

## Chapter One- Manhood.

Octavian Aurelius by his seventeenth birthday had grown into a fine figure of a man. Slate blue eyes, blonde hair, strong chin, and sturdy figure coupled with a ready wit made him an attractive companion. It was true his dotting parents had spoiled the child and a little arrogance had crept into his demeanour when dealing with lesser mortals.

Deva believed a youth should be firm in resolution and confident in manner so had not discouraged this obvious flaw. The boy proved excellent at his studies. He was respectful to his elders and expected to go far. Augurs and soothsayers predicted a great future. The Druid Queen had no reason to contradict these interpretations.

The Emperor Vespasian a former soldier believed army life bred moral fibre in young patricians. Tiberius was close to the throne. It was not difficult to mould a sensible boy to their Elder's way of thinking. His Patrons agreed a few years in the provinces then a spell in Rome with the Praetorian Guard was the best way forward for the boy.

The second Augusta was the Emperor's legion. Titus agreed to send a papyrus to the legate in Britannia with his recommendation. The men of the family satisfied with the arrangements needed to tell Deva the good news.

"I'll tell mother; I agreed to the idea."

"And what use will that be? She will talk you out of it and you will find yourself in the priesthood. Better to take the salt first. I'm surprised your mother has not detected the vibes."

"I've hardly seen her since I arrived back in Rome. She only came to the Domus once while you were away in Aurelia."

"You know she prefers a quieter life in the country."

Octavian nodded in agreement dismissing recent experience and student gossip. He well knew Portia Mettillus was mother's best friend and sworn to secrecy he had attended one of her famous parties. Youthful innocence had received a rude if pleasant awakening.

The other students spoke of Mistress Aurelius' beauty with awe. He could not deny even at mother's advanced years she still retained female attributes but then so did Portia Mettillus and hers had been made available. If Mistress Mettillus could behave like that in private, what mother might do behind those same closed doors beggared belief. It was both an exciting and disturbing thought.

A week became a month. Tiberius needed to grasp the nettle and inform Deva her pride and joy was off to play in Britannia. "Hello is anyone here? Oh, there you are my precious. I have mounted those rubies that came from Aurelia onto a golden necklace. Let me put them on."

The Queen glanced in the Chinese mirror and felt a cold chill as those fabulous rubies, bought from a caravan that traded with the East, settled between her inviting breasts.

Carnal lust for an ageing husband was becoming a distant memory even a triple dose of Devina's potion had little effect on his libido last week. A husband's heart was not what it was. The hint of blue on the lips told a story as did those long pauses to gain breath. Such jewels were a sweetener for something though it was not to persuade her into the marriage bed.

"No present could be finer. I love them dearly. I give up; what's happened?"

"Err, err it was the boy's choice not mine. I am sure it is for the best. The Emperor has asked the Legate to keep a special eye open."

"I suppose it was inevitable he'd join the Praetorians." Tiberius looked uncomfortable then sighed. "Tell me he's not going to Britannia? It is not safe. Four legions have been fighting there for years. Remember what the Icenii did to those veterans. Octavian could get himself killed. I hoped he would inherit a better instinct for preservation. That boy's senses are addled. You can't let him go."

"Deva be reasonable. Britannia has been in the Empire for over thirty years."

"Exactly and are the barbarians subdued? No, they are not. I hear those Druids are growing in power again."

"Stuff and nonsense, there are a few clerics hiding in the western mountains that spew out hatred nothing more. The Emperor was saying only yesterday the sooner the west and north are cleansed the better."

"Those clerics have ruled Britonic hearts and minds for over a thousand years. The Druids are trouble and my Octavian will be in the middle of it."

"He's my son as well. Deva what can you know of an insignificant little blot on the edge of the known world? The army will look after him."

"I'll not allow it. All that rain will be bad for his chest."

"Woman you have to let the boy live his life. Octavian is taller than I am and he is as strong as an ox. We have spoilt him. It will do him good to have a spell under the Eagles."

"Oh you men; you think you're so clever with your scheming and it always ends in trouble."

"The Emperor thought it was a good idea and has put in a good word."

"Vespasian enjoys playing at soldiers. Our boy is delicate and articulate. He paints you know?"

"The Emperor playing soldiers indeed; remember what Titus achieved along the Rhinus, in Britannia and on the Judean campaign."

"Now, you're changing the subject. We are talking about our little boy. You realise he's likely to meet his father."

Tiberius had never asked about the past but had often wondered what had become of his nephew.

"Marcus may have changed his name but he will not have forgotten his old one. He will ask questions when he sees the boy. Their features are similar. End this foolishness now Tiberius. You are tempting the fates."

"The Emperor has intervened. The boy has taken the salt. It is too late."

"Praise the Goddess; let us hope she protects him."

"Who's this Goddess you mention?"

"Husband, now is not the time."

"Octavian must know the truth."

"No he's not ready. The boy only knows one father and that one is you. It will be too much of a shock."

"Deva, I am the Patron of Patrons of the Aurelian family. I am getting no younger. Marcus is the son of my dead brother. Augustus was the eldest son not I. The family might need Marcus here. All I ask is a name, an idea where to find him and whether there are children."

The Queen had been close to this man for many years and had trusted him with her fortune, body, and son and never regretted a moment." You deserve some answers." For a second time, Deva threatened her husband with death and destruction if he ever revealed what she was about to say. "Marcus Alexander is a Tribune in the 2nd Legion Augusta. He bonded with my twin and has a daughter the same age as our son. I have never seen either since I came to Rome but I have my visions. They live near a castra by a sacred river whose name I hold." Deva stopped talking and became deathly pale.

Tiberius had never seen his wife cry but she cried now. The tears flowed as the memories returned. "I'll take you home." He vowed shocked at this loss of control. He had been selfish then remembered that until today he had not known she was a Briton.

"Someday the Goddess will call me back. Now is not the time."

Tiberius felt his hairs bristle on his neck and knew Deva believed it to be true. It was an eerie feeling as curiosity got the better of his forebodings. "What's your sister like?"

"She's pretty and placid, not like me at all. Vina understands about the foods and fruits of the forest. She is a caring person and the other half of our dual entity."

The husband grinned none could be more beautiful. He recalled Deva's words and was astonished. Marcus had married her sister. His wife must have loved his nephew and lost out to a sister. In one respect, Tiberius had guessed correctly; on the other, he was off the mark. The fates and a brother made that selection.

## **Chapter Two. The new Eagle.**

Octavian received a scroll from the Emperor. He must report to the Legate of the 2nd legion Augusta somewhere in the distant Western Province. He spent a last goodbye with the family.

"Have you got the remedies for the ailments packed safely?"

"Yes Mother."

"Have you enough money?"

"Err; yes I'm sure I have."

"Give him some more Tiberius."

"He's already carrying a fortune, anymore and he'll need another pack horse."

"You should take bodyguards carrying all that money."

"Mother I travel incognito. I'll be quite safe. Zeno guards my back."

"Zeno is a slave. He'll be worse than useless and the horse you picked is little better."

"Mother please, my mind is made up."

Deva knew those looks. More pleading would be useless. She kissed her son on the cheek and determined to be brave. "Take care and write often."

Zeno of Greek origin had curly black hair, swarthy skin, brown eyes, and a stocky figure. His mother was from the Syrian estate. Zeno had become a body servant when Marcus was ten. The slave though easily led, by his forthright young master, had become a welcome addition to the household.

Tiberius provided a berth on one of the family boats to appease a grieving mother. The two teenagers left Ostia to cross the Middle Sea to Arelate a large port on the mouth of the River Rhone.

Roads across Gaul were good and well serviced with easy stop off points. Octavian made good time enjoying the freedoms from family and the joys of the open road on that first day. He chose Cirrus a grey gelding because of his looks. It was not his wisest choice.

The horse was lame by dawn. A horse doctor diagnosed a weak tendon, a defect from birth, and advised a week's convalescence. The relay station owner agreed to take Cirrus off his hands for half his true worth.

Octavian cursed his foolishness. Mother was a finer judge of horseflesh. He checked the fetlocks, the teeth, smelt its breath then sat on the horses back. Zeno agreed the mare looked strong and sturdy.

An oxcart ahead broke a spindle. The large wooden wheel collapsed sideways and sent the dust from the split bags of flour skywards. The mare bolted in panic unseating its rider. "Catch the thing Zeno. Shape up man you must be able to ride faster than that."

Zeno returned within the hour. Marcus questioned local barbarians but no one had seen the animal. The horse had disappeared off the face of the earth and his forehead sported a bruise the size of an egg. They wasted the rest of the day's travel trying to find the mount.

Horse-trading is a fine art. Many are the cheats and tricks to improve a sale. Some owners give horses' beer to make them look timid when they were wild, and balms to make them look lively when they are half-dead. Poultices could make a fetlock look sound on the day of sale. Some animals could not digest food properly because of a twisted gut or rotten teeth.

This pick looked sturdy. The teeth were sound. Marcus had struggled to open the mouth and the animal had bit so hard he almost lost a finger. The feet were sound one hoof had squashed his toe. Cicero's problem became clearer after three hours of travel. The animal broke wind constantly after feeding. The gelding frightened not only himself but also other road users. Two donkeys had bolted shedding their loads and a cart ended up in a ditch. The master was unhorsed again and injured a shoulder.

Zeno returned after an hour's chase and still it fared. By dawn, Cicero at last went silent. An empty stomach cured the ailment. The silence was golden. The way station officer agreed to swap the animal for a hefty fee.

"What do you think Zeno?"

"He looks sturdy master."

"You said that about the others."

The sun shone down. It was a pleasant morning, optimism increased. Almost within sight of their lodgings, the packhorse collapsed and died. Zeno fell off into the side drain and hurt his leg.

Octavian stared in horror at the dead animal. Before, there had been servants to look after a young master's every whim. He had his choice of the finest horses, chariots, and carriages. He almost cried at the injustice. Another of his dwindling hoard of golden coins paid a knacker to remove the dead beast from obstructing the highway.

Zeno had no idea where he was, where he was going and how long it would take to get there. At home, he had been a small cog in a well-oiled machine. On the road, he became incapable of rational thought. A jug of wine from a stranger at the next way station when guarding the baggage ended in disaster. Zeno remembered nothing until he awoke to discover everything had gone.

The look said it all. The Gods were against them. It was a master's duty to look after his property. What coins remained would no longer be enough to reach their destination. Pride would not allow Octavian to go cap in hand back to the southern coast and admit failure. Zeno awash with tears left with an itinerant slave dealer in exchange for much needed cash.

In a fit of guilt, Octavian attempted to find his slave but the dealer was long gone. No one ever heard of Zeno again.

It had sounded simple in the Atrium. A week later, homesick, far from home, and apprehensive the young patrician dressed almost in rags waited for a ferry to take him to the end of the known world.

The weather looked beautiful until his foot touched the planking of the small ferry. The sun disappeared behind the darkening clouds. Octavian thought he had weathered a storm when crossing to Cyprus but was wrong even if the captain called it a heavy squall. They ran with the storm to the west and when the wind changed returned to the east. The boat found shelter in the Rhinus estuary and there they stayed. Four days later a gentle breeze blew them across the strait.

The South had been pacified for decades. Noviomagnus was a backwater where only a tent party and a few veterans remained to keep order. The young Eagle did not fancy getting his feathers wet again so walked towards the old wooden fort in the hope a legionary might point the way.

The garrison commander, an old Centurion, awoke from a drunken slumber. "The Augusta you say? Mm let me think lad. They moved to Isca or was it Eboracum? There is a Castra somewhere on the Deva or was it the Sabrina. It will be best to take ship to Isca. Some of the Augusta lads are still there."

The patrician used his initiative, tossed a coin, Isca won. A day later, a ferry carried Octavian on a gentle breeze back towards the west.

Isca Dumnodiorum; once the main base of the 2nd Augusta had become a shadow of her former self. A half-Century and a Vexillion of Auxiliaries were the only soldiers for miles. The commander, another old centurion had some idea of his legion's dispositions. The high command had placed elements of the 2nd Augusta at a new fortress built beside the narrowing estuary of the Sabrina. There was talk of troop concentrations in readiness for a new governor's arrival.

Octavian had two options, sail with the next ferry, or leave on horseback. The roads were good but it would be foolish and unsafe for an officer to travel alone.

Four days later Octavian sailed up the Sabrina on a high tide. The wide estuary stretched out for miles before the headlands converged and the watchtowers of a great camp filled the view on the far horizon.

With a feeling of optimism, the new recruit reported for duty. "I'm a noble courier. I must see the Legate."

The Decurion was not helpful. "Err if you are a lord. I suggest Master you dress in a proper uniform."

Don't bandy words with me soldier, get me someone in authority," Octavian shouted. "I'm carrying a personal dispatch to the legate from the Emperor."

"What's all the noise about?" A centurion asked as he strolled into the office.

"I'm a noble courier. I must see the legate."

The soldier of the old school was not impressed with any brash, young, whippersnappers. "Be a bit difficult your royal highness he's at his estate in Lusitania."

Marcus gasped. He had no money left, it was essential the system accept him. This dispatch was his lifeline. "I must see someone of importance. My, err dispatch could mean life or death."

"Life and death is it? I would be very surprised lad that such important news travelled with a novice. If it was that important why take so long to get here?"

"That's none of your business. I shall have you demoted to the ranks for your insolence. I'll have you know I'm the son of Tiberius Aurelius."

The Centurion gave a loud audible sign. "Improperly dressed while on duty; Decurion take this drunken troublemaker and lock him up."

Two days later Marcus waited in a line of defaulters to see the camp prefect. A feeling of injustice had grown with every minute in captivity. "Hail Caesar; I'm a senior tribune travelling as a courier. I would like to report a Centurion's dereliction of duty. He had the cheek to lock me up. I want him reduced to the ranks."

The Prefect listened politely. "I do not take it kindly when a trusted centurion's character is blackened by someone looking like a goat herder. I assume you can prove these charges and your identity?"

"Well I could if he had not taken my papyrus. I had my possessions stolen on the road. I guarded the report with my life. I assured that stupid centurion that my dispatch was important."

"You guarded the message with your life eh? How brave you must have been in such adversity. The legate will be informed."

"But he's away." Octavian determined not to shed a tear as his world fell apart.

The Prefect looked at the deflated young patrician. He became nervous when young nobles appeared unexpectedly. Some had more influence than was healthy. It was better to palm them off on someone until they learnt to be useful. "Boy it was stupid to antagonise a Centurion of Rome when not dressed for the part. It would be wiser to discover the lie of the land before you attack from a position of weakness. Your disguise is most effective I'll give you that. I have an urgent dispatch. I want you to take this to the camp upriver."

The Prefect placed a papyrus in Octavian's hand as the word dismiss echoed in the hallowed hall. Marcus was at the mercy of the same Centurion. Two legionaries one in front, one behind, marched him towards the jetty.

The Camp on the Upper Sabrina greeted the demoralised youth with a rainstorm. His last coinage bought an auxiliary cloak and trousers from a trader at an exorbitant price. Cold wet and miserable the tribune went off to report.

"What can we do for you lad," a Centurion shouted.

"I've a dispatch from the Prefect at Isca."

"A message from Isca, go on straight ahead lad"

Octavian looked in surprise and with a hint of relief as he was ushered into the holy of holes. Across the table sat a Senatorial Equestrian, the number two of a legion and beside him a Legatus Legion. It

might not be the 2nds Legate but he was back with the people that mattered. This was the commanding General of the 20th legion, known by his men quite rightly as God.

The 20th gladdened the heart of any young noble. Many were the tales of its fame throughout the capitol. The 20th was highly regarded even if the Emperor was once the 2nd Augusta's God. The Running Bears bore their title Valeria Victrix with a dashing arrogance. The Augusta still smarted at the disgrace of not helping in Boadicea's defeat.

"Well soldier what do you want?"

"I'm Octavian Aurelius arrived from Rome. I hold a dispatch from the Prefect of Isca Lord. There is also a report to the Augusta's Legate from the Emperor in introduction alas the Legate is on his estates. I also carry a scroll to the Prefectus Castrorum at Deva from my father which I'll deliver when time allows."

"My we are a busy little boy. Let's take a look, I've not got all day."

Marcus looked in horror as the Legate broke the Emperor's seal. God digested the edict. "My, my so you are the whelp of my good friend Tiberius. Mm a little wet behind the ears but with potential I'm sure. The Emperor requests the Army provide you with work compatible to your status. We can do better than any old buffer from the Augusta, eh Janus?"

"We can but try Lord." The Colonel replied with a grin

"You may join our staff Aurelius. First, you will become a courier so you can learn the lie of the land. Welcome to the 20th my boy. The Running Boars needs quality piglets, eh Colonel?" Dine with us tonight boy. We will talk of things at home. And for the love of Apollo get a bath and a proper uniform."

Within days, the Running Boars knew all about their new patrician. His father called the Emperor friend. Marcus status rose accordingly with the senior officers. The legionaries treated his illustrious person with more contempt.

Octavian had few illusions fail to gain his men's respect and he could end up murdered or worse sent home in disgrace. You had to be tough to last as an officer in the legion while campaigning in the provinces.

The learning curve was painful. Initiations bonded a soldier to his unit. A young lord was not immune to such practices. Degrading a youth of high rank heightened the fun. A legion was a hard taskmaster.

Octavian bore the marks of his indoctrination without squealing. Soft muscles hardened, his tail curled. Another piglet joined the herd.

### Chapter Three. A new Princess of the people.

In the years since the great rising of the Iceni and the burning of the sacred groves the Romans had sought to control and influence their borders by a system of client kings and instilling fear. The infrastructure expanded as the legions and auxiliaries constructed new forts, built roads, and guarded vulnerable frontiers. Druidism remained a nagging thorn. There were reports that the priests were regrouping and sedition was on their breaths. The Ordovices in the western hills and the Brigantes in the north were under surveillance.

The fourth legion, the 14th Gemina, left in '67 for the Eastern provinces. The second Adiutrix Legion, formed from men from the Imperial fleet at Ravenna, held the honour of the title Pia Fidelis. The legion had seen service earlier on the German frontier. Vespasian familiar with British failings changed the policy of containment and ordered the legion to reinforce the garrison during 71.

Octavian spent half of seventy-seven in the saddle carrying messages to villas, civitas, coloniae, castras, or hillforts but never reached the camp on the Deva. Baths were a place of relaxation. Woman, wine, the food, a famous charioteer or gladiator were the prime topics. Someone somewhere was a mind of information on most subjects. The topic of the Castra Deva came up.

"Castra Deva now there's a choice site. Spent a few days there during the last Druid campaign and been back a few times. The commander was an auxiliary, a Syrian Archer, raised from the ranks."

"How did an auxiliary ge--?" Octavian asked.

"Aye lad well you might ask. His father was a citizen and a grandfather made a fortune as a trader. This Syrian was a younger son that had women trouble and ran away. The Augusta's old Prefect, a close associate of Governor Veranius took a shine to the boy. You know how it is if you're a pretty boy that warms the right bedroll."

Another voice took up the tale. "Postumus something or other was his handle held the 2<sup>nd</sup> Augusta back on the lower Sabrina during the rebellion and fell on his sword for the dishonour. Surely you remember the gossip?"

Err a little before my time," a Decurion replied.

"Many of the lads thought the prefect did right to hold his ground." An old centurion added. "Governor Paullinus panicked and ordered the Augusta to march. The Iceni had caused merry hell in the east. The old boars forced marched from Mona and stopped the barbarians in the middle lands. It was a close run thing."

"Were you on the hill?"

"Aye lad, only been over here a year; got wounded in the thigh on the second day. The Prefect at Deva and his deputy fought with us that day. They were a part of the bodyguard that rode south with Governor Paullinus. None used a bow better than the Syrian and none used a gladius better than that Nubian. Old Majidus saved the Emperor's life on the Rhinus and was Aquilifer of the 2<sup>nd</sup> for a time. Those pair became famed spies. They witnessed one of them lewd barbarian festivals."

The echo of voices went quiet as Octavian and other soldiers listened in admiration at their exploits.

"The Archer fell in love with a native princess and the Nubian bonded with her sister. Old Postumus had them sent back to the Deva. They cleared a villa in the woods for their women and have lived like fighting cocks in a quiet warm billet ever since."

"But that's forbidden surely?"

"Depends lad on who you know and how well. Your highborn you know how patronage works. The Nubian was rumoured to be either one of Tiberius' boys on Caprae or his bastard."



The talk moved on to fertility rites and the lusts of barbarian women. Someone mentioned the Prefect of Deva's bondwoman. "I'd not mind a little rape and pillage with the princess or her daughter. She's got a fine pair of knockers I'-'."

The comment received dark looks from the Signifier. "Mind your manners lad or you'll have me to contend with. That woman is a Goddess. Let no man ever say different. She saved my life. A pestilence ravaged the land. Mistress Vina rode here and treated Roman and barbarian alike. Those potions were finer than any Greek physician could ever provide."

"Keep your hair on. I was just saying they would make any heart beat faster."

"The young one drives chariots. You'd not believe how well."

"And shoots an arrow straighter than any Syrian; what a woman," the Signifier confirmed.

Such admiration for a half-cast was difficult to understand for an aristocrat that believed anyone from the provinces was inferior.

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