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## CHAPTER ONE – THE CARCER

Day was dying over the city of Rome. The sun cast its failing light between monolithic marble columns to pour blood-red beams and black bars of shadow across the forum. Noble Romans had turned from politics to parties for the evening, and the usually-bustling expanse was empty save for a lean figure in the muscled breastplate and high-crested helmet of a Praetorian tribune striding across its limestone paving stones.

To anyone who did not know him well—and there were few who did—the young man would have appeared the very picture of confidence. His dark-complexioned face was hard and wolfish, with a prominent nose and skin stretched tight over high cheekbones as if all excess weight had been chiseled away. But beneath his helmet's brim dark brows were drawn down causing

his eyes to narrow just slightly, and there was a twitching tension in the muscles of his strong jaw.

Theudas ben Ya'ir was nervous.

It was not a feeling he was accustomed to, and he hated it.

He was a warrior. A fighter. He had fought more battles in his twenty-one years than most men faced in a lifetime. The scars of a trident thrust running parallel across his left cheek and forehead attested to only one of many times when death had been just an inch off the mark. He had fought in the Coliseum and on battlegrounds from Syria to Gaul and he had survived. No, he was not accustomed to being nervous.

But then the message had come half an hour before. Half an hour that his stomach had spent twisting in on itself as he crossed the city from the Praetorian fortress.

*Meet me at the Carcer immediately. Come alone.*

The Carcer. The Prison. Rome had only one prison, so everyone simply called it "The Carcer." This was not due to a lack of lawlessness, but rather because incarceration was not a penalty meted out by the courts. Prisoners were held in the Carcer only until their trial. Justice, or what passed for it in the Empire, was swift. The guilty were fined or exiled—if they were rich or fortunate—or else flogged, enslaved, or executed. Only if the verdict handed down was execution would the prisoners be returned to the prison to be cast into the miserable hole known as the tullianum. There, beneath the Carcer, in the perpetual night of what was once a cistern, the condemned would learn to long for the day of their execution.

But it was not the reputation of Rome's infamous jail that caused Theudas's heart to beat heavier than usual under his cuirass and caused his knuckles to whiten on the hilt of his sword as he loosened it in its sheath for the tenth time in as many minutes. It was the name and seal pressed into the wax tablet beneath the single cryptic line that summoned him to the Carcer.

*Gaius Fulvius Plautianus.*

To meet the newly-appointed Prefect of the Praetorian Guard, Theudas's direct superior and the most powerful man in Rome after the Emperor himself, would be nerve-wracking enough. To be commanded to meet him, alone, at the Carcer caused cold foreboding to writhe down his spine and coil heavily in his guts.

*Is it possible that he knows?* Theudas wondered. *Can he have discovered my secret so quickly?*

As Theudas turned right past the columned bulk of the Senate House a sight greeted him that nearly made him break stride. He had come alone, but the Prefect had not. For a moment the sun's last rays painted armored ranks of Praetorians with a ruddy glow, then it fell behind the bulk of the Tabularium. The blocks of men that flanked the door of the Carcer fell into shadow against its thick stone walls. Theudas's heartbeat quickened even further, adrenaline pushing energy to his limbs, readying him for either fight or flight.

To his left, in a shadowy cleft between the Temple of Concord and the Carcer rose the Gemonian Stairs, the Stairs of Mourning. For a moment Theudas considered fleeing up those stairs, or simply turning and running back the way he had come.

*He knows! He knows I've been going to the services.*

By sheer force of will Theudas fought down the panic that threatened to overwhelm his reason. *This could just be a routine assignment*, he told himself. Running away would only prove guilt where there may not even be suspicion. So instead he forced himself to advance with a steady, confident stride. His hobnailed sandals echoed loudly against the buildings around him, the sound all the more obtrusive in the presence of the silent scores of soldiers watching him approach.

With a rusty creak, the heavy, iron-bound door of the prison swung open and Prefect Plautianus stood in the doorway, the dim torchlight from the interior glinting off the golden shoulder bosses that held his crimson cape in place. He stood there impassively,

broad-shouldered and thick-chested under his ornate, form-fitting breastplate, waiting for Theudas to approach.

The two blocks of soldiers flanking the doorway—eight on each side, five rows deep—created a narrow path for Theudas to pass down in order to reach Plautianus. His muscles tightened in the center of his back as he passed the first row of Praetorians, then the second. He forced himself to take a deep breath and let it out slowly, then another. *If this is a trap I'm walking right into it, but what choice do I have?*

Without a word, Plautianus turned in the doorway and gestured with an outstretched arm toward the interior of the prison.

Instead of entering, Theudas stopped in the doorway and pivoted smartly to face the prefect. He would take this man's measure before walking voluntarily into prison with Plautianus behind him.

Theudas raised an arm in salute while rapping the other fist against his breastplate. "Tribune Theudas ben Ya'ir, reporting as ordered, sir." His voice was level and hard. He searched the prefect's features, looking for any hint of his intentions.

Plautianus had a face like a war hammer. It looked as if it could easily smash stone. In the muted glow of the torches, shadows turned his eyes into dark pools under craggy brows and a deep-furrowed forehead. His nose was blunt, his cheeks outlined with wrinkles. Steel-grey hair was cropped short and a tightly-curved beard and mustache lent further strength to his heavy jaw. His complexion was slightly swarthy, giving him a foreign appearance, and Theudas realized that the prefect shared Emperor Severus's skin tone. He vaguely remembered hearing that they were related and came from the same town in North Africa.

Theudas was skilled at sizing up an opponent. He could almost invariably discern their thoughts and intentions written on their faces. The talent had saved his life more than once. Today it failed

him. Except for a barely-perceptible sneer at Theudas's Jewish name, Plautianus's face was inscrutable. In response to Theudas's salute he merely nodded, once, and flicked the fingers of his outstretched hand again for Theudas to step into the prison.

Every muscle in his body torqued spring-tight, Theudas stepped across the threshold and into the Carcer. The rank smell of unwashed bodies, human waste, and damp rot hit him like a roundhouse punch in the nose. Prisoners huddled in miserable bundles of rags on the floor or slumped against the massive hewn stones of the prison wall. Any small stirring brought the clink of chains. Despair was palpable in the fetid air. The hairs on the back of Theudas's neck prickled, half expecting the door behind him to slam shut.

And it did.

Theudas spun around, shocked out of his composure, to find Plautianus standing inside the door behind him, a slight, sardonic smile on his thin lips. He had an ugly mouth, Theudas realized. Just a narrow red line in his beard, far too small for his broad face.

"My apologies," the prefect said, in a tone that was anything but apologetic. "I didn't mean to startle you." Plautianus's voice was surprising. It was warm and strong instead of the gravelly growl Theudas had expected. But there was an undercurrent of sly menace to his voice that made it all the more chilling for its smooth tone. "I assumed you would be used to barred doors . . ." the prefect paused as if searching for a polite phrase, ". . . given your history."

A sudden flame of anger flared in Theudas, but he beat it out quickly before it could reach his face. He mentally berated himself for showing his shock when the door slammed, and now forced a cold veil across his features every bit as impenetrable as the prefect's. But inside, his mind was whirling.

*Did the Emperor tell him about my past?* Before Theudas had been elevated to the Emperor's guard he had been a slave

and a gladiator. Only his skill had kept him alive and drawn the attention of Septimius Severus who had raised him and his friend, Antonius Maximus, on a mere whim. The next thought was more troubling. *Or has Plautianus been investigating me? And if so, how much has he learned? What if he's had me followed?*

When he spoke, Theudas's voice was hard. "You ordered me to report here. What further orders do you have for me?"

"Do you know the history of this place?" Plautianus asked, ignoring Theudas's question. Without waiting for a reply, he continued. "Many notable prisoners have been executed here." He gestured toward a perfectly-round hole carved in the floor at the center of the room. "Take a look."

Theudas gazed at the prefect levelly and was rewarded with a slight twitch of anger that flickered across his face and then was gone. He didn't know what game Plautianus was playing, but he refused to play along with it. He had seen the tullianum before, that horrific dungeon to which that dark shaft was the only access, and he felt no need to gawk.

Plautianus crossed the room, stepping over chained prisoners who scurried to get out of his way, to peer down into the circle of deep darkness that seemed to swallow the torchlight. "Jugurtha, king of Numidia, was thrown down this hole. They say it took him several days to starve to death." Plautianus's tone was conversational, as if he were discussing the price of Egyptian wheat in the marketplace. A horrified murmur ran around the room. "Julius Caesar sent Vercingetorix the Gaul to his death there too, though he died rather more quickly. Strangled."

He looked over at Theudas, his eyes glittering. "Which would you prefer, if you were given the choice? Starvation? Or strangling?"

"I'd prefer to die with a sword in my hand," Theudas said tensely. His hand itched to grip the hilt of the gladius at his side and he kept one eye on the door, expecting a flood of Praetorians at any moment.

Plautianus laughed. “Spoken like a true soldier.” He walked back toward Theudas, his cape whipping around his ankles, orange flames glinting off his armor. He suddenly paused, as if a thought had just occurred to him. “I wonder if Simon ben Gioras thought the same thing before he was captured, dragged through the streets of Rome in Titus’s triumph, and then thrown down that hole and strangled?”

Theudas’s eyes drew tight and grew cold. Ben Gioras was a leader in the Jewish Revolt of AD 66, a contemporary of Theudas’s ancestor, Eleazar ben Ya’ir. The connection was too blatant to be missed, but Theudas refused to be cowed. “Sejanus probably never expected the executioner’s cord either,” he retorted, voice cold.

The shot told. Plautianus advanced on Theudas until their breastplates were nearly touching. His mild tone had given way to icy smoothness. “Prefect Sejanus overreached, tried to gain power too quickly, and was betrayed by those under him. I will not make the same mistake. And you *will* remain loyal to me.” It was a statement, not a question.

“I am loyal to the *Emperor*.”

“And I am the Emperor’s right hand. If you are loyal to him you will be loyal to me.” Plautianus paused. “And vice versa.” The warning was clear. Any disloyalty toward the prefect would be considered treason toward the Emperor.

For a moment, Theudas considered his options. Plautianus had said nothing about Theudas’s Christian ties and seemed intent only on intimidating him into obedience. Clearly the prefect was trying to secure his own position, perhaps even against his kinsman, Emperor Severus. Theudas wondered if all the tribunes had been put through this same routine. Either way, there was something in Plautianus’s eyes that warned the Jew that he could either swear loyalty to him now or else he may never leave this prison alive. Pragmatic, he decided he would play along—for now.

For a long moment Theudas held Plautianus's hard gaze, then he allowed his eyes to shift sideways and down and bowed his head slightly as if in proud, unwilling surrender. "I await your orders."

Plautianus's small mouth split into a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Good! Those men outside await you to lead them. A few weeks ago you fought a Christian, Antonius Maximus, in a gladiator bout in the Coliseum."

Theudas nodded, his face betraying nothing. He had, indeed, fought his best friend. It had been the only way to save him. He had staged Antonius's death, allowing his escape. The fact that the prefect had said "fought" instead of "killed" made Theudas's pulse quicken.

*Can he possibly know?*

Plautianus's next words alleviated those fears while birthing many new ones.

"You killed the son; tonight you will capture his father."

It was a long moment before Theudas trusted himself to speak. "Titus Maximus?" he managed finally, willing his voice to be steady. "Hasn't he gone underground?"

Plautianus noticed Theudas's pause and considered it a moment, eyes narrowed, then went on. "Indeed, perhaps quite literally. These *Christians*"—he said the word like it tasted foul in his mouth—"have been known to hold services in the catacombs of all places."

Theudas nodded. "But how will we find them? We suspect there are dozens of different catacombs, hundreds of miles of tunnels, some systems eight to ten levels deep. It would take the whole Guard a year to find them all, a decade to search them all and if the Christians ever were there they'd disappear long before we found them."

Plautianus had begun smiling partway through Theudas's protest, the smug smile of someone who has superior knowledge

and is merely waiting for the other to admit their ignorance before revealing it.

“Why do you think we are here?” he asked. He waved a hand before his nose. “Certainly not for our health.” He gestured toward the huddles of humanity about the room. “I received word just this afternoon that an informant denounced a leader of the Christian church and his wife. They are here, and when they talk they will lead us to Maximus.”

“*When* they talk?”

“When,” the prefect replied, and there was a cruel coldness in his eyes that made Theudas shudder for the elder and his wife.

Already Theudas’s mind was working feverishly. *There has to be a way. A way to get them out of here before they give up Titus.* If only he had more time, but Plautianus was determined to get what he needed tonight.

“Jailor!” Plautianus called.

Against the wall in the darkest corner of the irregularly-shaped room the front legs of a huge oak chair slammed to the stone floor, the noise echoing about the prison and making several prisoners jump and gasp fearfully. The jailor rose and lumbered out into the firelight. He was so massive even the brawny prefect looked small by comparison. His iron-studded leather armor creaked slightly as he walked as if groaning with the effort of containing the man’s bulging muscles. In his right hand he carried a thick club that he swung back and forth in casual viciousness as he crossed the prison, sending prisoners clattering aside in their chains to avoid being bludgeoned.

“Marcus and Amelia Verus,” Plautianus demanded, as the jailor drew up before them. The man just stood there dumbly, pale grey eyes peering at them from within greasy locks of hair that fell to his shoulders. He was as filthy as any of the prisoners, as if he hadn’t left the prison or had a bath in years. The jailor scratched at his beard, picked something out and flicked it.