

Chapter One

AD 33, Caesarea, Judaea Province Six Days Before Passover

Usually Leah followed the path briskly from the main kitchen to the baths. Today, with the Mediterranean breeze caressing her face and the sun not yet a scorching heat overhead, she could not help but slow her steps. She lifted her eyes at the cry of the seabirds. How peaceful it appeared. Only a few clouds hung in the sky, like a flock of spring lambs. Down below the walkway, sea waves lapped gently along the promontory's edge. Not even the first stirrings within the palace compound behind her could diminish her sense of delight.

For one further moment Leah drank it all in, her gaze sweeping across the panorama before her. Finally she turned away from the vast blue sea and studied the beauty of the city's setting.

Caesarea stretched like a royal necklace along the seafront, with the palace of Pontius Pilate its centermost jewel. From her position upon the rocky point, Leah studied the elaborate courtyard with its columns and statuary, the opulent ceramic-tiled baths, and the impressive marbled façade of the palace itself. Broad, grand entrance steps rose up to gold double doors. In different circumstances, Leah would have found it all impossibly beautiful. Even though she had been raised as no stranger to fine things and elegant living, never had she dreamed of residing in the palace of the prelate of Judaea. Yet here she stood, strangely a part of it all.

In different circumstances ...

It was the first occasion in a long time that Leah's thoughts had flown across years and countries to her grandmother. Whatever would she think of Leah now, standing here amid such splendor? Leah recalled how the old woman often stroked her face and said, "I see great things in store for you, my little one." Then she would pat her generous silk-gowned bosom with bejeweled fingers, as though sealing the promise in her heart. Her dear grandmother. What Leah would give for just a few hours with her beloved grandparent now. But she had been gone for eight long years. Leah would have that opportunity no more.

Leah sighed and turned away from the opulence of the palace and back to the contrasting beauty of the sea. *Its surface sparkles like Grandmother's jewels.* How easy it would be on such a dawn to overlook the reality that she was here because she had no recourse.

Far beyond the rolling waves lay her real home. True, there was no longer any place for her there, but it still held her heart. Would she ever see Verona again? And in Rome, her mother faced a new dawn as well. Alone. Bereft. Leah yearned to be with her, offering what love and comfort she was able. But she remained trapped within this imposing palace of a Roman prelate, surrounded by elegance she could appreciate only from a distance. Yes, she had been born to wealth and position, yet here she stood, little more than a slave. Bitterness filled her throat and caught her breath.

Another thought chased through her mind. If nothing more, she faced an easier circumstance than her two older sisters. She was free in spirit, if not in body. She was able to call her life her own, even if it was a life of servanthood. She would far rather be a servant in Pilate's household than slave to a man she neither loved nor respected, who ruled her every move. Hers was a bondage far more easily endured, she was sure.

Leah cast one more longing look over the blue expanse of sea, and with a determined lift of her shoulders walked on toward the bathhouse. Her first duties of the day would have her laying out fresh towels and robes and making sure that all the expensive unguents and soaps were readily available.

You must take what is good from the world for yourself, a quiet but firm voice echoed in her memory, *for the world will never come to you with outstretched hand.* Her father's words. Yet even as she recalled them, she was forced to admit that the philosophy had brought even him no lasting rewards.

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The next morning, Leah's demanding day suddenly veered toward chaos. Like every other servant in Pilate's household, she always dreaded word that the prelate was moving to Jerusalem. For the servants and slaves it meant that their normal duties, already keeping them busy from early morning to late night, were multiplied many times over.

Leah struggled to meet the increasingly frantic pace. She had felt well enough the night before, when she had finally finished the day's work and retired to her pallet in the servants' quarters. Yet during the night she had tossed fitfully, and when she had lifted a hand to her brow, she knew she had a fever. Before dawn she had gone to the kitchen for water. She had slept some again and hoped her discomfort would pass. But now her strength drained away as her activities mounted along with the day's heat.

Leah knew her mistress, Pilate's wife, noted how sluggish Leah was that morning. She tried to add quickness to her step and lightness to her countenance. A servant's misfortunes, whatever their source, were not permitted to taint the lady's day.

But as the hours wore on, Leah found she was unable to sustain the brave front. Her body felt like it carried its own fire pit. Her stomach was unsettled, and she ached with a dreadful bone weariness from her head to her feet.

She touched her face with one hand, and her own fingers felt the unusual warmth. Though this was the first time she had ever suffered with the fever that swept the land at every winter's close, Leah knew its symptoms. She could feel the slow burn begin to scorch her limbs. *I don't have time to be ill*, she groaned inwardly. *Not today!*

A palace guard appeared from around the corner of the bathhouse and glanced her way. Despite the late afternoon light and the distance, Leah could see the scowl that touched his face. Had he noticed something? Were her steps dragging? Was she staggering? She forced herself to keep moving. Even though the sun was dropping into the western horizon, there was still much to be done. For on the morrow they all would leave for Jerusalem, where Pontius Pilate would take charge of maintaining the peace during the annual Passover festival.

She reluctantly turned away toward the servants' quarters. Maybe if she could rest for a few moments.... Midway there, however, she felt as though a wave from the sea were rising up and sweeping over her. She grabbed the wall as the light dimmed to grey, uncertain even where she was. She heard a voice call her name but did not have the strength to respond.

Leah did not fear the darkness that rose up to claim her. In fact, she welcomed it.

Chapter Four

Northern Galilee

Ten Days After Passover

Alban was awake when the guard changed two hours before dawn. He rose from his pallet, hefted his short sword, and walked out into the darkness. Like many able officers, he did not do well with waiting. Especially when the day ahead held such portent and danger.

He took his time checking the garrison's perimeter. He commanded a stodgy Roman fortress dominating the highest hill between the Sea of Galilee and the Golan, twelve miles northeast of Capernaum. The central parade ground, rimmed by simple structures of stone and wood, held corrals and barracks and baths and

officers' quarters. As centurion, Alban possessed a rudimentary dwelling of his own. When he returned to his quarters, he found that young Jacob had laid out a soldier's breakfast on the porch table and vanished back inside. Alban's two main officers stood by the garrison's watch fire and pretended not to observe him. They all knew his habits. He insisted upon solitude before battle. They obeyed him, not just because he was their commander, but because he was that rarest of breeds—a Roman centurion who brought his men back alive.

The predawn wind up this high was cold for April. The moon was clear and strong, five days beyond full. Alban studied the horizon, the terrain nearby, and reviewed his plans for the day. A great deal rested upon his getting all the details right.

His thoughts moved over the battle tactics ahead of him, then flitted to the hoped-for reward. Her name was Leah, and she was Pilate's niece. Though he had never set eyes on her, Alban already knew a great deal about the woman. Leah served in Pilate's household because her family had been disgraced, their fortunes lost. He knew she was five years younger than his own twenty-four years, quite old for an unwed woman of Roman aristocracy. He had heard she was not considered particularly attractive by Roman standards. Both tall and strong, she was said to be extremely intelligent with a quiet and reserved manner. His informer had gone on to state that her nose was too straight, her lips too full, her gaze too piercing. Alban cared little for such trifles, or at least he cared for them less than the prospects of a union with the governor's family.

Alban was ambitious. He had asked Pilate for the woman's hand in marriage to further his goals. He might currently be assigned duty at a half-forgotten garrison in the borderlands between two unimportant Roman provinces, but he was determined to rise much further—maybe even to Rome itself. The woman would serve his purposes well. But only if he succeeded today.

The sentry by the main portal called a quiet challenge to someone Alban could not see. His two officers by the fire rose in unison with his own movements. The sentry drew back the door's crossbolt and opened it to admit a squad of dusty men. They saluted Alban's approach, huffing hard. In the torchlight, the road's dust had turned the soldiers' legs chalk white.

"Bring them water," Alban said to the sentry, then asked the squad's leader, "What news?"

"We waited for confirmation as you ordered," he answered through his panting breath. "The caravan will arrive at the dangerous region of the Damascus Road by midday."

Alban gestured to his sergeant. "Rouse the men."

The squad leader accepted the sentry's bucket and drank deeply. He handed it on to his men, wiped his mouth, and added, "Pilate has returned to Caesarea."

Alban frowned. This was unexpected. When the Judaeans celebrated their major religious festivals, Pilate used his presence to proclaim that Rome would allow no unrest. Judaeans traveled from Rome, Babylon, Damascus, Alexandria, even Alban's own native Gaul. Jerusalem was packed for the entire period, since many of the families who journeyed in for Passover remained there through *Shavuot*, the Feast of Weeks, fifty days later. The risk of revolt was never higher than during this time.

"The city is quiet, then?"

"There was some talk of revolution. The governor put the entire garrison on alert. The Judaeans blamed the problems on the prophet."

Alban closed the distance between them in two steps. "The one called Jesus?"

"The same. The Sanhedrin threatened a rebellion of their own unless Pilate ordered the man crucified."

This was a cruel blow. The rabbi had used Capernaum as his base and had even healed Alban's favored young servant, Jacob. "So he's gone?"

"A storm blew out of a clear sky when he breathed his last upon the cross." The squad leader quickly made the sign against the evil eye.

Alban hid his deep regret. In his opinion, there was never a man less likely to brew trouble and war than the prophet Jesus. But Alban was a Roman soldier, under Pilate's command. It would not do to let his men see his dismay. He could not risk his personal feelings getting back to his commander, this one who could decide his own fate. "You've done well. You and your men get some rest."

Alban walked out into the shadows that still clung to morning. So the prophet was dead. He shook his head sorrowfully as his whole being revolted against the news. Surely the Judaeans knew they had no legitimate reason to crucify the man.

Young Jacob was alive only because of the prophet—of that Alban had no doubt. The lad had been terribly ill. Physicians had done all they could, to no avail, and declared the boy would be dead by nightfall. Alban had been desperate. Many whispered he had been too overwrought about the fate of a mere servant, especially only a Judaeans lad taken in battle against bandits. Yes, legally Alban owned the lad. But deep within he knew that, in reality, his heart belonged to Jacob. Alban had no idea why he felt such affection for the orphan. His own family had taught him nothing about love. Yet he knew he would give his life for the boy.

He heard a soft whisper in the darkness, "Master?"

Alban turned toward the small form behind him in the shadows. "Yes, Jacob."

The lad stepped into the light. "I heard the soldiers speak about the prophet. Is he truly dead?"

Alban's voice sounded gruff to his own ears. "So they say."

"This is the Jesus who healed me?"

"He is."

"But why? Did he do something wrong?"

"I do not know the reasons. But of this I am sure: He did only good. Look at you. You are well and strong."

"Then why ..." The voice trembled to a stop.

Alban reached out to touch the boy's shoulder. He felt a shudder go through Jacob's slender frame. Alban had no idea what to say to bring comfort. Alban released the lad, and became the commander once again. "You must prepare. We leave soon on our mission."

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They moved out in fading moonlight, an hour before dawn. Alban led his troops from horseback. His second in command, Horax, was the only other mounted soldier. Horax led the rear guard. Jacob trotted at Alban's side, one hand resting upon Alban's right stirrup. The lad was only twelve and far too young to take part in the operation. Yet this day's success depended upon the lad's knowledge and connections.

They moved in silent haste and entered the mouth of the first Golan valley. The night air carried the vague scent of date palms and olive trees. To their right, a field of new barley trembled in the wind.

Alban looked around with a practiced eye. Eons of wind-driven dust had carved these narrow gorges into bizarre shapes. Most of the vales were virtual prisons that twisted and turned and led nowhere except back upon themselves. Only a few traced their way through to the province of Syria. South of them, within the straightest and broadest of these valleys, ran the Damascus Road. Parthian bandits had become

increasingly bold of late, attacking along this barren stretch, then slipping into these secret vales and vanishing.

The squad turned south into a gulley that Alban knew ultimately led nowhere. Far on the horizon, dawn painted a tight sliver of sky. Down below, the wind moaned and fretted. As the rock walls closed in ever more tightly, Alban asked the lad, "You're certain he said to meet him here?"

"This is the chasm," Jacob confirmed with a quick nod.

Alban's horse shied with a startled neigh as a man suddenly appeared on a ledge overhead. The shepherd grinned at the soldiers' surprise. Alban inspected the ledge and realized that what he had taken for just another morning shadow in fact held a cave. His soldier immediately behind muttered, "This place is made for ambush and death."

Jacob turned his face upward to Alban and said, "This is the man I told you about, master."

Alban saluted the shepherd. "Your name?"

"Samuel, son of Ishmael. And yours?"

"I am Alban."

"That is a Roman name?"

"No. From Gaul."

"I know not Gaul."

"Far to the north and west, beyond Rome."

"Yet you fight for Rome."

"We have been a Roman province for three generations."

The shepherd sniffed his disdain for all conquered folk. Alban hid a grin. The man might be dressed in dust and rough weave, but he carried himself like a prince. It was a trait he had seen among many Judaeans who lived at distances from cities. And it was one of the qualities the Romans most despised. How dare these uncouth peasants flaunt their independence before an empire that had conquered nearly all the known world!

The shepherd, leathery skinned and broad shouldered, showed a few strands of silver against his dark beard. "Parthian bandits are stealing my sheep."

"Then we have a common enemy."

Alban watched Samuel take his time inspecting the Roman band, his gaze lingering upon Jacob's hand and how it rested easily upon Alban's stirrup. Alban's men remained still because he did. The shepherd apparently found what he sought, because he said, "Leave your horses here."

Horax argued hoarsely from the rear, "But this gorge leads nowhere!"

The shepherd's dark eyes glinted with desert humor. "Just as the ledge held only shadows, yes?"

Alban raised his hand in signal and slipped from the saddle. He said to Jacob, "Stay close, lad."

The shepherd led them ever farther into the deep chasm. The gorge twisted and turned and finally split into three fissures. The wind did not penetrate there, and the sun was visible only for a few moments each day, so the stone walls remained cool. Even so, Alban sweated heavily. This was perfect territory for an ambush. Stones or arrows from above would leave none alive. Without hesitating, the shepherd took the right-hand fissure, so narrow the men had to pass single file.

A hundred paces farther, the fissure opened into a shallow bowl. The sand floor was colored a sunset red and still very cool beneath Alban's sandals. Nothing lived there. Nothing grew. Far overhead, the dawn wind moaned.

"This is as far as any outsider has ever come." The shepherd pointed to Jacob. "He says I should trust you. But he is your slave and can be forced into saying anything."

"You have asked about me in the markets?"

Reluctantly the shepherd replied, "My wife."

"What was she told?"

"That you were a friend to the Judaeans." The shepherd's tone suggested he found this very hard to believe.

"You were promised a reward if we found the Parthians, yes?" Alban kept his focus on the shepherd's face.

"Five denarii."

A small fortune. "Horax."

"Sir?"

"Pay the man."

Alban's adjutant moved through the soldiers grouped closely about the shepherd. He looked at Alban as if he would argue, but Alban motioned his intention. When the coins rested in the man's gnarled hand, Alban said, "Now we must trust one another."

Samuel slipped the money into a leather pouch, turned, and proceeded to walk up the seemingly featureless wall. Up close, Alban saw how narrow ledges extended from the wall, hidden by shadows and the stone's pastel shading. Another motion, and the troops were moving upward behind their commander.

The climb did not end upon the Golan plateau as Alban had expected. Instead they gathered upon a broad stone ledge, remaining well hidden from anyone moving through the valley. From below, their shelf melded into the surrounding ridges. This was an ideal encampment for men who wished to keep their location a secret.

Samuel traversed the broad stone block and started along yet another ledge carved into the cliff, only this path took them gently down. As they swept around a gradual curve, Alban heard the bleat of sheep. Another turn, a second set of steps, and they arrived inside an even more secluded world.

Samuel spoke for the first time since accepting Alban's coins. "This has been the haven of my clan for generations beyond count." He looked hard at the man whom he was trusting only on the word of a boy.

Alban met his stare full on. "Your secret will go on no report or map of mine."

And secret it was. Alban had heard rumors of such places yet had not believed they existed until now. They stood in a small valley, really no more than a depression between two hills, perhaps fifty paces wide and twice as long. Instead of cool sand its floor was covered in grass. A herd of black-faced sheep grazed the

lush undergrowth. From the middle of the south-facing wall poured a small stream, enough water to stain the rock and form a pool as broad as a man was tall. A grove of stunted date palms clustered against the cliff face.

A young shepherd boy watched them with solemn eyes but made no attempt to approach. Alban's men took the opportunity to break out a breakfast of flatbread and goat cheese. After a time, Horax shifted over and squatted beside Alban. "I am amazed the shepherd trusts us with his secret."

"My guess is that the Parthians spotted his flock up on the plateau. They demanded sheep, tracked the shepherd, and now threaten to take everything. At least he has a chance with us." Alban spotted the man at the cliff's edge and rose to his feet. "Here he comes."

The shepherd signaled once and disappeared. Alban and his men again began a climb up the rocky path.

They were greeted up top by the best of an area spring. The wind was strong enough to cool the day's mounting heat and ruffled the knee-deep grass that still smelled fresh from recent rains. A second flock of sheep grazed contentedly. In a month's time, Alban knew, the grass would wither and the sheep would be reduced to eating thorns.

Alban turned to his young servant. "Wait for us here."

Jacob had not looked so distressed since his illness two years past. Or so vulnerable. He drew himself up as tall as possible. "I can help, master."

"You already have. I give you my word that the loss of your family will be avenged. The Parthians will pay for the death of your parents, your sister." Jacob did not respond. He simply looked a long moment at Alban and turned away.

The shepherd also watched as the despondent lad walked over to join his son with the flock. Jacob picked up a stick of his own along the way and gave the grass a frustrated whack. "He has personal reasons to loathe the bandits?"

"His family ran a caravan between Caesarea and Damascus," Alban said. "When he was only nine he saw them all slaughtered, and he and other youths were taken as slaves. We spotted the raiding party and gave chase. They only escaped by dumping the captured goods, including Jacob."

The shepherd studied the two boys with pursed lips. "The Parthians threaten us with the same."

Alban hitched his sword belt tighter still. "Not after today."

* * *

The highland pasture was bordered on all sides by sharp-edged cliffs. Alban ordered his soldiers to lower themselves prone, and soon his two squads of twenty-five men were just so many shifting mounds in the high grass. The shepherd used his staff to shove aside the animals and led Alban in a careful crouch to the southwest ledge.

The breathtaking view descended in a mad tumble of rocks and grass and scrub trees to the southern plains. Far below, the Damascus Road was a winding yellow river of dust.

The shepherd pointed with his staff. "There and there."

Alban nodded and muttered over his shoulder, "Horax? Do you see?"

"I see them."

Two bands of men, each some fifty strong, crowded on ledges below jutting from the rubble-strewn hillside over the highway. Far to the southeast, where the heat caused the air to writhe and tremble, came a long snaking line of men and beasts. The expected trade caravan was approaching.

Alban asked quietly, "Where are the paths?"

"Look to your left and your right. See how one shadow in each place forms a line from cliff's edge to valley floor."

Alban moved back a pace. A single bandit glancing upward would be enough to expose them and destroy the element of surprise. He lay on his back, surrounded by sweet-scented grass, and closed his eyes to the sun. "The question," Alban said, "is how to mask our descent."

Neither Samuel or Horax responded. Alban's adjutant rested on the grass beside him and remained silent. Watchful.

Alban turned over and carefully slid forward for another look. The bandits below were very much on the alert, watching for any outrider who might raise the alarm before the caravan drew close.

Fifty Roman soldiers descending from the plateau above them might as well arrive with trumpets and cymbals. To make matters worse, Alban's men would be attacking in single file against seasoned warriors massed on two ledges. Unless Alban could find a way to maintain absolute silence, he and his men would be decimated.

The shepherd moved back from the edge and swept his staff about him like a scythe. "The bandits saw us bringing sheep down to sell to a caravan they later destroyed. They tracked us back up and demanded a tax. Either in sheep ... or in boys. Each time it is more. Last night they took half my newborn lambs."

A plan began forming in Alban's head. Once more he slithered forward on his belly and inched his head out over the precipice. This third inspection confirmed what he thought he had spotted. He reversed away from the ledge, then said to Horax, "Assemble the men."

As Horax glided away in a low crouch, Alban told the shepherd, "You need go no farther."

"This is my clan's pasture." He could tell Samuel had more than his share of Judaeen pride.

"And I will keep it so. Now let my men do what we are trained for."

"I have fought brigands longer than you have been alive."

"Think of your sons," Alban said, his voice low.

More than half of Alban's soldiers were older than he. Four years earlier, they had greeted his arrival with sullen hostility. Now they watched him with the unblinking eyes of seasoned warriors. They trusted his ability to lead them into danger and bring them out again. They knew he had been trained for this role since childhood. He might be a chieftain's son, but he had never known a day when it had been within his power to choose a different life. Which, truth be told, was what bonded him most closely with his men and they with him. The power to choose one's fate was the prerogative of the wealthy and the firstborn.

Alban used his sword to diagram the cliff's border and the two paths in the rocky soil, then lifted his head to address the men now gathered before him. "We will split into thirds. I lead the group taking the eastern path. Horax, you lead the west."

The group scowled as one. They knew only one way of soldiering, the Roman way. Victory was achieved by the massed attack. The best-trained men and the greatest numbers were thrown forward in overwhelming force.

Alban pointed his sword at the most senior of the men and said, "You lead the third group from above."

"We're not to fight?"

"You will keep us alive." He stabbed his sword into the earth by the carved cliff edge. "You must crawl down among the rocks without being spotted. On my signal, you will dislodge the largest rocks you can."

"A landslide," Horax said thoughtfully.

"Aim for the two groups of men. Keep them so busy they can neither ready an attack nor escape."

Horax grinned. "It could work."

"If there are not enough rocks, use arrows. But you must keep the bandits occupied. Once we are in position, come down and join the outer wings." Alban slid his sword back into its scabbard and rose to his feet. He was desperate to move before one of the more experienced warriors spotted his plan's glaring weakness. "We move out."

Horax crouched alongside his centurion as the three groups crawled toward the cliff. "Split into threes we'll number far fewer than them. If the rock throwers are spotted before they're in position, we'll trot down those paths to sure death."

Which was why Alban had chosen the older ones for the rockslide. He hissed, "Quiet as snakes."

Crablike, Alban led his men to the cliff's far eastern corner, gliding forward until he could look over the edge. He watched Horax's face appear two hundred paces to the west. In between them, the third group slipped over the ledge in cautious stealth. Their goal was a pile of loose rubble perched upon a narrow outcropping above the bandits. Their progress was impossibly slow. Or so it seemed to Alban.

Like all good officers, Alban had learned to hide his fear. But his morning meal sat like a leaden lump in his gut. So much depended upon the success of this venture, yet so much was utterly unknown. It was difficult to concentrate fully on the task ahead. And Alban could afford no distractions—not for his men, not for the shepherd, not for himself.

The caravan's sounds carried through the desert heat, with jangling harnesses and shouting herders and the donkeys' sonorous protests. The noise was most welcome, because it focused the bandits' attention downward and masked the soldiers' hushed scramble.

At that point, the Parthians' evil strategy was revealed.

From the south rose shrill cries. Perhaps two dozen fighters on horseback and camels came screaming out of the valley's opposite side. Their exact numbers would be hidden from those walking the Damascus Road, for the dust and the heat would obliterate all but the leading bandits.

In a practiced motion, the caravan's outriders rode back to the procession's heart. They clustered together and drew swords, readying to meet the first attack. At the same time, the drovers and traders wrenched their beasts around and headed for the nearside cliffs, straight toward the bandits hidden below.

Then one of Alban's men slipped.

Roman sandals were not made for scrabbling silently on a stone face. A bit of rubble was unleashed to roll downward. Alban watched the tableau through an unmoving dread, as one Parthian after another looked up and the bearded faces opened to shout a warning.

Alban was already on his feet. "NOW!"

His men launched themselves downward, a howling Roman multiheaded beast. A hundred legs pounded the stone ledges. Swords and pikes rose like uneven teeth.

The soldiers on the cliff face let go of their boulders, which dropped in tandem. The two piles of rubble smashed into the second group of bandits while Alban's group frantically grabbed for handholds. Their combined weight had dislodged both piles, and they were threatened with following the cascading rocks to their own deaths.

The Parthians were caught in the instant of launching themselves downward. As the first raiders flung themselves down the ledge, those behind them screamed a shrill warning and turned to face rocks and Romans scrambling downward toward them.

"Hold hard!" Alban flung himself onto the cliff face, as more rocks tumbled and crashed from overhead. A stone struck his shield arm, almost dislodging him from the ledge. As soon as the tumult passed, he risked a glance upward, then shouted, "Attack!"

As he expected, the ledge used by the Parthians backed into a shallow cave. The ledge itself had been wiped clear of bandits. Either they had fled down the path, pursued hard by soldiers, or they had darted toward the cave's protection. Alban could hear the clanging of spear striking spear as the battle was struck below, but he knew Horax would be at the forefront and could be trusted to lead the men. His attention was on the cave mouth, which was now half filled with rubble and still-scrambling bandits. They were coughing and wheezing as they tried to grapple their way through the dust and debris.

"Bowmen!" The traditional massed Roman-style attack simply was not possible in such limited space. Now a quarter of his men fitted the shorter arrows into their bows and fired into the cave mouth. Shouts of rage changed swiftly to screams of alarm and pain.

Alban appointed a cadre of men to stand fast against any of the bandits who might try to return on the path. The rest stayed with the cave.

"Cease fire," he signaled his bowmen.

He shouted in Aramaic, the tongue used by all eastern border nations, "This is your only chance! Toss out your weapons, and you will be spared!"

Down on the plain, the situation had rapidly coalesced into victory for the caravan masters. Alerted by the rockslide, the traders had spotted the bandits before committing their beasts to the hillside. They drew their convoy into a tight defensive unit. Seeing that the allies on the hillside had been trapped, the bandits on horseback pulled up hard. The caravan outriders raced forward, their weapons glinting overhead. The mounted Parthians turned and fled.

But Alban had little time to peruse the fight below. His full attention was taken by the cave and its inhabitants. "Your cause is lost!" he informed them in a loud voice. "Drop your weapons or die!"

A dozen pikes and swords now clattered upon the rocks at his feet. He motioned his men forward. "Bowmen, stay on guard."

Alban turned to Horax, who had been gathering the men and taking stock. "How many of our men were lost?"

"One wounded, none killed, my lord."

Alban felt the tension in his body seep away like the sweat drying on his body.

As a raucous cheer rose from the valley, Horax lifted his sword and shouted, "Soldiers, salute your centurion!"

