

A  
**WAR**  
**WITHIN**

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**THE LEGIONNAIRE**

# **A WAR WITHIN**

Book One

## **A WAR WITHIN: THE GLADIATOR**

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Book Two

## **A WAR WITHIN: THE LEGIONNAIRE**

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## **What people are saying about Book One,**

**A War Within: The Gladiator at**

*www.pentecostalpublishing.com:*

“This is an incredible historical novel that so accurately depicts the way life was in ancient Roman times. The storyline itself is involving and will have you gripping your seat as events unwind. Absolutely worth reading for the spiritual inspiration it provides in addition to the exciting story.”

—cullengary55

“This was an awesome read. I’m recommending it to all my family, friends, and coworkers! Thank you for authoring such a great read. It is a great book to read during commutes at night, or whenever. Very addicting, I can’t put it down.”

—Gunthans

“What a start to the story. I was caught up in the gladiators’ combat before I realized it. A War Within did not disappoint, the beginning merely the tip of the iceberg. The prose was effective in conveying immediacy of action and portraying scenes down to the minutest detail. The dialogue was true to the nature of the characters. I thank the author for the treat.”

—Ken Lim

## ***Reviews from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com):***

“Keeps you on the edge of your seat with action...”

“It is hard just to read one chapter without going on to the next. It is a unique story...”

“This is a wonderful fast-paced read full of adventure, action, intrigue, romance and more. Difficult to put down once you enter into the story.”

“This is one of the best reads I’ve found for a long time, and the author definitely earned a spot in my library. I highly suggest the read!”

*You can connect with Nathan D. Maki at  
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**THE LEGIONNAIRE**

**Nathan D. Maki**



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# **A War Within: Legionnaire**

by Nathan D. Maki

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# **DEDICATION**

For my Dad and Mom, Dan and Hazel Maki,  
who taught me that God is always faithful.





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and laying out these books. I'm proud to partner with such talented people.

# COMMONLY USED TERMS

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**Aquilifer** - the senior standard bearer of the legion, entrusted with the legion's eagle

**Brazier** - a bowl-shaped metal container, filled with coals and placed on a stand to provide light and heat

**Cataphractii** - a type of heavy cavalry; both men and horses were protected with a coat of interlocking metal scales, forming a strong but flexible armor

**Centurion** - an officer in the roman army; each centurion led a century, a unit of eighty men plus support staff

**Charnel pit** - a pit under the Colosseum where dead bodies, both human and animal, were dumped for later disposal

**Gladius** - a short thrusting sword, between twenty-five to thirty-two inches long, which was the standard-issue sword of the roman legions

**Hobnailed sandals** - sandals worn by roman soldiers with nails embedded in the soles to provide better grip, especially in often-muddy battlefields

**Hoplite** - a heavily-armored soldier armed with a large shield and long spear or pike who would normally fight in phalanx formation

**Legion Legate** - the senior officer of a Roman legion

**Legionnaire** - a foot soldier in the Roman army

**Maniple** - a rectangular formation of approximately 120 soldiers into which legions were divided in battle

**Optio** - a centurion's second-in-command

**Phalanx** - a square battle formation originally introduced by the Greeks, formed of heavily-armored troops with extremely long spears or pikes

**Pila** - a throwing spear carried in pairs by Roman legionnaires with the shaft having a segment of softer metal that bent on impact to make the spear hang up in shields or armor, making the missile impossible to throw back

**Praetorian Prefect** - the commander of the Praetorian Guard, the emperor's personal bodyguard

**Praetorians** - the group of soldiers making up the emperor's elite bodyguard; the only people legally allowed to carry swords in Rome

**Quaternion** - a squad of four soldiers

**Raptore** - a member of one of the violent gangs who terrorized the streets of Rome after dark

**Scimitar** - a curved sword used for cutting and slashing, favored by Eastern troops

## Commonly Used Terms

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**Spatha** - a longer version of the gladius, this two-edged sword was originally used by cavalry to give them longer reach when fighting from horseback, but later adapted for use by foot soldiers as well

**Testudo** - the tortoise; a military formation executed by Roman soldiers in which the front and outside lines of a unit faced their shields outward while the interior ranks raised their shields overhead to form a protective roof; used for sieges or when under projectile fire

**Tribune** - one of six legion officers next in command to the Legion Legate







## **CHAPTER ONE – A PRAETORIAN SPY**

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With a clatter of hooves on cobblestones, a dusty rider on a foam-flecked bay horse passed through the momentary shadow of the fortress gateway and back into the baking sunlight of the parade ground. Antonius Maximus was on post with his squad of bodyguards outside General Septimius Severus’s residence, and now he stepped forward as the courier cantered up the center street of the army base and reined to a stop before the door. The dusty messenger was young, not much older than Antonius’s eighteen years. Tossing Antonius his reins, he swung down stiffly.

“I have an urgent message for the general, from the imperial secretary. You will take me to him immediately.”

The man’s imperious tone rankled Antonius slightly, and he took a perverse pleasure in finding that when standing face-to-face the rider was considerably shorter than his own five-foot-ten

frame. Antonius passed the reins to another soldier, then took his time surveying the courier's identification before ushering him inside. Leaving him to wait in an antechamber, he knocked on the general's door.

"Enter."

Antonius pushed open the door and straightened to a stiff salute. "A courier is here for you, sir, from Rome."

General Severus smiled into his tightly-curved black beard as always at the young man's formality. He tended to be very accessible to his men and informal compared with most generals. Even this residence in the center of the army fort was spartan. As governor as well as general he could be living in a luxurious villa on the outskirts of Carnuntum, but he chose to be near his men, and his soldiers loved him for it.

With a casual flip of his hand, the general waved Antonius and the courier in. Antonius closed the door and stood at parade rest, just inside it, his eyes never leaving the messenger for a moment. Having been a gladiator a mere month before, Antonius was still new to the world of politics, intrigues, and assassination attempts, but he knew a messenger could as quickly turn out to be a killer. The wiry muscles in his broad shoulders and long arms were strung tight with tension. Above all, he was determined to protect the general who had spared him and his friend Theudas ben Yair and raised them from the arena sands to their current post as his bodyguards.

The courier drew up before Severus's desk and saluted wearily before presenting a scroll sealed with a thick wad of red wax pressed with an official seal. Severus accepted the roll of parchment, glancing at the seal.

"So the imperial secretary sends his regards, and not a regular correspondence judging by how fast you've ridden." He broke the seal and began to read, his swarthy face furrowing in concentration and concern. Looking up, he addressed the courier. "You were there when this happened?"

The courier nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“And how did the crowd react to the news?”

“The crowd was jubilant, sir. They rushed to the temples and altars to offer thanksgiving sacrifices; they shouted in the streets, ‘The tyrant is dead!’ ‘The gladiator has been slain!’”

Antonius was puzzled and anxious. Who were they discussing? He held himself still, but his mind was spinning. *Someone was dead, a tyrant and a gladiator. Could they possibly mean Commodus?* A moment later his suspicions were confirmed, and anger exploded in him so fiercely he only kept silent with an incredible effort of will. Inwardly he was screaming with an unquenched thirst for vengeance.

“It says here that the emperor died of apoplexy. Who passed that word?”

“Praetorian Prefect Laetus, Eclectus, the emperor’s bedroom steward, and Marcia, the emperor’s mistress, all affirmed that to be the case.”

“Yet the people cried out, ‘The gladiator has been slain.’ Severus mused almost to himself, his eyes narrowed shrewdly. “What do the people really believe? On the streets.”

“May I speak freely, sir?” the courier asked, hesitating.

“Of course.”

“The people are saying that the emperor was insane at the end. He paraded around every day in lion’s skins carrying a club like Hercules.”

In a moment Antonius was there again. In the emperor’s office with his father, watching Commodus prowl back and forth in the dim light like the lion whose skin he wore. He remembered the emperor’s maniacal eyes burning into him from under the lion’s glistening teeth as he held out the letter for Antonius to deliver to the Praetorians: that slip of parchment that sealed his mother’s fate. And now Commodus was dead. A flash of anger shook Antonius free of the chilling memory. The messenger was still giving his report.

“He even entered the arena and fought the animals, killing them with bow and arrows. At first people applauded him so he went even further. He fought gladiators then, only wounding them because none really fought him strength on strength. Finally, he disgraced himself by fighting naked, wearing only a lion skin like Hercules.”

“The drunken orgies he once held in secret now he began to hold in public. He had many people put to death without any reason given. So when he died?” The courier just shrugged. “People accepted the reason given.”

Severus nodded, his square face thoughtful. “So Laetus, the Praetorian Prefect, threw his support behind Publius Pertinax? How did the people respond to that?”

“Overjoyed really. Pertinax is older, mid-sixties. The people think he will be a father to them.”

“And he is a military hero as well,” Severus added. He well knew the legend that was Publius Pertinax. “He should have the army and the city of Rome behind him. He may well make a strong emperor.” Antonius wasn’t sure but he thought he detected a slight note of regret in Severus’s words.

The general paused and thought for a long moment. “But how did the Praetorians take the news? Did they acclaim him as well?”

“They did....” the courier hesitated.

“Yes?”

“Well, it seemed it was more the masses that forced their hand.”

Severus frowned. “And the Senate?”

“Accepted Pertinax with open arms. In everything he has been humble. He would not let the sacred fire be carried before him as emperor or any imperial standards raised until he had gone to the Senate House to get their response. From what I hear he actually tried to decline the throne, but the Senate insisted on it!”

## Chapter One – A Praetorian Spy

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“Hmm, I’ll bet they’re relieved to have a moderate in the purple,” Severus mused quietly. He raised his dark eyes to Antonius and indicated the courier. “See that this young man gets access to the baths, a hot meal, and a warm bed. Then return here. I have an assignment for you.”

As he went about getting the courier settled in, Antonius’s mind was feverish with silent fury. Commodus was dead, and not by his hand! Now he would never get the revenge he deserved on the emperor who had made him carry his own mother’s death warrant.

At the same time, however, he remembered how he felt that day on the sands when Scipio fell to his blade. How the elation he expected never came and the vengeance he’d longed for had simply left him empty. *But this was Commodus!* Antonius thought angrily. *He had my mother killed! He was mine, and now he’s dead!*

He felt cheated, his vengeance denied and his hatred futile. It was like a great weight in his chest, gripping his heart in an iron fist.

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Antonius soon returned and rapped on the general’s door. He entered at Severus’s call and started to salute, but the older man waved to him to relax. Instead he settled into parade rest, eyes on the general he had already come to admire and respect. Inwardly he was still seething, but he schooled his face to show no emotion.

Severus’s eyes now bore an intensity Antonius recognized from that day on the arena sands when he had weighed their lives in the balance. It gave him a moment’s pause as he glimpsed the governor’s shrewd mind and steely will piercing his easy-going exterior. Perhaps there had been more to Severus’s magnanimous decision than simple goodwill? He felt a slight chill and forced himself to focus on what the general was saying.

“Antonius, I need to know what’s going on in Rome, and I need the information from someone I can rely on. You grew up in Rome, did you not?”

Antonius blinked in surprise at the sudden question. *How does he know that? If he knows that, how much more does he know?* The general smiled at his obvious consternation and waited until Antonius nodded.

“You’ve only been with me for a short time, but I can tell you’re a young man of intelligence and activity.”

In spite of himself, Antonius found his chest swelling with pride, and he had to fight to hold a stern face against the smile that threatened to break through.

“I want you to go to Rome.” Severus’s words were calm and matter-of-fact, but Antonius’s eyes widened in surprise. He started to speak, thought better of it, and simply settled for a curt nod.

“The Praetorians are powerful. No soldiers are allowed armed in Rome except for them, and they hold the emperor’s safety in their hands.” His voice was forceful. “It’s imperative that I know whether they’re loyal to Pertinax or not. I’ll give you letters that will allow you to infiltrate the Praetorian Guard. You will be perfectly positioned to test their true opinion of the new emperor and then report back to me personally. I’m sending your friend Theudas with you. If you need to get out a message to me while remaining undercover, you’ll send it through him.”

Inwardly, Antonius found himself wondering why a provincial governor and general would be so interested in the new emperor and his bodyguard. Severus obviously had his own reasons for this mission, and Antonius suspected they were deeper than mere concern for this new emperor’s safety. But he said nothing. “When shall I report back?” he asked instead.

“As soon as you know if the Praetorians are loyal. Stay long enough to be sure, but no more than three months.”

“When do we leave?”

“Within the hour.”

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Antonius raked a hand angrily through his thick black hair as he strode into the barracks, still steaming inwardly over the death of Commodus. *How could this have happened? How could I be robbed of my revenge this way?* In his mind he'd always fantasized that he would go back to Rome one day and exact vengeance and now in a moment those dreams were dashed. He threw open the door of the room he and Theudas shared with their squad.

Theudas looked up in surprise as the door banged against the wall.

"Well, are you angry or just in a hurry?" he asked with a slight smile, which slowly died when he saw his friend's tightly furious face.

"Commodus is dead!" Antonius blurted out. Theudas' eyebrows raised and his eyes widened. Other soldiers were in the room and the news hit them like a shockwave. They hurried over, questioning, asking details, demanding answers.

Amid the hubbub, Theudas simply sat on the bed, eyes closed, and began chanting an ancient psalm, "But the wicked shall perish, and the enemies of the LORD shall be as the fat of lambs: they shall consume; into smoke shall they consume away."

Antonius shot a glance at Theudas, then quickly poured out the whole story to the demanding legionnaires surrounding him. They dispersed again, talking and gesturing animatedly, each with his own opinion about the emperor and his death. Within an hour all Carnuntum would know of Commodus's death. Antonius sat down on his bed across from Theudas and leaned forward, grey-green eyes blazing. His friend's lean, scarred face showed no hint of the anger that he himself was feeling.

“Now! You’re not even upset? You wanted to kill Commodus as much as I did! Now you just sit here, and what? Pray? Sing? What is that?”

Theudas finished the stanza and opened his eyes, meeting Antonius’s gaze levelly. “It’s a psalm or song, written by David, who was king in Israel before Rome even existed. I was thanking Jehovah.” Theudas was a Jew whose ferocity in battle was only surpassed by his fierce faith and national pride.

“Thanking him for what? We didn’t get to kill Commodus! Now we’ll never have our vengeance! Your father, my mother! I wanted to look into his eyes as he died and tell him why! I wanted his blood hot on my sword hand as I twisted my blade in his belly! How can you sing or pray or see the hand of your God in this!?”

Emperor Commodus had killed Theudas’s father in a gladiator bout and had made Antonius unwittingly carry the order that led to his mother’s death to the Praetorians of Rome. When the two young men met in the gladiator school of Rome they had escaped and taken a blood oath to avenge their parents’ death by killing Commodus. Their first attempt had failed and they fled Rome planning to return and try again. Now that would never happen and the reality of stolen vengeance twisted in Antonius’s gut.

“God’s ways aren’t our ways, and his thoughts aren’t our thoughts. Jehovah has given justice and judgment. I wasn’t the instrument He chose, but His purpose was fulfilled and His will was done.”

Antonius got to his feet, black eyebrows still drawn together in anger. He couldn’t shake the feeling of emptiness inside. Up until this point he hadn’t realized just how much vengeance had kept him going. But with the death of his hated gladiator master Scipio and now that of Commodus he felt somehow lost, like a ship on a stormy sea when the lighthouse beacon blinks out. With sheer force of will he tried to shake off the feeling, but still it remained.



## Chapter One – A Praetorian Spy

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“There’s more,” he said. “General Severus is sending us to Rome, leaving immediately. He’s given me letters to the Praetorian Prefect to secure me a post in the Emperor’s guard. I’m to report to you if there are any developments, and you report directly to Severus. We’d better hurry. He wants us on our way now.”

They left within the hour, their few belongings easily packed in saddlebags and thrown over their mounts. Mounting was the hard part. There were no stirrups, and Antonius, who had learned to ride passably on various trips to survey the emperor’s estates with his father, laughed heartily at Theudas’s brave but clumsy attempts to climb onto the horse’s high back.

“Should I get down and give you a leg up, or would you rather I found you a box?” he laughed, his dark spirits momentarily forgotten.

Theudas shot him a scathing look and redoubled his efforts. He clutched the high saddle horns at the front and back of the saddle and leaped high, scrabbling wildly at the horse’s flank for a moment before heaving himself awkwardly atop the shying, sidestepping horse.

The mare snorted and tossed her mane, uncomfortable with the novice rider on her back, and it was all Theudas could do, lashing it with the long reins, to get the beast to move down the street. Finally, when it decided to move it bolted into a gallop, Theudas bouncing painfully up and down in the saddle leather and hanging on for dear life.

Still laughing in spite of his concern, Antonius spurred his gelding after Theudas’s horse. Coming up alongside as they neared the gate, Antonius shouted to Theudas, “The reins! Pull back on them! Rein her in!”

Reins forgotten, Theudas was clinging to the horse’s mane. Now he clutched desperately at the trailing straps of leather and hauled back on them with all his strength, bringing the galloping horse to a tossing, snorting stop just in front of the gate guards.

Antonius approached the bemused guards at a more sedate pace and handed over their identification and orders for inspection. While they waited, he looked over at Theudas with barely-concealed mirth playing about the corners of his mouth. Theudas just glowered back and tightened his determined grip on the reins. No beast was going to best him, and Antonius knew he would have ample time to learn equestrian skills before they reached Rome.

The road was long, but the military engineers who had laid its broad flagstones knew their business, and once Theudas grew accustomed to riding they made excellent time. They stopped at the official way houses that studded the road every twenty miles to exchange horses and get food before continuing on, or at night they would stop, sleep there, and then get an early start in the morning.

Neither of them was accustomed to riding, and the long miles on horseback left them with aching backs, bruised backsides, and inner thighs rubbed raw by the saddle. A friendly mile-house keeper gave them a jar of ointment, which they applied liberally to the abraded skin, and kept riding.

As they rode, sometimes they would talk for hours. Theudas talked about his mother, who as far as he knew was still a slave somewhere, and the things she taught him about healing, herbs, and ancient remedies. He talked about his father and the things he had taught him too: how to fight, to work, to love his mother, and be true to his friends.

Sometimes Theudas would quote sayings his father used to recite to him, proverbs he called them. Antonius recognized some of these proverbs from his own father's sermons and the memory of the gulf now lying between them sunk him into a morose silence. Antonius blamed his father for leading them into a faith that led to his mother's death—a faith that endangered and could not save—and his bitter anger had ripped apart their relationship.

Theudas talked more than he usually would have, trying to draw his friend out of his depression, and slowly it began to work. Antonius reluctantly began to recollect about his family and happier days, the days they'd spend in the country, and the things he learned from his father. Antonius was surprised to find himself talking about his father in a positive light for the first time since his mother's death. It felt strange...was it loneliness or longing? Maybe love?

*Do I still love my father?* he wondered.

*No. My misplaced faith in a so-called God got Mother killed!*

Yet still the thought remained. And the feelings. And hadn't he himself prayed to God after their fight with Scipio? His words to Theudas came back, "I don't know what to believe...but I want to believe."

For the past month Antonius had struggled with that statement, then finally just pushed it away because he couldn't make sense of his own feelings. It was easier to just get lost in the everyday business of learning to guard the governor and push away deeper questions like faith and family. He did the same now.

As they rode the two friends exchanged childhood stories, adventures, and mishaps, teeth lost and bones broken, things common to boys everywhere. They laughed loud in the empty countryside.

After one such session of laughter, Theudas asked suddenly, "So, do you think you'll see her?"

"See who?" Antonius feigned ignorance.

Theudas just shook his head and rolled his eyes. "You know who I mean."

"Who, what? Sabina, you mean?" Antonius acted surprised. "No, of course not. The city's huge. What're the odds of us meeting?"

"All depends," Theudas replied, keeping his eyes straight ahead over his horse's ears.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Depends on what?”

“Depends on whether you look for her or not, obviously! You know where she works, or if not there, somewhere in that area probably. And you know where she lives. It’s not been that long since we left. She and her mother are unlikely to have found a different place.”

“I highly doubt she’s going to want to see me,” Antonius said flatly. His mind replayed Sabina’s last words, begging him to abandon the quest for revenge on Commodus. “Please. Leave this. Leave vengeance; leave hate. Love is so much more powerful than hate!” And he had refused, had refused to let go of his hate to grab hold of love, had walked out on her. No, she would not want to see him again.

“And what about you? Do *you* want to see *her*?”

“Does it really matter?” Antonius replied morosely. “If she doesn’t want to see me it’s pointless.”

“What about your father?”

“No,” Antonius said quickly, but without his usual conviction. “He’s just as guilty as Commodus was!” he said, more forcefully.

“For killing your mother? He sent you to save her! How can you keep on blaming him?”

Theudas’ words hit close to home because Antonius had been thinking the same thing, but he wasn’t ready to agree, to let go. “He sold us a lie! He said Jesus would protect our family!”

“I don’t agree with your father’s belief, but he sounds like a man of faith. And no matter what, he’s your father. You should honor him!”

The two lapsed into an uncomfortable silence, broken only by the ring of horseshoes on cobblestones. Finally Theudas spoke, quieter. “What about your sister Julia? Will you try to see her?”

Antonius just sat silently on his horse. Theudas wasn’t sure but he thought he saw the silvery trail of a tear running down his friend’s cheek. But maybe it was just the wind.

## Chapter One – A Praetorian Spy

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They'd been riding for a week, though it felt like two, when they finally spotted the massive walls of Rome on the horizon. They entered the city separately. Leaving Theudas to make his way to a pre-determined hostel, Antonius turned his horse toward the Praetorian fortress that straddled the wall on the northeast side of the city. As he approached the gates he was accosted by a squad of hard-looking Praetorians, who forced him to dismount, present his identification, and state his business.

"I have a letter to Prefect Quintus Laetus from General Septimius Severus of the Northern Legions, Governor of Pannonia," Antonius announced in a tone that he hoped was stern enough to brook no opposition.

Having established that his papers were genuine and his letter truly bore the seal of Severus, the troopers let him pass, directing him to the headquarters building of the camp. Antonius headed that way, ignoring the snickers his stiff, bow-legged gait aroused from the guards behind him.

Antonius presented Severus's letter to Laetus. It introduced him as a son of a high-ranking friend who had served Severus well and wanted a position in the Guard for his son. Severus intimated that he would count it as a personal favor if Laetus would see fit to find a low-level officer post for his friend's son.

Laetus had a narrow, patrician face with a long nose, high brow, and sunken cheeks. There seemed to be a haunted look in his eyes and in the dark circles under them that spoke to Antonius of a great deal of stress or guilt. Thinking back to the courier's words, he remembered that Laetus was one of those who had announced Commodus's death of a supposed apoplexy, which could really mean any sudden death preceded by unconsciousness.

*Could Laetus have been involved in Commodus's death?* Antonius wondered. *Could he have stolen my chance at revenge?* He looked suspiciously at the prefect.

## A War Within: The Legionnaire

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Laetus, for his part, was looking suspiciously at Antonius. He looked the part of a young nobleman in search of a relatively safe appointment with the Guard. The Praetorians paid well too, twice as much as the regular army. Yet General Severus hadn't named the young man's father, and the information about Antonius was sketchy at best. Some of it struck him as sounding like an outright fabrication. At the same time, however, it wouldn't do to anger such a powerful man as Septimius Severus, especially in such uncertain times. The new emperor would need the support of the army, and Laetus was loath to offend the general over something as minor as this.

The two stood studying one another for a long moment, and then Laetus stretched out his hand to shake Antonius's.

"You will start at *optio* level. If you prove yourself, perhaps in time you will make centurion." Sitting down at his desk the prefect took a wax tablet and wrote up Antonius's orders, detailing his new position and to what century he was assigned. He punched his seal into it with his ring, then stood, handing the tablet to Antonius. "My aide will show you to your quarters. Dismissed."

Antonius saluted, turned about face, and left the prefect's office, led by the aide. He realized that he had been holding his breath and let it out now in a long, quiet gust, hoping the balding aide with the ledger and stylus walking officiously in front of him didn't hear.

The aide led him first to the quartermaster where he drew his new Praetorian equipment, arms, and armor and then introduced him to Claudius, the centurion he would be working under. He was a relatively young man; Antonius estimated he'd be about thirty. He had a square-jawed face with a flat nose that spoke of barroom brawls and a ready smile that suggested he'd probably bought the man who busted his nose a drink afterward.

"Welcome to the unit," Claudius said after the aide left. "You'll find it easy enough. Just follow my lead." He leaned in, a conspiratorial twinkle in his eye. "This is the good life, Antonius.

Just don't take yourself or the rules too seriously, and we'll get along famously."

Antonius just nodded and grinned in spite of himself. He instinctively liked Claudius, although his attitude was rather surprising to find in a centurion.

Claudius waved him into the quarters they would share. "Get in uniform and I'll introduce you to the men."

Antonius quickly donned his equipment, admiring his appearance. He thought he looked quite dashing in his polished armor and long crimson cape. With his sword buckled on his right and dagger on his left, he felt ready for anything.

Just then Claudius came in. He took one look at Antonius and began shaking his head. "No, no, this'll never do. You look far too proper and pompous. You'll set the men's teeth on edge. Here, lose the cloak, No one wears them in here in the fort, terribly uncomfortable things when you're sitting down for a pint of ale. Loosen up your armor man. Let your belt out a couple notches; we're all about comfort these days!" He smiled broadly as Antonius reluctantly added some laxity to his equipment and laid aside his cape.

"Much better, much better! Come meet the boys now."

As Antonius expected, the men in the century greeted him properly but suspiciously, their questioning eyes lingering on his youthful features.

*Another embarrassing son bought a post in the Guard.* He could read the conclusion in their gaze. Personally, Antonius could care less about their opinion of him, but he knew gaining their trust would give him a line on the popular sentiment in the camp, so he made a point of meeting each man individually and learning his name.

In spite of Claudius's easy-going demeanor, the men in the unit seemed to have a genuine respect and liking for the young centurion. More than one of them, Antonius noted, also shared

Claudius's battle-scarred nose, and he wondered if the centurion had earned their respect the hard way.

"All right, let me show you around the place," Claudius said and led Antonius on a whirlwind tour made entertaining by the young centurion's humorous running commentary.

"Over there's the gate, guarded all day and all night. Everyone's very punctual about their guard duty because it's customary to tip the keeper when you're bringing in liquor or a lady." He winked at Antonius. "We're supposed to guard the wall top too, but nobody tips those poor fellows so generally they sleep in that dark nook over there." He laughed.

"Here's the kitchens, where they try daily to poison us all. You'll have a stomach like an iron pot before long, I promise you!"

As they toured the fortress Antonius was surprised to see the slovenly state of the camp. Where once it had been a model of military efficiency, now it held an aura of laxness. He could see it in the way the Praetorians kept their kit: armor not properly polished and tunics often rumpled or dirty. Where once they'd been clean-cut and well groomed, now he saw soldiers walking around with several days' stubble on their cheeks and hair growing long and unkempt out of their helmets.

Clearly as Commodus had declined in sanity, so the Praetorians had declined in proper decorum. Antonius made a mental note to tell General Severus. He wondered what the incoming Emperor Pertinax, the hard-crusted war hero, would do about the laxity of his personal guard. He could imagine sparks flying.

As soon as his duties allowed, Antonius left the Praetorian camp and began to wander the streets of Rome. He was drawn inexorably toward the poor side of town, to the factory and harbor districts. Common laborers and sweaty dockhands cast anxious looks at his official uniform and hurried on with downcast eyes. For hours he roamed the streets, unwilling to admit even to himself



why he was there, who he was looking for. Finally, footsore and disappointed, he turned back to the Praetorian fortress.

For days Antonius kept to the same pattern. During the day he performed his duties around the base, which were simple enough. The Praetorians had grown lax about drill and practicing, and mostly they just wandered the streets pushing their weight around or lazed around the base gambling, sleeping, and eating.

Antonius just went with the flow, not trying to enforce any rules that weren't already being followed. He spent time sitting around playing dice and talking with the men of his century, gaining their trust. And always he was watching and listening. The overall atmosphere around the base was one of lassitude, but with an undercurrent of brooding unrest, like a lion stirring uneasily in its sleep. The veneer of slovenly languor barely masked the rising discontent among the soldiers.

In order to secure their loyalty, Emperor Pertinax had promised the Praetorian Guardsmen a generous lump-sum payment. Ostensibly it was wages, but actually it was a bribe. The sum promised was vast; the actual amount that had so far come in as payment was not. Promises that more was forthcoming directly were no longer convincing, and the Praetorians were getting restless.

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Evening was falling as Antonius once again made his way out of the camp and into the broad streets of Rome. Tonight he sought out Theudas to report the restless attitude of the Praetorians, but told him nothing was definitive enough to carry to Severus as yet.

They enjoyed dinner together, and then Antonius excused himself and began wending his way to his familiar haunt around the factories of Rome. Once, feeling bold, he had stopped at the pottery factory where he knew Sabina worked and enquired about her, only to learn from a very nervous-looking foreman who kept

eyeing his imperial uniform that she had quit right after the fight with Lucullus.

Lucullus was a senator's son who got a dark thrill from leading a gang of street youths in crime. Antonius and Theudas had gotten entangled in his gang, but when Lucullus tried to capture and enslave Sabina, the three of them had fought their way free and escaped. No doubt Sabina was afraid the young nobleman would seek her out at her workplace again for revenge so she had quit. As an added precaution, Antonius found out she and her mother had also left their apartment complex and presumably moved to another.

With no real idea of where to start looking, Antonius just wandered the streets, hoping to glimpse the graceful lines of that familiar face, those dark, expressive eyes, her raven-dark hair. His search took him from main streets to dark alleyways, from the factories to the docks. Thankfully his shining armor and weapons kept the lurking thieves and cutthroats at bay, because Antonius was heedless for his safety. The search he had begun so hesitantly, denying it even to himself, he now pursued obsessively.

More than once Antonius thought he had seen Sabina, only to be disappointed bitterly when he drew closer. So when he spotted the dark-haired girl ahead of him carrying a basket of laundry, he hardly dared to hope. He crossed the street on an angle, speeding up until he was parallel with her and then looked across at her.

Sabina! There was no mistaking her. He started across the street to intercept her before he could second-guess himself.

"Sabina," he called as he drew near her. For a split second she froze in place, shocked motionless. Then, with a slight cry of surprise she spun toward him, the laundry basket falling to the ground. Antonius's heart pounded as he hurried toward her, his smile a mirror of her own. *She's happy to see me!* He felt a joy he hadn't dared to hope for.

And then Sabina's smile died. Hurt, confusion, and perhaps revulsion were written large across her face. Antonius quickly

realized why as her gaze swept up and down him, taking in the armor and weapons of a hated Praetorian. She turned and started to walk quickly away, laundry basket forgotten in the street, but he followed and caught her arm, holding her tighter than he had meant to. She pulled her arm away violently.

“Take your hand off me!”

“Please, Sabina,” he entreated her. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you. Let me explain...all this.” He motioned to his uniform.

She relented, and they stepped out of the street into a shadowed alcove. In a rush, Antonius told her what had happened, how they’d stowed away on a ship after their assassination attempt, how they’d been caught by Lucullus when pirates attacked the ship, the fight with Scipio, and now his assignment from General Severus.

Heart hammering in his chest, Antonius tried to pull intelligible words out of the churning maelstrom of his thoughts. He felt off-balance and clumsy, the words tumbling out awkwardly. “On our way here Theudas asked me if I wanted to see you, and I tried to convince myself that I didn’t, because I knew...or thought I knew, you wouldn’t want to see me. But I love you, Sabina. I couldn’t stay away. I’ve been looking for you every day since I got back. Please don’t go.”

Sabina laid her hand gently on Antonius’s cheek, and he turned his head to kiss her palm fervently. “It is good to see you again, Antonius,” she said, her voice soft and warm. “I’m sorry that we parted that way the last time.” She looked down for a moment as if replaying the painful scene. Finally she looked up, eyes glistening. “I thought you had died.” Her voice trembled slightly and she paused, biting her quivering lower lip. “I hated that I never got a chance to say I love you or kiss you good-bye.”

“I’m so sorry,” Antonius said fervently. “I never should have treated you like that, talked to you like that. It’s just...there was

this rage inside of me. This hatred and desire for revenge. It was like a mist in front of my eyes. It was all I could see.”

“And now?” Sabina asked, her dark, shining eyes searching his. “Now that Commodus is dead, what will you do? Will you come back to me? Come back to your family?”

Antonius shook his head. “I can’t. I’ve got a mission I have to fulfill.”

“Antonius, leave the army!” Sabina said forcefully, taking his hands in hers with a fierce grip. “Leave this intrigue! Come back to me. Come back to your family and your faith.”

“My family? My faith?” Antonius’ lip curled contemptuously, the deep-rooted bitterness surfacing involuntarily. “There is nothing for me there! You’re the only one who matters to me, Sabina!”

Instantly he could see the hurt and anger in Sabina’s eyes. She pulled her hands from his grasp and made to turn away.

“Sabina, wait. I didn’t mean it like that!” Reaching out Antonius caught her, pulling her close and leaning in to try and kiss her. He received a stinging slap instead.

She pulled away, dark eyes flashing dangerously. “What ever happened to the man I fell in love with? You’re nothing but a brute in a suit of armor!” Her words stung him more painfully than her slap.

Her voice dropped and grew more sad than angry. “This is not who you are, Antonius. This is not who you are meant to be. I believe inside you’re still the man I first met. I’ll pray that one day you come to yourself, that you realize who you’ve become and who you should be, and when that day comes...come back to me.” She leaned up and brushed soft lips lightly across the cheek where the slap still stung, then backed away, serious and solemn. “Until then, don’t look for me.”

Antonius felt tears welling in his eyes and turned his head away so she wouldn’t see. Mutely he picked up her laundry basket from the street and held it out to her, eyes focused on the linen

## Chapter One – A Praetorian Spy

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it contained. He couldn't bear to look her in the eye and dared not say a word, knowing if he did the tears would spill over. He felt more confused and lost than ever, like his last hope had been stolen. He was empty, sad, hurt, and angry. Antonius watched Sabina turn, watched her until she disappeared into the gathering darkness of the street.

*God is taking away another woman I love, just like He did my mother.* His lips trembled for a moment, tears brimming over in spite of himself. Then he shook his head angrily, dashed a hand across his damp cheeks, turned, and walked away.