

Perusia

by

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Prologue

The mid-March skies are heavy with clouds that seem to press in upon the city. The smell of impending rain is in the air. Perhaps this is the reason so few people are milling about the streets.

A beggar conceals himself behind a statue and watches for any opportunity that might come his way.

It seems as though there is a pall over the city, a sense of foreboding. Even the stall keepers are at a loss for something to do as they stand behind their tables waiting for customers or perhaps the storm to be unleashed. Only one or two cries can be heard hawking their wares. Then even they become silent.

A lectica rounds the corner, carried by four stout men. It seems headed for the Curia Pompeii. It is obvious to the few onlookers that the golden litter holds a very important person. All know his name.

The beggar watches as the lectica approaches, biting his lip in anticipation. He carefully scans the streets and can see no one of authority.

Before the beggar can make his way to the litter he sees an old blind man struggle to it's side, forcing it to stop. The curtain in the side opens and an animated conversation ensues.

The beggar is too far away to hear what is being said, he skulks away angrily at the prospect of being outdone by another beggar, and a blind one at that.

The blind beggar leans heavily on his staff, slowly shaking his head as the litter moves on leaving him in the middle of the street. The old man's shoulders sag as he turns to make his way back to the walkway.

A Lictor comes out of the Porticus adjoining the Curia to welcome the important passenger. As he holds out his arm to assist the man inside to get out, it is pushed away almost disdainfully. With a wave of his hand the man dismisses the official and climbs the stairs to enter the Curia. Once inside it is evident that all of the others have arrived. Most are seated on benches awaiting the start of this meeting. Several men, sixty of his trusted friends, cluster around the seat he is to occupy.

He is intrigued by how quiet it is within the building. Strange, he thinks, given there are some nine hundred men here. The silence matches that of the streets, hardly the normal state of affairs.

The man sits in his chair and pulls the purple cloak around him to offset the chill in the March air. He is tired and would have rather been somewhere else this day. Perhaps he should have listened to his wife's urgings and simply missed this meeting. He knows of nothing momentous on the agenda today.

Before he has the opportunity to call the meeting to order, someone that he knows approaches him. He assumes it is to discuss some kind of petition before the meeting begins. There is always something being asked for.

The others move nearer. He stands as the petitioner comes toward him, surprised by how closely he approaches. With a swift movement, the petitioner grasps at his clothes pulling them off his shoulders. Then he sees it, glinting in the light from the lamps, a knife held high. The knife stabs into his neck. He shouts and fights back the attackers but they don't stop. Instead they all reveal their knives and begin stabbing him.

He turns and sees the face of one of his best friends, knife in hand raised to strike. The knife pierces close to his heart and with that blow he resists no longer. He grasps the pedestal of the statue of Pompeii, his blood flowing over the statue's feet.

All those pressing around the man fall on him, striking blow after blow with flashing blades. So bloodthirsty are they that some even strike each other in their zeal to share in the act.

When they finish, the conspirators look around them to find the place empty. All the others have left silently. There were no cheers for what they have done, just empty silence.

The victim lies on the cold marble floor, his life draining from his body through 23 stab wounds, as the statue of his enemy Pompeii gazes down through sightless eyes.

At the age of fifty-five, so died Julius Caesar, and so began the chaos in the Republic.

Chapter One

Three years after Caesar's Assassination

The three boys, Pando the eldest, Tactus the middle one and Pico the youngest, crossed the fields of ripe grain on their way home from their tutor Castor's house.

They were excited at having seen the Roman Legions marching into Perusia earlier. But their early release from their studies and the fact they had no homework assignments left them in an even higher state of excitement.

Tactus spoke to Pando.

"Why do you think that Castor was so upset Pando? It's not like him not to give us any homework."

Before Pando could answer, Pico responded.

"What difference does it make, no homework is no homework."

"Be quiet Pico, I was talking to Pando."

"I heard Father talking about it with some neighbours. It has something to do with the Legionnaires coming to take land away for themselves. Everyone believes it's going to lead to trouble."

Tactus asked, "What kind of trouble?"

"I don't know, father didn't say. But from the way Castor acted, I think it's serious."

Pico chased a butterfly and ran well ahead, not caring to be part of the discussion; he had more important things to do. Like catch a butterfly. Except that he lost interest in that adventure when a large gray rabbit jumped across his path and he veered in a vain effort to catch it instead.

"Pico you're never going to catch that rabbit, you'd have had better luck with the butterfly," said Pando.

"Tactus, why are you so quiet?"

He seemed preoccupied when Pando spoke to him.

"Did you hear me Tactus?"

"What, ah no I didn't, sorry."

"I said what's bothering you? You seem lost in your own little world."

"I was just thinking about all those soldiers and what's going to happen to the people who lose their land."

"Cheer up Tactus, it's not going to happen to us."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Just remember, we are of the 'Equestrian Class', we would never be treated that way."

"I suppose you're right. I wonder what mother's making for supper tonight?"

"Whatever it is, I'm sure you'll like it. Maybe even a sausage or two."

"My very favourite."

The two boys laughed. Pico was so far ahead that he was almost at the front door of the house.

"Come on you two laggards, I beat you home."

He pushed through the door expecting to smell the evening meal. But there was nothing.

"Mother, I'm home." He called out.

"In the kitchen." His mother answered.

When Pico entered, he was surprised to see that his father was there too.

"What are you doing home so early?" His father said.

By this time, the other two tumbled through the doorway and into the kitchen, they too were startled by the presence of their father.

Pando thought.

Something's not right I don't ever remember father being home this early. What is it I wonder?

"I asked why you are all home so early from the tutor's?"

Pando responded.

“When Castor saw the Legions advancing towards the city, he decided it would be better if we left early. He seemed very upset. What’s happening father?”

“Nothing for any of you to worry about.”

Pando could see the distress in his mother’s face.

Have they had a fight? There’s such tension. I can feel it.

It was as if Livonia could sense her son’s anxiety. She forced a smile and said.

“Since you are all home early you can help prepare dinner. But before you do, get your homework done.”

Pico shouted and did a little dance around the kitchen.

“No homework, no homework. Castor didn’t give us any.”

Livonia looked at her husband, shrugged and said.

“In that case Pico, you can begin by taking the garbage to the shed.”

“But why can’t Leto take it out. What are slaves for?”

“I won’t have you talk that way about Leto. We’ve always considered her to be part of the family not just our slave.”

“Sorry mother, I didn’t mean it the way it sounded. Where is she anyway?”

“She’s left, her mother was ill,” Livonia lied.

“So now we have no slave,” said Pando.

“You’ll get used to it, she may be gone for some time.”

Tactus asked, “Can’t we get another slave father?”

“You heard your mother, you three can just pitch in until Leto gets back.”

All three of the boys recognized that this discussion was at an end. They said no more.

Livonia whispered in her husband’s ear.

“Marcus, don’t take it out on them. It’s not their fault, there’s no way they can understand what’s happening.”

He nodded and left the four of them in the kitchen.

Although it was still early afternoon, Livonia proceeded with the evening meal. Anything to keep busy and take her mind off the worry for her family.

Pando filled the water containers in the kitchen carrying jars of water from the well in the courtyard. Tactus set the table in the dining area while Pico grumbled as he separated the lentils, good from bad, pebbles from lentils. He hated lentils, but said nothing.

“Is there anything else you need me to do mother?”

“You could bring some more firewood in for the stove Pando and then see if there’s anything your father needs you for.”

He did what he was asked and then found his father sitting under an olive tree in the courtyard.

He seems deep in thought, I wonder if I should disturb him. I’d like to know what’s happening, something is and I think it has to do with the Legionnaires.

Marcus looked up and said to his son.

“Come sit with me boy.”

Pando did as he was asked and picked a piece of long grass, and stuck it in his mouth just as his father had. Marcus smiled.

After a long silence Pando spoke.

“Father, something is going on, I know it. I think I’m old enough to know if we are in some kind of trouble.”

“Trouble, you think we are in trouble?”

“Well it’s something, I don’t know what, but things aren’t right.”

“You’re very observant for one so young.”

“I’m not that young.”

“Barely fourteen, I’m sorry boy, but that is young.”

“The Legion would take me at this age.”

His father’s eyes flashed as he said.

“Don’t you even think about it. You think the Legion to be a glamorous life? Then you’d be a fool, death and destruction around you every day, it isn’t just triumphal parades and pageantry.”

“I didn’t mean to upset you father. I do not intend to join the Legion. I just wanted you to know that I’m old enough for you to count on me.”

Marcus reached up and tousled his son’s dark hair.

“My boy, I know I can count on you.”

“Then why not tell me what’s going on?”

“It’s just politics Pando.”

“Politics?”

“Yes, since Caesar’s murder there has been great turmoil throughout the Republic. And there is corruption on the part of many that would fill the void left by his death.

“Factions have developed. There are those like your mother and I who have always been faithful followers of the Great Caesar and the principles he put forward. Then there are the corrupt who want to enrich themselves.

“You know that the country is being run by a Triumvirate and as far as I’m concerned that’s a recipe for failure. They fight amongst themselves and the Republic suffers.”

“I don’t understand father, what has that got to do with us?”

“Your mother and I have thrown our support to the Imperialist faction, those that seek a strong Emperor who can lead us back to Rome’s rightful place in the world.”

“And the others?”

“The Republicans who want the present state with all the corruption maintained.”

It was then that they both heard Livonia’s call for dinner.

There was little talk at the table, the boys sensed that both parents were preoccupied with thoughts they were unwilling to share with their children.

Marcus scraped up the last of his lentils with a crust of bread and leaned back in his chair, thinking about what might be had for dessert when there was a mighty crash.

The door to the house splintered into pieces and flew inward as though smashed by an angry God. Standing in the doorway was a Lictor, a large man with wide shoulders and muscled arms.

He carried with him a ‘fasces’ a bundle of stout birch rods, from which protruded an axe head, a sign of the legal authority bestowed upon him by the Praetor or Chief Magistrate.

The Lictor made his way through the doorway, almost filling the opening as he did so. Three others entered behind him. In a loud voice the man said.

“This is the house of Marcus Merula and his wife Livonia, is it not?”

Marcus is on his feet. Angered at this intrusion he shouted.

“Yes it is and what business is that of yours. By what right do you break into my home and destroy my peace.”

“I come by order of the Praetor Maximus to arrest you and your wife as Enemies of the State.”

He held out the official parchment for Marcus to see. He responded.

“This is a sham, I’m not nor is my wife an Enemy of the State, we are loyal Romans.”

“That’s for the Praetor to decide at your trial, this document orders that you and your wife surrender to me and instructs me to transport you to prison.”

“This is nothing but a lie, I refuse to go.”

“I’m authorized to use force if necessary.”

The other three moved menacingly forward, they seemed eager to act against him.

Livonia screamed at the man.

“What about my children? I will not leave them. I must stay to look after them.”

“That’s no concern of mine, my duty is clear.”

Livonia persisted.

“Let me make an arrangement for a neighbour to come in and look after them until this is cleared up.”

“No, the children must leave this place. The property has been seized under the Proscription. Your children have no right to stay here. They must leave forthwith.”

“You can’t do this,” cried Livonia.

The Lictor turned to his men and said.

“Shackle them both and put them in the cart.

“I’ll get rid of the children take care not to do too much damage to those two. I’ve no more use than you three for Equestrians, but the Praetor will have your head if they seem abused.”

Livonia screamed over her shoulder as she was dragged from the house.

“Pando take your brothers and go to your Aunt Junia in Rome, she’ll help you. I love you all, take care.”

Her voice trailed off into tears and they could hear their father shouting vainly at their captors.

He ran after them but was restrained by the Lictor, he couldn’t see past him. But he heard the groaning of the cart leaving and the sounds of gravel crunching under the wheels.