunity that went with being a junior officer commanding a small vessel that rarely ventured out of the port's eastern harbour. The appointment to the small naval station at Epichos had given him independence, and at first Philipus had striven to make his supply station a model of efficiency. But, as the months dragged on, there had been no sign of any excitement and the men of the station had little to do beyond provisioning the warships or imperial packets that occasionally entered the small, low-lying harbour as they made their way along the coast of Egypt. The only other duty Philipus had to discharge was to send a regular patrol up the Nile delta to remind the natives that they lived under the watchful gaze of their Roman masters.

And so Philipus eked out his days commanding a half century of marines and as many sailors, together with an old bireme – the *Anubis* – that had once served in the fleet that Cleopatra had taken to support her lover, Mark Antony, in his war against Octavian. After Antony's defeat at Actium, the bireme had been absorbed into the Roman navy and served with the Alexandrian fleet before it was finally sent to end its days at Epichos, beached in front of the small mud-brick fort that overlooked the bay.

It was a dismal posting, Philipus reflected. The coastline of the Nile delta was low and featureless, and much of the bay was taken up by mangroves where crocodiles lurked, lying still like fallen palm logs as they waited for any prey to come close enough to be rushed. The trierarch lived in hope of adventure. However, he mused, the nearest he would ever get to that this day was overseeing the loading

of biscuit, water and any supplies of cordage, sail or spars on to the new arrival. Hardly worth disturbing his breakfast for.

'A warship, eh?' Philipus bit off some bread and chewed. 'Well, it's probably on patrol.'

'I don't think so, sir,' said Optio Septimus. 'I've checked the station's log book and no warships are due to put into Epichos for at least a month.'

'Then it's been sent on some detached duty,' Philipus continued dismissively. 'The captain has made a landfall to pick up water and rations.'

'Shall I order the men to arms, sir?'

Philipus looked up sharply. 'Why? What's the point?'

'Standing orders, sir. If an unknown vessel is sighted, the garrison is to be alerted.'

'It's not an unknown vessel, is it? It's a warship. We are the only people who operate warships in the eastern Mediterranean. Therefore it's not unknown, and there's no need to trouble the men, Optio.'

Septimus stood his ground. 'Unless the ship is making a scheduled call, it is unknown, according to the book, sir.'

'The book?' Philipus puffed his cheeks. 'Look here, Optio, if there is any sign of hostility then you can call out the garrison. Meanwhile, inform the quartermaster that we have a visitor and that he and his staff are to be ready to revictual the warship. Now, if I may, I'll finish my breakfast. Dismissed.'

'Yes, sir.' The optio stood to attention, saluted and turned to stride down the short colonnade towards the exit to the commander's quarters. Philipus sighed. He felt guilty about treating the man with disdain. Septimus was a

good junior officer, efficient, even if he wasn't terribly imaginative. He had been right to cite standing orders, the same orders that Philipus had carefully penned in the early days of his appointment when the first flush of enthusiasm for his new post had governed his actions.

Philipus finished the last mouthful of bread, drained his watered wine and rose to make his way to his sleeping chamber. He paused by the pegs on the wall, and then reached for his breastplate and helmet. It would be as well to greet the commander of the ship formally, and to ensure that he was efficiently served, so that a favourable impression was conveyed back to the fleet in Alexandria. As long as his record was good, there was always a chance that he might be promoted to a more prestigious command, and could leave Epichos behind him.

Philipus tied his chinstrap and adjusted his helmet, then slipped his sword belt over his shoulder and strode out of his quarters. The fort at Epichos was small, barely fifty paces along each wall. The mud-brick walls were ten feet high and would present little obstacle to any enemy who decided to attack the supply base. In any case, the walls themselves were cracked and crumbling and could be knocked down with ease. In truth, there was no danger of any attack, Philipus mused. The Roman navy commanded the seas, and the nearest threats by land were the kingdom of Nubia, hundreds of miles to the south, and sundry bands of Arab brigands who occasionally raided the more isolated settlements along the upper Nile.

The trierarch's quarters were at one end of the fort, flanked by the granary and the warehouse for ship's stores. Six barrack blocks lined the street running down the

middle of the fort towards the gatehouse. A pair of sentries unhurriedly stood to attention at his approach and presented their spears as Philipus passed between them and left the fort. Although the sky above was clear, a thin mist hung across the bay, thickening where it lay over the mangroves so that the tangle of rushes, palms and shrubs assumed a vague spectral form which Philipus had found a little disturbing when he had first arrived. Since then, he had frequently joined the river patrols and had become used to the early-morning mists that often cloaked the Nile delta.

Outside the fort lay a long strip of beach, reaching round the bay towards the mangrove. In the other direction it gave way to a rocky strip of land that curved out towards the sea, creating a fine natural harbour. Directly in front of the fort lay the beached bireme, which came with the command. The chief carpenter had lavished many months of his time on the old warship and he and his men had replaced worn and rotting timbers and applied fresh tar to the hull and re-rigged the mast and spars. The sides had been repainted with an elaborate eye design at the bows. The ship was ready to put to sea, but Philipus doubted that this veteran of Actium would ever see action again. A short distance to one side of the *Anubis* a sturdy wooden jetty projected from the shore forty or so paces out into the bay to allow visiting ships to moor alongside.

Although the sun had not yet risen above the mist, the air was warm and Philipus hoped that he could quickly dispense with any formalities arising from the arrival of the ship and remove his breastplate and helmet. He turned

and strode along the dusty track that led towards the lookout post. The small tower was built on a rocky outcrop on the strip of land forming the natural breakwater of the harbour. At the end of the strip another, sturdier, watchtower guarded the entrance. Four bolt throwers were mounted on the walls, together with a brazier, so that any enemy vessel entering the narrow channel leading into the harbour could be subjected to the torment of incendiary fire.

When he reached the lookout post, Philipus entered the shelter at the bottom and saw three of his marines sitting at a bench, chatting in muted tones as they ate their bread and dried fish. As soon as they saw him they rose and saluted.

'Easy, boys.' Philipus smiled. 'Who reported the approach of the warship?'

'Me, sir,' one of the marines said.

'All right then, Horio, lead the way.'

The marine lowered his bread into his mess tin and crossed the interior of the tower and climbed the ladder leading to the roof. The trierarch followed him and emerged on to the platform, next to the signal brazier, made up and ready to be lit at a moment's notice. A section of the space was sheltered by a roof of thatched palm leaves. The sentry who had replaced Horio stood at the weathered wooden rail, gazing out to sea. Philipus joined him and Horio and stared towards the ship approaching the entrance of the bay. The crew were busy furling the sail, a wine-red spread of goatskin decorated with the broad wings of an eagle. A moment later the sail had been lashed up and oar blades extended from the

sides of the vessel and dipped down into the light swell. There was a brief pause before the order to take up the stroke was given and then the oars rose, swept forward and down, cutting into the water and thrusting the bows of the ship forwards.

Philipus turned to Horio. 'Which direction did it come from, before it made towards land?'

'From the west, sir.'

The trierarch nodded to himself. From the direction of Alexandria, then. Which was odd, since no warship was due to pay a visit to the outpost for at least another month, when it would drop off despatches and the quarterly pay chest. Philipus watched as the ship passed by the tower guarding the entrance of the harbour and continued across the calm waters towards the jetty. He could see the sailors and marines lining the sides as they surveyed the bay. In the wooden turret at the front of the vessel a tall figure in a plumed helmet stood erect, hands spread out on the rail in front of him as he stared towards the jetty and the fort beyond.

A movement over by the fort caught Philipus's attention and he saw Septimus and the quartermaster, together with a small escort of sailors, making their way down to the jetty.

'Best join the reception committee,' he mused. Philipus took a last look at the ship crossing the bay, a picture of efficient grace against the tranquil backdrop of distant mangrove. Then he turned to climb down the ladder.

By the time he had returned to the end of the jetty, the warship had slowed and the order to backwater carried clearly to the three officers and the sailors as they advanced

down the jetty to greet their visitors. The rowers held their oars in the water and the resistance of the blades quickly killed the forward motion of the vessel.

'Ship oars!'

There was a dull rumble of timber as the oars withdrew through the slots on each side of the ship and it continued to glide round towards the jetty as the men on the tiller steered the liburnian alongside. Philipus could see the officer in the turret clearly now: tall and broad-shouldered, younger looking than he expected. He stood impassively as his trierarch bellowed the orders for the sailors to make ready their mooring ropes. As the ship edged towards the jetty, ropes snaked through the air from the men in the bows and Philipus's men caught them and heaved the vessel alongside, until the side creaked up against the bundles of woven reeds that protected the jetty's posts. Another line was tossed to the men waiting near the stern and a moment later the ship was securely moored.

The officer descended from the turret and strode across the deck as his sailors opened the side port and slid a gangway on to the jetty. A squad of marines had formed up nearby and the officer gestured towards them as he stepped across on to the jetty. Philipus strode forward to greet him, extending a hand.

'I'm the commander of the supply station, Trierarch Philipus.'

The officer took his hand in a powerful grip and nodded curtly. 'Centurion Macro, on secondment to the Alexandrian flotilla. We need to talk, in your headquarters.'

Philipus could not help raising his eyebrows in surprise and he was aware of his subordinates exchanging an uneasy look at his side.

'Talk? Has something happened?'

'My orders are to discuss the matter with you in private.' The officer nodded towards the other men on the jetty. 'Not in front of anyone else. Please lead the way.'

Philipus was taken aback by the younger officer's terse manner. The man was no doubt a recent arrival from Rome, and therefore inclined to treat the local military with a haughty arrogance that was typical of his kind. 'Very well, Centurion, this way.'

Philipus turned and began to make his way along the jetty.

'Just a moment,' said Centurion Macro. He turned to the marines waiting on the deck. 'With me!'

They crossed the gangway and formed up behind the centurion, twenty armed marines, all burly men with powerful physiques. Philipus frowned. He had been expecting to exchange a few pleasantries and some news before he gave the order for his quartermaster to see to the ship's needs. Not this brusque encounter. What could the officer have to tell him that was so important that it had to be said in private? With a stab of anxiety Philipus wondered if he had been wrongly implicated in some crime or plot. He gestured to the officer to follow him and the small column made its way towards the shore. Philipus slowed his pace until he was at the side of the centurion and addressed him quietly. 'Can you tell me what this is about?'

'Yes, shortly.' The officer glanced at him and smiled

slightly. 'Nothing that need worry you unduly, Trierarch. I just need to ask you some questions.'

Philipus was not reassured by the reply and kept his silence as they reached the end of the jetty and marched up to the gates of the fort. The sentries stood to as the officers and marines approached.

'I don't imagine you get many ships calling in here,' said Centurion Macro.

'Not many,' Philipus replied, hoping that the other man was revealing a more conversational aspect of his seemingly cold character. 'Occasional naval patrols, and imperial couriers. Other than that, a few ships with storm damage over the winter months, but that's about it. Epichos has become something of a backwater. I wouldn't be surprised if the governor in Alexandria didn't reduce our establishment one day.'

The centurion glanced at him. 'Fishing for information about my being here?'

Philipus looked at him and shrugged. 'Of course.'

They had entered the fort and Centurion Macro stopped and looked around. The place was quiet. Most of the men were in barracks. The night watch was finishing off their morning meal and were preparing to rest. Some of the other men were sitting on stools outside their barracks, playing at dice or talking quietly. Centurion Macro's eyes keenly took in the details.

'A nice quiet posting you have here, Philipus. Quite out of the way. Even so, I imagine you are well provisioned.'

Philipus nodded. 'We have ample grain and ship's stores. Just not much call for it these days.'

'Perfect,' Centurion Macro muttered. He turned and nodded to the optio in command of the party of marines. 'Time to proceed, Karim.'

The optio nodded and turned to his men. 'Take 'em.'

As Philipus watched, four of the marines abruptly drew their swords and moved back towards the sentries on the gate. They just had time to turn at the sound of the men approaching before they were cut down with a savage flurry of blows; they had no chance to even cry out before they were killed. Philipus stared in horror as the bodies slumped to the ground either side of the gateway. He turned, aghast, to Centurion Macro.

The man smiled at him. There was a light rasp, a blur of movement and the trierarch felt a sudden blow in his stomach, as if he had been punched, hard. There was another blow that left him gasping in agony. Philipus looked down and saw the other man's hand clenched round the handle of a knife. An inch of blade showed before it disappeared into the fold of his tunic, just below the bottom of his breastplate. A red stain spread through the cloth even as Philipus stared down at it in numbed incomprehension. The centurion twisted the blade, tearing through vital organs. Philipus gasped for breath and grasped the knife arm in both hands. 'What? What are you doing?'

The centurion withdrew his blade and Philipus felt a quick rush of blood as it poured out of the wound. He released his grip as he felt his legs buckle and he collapsed on to his knees, staring up at the centurion in mute horror. Through the gateway he could see the bodies of the sentries and, beyond, one of the marines striding into clear view in front of the fort and punching his sword up into

the air three times. This must have been a prearranged signal, Philipus realised, and a moment later there was a cheer from the liburnian as men who had previously been hidden along the deck swarmed over the side on to the jetty. Philipus saw the quartermaster try to draw his sword, but he was overwhelmed with a glinting series of sword blows, as were the stunned optio and the sailors. They were dead even before they could draw their weapons. Their assailants rushed along the jetty and up towards the entrance to the fort.

Philipus slumped against the wall of the gatehouse and unbuckled his breastplate. He let the armour drop to one side and pressed his hands over the wound with a groan. The officer who had stabbed him stood nearby. He had sheathed his dagger and was shouting orders at his men as they rushed into the fort, cutting down any opponents they could find. Philipus looked on, in agony. His marines and sailors were being butchered in front of his eyes. Those who had been playing dice outside the barracks, and others who had emerged at the first sounds of fighting, now lay dead. Muffled cries and shouts from the barracks told of those who were being killed inside. At the end of the street a handful of men who had snatched up their swords tried to stand their ground but were no match for their skilled opponents who parried their blades aside and struck them down.

The centurion looked round the fort and nodded with satisfaction, then turned and gazed down at Philipus.

The trierarch cleared his throat. 'Who are you?'

'What does it matter?' The man shrugged. 'You will be dead soon. Think on that.'